Three Square Meals Ch. 75

The Maliri Shandrass-class battleship jumped into the Epsilon Aquarii system in a flash of blue particles, the Tachyon field quickly dispersing as it came out of hyper-warp. The light from the blue star in the centre of the system made the battleship's golden hull gleam majestically, as the Galaena Serine powered up its huge Trankaran engines, and plotted a course towards the gigantic facility in the heart of Valaden Space.

Shaped like a colossal wheel, the vast golden space station was filled with row after row of maintenance gantries, positioned inside the slowly-rotating orbital shipyard. Genthalas station was a beautiful golden edifice of sweeping crystal domes and magnificent spires that seemed to reach loftily for the heavens. Fully a third of the enormous technological marvel now twinkled with lights, and scores of civilian vessels were making use of the sweeping banks of docking bays, as traders went about their business. There was a significant military presence here too, with corvettes all the way up to battleships and carriers in attendance, watching protectively over their smaller civilian counterparts.

"I don't remember Genthalas being that busy," Ceraden murmured, as he watched the docking ships performing careful course corrections, retro-thrusters flaring brightly against their metallic hulls.

Myriana slipped her arm through his, and said soothingly, "How many years is it since you visited Valaden, my love? I'd imagine a lot's changed since then."

He nodded, and his handsome blue face was shadowed with grief as he replied, "It's been fifteen years, three months and ten days."

"Sylmae's funeral? I'm so sorry, Ceraden," she murmured, leaning in to give him a gentle kiss on the cheek.

"That was the last I saw or spoke to my girls," he replied despondently, his eyes losing focus as he remembered that bitter meeting, full of unfounded recriminations.

"I promise you, you'll always have a place in our little one's life," Myriana said to him, her voice earnest as she gazed at him.

He smiled at her as he focused on her beautiful face once more, and his rich blue eyes sparkled with happiness. "You're such a treasure, my love. Have I told you that yet today?" he asked, as he pulled her into a fierce hug.

She nodded when he released her, then gave him a coy smile as she replied, "Actually yes, just after you gave me my delicious breakfast this morning."

Ceraden laughed uproariously at that, and he brushed his hand through her short white hair as he marvelled, "I've never met anyone like you, my dear. You really are quite wonderful!"

Myriana smiled at him fondly, and then tugging his hand, she said, "We better get ready to disembark. We'll be landing at Genthalas soon."

The week's journey from Geniya Trading Station to Genthalas Shipyard had gone by in a blur for Ceraden, with Myriana proving to be a most enticing distraction. As they walked back to their cabin, he smiled as he recalled the blissful week's journey. They'd been equally elated about her pregnancy, and had spent hours discussing their plans for the future together. He'd willingly allowed himself to put his concerns about his meeting with Edraele Valaden to one side while he relished Myriana's thrilling company, but he'd never entirely forgotten the purpose behind his visit to Valaden. As wonderful as the trip had been, he now felt a pang of regret that he hadn't spent the week preparing an excellent justification for avoiding the confrontation with the terrifying Valaden Matriarch.

Still, Ceraden reasoned he could languish on Genthalas for a couple of days, and put the meeting off for at least a little while. Enough time to think of a way out of this predicament. He glanced at Myriana as she smiled at him playfully and pushed his suitcase towards him. Anti-grav devices were built into the luggage to make it weightless, and he stopped it with a smile. She was fun to be around, kind and considerate, interested in hearing his thoughts and views, and seemed to genuinely enjoy his company. His budding relationship with her was so radically different from the awkward liaisons he'd experienced in the past. He was still astonished by it.

They left their quarters and walked hand-in-hand along the high-arched corridors, as they followed the happily chatting throng of white-haired Maliri women. They smiled and waved at Myriana, before their inquisitive eyes met his as well, and they greeted him in a similar friendly manner. Ceraden still found the way these stunning girls interacted with him to be deeply unsettling, with such open cheerfulness a radical departure from anything he'd witnessed from Maliri women in the past. He'd asked Myriana about her white hair, and it had been the only subject with which she'd ever been evasive, promising him that all would be revealed eventually.

They made their way through the airlock, and stepped out of the enormous warship into the docking bay at Genthalas. Ceraden glanced up at the gleaming crystal plating of the Galaena Serine as they walked away, and shuddered at the sight of the ferocious weapons dotting its hull. He'd been more than a little unsettled to find they were travelling back to Valaden on a battleship, but it was just one more perplexing piece in a series of very mysterious puzzles.

"Ceraden, would you follow me, please," a lovely, rich voice said to him, courteously.

Shocked out of his reverie, he turned to see who had spoken to him. The black-garbed woman was cowled, revealing only her impassive yellow eyes. One glance at the sword hilt rising up over her shoulder made his heart skip a beat, and he realised at once that she must be one of House Valaden's feared assassins. He briefly considered making a run for it, but Myriana's soft hand holding his dispelled that thought just as quickly.

"I'll meet up with you later, my dear," he said to her, turning to give her a reassuring smile so she wouldn't be alarmed.

"The Matriarch wishes to speak with you too, Myriana," the assassin informed them, before the engineer could reply.

Ceraden felt his heart lurch in his chest, but as he gazed at Myriana, she just nodded amiably and smiled as she replied, "I can't wait to see her again! Lead on please, Luna."

The assassin nodded, and turned away, slinking across the docking bay like the predator she was, with Ceraden and Myriana following after her. Ceraden's feet felt leaden as he walked along robotically, his mind whirring as he darted furtive looks at the white-haired angel at his side. It appeared she'd been keeping more than the origin of her snowy locks from him! She'd told him she was an engineer, and from her impressive knowledge of the spacecraft she'd described when telling him about her work, he hadn't doubted her story for a moment. However, this encounter begged the question of how an engineer knew the most powerful and tyrannical Matriarch in the entire Regency, let alone one of her dreaded assassins!

As they made their way to the Matriarch's suite, Ceraden felt like he was being drawn inexorably towards the inescapable gravity well of a black hole. His mind floundered for a way to escape from the meeting with the notoriously foul-tempered Valaden leader, knowing that one wrong word could mean a brutal and protracted end. Unfortunately, the walk was over with all too soon, and Luna stepped aside at a set of guarded double doors, gesturing for Ceraden and Myriana to proceed through.

He felt chills run up his spine when he saw Edraele Valaden standing on the far side of the lounge, watching her fleet out of the window, and looking as regal and as intimidating as ever. His sharp ears heard the doors clicking together, the sound making him think of a jail door being closed, and he realised there was no escape as the guards sealed the doors behind him.

"I've brought Ceraden as you requested, Matriarch," Luna said, her dulcet tones sounding deafeningly loud to his electrified senses.

Edraele turned to look at them, and to Ceraden's amazement, she gave him a sparkling smile that left him reeling. Her voice throbbed with sincerity as she said, "My humblest apologies for all the theatrics, Ceraden. I knew if I'd asked you nicely to travel to Valaden, you would have been absolutely convinced I had some horrible fate planned for you. Nothing could be further from the truth, I promise."

She glanced to the side of the lounge, and a door to his right opened, admitting four young women he hadn't seen for over fifteen years.

"Father!" Elinris blurted out, rushing over to him.

He stared at his four daughters in shock as they swept towards him, barely having time to register their white hair, before opening his arms reflexively to embrace them.

"We've treated you so badly, daddy. Will you ever forgive us?" Ifene asked, hugging him close.

"I'm so sorry," Dalesse murmured, resting her head on his shoulder. "I've missed you so much."

Laenya gazed into his eyes and said earnestly, "I was such a fool to push you away! I blamed you for Sylmae's death, but now I know you tried everything to save her!"

Ceraden's eyes filled with tears, and he hugged them as best he could, wishing he had longer arms to surround all four of them at once. "My girls!" he croaked, quite overcome.

Glancing to one side, he saw Myriana smiling at him lovingly, biting her lip as her beautiful eyes welled up.

He turned back to look at Edraele, and she removed her diadem and pulled back the cowl from her head, unveiling her flowing mane of snowy-white hair. She answered his look of utter astonishment with a benevolent smile, and said gently, "Enjoy as much time catching up with your daughters as you need. Whenever you're ready, we must have a talk about John Blake."

With that, she glided out of the room, followed by Luna, who smiled at him kindly as she pulled off her cowl and fluffed out her own long, silky white tresses.

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"What trickery is this, Tsarra?" the House Baelora Matriarch asked sharply. "I've just seen reports that you've removed all fleet assets from our border!"

Tsarra Perfaren held her hands open wide, and replied, "There's no trickery involved, Gaenna. I'm simply moving my fleets to respond to a deadly new threat."

Narrowing her eyes, the older Maliri Matriarch's voice dropped a few octaves as she said, "Just because House Baelora is ranked sixth, you shouldn't be so foolish as to dismiss me as inconsequential. If you're not careful, you might find House Perfaren tumbling from its lofty perch at Rank Three!"

Shaking her head, Tsarra responded sincerely, "I wouldn't dream of dismissing you, Gaenna. The reason I'm calling you is quite the opposite in fact - you're potentially my most powerful ally."

"You're proposing an alliance?!" Gaenna scoffed, her tone one of scornful disbelief. Her magenta eyes flared with anger as she continued, "You have some nerve! After your mother stole the Kappa Aquarii system from me not more than-"

"I'll give it back," Tsarra said quietly, cutting the other Matriarch off mid-tirade. "You can have the system back, I don't care. All I ask, is that you listen to what we're about to tell you, and take it seriously."

Gaenna gaped at her in shock, never for one moment expecting their impromptu conversation to turn out this way. Her eyes widened as a golden-masked woman appeared by Tsarra's side, and said in a calm but gravelly voice, "We have to work together now, or everything we hold dear will be destroyed."

"This is Tashana Valaden. Her mother and sister have been enslaved," Tsarra said solemnly. She leaned forward, and the fear was quite apparent in her young face as she added, "If you're like me, and have no wish to become a Progenitor's broodmare, I'd suggest you listen closely to everything she tells you."

Gaenna sat there in stunned silence as the two women explained everything to her. Their story inadvertently confirmed some of the more bizarre and worrying reports she'd received from her spies in Genthalas, about the strange behaviour of white-haired women that were appearing around the shipyard with increasing frequency. When Tashana revealed the pictures of her enthralled sister and the images of the Mael'nerak, Geanna couldn't deny the strange draw she felt towards them, nor the creeping dread when Tashana explained what it meant.

Her expression turned to one of horror as she recognised the simple truth in everything they were telling her. The childhood fairy tale was not simply a frightening story to get little girls to behave themselves, but a chilling warning from millennia past: Be a good girl, or the Mael'nerak will come for you. Gaenna had not been a good girl, and she was suddenly very afraid...

"What do you want me to do?" she asked, as she shivered in her chair, all artifices and posturing forgotten. "Tell me, and I'll help you..."

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John rubbed his chin thoughtfully as he looked over the Invictus, pleased with the progress they'd made over the last several days. Large swathes of the new Maliri crystal hull were completed in the midsection of the ship, and it would only take a few more days to finish the rest. Once that was done, they'd be able to start replating the Invictus in Crystal Alyssium armour plates. A large crane was lowering the spherical Tyrenium lattice through one of the huge turret wells in the topdeck, where it would be carefully manoeuvred into position at the heart of the Singularity Generator.

"We'll need your assistance today, in armouring the munitions rooms," Rachel said, as she glanced his way.

He smiled at her, and said, "I suppose it's only fair, it was my idea after all. The last thing we need is a lucky hit to the magazines blowing the ship apart from the inside!"

The tawny-haired brunette grimaced, and nodded her wholehearted agreement. She appeared thoughtful for a moment, then said, "We'll be converting the Mass Driver magazines to carry rounds for the Singularity Drivers, so you might want to armour them too."

"They won't be storing explosive shells now, so it shouldn't be necessary," John said, shaking his head. He mulled it over for a moment, then changed his mind, and added, "Actually, we don't want the Singularity Drivers being knocked out of action by some fluke shot. I'll plate them too, just in case."

Rachel glanced towards the stern of the ship where Alyssa was lifting, melting, and reshaping a dozen armour plates at a time, and said, "You're on your own there, I'm afraid. Alyssa appears to have her hands full with quad-shaping all the armour plating."

"That's alright, she looks like she's having fun," John said, waiting for an explosive reaction from the blonde.

\*I'll give you 'fun', mister,\* Alyssa grumbled, turning and sticking her tongue out at him. \*Have I told you how much I hate reshaping the armour plating?\*

\*Repeatedly, honey, repeatedly,\* he replied, sending her a teasing wink. His tone was conciliatory as he added, \*We can swap, if you like? I don't mind taking a shift with the armour plating, if you want to work on armouring the internal rooms.\*

\*Nah, I'm barely having to concentrate to do this. It's just a bit boring. If you stay out here, you'll distract half our workforce!\* she said, with amusement.

He chuckled, but before he could reply, he heard the familiar high-pitched hum of one of the Maliri Cutting Beams at work. Trying to place the sound, he saw a blue beam of energy lance out from the front underbelly of the Invictus, and a large titanium segment crashed to the drydock deck below. There was now a gaping hole about forty metres wide in the lower bow of the assault cruiser, just beyond the secondary Hangar Bay.

"What the hell was that?" John asked Rachel, looking at her in surprise. "I thought we'd finished chopping up my ship!"

The brunette put her arm around his waist and gave him a hug, as she said in a reassuring voice, "A last minute addition from Dana. She said it's going to be 'fucking awesome'."

He thought about it for a moment, then groaned as he said, "She's going to a hell of a lot of trouble for something we're never going to use!"

Rachel giggled, and replied, "She knew you'd say that, and told me to remind you, that you said, 'Join the crew as Chief-Engineer, and you can work on whatever side-projects you like'."

"What is it with these Karron girls and verbal contracts?" John grumbled good-naturedly, and he heard Alyssa's laughter even from up on the maintenance gantry.

\*Sorry to interrupt, John,\* Edraele said to him, her telepathic voice sounding happier than it had done in days. \*I just wanted to let you know some friends are on their way.\*

He was pleased to hear her striking a more cheerful tone, and was about to ask who, when he spotted a large crowd of white-haired Maliri walking into the drydock. He spotted lots of familiar faces in the crowd, and grinned at Rachel as he exclaimed, "The engineers from the first refit! They must have just got back from Geniya!"

Rachel shared his grin, looking forward to seeing the Maliri she'd befriended on the last refit, and she said, "Let's go and say hello!"

The two of them jogged along the maintenance gantries, boots clanging on the metal structure as they darted down the steps to the drydock deck. The Maliri had gathered around Alyssa, who was sharing hugs with the engineers, and chatting to them animatedly.

"Welcome home!" John called out to them, as he loped up to the group.

He was soon deluged in loving hugs, as the Maliri engineers thanked him emphatically for everything he'd done for them. There was congratulations all round as one smiling girl after another confirmed they were now expecting, and John stroked their slender tummies, as he told them how much he was looking forward to seeing them bloom with their pregnancies. He worked his way around the group, greeting them all by name, until he came to the last group of five, who stood apart, watching with nervous anticipation.

Filaurel stepped, forward, and gazing at him with wide eyes, she said nervously, "Hello again, John. We'd like to speak to you for a moment in private, if that's alright?"

Nodding, he smiled at them, and replied, "Of course, girls! I know where we can go." He began to walk towards the double doors leading out from the drydock, and slipped an arm around Filaurel and Thessalia as they fell into step beside him. He grinned at each of the group in turn, and continued, "It's so wonderful to see all of you again!"

They smiled back at him, but didn't respond, too keyed-up for small talk. He wondered what had them all on edge as he guided them into the recruiting room, and led them over to a space on the soft matting. When they were all sitting comfortably together, and the door was closed to give them some privacy, he looked around at the five engineers, waiting for them to speak. They blushed and stayed quiet, so he reached out to take Filaurel's delicate blue hand in his, and squeezed it gently.

He gave her an encouraging smile, and to break the ice, he asked, "Did all of you have a good trip to Geniya Station?"

"We didn't go!" Thessalia blurted out, then flushed with embarrassment.

Frowning at that, John asked gently, "But I thought all of you were longing to having a baby? I asked Edraele to arrange the trip, because it's what I thought you wanted."

"We do!" Ioelena said with enthusiasm. Her voice turned quiet, as she added shyly, "Just not with anyone at Geniya Station."

John was about to ask her who she had in mind instead, but Alyssa's soft, affectionate voice whispered through his mind, \*With you, you big dummy. They're all smitten with you.\*

\*I hope this wasn't a bad surprise?\* Edraele asked him, and he could hear the sudden worry in her voice. \*They asked me just before they were scheduled to depart for Geniya, and I told them they could speak to you about it when you returned. They spent a lot of time with you on the refit, and you made more of an impact on them than the other engineers.\*

John blinked in surprise, and one glance at the doe-eyed looks the five engineers were giving him instantly confirmed his Matriarch's words. The Maliri sitting in front of him were all stunningly beautiful women, even though they were all several decades older than him. He couldn't deny the thought of all five of them pregnant with his babies was extremely arousing, but something held him back from springing into lusty action.

He gave them all a warm smile, and asked, "Just so there's no confusion, you're all asking me to be the father of your children?"

"That's right," Syndra murmured, her angular eyes wide with excitement as she stared at him.

He met each of their searching gazes in turn, then said earnestly, "I'm really flattered, but this has just come as a bit of a surprise. I don't have any children yet, so this is a big step for me, too. Would you give me a little while to think about it? I promise I won't keep you waiting long for an answer."

They each returned his smile, and chorused that they understood, and he could take as much time as he needed. John rose to his feet before helping them stand too, and shared a brief kiss with each girl. With coy waves goodbye, the five engineers left him on his own in the recruiting room, sporting a painfully hard erection in his trousers.

He closed the door after they left, and leaned back against it, trying to collect his scattered thoughts. As much as he lusted after these blue-skinned temptresses, something was holding him back from agreeing to their wonderful offer. However, after just stroking seventy-five freshly impregnated slender tummies, he had a one-track mind at the moment.

Alyssa only let him stew for thirty seconds before she said sympathetically, \*Why don't you head up to our bedroom in the Invictus? Irillith's waiting for you there, she wants to talk to you.\*

\*Alright, on my way,\* he replied, before flinging open the door, and strolling back towards the Invictus.

When he entered the drydock, he stepped aside to make room for a grav-truck, which was towing four anti-grav sleds of Maliri crystal support structure into place for the Invictus' hull. He weaved his way around Alyssa's neat stacks of re-shaped armoured plating, and she blew him a kiss as he strolled past, with the attending group of engineers giving him a friendly wave. Dana was working with an exclusive group of white-haired engineers to secure the second Progenitor Power Core to a lifting harness so that it could be lowered into the hull, and they all stopped what they were doing and waved at him as walked up the ramp into the ship.

It seemed everywhere he looked, there were dozens of beautiful Maliri girls watching him in fascination, and he knew he only had to ask, and they'd be overjoyed to join him for some fun. He was in quite a flustered state when he finally made it into the bedroom, and found Irillith sitting on the bed waiting for him.

She gave him a smouldering look as she rose to her feet, and slipped the dress off her shoulders, letting it fall to the floor. "Are my fellow Maliri driving you to distraction?" she purred, her violet orbs hiding behind her long lashes.

John nodded as he walked over to her, and he reached out to brazenly squeeze her big, round breasts, delighting in the contrast of his skin against her flawless azure flesh. "You drive me wild," he admitted, as he enjoyed the heavy weight of her taut orbs, as they filled his palm.

She kicked off her shoes, then climbed on the bed, as she said alluringly, "Come and use me to blow off some steam, then we can chat when you can think straight."

Scarcely believing his luck, he quickly stripped off his clothes, then joined her on the bed as she spread her thighs for him in invitation. He could see she was as turned on as he was, and when he positioned the head of his cock at her dark-blue pussy, she was wet and ready for him. Not wasting any time, he thrust forward, loving the delicious sound of her lusty groan as he pushed deep inside her.

He raised himself up on his arms so he could look down at her flushed face, and after admiring her luscious body for a moment, he said, "You're a truly beautiful girl, Irillith."

Shaking her head, she hissed at him, "No, I want it nastier than that. Use me hard, and work off those frustrations!"

Covering her body with his own, he pinned her wrists to the bed above her head, and asked, "Is this what you want, you horny little slut?"

Her violet eyes flashed dangerously, and she retorted, "Show me how you ride your Maliri Thralls, Progenitor. If you want to put a baby in my belly, you better be a good fuck!"

He leaned down and kissed her fiercely, forcing his tongue into her mouth as he pulled back with his hips, and then rammed forward, knocking the breath out of her with the impact. "Hold on tight... you aren't going to be able to walk straight after this," he promised her, his eyes sparkling with lust.

John began to pick up the pace, pulling his wide-girthed cock out of her clutching pussy, before driving back in, the tip kissing her uterus with every thrust. He held her down, stretched out beneath him as he fucked her, and after a dozen strokes, he rammed in hard, penetrating all the way into her womb.

"Oh, fuck!" she grunted, as she took his entire length, her body forced wide open to accept the massive invader. After panting for a moment, and getting used to being so tightly stretched, she whispered in his ear, "That gets you going, doesn't it? The thought of blue Maliri bellies loaded up with your cum!"

He pulled back slowly, then gave her a long, pussy-stuffing thrust that made her grunt as she took him all, his quad resting against the soft cheeks of her ass. "You're all so fucking hot, and practically begging me for it!" he muttered, as he stared into her eyes. He grinned then, and added, "Except you! You really made me work to get balls-deep in your tight little body!"

"But that's what makes fucking me better, isn't it?" she asked, staring back at him, her angular eyes flashing with lust. "You had to work to break me in, not like those girls outside. You only have to snap your fingers, and they'd spread their legs for you."

Tightening his grip on her wrists, he began a steady, rhythmic pounding, her body moving with his as he rode her lithe frame. He nodded, as he said, "I had to collar you first, before you started sucking down my cum."

"Fuck!" Irillith hissed, her eyes rolling back as she came. Her athletic legs clung to him in a powerful grip as her pussy convulsed around his shaft, massaging him with undulating contractions.

"That's right, keep cumming for me, you smoking-hot, blue piece of ass," he grinned, fucking her harder now, and loving the sound of her ecstatic cries.

She arched her back, her warm, soft breasts pressing into his chest as she climaxed hard, her thighs trembling as she responded to his domination. "Don't stop! I love it!" she pleaded with him, as he really began to go to town, his hips a blur as he skewered her nubile body.

After ten minutes of pussy-punishing action, which left Irillith a sobbing, whimpering, orgasmic wreck around his burgeoning shaft, he stopped focusing on screwing her brains out, and focused on his own pleasure. He let go of her wrists, and she wrapped herself around him, a sudden flush of energy from Alyssa rousing her from her ecstasy-induced stupor.

"That's right, you've earned your prize now," she whispered in his ear, as she caressed him. She planted a loving kiss on his cheek and continued, "You proved what a stallion you are. Now, just use me to empty those big, full balls."

He cradled her head in his hands, and stared into her eyes as he drove into her soft, warm body, slowing his thrusts so he could see her reaction to each one.

"I'm going to breed you one day," he said firmly, no doubt in his mind.

Her pupils flared with arousal, and the heated look in her angular eyes turned gentle as she murmured, "Whenever you want, I'm yours."

They kissed again, but it was tender and passionate this time, and he could feel her heartfelt yearning as she responded to him. He came then, long and hard, his quad convulsing with powerful contractions as he spurted huge streams of cum into her womb. She joined him in his release when she felt that first splash of spunk, and her tightly-stretched pussy squeezed him as he flexed inside her. They stared into each other's eyes as he continued to fill her up, with John lifting his weight off her a little, to give her rapidly-expanding abdomen room to grow.

When every last drop had been wrung from his four balls, John groaned with relief, then gently eased out of her lust-swollen pussy, before flopping down on the bed beside her. He rolled to one side, and placed a possessive hand on her sperm-laden belly, and said in wonder, "You've no idea how much I needed that."

Irillith let out a low groan as she stretched her lithe limbs, and she laughed airily as she replied, "You weren't kidding about me not being able to walk straight after that. You were a beast!" He laughed along with her, and she turned her head to stare into his eyes, as she added softly, "Until the end, of course. That was just wonderful."

"It was," he agreed, as he caressed the rounded curve of her cum-stuffed abdomen.

They lay like that for several minutes, both enjoying the intimate, loving afterglow. Eventually, Irillith gave him a sparkling smile, and asked, "Now we've emptied your quad, do you want to talk about what got you in such a state in the first place?"

He returned her smile, and replied, "Alyssa must have told you?"

"She did, but I want to hear it from you," Irillith replied, studying him with those enchanting violet orbs.

He thought it over for a moment, then said simply, "Five of the engineers from the last refit have asked to have children with me."

"I know which ones you mean. You spent more time with Filaurel and her friends than any of the others," she replied, looking thoughtful. She brushed her fingers along his cheek, and smiled as she added, "I think we just established that you're quite the fan of Maliri women, so what's the problem? They'd be overjoyed to have you as the baby's father."

John looked conflicted as he confessed, "There's a big part of me that would love that - to knock them up, and see them get big bellies with my babies growing inside them." He stroked her enormously swollen stomach pointedly, and they shared a lusty grin.

"But?" she prompted him, seeing he was holding something back.

He let out a regretful sigh, as he replied, "Fantasy isn't the same as reality. I've made commitments to so many girls already, and when we do settle down to raise a family, I'm not going to have enough time in the day to devote to them all." He rested his head on the pillow, and smiled at her as he continued, "To start with, obviously, there's all you girls on the ship, so that's seven."

"Mmmhmm," Irillith agreed, a look of contentment on her face as he stroked her tautly-curved belly.

"Then there's Luna, Ilyana, and Almari. I promised them the same when I restored their fertility," he explained, watching her lovely features. He gently caressed her, as he added, "That brings the total to ten expectant mothers."

She arched an eyebrow, and continued wryly, "Speaking of which, I'm sure you plan to have Edraele give me another sibling or two."

He blushed then, and apologised, "I'm so sorry for the position that puts you in. I can't even imagine how weird that must be."

Irillith studied his tense expression for a moment, then gave him a reassuring smile, as she replied, "I'm sure such a thing would be scandalous in the Terran Federation, but I'm actually perfectly alright with it. With men in such short supply in the Regency, it's really not much of a culture-shock for me. We Maliri are so long-lived, it's far from uncommon that an unrelated male might father children with one or more sisters, or yes, even a mother and a sister."

Nodding his understanding, and letting out a sigh of relief that made her giggle, he then said, "Finally there's the four Matriarchs that Edraele has made an alliance with. They raised the same prospect with me a couple of days ago, and I've been meeting with them regularly for their daily meetings, and getting to know them quite well. I'm already quite fond of all four girls."

"Fathering children with the Matriarchs of all the highest-ranked Noble Houses would help secure an incredibly powerful alliance," she noted, nodding enthusiastically. "You should definitely give them each a baby as soon as you can, they all need to rebuild their Houses."

John raised his eyebrow at the thought of his girlfriend eagerly encouraging him to impregnate several more girls. It seemed Irillith wasn't alone in that opinion.

\*I so want to be there when you knock them up, lover!\* Alyssa agreed, her lusty voice echoing through his mind.

\*I'll protect them and keep them safe while you're away, my Lord,\* Edraele agreed, equally as enthusiastic. \*There's also no reason to wait with them, they won't be in any danger, not safely protected here in Genthalas.\*

\*Edraele should definitely be there when you breed them!\* Alyssa exclaimed, growing more excited by the moment. \*It'll be a wonderful bonding moment for her and her girls, when you pack their wombs full of cum. Are you going to do them two at a time, or-\*

\*Alright, calm down!\* he said to them both, shaking his head in amusement. \*We can discuss all that later!\*

Trying to remember where he was in his conversation with Irillith, he said, "The Matriarchs bring the total to fourteen."

"So, the engineers would make nineteen," Irillith noted, then winked at him as she added, "You're going to be a very busy boy."

"Fourteen is already crazy! I want to be there to support each of you through your pregnancies, and adding another five women I barely know seems ridiculously selfish," he explained, trying to make her understand his predicament.

"You could just give them what they want, but not be so involved with their children's upbringing. It might seem callous to you, but that's how Maliri society works." Irillith explained, her tone patient and non-judgemental. "With so many women to men, it's the exception, not the rule, when a father is heavily involved with bringing up children."

"I'm trying to change that, though," he said emphatically. "I'd be a ridiculous hypocrite if I went along that route. Besides, I know what it's like not growing up with parents, and I've always sworn that I'd be there for my kids."

She leaned in to give him a tender kiss, and said softly, "I think you have your answer, then."

He nodded, and frowned as he replied, "I'm not looking forward to telling them. It's going to sound like a rejection, when I'm really just trying to do the right thing."

\*Don't tell them just yet, handsome,\* Alyssa said thoughtfully. \*I've just been discussing it with Edraele, and we think we might have come up with an interesting solution.\*

\*Really? What's that?\* he asked, equally curious and relieved.

Her melodic teasing laughter filled up his mind as she replied, \*You'll just to wait and see. It involves another one of Edraele's surprises.\*

He groaned inwardly at the thought, to the amusement of both his Matriarchs. Turning his attention to Irillith, he stroked her cheek, and said, "Thank you for this. Talking to you really helped."

"It was quite literally my pleasure," she replied, smiling at him as she stroked her swollen belly. Her expression turned more serious then, as she added, "It felt wonderful being able to help you for a change. I'm always here for you, if you ever have anything else you need to get off your chest."

"Likewise, honey," he agreed, and they shared a loving kiss as they cuddled together.

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John spent the rest of the afternoon working on the refit, shaping Crystal Alyssium into a sturdy, reinforced cage around the vulnerable areas of the ship. He decided to quad-shape the alloy to make it as robust as was reasonable, considering the amount of material involved, but he had to call on Edraele to supply him with Eldritch power, to avoid becoming exhausted. She seemed to have no problem supplying him with a steady surge of psychic energy, more than enough in fact, for him to finish all the rooms, without unduly taxing his own reserves.

\*You must be tapped out after all that,\* he marvelled, as he finished shaping the armour for the last of the new magazines, moulding it neatly into place. He winked at the engineer back in the corridor and gave her a thumbs up, before backing out of the maintenance ducts at the rear of Singularity Driver ammunition room. Voicing his concerns, he added, \*Don't drain yourself excessively, I don't want to leave you worn out. I can always use more of my own energy next time.\*

\*I'm fine, John, honestly!\* Edraele said, sounding positively delighted. \*You've more than quadrupled all the energy reserves I have at my disposal, from both myself and my network of wards! It's not just because of all the Maliri you've been adding, either. After all the effort you've made to get to know them all, their connections to me are all so much stronger than they were under the old bond. It's amazing, how much enforcing the compulsion to obey, inhibited the psychic energy they could contribute.\*

John clambered out into the corridor and closed his eyes for a moment, so that he could examine the rows of Maliri under Edraele's care. Sure enough, the hundreds of lines linking them all to each other were much stronger than the faint, fairly noticeable trails that were in place beforehand. While they weren't in the same league as the blazing conflagration of light from Alyssa and the Invictus' crew, it was still a startling improvement.

\*We noticed the exact same thing when we renewed the bond,\* Alyssa said, agreeing with the Maliri Matriarch. She hesitated, then added with a tinge of regret, \*My girls also had a bunch of epiphanies, with lots of breakthroughs on everything they were working on. It's a shame we hadn't been able to build up stronger connections with the assassins and the first group of engineers, before you two changed the nature of your bond.\*

\*Not to worry, they've all been working incredibly hard on the refit,\* John said, smiling gratefully at one of the engineers as she handed him a towel and a flask of water. "Just what I needed, thanks, Caelitia!" he added, before downing the flask, and upending the last over his face, so he would wipe away the sweat and grease. She smiled and took the items back when he was done with them.

\*You better get ready,\* Alyssa prompted him. \*We're going out for dinner tonight, remember?\*

\*I'm looking forward to it,\* he agreed, genuinely looking forward to a break from the hectic refit schedule over the last week-and-a-half.

He nodded in greeting to the white-haired Maliri he passed as he walked along the partially-completed decking on this corridor. There were still huge holes in the midsection of the ship, with the work crews focusing on building up the support framework, and then constructing the most important areas first. They were planning to fill in the rest over the next week, before moving on to the final stages of the refit.

The busy corridor led into Deck Five on the aft section of the Invictus, and he stepped through the door into the grav-tube, before rising in the blue glow. There were no Maliri on Deck Two, so the corridor was silent and deserted as he strolled towards his bedroom. His sharp ears caught the sound of a running shower, and when he walked into the bathroom, it was warm in there and filled with clouds of steam. A pair of luscious sirens appeared through the swirling clouds, their brown and red hair slicked back as they glistened wetly.

"Hello, handsome stranger," Rachel purred, as she wasted no time in helping him shuck off his clothes. "We'll be your bathroom companions this evening."

Dana nodded, her sky-blue eyes glistening, as she said lustily, "We're supposed to get you squeaky clean, then empty your quad." She winked at him, and added, "Dealer's choice where it goes."

He laughed at her bawdy greeting, and when he was as naked as they were, slipped an arm around them both as they led him into the shower. "How come the rest of you girls aren't coming with me, Alyssa, and Edraele?" he asked, curiously, closing his eyes as they all soaked under the warm water.

"It will all become clear, later," Rachel murmured, as she began soaping down his shoulders. "We'd be in terrible trouble if we spoiled the surprise."

After a sigh of satisfaction, John asked, "What are all of you planning to do instead?"

"We've invited Edraele's bodyguards over to watch a holo-vid movie. We figured with two Progenitors as company, she'll be safe enough," Dana explained, nonchalantly.

"I suppose I better provide the refreshments, then," John said with a grin.

"We'll be the perfect entrées," Rachel agreed, before the two girls giggled with delight.

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The bedroom was much busier when John finally emerged from the bathroom, and he smiled at all the women waiting on the vast bed, then turned to give Dana and Rachel a grateful kiss. He playfully patted their rounded tummies, before giving them a firm swat on their pert rumps to send them on their way. They laughed as they rejoined their friends, who enthusiastically welcomed them onto the bed.

John headed into the walk-in wardrobe next, and quickly got dressed in a fetching dark-blue suit with a with freshly-pressed white shirt. He tied the blue tie into a full-windsor knot, and after adding his cufflinks, he strolled out into the bedroom again. Calara, Dana, Rachel, Jade, Irillith, Sakura, and the three assassins were all nude now, accompanied by an equally-naked purple sprite. However, it wasn't them who drew his attention.

"You look amazing," he marvelled, as he stared at Edraele and Alyssa in awe.

They had their hair up, with a few artfully curled locks framing their naturally beautiful faces, which had been subtly and expertly enhanced by the judicious use of make-up. They both looked absolutely ravishing, and to complete their devastating efforts to ruin his concentration for the night, their lithe, athletic figures were swathed in form-fitting evening dresses. He licked his lips as he approached them, reaching out to gently stroke their toned stomachs through the velvety material.

"I know what you like, my exceedingly handsome man," Alyssa purred, a loving smile on her lips, while posing for him as he caressed her.

Edraele's purple eyes sparkled as she looked down at his roaming hand, and listening to his thoughts, she said, "Alyssa thought it prudent to have Dana and Rachel empty your quad before we left. I can see she knows you very well, indeed."

“It wouldn't do to make us look like we're pregnant before we go out,” Alyssa murmured, pressing her tummy into his hand.

“We'll be good girls for you when we return home,” Edraele promised him, leaning forward too, and letting out a barely audible moan.

"Bye, ladies, don't wait up!" John announced cheerfully to the onlookers on the bed, much to their amusement.

He offered his Matriarchs his arms, and they slipped their hands through, and let him escort them out of the room. The sound of giggling reached their ears, as the girls on the bed decided who was going to be first to enjoy the sweet-tasting treats John had left in Dana and Rachel.

\*That's going to be the third time for Luna, Almari, and Ilyana,\* John said, glancing at both the blondes in turn. \*I'm going to have to speak to Athena tonight, and get that Astral Ward in place.\*

Alyssa patted his arm, and said seductively, \*We'll have a fun evening together, then empty your quad for you. Edraele and I can go to sleep with full tummies, while you chat to Athena.\*

He reached down to squeeze their taut cheeks, and said quite reasonably, \*Sounds like a hell of a plan.\*

Neither Alyssa nor Edraele would tell him where they were going, but there was a golden hover-car waiting outside the Invictus for them when they left through the airlock. He opened the door for the girls, and let them climb inside, before shutting it after them and walking around to the other side. When he sat down, John recognised one of Kali Loraleth's white-haired bodyguards at the wheel, and he said hello to Avelissa when she turned around to smile at them, as she checked they were safely aboard.

John studied the former assassin as she drove, not paying attention to their journey, but focusing entirely on her instead. That strangely discordant aura about her had gone now, and she seemed relaxed and happy as she operated the hover-car.

\*I'm so sorry about everything that happened with Avelissa and the other assassins,\* Edraele said, squeezing his arm. \*At the time, it seemed so clear that it was best way forward.\*

\*I've removed the compulsions you added to her mind, and fully restored her now. She'll be perfectly fine, as will all the others,\* John said, nodding with satisfaction. He turned to smile at Edraele, and added, \*Let's not dredge that up again, alright? It was my fault, not yours, and I hate seeing you get upset over it.\*

"I won't," she replied in a whisper, leaning in to brush his lips with her own. "I promise."

He smiled at her, and she looked at him adoringly, but before anyone could say anything else, they slowed to a halt in front of a grand-looking restaurant. John recognised Avelissa's counterpart, Renaya, who was standing at the door, shaking her head with an apologetic smile as she turned away a couple of hopeful-looking prospective diners. He glanced at the sign, "Ralomoire" written in sweeping lettering, and raised his eyebrow in appreciation.

"I've heard some of the engineers talking about this place," he noted, as he opened the door to get out. "It's practically impossible to get a table, isn't it?"

Edraele laughed gaily, and replied, "Not when you own the station it's built in, it isn't."

He offered her a hand to get out of the car, then jogged around to the other side to open the door for Alyssa, and help her out too. With a girl on either arm, he walked up the steps towards the grand double doors that opened before them. Inside the restaurant the decor was elegant and refined, with an outer circuit of tables surrounding an inner layer. The layers were separated by flowing streams, and their path to the middle took them over low-walled bridges. It was also entirely emptied of guests, with the lighting on the outer circuit lowered to a soothing ambient glow, with brighter lighting around the central table, which had place settings for five.

"You didn't need to clear the restaurant," John said, smiling at Edraele as he rolled his eyes in amusement.

Alyssa laughed, and replied, "Oh yes, she did! Can you imagine trying to eat with a whole load of Maliri fawning over you? I want a nice, hefty load tonight, and I didn't fancy sharing with a bunch of random women, who all want to try some of what you're serving."

"Alright, good point," he agreed, bowing his head in apology to Edraele. He pulled out two of the chairs for the blondes to sit, and glancing at the two extra place settings, he added, "Who are we dining with?"

"My friend! It's so wonderful to see you!" Ceraden called out to him, as he walked through the door with Myriana on his arm.

John turned in amazement, his jaw dropping open as he stared at the Maliri trader. "Ceraden! What on Terra are you doing here?!" John asked, walking over to meet the man halfway, and shaking his hand firmly as he grinned at him.

"I was invited by an acquaintance of yours," Ceraden replied archly, his bright blue eyes flicking to the Valaden Matriarch.

"I hope this was a good surprise?" Edraele inquired, gliding over with Alyssa, to stand beside John.

"An amazing surprise, thank you!" John said, with a disbelieving chuckle. He turned his attention to Ceraden's companion, and continued, "It's lovely to see you again, too, Myriana."

"Thank you, John," she replied, flushing with happiness. Glancing fondly at Ceraden, she added, "I had the time of my life at Geniya."

John looked at the pair of them for a moment, until he realised what she was hinting at, and blurted out, "That's amazing! Congratulations, the pair of you!"

"Myriana's a truly marvellous woman, my friend," Ceraden confided in him, with a broad smile. "I'm happy to admit I've fallen head-over-heels for her. I believe you had a hand in sending her to Geniya, so it appears I'll forever be in your debt."

John laughed in astonishment, shaking his head as he marvelled, "Isn't it strange the way things work out?"

Edraele smiled with satisfaction, as she agreed, "Oh yes, these kinds of coincidences can be truly bizarre."

\*You're so naughty,\* Alyssa told her, glancing Edraele's way with a sparkle in her cerulean eyes. \*He'll give you a well-deserved spanking when he finds out what you've been up to.\*

\*Look how happy he is,\* Edraele replied, her purple eyes darting to John's beaming face as he spoke with Ceraden. She nodded to herself, and added, \*I'd willingly endure far worse to see a smile like that again.\*

Ceraden turned his attention to her, and performed a sweeping bow as he said respectfully, "You look positively radiant this evening, Matriarch."

"Just Edraele, please, Ceraden," she replied, giving him a warm smile.

He nodded, meeting her gaze for a fleeting moment, before turning his attention to Alyssa. Ceraden grinned at the Terran teenager, and exclaimed, "It's so good to see you again, Alyssa! Have you grown weary of this scallywag, yet?"

Shaking her head, Alyssa gave him a dazzling smile, as she replied, "No, he's still doing a splendid job of keeping me entertained." She arched an eyebrow at Ceraden, and asked, "Why? Are you still looking for more companionship?"

He shot a wary glance at Myriana and shook his head, as he replied, "Of course not, my dear. I wouldn't dare risk my current status as Lady Luck's most-favoured son."

"You old charmer, Ceraden," Myriana replied, grinning at him happily. She shared a very quick glance with Edraele, and added airily, "Although, I wouldn't be too hasty in writing off some more company."

Ceraden blinked in surprise as he doubted his own ears for a moment, but he brushed it off, figuring now was neither the time nor place for such a discussion, no matter how intriguing.

"Let's all sit down, everyone," John suggested, gesturing to the table. He held the chairs for Alyssa and Edraele as they sat, then took the seat between them. A white-haired waitress glided across the bridges to their table, and he was surprised to recognise one of Leena's bodyguards this time.

She saw his inquisitive glance, and smiled at him, as she said, "Leena and all the other Matriarchs are quite safe, you have nothing to worry about. Now, what would you like to drink?"

Dinner was a delightful affair, with everyone sampling the light, fragrant wines, except for Myriana, who was avoiding alcohol due to her pregnancy. Conversation was light-hearted and flowed freely, with everyone well at-ease in each other's company. Course after course appeared, with the assassins proving that being an accomplished martial artist and trained killer provided useful, transferable skills, for slightly more mundane professions. They removed trays stacked high with plates, without so much as a single spillage, as their guests moved on to a selection of exquisite desserts.

Once dinner was finished, John and Ceraden left Myriana to gossip with Alyssa and Edraele. Brandishing glasses of whiskey, they made their way up a flight of stairs to a couple of chairs on the balcony that overlooked the restaurant. The ceiling was formed from a clear-crystal canopy, giving a breathtaking view of the Valaden system. Sitting back in their chairs, the two men watched the broad variety of golden-hulled vessels flying to and from Genthalas, against the backdrop of a brilliant multi-hued starscape.

"It's been a fantastic evening, Ceraden," John said, toasting his friend, before taking a sip. "You've no idea how much I've missed some male company!"

Ceraden smiled back at him, and said, "After everything you've done for me, my friend, consider it the smallest of karmic favours being repaid." Before John could ask what he meant by that, the Maliri added, "It seems you've been entertaining some quite delightful new female company yourself?"

John glanced down at the white-haired Matriarch, and he smiled as he said, "Edraele's remarkable, isn't she?"

"She certainly is," Ceraden agreed, with a slight catch in his throat. He coughed and took a quick sip of his drink, before he smiled, and added, "It seems I was quite wrong with the unfounded warning I gave you, regarding the esteemed Edraele Valaden. My apologies, for giving you such terrible advice."

"No need to apologise," John replied hastily. He faltered then, before replying, "I think she's had a relatively recent change of heart."

"Ah, I see. There seems to be quite a bit of that going around, of late," Ceraden murmured, studying John in fascination. Watching one of the House Aeberos assassins walking away with the dessert dishes, he continued, "What do you think of this new fashion for white hair amongst the females of my species? I believe it's a most fetching look, myself."

John spluttered into his drink for a moment, then managed to collect himself, and replied, "I've had a bit of a thing for blondes since Alyssa bounded into my life. I'd have to agree with you there." Eager to change the subject, he added, "I'm so pleased for you and Myriana. I think you'll make wonderful parents together."

Ceraden nodded, and said earnestly, "Children are a gift John, and one to be treasured. You'll understand how much they mean to you, when you become a parent."

Flinching as he remembered that Ceraden had lost contact with his daughters, John nodded, while trying to think of another, safer, topic to shift to next.

Ceraden took pity on him, and quickly said, "Myriana tells me that you're thinking of becoming a parent yourself, in the near future?" When John glanced down at the two lissom blondes chatting to Myriana, Ceraden chuckled, and added, "You aim high, my friend, I'll give you that! Until today, I would have considered any man pursuing Edraele Valaden in that regard to have lost all grip on his sanity. Now, I must confess, I'm envious that you attracted the favourable attention of such a woman."

John nodded, and said, "All the women in my life are truly exceptional." He smiled at his friend, as he added, "I'm sorry to tell you, but I think Lady Luck is still in my corner."

The Maliri trader laughed, and raising his whiskey glass, he said, "A toast, then - to all the remarkable women, tamed by Lady Luck's most-favoured son!"

Something about the way Ceraden said that made John pause, and he watched the Maliri while he took a sip from his drink. Those blue eyes of his twinkled in amusement, as though he were privy to a joke that John wasn't aware of, and John wondered what he was up to.

\*We're getting ready to call it a night, if that's not too soon for you, my love?\* Alyssa asked him, her tone loving and affectionate.

\*No, that's okay, we'll come down and join you,\* John replied, wondering just how heavily Alyssa had been hitting the wine. Although he always felt those emotions from her towards him over their empathic bond, it was unusual for her to put them into words, usually hiding behind mischievous teasing, instead.

She sounded amused as she said, \*I think I need to keep you away from Rachel. Some of her uncanny perceptiveness seems to be rubbing off on you.\*

John and Ceraden walked down the steps, and rejoined the three women seated at the table. They were sipping coffee, and they all turned to smile at their men, as they sat with them again.

Edraele grinned at John, as she asked, "I thought you might like to meet the chefs before we leave?"

He nodded, and said enthusiastically, "Their food was incredible! I'd love to learn how to cook more Maliri dishes; Jade loves it, and it would be a nice surprise for Irillith, if she gets homesick."

"It's a sweet gesture, but her home's with you, aboard the Invictus," Edraele replied, stroking his hand fondly. Her mouth turned up into a generous smile, as she added, "At least until I can convince you to give up your nomadic existence, and put down your roots here."

"You're doing an excellent job so far!" John said, with a chuckle.

Movement at the far side of the restaurant caught his attention, and his eyes widened as the four chefs glided out of the kitchen to join them. He shook his head in amusement, and then said to Ceraden, "We've just had dinner prepared for us by four of the most powerful women in the Regency!" He rose from his chair and walked around the table to meet the four girls, and said, "Dinner was absolutely delicious, thank you, ladies!"

"One of the benefits of preparing all your own food to avoid being poisoned - you end up becoming a good cook!" Leena said, with a beaming smile.

John had heard Irillith echo similar sentiments, and although the meal had been incredible, it was sad to hear that their lives had been so dangerous, that such precautions were necessary. He turned around to look at Ceraden and Myriana, and said, "Please let me introduce you to: Kali Loraleth, Nyrelle Aeberos, Valani Naestina, and Leena Ghilwen, Matriarchs of their respective Houses."

Now it was Ceraden's turn to look astonished, and he took one look at their long-flowing hair, then shared a quick glance with Edraele. When she nodded imperceptibly, his eyes flashed to John with a newfound glimmer of awe. The exchange only took a second, and he shrugged it off quickly, as he performed a sweeping bow, and said, "I feel honoured to have sat at your table and eaten such an exquisite meal, Matriarchs. Consider me your humble servant."

They smiled at him, and murmured that he was welcome, unsure how to react to the flamboyant merchant. After saying goodbye, they left the restaurant while flanked by their bodyguards, leaving the group of five alone.

John grinned at his friends, and said, "Well, this evening's been full of nice surprises. I'm not going to forget this night out in a hurry!"

"I had a lovely time, thank you for arranging everything," Alyssa said, stroking Edraele's arm.

She inclined her head, and said, "Seeing everyone enjoy themselves made it all worthwhile. I'm so pleased you had a good time."

John nodded towards the door, and said, "Shall we head off?"

"One moment, John," Edraele said, raising a slender blue hand to caress his shoulder. Turning to glance at the Maliri merchant, she added, "I believe the others are travelling back to your guest suite, Ceraden?"

"That's right, Edraele," he replied, his smile enigmatic.

"Others?" John asked in confusion, assuming that they had been left alone.

The door to the kitchen opened once more, with the four sous chef's making an entrance, having just finished tidying up. John was astounded to see the four unruly noblewomen he'd seen only a few days ago, and they flashed playful smiles at him, as they walked up to the table. The four white-haired women gathered around Ceraden, and each gave him an affectionate peck on the cheek.

Before John could jump to the wrong conclusion, Dalesse said, "We're so pleased you enjoyed dinner, father!"

Ifene nodded, and said, "Maybe you can tell us some stories when we get home, like you used to, Daddy? I haven't heard the one about the Mael'nerak in years..."

The four women glanced John's way, eyes flashing with amusement at his look of stunned amazement, tinged with more than a little dread. He eyed Ceraden warily, as his friend walked over to him and clasped him on a shoulder. He had no idea how the man was going to react, especially if he suspected what had gone on between John and his four daughters.

"Children are a precious gift, John," he said earnestly, reiterating his words up on the balcony. "I'll never be able to repay you for returning mine to me. Thank you."

With that, he turned and left, with Laenya and Elinris on each arm, while Ifene and Dalesse hugged Myriana, and walked hand-in-hand with her, as they left the restaurant. Now it really was just John, Alyssa, and Edraele left inside, and he turned to look at both women with wide eyes.

"You set up all of this?" he asked them both, looking from one beautiful woman to another.

Alyssa glanced at Edraele, and grinned as she replied, "I was aware of everything once we'd bonded, but I can't claim credit for any of it. Edraele was the creative genius behind all that."

"A good surprise?" Edraele asked him tentatively, her face lifted in hope.

John pulled her in for a hug, and said, "I can't believe the lengths you went to, setting all this up! It could have all been an unmitigated disaster, but somehow, you managed to pull it off!"

She bit her lip coyly, and murmured, "You did say you were missing male company, and I really want you to be happy here. Ceraden was so overjoyed at being reunited with his daughters, he forgave my manipulation in ordering him to return to Genthalas."

Alyssa hugged Edraele from behind, and kissed her on the cheek, as she replied, "I've got a lot to learn from her, she's quite ingenious."

John blanched then, and asked, "What on Terra did you tell him I'd done to his daughters?! I can't imagine him reacting that way if he knew they'd all swallowed my cum!"

Edraele met his worried gaze, and leaned in to kiss him, as she replied, \*I told him that you're related to the Mael'nerak, but a benevolent version instead. That you have psychic powers that let you heal the trauma Maliri society inflicted on his daughters.\* When she pulled back, she added earnestly, "I didn't lie to him. Everything I said was true, but Ceraden didn't want to delve any deeper into talk of psychic abilities; he's quite squeamish in that regard."

John chuckled, and replied, "That was an incredible surprise, thank you."

"You're very welcome," she said in a soft voice, planting a tender kiss on his lips. "It was magical to see you looking so relaxed and happy with your friend."

"Come on, let's go to bed," John said with a grin. "Despite your best efforts to give me a heart attack, I'm fully restocked and ready to go."

Alyssa raised an eyebrow, and asked, "I assume you'll want us to leave the evening dresses on?"

He pulled back so he could admire both women in their figure-hugging outfits, and ran the backs of his fingers over their firm breasts, and down to their toned abdomens. "Oh yes, absolutely," he agreed, his cock throbbing at the thought.

They walked out of the restaurant arm-in-arm, as Alyssa mentioned conversationally, "The fabric's designed to stretch, but I think you should give it a field test. You should really stuff Edraele's womb for her, just to make sure..."

John put his arms around them both as they snuggled into him in the back seat of the car, and said to their driver, "Edraele's suite please, Avelissa. I think Edraele and Alyssa are going to be quite noisy tonight, and we wouldn't want to wake up the girls."

"Of course, John," she replied with a wide grin, the hover-car pulling away on silent anti-grav motors.

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John gave his sleeping Matriarchs a final loving glance, before closing his eyes and pulling his astral-form away from his body. Even though he felt like he was dragging an anvil with him, it felt easier than the last time he'd done this, either through practice, or because of his growing strength.

"It's so good to see you!" Athena gasped, steadying him, and helping him sit upright on Edraele's bed.

John smiled at her, and was about to reply, but something in her deeply worried expression made him pause. "You look scared, Athena. Is something wrong?" he asked, pulling her in for a hug.

She tried to deny it at first, but his strong arms were comforting, and he felt her nod as she tucked her head in under his chin. "She's getting stronger, so quickly," Athena murmured into his chest.

It took him a moment to realise what she meant, then asked, "You're getting close? The time when the two of you are going to merge?"

"I've only likely got a matter of weeks, maybe a month or two, at most! Then I'll be gone," she corrected him, shivering in his arms. She glanced up at him, and he could see the fear etched in her radiant face, as she added plaintively, "I know that's why you created me, but I want more now! I see how much pleasure you gain from each other's company, and now I've tasted some of what life has to offer, I want to gorge myself on it!"

"I didn't realise we were that close," he apologised, as he stroked her back.

Athena shuddered, and said, "We still had some time, and I was starting to hope, but when Alyssa bonded with Edraele..."

"We'll try and come up with some ideas," John said, trying to stay optimistic. "Rachel, Edraele, Alyssa, Dana, they're all very clever, they might be able to come up with something!"

She shook her head, her face looking forlorn, as she replied, "There's no time. You should forget about me, you've got enough to deal with." She pulled out of his arms, and sat back as she gave him a sad smile, and added, "Let's get this Astral Ward in place. You already know what to do, you learned the Progenitor runes during the last nightmare, so it should be easy."

"Wait, let's talk about saving you fir-" John started to say, before she cut him off abruptly.

"No, this is too important. You can't waste too much time in the Astral Plane, you don't want to exhaust yourself. Now, you need to weave a tight set of wards around yourself, no more than a few inches from your body. Keep it close, so you don't accidentally drag Alyssa or Edraele into the nightmare, if it goes wrong," she advised him, sternly. Her expression softened then, and she smiled as she added, "Don't forget to close all the gaps this time. We don't want a repeat of the dome fiasco."

He nodded, understanding what he had to do, then reached out to stroke her arm, and said, "We'll try and think of something to help you. You've done so much for me, I won't let you down."

"You can't save everyone," she told him softly, turning away as he was pulled out of the Astral Plane, his concentration broken.

John fell back into his body as the Spirit-walk ended, the disorientation fading as he readjusted to being back in the Physical Plane. He was tempted to rest and try to reach Athena again, but he knew she'd be furious if he ignored her advice so blatantly, putting himself at risk. She'd saved them time and again over the last few months, and it was galling to think that he couldn't reward her for such unflinching dedication, with what she desired the most. He was determined to speak to the girls about it the following morning, but for now, he had work to do.

Relaxing on the bed and calming his breathing, he felt the runic language of the Progenitors flowing from his subconscious. The runes tingled with potential, and while he understood what each of the glyphs meant, linking them together into runic phrases of Eldritch power, was something else entirely. He chose the nebulous rune that represented the Astral Plane, the warding rune for protection, and the shadowy rune for concealment, before discarding the rest.

Mashing them together into the equivalent of "Run, Spot, Run," he formed a primitive sigil that he knew would do what was required. He summoned a glowing shell constructed of hexagons that completely encased his body, then daubed that sigil on every one, armouring himself in a runic fortress that would protect him while he slept.

With one last glance to check he hadn't missed anything, he smiled as he wriggled between Alyssa and Edraele, then pulled them close to him. They mumbled in their drowsy state, then snuggled closer, pressing their warm, cum-filled stomachs against his sides, as they nestled in against him. He let out a contented sigh, then closed his eyes, letting himself drift off to sleep.

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The swirling mists came for him that night, some otherworldly horror in the Astral Plane drawn to him like a beacon, just as he'd feared would happen. The feelings of mind-numbing terror were muted this time, and he felt like he was able to view them dispassionately, almost as if they were tangible things, on this Plane of dreams given physical form. With a start, he realised the leviathan was swathed in an insidious psychic aura that would worm its way into a man's soul, filling him with paralyzing terror, and leaving him vulnerable to ruin.

Although he couldn't see anything more than a few feet in any direction, what with the obscuring nature of the fog that pervaded this realm, he could -feel- that something was hunting him. It was vast, ancient, and possessed of an alien and unnatural intellect that left him quaking, even with his protective wards in place. Although he desperately wanted to exit the dreamworld, he had no way of forcibly ejecting himself, not while the hideous presence was blocking the exits as it had done before.

Something titanic loomed overhead, eerie wails and discordant cries trailing in its dreadful wake, but the shroud of wards held strong, hiding him from the Astral behemoth. He heard something else skittering nearby, his mind conjuring frightful images filled with eyes and fangs. Then, yet another antediluvian monstrosity lurched past, unseen, but its dread presence left a wake of horror in its passing.

He quailed, as he suddenly realised that whatever hideous abomination lurked there, as the mastermind behind this pocket plane, it was not the creature that attacked them last time. That massive titan was but one pawn in this terrifying legion of slavering monstrosities, who were searching for him in vain, and so hungered for his flesh.

The minutes stretched out for what seemed like an eternity in that damnable place, but his wards held strong, shrouding him from the monsters’ malevolent intent. Then, just like that, the confining blocks were removed, and he was able to burst clear, his eyes snapping open as he returned to reality again. His heart hammered in his chest, but it wasn't with the same feeling of unspeakable horror as before. He quickly calmed himself, then smiled at Edraele and Alyssa, as they hugged him tightly.

Sending a heartfelt message of thanks to Athena, he closed his eyes, and drifted off to sleep once again.

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The following morning, John did as he promised he would, and called a meeting with his crew and Edraele, asking all of them to think of any possible way they might be able to assist Athena. They agreed that they would, before they moved on to a quick recap of the refit plans. Rachel had been delighted by the return of the dedicated engineers from the last refit, and she put them into supervisory roles, freeing up the crew for more useful work.

Sakura and Calara were both overjoyed when Rachel told them this. Not only did they now have time to spar again, Sakura was able to devote more time to the security upgrades, while Calara was able to test the holo-functionality in her new Fleet Command interface. There was to be no respite for John and Alyssa, though, as they were the only ones able to psychically shape the Crystal Alyssium they were using to reinforce and protect the ship.

Before John started any work that morning, he sought out Filaurel and her friends, to gently decline their wonderful offer. He was surprised, but greatly relieved when they weren't distraught, and told him that they understood, when he explained that he had already made such commitments to a significant number of other women. Ioelena looked guilty as she admitted that Myriana had reached out to them late the previous night, with a most intriguing alternative. Sensing Alyssa and Edraele's hand in events, he thanked them both profusely, then went back to assisting with the refit.

A week passed, with the work on the Invictus proceeding faster than Rachel had scheduled. The dedication and focus of all the engineers was remarkable, and they swept through the mid-section of the hull, building the Maliri Crystal superstructure for the new rooms and corridors, before laying down the required power and data cables. After several more days of feeding sessions, every engineer in the project was now linked to Edraele, her psychic network throbbing with new potential.

While John and Alyssa helped with the heavy-lifting and psychic reshaping, Dana focused on the complex and detailed work of constructing the new Progenitor components. She finished the third Power Core, and the moment it had been installed, she launched straight into construction of the Progenitor variant of the Tachyon Drive. Irillith soon had all of the old digital network restored, and working with Jade and Faye, they began to construct the Nexus server required to host the Invictus' gateway.

Everything seemed to be going fantastically well, but there was one unknown that had them all on edge: Tashana. They all wondered where she was, and equally as importantly, was she alright?

John stood with Dana outside the Invictus, studying intricate schematics on her portable holo-viewer, of her variant of the hugely-upgraded Maliri Pulse Cannons. He'd been tasked with extending the defence grid and constructing another sixteen of those weapons, while his mischievous blonde counterpart had started working on the exciting new weapons. As he flogged his brain to memorise the exact dimensions and precise shape of the two-metre-long barrels, Edraele's alarmed voice echoed through his mind.

\*I've received some very disturbing reports, John,\* she said, sounding alarmed. \*Do you think you could return to my suite? I'd like to go over these with you in person.\*

\*Of course, I'll be right there,\* he agreed, trying to sound as reassuring as possible.

Dana looked at him curiously, and said, "You zoned-out for a second there. Everything okay with Edraele?"

He nodded, then said apologetically, "Sorry, Sparks, I need to get over there. I think I've got the Pulse Cannons memorised now, though, and I'll make a start on them as soon as I can."

She shrugged, and said, "There's no rush. It won't take long to fit them on the ship, not like the big fuckers Alyssa's working on. I can leave you the holo-viewer, if you want a refresher on the Pulse Cannons."

Shaking his head, John jogged over to a passing hover-truck, and jumped nimbly onto the back to catch a ride. "I'm sure I've got it now. See you after lunch!" he called back to her, waving goodbye.

The redhead grinned at him, showing him a sparkling white smile, before she bounced off to her Engineering Bay, to continue work on the Tachyon Drive.

John leaned forward to tap the driver on the shoulder, and said, "Hey, Zinthae! Are you heading to the crystal plant in sector fifty-seven?”

She glanced over her shoulder at him in surprise, then grinned, as she said, "That's right, I'm off to pick up the next delivery. Hey, how'd you know it was me driving?"

"Your elegant posture gave it away," he replied, with a wink. "Mind if I hitch a ride part of the way? I've got to see the boss lady."

She chuckled, and shaking her head, she replied, "I can't believe you, of all people, have to answer to a Matriarch!"

"I've got two nagging me all day!" he answered in a staged whisper, while rolling his eyes.

She giggled at that, and he sat back on the truck, enjoying the banter with the young woman. He frowned then, remembering that she was actually seventy-eight, but she looked so youthful, it was easy to forget.

\*I do not nag,\* Alyssa said, faking a frosty, disapproving tone.

\*Sure you do,\* he teased her, in return. Adopting a high-pitched telepathic voice, he continued, \*Have you remembered to bone this girl today? How about fucking that one up the ass? Don't forget to have these four girls blow you! Oh, and leave the recruitment of nubile young playmates to me, I'm the XO, remember...\*

\*Your life is just one monotonous grind, isn't it?\* Alyssa said, with faux-sympathy. \*You must really wish you could catch a break someday?\*

\*Welcome to my life,\* he replied glumly, then grinned as he heard her laughter reverberate through his mind.

"Nearly there, John," Zinthae called back to him.

"Thanks, beautiful!" he replied, patting her on the shoulder, before leaping off the side of the truck.

He jogged down a side corridor as he headed from the main thoroughfare towards the Matriarch’s quarters, and the blonde guards smiled at him as he walked between them. The lounge was empty, so he walked straight through to Edraele's study, where he found her sitting behind her desk, while the four young Matriarchs sat on the sofas nearby. He acknowledged each of them with a warm smile.

"Thank you for arriving so quickly," Edraele said, rising to her feet and gliding over to greet him with a kiss.

"Of course, what's the problem exactly?" he asked, looking at her tense expression with concern.

She sighed, and said, "We think we know where Tashana went." She glanced over at the House Loraleth Matriarch, and continued, "Kali, could you show John what you showed me, please?"

"Of course!" Kali replied, springing energetically to her feet.

She took a deep breath to remind herself to be stately and calm, and walked over to the holo-projector on Edraele's desk and pressed a button. A Maliri Regency territory map sprang into existence in the centre of the room, clearly showing the areas of space owned by each of the rival Houses. She pointed to a significantly-sized area of territory, that was marked as belonging to House Perfaren.

"I've been receiving reports from spies and hidden sensor probes, which have been showing massive fleet movements into House Perfaren territory," Kali explained, hitting a couple of buttons which showed sizeable numbers of ships crossing the border. "My sources believe that Matriarch Gaenna Baelora has stripped every fleet asset from her territory, and has sent them into Perfaren space."

"Are you sure it's not some kind of massive invasion?" John asked, just to check.

Shaking her head, Kali replied, "No, definitely not. Their forces are forming up together in huge staging grounds. It looks like they've thrown everything into an alliance."

John frowned, and pointing at the House Baelora territory on the map, he asked, "Won't that leave this Geanna vulnerable to attack from Houses... Holaris, Romenor, and Kayden?"

Nyrelle shook her head, and replied, "I'm afraid not, John. House Aeberos shares a border with Holaris and Romenor, and my spies report they've withdrawn all fleet assets from the border as well. They're all gathering in House Perfaren territory."

Edraele placed her hand on his shoulder, and sounded deeply concerned, as she explained, "That would mean that House Perfaren at Rank Three, has formed an alliance with Houses ranked Six, Eight, Nine, and Fifteen."

"How many Houses are there in total?" John asked, looking around the group of worried women.

"Nineteen!" Leena answered in a rush. "The number fluctuates slightly as new houses are formed or old ones brought down."

"Alright, but your Houses are ranked One, Two, Four, Five and Seven, right? Surely based on pure power, we have a significant advantage?" he asked them.

"Against those five Houses alone, we would have a huge advantage in fleet size," Edraele confirmed for him, but her frown told him there was more bad news.

"Let me guess, there's more Houses in this new alliance?" he asked, looking pensive.

Edraele nodded, and replied, "We think all of them have thrown in their lot with House Perfaren."

John winced, and exclaimed, "All of them! I thought alliances were extremely rare?!"

Edraele nodded, and replied, "Such a vast coalition is unprecedented. For the last several days, I've been attempting to reach out to various Houses, to see if the pressure we applied had borne fruit. They're all refusing to take incoming calls from me. I tried contacting some of the more remote Houses as well, but I've been facing an identical comms blackout."

"They won't open comms with any of us, either," Kali confirmed, sounding nervous.

Valani looked apprehensive, as she cleared her throat, and said, "I think all this might have been my fault." She ignored the supportive words and denials from her fellow Matriarchs, and stepped over to John, as she continued, "I accidentally met with Tashana a couple of times before she left, and she was deathly afraid of you, and what you might do to the Maliri. I only just remembered it now, after seeing what's been happening with House Perfaren, but I mentioned to her that I'd been having problems with my Fleet Commander on that border."

“There’s no way you could have known what she was about to do,” John said, taking her hand in his and smiling at her supportively.

"We think Tashana slipped into House Perfaren territory," Edraele summarised for him. "She must have convinced Tsarra Perfaren that the Mael'nerak threat is real, and they've been working nonstop to gather allies."

"Hold on, let me think a moment," John said, clenching his jaw as he stared at the map. He narrowed his eyes, and continued grimly, "We've got to assume your theory is correct, that they've managed to recruit all the other Houses against us. How do we stand in a knockdown fight against their forces?"

"They slightly outnumber us, by a margin of perhaps twenty percent," Edraele said soberly. "Although, all vessels in my fleets have been upgraded with Trankaran engines and retrothrusters."

"And we've got the Invictus," John said, then grimaced as he added, "When it's finally spaceworthy."

"What should we do?" Kali asked, looking at him with wide eyes.

He closed his eyes for a moment, trying to put himself in Tashana's position. He knew she hated Irillith and Edraele, blaming them for everything that had happened in the Unclaimed Wastes. However, he'd seen how terrified of him she was, and armed with whatever knowledge she had gathered about Progenitors in her research, he knew that opposing him had to be her highest priority.

"I want you to move all your fleets to Genthalas. Tashana and her Matriarchs aren't interested in territory, they want to take out everyone in this room," John said, looking at each of them in turn. "We'll need everything you've got to stand off against Tashana's rebellion. Whichever fleet gets here first, we'll start upgrading those ships with Trankaran engines and thrusters. I planned to give all of you access to some more of my tech so you could upgrade your fleets, but we won't have time for major refits now. Will any of your Fleet Commanders give you any difficulty about moving your forces?"

Nyrelle smiled at him, and brushed her hand through her long flowing white hair, as she replied, "Since we've been with you, they wouldn't dream of disobeying us. Kalmaera has been helpful and eager to please."

"Good, just let me know if you need me to intervene," he said, supportively. Turning to look at the map again, he asked, "I need to know two things: How long until they finish amassing all their forces, and how long will it take them to fly to Genthalas?"

Edraele and the others shared pensive glances, until she replied, "I'd estimate four days for forces from the furthest-flung Houses to assemble. Then three days for their armada to arrive at Genthalas." The young Matriarchs nodded their agreement with her hasty estimates.

John nodded, and said authoritatively, "We'll assume only two days for them to gather enough ships, just in case they don't wait, and try to catch us unawares. However, they'll still need three days to get here. So we need to prepare for a massive battle in five days, ladies."

"A battle this closely matched, involving every ship in the Regency, is going to be a bloodbath," Leena said quietly, sounding more than a little scared.

"We'll be looking at Maliri casualties in the tens of millions," Valani agreed, having gone deathly pale.

"I'm going to try and make sure it doesn't come to that," John replied, reaching out to put a comforting hand on her shoulder, then looking around the group and meeting each of their frightened gazes.

They nodded, drawing strength from his supportive smile and confident bearing.

\*Rachel says it's going to be tight,\* Alyssa warned him. \*You better get back here. We need everyone working balls-to-the-wall to get this crate hammered back together in time!\*

\*Alright, I'll head back in a minute. We'll review and see if there's anything else we can scratch from the refit, while we just focus on getting the Invictus ready for battle,\* John agreed, doing his best to keep his worry from his face.

He beckoned the young Matriarchs over for a group hug, and when they'd gathered to him, he said to them in a calm, steady voice, "Now, It's important that you don't go worrying yourselves sick, wondering what might, or might not happen next. I need all of you fresh and alert, so that we can react quickly and efficiently to anything unexpected that crops up." He smiled at Edraele, and beckoning her over, he added, "That goes for you too, beautiful."

Edraele put her arms around, Nyrelle and Valani, and said obediently, "I'll try to just focus on the tasks at hand. I'll recall all my border forces, and marshall them at Genthalas."

"Thank you," he said, giving her an approving smile. He looked at the four young women around him, and continued, "Can all of you do the same for me?"

They all nodded, looking at him with big eyes, the nervous tension quite apparent in their beautiful young faces.

"You're all good girls, and I'm very proud of you. We've made our strategic decisions and now we just need to wait to see how this plays itself out. Just focus on gathering your forces as we discussed, and if circumstances change, we'll adapt to them," he said, locking eyes with each of them, as he looked around the group.

"I'm so glad you're here to help us get through this!" Kali exclaimed, her indigo eyes full of gratitude.

He leaned in and gave her a tender kiss, and said, "Everything will be alright. We've got one huge advantage that Tashana's Matriarchs don't have."

"What's that?" Valani asked him, hanging on his every word.

"All of us genuinely care for each other, and want to do our best to improve the lives of billions of Maliri. Knowing that we're doing the right thing makes a huge difference to morale, and the women under your command will already know about the impact you've made to the worlds you govern," he explained, looking into her lovely teal-coloured eyes.

"John, can we meet up for a team-building session tonight?" Nyrelle asked him, her dark-blue eyes flashing with excitement.

He smiled at her, and replied, "That's an excellent suggestion, Matriarch. I'll bring my crew too, if that's alright? They've been dying to meet all of you."

Nyrelle nodded eagerly, and the others smiled at her, then nodded too, equally as excited as the lusty House Aeberos Matriarch.

\*Celebrate the news that we're about to face an empire-wide civil war, with an orgy?\* Alyssa asked him, curiously. He could feel her flush of arousal across the empathic bond, as she added, \*I like your style, Mister Blake!\*

Edraele met his gaze across Nyrelle and Valani's shoulders, and said, \*Thank you for putting them at ease, John. You did a superb job of keeping your worries so well hidden. If I couldn't hear your thoughts, I'd never have suspected.\*

\*It's my job to shoulder that burden of responsibility, so they don't have to,\* he replied, dropping his confident bravado for a second, as he met Edraele's probing purple gaze.

Alyssa's soothing purr coasted through his mind, as she murmured, \*And it's our job as your Matriarchs, to reward you for your diligence in your new role. We're going to be very good girls for you tonight, handsome.\*

Edraele's full lips lifted up into a beautiful smile, and she nodded, as she stared at him reverently.

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Tashana gave the young House Perfaren Matriarch a reassuring pat on the shoulder, and said in her rough voice, "I have every confidence in you, Tsarra. You can do this."

Doing her best to fight down her nerves, Tsarra nodded, and then turned in her chair to face the screen. She glanced at her assistant, Renelle, who began the recording, then stared at the camera, and said decisively, "My name is Matriarch Tsarra Perfaren, and I lead the Maliri Freedom Alliance. The Matriarchs who stand with me profoundly reject your attempts to subjugate our civilisation, Progenitor. We will not bow down for another of your kind, like our ancestors were forced to for the Mael'nerak, and we will fight you to the last woman, to protect the Regency! On behalf of all the Free Maliri, we declare war on you and your Thralls, enslaver!"

With a curt nod to Renelle, the recording was ended, and she slumped in her chair, glancing at Aadya and Tashana with a worried frown. "How was that? Did I sound nervous?" she asked, lifting her ragged thumbnail to nibble on it, before forcing herself to clasp the armrests of her chair, to keep her anxious hands occupied.

"That was perfect!" Tashana said, her violet eyes flashing with excitement. "You didn't seem nervous at all."

Aadya smiled at her youthful Matriarch, remembering well her vicious predecessor, and felt profoundly grateful that Tsarra had been the one to inherit her position, rather than her two spiteful older sisters. She nodded her agreement with Tashana, and said, "You had just the right amount of gravitas, Matriarch. Your speech was very inspiring."

Tsarra looked immensely relieved, and she said, "I was sure you'd be able to see I was shaking with nerves!"

"Should I arrange for your declaration of war to be broadcast to our worlds, Matriarch?" Renelle asked, her tone respectful, as she looked at Tsarra.

After a moment of indecision, Tsarra nodded, and said, "Yes, do that please, Renelle. Oh, and don't forget to send a copy to the other Matriarchs too! It's important they see what we're transmitting to the Progenitor and his Thralls." She blushed then, remembering that a Matriarch shouldn't be so polite to one of her servants.

"At once, Matriarch," her assistant replied, smiling at her before bowing and leaving the room.

"Is Edraele still attempting to contact you?" Tashana asked, her tone pensive.

Tsarra nodded, and replied, "She's been trying to reach me daily for the last several days."

Tashana's eyes narrowed suspiciously as she asked, "You haven't viewed any of her messages have you? It's imperative you don't expose yourself to her lies and insidious influence!"

The pressure on the young House Perfaren Matriarch had been intense over the last few weeks, as over a dozen Houses looked to her, to organise and lead their unlikely coalition. Overwrought with the stress, she frowned at the masked woman's tone, and Tsarra bristled as she replied, "Of course not! Why are you treating me like some half-witted fool? I listened to your warnings!"

"I'm sorry, Matriarch. I'm just worried," Tashana replied, averting her eyes from Tsarra's indignant glare. She went quiet for a moment, then added urgently, "We can't afford to take any chances with the other Matriarchs, though. I think you should destroy any comms beacons around Valaden Space. We need to contain and isolate House Valaden territory, and quarantine the Progenitor and his Matriarchs in Genthalas, before he can corrupt any more Houses!"

Tsarra darted a worried glance at Aadya, and the older Fleet Commander nodded, as she said, "I know such a thing is unheard of, but it's a sensible precaution."

"Alright, issue the command then, Aadya," Tsarra said, as she rose from her chair. She shivered, as she continued, "I'd better go and prepare for my meeting with the Alliance. I can't let the other Matriarchs see how scared I am..."

"I'll issue your command to the appropriate fleet assets, immediately," Aadya replied, while dipping her head to the younger woman a respectful bow.

Tsarra started to walk for the door, with Tashana and Aadya falling into step beside her, and the House Perfaren Matriarch sounded apprehensive, as she asked, "Are you sure it's wise to charge headlong for Genthalas? You advised me previously that the station's defences are formidable..."

"We have no choice," Tashana replied, her rough voice insistent. "The longer we wait, the more time John Blake has to enthrall more of the Maliri. We have to strike as quickly as we can, while we still have an advantage in numbers."

Aadya nodded, as she replied, "It's their most powerful defensive asset, drawing them away from it will be almost impossible." She sounded resigned to the decision, as she continued, "If we're going to confront the Progenitor and House Valaden, we have to prepare for a battle around Genthalas Shipyard. I've drawn up plans for numerous different scenarios involving an assault on the station."

Tashana smiled grimly behind her mask as they walked along the corridor, and she sounded confident as she said, "Even if we can't kill him outright in the battle, we just have to damage his forces enough to make him abandon his Maliri Matriarch and flee. That's how Mael'nerak's foul dominion was finally overthrown."

"I hope you're right," Tsarra said, sharing a nervous glance with Aadya, as they approached the meeting room. "We're gambling everything on this strategy."

"I've heard it from Mael'nerak's Matriarch herself," Tashana replied, her faith unshakeable. "Valada, my ancient ancestor, was the First Matriarch of what was to become House Valaden, and she left a warning for future generations. Mael'nerak was attacked, and was forced to abandon her when he left. That was what freed the Maliri from his tyranny ten millennia ago."

Aadya's normally-calm face was tense with worry, as she said, "We do have the advantage in numbers, but that's balanced by Genthalas. If he doesn't flee, and his forces don't surrender, the scale of death and destruction will be too terrible to contemplate."

"Trust me," Tashana said, not wavering for a moment. "It's our single best chance of defeating him."

With that, they walked into the meeting room, and prepared themselves to convince thirteen other Matriarchs of the validity of exactly that strategy.

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Receiving Tsarra Perfaren's declaration of war invigorated John, the girls, and the Maliri, with renewed focus. With a dramatic deadline now set, work on the Invictus continued at a frantic pace. The Maliri engineers finished the superstructure after two more days, and the empty shells of all the new rooms were completed by the third. Power and data cables were put into place for all the new facilities, although construction for a number of them had been postponed, with the push to get the Invictus combat-ready paramount. While hundreds of engineers laboured away inside the assault cruiser, even more burst into action, rapidly cladding the entire outer-hull in Alyssa's quad-shaped Crystal Alyssium armour plating.

As soon as Dana had finished constructing the Tachyon Drive, it was swiftly installed in the refurbished Drive Room, the power-hungry device hooked up to dozens of power relays, to provide it all the energy it needed. John and Dana called for Alyndra and her group of white-haired technicians to visit them in the Invictus' cargo bay afterwards, and they presented the astonished women with the now-obsolete Power Core and Tachyon Drive that had just been removed from the Invictus, along with the schematics to build more. There was no rest for the redhead after that, as she immediately got to work on creating smaller versions of the Progenitor devices, that would be installed in the Raptor.

The Invictus had started the refit at a trim five-hundred metres, which was the standard size for a Terran Federation cruiser. With the additional superstructure in place, it had been extended to a burgeoning length of seven-hundred-and-fifty metres, making it comparable in size to a battlecruiser. It took nearly three days to affix all the new armour plating into position, but Rachel grinned with satisfaction when the grey, denuded vessel, was a resplendent sparkling-white once again.

It took John a few attempts to get the Pulse Cannon barrels exactly right, but one of the advantages of working with a psychically-reformable material, was that he could simply melt the alloy into a big floating ball, and start all over again. Eventually, he received an approving nod from Dana, when she examined the first one he was happy with, and he proceeded to blitz through the rest of the sixteen that were required.

Alyssa worked on the twelve huge, forty-metre-long howitzers that would be required for the new batteries in the mid-section, and she finished at roughly the same time as John completed the last of the Pulse Cannons. After a quick game of rock-paper-scissors, John began to form the plating for the inside of the turret wells. Alyssa was overjoyed to have avoided working on any form of armour plating, and she only teased him lightly for losing. As the victor, she worked on the sixteen new ten-metre barrels for Dana's latest toys, which would be mounted on the underbelly of the Invictus.

Teams of engineers worked frantically to assemble the rest of the weapons, while secondary teams laboured on the turret housings which would support all this new firepower. Meanwhile, a number of the existing Beam Lasers on the underbelly were moved to new hardpoints, making room for the new weapons, and providing an even spread of weaponry over the hull. By the time the engineers had finished armour plating the Invictus' hull, the Pulse Cannon turrets were fully built, and ready to be installed on weapon hardpoints.

It was at that time Edraele contacted John, warning him of a massive incoming armada. Sensors on the edge of Loraleth territory had picked up several hundred vessels crossing over the border with House Perfaren, and just as John had predicted, they ignored all House Loraleth's worlds, as they made a beeline for Genthalas Station. Ships from John's forces had been arriving at the station daily, and it was now a race to get all the vessels there in time, before the invaders arrived.

Knowing they only had a couple of days left to finish the work, had everyone working long shifts to wrap up the final stages. By the evening of the fifth day, the last of the new huge cannons had been lowered into place, massive hull doors were aligned and secured for the additional hangar, and the launching mechanism for Dana's secret project was hastily fixed in the bow of the ship.

John and the girls met up on the maintenance gantry overlooking the Invictus that evening, to see the final results of all their hard work. All the weaponry was exposed from the hull, revealing the forbidding arsenal contained within the ferociously upgraded vessel.

Shaking his head in wonder at the glorious sight, John put his arm around Rachel, and said, "You excelled yourself, honey. I can't believe we managed to get everything finished in time."

"Not quite everything," she admitted, with a resigned expression on her beautiful face. Ticking off the unfinished items on her fingers, she continued, "We had to postpone refurbishing the Officers' Lounge, and we still need to construct the Observatory. We haven't made a start on Jade's-"

Alyssa laughed, and interrupting her, she said, "If we're still alive tomorrow, we can worry about installing the rest, after the battle. John's right, you did a hell of a job coordinating everything."

"The sheer number of components we've installed and upgraded is astounding," Irillith agreed, giving Rachel a respectful nod of the head. "Planning out the phases of the install was tremendously helpful; we would have been lost without your guidance."

Dana slipped her arm around the brunette's waist, and said honestly, "There's no way I could've built all those Progenitor devices, and supervised everything too. If I'd been left in charge, the ship would still be in bits!"

"I've no idea how you managed all those teams," Sakura agreed, nodding. She smiled at Rachel, and added, "I watched you organising pretty much everything, and I still don't know how you pulled it off!"

"I wouldn't have known where to even start," Jade freely admitted.

Alyssa smiled at the Nymph, and said affectionately, "You spent most of the last three weeks either acting as a very tasty straw for John's quad, or blown up like a deliciously curvy, cum-inflated balloon. I doubt you'd have had time for anything else, sexy!"

Jade let out a happy sigh, and glancing at John, she said, "Feeding all those little kittens was bliss!" She smiled at Rachel, and added, "Even if I hadn't been busy, I still couldn't have managed everything. I don't think any of us could have."

Rachel grinned at her in gratitude, and looking around at her friends, she replied, "Thanks, everyone! I must admit, it was very exciting, running a project of this size. I'd be happy to plan and oversee the next one, too."

John faked a groan, and exclaimed, "We've only just put my ship back together again! I'm not having you girls chopping it to bits, again!"

Dana grinned at him, and her eyes sparkled, as she said, "With the right tech, you'd change your tune!"

"Yeah, that's true enough," he conceded, sharing her grin.

"Shall we take a tour?" Calara asked everyone, impatient to have a good look around.

John nodded, and said, "Not much has changed in the rear of the ship, if I remember right? Pretty much everything new, is built into the middle section?"

Dana nodded, and said, "Yeah, most of the new stuff, we can access from the front-tube."

"'Front Tube'?" Calara asked with a frown. "Maybe we should start calling them the 'fore grav-tube', and 'aft grav-tube', to be more accurate?"

"Nah, that's too much of a mouthful. We refer to those fuckers dozens of times a day," Dana said, as they followed her down the steps from the maintenance gantry, to the drydock deck. She waved a hand dismissively, and continued, "Front-tube, and rear-tube will do."

"Which do you prefer taking, John?" Alyssa asked airily. "Are you a front-tube, or a rear-tube man?"

"I like to use both, as frequently as possible," he replied, suppressing a grin with some difficulty.

Dana groaned, and said, "Yeah, you lot won't let that go, will you? Fine, we'll use whatever Calara said."

"How about we compromise with 'fore-tube' and 'aft-tube'?" the Latina suggested with a smile, as they approached the secondary airlock on the starboard side of the hull.

"Sounds good to me," John agreed, and the nodding heads all-round clinched it.

Stopping by the forward airlock, Dana said, "Alright, let's start right here. I decided to install two new airlocks, on the port and starboard side, mainly for ease of access. They operate in the same way as the old one, with DNA scanners built into panels beside the outer and inner airlock doors."

Sakura stepped forward, and turned to look at her audience, as she said, "I wasn't sure it was wise to triple the number of possible entry points for hostile boarders, but Dana made some compelling arguments."

The redhead smiled at her, and said, "Firstly, we've beefed up internal security. Secondly, I'd prefer badguys come in through the doors where we're prepared for them, rather than burn their way through my hull, and thirdly..." She grinned at her audience, and added, "Anyone boarding us would have to be fucking crazy. If they're badass enough to survive for more than a few seconds... Well, it probably wouldn't make a difference if we just had one or three airlocks, at that point."

Sakura pressed her hand on the DNA scanner, and it flashed green, when it identified her. The airlock door spiralled open, and she gestured inside, and said, "Shall we?"

The tour group proceeded inside, where they were met by Faye, who greeted them all with a beaming grin. "Welcome to your new home!" she announced, cheerfully.

"Thanks, Faye," John said with a smile. He raised an eyebrow, and asked, "Have you got free-run over all the new rooms?"

"I certainly do! There's holo-projectors mounted everywhere!" she replied, bouncing with excitement. Turning to Dana, she gave her a guilty smile, and added, "Sorry to interrupt your tour!"

"No problem, Faye," the redhead replied, grinning at her affectionately. Turning to look at her audience, she added, "Alright, the first new internal room, is this security corridor."

Looking past her, the long corridor stretched back for just under half the width of the Invictus, before turning a sharp corner.

"I've been wondering about this," Jade mused. "Why is there a bend in the corridor? Wouldn't it have been easier to just build it in a straight line, connecting the two airlocks?"

Rachel nudged her lover, and asked playfully, "Did you lose your ruler when you made the plans?"

Dana rolled her eyes, and pointing at Sakura, she said, "Hey, it was her idea!"

"Very nice," John said, nodding his approval as he took a few steps along the corridor, moving to one side, to try and see around the corner.

"What is?" Rachel asked, in confusion.

Sakura smiled at the brunette, and replied, "With the modified design, if we're boarded from both sides simultaneously, defenders in the reinforced sentry station in the middle can't be caught in a crossfire."

Dana nodded, and said, "We've built pop-out turrets in the walls, and pop-up barricades for cover in the floors. There's also a small secured armoury at the bend in the corridor, to make sure defenders are stocked-up on gear."

Sakura pointed to the floor, and said, "The decking can be electrified to stun intruders, and when the blast doors have been lowered, we've got knock-out gas we can use to incapacitate people caught between them. We added the same security measures to the corridor inside the original airlock."

"Very sensible precautions," Irillith replied, looking suitably impressed. She raised an eyebrow as she turned to look at Sakura, and asked, "Would they have stopped you?"

The Asian girl thought about it for a moment, then shook her head, and replied, "Not on their own, no. However, we've repositioned the airlock's sensors to a non-standard location, to make them much harder to find and block. They're also shielded, so simple scanning devices won't pick them up, either."

Dana shared a look with Sakura, then explained, "I also modded the cameras to add thermal and mag-vision, and motion scanners have been built into the walls that are designed to detect disruptions in airflow. Infiltrators using similar stealth technology to that light-bending weave Sakura had, would be immune to most forms of detection, but the motion scanners would have allowed us to track her, when she snuck aboard."

Sakura nodded, and continued, "The motion scanners are tiny and shielded, making them very hard to locate. I wouldn't have been able to block or hide from them, and Faye would have been alerted."

"Unfortunately, we've still only got Gatling Lasers in the turrets at the moment," Faye said, with a cute frown.

Giving her a sympathetic smile, Sakura said, "The upgrade had to be abandoned on the tighter timeframe, but we'll work on them soon."

"What are you going to replace them with?" John asked, as it hadn't come up in earlier briefings.

Dana winked at him, and replied, "Remember that weird-looking sonic rifle I swiped from Underworld? I've been redesigning and improving that in my spare time, and I'll fit Sonic Cannons to replace the Gatling Lasers. They can be used on lethal or non-lethal modes, and although they have a hard time with very thick armour, they'll be ideal to combat most invaders, without fucking up the hull with missed shots."

"They'll be devastating against stealth-based infiltrators who favour light armour," Sakura agreed. She gave them a rueful smile, and added, "I think we're all agreed we don't want any shady characters like that sneaking aboard."

John put his arm around her, and said, "If they all turn out like you did, that wouldn't be so bad."

She gave him a playful peck on the cheek, then pointed at the nearest door leading to the bow of the ship. "Do you want to show them that, next?" she asked Dana.

"Nah, that's not finished," she replied, pouting in annoyance.

Rachel rolled her eyes, and said, "Yeah, you did say you wouldn't get a chance to work on it. I suppose I'll be putting my delicate surgeon's hands to work on your grubby electronics again, right?"

"Oh, a girl after my own heart!" Dana swooned, holding a theatrical hand on her chest, before grinning at the brunette.

"Yeah, yeah, on with the tour," Rachel replied, smiling at her lover.

Turning to the double-doors on the aft side of the corridor, Dana hit the button, and the reinforced doors slid wide open, revealing the cavernous room beyond. "Here, we have the Primary Hangar," she said, walking inside the two-hundred-metre long hangar bay, and turning with her arms wide apart. "What the fuck we're actually going to do with all this space, I've got no idea!"

"You could fit a destroyer in here!" Calara marvelled, slowly walking out into the cavernous room. "I hadn't realised how big this was actually going to be!"

Dana nodded, and pointing upwards to the ceiling that soared high overhead, she said, "It's double the height of the old hangar, just in case." She stood with her hands on her hips as she turned around to survey the enormous room, and added, "We don't necessarily have to use it for one big ship, we've got tons of options. We could convert it into automated-combat-drone bays, or maybe Maliri-crewed fighter bays. Hell, we don't even have to keep it as a hangar! You could convert this whole area into one vast missile battery."

Alyssa appeared to be mulling the options over, until she said, "I vote for the Maliri fighter bays." She raised an eyebrow as she glanced at John, and added disingenuously, "How many gorgeous Maliri pilots and groundcrew do you reckon we'd need for that? Fifty? One hundred? More?"

He laughed, and grinned at her, as he said, "I'm not sure that's such a great idea. Next, you'll be wanting to know if they can fly fighters while pregnant."

"Accidents do happen," she said archly. "Who knows how reliable Maliri birth-control is, or if they even bother, with no men around!"

Rachel suddenly looked stunned, and she murmured, "How on Terra did I miss that?!"

"What's the matter?" John asked her, startled to see her looking so taken aback. The incredibly intelligent doctor rarely seemed to be surprised by much these days.

Shaking her head, the brunette replied, "Let me look into it, and I'll get back to you, okay?"

"Sure," John agreed amiably, seeing the bemused looks on all the girls' faces, except for Alyssa, who appeared flushed with arousal. Realising he wasn't going to get any answers for the moment, he glanced at Dana, and continued, "Let's leave the decision on the Primary Hangar for the moment, there's no rush. I'm guessing the Secondary Hangar is basically the old one, with the Raptor in it?"

"Yeah, that's right," she confirmed for him. Smiling then, she added, "I did think of something new to add there, that wasn't on my original plans. I'll show you that in a minute."

They filed back into the corridor, and followed her along to the bend, where they found the entrance to the fore-tube. The design was identical to the previous grav-tube, with red and blue anti-gravity fields in a large cylindrical shaft, that rose up through the decks. There were only two exits from this tube though, one at Deck Five, and the other was right at the top of the tube, on Deck Three.

Stepping into the blue field, Dana said, "There's no point showing you Deck Three yet. We had to postpone everything there, to finish all the combat-orientated facilities in time."

"No problem, let's just take a stroll along Deck Five," John agreed, shrugging his shoulders amiably. He knew what had been constructed on that level, having armoured most of it, but this was still new for most of the others in their group.

Stepping out into another long corridor, there were closed bulkheads every fifty metres or so, which were designed to limit the damage from internal explosions. This level contained the two new Power Core Chambers, along with the magazines for all the new ordnance-based guns. They stopped at the first pair of those magazines, with Dana strolling inside the one on the right, as soon as they'd all caught up with her.

Pointing to an enormous reinforced caisson that dominated the room, Dana said, "The ammo for the front pair of cannons goes in there, and there's six rooms like this, one for each set of Heavy Cannons. We used Maliri crystal-tipped rounds so we didn't waste any priceless elements like Onyxium, but they're harder and denser than standard Terran titanium rounds, so I was able to reduce the calibre, and pack in a lot more." Nodding towards tubes that rose up through the ceiling, she continued, "Rounds are fed by gravity fields up to the chambers above, then auto-loaded into the cannon."

Calara nodded her approval, and said, "Looks like an elegant, sturdy, and reliable design, and a huge improvement over the original." She smiled at the others, and explained for their benefit, "Terran Heavy Cannon magazines have been notorious for conveyor-belt jams."

Dana chuckled, and said, "Yeah, I didn't fancy running all the way out here mid-combat, and getting stuck in with my wrench. We'll leave that shit to Terran Federation crews! They've usually got more engineers aboard than they know what to do with!"

With that, she led them outside, and jerked a thumb at the next room, as she said, "Same idea here, but it's smaller calibre, for the cannons on the underbelly."

There were two identical rooms opposite each other, one for the port weapons, the other for the starboard batteries. John glanced through the clear-crystal window in the sealed door, and spotted tubes leading down into the floor this time. He jogged to catch up with the rest of the group, who were walking through the first bulkhead.

"So, there's three pairs of each magazine type, along this deck?" Calara was asking, when he fell into step beside Dana.

The redhead nodded, and replied, "There's no point showing you the others, they all look the same. I figured it was sensible to split the magazines though, what with John reinforcing them all. Even if one is penetrated, the resulting explosion would just vent out through the point of impact. A detonation wouldn't be powerful enough to rupture the quad-shaped Crystal Alyssium shell. The main benefit, is that the rest of the guns can keep on firing, even if we lose a magazine."

"That's a very sensible damage-mitigation policy," Calara said, thoroughly approving of the redhead's modifications to her original plans.

"I thought you'd like it," Dana said, nudging the Latina with an elbow.

They walked along the length of the corridor until they reached the aft-tube, and the newly-cut hole in its Crystal Alyssium shell.

Before Dana could step out into the grav-tube, Alyssa said, "When you asked me to shape new doorways in this grav-tube, I was too busy to bother asking questions at the time, but won't punching holes in it fuck up the Inertia Negation device?"

The Chief Engineer shook her mane of dark auburn hair, and replied, "Nope! The tube is incredibly strong, with the built-in crystalline lattice. Knocking a few holes in it won't make a difference, and besides, we've got the 'fore-tube' to share the load now. If anything, the stress on the frame has been lessened since the refit."

Alyssa patted her on the shoulder, and smiled, as she said, "I knew you'd have thought it through, Sparks, I was just curious."

"Anyone else want to second-guess my designs?" Dana asked, airily. When everyone shook their heads, she smiled at them, and continued, "Alright, let's move on to the really good shit!"

They stepped into the grav-tube, and rose up in the blue field, passing level after level, until they reached Deck Two. Dana jumped out with a spring in her step, and bounced there impatiently, while she waited for the others to join her.

"Aren't you going to show us the new Tachyon Drive?" John asked, glancing back down the tube.

"It's a big, round, shiny sphere, on Deck Five," she replied with a shrug. "Progenitors have developed some incredible technology, but it's not particularly exciting to look at."

"Alright, we'll skip that then," John said, with a chuckle. The rest of the group had arrived, so he bowed to Dana, and gestured down the familiar corridor with his hand, as he said, "You may continue with the tour, Grand Engineering Overlord."

She giggled with excitement, then skipped down the corridor ahead of them, turning around every ten metres to urge them to hurry. The girls had been sleeping in their own rooms for the last couple of days, just while the Captain's Bedroom went through a refurbishment, and Dana had forbidden anyone from entering until the work was complete. John had been involved with her plans, as he'd been the one reinforcing the walls with Crystal Alyssium, to keep them safe while they slept.

They passed all the Officer's Rooms, and strolled into the Captain's Bedroom, to find it had dramatically changed. The room was now double the length, with the vast bed still dominating the back wall.

"Isn't the corridor a bit longer now?" Jade asked, looking back through the door, to get her bearings.

Dana nodded, and said, "Well spotted!"

John saw Alyssa dart off to the left, a worried look on her beautiful face, as she disappeared through the new door in the wall.

"Are you alright? Where are you going?" Calara called after her.

"Checking my clothes!" the blonde replied, her voice muffled from inside the new room.

Alyssa reappeared a few moments later, and sounding deeply relieved, she said, "I'll have to thank whoever you got to move everything. It all looks pristine!"

"I'll tell my boys you said thanks!" Faye replied, grinning at her. She frowned for a moment, then added, "Enhancing their programming for that level of fine-motor-control was tricky, but they were due an upgrade, anyway. I knew you'd be upset if anything got wrinkled."

John walked over to the door and peered inside, finding everything looking much the same as before, but with twice as much space in the wardrobe. At the far end was the weapon rack, and two armour-equipping frames, complete with armour. His and Alyssa's clothing were hung up in a breathtaking display of neatness and orderly perfection, with long empty rails beyond the ones occupied by their clothes.

"It looks so sad, half-empty like this," Alyssa said, a forlorn expression on her beautiful face. She glanced at him with puppy-dog eyes, and continued, "It's just begging to be filled up with loads of sexy new outfits..."

He laughed, and rolled his eyes, as he replied, "Alright, we'll go on a shopping trip sometime." He smiled at Sakura and Irillith, and added, "You two haven't experienced the joys of one of Alyssa's shopping bonanzas yet. I wouldn't want you to feel left out."

"We'll have the best time!" Alyssa said, beaming with happiness, as she walked over and put her arms around the two women.

Jade turned around to look to the right of the bedroom, and was surprised to see there was only one door on that side now. "Why did you move the walk-in wardrobe?" she asked Dana, looking bemused.

"Come and have a look!" the redhead replied, skipping over to the door, and beckoning the Nymph with her.

Jade gasped when she gazed through the door, and got her first look at the greatly-expanded new bathroom. "This looks amazing!" she gushed, her emerald eyes opening wide.

As the girls darted inside and swooned over the vast bathtub and much larger shower, John smiled at them, as he said, "I don't think Charles ever envisaged I'd be having quite so much fun, when he refurbished the ship. We were long-overdue an upgrade." He shared a look with Dana, and raised an eyebrow, and she gave him an excited nod in return.

Alyssa's eyes sparkled as she listened to his thoughts, then ran her fingers along the bathtub, and said, "We'll be able to have all sorts of soapy fun in here."

Dana nodded and grinned as she said, "Exactly!" Walking back into the bedroom, she added, "Alright, back to the serious stuff now. This is the important bit."

John led the somewhat reluctant girls back into the bedroom, and they gathered in a semi-circle around Dana, as she waited for them by the foot of the bed.

"What now?" Jade asked, looking around curiously.

Grinning at her friend, she said, "I'm going to need an actor and a couple of actresses to make this more authentic. John, Calara, Sakura, could you get on the bed please?"

John laughed, but did as he was bid, offering a hand to the two of them, as they kicked off their shoes to join him. He lay back in the middle of the bed, with the Latina and the Asian girl sitting down beside him.

"Hello," Sakura said, with a flirtatious smile.

"Hello, right back," Calara replied, and the two shared a kiss, before snuggling into John.

Dana held up her hands, and said in a dramatic voice, "Now, imagine the scene! Our lusty hero has just fucked his beautiful wenches senseless, and is enjoying a well-earned nap!"

Rachel giggled at her lover's theatrics, until the redhead shushed her to silence. Meanwhile, Sakura grabbed a couple of pillows, and handed one over to Calara, with a grin. The Latina laughed, and they stuffed them under their tops, to make it more authentic.

"Oh no!" Dana cried out, sounding alarmed. "They're under attack!"

Faye was watching Dana like a hawk, and eagerly waiting for her signal - a nod towards the trio. As soon as she received it, the purple girl leapt up onto the bed, and announced, "John, wake up! Incoming baddies! We're about to be interdicted!"

"What are our hero and heroines to do?" their auburn haired narrator asked her giggling audience. She turned to Jade, and asked, "What do you think, my lovely green temptress?"

Jade smiled at her, then said, "They run back along the corridor, then go up in the grav-tube to the Command Deck?"

"What if the ship was ambushed, and has been interdicted? The ship's been compromised and there's already bad guys aboard!"

With a frown on her verdant face, Jade glanced at the walk-in-wardrobe, and replied hesitantly, "John and Sakura go and get their armour and weapons, and fight off the intruders? Calara's a bit stuck, until they can clear a path to the Bridge. All of you girls would be."

"Exactly!" Dana exclaimed, with delight.

Walking over to the cabinet by the bed, and pressing the red button she'd installed months ago, Dana activated the ship's internal defences. A second later, they heard the heavy blast doors slamming home in the corridor outside the bedroom, and two concealed panels on the back wall to either side of the bed slid open. Her audience stared at those hidden alcoves in fascination.

"Let's go!" Dana exclaimed, then sprang into the alcove on the right.

Irillith chuckled at Dana's antics, as she handed Calara and Sakura their shoes. They quickly slipped them on, and abandoned their pillows, then joined the others at the alcoves. There were more grav-tubes concealed within, which seemed to drop down a couple of levels. John took the lead, and stepped into the red glow, and he gasped as he felt himself sink like a stone, dropping at a far faster rate than was usual in the standard grav-tubes. His fall was rapidly slowed as he reached the bottom, and he managed to make a graceful landing, before stepping out of the tube. He grinned as he saw the next room, his expression mirrored by the girls when they dropped down both tubes, and moved to stand beside him.

"Welcome to the Combat Bridge," Dana said, encompassing the large room with a sweeping gesture of her hand. She was already fully armoured, and carrying a Punisher rifle in her right hand.

John smiled at her, then turned to look at the girls, and said, "Over the last few months, we've been getting into progressively more dangerous battles. When we're on the Combat Bridge, I want everybody fully equipped for a fight."

Dana grinned at them, as she added, "Get geared up, guns as well, and I'll show you to your stations."

Jade looked pained, and said tentatively, "Dana... If it's okay with you-"

With a quick glance at the distressed Nymph, Dana gave her an encouraging smile, and beckoned her over, as she said, "Of course we didn't mean you, Jade! You're perfect as you are!"

Jade sighed with relief, then glided over to join the waiting redhead.

They were all standing on a platform that overlooked the Combat Bridge through a broad, clear-crystal window. Enough armour-equipping frames for everyone had been set up against the back wall of the room, and there were two ramps that led down, onto the Bridge itself. On the starboard side of the platform, was another grav-tube, built into the wall.

"You added a new grav-tube to the Combat Bridge?" Sakura asked, sounding surprised. Walking over to the anti-gravity shaft, she peered down the hole, and added, "Where does it go?"

"The Secondary Hangar Bay with the Raptor," Dana replied, with a wide smile. She glanced at John for his approval, as she continued, "I figured we might need to get down there in a hurry, to repel boarders. There's a door at the bottom of the tube that's hidden from the Hangar side, so invaders won't be able to spot it."

"It was a brilliant idea, Sparks. Well done," John said, appreciatively.

She grinned at him, and was about to accompany Jade down the ramp to the Combat Bridge, but she saw the puzzled look on Sakura's face, and asked, "You're looking confused. What's up?"

The raven-haired girl gave Dana an apologetic smile, and replied, "I don't know the Invictus' deck layout quite as well as you guys. Would you mind just giving me an overview? I'm not sure where we are now, in relation to the old decks."

Dana smiled at her indulgently, and slinging her rifle over her shoulder, she said, "Get your armour on, and join me down there. I'll show you the floor plan."

While the redhead and the Nymph strolled down to their stations, the rest of their group stepped into the equipping frames, to get suited-up in Paragon armour. With a series of rippling clicks, they were each sealed in their body armour, and they grabbed Punisher rifles, before jogging down the twin ramps onto the Combat Bridge itself. It was a tighter, more compact version of the Bridge up on the Command Deck, with stations laid out in the same familiar arrangement. They all fanned out to take their positions, glancing at Dana, who nodded to each of them, to confirm they had reached their correct places.

She hit a button on her engineering console, and a holograph appeared in the centre of the room, showing a detailed overlay of the Invictus' deck plans. Pointing towards the middle section, Dana said, "I'll just give you a quick reminder of the new deck levels. Starting at the top, and working down, there's no Deck One, as that's the Command Deck, which sits on top of the Invictus. Deck Two is taken up by the Singularity Driver rails, and the huge turret wells for the new cannons. Deck Three is still being built, and we'll construct those rooms when we get a chance."

"Where are we now?" Sakura asked, tilting her head to one side, as she studied the map. "I got a bit thrown after the drop in the grav-tubes."

"The armoured Combat Bridge is on Deck Four, putting us right at the centre of the ship. Deck Five has the Power Core Chambers and the ammunition magazines, and Decks Six to Nine, are taken up by the new Primary Hangar."

Their Asian Security Chief grinned at her, and said, "Got it, thanks!"

Irillith had been studying her IntOps Station, and had spotted what looked like a rifle-sized rack built into the end of her console. Measuring up the Punisher railgun against it, she asked, "I assume these slots in our stations are for the rifles?"

"That's right!" Dana agreed, pleased that someone had noticed the new feature. "Obviously, you can't hold a gun while you're manning your station, but now they're at hand if things get really hairy!"

Irillith nodded, and fit the weapon into the slot, watching inquisitively, as it was held firmly in place by self-locking restraints.

"That's in case we lose artificial gravity mid-combat," Dana noted, watching Irillith's curious expression. She mimicked grabbing the railgun, and added, "Just hold the rifle by the grip, and the restraints will unlock automatically, letting you pull it out."

When Irillith placed her armoured hand on the rifle grip, a light on the base flashed green as it scanned her DNA, and the weapon was released from the slot. "Very nice!" she said, flashing Dana a smile, before returning the weapon to the slot.

Dana grinned at her, then turned to look at John, and said proudly, "I've timed how long it takes to get from bed to being fully geared and at my Station, and I've done it in fifteen seconds!"

He shook his head in amazement, and said, "Outstanding work, honey. The whole refit has been inspired!"

"Thanks for trusting me with everything," she replied, her tone earnest, as she looked into his eyes. He could see the sincere gratitude, as she continued, "I never thought for one minute, that I'd ever get to work on something so awesome!"

"Speaking of which, just look at all that firepower!"Calara said breathlessly, pointing up at the Invictus Weapon Loadout display. Her brown eyes gleamed with barely controlled excitement, as she added, "It wasn't just Dana's dreams that came true with this refit!"

"Break it down for me, Commander," John said, his stern voice ringing with authority. He met her hungry gaze, and smiled, as he added, "What's the Invictus' complement of guns?"

Calara kept her intense gaze locked on his, as she reached behind her and tapped in commands on her console, highlighting the weapons by group on a rotating model of the Invictus. Her tone was formal, but she couldn't conceal her enthusiasm, as she replied, "First up, we've extended the defence grid, Admiral. Sixty-four fast-tracking Pulse Cannons, providing full coverage against missiles, torpedoes, and strike craft, and capable of firing up to thirty-two cannons in any direction."

"Good. What else?" he asked, leaning forward in his Command Chair.

"Our Beam Laser batteries are unchanged. We've got twenty-four in total, sixteen on the topdeck, eight on the underbelly, and we've got the capability to fire twelve in any direction on the horizontal axis," she replied, cycling through the weapon emplacements. Calara grinned, as she continued, "Then we've got the Gauss Cannons. Sixteen in total, all mounted on the underbelly. Dana, want to tell us more?"

Their Chief Engineer was leaning nonchalantly against her Station, and she tapped a button, bringing up schematics for the new weapon. "I upgraded the shit out of them, but that goes without saying," she added, with a sly wink. "They work by magnetising coils around a barrel, and accelerating slugs to hyper-speeds. I reduced the calibre from the Terran Federation's original design so we could carry more ammo, then slapped on Kintark heatsinks, and juiced them up to the tits with power."

"How much more powerful are they?" John asked, fascinated to hear about her upgrades to the innovative Terran weapon.

"They hit twice as hard as the Terran version, and fire three times as fast," she replied, with a sly grin. "They're designed to rip through and tear apart armour plating, setting the target up for salvos from the Beam Lasers."

Calara looked delighted, as she added, "They were light enough for Dana to mount them on fast-tracking turrets, despite their ten-metre barrels! That means we can track strike fighters with them, if we have to!"

"Why mount them all on the underbelly?" John asked, glancing at the display of the Invictus.

"Hardpoint limitations, mostly, but the Invictus is so mobile, it shouldn't be a huge problem," Calara clarified for him. She looked excited, as she added, "We used up all the space on the topdeck with the big guns! Six pairs of Heavy Cannons, light enough to mount on pivotable turrets, so we can fire them in a full broadside from the topdeck!"

"They reload every ten seconds, which hasn't changed from the original design," Dana explained, bringing up the next schematic. She gave John a wicked grin, as she added, "But now they hit about as hard as our old Mass Drivers! I've customised their shells to punch through armour plating, and to detonate as soon as they hit the hull beneath. The effect on a ship's armour should be fucking brutal-"

"-allowing us to strip reflective plating off a target's hull, and leave them vulnerable to energy weapons," Calara finished for her.

"That's just what we needed, girls," John said, nodding his approval. "Very nicely done."

"Which brings us to the real heavy hitters," Calara said, changing the weapon loadout once more. "A pair of linked Nova Lances, with a forty-five degree front-mounted fire arc. Triple the range of a Beam Laser, and as I'm sure you remember, capable of obliterating a Terran Battleship in a single lethal blast."

Dana gave John a wicked grin, as she added, "But now we've got enough power to fire those fuckers every thirty seconds, and we don't have to shut down half the ship to do it!" She winked at him, as she added, "Plus, the Maliri power relays we installed got rid of that high-pitched whine when they're charging up!"

He chuckled at that, and said, "Thank God for that!" After a moment's pause, he raised an eyebrow, and continued, "I know you've been saving the best 'til last..."

"We've now got two Singularity Drivers!" Calara said, a look of wonder in her eyes. "Only normally mounted in a dreadnought, the four-hundred-metre barrels mean they can only fire directly forward, and they take a little while to power up. When they do, we'll be able to fire the equivalent of a Mass Driver slug every second, at triple the old range!"

Dana nodded eagerly, and added, "Nothing can fuck up a heavily-armoured target like they can!"

John gazed at the rotating image of the Invictus, with a sudden sobering appreciation of the colossal weight of firepower they could now bring to bear. He shook his head in wonder, as he said to her, "You told me months ago that you'd eventually make the ship powerful enough to go toe-to-toe with a capital ship... I didn't believe you at the time, but now we're packing more firepower than a dreadnought!"

"Just think what it'll be like, when I get the rest of the Progenitor tech," she said, with an acquisitive gleam in her sky-blue eyes. "We'll be able to rip through fleets like we're swatting flies!"

It was quiet on the Bridge while they tried to come to terms with the level of destructive capability at their disposal, glancing at each other with wide eyes.

Calara suddenly frowned, and admitted, "As good as my weapon controls are, there's no way I can aim and fire so many different weapons at once."

John nodded his agreement, and said, "It might be sensible to give Jade fire control of the Singularity Drivers. I'm guessing you need to manoeuvre the ship to line up any shots, so the Pilot's already basically in charge of aiming them."

"That does make sense," Calara conceded, a flicker of disappointment crossing her face. She smiled then, and added, "I can still give her aiming advice!"

Alyssa smiled at the Latina, and said, "We can handle all that by telepathy. Just pass anything on to me, and I'll advise Jade accordingly."

John looked at the Nymph, and asked, "Does that sound good to you, honey?"

Jade's emerald eyes were wide with excitement, as she replied, "Just tell me what you want me to shoot at, and I'll line up the shots!"

"I'm happy to act as a secondary gunner!" Faye volunteered, bouncing up and down enthusiastically. "I've been using the Pulse Cannons a lot recently, and I think I'm getting much better with them!"

"That's true, you've improved a lot," Calara said, giving the purple girl an encouraging smile. She hesitated a second, then added, "I might need to take control occasionally, but as long as you're happy with that, then making you the permanent Pulse Cannon gunner sounds like a great idea."

"Yay!" Faye squealed, clapping her hands together in joy.

John glanced at the weapon loadout display, then said, "Alright then, Commander. That leaves you the Nova Lances, the Beam Lasers, the Gauss Cannons, and the Heavy Cannons. Can you manage all that lot?"

The Latina grinned at him, and replied, "That's perfect, Admiral! I can handle all those simultaneously, no problem!"

"It looks like we're all set for the battle tomorrow, then," Alyssa said, turning in her Executive Officer's Chair to look at John. She looked worried, as she added, "How are we going to play this, anyway? I'm assuming you're planning to try and do something to avoid a massacre, but I haven't heard anything concrete from you, yet."

John nodded, but his expression was one of pure frustration, as he replied, "I've been wracking my brain to think of something, but I'm not sure how we can avoid a fight. If we can't communicate with Tashana's Matriarchs, we've got no way of talking them out of a battle!"

Calara turned in her Tactical Chair, and her expression was grim, as she said, "Dana equipped the Combat Bridge with a specially designed holographic suite, which I've been using as a Fleet Command interface. Faye helped me configure it with all our Maliri Fleet assets, and I've spent days running simulations against their forces, using data gathered from the border sensor nets and intelligence from our allied Houses. If it comes to a fight, I believe we'll be victorious."

John studied her face, and could see the bleak outlook painted as clear as day across her lovely features. He took a deep breath, then asked, "Let me hear it, Commander. What's the best case scenario?"

"I've assumed their forces will only break at ninety-percent casualties, taking into account that the Matriarchs in charge are viewing this confrontation as a last stand for their species. The best case scenario obliterates their forces, and leaves our fleet at thirty-seven-percent strength. Combined Maliri personnel deaths would total just over five-million, with the loss of six-hundred-and-fifty-seven cruiser class vessels, or larger," she informed him, in a chilling delivery.

"Fuck me... That's the best case scenario?!" he asked, truly appalled at the projected loss of life. "What about the worst case?"

Calara sank back in her Tactical Chair, and replied dejectedly, "There were scenarios where the Invictus is lost with all hands, and both sides effectively wipe each other out. Maliri fatalities would exceed eight million, Genthalas Station and over eight-hundred-and-fifty large vessels would be destroyed. However, I assume you meant, worst case scenario where we survive?"

John nodded, not trusting himself to speak.

"Discounting those other outcomes, but allowing for the tides of war to go against us, we could potentially prevail with less than five-percent of our allied forces still intact," she explained, looking deeply worried.

"That would leave the Regency unable to defend itself from any external threats!" Irillith gasped, horrified by the thought. She looked at John, and added, "Even in the best case scenario, the Maliri would be horribly vulnerable! They wouldn't be able to repel a half-hearted invasion from the Drakkar, let alone an assault from the Progenitor!"

Edraele's telepathic voice rushed into John's mind, as she thought to him,\*I have no doubt Calara could see you to victory, but even if you prevail in this battle, we still lose! If the Maliri forces are that badly mauled, we'll be powerless to assist you against the Progenitor!\*

\*The last thing I want is a pyrrhic victory! I don't want to see millions of Maliri get killed!\* he replied, his frustration bubbling over. \*It's not me you have to convince that a fight to the death is fucking crazy!\*

He suddenly froze, his eyes going wide, as he blurted out, "Calara! Faye! I just thought of something, but I'm going to need your help!" Turning his chair to look at Irillith, he added, "We need a nearby system with an asteroid belt. Any ideas?"

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Tashana was soaked with sweat, thrashing in the bed as she suffered through one of her more vivid nightmares. It started the same way as it always had, with a shattering crack as the airlock door to the shuttle she'd been given for her exile, was sundered by the pirates. As they battered it aside, and the burly pirate in the lead got his first look at her, his lecherous laugh chilled her to the bone. Without so much as a pistol to defend herself, she brandished a wrench, trying to look threatening.

"Welcome to the Unclaimed Wastes, pretty thing," the muscular Terran pirate leered, licking his lips as he stared at her body.

"Leave me alone!" she yelled, but even to her own ears, it sounded like shrill shriek.

More pirates were forcing their way through the broken airlock, and a shorter, rotund man gave her his most disarming smile, filled with rotten teeth, as he said, "There's no need to get all riled up. We just wants to be friends."

They were spreading out around her now, and she waved the wrench in front of her, trying to ward them away. "Please," she sobbed, panting hard with fear. "I haven't done anything to you!"

She caught movement to her left, and swung around to swing the wrench at her attacker, but all too late, she realised it was just a ruse. She felt a heavy hand clamp down on her wrist, as someone surged in behind her.

"We're going to do everything to you, though, pretty thing," the lecherous pirate said, close to her ear, as he shook the wrench from her hand.

The room echoed with braying laughter, as she was twisted in place, and forced to face her tormentor. Her heart lurched in her chest, when she saw who it was! It wasn't Hadley, the pirate who'd been the first to brutally ravage her. This man was just as tall and muscular, but altogether more terrifying, his Maliri-like pointed ears giving away his true nature. Those handsome features concealed the malignant mind of a despicable tyrant, one hell-bent on enslaving the Maliri.

She opened her mouth in a wordless scream of terror, but a light, tinkling noise echoed around the interior of her interdicted shuttle, filling her mind with confusion. With a lurch, she shrugged off her nightmare, and sat bolt upright in bed, her chest heaving. The noise echoed around her room again, and she grabbed for the Enshunu pistols she kept under her pillow, feeling a tremor of fear when she found nothing but the sweat-soaked bedsheet.

Suddenly, she remembered where she was, and slumped with relief, as she pressed the comm button on the sidetable, and said, "I'll be there in five minutes, just let me take a quick shower."

"Take your time," Tsarra said, her youthful voice kind and understanding. "I just wanted to let you know our fleet's approaching Epsilon Aquarii. We'll be launching the assault on Genthalas and the Progenitor's forces in just under an hour."

"Alright, I'll be there soon, Matriarch," Tashana replied, closing the call and flopping back on the bed, wincing at the painful cramping in her stomach.

She lay there for a minute, staring at the golden, high-arched ceiling as she calmed her frantic heartbeat, and slowed her breathing. The moment of truth was finally here. Would they be strong enough to defeat the Progenitor? With a shaky sigh, she climbed out of bed, and headed for the bathroom.

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John wrapped his arms around the tearful girl, as she clung to him fiercely. "it's for the best, Kali," he said, stroking her back.

"There must be something I can do!" she pleaded, looking up at him with her lovely indigo eyes. "Why can't I lead my forces on my flagship?"

Leena stepped closer and placing her hand on his shoulder, she sounded worried, as she said, "She's right, we might be able to help! Just by being present with our Fleet Commanders, we might be able to pass on orders from Edraele, or something."

Shaking his head, John looked around at the four upset young Matriarchs, and replied, "It's too dangerous, and I'm not going to risk any of you getting hurt. Calara believes the safest place for you is here with Edraele at Genthalas, and I'd be a fool to ignore her advice. Besides, she'll be coordinating with Alyssa, who can pass on all her orders to your Fleet Commanders, now that they're all linked to Edraele. Calara's a gifted tactician and strategist, and we couldn't have anyone better coordinating our forces."

"You said we're in this together," Valani said, her expression anxious. "I don't want to just sit back and watch, I want to fight at your side!"

John caressed her cheek, before pulling her in for a hug beside Kali, and said, "I'll try to stop Tashana's forces, no matter what, but If something happens to me, all of you are the best hope for a brighter future for the Maliri. You're all my beautiful insurance policies, okay?"

The thought of losing John was almost too much to bear, and the girls gasped in fright, their faces stricken with alarm. Under Alyssa's guidance, Edraele reached out to them, swaddling their minds with loving reassurance which soon settled them down again. Understanding that John was right, they nodded reluctantly, feeling disappointed.

Nyrelle hugged him from behind, and whispered, "Be really careful, and come home to me. You've got a promise to keep, remember? What we've done so far has been amazing, but I want you to be my first..."

His eyes widened at that, and he turned to look at her over his shoulder, as he said, "But you seemed so confident and self-assured, I just assumed..."

She giggled, and shook her head, as she replied, "How many men have you seen around here? Except for Ceraden, of course, but he doesn't count. I've never been to the border stations..."

"None of us have," Kali said in a hushed voice, blushing furiously to a fetching royal blue.

"Give me a few minutes to go and wrap up this battle, and I'll be right back! Okay?" John announced, sounding cheerful and enthusiastic, and lightening the mood with his playful joke.

The girls laughed and smiled at him fondly, moving closer to give him a group hug.

He hugged them in turn, and was sincere as he said, "I wanted to spend some time getting to know you first, and didn't want to rush any of you into anything you weren't ready for." He gave them an apologetic smile, and added, "I'm just sorry you've had to share my time the way you have. It's been a hectic couple of weeks with the refit, and what with healing so many engineers, guards, command staff..."

"That's alright," Nyrelle purred, rubbing her slender tummy. "Getting you all to myself the other day was amazing!" The other three girls nodded, giving him shy, but lustful smiles.

John pulled back a bit so he could place his hand on Kali and Leena's toned stomachs, and said, "I'm really glad we did it that way. The third time is special, and I wanted each of you to feel what it's like on your own."

Earlier that week, he'd been with each of them on their own, packing their youthful stomachs with a full load of cum. It had been an intimate moment with each young woman as she knelt before him, staring into his eyes, as he fed her for that all-important third time. He'd cuddled each girl afterwards, running his hands over her swollen belly, and promising that the next time, they'd be able to feel that heavy weight expanding their womb.

He had arranged to see all of them on the same day, so when he went to sleep that evening, he'd been pulled into the dreamworld again that night, just as he expected he would. However, he'd worked to improve the Progenitor sigils in his wards, and had once again managed to elude the ancient horrors that stalked him relentlessly in the Astral Pocket Plane.

Leena stood on tiptoe and gave him a tender kiss, drawing him from his thoughts, and she said wistfully, "The last few weeks have been incredible. I can't even remember what my life was like, before you were here."

"You're a wonderful girl, Leena," he replied, stroking her cheek as he gazed into her eyes. Looking around at each of them in turn, he added, "All of you are. You're all kind, thoughtful, and caring, and I think you're going to be outstanding Matriarchs."

"And good mothers, too?" Nyrelle asked him, her bravado leaving her for a moment.

John kissed her, then brushed his fingers over her toned lower belly, making her gasp. Giving her a warm smile, he replied, "You're going to be amazing."

\*Better wrap it up, we need to depart soon,\* Alyssa told him, her tone gentle and apologetic for interrupting them.

Looking around at the four girls, John said, "I'm sorry, but I have to go now. I want you to promise me something before I leave, alright?"

"Anything!" Kali said breathlessly, the others nodding their immediate agreement.

"I know I don't need to tell you to look after each other, but can you take special care of Edraele?" he asked, meeting their probing gaze. "She's going to be worrying about Tashana, as well as all the people on both side. She'll need your support."

"You can count on us," Valani said, her tone serious, her three friends echoing her sentiments.

John smiled at them, and said, "You're good girls, thank you."

With that he waved them a fond farewell, then left the room, and walked quickly back towards the drydock, where he know the Invictus' crew, and Edraele, were all waiting for him.

\*You were very sweet with them,\* Edraele told him, sending him a tender telepathic smile. \*I appreciate your thoughts about me, but I'll be alright, you don't need to worry.\*

\*You need looking after just as much as the rest of my girls. You're all exceptional women, but everyone needs some emotional support now and then,\* John said firmly, striding along the corridors as he made his way towards Genthalas' dock. \*I know you're worrying about all of us, as well as Tashana, but let those girls help you. They care about you a great deal.\*

\*I will do, thank you,\* she replied, sounding touched by his concern for her.

John knew the way from Edraele's quarters like the back of his hand now, and he returned to the relatively quiet drydock in record time. His crew were already waiting aboard the Invictus, but Edraele was waiting for him with her three bodyguards. He smiled as he approached them, hugging the four women in turn, before he said, "We're going to try and draw them away from Genthalas, but watch out for surprise boarding actions. You've got the garrison, and the four of you to lead them, if Tashana's Matriarchs try to sneak in and take over the place."

"This station will not fall," Luna said, her intimidating yellow eyes flashing to his. Ilyana and Almari nodding grimly, in wholehearted agreement with their deadly companion.

Edraele smiled at him, and said, "Don't worry about us, you've got enough to take care of. Genthalas is strong enough to repulse all but the most concerted fleet actions, and we have these three ladies, as well as the Matriarchs cohort of assassins. We're more than capable of keeping the station secure."

He nodded, then said, "I almost feel sorry for anyone trying anything!" He glanced at the holo-image shimmering on his wrist to check the time, then added, "Time to go, I've got a promise to keep."

Before he could turn to leave, Edraele leaned in and gave him a tender kiss, before saying telepathically, \*I love you. Thank you for trying so hard to restore my family.\*

\*This time when I bring Tashana back, we'll sit her down, and explain that we're just trying to help the Maliri. It'll all be okay,\* he replied, soothingly, stroking the side of her head, before waving them goodbye and jogging over to the aft-airlock, on the starboard side of the ship.

He glanced back at the four women and gave them a wave goodbye, before stepping inside the Invictus, the door closing behind him to the sound of crystal bolts sealing the hull.

\*We're on the Combat Bridge to save time,\* Alyssa told him, as soon as he came aboard.

\*I'll be right there,\* John replied, before walking up to the double doors on the right-hand side of the corridor, and pressing the button beside them.

The reinforced doors swished open with the whir of heavy-duty hydraulics, and he jogged across the Secondary Hangar Bay, ducking underneath the Raptor as he did so. There was another set of newly-installed double doors on the opposite site of the huge room, which he knew would lead into the Primary Hangar Bay. He ignored those, however, and ran straight up to what appeared to be a seamless wall.

Counting the fourth decking plate over from the door, he held up his hand at chest-level, and placed it on the cold Titanium wall. A green light swiped over the concealed DNA scanner built into the featureless surface, and to his left, a door swung open, revealing the glowing anti-gravity fields of the secret grav-tube. Stepping inside the blue field, he floated up in the dimly-lit tube, hearing the door close behind him. The field was set up for fast travel, like the emergency grav-tubes from the bedroom, and it seemed to take only a few seconds to shoot up the five decks to the Combat Bridge.

He stepped out into the brightly lit room, and found the crew waiting for him, already geared up in full armour. "Hey everyone," he greeted them, as he stepped into the armour-equipping frame, and donned his lion-embossed Paragon armour suit.

The girls turned to wave at him as he strolled down the ramp, before sheathing his sword in the custom-built slot on the back of his chair. Sliding his Punisher rifle into the secure rack at the end of his console, he settled in his chair, and smiled at Alyssa when she turned to face him.

"Welcome back," she said, returning his smile. Glancing towards the Pilot's Seat, she added, "Jade's taking us out."

John turned his attention to the Nymph, and saw that Jade had already lifted the Invictus off the deck, and was now reversing out of the drydock. There were huge view-screen panels set up around the walls, the feeds from a multitude of external cameras giving the illusion that he was looking straight out of the hull, through huge windows. The Combat Bridge was in the centre of the Invictus, though, protected by dozens of metres of reinforced hull, and quad-shaped Crystal Alyssium armour plating.

The view was spectacular, giving them a breathtaking view of the drydock as they left, before the Invictus cleared the edge of Genthalas Station, and was out in space once more. Jade rotated the assault cruiser with practiced ease, retro-thrusters flaring all along the port side, as they swung around to starboard. She powered up the six massive Trankaran engines on the rear of the ship, and the Invictus leapt forward, as it raced towards the Nav-beacon.

"How's the handling?" John asked, as the Nymph began putting the ship through its paces.

"Fantastic!" she exclaimed, turning in her chair to give him an excited grin. "It's even better than before!"

He frowned, and glancing at Dana, he asked, "Hey, Sparks! Didn't we just make the ship fifty percent bigger? Shouldn't the handling be more sluggish?"

Dana turned her chair, and grinned at him, as she replied, "Nah, we aren't flying through an atmosphere. We don't have to worry about aerodynamics, just how much mass we're hauling. Sakura's team slapped on two more engines, and the extra thrust from them countered the additional mass we added to the midsection of the hull." She tapped a few commands into her console, which brought up a rotating display of the Invictus, showing the locations of all the new retro-thrusters. The redhead winked at him, as she continued, "We've got a shitload of spare power at the moment, so I added lots more retro-thrusters; way more than we needed to counter the added tonnage."

John watched Jade put the ship through its paces, the seven-hundred-and-fifty-metre vessel manoeuvring with a grace that seemed utterly implausible for a vessel of its size.

"Well, that was a surprise, but I'm not going to complain," John said, giving Dana a broad smile.

"Sorry to interrupt, John," Rachel said, turning in her chair to look his way. "I'm receiving a call from Fleet Commander Lilyana."

"Put her through, please," he replied, focusing his attention of the holographic image that coalesced before him.

An image of a beautiful Maliri woman appeared in the centre of the Bridge, with long snowy-white hair brushing down over her shoulders. The House Valaden Fleet Commander gave him a lovely smile, and said, "It's wonderful to see you again, John."

She was wearing the incredibly ornate golden armour of a highly experienced veteran officer in the House Valaden military, numerous priceless gemstones sparkling where they caught the light. Despite her obvious seniority, which matched her calm and elegant bearing, she looked in the flush of youth, with flawless skin, and bright aquamarine eyes. Behind her, on the bridge of her ship, the Galaena Serine, her white-haired Bridge Crew busied themselves with tasks, glancing up to smile at John in acknowledgement, before continuing with their work.

In truth, Lilyana was one-hundred-and-seventy, and had undergone a rather dramatic transformation since their first meeting, earlier that week. As the highest ranking Fleet Officer in Edraele's mighty navy, it was fitting that she receive more attention than the rest of her lower-ranked officers, and he'd set aside time for a couple of intimate sessions with her. Her worry lines had smoothed away as she supped from his miraculous fountain of youth, greedily drinking down every last drop he could give her. With her new mane of white hair, she had gained a dramatic new air of authority over every woman under her command.

"It's good to see you too, Lilyana. I like the new hair," John replied, returning her smile. He frowned then, as he asked, "Is there a problem?"

She shook her head, making her long, feathered hair swish with the movement, which took her by surprise. Blushing self-consciously, she replied, "I know Edraele said that she would pass on your commands via telepathy, but it would feel disrespectful not to acknowledge my Commanding Officer, on the eve of battle."

He gave her a respectful nod, and said, "Thanks for checking in. Is everything proceeding according to plan?"

"All our forces have assembled in the Lambda Aquarii system, as you instructed," she replied, although she bit her lip anxiously when she finished speaking.

"You look worried, Lilyana," John stated, rather than asked. He gave her an encouraging smile, and added, "You've got over a century more fleet combat experience than I do. Never be afraid to speak your mind."

She looked relieved, and said in a hushed, discreet voice, "Genthalas is a powerful defensive asset. Perhaps a more -cautious- plan, would be to fight the battle in the Epsilon Aquarii system, instead? We could then bring the station's arsenal to bear, and make use of the extensive fighter bays it has available. With the addition of the system defence fighters there, we'd be assured of strike-craft superiority, before the battle commences."

After listening to her counsel, John smiled at her gently, and replied, "I want to try to avoid a battle, if I can help it. This is our best shot at achieving that."

She bowed her head, and her tone was respectful as she replied, "I'm aware of your primary objective for this confrontation, I just wished to raise this point with you, in case you were unaware. I hope I have not given offence."

"It was a perfectly reasonable suggestion, Fleet Commander. No offence taken," John said, waving away her concerns. "I know you can't use telepathy with Edraele yet, so join the command channel, and if it should come to a fight, Rachel will pass on any critical information to me."

"I will do so the moment we end this call," she agreed, smiling as she realised he hadn't been upset by her well-meaning advice.

"We'll be jumping in-system shortly, so I'll see you then," he said, and they shared a smile, before Rachel closed the comm channel on John's order.

"It looks like we're all set up," Alyssa said, glancing his way. "Now let's see if they want to come and play..."

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Tashana walked out onto the bridge of the battleship, and greeted Aadya and Tsarra with a nod. The worried look on Tsarra's face made her pause, and she asked, "What's wrong?"

"We've detected a Terran cruiser," Tsarra explained, pointing at the Holographic Sector Map.

Whirling around to look at the map, Tashana's eyes widened when she saw the white-hulled vessel. It was much longer than before, and where it had once vaguely resembled an angular shark, it now reminded her of a gladiator's sword from one of those Terran Holo-vids. She blurted out, "That's him! That's John Blake's ship!"

Aadya nodded, and replied, "We realised that, and he's heading directly towards us..."

Tashana looked at the map in confusion, and muttered to herself, "I don't see the Valaden fleet... why would he leave Genthalas?" After a quick shrug, she looked at the House Perfaren Fleet Commander, and added eagerly, "If we interdict him now, we can cut the head off the snake!"

Shaking her head, Aadya replied, "I'm afraid we can't do that."

"Why not?!" Tashana demanded, her temper flaring. "Don't you see? This is our best chance to eliminate him now, without having to fight through all his fleets of thralls!"

"Oh, I understand that perfectly well," Aadya replied, patiently. She nodded her chin towards the map, and added, "Look how fast his ship's travelling! We have no hope of catching him."

Tashana glared at the white holograph representing the Invictus, and then gaped at it in shock, when she saw how fast it was travelling in hyper-warp. She remembered how quick their journey from the Underworld to Genthalas had been, and she stammered in a hushed voice, "It's even quicker than before!"

"It appears they've undergone some rather significant upgrades in this refit you mentioned," Aadya said, the normally unshakeable Fleet Commander looking pensive. "They're travelling at triple our fastest hyper-warp speed."

"What's he doing now?" Tsarra asked, looking at the image of the ship with fear in her eyes.

As they stared at the Sector Map, the Invictus performed an arcing loop that positioned the Invictus just in front of their fleet, travelling just outside of interdiction range. The Terran vessel was travelling on the same course as their Armada, on a heading directly towards Genthalas Station. As they watched, the glossy-hulled ship made a slight course correction, and tacked to port, but still stayed just ahead of the frontrunners of their fleet.

"It looks like he's trying to get us to follow him," Aadya murmured, staring at the Terran ship in fascination.

The Communications Officer cleared her throat, and said nervously, "We're being hailed by the Invictus, Fleet Commander. I know your ord-"

"Don't answer it!" Tashana snapped, furiously.

With an impatient sigh, Aadya glanced at Tashana, before looking at the Comms Officer again, and saying, "Go ahead, finish what you were telling me."

With an indignant look at the golden-masked woman who had cut her off, the Bridge Officer replied, "I know your orders were to not open any comm channels with them, but they've transmitted what looks like some kind of software package to us. They aren't trying to establish video comms."

Tashana began to pace nervously, as she said, "My sister's a devious and vindictive hacker! Don't open that application, whatever you do. Who knows what it'll do to our systems!"

Ignoring her, the Comms Officer continued, "I've had incoming messages from the other flagships in the fleet. They've received similar packages, and are holding them in a secure subnet, but haven't accessed anything."

Tsarra and Aadya exchanged glances, and the young Matriarch said, "Do we follow after them? Our fleet is bigger than theirs, and if they don't have Genthalas to back them up, it should make it easier to beat them, shouldn't it?"

"I don't like this," Tashana muttered. "This smells like a trap."

Aadya turned to the battleship's navigator, and asked, "Where will their current course take them?"

After a moment checking the Sector Map, the navigator looked puzzled, then replied, "They're on a direct heading towards Lambda Aquarii, but it's basically an empty system."

"Show us," Tsarra requested, pointing towards the Sector Map.

With a few clicks on her console, the map zoomed in on the Lambda Aquarii system, focused on the red-giant at its centre. Just as the navigator had stated, there wasn't much of interest to this system. There was a single orange gas giant planet on a wide orbit around the star, and a dense belt of strip-mined asteroids about halfway between them.

"Perhaps an ambush from the asteroid field?" Tashana suggested, pacing nervously.

Aadya shook her head, and replied "You couldn't conceal a fleet of any consequence in there."

"Mines, then?" Tashana blurted out.

The Fleet Commander looked dubious, and replied, "We could jump in anywhere around the outer edge of the gravity well. They wouldn't have had time to mine the entire system."

Tsarra studied her older advisor, and asked, "It sounds like you're suggesting we follow them?"

"Maybe just until we can see what's on the long-range sensors?" Aadya replied, looking at the map thoughtfully. "It's not like we're stumbling into a nebula; we'll be able to see what we're facing before we consider entering the system."

"I agree," Tsarra said, with a decisive nod. She glanced at the Comms Officer, and continued, "Advise the other Matriarchs that we're about to change heading."

"I don't like this one bit," Tashana growled, her eyes searching the map suspiciously, for any clue as to what the devious Progenitor was up to.

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"They're following us!" Jade exclaimed, pointing at the huge armada of Maliri vessels that were pursuing them.

Alyssa grinned at her, and said, "They took the bait!"

The Nymph laughed, as she said, "I don't blame them! Having something teasing you just out of paw's reach is maddening!"

"Nice work, Jade," John said, giving her an appreciative smile. Turning to his left, he continued, "Rachel, did they all receive Irillith's program?"

The brunette nodded, and replied, "I broadcast it to every ship bigger than a cruiser, but I've no idea if they've opened it yet."

Irillith shook her head, and said, "They won't. It'll be stored in a secure subnet, while they try and determine what it is. Maliri believe in a defence-in-depth strategy for their networks, with compartmentalised zones in layer upon layer of subnets. I could brute-force my way in there, but they'd just eject the comms array when they saw me smashing through firewalls."

"We'll just have to convince them to take a look," John said, glancing at the System Map centred around its big red star.

"I'm getting messages from all the allied Fleet Commanders," Rachel said, touching her finger to the headset in her ear. She gestured towards the map, and said, "They've assembled their fleets on the outer edge of the system, as you requested."

John watched as their long-range sensors started to pick up the leading edge of the House Valaden fleet. Row after row of cruisers, carriers, and battleships were arrayed in neat divisions, with dense screens of corvettes and destroyers positioned in front. Scores of fighter and bomber wings had been launched, but all were stationary, parked in formation, like they were preparing for a huge parade. House Loraleth's forces appeared to the right, with House Ghilwen's fleet adjacent to it, while the considerable military might of Houses Aeberos and Naestina were assembled to the left. All told, there over four-hundred ships-of-the-line, the picket vessels doubling that figure, and the strike craft tripling it.

"The Maliri have so many ships," Dana murmured, staring in awe at the impressive display of interstellar power.

Calara nodded, and replied, "Just the forces on our side could crush the Terran Federation, or the Kintark Empire. They'd be outnumbered, but the Maliri have a huge tech advantage."

Dana glanced at John, and said, "One that just got a whole lot bigger. I know I said I didn't mind what you did with my tech advancements, but are you sure giving them the heatsinks, the power cores, and the Tachyon Drive was a good idea?"

He nodded, as he replied, "If all goes well today, there won't be a 'them' and 'us', we'll all be on the same side. Even if something goes horribly wrong, at least we've given the Maliri a fighting chance of holding off the Progenitor."

She shrugged, as she said, "Like I said, I don't mind. As long as you think you can trust them with it."

Irillith smiled at the redhead, and said, "My people are obsessively paranoid about secrecy, and have a long history of refusing to trade tech with xeno-races. Nothing we gave to the technicians on Genthalas will leak out to other species."

"We'll be ready to drop out of hyper-warp in three minutes, " Alyssa noted. She smiled at Dana, and added, "Going twice as fast is amazing, but it's halved our warning time on the sensors. Anything you can do to give them a boost?"

"I'll think about it, but without access to some radical new tech, I'm a bit stuck," the Chief Engineer admitted. "I already upgraded the Maliri versions a shitload. They're about as advanced as I can make them."

John held up his hand to still the chatter in the Bridge, and said, "Alright, Jade, when we drop out of hyper-warp, you know what to do, right?"

The Nymph nodded eagerly, and said, "Sure. I'll begin manoeuvres immediately."

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"Tashana, have you got any idea what they're doing?" Tsarra asked, staring at the map in confusion.

The masked girl slowly shook her head, as she was forced to admit, "I'm sorry, I haven't the faintest idea."

They watched as the Progenitor's ship raced back and forth, in front of the neat lines of his fleet. The white cruiser was flying perpendicular to the rows of vessels, until it reached one end of the formation, where it looped around, and began rushing back the way they had just come.

The Perfaren Fleet Commander scratched her temple, and said, "This makes no sense. It's like he's showing off the capabilities of his ship. First, he reveals he has a vastly quicker FTL drive than us, and now, he's just given away the flight characteristics of that cruiser. Granted, I've never seen a ship move that fast before, but normal doctrine would be to conceal your strengths, and only reveal them when striking to your advantage." She frowned, as she added, "The same applies to the Fleets at his disposal. Why just leave them all on display like that?"

"Is there any news from the sensor probes?" Tsarra asked, nibbling at her index fingernail.

Aadya turned to her Engineering Officer, and the Maliri woman shook her head, and replied, "There's nothing there, Fleet Commander. No mines, no gravity inducers, no sensor nets, and there's nothing concealed in the asteroid belt. The entire system is barren."

"Apart from a Progenitor and his enormous fleet of thralls," Tashana scowled. She turned around, and added impatiently, "If the system really is empty, perhaps he's just grown overconfident, but doesn't want to risk Genthalas being damaged in a battle? If that's the case, this might be our best opportunity to strike."

"I'm inclined to agree," Tsarra said, looking at her Fleet Commander, to see her verdict.

With a decisive nod, Aadya said, "Let's enter the system, and prepare the armada for battle."

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"Here they come!" Jade exclaimed, pointing to the stationary mass of vessels, which had stopped just outside the Lambda Aquarii system.

The opposing armada of ships had entered hyper-warp again, and were now jumping in-system, forming into well-organised, battle-ready formations. It took several minutes for the hundreds of bigger ships to assemble, and once the fighter and bomber wings had deployed, they were facing nearly fifteen-hundred Maliri vessels. They hadn't begun to close yet, but John knew it would be only a matter of moments before they did so.

"They're a whole lot scarier when I know they aren't just models in a simulator," Calara murmured, glancing back at John nervously.

John met her apprehensive glance, and raised an eyebrow, as he asked, "You're not getting jittery on me, are you, Commander? Remember, you're the saviour of the Dragon March, and the heroine who saved Terra! Billions of people are only alive today because of you. I couldn't ask for a finer Tactical Officer."

The Latina sat up straight, her face showing a flicker of pride, as she remembered her accomplishments. She gave him a firm nod, and said confidently, "Powering up weapons, Admiral."

He smiled at her, then turned to face their green-skinned pilot, and said, "Alright, you know what to do, Jade. Take us in."

"You got it," she replied, pushing the throttle forward to maximum, and changing course, rather than looping around when they reached the end of the Maliri formation lines.

John looked at the view-screen windows displaying the star fields beyond, and watched as they whirled madly with Jade's manoeuvres. The Invictus swooped about, shining dots flashing by in a blur that left him dizzy just to look at them. They finally held steady when Jade levelled out the ship, and pointed the nose directly towards the asteroid belt. The field of rocky chunks was densely packed, but didn't stretch particularly far, at least not like the vast, sprawling belts that were so prevalent in the Trankaran Republic.

"Get ready for my targets, Jade," Calara said, as she gripped the two weapon controls.

"I'll let you know which ones she tells me to aim for," Alyssa added, leaning forward, as she concentrated on the huge sprawl of asteroids, getting ready to relay the brunette's telepathic instructions.

"You're on clean-up duty, Faye," Calara said, glancing at the purple sprite with an encouraging smile. "Remember what I told you about leading your targets."

"You can count on me!" Faye agreed, her cute face set in a mask of concentration.

Dana had a wicked grin on her face, as she said, "Powering up the Singularity Generator!"

John nodded, and said grimly, "Alright ladies, let's see what the Invictus can do..."

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"Wait! They're doing something!" Tsarra gasped, pointing urgently at the system map.

Tashana stared intently at the Invictus, and nodded as she blurted out, "They're running for cover in that asteroid belt! I knew it wasn't a coincidence it was there!"

They watched in silence for a long moment, as the white cruiser roared towards the field of rocks, then blinked against a sudden blinding flash from the System Map. The dazzling glare was from a blazing bluish-white beam that arced through half-a-dozen asteroids, obliterating the massive rocks in an instant.

"That blast came from a Nova Lance!" Aadya gasped, staring at the cruiser in shock.

Tashana nodded, and swore vehemently before she snarled, "Courtesy of Edraele Valaden, have no doubt."

They watched as a blue nimbus seemed to shroud the end of the ship, until there was a sudden detonation deep within the asteroid belt, the largest rock in the field left trembling by a huge explosion. The slowly-turning rock was gigantic, easily twenty times larger than the biggest Maliri battleship. A second later, it was struck by another terrifying impact, then another; one coming every second, in a blistering and unrelenting hail that pounded into the rocky edifice. It reeled under that storm of hyper-accelerated slugs, enormous craters pockmarking its surface, with deep rings spiralling outwards from each impact site. Unable to withstand such devastation, the moon-like asteroid broke apart in a savage display of raw, unadulterated carnage.

As the Maliri looked on in horror, the Invictus plunged into the asteroid belt, and a dazzling riot of blue beams seemed to explode outwards. They slashed through asteroids, cutting them to pieces with far greater efficacy than a normal Maliri Beam Laser, and each melted chunk was subsequently pounded by a storm of shells, fired from both above and below the ship. The sheer weight of firepower was terrifying to behold, and there was deathly silence aboard the Bridge, as every woman there stared at the frightful holographic images.

Just when they thought it couldn't get any worse, a blistering sheet of blue laser bolts swept out from the glossy-white hull, forming a globe of energy that scythed through the rocky fragments. The asteroids were blasted into tiny pieces, forming a vast sea of gravel, as the ship steamrolled its way through the asteroid belt.

"Are they trying to scare us?" Tsarra asked, in a hushed voice. She glanced nervously at her Fleet Commander, and added in a whisper, "If so, it's working."

"How can anything that size carry so much firepower?" Aadya murmured to herself, sounding awed.

"Wait!" Tashana hissed, pointing at the map. "What the fuck are they doing?!"

As the Invictus swept on through the asteroid field, it soon became apparent that the destruction had not been absolute. A number of asteroids had been sliced by the beams, but left intact, and the white ship slowed, as it began to move the huge rocks via tractor beam.

"They're spelling out words using the asteroids!" the Communications Officer blurted out, her angular eyes as wide as saucers, as she gazed at the map.

Tsarra frowned, as she tilted her head to one side, and she read aloud, "Does that say 'Play'?" Turning to look at Aadya and Tashana, she continued, "Play what?"

Aadya nodded towards the map, and said, "There's more, Matriarch..."

Sure enough, the Invictus tractored more of the glowing asteroid letters into place, until it formed a phrase, perfectly sculpted in Maliri script. In thirty-metre-high letters, the words, "Play the game", were all that was left of the asteroid belt, the rest entirely obliterated.

"Play the game," Tsarra read, her brow furrowing in confusion. She looked at her colleagues, and admitted, "I don't understand. What game are they asking us to play?"

There was a long moment of silence on the Bridge, before the Comms Officer said, "Matriarch, I've had word from Matriarch Gaenna Baelora. She says the software package the Progenitor sent is some kind of gaming simulation."

"She opened the file!" Tashana wailed, her eyes frantic as she grabbed Tsarra by the arms. Shaking her, she pleaded, "You've got to stop them having any contact with the Progenitor! If he speaks to them, we're done!"

Tsarra shook herself free, her nervous state in the tense situation made much worse by Tashana's hysterics, and she snapped angrily, "You forget yourself, Tashana! How dare you manhandle me?!"

Holding her hands up in apology, Tashana said in a rush, "Sorry, Matriarch, I'm just worried, that's all!"

Narrowing her eyes in irritation, Tsarra glanced at her Fleet Commander, and said curtly, "Open the file. If the other Matriarchs are viewing it already, we need to see what it is, too."

With a respectful bow of her head, Aadya gestured to her Bridge Officers, and a few seconds later, the System Map disappeared. It was immediately replaced by a sweeping tactical overlay of the Lambda Aquarii system, with accurate representations of the forces arrayed against each other. One side was spread out as if on formation, but the golden ships were coloured white, instead. The other was coloured red, and it was disturbing how accurate the depiction of the fleet dispositions were, that Aadya had chosen for the House Perfaren forces.

"Is this application tapping into our sensor data?" Aadya asked, in alarm.

"No, Fleet Commander," her Intelligence Operations officer replied. "The program is self-contained."

While Aadya was digesting that, a purple girl, no more than five-feet-high popped into existence. She smiled at them disarmingly, and asked, "Hello! My name's Faye. Would you like to play a game?"

"That's the Progenitor's AI!" Tashana blurted out, in a panic. "You need to shut that fucking thing down!"

Shaking her head, the IntOps officer replied, "It's a VI; a self-contained Virtual Intelligence. They can only handle simple commands, and basic instructions trigger pre-programmed responses. I believe it's just there to operate this 'game'."

Tsarra glanced at the purple sprite warily, then said, "Yes, my name's Tsarra, and I'd like to play."

The image of Faye looked delighted, and said, "I hope you have fun! Our side is white, and your side is red. Tell me what orders you'd like to issue your forces, and I'll show you the outcome!"

"Don't, it's probably going to store all your responses, then send them to the Progenitor! He'll see how you're going to react to his attacks! Shut this thing down before it's too late," Tashana urged them.

Aadya looked apprehensive, and a shiver ran up her spine as she said, "No, that's not what this is for."

"What do you mean?" Tsarra asked, her Fleet Commander's tone unsettling her.

"If you'll just indulge me, Matriarch?" Aadya requested, gesturing towards the purple girl.

When her young Matriarch nodded her agreement, the Fleet Commander stepped forward, and faced the digital construct. "I'll play. Show me the forces at my side," she requested, staring warily at the complex formations of vessels.

Faye did as she was bid, highlighting the sweeping formations of House Perfaren ships, then including all the other aligned fleets in their coalition. Aadya reviewed her forces with a skilled and experienced eye, noting that the simulation accurately displayed the four-hundred-and-fifty large vessels at their command.

"It's your move," Faye said, smiling benignly.

Folding her hands behind her back, Aadya said, "Move forward with the picket line and cruiser screen, Battleships to support, and Carriers at the rear. Hold the reserves until I give the signal."

Faye nodded eagerly, and the red-swathed ships began to move as Aadya requested, following her orders for a no-nonsense, standard Fleet engagement. The white ships began to move as well, the way they suddenly sprung into action unsettling, after having remained motionless for so long. The formation they adopted was bizarre, with carriers front and centre, orbited by swirling groups of strike craft, while the rest of the forces hung back. The Invictus swung about, moving right around to the very rear of the entire formation, before turning to point at the opposing red vessels.

"Leading with carriers?!" Aadya muttered, and shook her head scornfully, a relieved smile appearing on her face. She glanced at Faye, and added, "Send in the cruisers to attack the carriers, support with strike craft."

"Your capital ships?" Faye prompted, highlighting the score of battleships halfway between the carriers at the rear, and the cruisers at the front of the engagement.

Aadya judged that the carriers were perfectly safe, with no visible threats to them, her sweeping wall of capital ships preventing any rush for the more vulnerable vessels. "Bring the battleship formations in closer, and prepare to time the use of Nova Lances as the battle commences," she ordered, decisively.

Faye smiled at her, and said, "Of course! Feel free to interrupt at any time, if you wish to change orders, or require further information."

"OK, go ahead," Aadya said, eager to see the results of the engagement.

The red cruisers increased the power to their engines, over one-hundred nimble Maliri vessels sweeping forward to engage the white carriers. The white forces hung there motionless for a long moment, only reacting when the cruisers were approaching Beam Laser range. Moving at a freakishly fast turn rate for a vessel of their size, the white carriers rotated smoothly, retro-thrusters on the vessels flaring as they pivoted towards the rear of the white lines, and began to accelerate away.

"Stop!" Aadya protested. "The white side is cheating! Maliri carriers can't move that quickly!"

Faye paused the simulation, and cheerfully informed her, "These House Valaden Carriers have undergone a refit with thrusters and engines obtained from the Trankaran Empire! Would you like to see the schematics?"

Aadya glanced at Tsarra and Tashana, suddenly looking very worried, and replied, "Show us."

The chirpy AI displayed the detailed schematics for everyone to see, and the startled gasps from the Engineering Officers on the Bridge was enough confirmation for Aadya to know they were authentic.

"Are you ready to continue the game?" Faye asked, politely.

Nodding with trepidation, Aadya waved the VI to continue, and said, "I'll hold position with the cruisers, don't pursue the carriers."

"Of course!" Faye agreed, as a dozen white battleships with the crossed-blades insignia of House Valaden rushed forward, moving much faster than should be possible. Aadya looked on in alarm, as they unleashed a savage volley of Nova Lance fire through the leading cruisers, obliterating well over a dozen.

"You're a sitting duck, you should attack them!" Tashana urged her, getting sucked into the simulation.

Aadya looked torn, then said to Faye, "Move the cruiser screen forward, and send in the strike craft. Bring the battleships closer, to support them."

Faye bowed to her, and said, "Moving your forces, as you command."

As the red forces moved to engage, the white battleships withdrew. They were slower than the red cruisers, but not enough to allow the red forces to close to Beam Laser range, yet. The red strike craft swept in, with the red bombers greeted by uncannily fast-firing Pulse Cannons.

"Faye, pause the simulation!" Aadya demanded. She pointed at the map, and objected, "My bombers are being cut to pieces, but Pulse Cannons can't fire that fast!"

"The Pulse Cannons on these battleships have been upgraded with heatsinks from the Kintark. Would you like to know more?" she asked, a pleasant smile on her face.

"Show me," the Perfaren Fleet Commander demanded.

A fresh schematic popped up in front of them, showing a strange, and clearly alien piece of technology. There were compressed ribbons in the heatsink, and from what Aadya could make out from the schematic, it offered a profound improvement on the Maliri equivalent.

There was some muttering from the engineering team as they examined the blueprints.

"It looks authentic," the Chief Engineer said, looking at the glowing blueprint in awe.

With an exasperated sigh, Aadya said, "Fine, run the program again, Faye."

She nodded, but before the unsettled Fleet Commander could respond, there was a blue flash on the far side of the map, behind the red carriers.

"What was that?!" Tsarra said in panic.

Faye smiled at her, and explained, "The Invictus performed a short-range hyper-warp jump for two-point-three-eight seconds."

"That's impossible!" Aadya snorted indignantly. "There's no technology that can make those kind of calculations."

"Would you like to 'see the math', so to speak?" Faye asked, with a pleasant smile.

Aadya was about to decline, but her Head Navigator nodded insistently. Aadya turned to Faye, and replied, "Show us then. How is it done?"

A holographic treatise on hyper-warp jumps within gravity wells popped into existence, and the Head Navigator stared at it with eyes as wide as saucers. One look at the woman's stunned expression told the Fleet Commander everything she needed to know.

Waving her hand in exasperation, Aadya said to the VI, "Fine, I believe you! Continue with the simulation."

They watched with a creeping feeling of dread, as the white House Valaden forces fell backwards in full retreat, with the red force in pursuit. Aadya noticed that some of the other Houses' ships were not able to travel so quickly, making the battle line for the retreating white forces bow out like a boomerang.

There was a bright flash of light from behind the red lines, as the Invictus ripped into the Freedom Alliance carriers. It had opened with a Nova Lance blast, sweeping the incandescent beam over three ships, and knocking out all their shields. Now, it began bombarding the huge majestic vessels with slugs from the pair of Singularity Drivers. Watching the battlecruiser tear its way through lifeless asteroids had been unsettling enough, but to see that dreadful weapon unleashed on a Maliri ship was horrifying.

Aadya watched impassively, as a series of slugs stitched a slew of impact craters across one carrier, blowing apart its engines, before driving rounds into the launching bays. There was a rippling series of explosions, as the vessel bulged grotesquely with internal detonations, an internal magazine explosion the downfall of the first carrier. The second met a similar fate, while the third was pounded in the rear, engines disintegrating in a shower of debris, before the chain of slugs smashed deep, coring the vessel through from the inside. Then the Invictus closed to Beam Laser range, and the levels of destruction intensified, more carriers blown apart in rapid succession.

"What's that number, Faye?" Tsarra asked quietly, looking at the rapidly-increasing number floating above their heads.

"It's a tally of the slain Maliri in your forces. Standard complement on a Kelamaen class carrier is fourteen-thousand personnel," she informed the young woman helpfully.

Tsarra was stony-faced as she watched the number jumping upwards, the Invictus eviscerating the carrier group, and turning each one of the massive ships into a ruined hulk. At a stroke, the remaining strike craft of the combined fleets had been obliterated. She heard Aadya curse, and turned back to look at the red cruisers and battleships, seeing the white forces suddenly sweep around from both sides, to envelop the pursuing forces. Caught in a blistering three-way crossfire, the cruisers were savaged by the white ships, losing vessels at a three-to-one ratio.

The white strike fighters were faster and fired more quickly than their red counterparts, allowing them to gain flight supremacy in a frighteningly short timeframe. Aadya queried their performance with Faye, and she informed her that they had received the same engine and heatsink upgrades as the capital ships. With the red fighters swept from the battlefield, waves of white bombers assaulted the battleship group with impunity, catching the huge vessels as they tried to engage in the sprawling close-quarters cruiser melee. Aadya watched in silence as her forces were torn apart, the death count spiralling upwards so fast, it was hard to keep track.

"Your flagship has been destroyed," Faye said, giving the troubled Maliri a sympathetic smile. One of the harried battleships had been struck amidships by a torpedo, and erupted in a Power Core explosion. "Would you like to start a new game, or see how this one plays out to its conclusion?"

Aadya was staring at the tiny fragments that were all that was left of her flagship, and said quietly, "Play a new one."

"Hold on!" Tsarra objected. She looked at Faye, and said, "Can you accelerate this battle to its conclusion, please?"

Faye bowed obediently, and the red and white ships slashed into each other, the red forces fighting a desperate, but futile last stand. When the battle had played out, the death count for the red side included a summary, and it read: "Your forces have lost Four-million-nine-hundred-and-forty-seven-thousand Maliri personnel, including all Matriarchs and Fleet Commanders. All cruiser-class or larger vessels have been destroyed."

"What about the white side? What did they lose?" Tsarra asked, looking in numbed disbelief at the scene of utter devastation.

"One-million-eight-hundred-thousand fatalities, with thirty-four percent of fleet assets destroyed," Faye informed her politely.

Tsarra shared a pointed look with Aadya, and said, "So, armed with no foreknowledge of their force's capabilities, we would have faced utter annihilation today?"

Aadya was about to protest, and explain that she had merely been observing the software to begin with, but her words died on her lips. She was forced to grudgingly concede to herself that she would have been caught out by all the surprising tech revelations. "Yes, that's correct, Matriarch," Aadya answered, her voice sober.

"Would you like to play again?" Faye asked, her mouth lifting into an encouraging smile.

Ignoring the VI for a moment, Tsarra nodded to herself as she said, "The Invictus attacking the asteroid belt; that was just to prove that this simulation is accurate, wasn't it? That John Blake's ships can do everything in the simulator..."

"I believe so, Matriarch," Aadya agreed, nodding her agreement.

"They just got lucky!" Tashana protested. She looked at Aadya, and said, "You basically gave up halfway through the battle! That wasn't a realistic or accurate prediction of how it would play out!"

Aadya turned back to the patiently waiting purple girl, and said, "I'd like to play a new game, Faye."

Everyone on the Bridge watched in silence, as the House Perfaren Fleet Commander started a second battle. Despite her many decades of experience, whoever had programmed the white forces, possessed an unmatched grasp of strategy and tactics.

Her adversary employed an unending flurry of feints and misdirections, cleverly interspersing them with genuine threats, all of which left Aadya bewildered as to which she should respond to. Even when she guessed correctly, her opponent always seemed to correctly gauge the exact strength of forces required to tie up her counterattack, while holding enough firepower in reserve to savage vulnerable red assets. Chief amongst these threats was the Invictus, and watching that monster rip apart a trio of battleships sent shivers down Aadya's spine.

Even though she had been forewarned of the capabilities of the upgraded Valaden fleet, Aadya faced one bruising defeat after another. Her most successful attempt still left over a third of the white forces intact, with the Invictus still operational, to the cost of every single red ship in their Armada.

Deciding to throw everything she had at the Invictus, in an attempt to execute Tashana's plan of "cutting the head off the snake", led to the most crushing defeat of them all. The Invictus was almost as fast as a strike craft, and the impenetrable blue globe of Pulse Cannon fire meant that no strike craft survived for more than a few seconds in that deadly hail. The battlecrusier led her forces in a merry dance around the battlefield, while the white forces fell on her chasing vessels and tore them to pieces.

"It's hopeless, Tsarra," Aadya eventually whispered, in a hushed voice. She was already well aware of the crippling toll on the Bridge Crew's morale, as they saw their flagship get ignominiously blown to bits in one simulated battle after another. "This John Blake must be some kind of tactical savant. I've never seen anything like it!"

"This simulation was built by Irillith Valaden, and the tactics developed by John Blake's companion, Calara Fernandez," Faye cheerfully informed them.

"She's just a mindless thrall!" Tashana objected. "This is just one of the Progenitor's tricks!"

"Matriarch, I've been receiving incoming calls," the Communications Officer said to them, looking deeply worried. "It's from the other Matriarchs. They're demanding to speak to you - they think it might be wise to parlay with John Blake."

"Those fucking fools! They've fallen for his trick!" Tashana swore vehemently, her eyes wild with fear. Whirling around to look at Tsarra, she added curtly, "Don't speak to him! You mustn't! You'll throw away everything we've worked for!"

The young Matriarch looked haggard, as she said, "Don't you see? It wasn't a trick, a bluff, or anything like that. If we proceed with this battle, we'll be slaughtered! He was warning us not to throw our lives away!"

Aadya nodded, and with the certainty of someone with the Reaper's scythe hanging over them, she said, "If we face them today, we'll all die. We have no chance of eliminating him."

"You're just fucking cowards!" Tashana raged, her temper flaring. She sneered with contempt, as she added, "Go on then, become one of his mindless whores! I'll never-"

She was knocked sprawling to the ground in a daze, as a guard thumped her on the back of the head with the butt of her laser rifle. Tsarra nodded gratefully to the guardswoman, then said, "Put her in the brig. I'll speak to her later, when she's calmed down."

Tsarra and Aadya watched the masked woman being dragged away by a pair of guards, before the Perfaren Fleet Commander asked, "What are we going to do?"

Tsarra looked thoughtful for a moment, then turned to the purple girl running the simulation, and asked, "Faye, what's the purpose behind this game?"

Faye smiled disarmingly, and replied, "This simulation was designed to show you the horrible consequences if our forces should attack each other. It's only a harmless game, but if we begin the battle in earnest, the outcome will be terrible for both sides. John doesn't want anyone to get hurt, and only wishes to arrange a parlay, to try to come to some kind of peaceful resolution to this conflict."

"A parlay..." Aadya noted, remembering the unusual Terran term the Comms Officer had used. She shared a pointed look with Tsarra, and added, "The other Matriarchs must have heard this same message."

Tsarra nodded, then appeared thoughtful for a moment, before she said, "Something doesn't feel right about any of this. Why would he give away all his technological secrets to us before the battle starts?"

"I have no idea, Matriarch. Revealing them as he's done eliminates any element of surprise he could have exploited in the battle," Aadya replied, her brow furrowed in confusion. She sounded uncertain as she added, "I would normally tell you that it was a grievous tactical error, but I'm inclined to agree with you, though. John Blake is not behaving in the way Tashana led us to believe he would."

Studying the purple construct, Tsarra asked, "Faye, is John a Progenitor like Mael'nerak? Is Tashana right about him?"

The VI of Faye blinked as the key words triggered more of her programming. She looked sad, as she replied, "Tashana correctly identified John as a Progenitor, but she doesn't understand that he's not the same as Mael'nerak. He wanted to explain to her that he's trying to help the Maliri, to heal the terrible wrongs that were done to your people, but she's too frightened of him, and can't be reasoned with." She leaned forward, and said earnestly, "Your DNA was tampered with by Mael'nerak. The gender imbalance in the Maliri is unnatural, and your bodies were modified by him, to provide endless armies of soldiers."

An image appeared, showing a double-helix spiral, with key information highlighted in the code. Startled gasps echoed around the Bridge, with the crew staring at each other in shock.

"John only wishes to help you," Faye continued, her tone sincere. "Maliri society has been corrupted by the skewed gender imbalance, with the males fleeing to the border stations to escape the murders and assassinations. If this isn't corrected for future generations, the Maliri will eventually be doomed to extinction."

Tsarra felt a shiver of fear run down her spine, and she instinctively knew the VI was telling her the truth. Her own experiences with the truculent prized breeding males on the border stations only confirmed Faye's warning. When the young Matriarch looked around the Bridge, she saw similar looks of dread appearing on her crew's faces, as they came to the same bleak realisation.

Faye spread her hands, palms upraised, and continued, "You are free to leave, if you wish. John's forces will not pursue you, and will grant you safe passage back to your own territory." The VI clasped her hands together in a pleading gesture, and continued, "But, I urge you to talk with him, instead! Let him help you, as he's helped the other Matriarchs who have allied with him. He's offering you a bright, happy future. Please, at least hear him out."

Letting out a ragged sigh, Tsarra looked to Aadya, who appeared lost in thought, her brow creased with worry. The Matriarch reached out to gently touch the Fleet Commander's arm, and Aadya jumped, before looking intently into the younger woman's probing gaze. Seeing the question in her dark-green eyes, Aadya slowly nodded.

Tsarra turned to address the Comms Officer, and said, "Prepare to hail the Invictus."

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Alyssa banked the Raptor out of the Invictus' hangar, and glanced over her shoulder at John, grinning at him as she said, "The House Perfaren matriarch was gorgeous! Are you going to share the love with the rest of the Matriarchs, or give her the special full-belly treatment?"

John smiled back at her, and replied, "Neither at the moment. We've got two vast armadas facing off against one another with lots of nervous fingers on triggers. Leaving them leaderless for a few hours while the Matriarchs sleep off brunch probably isn't a good idea."

He glanced over at the Tactical Map where both Maliri fleets were currently in a state of limbo, floating there in space while they awaited word from their Matriarchs. Following the terms of the truce, all strike craft had been recalled to their carriers, and vessels on both sides were now arrayed in non-combat formations. Each ship had a red icon next to it indicating that shields were deactivated, and John knew that their weapons were powered down too.

Laughing happily, Alyssa shook her head in wonder, and said, "I can't believe you managed to get them to talk to you! I love these wild plans you come up with, it's so exciting when they work." Glancing at him over her shoulder, her cerulean eyes sparkled, as she added, "If you aren't planning on stuffing the Matriarchs full of cum, how about I lighten your load instead?"

He pointed at the golden Maliri battleship they were swiftly approaching, and chuckled, as he replied, "Just concentrate on flying, you little minx. We'll have plenty of time to celebrate later."

Alyssa winked at him, then faced forward again, making minor course corrections as she followed the flight path to the Perfaren battleship. Just like the Encaren Valar - the House Ghilwen battleship they'd landed on a few weeks earlier - the large hangar bay on Tsarra's flagship was located at the rear of the vessel, below the huge engines. The crystal bay doors were opened already, giving them a clear view inside the high-arched interior of the hangar.

"There's Tsarra!" she noted, looking out of the window at the beautiful Maliri woman who waited near the landing bay. The House Perfaren Matriarch had a brilliant smile on her face as she waved at them, all sense of decorum forgotten in her excitement. Alyssa grinned at John, and pointing to the crowd of elegantly robed Maliri Matriarchs who waited back near the entrance to the hangar, she added, "Looks like the rest of the House Matriarchs are eager to say hello, too!"

John rose from his chair and gazed out the window, while resting a hand on Alyssa's shoulder. He looked down at her, and said, "Tashana actually did us a huge favour, gathering them all up like this. Once I've had a long chat with them and calmed this situation down, we can all head back to Genthalas. With Jade's help, we can finally get all the Maliri working together."

Alyssa brought the gunship down to land on the landing pad, then reached up to stroke his hand, and said quietly, "I'm proud of you, John. It's amazing seeing you help the Maliri like this, and it feels wonderful knowing I'm a part of it."

He squatted down beside her, and staring into her enchanting blue eyes, he said, "I couldn't do any of this without you. Thank you, for everything."

They shared a tender kiss, until he stood up straight and smoothed out his smartly-tailored suit. "I better go," he said, giving her a warm smile. "I'm trying to make a good impression; I shouldn't leave them waiting."

"Don't do anything I wouldn't do," she teased him, with a lusty grin.

He chuckled, and waved goodbye as he left the cockpit.

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Tashana groaned, and felt the bump on the back of her head. There wasn't any blood, but the thump from the rifle had hurt like hell, leaving her dazed while they dragged her away from the Bridge. She looked around the tiny, austere cell, her eyes narrowing as she was outraged to realise she was now in the ship's brig. After all the effort she'd gone to, convincing the House Perfaren Matriarch and her thirteen peers about the threat the Progenitor posed, she couldn't believe they were just going to throw it all away like this. Her fiery anger simmered away, offering her a blissful release, if she were to just embrace it.

She sat up on the narrow bed and did her best to calm down, massaging her temples as she desperately tried to work out her next move. If Tsarra had spoken to the Progenitor, then Tashana knew she would already be hopelessly fascinated by him. The House Perfaren Matriarch would be eager to meet him in the flesh, just as Valani Naestina had longed to see him again, after their initial brief contact back on Genthalas. That meant a meeting in person, where the Progenitor could make her his Thrall, which would have to either be on the Invictus or on this battleship.

Considering the Invictus as a possibility for a moment, Tashana quickly dismissed it. The Progenitor would want to seem unthreatening, and would make an effort to meet Tsarra in familiar surroundings. That meant he'd likely be coming here, confident in the debilitating effects he had on the Maliri, and ready to enthrall the last Matriarchs that opposed him. She trembled in fear at the thought of the Progenitor being so close by, until she suddenly realised that by gathering all the Matriarchs together like she had done, she'd inadvertently done his work for him. Rather than slowing down his conquest of the Maliri, she'd likely accelerated it by weeks, if not months!

Letting out a furious sob, she felt that spark of rage within her, the flames burning bright, as she fanned them with her fury at Tsarra's betrayal. Tiny tendrils of fire burst forth around her hands, the orange zephyrs dancing playfully across her fingertips. Doubt, fear, and self-loathing were burned away in the delicious heat that swelled within her, and she submerged herself in the flames, as they spoke to her with their siren call.

Rising to her feet, she pressed her hands towards the door, blackening the crystal portal with the intense heat from her fingers, and causing it to crack sharply as the door shattered. She heard cries of alarm coming from the corridor to her left, so she pointed her fists upwards, sending sheets of flame into the ceiling. Melting straight through the roof with her fiery conflagration, her eyes narrowed in anger and she intensified the blaze. The ceiling collapsed as she burned through the support beams, bringing down that section of the corridor in a blazing ruin.

Darting into the smoke-filled passageway, she sprinted away to the right, wanting to quickly distance herself from her cell. Tashana had grown up around House Valaden's vast military, and she was very familiar with the layout of a Shandrass class battleship. She knew that the hangar was only three floors above her head.

There were more startled cries coming from the corridors she sprinted past, the fire alarm beginning its high-pitched warning dirge. She spotted movement up ahead, but she had already reached her goal - the lifts that led to the upper decks. Slapping the button on the wall, she dived inside as soon as the door let out a soft chime, partially drowned out by the undulating wail of the fire alarm. Dousing the flames from her right index finger, she pressed the brightly-lit gem for the 7th floor, the crystal door to the elevator swinging closed a moment later.

She let the swirling blaze engulf her hands again in a thrilling rush, and she stared at the smouldering flames in fascination. Their bewitching dance fortified her, keeping her mentally strong for what she had to do next. There was no fear, only the fire, the deadly heat a precious gift to burn away the wicked.

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Alyssa smiled to herself as she watched John through the cockpit canopy, her handsome man working his magic on the House Perfaren Matriarch. The young Maliri noblewoman blushed a dark blue as he took her hand and kissed it chivalrously, her green-eyed gaze thoroughly captivated as he spoke with her.

She smiled as she listened to John's thoughts, hearing how he carefully watched everything he said, trying to be friendly and put her at ease. Alyssa knew it was all unnecessary, and he could have simply asked Tsarra to kneel down and open wide, before packing her grateful belly with as much cum as she could manage. The fact that he tried so hard to get to know these Maliri girls beforehand, and took the time to explain how he was going to heal them, made her love him just that little bit more.

\*Tsarra Perfaren lost all her family to assassinations,\* Edraele informed her thoughtfully. She sounded eager as she added, \*Do you think John might approve of adding her to my special group of orphaned wards?\*

Alyssa felt a flutter of arousal at the thought, and she quickly replied, \*He's quite smitten with the 'Young Matriarchs', as he calls them. I don't think he'd need much persuading there, but we can raise it with him tonight.\*

\*I'll look forward to that,\* Edraele replied, sending her a telepathic kiss.

The blonde teenager grinned to herself as she teased her fellow Matriarch, \*How about you? I know he'd just love to-\*

Before Alyssa could finish her sentence, her mind was flooded with an angry voice, and what seemed like swirling images of fire.

\*Stay strong, don't let the fear distract you!\* the angry voice snarled to itself. It continued, sounding almost trance-like as it intoned ominously, \*The flames, burning so bright... beautiful, pure, your liberator and saviour...\*

\*That's Tashana's voice!\* Edraele called out to her, in alarm.

\*John, look out!\* Alyssa cried out to him, rushing to the cockpit window and searching for him urgently.

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John smiled at the charming young Maliri woman, who was staring at him in awe. Alyssa was right, Tsarra certainly was a very beautiful girl, but he tried to keep his thoughts clean as he gave her a warm smile.

"Would you be kind enough to introduce me to the other Matriarchs, Tsarra?" he asked pleasantly.

His question roused her from her stunned state, and not taking her eyes from his face, she said breathlessly, "Of course, I'd love to, John!"

The thirteen other Matriarchs were similarly spellbound, and hadn't moved a step since they'd laid eyes on him, standing a little distance away from the landing pad with the parked gunship. John gave them a friendly smile, and he suppressed a chuckle when he saw the older women blush furiously. He'd spoken to all of them before the meeting, just using voice comms initially, and calmly reiterated his message from the simulation. He explained that he meant them no harm, and was just trying to help undo what Mael'nerak had done to the Maliri.

His reassuring baritone voice had soothed tensions, and it hadn't taken much more persuading to then move on to a slightly unnerving conference call, where the fourteen women stared at him, quite enraptured. As the most highly-ranked Matriarch amongst them, Tsarra Perfaren's battleship had been selected for the meeting, the decision made almost as soon as he raised the question of location. He found it curious that the Matriarchs automatically deferred to Tsarra based on House Rank alone, when she was clearly the youngest and least experienced of the group.

\*John, look out!\* Alyssa blurted out, her desperate cry shocking him from his idle thoughts.

Before he could reply, he caught a bright flash of movement by the hangar door, twin orange balls of light shrouding the approaching woman's hands. He saw Tashana's furious violet eyes blazing in her golden mask a split-second before a vast cascade of flames blasted out towards him, the raging inferno howling as it hungered for his flesh.

Acting purely on instinct, he activated his psychic speed, the conflagration slowing to a crawl as it inched towards him from just feet away. He could have easily thrown himself clear, but Tsarra would have been incinerated in his wake, and he didn't even pause as he turned and reached for the terrified young woman. The amber hues of the flames were reflected in her wide green eyes as he scooped her up in his arms, and hurled himself clear, shielding her body with his own.

Then there was just the pain.

Searing, agonising pain, as the fire scorched his back, causing him to cry out, and stumble as he ran. He managed to push Tsarra clear as he lost his balance, and she slid across the floor away from him, as he crashed to the deck, his uncontrolled speed slamming him into the Docking Bay wall.

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Alyssa watched in horror at the events unfolding in the hangar, her shock paralyzing her for a second, as Tashana hurled a writhing sheet of flames at John and Tsarra.

\*JOHN!\* she screamed, her heart clenching in panic, as she saw him burst free of the flames, before skidding into the wall.

\*Burned...\* he replied weakly, and she could feel the blistering pain across their empathic bond.

"You fucking bitch!" she screamed in fury, her telekinetic backhander catching the pyromaniac across her masked face, and sending her cartwheeling back through the door.

Alyssa left the cockpit in a sprint, diving into the grav-tube and bouncing off the rear wall, as she turned and landed nimbly on her feet. The moment her boots hit the ground, she was running again, tearing towards the front loading ramp in her urgent need to protect John.

Edraele's fearful voice reached through Alyssa's seething anger, and she faltered, \*Alyssa, please-\*

\*We tried to be nice, but now she's fucking dead!\* Alyssa snarled, leaping clear of the loading ramp, her body shrouded in a white light as she floated through the air. The lighting in the hangar flickered and dimmed, as white swirls of eldritch energy cascaded down her arms to gather around her slender fingers.

\*Don't kill her...\* John groaned, his telepathic voice faint and unsteady.

Alyssa whirled around, her incandescent gaze falling on John's scorched body. He was slumped against the hangar wall, his suit jacket burned away, leaving his back a red sheet of agony. To see him brought low like this made her heart flutter in her chest, and when he pitched over, she quailed for a moment as she feared the worst.

\*Not her fault...\* he gasped, as he lay prone on the decking, alive, but in a world of pain.

She caught a quick flash of movement by the door as a pair red boots disappeared from sight, Tashana fleeing from where she'd been slapped into the corridor.

Spotting Tsarra Perfaren, who was staring at her in a mix of terror and wonder, Alyssa pointed at John, and thundered, "Help him!"

As her booming, amplified voice echoed around the hangar, Tsarra ran over to John's side with a low cry, raising the intercom on her wrist to call for assistance.

"Now for you," Alyssa spat furiously through gritted teeth, rushing towards the big door that was the only way out of the hangar.

The moment she glided through the doors, a bright burst of flame licked down the corridor, scorching the walls as it reached for her. Alyssa simply raised her left hand, and a shield of white hexagons sprang into place, deflecting and containing the flames. The inferno intensified until it was white-hot, cracking the walls and ceiling as the flames were swept harmlessly aside by the impenetrable shield. The hellfires incinerated everything but the gleaming wall of hexes, which were severely tested by that blistering heat, but still stood unbowed by the assault. Alyssa glided towards the twisted source of the inferno, a grim smile of anticipation on her face, as a whirling white storm swirled around her flexing right hand.

\*I promised Edraele and Irillith...\* John murmured, his weakened voice drifting through her wall of hate. \*They'll never forgive themselves if you kill her.\*

It took a moment for his words to sink in, and letting go of her anger with an exasperated sigh, Alyssa rolled her eyes, and snorted, \*Fine! We'll do it your way,\* She paused for a moment, then asked hopefully, \*How about smacking her around a bit? I might knock some sense into her.\*

She waited for John to reply, but she could feel the waves of pain radiating from him as he finally lapsed into unconsciousness. Without her anger clouding her mind, she was overwhelmed with concern for him, and she reached out urgently to Rachel, and gasped, \*John's been hurt! Ask Faye to bring the Raptor back, then get over here! He needs you!\*

\*I'm already on my way to our hangar. Faye's connected to the Raptor, and is heading to the Invictus,\* Rachel replied, her voice soothing. Sensing Alyssa's confusion, she added, \*Edraele told us what happened.\*

\*Thank you,\* Alyssa said gratefully to the Maliri Matriarch.

Part of the ceiling collapsed with a tortured groan, the melting superstructure no longer able to withstand the ferocious heat from Tashana's assault. Alyssa blinked in surprise at the noise and shower of debris, almost forgetting about her assailant as she tried to organise help for John. Glancing up the corridor, she dramatically reduced the eldritch power coiled around her fist, then pushed out, sending a hail of stinging telekinetic projectiles at her assailant. There was a startled cry of pain from behind the sheet of flames, and they guttered and died as Tashana dived for cover, disappearing through a door in the corridor.

Striding after her, Alyssa groaned when she reached the door and realised the Maliri girl had leapt into a lift. Hitting the glowing gem on the wall to summon another, she paused to note the floor count, watching as it reached the lowest level. Sometime during Tashana's assault, the fire alarm had been triggered, and Alyssa winced against the harsh noise as she stepped inside the lift and hit the button for Deck Twelve.

\*I'm chasing Tashana, and she's running to Deck Twelve,\* Alyssa said to Edraele, her voice throbbing with urgency. \*What's down there? Anything I should know about?\*

She could sense Edraele's confusion for a moment, then a sudden surge of fear, as she gasped, \*The airlocks!\*

Alyssa frowned, her brow creased with worry. She'd never forgotten Irillith's desperate suicidal plunge on Trankara, and now that Tashana's plans lay in tatters, it seemed as though she planned to end her suffering in a similar fashion. The lift dropped down the levels, moving at what felt like a glacial pace in her heightened state of awareness.

"9," the deck counter displayed helpfully.

"'I think twins are hot!' he says," Alyssa grumbled, tapping her foot impatiently.

"10," the counter continued to increase, as the lift descended.

"'A threesome with Irillith and her twin would be amazing'," she parroted, as she recalled one of John's idle thoughts, clenching her teeth with frustration.

"11," the deck counter informed her, as she dropped down through the decks.

She rolled her eyes as she muttered, "There must be thousands of sexy Maliri twins who'd be begging to take his load, but no, that would be far too easy..."

"12," the lift let out a smug chime, and she could almost hear its sense of satisfaction at a job well done.

The lift finally opened, and Alyssa stalked outside, quite certain she deserved the 'Best Girlfriend in the Universe' award for her efforts.

She caught a flicker of movement a long way up the corridor, and she sprinted after Tashana, hexagonal shield bobbing in front of her. Alyssa felt a flicker of fear as she recognised the crystal portal up ahead, the design identical to the inner airlock door on Edraele's private shuttle. She skidded to a halt outside the sealed portal, and peered through the clear-crystal window into the small, pressurised airlock chamber.

Tashana was standing there, her hand trembling as it hovered over the button that would open the outer airlock door. She'd lost her cowl and mask when Alyssa had smacked her out of the Docking Bay, and the blue skin on the back of her shaven head was crisscrossed with a patchwork of ugly scars.

"Wait! Don't do it!" Alyssa called out, making a quick gesture with her right hand.

Tashana whirled around, her angular eyes widening with fear as she stared at her blonde pursuer. Not wasting any time, she slapped her hand down on the button, but her hand came up short, blocked from making contact by Alyssa's invisible wall of telekinetic force. Hammering away at it time and again, she finally realised it was futile. The terrible look of despair in those violet orbs was heartbreaking, and Alyssa felt a sharp pang of sympathy for the ravaged girl.

She pressed her hand on the button to open the inner airlock door, but Tashana had sealed it from the inside. Making a lifting motion with her left hand, she forced the door upwards with a tortured shriek of crystal.

Backing away into the corner of the airlock chamber, Tashana's violet eyes were wide with fear, as she blurted out, "You've already won! What more do you want from me?!"

Alyssa stepped inside the airlock, then lowered her left hand again, dropping the crystal door and sealing them inside. Her bright blue eyes narrowed, and she pointed at Tashana, the eldritch vortexes swirling ominously around her slender arm. "Sit down, we're going to have a little chat," she said firmly.

Shaking her head, Tashana replied, "No! I'm not listeni-"

Giving her a shrug, Alyssa said, "Either you sit down, or I'll make you. It's your choice."

Eyeing the white nimbus of power shrouding the Terran girl, Tashana reluctantly squatted down on the ground, watching the blonde like she was a poisonous snake.

Alyssa leaned against the opposite wall, then slid down so she was sitting on the floor. They sat staring at each other for a few seconds, until she said, "Despite everything you've done, I just want to help you."

"By helping him turn me into one of his indoctrinated thralls?!" Tashana snapped, her fear receding as her temper flared. "I've had enough of being raped for ten lifetimes!"

Shaking her head, Alyssa replied, "It's not like that at all." She smiled at the horribly scarred Maliri girl, and said, "He can undo everything that happened to you - put you back the way you were before the banishment."

Tashana snorted, and said, "If I become one of his mindless puppets?! I'd rather just space myself!"

"Progenitors do turn women into Thralls, but John is very different. There's no domination over our bond with him, he got rid of all that. If you decide to join us, you'll just be yourself," Alyssa explained patiently. She looked into Tashana's disbelieving eyes, and added, "Alternatively, he doesn't even have to be involved at all. Our doctor, Rachel, can help you instead. It won't be the same as if John heals you, and will take a lot longer, but at the very least she can save your life. You've been getting splitting headaches, haven't you?"

The Maliri girl subconsciously reached for her temple, then sounded more subdued as she murmured, "The brain tumour..."

Alyssa arched an eyebrow, and said, "I didn't realise you knew about it. You ran away before we could tell you."

Tashana nodded, and said, "The scanner in the Medical Bay. I saw the scan results when I was looking for the tracking implant."

Spotting the burn mark on her neck, Alyssa winced, and said, "That must have hurt like hell." She looked into Tashana's wary eyes, and continued sincerely, "Anyway, Rachel can operate to remove the tumour, which will stop the headaches and save your life. She'll be able to rebuild your nose with a synthetic version, and she's also developed enzymes that can regenerate scar tissue on burn victims - they'd work just as well to heal all your scars. She can't undo all the psychological trauma you've suffered, but there's no extra implications involving John, if you choose to go along that route."

Tashana didn't say anything for a long moment, before she asked in a quiet voice, "So your doctor could help me? Then I'd be free to leave?"

The blonde girl nodded, and replied, "Rachel tells me it'd take a few weeks to treat all your injuries." She smiled as she added, "We aren't going to hold you prisoner, you can go whenever you like. Hiding in our Medical Bay was your idea, we just wanted to check the extent of your injuries."

"Why are you trying so hard to help me?" Tashana asked, trying to decide if she was being manipulated.

Alyssa smiled at her, and replied, "Because John loves Irillith and Edraele, and wants to help them make amends. They both bitterly regret what happened to you, even though it wasn't their fault."

"Of course it was their fucking fault!" Tashana snarled, her eyes blazing with fury.

Shaking her head, Alyssa's voice was firm, when she replied, "No, it wasn't. The women that betrayed you no longer exist, not as they were, at least." She sighed, as she continued, "It's a long story, but Edraele fought a Progenitor, and had her mind wiped out when she lost. That vicious, heartless monster that was your mother, is dead. Her body was nothing but an empty shell when John and I found her. Her memories were intact, but everything that formed her personality was totally obliterated. He rebuilt Edraele's mind, shaping her into a kind woman, who's doing her best to lead and care for her people."

Despite how ludicrous it sounded, Tashana knew Alyssa was telling the truth. Her tale was too outlandish to be some half-baked lie. "What about Irillith?" she asked sullenly.

Alyssa laughed, tilting her head back as she stared at the ceiling, and replied, "Holy Christ! She was a real grade-A bitch when we first met her! Irillith was even more of a pain in the arse than you are!" Lowering her eyes to fix Tashana with her steady blue-eyed gaze, she continued in a sober voice, "She got shot, and would have died if she hadn't asked John to save her."

"So I suppose she's all 'kind' now, too?" Tashana asked, her voice full of scorn.

Ignoring the other girl's sarcasm, Alyssa replied quietly, "Trying to live in this fucked-up Maliri civilisation of yours warped your sister. The daily floggings with the neural whips, the mental and physical abuse from your mother; they all turned her into a woman that was bitterly jealous of Edraele's attention, and viewed you as a threat. John healed her mind, erasing all those torments, and she's simply not the same person any more. She's good and kind now, like you were, before you were betrayed."

Tashana looked haunted by those memories, filled with a fierce yearning for the days before all those years of pain and anguish. She didn't say anything, but the look she gave Alyssa spoke volumes.

Alyssa spoke softly now, and said, "You were always a good girl, just trying to keep your relationship going with your sister, while she pushed you away. What happened to you was horrible, and you never deserved any of it." She leaned forward, and said earnestly, "Let John help you. He can put things back to the way they should have been."

"So I'm supposed to believe he's some kind of white knight? He just rides in on his trusty steed, and magically fixes everything?" Tashana snapped, her ruined face twisting with her snide comment.

"Yes, pretty much. He did the same for me, and all the other girls on the Invictus. You had the intuition to realise the truth behind the 'Mael'nerak' fairytale, then spent decades researching it, and trying to convince everyone that you were right. I know it's going to be difficult for you, but you're simply going to have to trust me, and realise that I'm the one telling you the truth this time," Alyssa replied, her tone sincere.

Tashana faltered for a moment, then sounded suspicious as she asked, "How do I know this isn't some kind of trick?"

Alyssa glanced pointedly at the button that controlled the outer airlock door, and added, "Considering what you were planning to do, what have you got to lose?"

Hugging her knees, the troubled girl turned away from Alyssa's bright blue eyes, unable to face her piercing gaze. When Tashana eventually looked up again, Alyssa waved her hand at the telekinetic barrier over the button controlling the airlock door, and removed it with a brief surge of willpower.

Meeting Tashana's questioning look, Alyssa smiled, as she said, "There, I've removed the barrier. Now I'm placing my trust in you first, and putting both our lives in your hands."

Tashana stared at the airlock's emergency release valve with wide eyes. It had been several decades since anyone had placed that kind of blind faith in her, and it was shocking to experience it once again. She turned to look at the calm girl before her, and sounded tentative as she asked, "What do you want me to do, exactly?"

Alyssa rose to her feet, dismissing the white glow of power around herself, and replied, "I'm only asking you for one thing. You've spoken with Faye before, and you've probably realised that she's an innocent soul. She's honest and trusting, and I've never seen her act in a duplicitous way. She can show you cam footage of everything we've been doing on the Invictus. If you watch that, you'll be able to see that John isn't anything like Mael'nerak was. He genuinely wants to help you, just like he helped me and all the other girls."

Tashana was silent for a moment, moved by her sincerity, and she finally said, "Alright, I'll do as you ask."

With a bright smile on her face, Alyssa raised the internal airlock door with a slight gesture, and said, "Come on, let's get out of here." She frowned slightly, as she added, "I need to check on John, you really hurt him."

She opened the airlock door, and Tashana followed her out into the corridor. They walked together in silence, with the Maliri girl lost in her thoughts, while Alyssa caught up on events with her girls.

\*John sustained severe third-degree burns across his back, which I've treated as best I can,\* Rachel explained, her tone detached and professional to stop herself getting upset. \*He's anaesthetised, and aboard the Raptor. We're just waiting for you before we depart.\*

\*Thank you, we won't be long,\* Alyssa replied, stepping into the lift with Tashana at her side.

They rode up together, the lift chiming as it counted off the deck levels, until they finally reached Deck Seven. The corridor outside was a charred ruin, with billowing black smoke staining the ceiling after the fire had been extinguished. They walked past the emergency response teams who were starting the clean-up operation, and they glanced at Alyssa with curiosity, and Tashana with a mixture of pity and revulsion in their eyes.

The scarred girl flinched from those judgemental looks, until Alyssa reached out to take her hand, a sympathetic, supportive smile on her full lips. Tashana flinched at the contact, then smiled at her tentatively, letting the blonde girl lead her past the Maliri and into the Docking Bay. She stopped momentarily to scoop up her mask, the cowl torn where it had been ripped from her head.

Alyssa studied her for a moment, then said softly, "Whether you choose to let John or Rachel help you, you won't need to hide behind that mask any more." She gently squeezed her hand then released it, before walking over to Tsarra and the rest of the Matriarchs. They had gathered around the Raptor, and had looks of concern on their faces as they spoke to Sakura, who stood fully armed and armoured on the loading ramp.

Tashana lifted the golden mask with its mocking grin, turning it in the light as she studied it. Alyssa's telekinetic blow had smashed its features, and the heat from the fire had melted them, distorting the golden face even further. The mask looked strangely sad now, the grin distorted and downturned, and where the metal had melted around the eyes, it looked like it had been crying golden tears.

The mask had been the face of Malifica, the persona she'd hidden behind as an arena fighter first, then a freed slave, and finally, a smuggler. It had helped protect her from those pitying and horrified looks, letting her forget for brief moments everything that had been done to her. While it offered protection, she suddenly realised that it was also a golden cage, keeping her trapped behind its concealing embrace, and preventing her from having any real interaction with the world. While that had been a blessing in the Unclaimed Wastes, she realised she'd never be able to truly experience life while hiding behind it.

She let the mask fall from her fingers, then watched as it dropped to the deck with a metallic clang. When she turned away and followed Alyssa to the gunship, she didn't look back.

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\*The Matriarchs have sent their fleets back to their territories, and are all coming to Genthalas in their flagships,\* Alyssa said to Edraele, as she walked towards the aft grav-tube. John was unconscious, and floating along beside her, cradled in her gentle telekinetic embrace.

\*I'll arrange berths for the ships, and guest quarters for everyone,\* Edraele replied, her tone distracted and perfunctory. She hesitated for a moment, then her voice trembled, as she added, \*Thank you, for saving her.\*

Alyssa glanced at Tashana, who walked along quietly beside her, and replied, \*I'm hoping she'll make the right choice, but whatever happens, things will be better for her now.\*

Edraele didn't reply, but opened her empathic bond wide, instead. She shared all her feelings of relief and gratitude, love for the daughter that had been so badly wronged, and for Alyssa herself, for rescuing Tashana from a cold, bleak end in the vacuum of space. It was a moving experience, one that was far more profound than words alone could convey.

Surreptitiously wiping away the welling tears in her eyes, Alyssa stopped in front of the blue anti-gravity field, then turned to Sakura, and asked, "Please could you take Tashana up to John's Ready Room? Faye's got some videos to show her."

Sakura nodded, then smiled at Tashana, and said, "If you'd like to follow me, I'll show you the way."

They stepped into the grav-tube, and once they were enveloped in the blue glow, they rose upwards and out of sight.

Contacting Sakura telepathically, Alyssa added, \*You better stay geared up and wait in the Bridge. Faye will be with her, but I'm not willing to take any chances. I'll be with John, but just let me know if there's any problems, okay?\*

\*Don't worry, I'll keep everyone safe,\* Sakura replied confidently.

Alyssa guided John into the grav-tube, then glanced at Rachel and asked, "How long will he be out for?"

"The sedative should keep him under for six hours," the brunette replied, studying John's gel-sealed wounds, his torso thoroughly wrapped by bandages. "I've never seen him heal himself before, so I'm not sure how long that'll take."

Stepping out onto Deck Two, Alyssa replied, "He was completely healed from a spike being driven through his gut in about the same time, and he's a lot stronger now. I guess we'll just have to see."

They walked through to the bedroom, where Dana was waiting for them, and Alyssa levitated John over the bed, before gently laying him down on his front.

"Fuck! She really toasted him!" Dana swore, scampering over the bed, and looking at the swathes of bandages covering John's entire back and left arm.

Rachel nodded, and said, "They were terrible burns. He was fortunate he was only exposed for a few seconds." She kicked off her shoes, then climbed on the bed, her professional composure cracking as she leaned in to plant a loving kiss on his cheek.

John's jacket and shirt had been burned or cut away, leaving him in just his trousers and shoes. Dana and Rachel quickly pulled them off, then covered his lower body with the bedsheet, before stripping off themselves and getting into bed beside him. Alyssa followed their lead, snuggling in behind Dana as they gazed at John in concern.

"It's bad enough seeing any of us get hurt, but it feels worse when it's John," Dana murmured, running her hand through his hair. "He's normally the one looking after us."

Alyssa nodded, then rested her chin on her friend's shoulder, and said, "He'll be alright, Sparks. I can feel him drawing energy from me to heal himself." She glanced at the redhead, pulling psychic energy from her to add to the stream she was feeding to their man.

"I feel it too," Dana murmured. She looked over her shoulder, then smiled as she added, "Thanks for letting me help."

Giving her a loving smile, Alyssa glanced over John to see Rachel watching them, that same desire to help etched clearly on her beautiful face. Even though it was unnecessary, as she had more than enough energy reserves to heal John herself, Alyssa gently drew power from Rachel. It was just enough for her to feel it, and the brunette nodded and smiled in gratitude, before lying down on the bed beside him. The three girls settled down to begin their vigil, knowing he was going to be alright, but worried for him all the same.

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"Hi, Sakura!" Faye greeted the Asian girl as she stepped onto the Bridge. She waved at Tashana and added, "Hello again, Tashana! I've been reviewing all our cam-feed archives, and I've got lots to show you!"

Tashana responded with a curt nod, then followed after the chirpy purple girl as she skipped towards the Ready Room. The Command Deck was deserted, but only because Jade was piloting the Invictus from the Combat Bridge, instead. While the situation with the rival Matriarchs seemed to have been calmed, Calara wasn't willing to take any chances, so she was keeping her company at her Tactical Station, just in case she needed to spring into action. Although Irillith longed to see her sister, she was down there too, following Alyssa's request to keep out of sight. Neither of them wanted to risk sparking off Tashana's anger with her twin's presence, not at this delicate stage.

Sakura settled in to wait, sitting in the Comms Station chair to surreptitiously stand guard, while Faye closed the Ready Room door behind Tashana.

"So, what would you like to see first?" the chirpy AI asked, as she bounced over to John's desk, and sat on the end. "Alyssa told me to show you anything you like, but she thought it would be more useful to show you the transformation each of the girls underwent."

Tashana swept the unfamiliar room with a cautious glance, and seeing nothing threatening, followed Faye over to the desk. She slowly sat in the big leather chair, before turning it towards the glowing holographic interface that floated above the heavy desk. After thinking about Faye's question for a moment, a dark smile spread on her ravaged face, as she replied, "Start by showing me Irillith, when she got shot."

Faye nodded, and said, "Sure! Let me just load that up for you!"

The interface flickered for a moment, before changing to a view of the Medical Bay, where Irillith lay unconscious on the medical scanner. A horrific gunshot wound had left a ragged, terrible hole in her lower torso, and Tashana watched as Rachel administered a stimulant via a hypo-syringe, waking her sister up.

Irillith let out a low, strangled cry of agony, moaning with the indescribable pain as she writhed on the bed. Tashana was riveted to the screen as she listened to John offering to help her, but only if she gave him permission to do so. She saw that moment when she broke, that dreadful look in Irillith's violet eyes as she agreed to become one of John's thralls, knowing what it would mean.

Watching her twin begging for help while convulsing in agony was an oddly conflicting experience, and Tashana sat back to try and make sense of it. While there was a brief moment of satisfaction at seeing Irillith suffer, she was surprised to find that joy was quickly replaced by feelings of pity and sympathy. Tashana knew pain and suffering like two old friends, and as much as she'd wished to introduce her sister to them both, to finally witness it in all its gory, merciless detail felt hollow, and filled her with sadness.

"Show me the rest, but as they were before John met them, not as they are now," she muttered, glancing at Faye.

"Will do!" Faye replied, giving her a kind smile. She paused for a second, her big luminescent eyes blinking once, before she added, "I've queued up all the footage. As you didn't specify an order, I've arranged them chronologically. Alyssa met John on his old freighter, the Fool's Gold, not the Invictus, so the camera footage isn't as good quality."

Tashana nodded, and said, "That's fine, go ahead."

Faye began the playback, watching the spellbound Maliri girl, as she stared at the screen. First there was the waif-like Alyssa, who made her fateful agreement with John that had so radically transformed their lives. Then it was Calara on the screen, smaller than she was now, with vicious scars across her back and a battered face. Tashana watched the Latina spying on John and Alyssa together, before walking over to willingly join them in bed together.

Dana was next, with her horribly burned waifish face, completely unrecognisable from the statuesque beauty she was now. She sat in a long meeting room with John, Alyssa, and Calara, where they offered her a job as their Chief Engineer, and she gladly agreed to join them. Jade was all over John from the start, while with Rachel it was a lengthier process, with hours of conversation fast-forwarded, before she agreed to join the crew.

To see Sakura start off as a deadly assassin, who had inflicted so much damage to the crew before she had been captured, was the most shocking of all. She watched in fascination as they operated on the Asian girl, removing a bewildering amount of cybernetic implants from her body, before leaving her a pretty, petite version of the glorious Amazon who had escorted her into the ship. The parallels to Tashana's own situation were striking. To see Rachel labouring away in surgery for hours, and then the miraculous results afterwards, gave her a sense of hope that she thought had long been extinguished.

The footage all followed the same pattern, with John seeking each girl's permission, before helping them in various ways. Faye began queuing up more footage, showing the girls as they recovered from their various ordeals, then as they began to grow and develop far beyond their humble beginnings. Tashana made no objection to her choice of videos, so the helpful digital girl spooled up hour-after-hour of footage. She cycled between the different girls in their moments of happiness filled with laughter, then showing them working as a team to beat impossible odds, and their loving victory celebrations afterwards.

Tashana flinched instinctively at first when she saw them naked in bed, but it didn't take long for revulsion to be replaced by fascination, and she found herself leaning forward to watch with eyes wide open. It was all so different from the brutality Tashana had experienced, and there was no violence, or pain, just playful fun as John and the girls enjoyed each other.

They sat and watched nearly six hours of video, detailing their lives aboard the Invictus, until an image finally shocked Tashana out of her transfixed state. It was Faye, but not as she was now. Instead, she appeared as a tiny, four-inch-tall androgynous sprite that Tashana instantly recognised. The image was taken of her speaking with Dana and Rachel, and the purple construct looked delighted, as she said, "I'd like to be called Faye."

Tashana looked at Faye in surprise, and the AI smiled at her, and replied to her unanswered question, "He's helped me too. They all have."

The footage showed Faye interacting with the crew, speaking with John as she learned from them and developed at an astonishing rate. They watched as he helped her deal with her shock over Jade's death, and the bonding moments where their trust in her grew and she was given more responsibilities, truly becoming part of their team. Finally she watched as Dana and Irillith laboured away for days on end, building a new Nexus server for her, and saving her from an untimely end. The final image was taken from her special archives, showing John planting a kiss on her lovely holographic cheek, with Faye's eyes closed in bliss.

"You're in love with him!" Tashana gasped, staring at the AI in shock.

Faye blushed demurely as she glanced at the image of John, and said with a fond smile, "I am. He didn't trust me at first, but we've both grown a lot since then." Turning back to look at the stunned Maliri girl, she added quietly, "I'm a digital creature, so I'm not affected by any of John's Progenitor abilities that influence organic women. I can quite objectively tell you that he's a good person, genuinely trying to help people. I'd give everything I have to be in the position you're in right now, but as much as I wish for it, I know it's something I can never experience."

Tashana stared at the forlorn purple girl in amazement, and said, "You wish you were me?!"

The purple girl nodded, then gave her a sad smile, as she replied, "Please don't waste this opportunity, they're offering you a wonderful gift."

"Alyssa said that Rachel could heal me too," Tashana said cautiously.

Shaking her head, Faye replied, "No, I don't mean that. They're offering to let you join their family." With that, she rose from the desk, and gave Tashana a gentle smile as she added, "I think you've seen enough to make your decision. I'll leave you to think it over, but Sakura and I will be waiting outside for you, when you've made up your mind."

Tashana stared at the purple girl in shock, then said, "Thank you for showing me everything." She paused for a moment, then smiled, as she added, "I hope your wish comes true one day."

"Thank you, that's nice of you to say," Faye replied, returning her smile, before vanishing in a purple flash.

Turning and leaning back in her chair, Tashana stared at the window, her mind a blur. The kind-hearted sprite had given her a lot to think about.

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It had only taken ten minutes for the Invictus to return to the Epsilon Aquarii system, and they docked at Genthalas while John's burns regenerated as he slept. The rest of the Matriarchs jumped into the system shortly afterwards, while the allied fleets dispersed, returning to their respective House territories. The entirety of the House Valaden fleet returned to Genthalas too, to provide additional security with so many House flagships in attendance.

When Gaenna, her cohort of Matriarchs, and their Fleet Commanders all arrived on the station, Edraele greeted them like long-lost sisters. After that first dramatic meeting John, they were all so eager to see him again, they agreed to put past differences aside, and gladly accepted Edraele's offer of guest suites until John was available.

Now that all the Matriarchs were settled and a disastrous battle averted, Edraele could attend to the business of running House Valaden. Her first command was to begin the deployment of fresh comms beacons around her territory, to replace the ones destroyed by hostile Houses. She then began the long process of refitting her ships with all the new technology that John had provided, using nearly nine-hundred fanatically dedicated engineers to commence work immediately.

The "Young Matriarchs" agreed with her plan the moment she raised it. They all understood the value in upgrading the most powerful vessels in their alliance with the new Tachyon Drives, as doing so would enable them to respond more quickly to threats. House Loraleth's forces were to be next, then Aeberos, Naestina, and finally Ghilwen's, the Maliri following House Rankings by instinct.

With those important matters attended to, Edraele was forced to wait for John to recover from his injuries. True to their word, Kali, Leena, Nyrelle, and Valani kept her company, distracting her with questions about running their Houses. She knew what they were doing, but she smiled at them and played along, always eager to help them learn, and grateful for something to take her mind off her worries.

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John awoke feeling fully refreshed and brimming with energy, and he grinned as he felt warm, soft female bodies draped over him. Glancing down, he saw thick manes of blonde, red, and brown hair, and he smiled at the thought of an energetic foursome with the three nubile teenagers.

"If you're thinking about fucking us, you must be better," Alyssa said, looking up at him with a sparkling smile on her face. She hugged him fiercely, and added, "I'm so glad you're okay!"

Dana and Rachel had only been lightly sleeping, and they awoke with only the slightest of telepathic nudging. They hugged him too, overjoyed to see John looking vibrantly health once again.

"Thanks for looking after me," he said, with a grateful grin. "I feel amazing!"

Rachel smiled at him, then urged him to sit up so she could examine his wounds. They all sat up and gave him some space, before the brunette carefully peeled away the bandages and gel packs, revealing perfect, fully-healed skin.

"I know I was expecting it, but it's still astonishing seeing it work like that," she said, examining his back in wonder.

\*Talking of healing, we have company,\* Alyssa thought to him, glancing towards the bedroom doorway.

Sakura was still armoured, but she'd removed her helmet, her long jet-black hair fanning out over her shoulders and tumbling down her back. She stepped into the bedroom with Tashana following behind her, and glancing at the Maliri girl, she said kindly, "Our guest has made a decision. She wanted to speak to you."

"Thanks, Sakura," John said, giving her a warm smile.

"You're welcome," she replied, grinning at him in delight to see he was fully recovered. She glanced at Alyssa, then turned and left the bedroom to remove her combat gear.

"We'll leave you to talk," Rachel said, sliding out of bed, and beckoning Dana to follow her.

The redhead pouted, but scooped up her clothes and left with the brunette, whispering furtively, "I wanna know what she says!"

John smiled at the departing girls, then glanced at the chair near the bed, and said, "Take a seat, Tashana. What's on your mind?"

She watched him warily for a moment, then seemed to make a decision before she walked across the bedroom, and sat on the edge of the bed. Looking from Alyssa to John, she asked, "I've chosen to let Rachel help me. So, what happens next?"

He gave her a reassuring smile, as he replied, "Then we'll take you down to Medical, and she'll prep for surgery to remove that brain tumour. After that, Rachel will help you with the rest of your injuries."

"That's it?" she asked him dubiously.

Nodding, he replied, "Once she's helped you as much as she can, whatever you choose to do then is entirely up to you. Although, if you'd be willing to share some of your expertise on Mael'nerak, I'd really appreciate it. Any information you have that might help me protect the Maliri against the other Progenitor would be invaluable."

Tashana had been wary when he mentioned her research into Mael'nerak, but she looked at him in shock when she heard the last, and blurted out, "Another Progenitor! What do you mean?!"

Alyssa smiled grimly, and said, "As I explained before, John's a good Progenitor, but there's an evil one out there too, busy fucking everything up. He's been using a Wormhole Generator to jump around the galaxy, stirring up shit all over the place."

John met Tashana's startled glance in his direction, and said, "We've intervened and stopped him on three occasions so far. Firstly, he was behind a series of Drakkar raids against the Ashanath. Then he enthralled a Trankaran called 'the Glowing Queen', and tried to use her to start a civil war in the Trankaran Republic. Finally he enthralled a Terran Federation Admiral, and used her to stir up conflict between the Kintark and the Terrans in the Dragon March. Hundreds of thousands of Kintark and Terrans were killed before we managed to disrupt his plans. Unfortunately, he killed Admiral Lynton before we could question her."

"What about the Maliri Regency?" Tashana asked, looking ashen as she stared at him with big, frightened eyes.

John studied her for a moment, before he asked, "You already know what Mael'nerak did to the Maliri? How he turned your women into soldiers for his armies?"

"I've seen pictures, heard testimonies... He changed the Maliri, to make us welcome his subjugation," she faltered, wringing her hands together nervously in her lap. Her violet eyes hardened then, as she added in an accusatory tone, "Just as you've done to the Matriarchs!"

He gave her a look of regret as he replied, "I never wanted that to happen, but it's better this way."

"Better for who?! How can you be 'good', if you've turned the Maliri into your slaves?!" she demanded indignantly.

"They aren't my slaves," he replied, with a firm shake of his head. He gave her a reassuring smile, as he continued, "When we get back to Genthalas, just talk to anyone from House Valaden. Edraele and the Matriarchs from all our allied Houses have outlawed torture and murders - political assassinations have been practically eliminated overnight."

Alyssa nodded, and said, "All those white-haired Maliri on Genthalas, you must have seen them... Do you know what the white hair actually means?"

"That they've been turned into Thralls," Tashana replied, her tone blunt and damning.

John said in a quiet voice, "They do have a psychic connection to Edraele, but that's not the most important difference. I've undone Mael'nerak's tampering with the gender birth ratios. Any children those women have will have an equal chance of being male."

It took Tashana a couple of seconds to process what he was telling her, but she gaped at him in amazement as she suddenly realised the titanic shift this would have on Maliri society.

He smiled at her when he saw the light of understanding in her eyes, and said, "That's my long term plan to help your people - I'm just trying to stop the Maliri from driving themselves to extinction. Now that all the murders on the homeworlds have stopped, the men will start to return from the border stations. After that, nature will do the rest." He looked thoughtful as he added, "In the short term, with the matriarchs all linked to me, I can stop the other Progenitor from taking control of them. They'd be vulnerable to him, but I can keep the Maliri safe."

Tashana stared at him in silence for a long moment, the image of John pulling Tsarra Perfaren clear of her flames burned into her mind, just as she'd burned his flesh. Her hushed voice was full of regret as she murmured, "I was so wrong about you, you really do care about the Maliri. I'm sorry... about everything."

"That's okay, I'm just glad you can see that I'm trying to help your people," he said, looking relieved. After a moment's pause, a shadow of guilt crossed his face, and he sighed as he admitted, "You weren't completely wrong about me, though. I do have a darker Progenitor side. He was supposed to be a guide to my psychic abilities, but he fought against me, and managed to take control a few months ago."

"That sounds ominous. What happened?" she asked, her face impassive as she studied him.

"Edraele released him, trying to break into my mind. They fought, and when he defeated her, he wiped her mind as the first step of turning her into his Matriarch," John replied, meeting her searching gaze. He glanced at the blonde girl sitting beside him, and continued, "Alyssa helped me defeat him, and he's locked away in a psychic prison now."

Alyssa gave Tashana a regretful smile, and added, "I'm really sorry I was vague about that earlier. I'd only just started to build up a rapport with you, and I didn't want to scare you off."

"Is there any way he can take over again?" Tashana asked, her tone curious rather than angry.

Shaking his head, John replied, "There's no chance of him escaping, but I will need to face him again eventually. He's stopping me from unlocking my full psychic potential."

She thought about it for a moment, then gave him a tentative smile, and said, "Thank you for being honest with me. I appreciate it."

John returned her smile, and said, "I don't want to keep anything from you, and you deserve to hear the truth. Once Rachel's healed your injuries, I hope we can be friends." He glanced down at his state of undress, then gave her an embarrassed grin, and added, "If you give me a moment to get dressed, we'll take you down to Medical, and you can get started."

Tashana was quiet as she studied him. This kind, thoughtful man was nothing like the evil tyrant she'd envisaged. She'd spent years being abused by all sorts of vicious, sadistic monsters, but she could tell instinctively that John had been truthful with her about everything. Calm and at ease now, she studied his handsome features, and finally letting her guard down, she felt a strong flush of attraction towards him. Tashana knew exactly what she was feeling. She was drawn to him by the instinctive lure that all Maliri felt towards a Progenitor, but she didn't fight it, she embraced it instead.

"I've changed my mind," she said swiftly, a slight flush in her scarred cheeks.

John looked worried, and trying to calm any worries she might have, he said, "I promise, there's no downsides to having Rachel heal your injuries."

She slowly shook her head, and said, "No, I don't mean that." She bit her lip, then added tremulously, "If I choose you to heal me, what happens next?"

When John glanced at Alyssa, she thought to him, \*She's just watched six hours of video footage of you healing all of us. She knows the drill, I think she just needs to hear you say it.\*

He focused on Tashana, and paused for a moment, before he replied, "Perhaps you should speak to the other girls on the crew? Then you can hear what they have to say, and get to know them a bit, before making your decision."

Tashana shook her head in a slow, deliberate motion, and replied, "What would they tell me? That you're a good man, and that they're in love with you? I've already seen how you helped each of them, and how all of you are together." She let out a forlorn sigh as she added, "I'm just so tired of being scared and alone, and of all the pain..."

John turned to face the Maliri girl, and beckoned her over. Tashana took a deep breath, before kicking off her boots and climbing over the bed towards him. She knelt there less than a foot away, staring at him with her violet eyes full of anxiety.

Reaching out with his hand in a slow and unthreatening manner, John paused with his fingers a few inches away from her belly. "May I?" he asked, quietly.

Tashana stared at him, then slowly nodded as she lifted her top a few inches, and replied in her gravelly voice, "Yes, you can touch me."

He placed his hand on her skin and gently stroked her, his fingertips tracing over the hundreds of scars that lined her abdomen. Meeting her probing gaze, he replied, "If you give me your permission, then I'll heal your body, and your mind." Raising his hand, he didn't touch her again until he reached her face, where he caressed her ravaged cheek. His voice was filled with sympathy, as he continued, "You've been through so many terrible things. I want to take all that pain away, and help you go back to being the person you used to be."

Her eyes filled with tears, and she stared at him until she broke down, and sobbed, "All I ever wanted was to make Irillith proud of me, but everything I did drove her further away. Then those long years of torment, I thought they'd never end..."

Alyssa moved across the bed, and put her arm around Tashana, as she said gently, "Things are different now, we can give you everything you ever wanted. Your sister and mother both love you, and all of us will too."

"Please help me," Tashana asked, her trembling voice throbbing with emotion. "I don't want to deal with all this pain any more. Can you make it all go away?"

John nodded, stroking the side of her face as she leant into his hand, shuddering with relief.

They helped her undress, revealing the full, horrifying sight of her abused and tormented body. John ignored that though, helping her move to kneel before him, as Alyssa pulled back the covers. Although she knew what to expect, Tashana's eyes widened at the sight of him, but she looked into his eyes, and lowered her mouth to his cock. Those angular violet orbs were the one part of her that remained unspoiled, and they gazed into each other's eyes as she engulfed him.

Tashana had spent years being forced to learn how to service men, and for the first time in her life, she willingly put those skills to work as she sucked on his shaft. John's quad was taut, full with a heavy load that hadn't been emptied in nearly a day, and it didn't take long for her to coax out his first spurt of pre-cum. It covered her tongue, bathing it in his sweet-tasting semen and making her taste buds tingle with delight, her eyes rolling back as she moaned in ecstasy.

"Just like Irillith," Alyssa murmured, stroking Tashana, as she suckled hungrily now, desperate to fill her belly with his load.

She swallowed down the pre-cum, the psychic catalyst coating her throat and allowing John to start working on her immediately. Her damaged vocal chords began to mend, just as the muscles in her neck were strengthened then relaxed, preparing her body to take all of him. Moving on autopilot now, Tashana leaned forward, smoothly engulfing his entire shaft down her throat and massaging him with her enhanced muscles.

"There's a good girl," John murmured, encouraging her, even though he knew she was completely oblivious to him now. He cradled her head in his hands as she nestled up against his groin, fully sheathing his cock inside her.

Alyssa knelt beside him, kissing him on the cheek, as she whispered, "She needs your help so badly."

He closed his eyes, losing himself in her soothing voice as Tashana massaged him with her throat. Seeing no reason to hold back, he came hard, pumping the hefty load in his four balls straight into her scarred stomach. Her lean belly rapidly expanded to hold so much cum, her tummy curving outwards as she suckled on him, until it had grown hugely round. Eager Maliri girls had been milking him every four hours for weeks, so to go almost a whole day without release meant he was very backed up.

Tashana's tummy was stretched taut when he was done, her belly-button popping out to accommodate the vast amount of sperm he'd packed inside her stomach. He sagged back on the bed with a groan of relief, while she sat upright with a dazed look on her face, caressing her enormous blue abdomen with both hands.

Alyssa helped Tashana lie down next to John, then cuddled up beside him, and asked curiously, "Do you think you can heal her in one go?"

He nodded, as he replied, "The Maliri respond very quickly to me, it shouldn't take too long. Tashana won't have to grow to fit the standard template, and while all her scars look terrible, they'll be easy to fix."

"How about her mind?" Alyssa asked, stroking Tashana's shaven head.

John glanced down at the sleeping Maliri girl, and replied, "I'll do that in two stages. First, I'll remove the mental map of emotions from all her memories over the last thirteen years. Then she'll be able to view all those experiences objectively, without all the pain associated with them. After that, it's up to her. I can either remove the memories entirely, or leave them, like I did with Edraele."

Alyssa watched him for a moment, listening to his thoughts, as she added, "You're hoping she'll let you wipe them completely."

He let out a deep sigh, and replied, "I know Edraele needed all her memories to keep up appearances, but they weigh heavily on her. She blames herself for everything the original personality did. While there's no emotion attached to the memories any longer, she still remembers everything that happened, and her subconscious feels guilty about it."

"And you don't want Tashana reacting badly to any memories from the Unclaimed Wastes," Alyssa reasoned.

John nodded, and replied, "The shit she's been through... The poor girl's trying to start over again, so why saddle her with all that baggage, when it's totally unnecessary?"

Stroking Tashana's scarred arm, Alyssa was quiet for a moment, before she added, "For what it's worth, I agree, and after speaking with Tashana, I think that's what she'd want too." She sat upright, and continued decisively, "Let me reach into her subconscious and make sure. If I'm right, and she really does want a fresh start, then you're work isn't done, I'm afraid."

"What do you mean?" John asked, looking at her curiously.

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Edraele and Irillith stood quietly by the side of the bed, looking down at Tashana as she slept peacefully under the covers. John had refused to let them see her until he'd healed her scars and reconstructed her face, but now, after several hours of his tender psychic ministrations, she was almost completely healed. Her beautiful azure face was a flawless copy of Irillith's, identical in every way, her lovely features framed by medium-length white hair.

It had been easy for John to heal the dense patchwork of scars across her body, having had extensive practice with all the engineers he'd been restoring. Rebuilding her nose had not proven too difficult either, as he knew Irillith's exquisite features by heart, and she was Tashana's twin, after all. Work on her mind was a much more delicate affair, as he was carefully sifting through her memories, only removing the emotional references to the most recent ones - those that had occurred in the past thirteen years. Her tummy was still heavily rounded with his cum, the active connection wide open, and he knew he'd be able to keep up his tireless efforts for several more hours.

John glanced at Irillith and Edraele, mother and daughter both wracked with guilt, as they stared at Tashana. He didn't need a telepathic connection with them to know what they were both feeling - their remorse was etched on both of their beautiful faces. Sitting down in the high-backed leather chair, he watched them for a while, letting them come to terms with the riot of emotions he knew they were both feeling.

Eventually, he'd seen enough, and he cleared his throat, and said, "Edraele, Irillith, could you both come here, please?"

They walked over to join him, responding instantly to his polite request, and standing in front of him with very different expressions on their faces. Irillith looked at him curiously, while Edraele appeared horribly conflicted, knowing what he was going to ask of them.

Looking up at the beautiful Maliri women, he said, "As I explained earlier, Tashana wants a fresh start. She wants to put everything that happened with her banishment into the Unclaimed Wastes behind her."

Irillith nodded, and replied, "Yes, that's probably for the best." Her face was shadowed with guilt, as she added, "She's suffered through so many terrible things while she was there."

"She did," John agreed, Alyssa having explained them too him after her visit into Tashana's mind. He could clearly picture the look of sorrow and revulsion on her face as she described what she'd seen. He studied both women carefully, and continued, "I can give her that fresh start and help her forget, but there's two problems if we go along that route."

Edraele remained silent, but Irillith looked concerned, and asked, "Problems? What do you mean? Is she going to be okay?"

John nodded, and replied, "The problems are standing in front of me. The two of you blame yourselves for everything that happened to her, and even if I ask you not to, you won't be able to help feeling guilty."

Irillith started to protest, saying, "I'd never let her know! I want to help her move on!"

Shaking his head, John replied, "I've seen it with Edraele and Sakura. They can't help reacting to the memories, even when there aren't any emotional pathways there. If you really want to give her a fresh start, I'll need to absolve you of your guilt, and help you both forget what you did to her."

Edraele finally spoke up, her voice sounding haunted, as she said, "Tashana's been through so much, and it was my fault, I was the one who exiled her."

Irillith listened intently to her mother, then nodded her agreement, and said, "I framed her! I was the one who betrayed her first! It's important to remember what we both did to her!"

"Why?" John asked them, simply.

She faltered for a moment, then replied, "I shouldn't be allowed to just forget about it, it's not fair."

He shrugged, and asked, "Fair to who? Tashana's prepared to move on, so why can't you? I can pretend to punish you, if you like, but you both know I don't consider either of you to blame for what happened before I changed your personalities. We've talked about it on lots of occasions." He leaned forward, and added earnestly, "This seems more like self-flagellation to me, and it's pointless, it doesn't actually help anyone."

"What do you want to do?" Irillith asked, looking down at him with wide eyes. "It sounds like you're asking my permission for something."

"I am," he agreed. Looking at each of them in turn, he continued, "I want you both to forgive yourselves for what happened to Tashana. Let go of the guilt, and just be there for her as a loving sister and doting mother. To do that, I'll need to remove your memories of the banishment - we'll just say she went off on an archaeological dig in the Trankaran Republic for thirteen years, before travelling into the Unclaimed Wastes to do more research. She got into trouble, so we rescued her."

"That's ridiculous," Irillith scoffed. "Who'd buy that excuse?"

"I suspect you two would, and that's all that really matters," John said, with a smile. "Tashana's subconscious suggested it. She said she'd been going on longer digs for years, with both of you paying her progressively less attention over two decades."

They both looked guilty when they heard that, and Edraele murmured, "I never had much time for her."

Irillith looked equally shamefaced, as she said, "I got more and more wrapped up with my own cyber-security work. I found her interest in the Mael'nerak legend embarrassing, and deliberately distanced myself from her."

John smiled at them both, and said, "Tashana's a bright girl, just like her sister and mother. You two feeling guilty about not spending enough time with her is alright, that's something we can work with. So, what do you think?"

"If it's what she wants, then I agree," Edraele said, glancing back at her sleeping daughter.

Irillith thought it over for a moment, then nodded, and said, "I'd do anything for Tashana, to make up for how I betrayed her. You have my permission."

"Good girls," John said, genuinely pleased. He reached out to stroke their toned stomachs, and asked politely, "Alright, who'd like to go first?"

Edraele and Irillith glanced at each other, and shared a long, intense look, an unspoken question in their eyes. Irillith finally gave a slight nod, a smile reaching her full mouth, matched by Edraele's, a moment later.

Irillith turned to gaze down at John, and reached up to slip her long dress off her shoulders, letting it fall to the floor at her feet. She arched an eyebrow at him, and asked, "If we share, will you be able to feed us enough to do what you need to?"

Edraele matched her daughter, letting her long dress pool at her feet, and said, "We can always do this again, if he needs more time."

John sat back in surprise, his eyes widening as he stared at the stunningly beautiful women. They looked more like sisters than mother and daughter, with their spectacular athletic figures and flawless skin. They posed for him as he shamelessly admired them, his cock throbbing at the sight.

Sinking to their knees in front of him, they looked up with purple and violet eyes, both women smiling at the look of lust on his face. John fumbled for his belt in his eagerness, and they both chuckled at his sudden loss of coordination.

"I think he likes the idea, mother," Irillith said with a smirk, pushing his hands away to help him with her nimble fingers.

Edraele wagged a finger at John, and said, "One of my daughters already has a tummy full of your cum. I can't believe you're planning to fill up mine and my second daughter's too! That's so naughty!"

Irillith looked shocked, and she asked in a fake whisper, "When he sees all our rounded bellies, you don't think he'll be imagining all of us pregnant, do you?!"

Tugging his trousers down, Edraele replied playfully, "I should certainly hope not!" She turned to look at him then, and added, "If you sit down, you'll be more comfortable, but if you stand over us, we'll feel more submissive. Which would you prefer?"

John immediately rose to his feet, towering over them as they knelt obediently before him. His cock throbbed with excitement, and his balls ached for release, he was already that turned on. Edraele and Irillith sensed his need, and nuzzled into him, their velvety soft tongues feeling cool and wonderfully wet against his throbbing heat.

"Oh, fuck! That feels so good!" he groaned, reaching down to run his fingers through their hair.

He could see the look of lust in both their eyes as they worked together, mother and daughter servicing his pulsating shaft. John glanced across the bed at Tashana, still asleep with a heavy load in her belly. He knew this dual-blowjob was special, as it was the only time he'd be able to give them all a rounded tummy at the same time. When Tashana's body got used to feeding off his cum, she'd absorb it too quickly in the future.

\*Until you get them all pregnant at the same time,\* Alyssa panted, her fevered, lustful groans echoing through her mind. He could feel the lust pouring off her, as she moaned, \*Oh fuck! This is so fucking hot!\*

He heard her faint cry reach his ears, and he realised Alyssa must be close by. \*Are you with Calara?\* he asked, as he brushed his fingers through Edraele and Irillith's hair. He smiled at them, and managed to moan, "That feels amazing, don't stop!"

\*They're all in here with me!\* Alyssa cried out, a wordless shriek echoing through his mind as she climaxed.

John groaned as Edraele engulfed the head of his cock in her mouth, while Irillith worked one side of his length.

\*There's definitely room for one more,\* Edraele noted, her purple eyes twinkling with excitement at the look of unvarnished lust in his face. \*Do you think Tashana will want to help out too?\*

"I'm getting close, girls," he grunted, not able to hold off long against the delicious mental thrill of this lewd coupling. "Who wants it first?"

"You go first, mummy," Irillith said, while flashing him a wicked grin. She crouched lower, so she could lap at his taut balls with her teasing tongue.

Now she had room to move, Edraele sank down his shaft, and with no gag reflex to suppress, she effortlessly welcomed half his length into her throat. John groaned with excitement when he saw her full breasts press against Irillith's toned back, his cock lurching at the intoxicating sight.

\*I never breastfed my girls,\* Edraele informed him, purple eyes staring intently into his. \*When you make me pregnant, should we change that? Would you like to see all of us with big baby bumps, and the two of them suckling from me?\*

"Oh fuck!" John grunted, lurching forward and burying his cock down her throat as he came.

His shaft lurched as the tight muscles gripped him like a fist, contracting rhythmically around him as she drank down his cum. Irillith had opened her mouth wide, sucking on one of his orange-sized balls as it clenched and released, pumping sperm down into her mother's stomach. He was literally seeing stars, he came so hard, spots appearing before his eyes as he unloaded two pints of spunk into Edraele's waiting tummy. They quickly switched, with Irillith engulfing him next, her eyes rolling in ecstasy as he filled her mouth with cum.

Edraele slipped behind the swallowing girl, and cuddled her from behind, pressing her own cum-filled tummy into her daughter's back, as she stroked Irillith's expanding stomach.

"Please don't get my daughters pregnant until you're back at Genthalas," she requested, before planting a loving kiss on Irillith's shoulder. She smiled at him, as she added, "I'd like to be there to kiss your balls when you do. I'd love to say hello to my grandchildren when you're pumping them into my girl's wombs."

Irillith squealed around his cock, letting him plunge down her throat as she came. John staggered back, slumping into the chair while he held a quivering Irillith to his groin, quad lurching violently as he fed her every last drop of spunk. When he was finally done, he sagged bonelessly against the leather chair, his breath coming in ragged gasps. It took him a couple of minutes to recover, with Edraele and Irillith kneeling before him, heads resting against his shaking thighs.

"Do you think he enjoyed that, my precious little girl?" Edraele asked Irillith, giving her a loving smile as she stroked her hair.

Irillith smiled at her affectionately, and replied, "I'm not sure, mother, but I think he might have cum!"

"My God! I thought you were trying to give me a heart-attack!" John finally managed to gasp, as he reached out to stroke their soft hair. He smiled at them both, and said, "Thank you. I can't think of a better way to go!"

They both laughed at that, and he closed his eyes as he listened to the beautiful, carefree sound.

"It's been a stressful day, would you mind cuddling me to sleep?" Edraele whispered to him quietly.

"That sounds like a lovely idea," Irillith agreed, and he felt them rise to their feet.

Opening his eyes, he stared at the Maliri women as they stood before him, both blue waistlines rounded out with the cum they'd just sucked out of him. He reached out in awe, gently stroking mother and daughter's sperm-swollen bellies as they presented them to him.

They all knew what he was thinking, and both women gave him a loving smile, as Irillith said, "I can't wait."

Moving over to the bed, Edraele and Irillith curled up next to him, firm, full tummies flanking his waist. He pulled them closer and they each gave him a tender kiss on the cheek, before Irillith suddenly turned and cuddled up behind Tashana, wrapping her arms protectively around her sister. Edraele watched her daughters for a moment, then gave John a lovely smile of gratitude, before resting her head on his shoulder and settling down for the night. With a final glance at the ship's chronometer, John saw that it was nearly midnight, with Tashana likely to sleep for another nine hours, before coming around from her peaceful slumber.

The last thing he did was to contact Edraele by telepathy, and say, \*I'm going to block you out of my mind until Tashana's Change is complete. After I've wiped your memory of her banishment, you'll get confused if you hear my thoughts while I'm discussing it with her.\*

\*Of course, John, I understand,\* she replied, kissing his chest. Her purple eyes met his, as she murmured, \*Thank you, for everything.\*

He smiled at her, and they shared a tender kiss before falling asleep.

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John awoke shortly before Tashana at eight the following morning, and was pleasantly surprised by the smell of fried eggs and bacon. When he opened his eyes, he found Alyssa waiting patiently while sitting on the bed, four trays piled high with food beside her. She winked at him as she spoke to him telepathically, \*So, you went for the Valaden hat-trick, then? Bravo, Mister Blake.\*

He grinned at her, as he replied, \*You heard it all, you little vixen.\*

She nodded, her blue eyes sparkling with lust, as she said, \*I certainly did! You should see Calara's bedroom this morning, us girls fucked up a storm last night! They loved hearing all about it as much as I loved telling them!\*

John's laughter woke Edraele and Irillith, and while Edraele looked gloriously happy, Irillith smiled at Alyssa self-consciously.

Her blonde Matriarch went to her immediately, and gave her a fierce hug as she said, "Don't be embarrassed, John came like an express train! As long as you had fun, that's all that matters."

Irillith blushed, then gave Edraele a relaxed smile, as she said, "It was definitely exciting. I certainly wouldn't say no to a repeat performance."

"Oh! I brought all of you breakfast," Alyssa said, turning around to the trays. "If you're going to make John cum that hard, he needs his energy!"

They laughed and all tucked in, enjoying the delicious food that the girls had prepared for them. Alyssa informed them that Calara had been the head chef, and John made a mental note to thank her in person. After they finished breakfast, Alyssa joined them for a quick shower in the huge new bathroom. Edraele enjoyed the Terran shower immensely, telling them that she definitely planned to have one installed in her suites at Genthalas, and another in her palace on Valaden.

After drying and getting dressed, the three women kissed John goodbye, leaving him alone with Tashana and a large glass of chilled water. John didn't have to wait long for her to start; Tashana beginning to stir precisely fourteen hours after he'd finished filling her stomach with cum.

Tashana woke up and took a huge lungful of gloriously clean air, then coughed, her throat feeling dry as sandpaper. She was vaguely aware there was someone else in the room with her, and she croaked, "Thirsty..."

"Here you go," John said, his voice kind and gentle as he handed her the glass of chilled water.

She smiled at him gratefully, then gulped down the refreshing drink, swallowing one big mouthful after another, until her thirst was quenched. "Oh my goodness, that feels so much better!" she exclaimed, as she handed over the empty glass. Tashana looked at him in astonishment, then bringing her hands to her throat, she gasped, "My voice! You fixed it!"

John gave her a wide grin, pleased to see her looking so delighted, as he replied, "All healed and good as new."

Tashana's hands flew to her smooth tummy next, and she marvelled, "The stomach cramps, too! I've woken up to them for over ten years!"

Nodding to her, he said, "I know. You had scarring in your intestinal tract, but I've regenerated all the tissue in your stomach and intestines. I took the liberty of healing your brain tumour as well, so you'll never experience that pain again."

She gaped at him in wonder, then suddenly noticed her hands, staring with wide, disbelieving eyes at the beautiful, unblemished blue skin. "Thank you so much!" she said, giving him a gorgeous smile.

"Come on, there's more you need to see," John said, rising from the bed, and holding out his hand to her.

Tashana nodded, her violet eyes full of trust as she reached for his hand. Climbing off the bed, he led her through the door to the right, into the newly relocated walk-in-wardrobe.

"Close your eyes," he said, with a playful grin.

"Okay," she replied, violet eyes flashing in amusement.

She closed her eyes and waited with a little smile on her full lips, not a hint of doubt or suspicion on her face. John paused for a second to study her, marvelling at the radical transformation in her personality, now that it was no longer crushed under the weight of thirteen years of abuse and suffering. He guided her over to the mirrors, positioning her right in the centre between them.

"You're all set, you can go ahead and open your eyes now" he said, releasing her hand and stepping back.

Doing as he asked, Tashana blinked in shock, and brought her hands to her mouth as she stared at her reflection in utter disbelief. "You really did it," she whispered in awe, raising a shaking hand to her exquisitely beautiful face. She slowly turned her head from side to side, running a finger down her elegant nose that fit the shape and dimensions of her face perfectly. There was a slight tremor in her voice, as she added, "I can still remember everything that happened, even the pirate slashing up my face with a knife and cutting off my nose, but I feel... nothing!"

"It's just the first step," John explained, watching her carefully, to check she was coping with the sudden and dramatic transformation. "I thought it'd be sensible to do this in stages, to help you adjust to everything."

Shaking her head in amazement, she gazed at her reflection, as she said, "The gang-rapes, the torture, being sold as a prostitute to all sorts of terrifying aliens, and forced to give birth to a Bolon's spawn..." She turned to look at him with a look of adoration, as she continued, "I just don't feel anything! There's no pain, no fear; it's like I couldn't care in the slightest!"

He nodded, and gave her a gentle smile, as he said, "My finest work yet."

She giggled at his joke, then darted over and threw her arms around him. "I don't have the words to thank you for everything you've done!" she exclaimed, hugging him fiercely.

"It's okay," John replied, stroking her slender back and holding her in a warm embrace. He smiled, as he added, "It's lovely to see you looking so happy."

Tashana laughed in delight, then grinned at him as she heard the sound. "I've missed laughing," she replied, her violet eyes twinkling in the light.

"I'll look forward to hearing you laugh every day," he said with an answering grin. Looking at her lustrous mane of snowy-white tresses, he added, "What do you think of the hair?"

She bit her lip, then stepped away from him to look in the mirror again, and murmured, "It's breathtaking." Taking a moment to run her fingers through her long, silky-white hair, she smiled, as she continued, "I know what my people think of long hair, but their opinion be damned! I think it suits me."

"You do look very beautiful," he agreed, thoroughly enjoying the company of this effervescent young woman.

Tashana blushed then, and turned to look at him with a curious expression on her face, appearing hesitant to ask him something.

He gave her an encouraging smile, and said, "Go ahead, you can ask me anything. I won't be offended."

"Am I your Thrall now?" she asked, gazing at him with big eyes.

Shaking his head, John replied, "No, it doesn't work that way. It takes three loads of my cum before you'll be connected to me, but even then you'll still be yourself - I don't have Thralls." He paused for a moment, then raised a hand, as he added, "Hang on a second, I need to ask my Matriarchs something."

Already knowing what he was about to ask, Alyssa replied, \*She's not linked to me, handsome.\*

Knowing that Edraele couldn't hear his inner voice at the moment, he asked, \*Edraele, is Tashana connected to your network of Maliri?\*

\*No, I don't have an empathic bond with Tashana,\* Edraele informed him obediently.

Looking at Tashana in confusion, he said, "The girls in my crew had to swallow three loads of cum before being connected to Alyssa. It's been different with Edraele and the rest of the Maliri - for some reason it only takes one time with them."

Tashana licked her lips, and looking down at his cock with a look of fierce desire in her violet eyes, she gave him a coy smile, as she said, "I don't remember much about last night, but I do remember the sweetness of your cum. That was the most delicious thing I've ever tasted!" She blushed endearingly, as she continued, "I'd love to have some more, if that's alright?"

He returned her smile, and taking her hand, he said playfully, "Sure, I think we can work something out."

She practically skipped over to the bed in her enthusiasm, before vaulting onto it and landing on her knees. She grinned at him, and said, "This all feels so naughty! I've done so many awful things with so many horrible creatures, but this feels so exciting! It's almost like I'm about to give my first blowjob!"

John studied her for a moment, and when he sat down, he asked, "Tashana, had you ever slept with anyone before you were banished?"

She blushed a lovely dark blue, and shaking her head, she replied, "No, I'd put off going to the border stations. I still wanted to spend more time continuing my research into the Mael'nerak, before thinking about having a baby."

"Okay, thanks for being honest with me," he replied, reaching out to stroke her arm in an affectionate gesture.

Smiling at him, she prowled forward, and purred, "I think we've done enough talking. I really need another delicious mouthful of your cum."

Holding the cum-hungry girl at bay for a moment, he said, "Sure, but I'd like to ask you one last question."

Kneeling beside him, she gave him an open smile, and said, "Go ahead, ask whatever you like."

Stroking her head, he looked into her bright violet eyes, and asked, "Are you happy as you are now, or would you like me to remove all the memories of your time in the Unclaimed Wastes? A lot of horrible things happened to you there, and I'm worried how your mind will cope with those memories, even if you're fine with them now."

Tashana gave it some serious thought for a moment, looking away from him as she thought about everything that had happened to her. There was a flicker of sadness on her face, as she said, "I did make one friend there. A Terran named Bull, who looked after me for the last three years, and helped keep me steady. He died though, killed by Hades and his men when they captured me."

John was wary at the sudden hint of emotion, and said cautiously, "He sounds like he was a good man, I'm sorry we couldn't save him."

She nodded, and said, "Other than Bull, I can't see any point in remembering anything that happened." She frowned slightly, and sounded sad as she continued, "It was all just so bleak. How can people be so horrible to one another? I thought the Maliri were bad, but there was usually some point to the violence and torture, even if it was only for political gain. The pirates and the Enshunu though... they were so vicious and cruel, just for the pure sadistic pleasure it gave them."

"I think it's probably for the best if I help you forget what happened," John said, staring into her eyes. "Alyssa spoke to your mind while you were asleep, and apparently you suggested a cover story for the last thirteen years. You suggested we tell Irillith and Edraele that you went hunting for Progenitor relics in Trankaran Space, then went on an excursion into the Unclaimed Wastes. Then we rescued you when you got in trouble."

"She spoke to my mind?!" Tashana asked, in astonishment.

John nodded, and replied, "Yes, she's a telepath like your mother. It comes in quite handy."

"I'm sure it does!" Tashana said, with a smile. She paused for a moment, then said, "Sure, that story would work. I started going on longer archaeological digs over the years, and I doubt either of them missed me that much."

"I think it's a good cover story, too," John agreed. "Alyssa and the girls all know the truth, but we'll just skate over your recent past, and not bring it up too much in conversation."

Tashana's violet eyes darted lower, and she subconsciously licked her lips, before giving him a dazzling smile, and asking suggestively, "Was that everything you wanted to know? If so, there's something much more exciting we could be doing..."

"Sure, thanks for answering," he replied, surprised by her raw hunger to taste him again.

\*It wasn't much different with Irillith. I did warn you what she'd be like,\* Alyssa noted, with just a hint of smugness. \*When Irillith woke up after the first time Jade fed her, she was sucking down a second load within seconds of drinking some water. Don't you remember the eye rolling and the moans of ecstasy? She couldn't get enough of it! The third time, she was so desperate to get a fresh load of your spunk, she practically killed herself breaking that collar.\*

\*I wonder why they react so strongly to it?\* John asked, fascinated by the twins' behaviour.

Alyssa thought about it for a moment, and after a brief discussion with Rachel, she replied, \*Rachel thinks it's probably because they're latent psychics, and it's linked to their resistance to the genetic modification. She said your cum is a psychic catalyst, and they're just reacting to that. Irillith still loves it, but now she's connected to me, she isn't quite the cum-crazed nymphomaniac any more.\*

The whole conversation only took a few seconds, but Tashana was fidgeting now, and looking antsy. She bit her lip and rubbed her tummy, the look she gave him filled with longing.

Taking pity on the cum-addicted girl, John glanced down, and asked, "Would you like some more?"

Tashana pounced on him, grinning with excitement, and gave him a passionate kiss. She reached down to take his cock in her slender fingers, and let out a low, lustful moan. All of a sudden, she paused, and looked wracked with indecision.

"I'll be right back!" she blurted out, leaping off the bed, and darting for the door to the walk-in wardrobe. After disappearing inside for a second, she reappeared again, and pleaded, "Don't go anywhere, this'll only take a minute!"

He nodded, quite bemused by her strange actions, but did as she asked, and didn't move from his spot on the edge of the bed. Tashana reappeared about a minute later, then rushed over to him, before sinking to her knees.

"Don't you want to get on the bed?" he asked in surprise.

She shook her head as she reached for his cock, her eyes flaring with excitement when she enclosed him in her delicate blue fingers. "The floor around the bed is padded, it's really comfortable," she informed him, before licking her lips to get them nice and wet. She leaned in but paused an inch away from his throbbing crown, and with an act of iron willpower, she looked up at him, and added, "Please promise me you won't wipe out that last memory? When I went into the wardrobe? It's important."

Startled by her intensity, he nodded and replied, "Of course. I promise I won't change anythi-"

The last was cut off as Tashana engulfed the head of his cock in her hot little mouth, swirling her tongue over him and sucking intently. She had great technique, and he caressed her head as she ratcheted up the intensity of her lashing tongue, trying to coax a load from him. Her hands cradled his first two balls, petting them lovingly as she hungered for their contents. It took her less than thirty seconds to get her first taste of pre-cum, and she squealed with ecstasy as her eyes began to roll back.

He watched Tashana climax, her body shaking with excitement as she sank forward and buried her beautiful face in his groin. John could only hang on tight as she brought him to a bewilderingly fast climax, her raw desire for him proving to be a powerful aphrodisiac. She swallowed down everything he could give her, then let him slip out of her throat, kneeling back and cradling her bloated stomach with a giddy smile on her dazed face.

After taking a minute to catch his breath, John chuckled and scooped her up, placing the drowsy girl on the bed before tucking her in under the covers. By the time he'd spooned up behind her and wrapped her in his arms, she'd fallen fast asleep, her slender fingers intertwined with his, rested atop her swollen belly.

"I wonder what she was doing in the wardrobe?" Alyssa asked him, as she wandered into the bedroom and climbed on the bed.

"We'll find out in about four hours, I guess," John replied, smiling at her over Tashana's shoulder.

Brushing her fingers through the sleeping girl's snowy-white hair, Alyssa said, "She seems so nice. How Irillith and Edraele could have treated her the way they did is beyond me." She let out a sad sigh, before she added, "I'd have loved to have had a sister like her growing up."

He nodded his agreement, then said thoughtfully, "There's one thing we haven't really thought of. What about her psychic abilities?"

"I'm sure it'll be exciting finding out," Alyssa said with a smile, before brushing away a stray lock from Tashana's lovely face. She met his questioning gaze, and continued, "Just keep loading her up, and they're bound to resurface, just like Irillith's did. When that happens, we'll help her adjust. She'll be fine."

John grimaced for a moment, before he said, "I think I'll leave training Tashana to you, if you don't mind. I don't fancy being flambéed again!"

"Yeah, that reminds me..." Alyssa said ominously, narrowing her eyes as she glared at him. "You've been slacking off on your psychic training! Progenitor-John could make Hex-shields like me, so you've got no excuse."

"We'll do some training as soon as we get some free time," he agreed, having no desire to be toasted like that again.

"Good boy," Alyssa said with a grin.

He suddenly blinked in surprise, and exclaimed, "Wait a minute! You were flying! I forgot, with everything else that happened afterwards."

She smiled at him, and replied, "Yeah, that bit was fun. I highly recommend it."

They laughed together, then cuddled Tashana protectively between them as they fell asleep.

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In the silvery-grey High Council Chamber on Ashanath, Senior Councillor Ularean glanced at a psi-panel, activating the holographic projector by thought alone. An intricate holographic territory map for the Ashanath Collective appeared in the centre of the room, and he slowly rotated it until the border with Drakkar Space was clearly visible.

The sight made for grim viewing, with scores of recent battle sites pockmarking the glowing green map with red crosses. There seemed to be no pattern to the attacks, but the recent increase in intensity had him very worried.

\*Greetings to you, Senior Councillor Ularean,\* a familiar voice said, but he could hear it was filled with worry.

\*Warmest welcome to you, Councillor Talari,\* Ularean replied, his unblinking black eyes turning towards the door into the spherical chamber. \*Any updates from the Security Division?\*

A second later the double doors swung open, and Councillor Talari glided in, his rakish grey features ever-so-slightly more rounded than the norm. \*More dreadful news from the border forces, Senior Councillor,\* Talari said, his voice broadcasting his concern. \*We lost two patrol cruisers to a Drakkar raiding force. That is the third group this week.\*

\*We cannot sustain losses like this,\* Ularean replied, his voice raised in alarm. \*We must recall all our forces and garrison our worlds. A Drakkar raid on one of the colonies would be too terrible to contemplate.\*

\*I shall issue the appropriate orders,\* Talari replied, before turning to look up at the holographic map. He studied it for a moment, then asked, \*Have you heard any news of JohnBlake?\*

Ularean shared his feelings of frustration over their telepathic link, and replied, \*We have broadcast our call for assistance, but as of yet, there has been no reply. The Terran Federation have not seen him for over a month. My contact reports that after JohnBlake's intervention in the Battle of Regulus, he departed on a course towards the Maliri Regency, where he intervened to save one of our Merchants.\* He paused for a moment, then added, \*His cruiser now possesses overwhelming firepower. He destroyed the Drakkar cruiser with contemptuous ease.\*

Talari slowly turned to stare at his colleague, and his telepathic voice was hushed as he asked, \*Could he have claimed his inheritance? I read the reports from JohnBlake's defence of Terra. He utilised a Thrall's weapon to destroy the vessel housing the AI.\*

\*I do not know, Talari. Despite the terrible risk, he might be our only chance of survival,\* Ularean replied, his voice filled with fear. There was an undercurrent of desperation in his voice as he added, \*What of the Legacy? How goes the project?\*

\*Work is almost complete,\* Talari replied, before he hesitated, blinking a couple of times in an uncharacteristic display of fear. \*Dare we use it? The attention it could draw to us... surely the risk is too great.\*

\*Desperate times call for desperate measures,\* Ulerean replied, but his bold statement was undermined by the way he blinked five times.

Talari chose not to comment. He could feel a sense of dread creeping up his spine too.