Three Square Meals Ch. 80

“I thought you weren’t mad at me?!” Dana protested, but she shifted nervously on her feet, knowing she was on very shaky ground.

“Just look at it!” John exclaimed waving his hand at the Valkyrie. “You couldn’t have been hit by more laser fire if you ran around diving into shots!”

Her eyes darted up at the dense patchwork of laser burns across every single piece of armour plating and Dana couldn’t help wincing. “I was trying to shoot down dropships! I didn’t want the Ashanath to get eaten,” she said defensively.

“I told you, no heroics!” he said, his voice angry now. “It looks like you were so focused on killing dropships, you didn’t even bother dodging incoming laser fire. Am I right?”

Dana started to deny it, but she stopped herself and mumbled, “Yeah, you’re right.”

His eyes narrowed as he pointed towards the savage rents in the Valkyrie’s head and said furiously, “And I bet you were so fixated on your shooting, you lost situational awareness... let that dropship ram you?”

“Yes,” Dana squeaked, her eyes welling up with tears.

John paused in his diatribe as he saw her starting to cry, then took a deep breath to calm himself. He pulled her into his arms and said, “Honey, I’m upset because you were that close to being killed.” His voice softened as he continued, “I wanted to help the Ashanath, but never at the cost of your life. You can’t even imagine how broken I’d be if I lost you.”

“I’m sorry,” she said, her voice muffled against his chest.

He held her tight, stroking her back as he said quietly, “Keep this to yourself, but I was really close to just calling off our intervention to save the Ashanath. I knew how dangerous it was going to be and I wasn’t planning to throw away any of your lives because of their lack of defensive preparations.” He grimaced as he added, “If saving them had meant sacrificing you, I’d have just walked away.”

“Really?” she asked, looking up at him with tear-rimmed eyes.

“You’re one in a billion. I’d be a fool to risk losing something so precious,” he said, squeezing her tight.

Dana brushed away her tears then grabbed him and planted a fierce kiss on his lips. John returned her kiss, but she appeared to have no plans of letting him go anytime soon, so he embraced her and enjoyed the passionate liplock with the overwhelmed young woman.

When they finally separated to take a breath, she looked at him shyly and murmured, “No one’s ever said anything like that to me before.”

“That’s because everybody else is stupid,” he said with a playful smile. John hesitated and corrected himself, “Not the girls obviously, but you know what I mean.”

Her eyes filled with love and she said, “I know what you mean.”

He gave her a brief kiss on the nose, making her giggle, then glanced up at the battered mech. “Alright, let’s do this. I’ve reviewed the battle footage with Calara, so I saw how you tore up those Drakkar cruisers. The Valkyrie did seem effective, but I’m sure we can make it better.” Returning his focus to the girl in his arms, he added, “What kind of upgrades can we make to this thing?”

She looked surprised and replied hesitantly, “Am I still going to be able to-“

John cut her off, knowing what she was about to ask and said firmly, “We can discuss that later. Let’s talk about ways we can improve the mech first - this was just a prototype after all.”

Dana nodded and said with an eager grin, “Actually, I came up with a list of ideas during the battle.”

“Great! What did you have in mind?” John asked, releasing her from his embrace.

Dana slipped away from him and walked around the Valkyrie’s massive foot, pointing up at the orbital insertion pack. “The first thing to do is sort out the engines,” she explained, frowning at the damage to the right thruster. “I originally designed the mech to be a super-powered ground support platform, so the engines were only really there to slow its descent from orbit. I think it’ll be a lot more useful if we design it primarily for space combat, because then it’ll still be capable of ground support anyway.”

“So just make it faster?” John asked, nodding as he looked up at the pack.

“Yes, exactly!” she agreed enthusiastically. “At least the same speed as the Raptor, which shouldn’t be that hard as the gunship is bigger and has more mass. We’ll just remove that drop pack and I’ll design something with a bit more poke.”

“Sounds like a good start. That way the Valkyrie and Raptor can support each other more effectively,” John said, rubbing his chin as he tried envisioning them in combat.

Dana placed her hand on the mech’s armoured foot, giving him a shifty look as she repositioned her hand away from the blast crater left by a laser cannon bolt. “The second thing is more hull reshaping.”

“To make it immune to laser fire?” John asked wryly. “Yeah, I can’t imagine how you came up with that idea.”

“Not just to protect it against laser cannons, but to be able to shrug off Beam Lasers too,” Dana elaborated with a self-conscious smile. “They seem much more common in the big fights we’ve been involved in, what with all the heavier ship classifications on both sides of these massive battles.”

“I agree in principle, but it’s a big machine,” John said, sizing it up warily. “Alyssa really struggled with octo-shaping the swords for me and Sakura. I don’t think she’s anywhere near strong enough yet to replate the entire Valkyrie in fully reflective armour.”

“Is it really that hard?” Dana asked him curiously. “Alyssa normally makes it look so easy.”

“The Invictus is only plated in quad-shaped armour, and this mech has penta-shaped Alyssium. Believe me, it gets a LOT harder as you go up each classification,” John explained, grimacing at the memory. “I can’t even imagine how hard it would be to octo-plate anything; I’m amazed she can even try it.”

“Which shows how much of a badass Athena is,” Dana said thoughtfully. She smiled at him and added, “Maybe you should find a way to start porking her? You’re fantastic in the sack and we really want to stay on her good side.”

John laughed and rolled his eyes, but his laughter died out and he said emphatically, “Now that things have calmed down a bit, we have to try and come up with some ideas on how to save her. She’s been there for us countless times, never asking for anything in return. I’ve got to help her from being absorbed and destroyed.”

Dana nodded and said, “It’s way outside my area of expertise but I’ll wrack my brain for ideas. I might be able to come up with something useful.”

“Good girl, thank you,” John said, smiling at her appreciatively. He glanced up at the mech and added, “Anything else you had planned for the Valkyrie?”

“Yeah, a couple of other things,” Dana replied with a nod. “One of them is only minor, but the arm vibrates when firing the Punisher Gatling.”

“Is that because it’s using a hand-held weapon rather than having the gun built directly into its arm?” he asked, stepping back a few paces to look at the gigantic weapon.

She walked over to join him, then followed his curious gaze towards the mech’s weapon. “I suspect so. I could either remove the forearm and incorporate the cannon as a replacement, or I could improve the vibration dampening, check the mountings and balancers that kind of thing.”

“Do you gain anything by having a second hand?” he pondered, staring at the enormous metallic fists.

“It gives us more utility. We could use the Valkyrie to help with refits,” she replied thoughtfully. “Also, if it ever has to grapple anything big, having the second fist would be more useful than a gun arm if the target is too close to shoot at, or if it runs out of ammo. Actually, that reminds me, I was thinking I could incorporate some kind of energy blades into its arms, or maybe give it a big crystal Alyssium sword. What do you reckon?”

“For chopping your way free from docking claws? Yeah I can see how that could be useful,” John said, giving her a knowing look.

“That would be one way of using them, yes,” Dana said with a guilty grin.

“Anything else?” John asked, studying the enormous metal titan.

She pointed to its shoulders, saying, “Just one other minor item. The pauldrons on the Valkyrie are big enough to fit a couple of Pulse Cannon turrets.”

“Ah right, to shoot down incoming missiles?” John asked, recalling their earlier conversation by the Raptor.

“Yes, exactly! They’d be a huge help against strike craft too, like fighters that kind of thing,” Dana clarified.

“Sounds like a quick and really useful upgrade,” John agreed as he started walking towards the steps leading up to the maintenance gantry. He turned and beckoned her to follow. “Come on, I want to take a closer look at the damage to the cockpit.”

Dana followed after him, dragging her feet reluctantly as she knew exactly how he was going to react when he saw inside the Valkyrie’s head. When they reached the top of the maintenance gantry, he didn’t disappoint.

“Fuck me!” John swore, going pale as he peered inside the gaping hole in the mech’s cockpit.

The Pilot’s chair had been ripped from its base and tipped over on its side, barely anchored to the floor by the cabling that was now exposed. There was a deep gouge through the side of the chair and that trough in the metal was covered in dark-red blood. He turned around and just pulled Dana into a hug, not saying anything for a couple of minutes as he held her.

As much as Dana knew she should be feeling remorseful, John’s strong arms wrapped around her felt lovely and she rested her chin on his shoulder, a happy smile on her face. When he started to pull away, she quickly did her best to look chagrined as she turned to look at him.

“Alright, you big faker,” he said, smiling at her in amusement. “You can drop the act, I can tell you’re too happy at the moment to pretend to be contrite.”

“That’s your fault, not mine,” she said with an impish grin.

John glanced back at the cockpit and jerked a thumb in its direction. “Is there any way we can stop this happening again? Maybe stick the cockpit in the chest, something like that?”

Dana wrinkled her nose with distaste and replied, “In its chest? That’d look really weird and would fuck up the emergency ejection system. Besides, the Power Core and ammunition hopper for the Punisher Gatling are built into the chest, there’s no room for the cockpit in there.”

“Alright, it was just a suggestion,” John said with a smile.

“I actually do have something else in mind for the cockpit!” Dana said enthusiastically. “One of the problems I found, was that the controls just weren’t responsive enough. I thought we could remove the chair and replace it with some kind of anti-grav field that responds to the Pilot’s actions. It would make fighting in the mech much more natural, as the Valkyrie would essentially just mimic the movements of the person controlling it.”

“That sounds like an excellent idea,” John agreed, looking thoughtful. “Exactly how responsive could you make it?”

She smiled at him and replied, “With a few upgrades to the joints, very quick indeed. You could make it do cartwheels if you wanted.”

He laughed at the thought of the thirty-metre-tall mech performing acrobatics.

“Hey, guys!” Sakura called up to them from the deck of the Launch Bay. “I’ve brought breakfast!”

John leaned over the safety railing and exclaimed, “You’re a life saver! We’ll be right down.”

John and Dana were both feeling famished and they raced down the steps from the gantry taking them two at a time. Sakura watched them both in amusement, then handed over a couple of breakfast baps, fully loaded with sausage, fried eggs, and rashers of bacon. She also had bottles of water, quickly handing them over too.

“Oh God, this is heaven,” John said after swallowing the first bite. “It’s still hot from the oven!”

“I didn’t want it getting cold, so I ran all the way here,” Sakura explained, before taking a bite from her own. Once she’d swallowed she added, “Jade’s a great cook!”

“Thanks for the express delivery,” John said with a grin. “I take it when you said you ran, you enhanced your speed too? Are you fully recharged this morning?”

She nodded to both questions before replying, “I feel fine today, in fact I’m full of energy and raring to go. I’m planning to work off some off that energy in the Training Dojo later, so you’re welcome to join me if you’d like to have a duel?”

“I’d love that, thanks,” John said with a smile.

The three of them ate together, sitting on the Valkyrie’s foot and making light chit-chat as they finished their breakfast. As soon as they were done, Sakura rose to her feet and gave them both a wave goodbye. Before she could leave, Dana suddenly wrapped her in a huge hug, taking the Asian girl by surprise.

“Rachel told me how you saved her life,” Dana murmured in her ear. “I really liked you before that and now I think you’re fucking awesome! Thank you so much.”

Sakura smiled at John over the redhead’s shoulder, gratefully returning the hug. She turned her head to kiss Dana’s cheek and said, “You guys saved my life, so it felt wonderful to be able to protect Rachel in return. You stay safe though, okay? I’ll feel even happier if you never end up needing my help like that!”

Dana nodded and smiled at her in gratitude. With that, Sakura waved them goodbye again and accelerated away, sprinting with her enhanced speed to rush from the Launch Bay in a blur.

“She’s really growing on me,” Dana said, smiling at John once Sakura had left. “I must admit it felt a bit weird having her join the crew to start with, especially after how much Shinatobe fucked us over, but that’s way in the past now.”

“Yeah, I’m very fond of her too,” John said, a little half-smile forming on his face. “I know I wanted her to go her own way and have a fresh start, but I’m really glad she talked me round. I must admit, it’s great having someone that shares my interest in swordsmanship, but more than that, she’s very bright and great company too. Relaxing to be around - you know what I mean?”

Dana gave him a sly grin and said, “It sounds like you’re falling for her.”

He laughed self-consciously and admitted, “Yeah, I guess I am.” He smiled at her and added, “That makes eight women now though, that’s not too unreasonable, is it?”

She grinned at him and replied, “For someone with your stamina, we need all the help we can get!”

John returned her grin then slipped his arm around her, stroking her back. “I think we’re pretty much done with the review of the Valkyrie. Do you fancy relaxing with me in the Observatory for a while? There’s a few of things I wanted to chat to you about.”

“If that’s another way of saying, ‘fancy a fuck, baby?’ then sure!” Dana replied, nodding eagerly.

John laughed as he jumped off the mech’s foot, then held out his arms for her and helped her down. She grinned at him and they walked out of the Launch Bay hand-in-hand. The fore grav-tube was just to the right of the doors, so they stepped into the glowing blue field and floated upwards past deck after deck until they reached Deck Three.

Dana jogged ahead to hit the button that opened the door at the end of the short corridor, revealing the oval-shaped observatory as the door slid aside. She kicked off her boots, then bounded onto the huge, pillow strewn bed in the centre of the room, tugging her top off as she did so. John was a little more restrained, removing his boots before walking over to join her. Dana had already pulled off her trousers, leaving her wearing a beautiful set of lacy white underwear as he reached her side.

“Very nice,” he said appreciatively, admiring the way the bra cupped her full breasts as though offering them up for his enjoyment.

“I picked it up from Rachel’s store on Gravitus,” Dana explained, reaching behind herself to unclasp it. “We spend so much time naked in bed, I haven’t really had a chance to wear it for you yet.”

He laughed, then ran his fingers over her succulent cleavage, following the mouth-watering curves. “Leave it on. You look ravishing and I really do want to talk to you first. We both know we’ll be too distracted once I’m inside you.” He let his hand slide lower so that the back of his fingers gently brushed over her svelte lower belly and said, “We were rudely interrupted last time, because I got far too turned on at the thought of getting you pregnant. I promise I’ll show more restraint this time, but I really want to finish what we started.”

Dana let out a low moan and protested, “I was already really fucking horny! How am I supposed to concentrate on talking to you now?!”

John smiled at her and sat down on the oval bed, guiding her down with him. “You’ll manage, I’ve got every confidence in you,” he said, laying her back and resting his hand on her slender stomach.

She sucked in her breath, watching with a smouldering look in her sky-blue eyes as his gentle fingers traced a circle around her navel. Finally looking up at him, she said, “Alright, what do you want to talk about? The sooner we get this over with, then we can really have some fun!”

He studied her face for a moment, enjoying her eagerness, so he hesitated before he spoke, reluctant to bring down her happy mood.

Dana could see him pause and asked with concern, “What’s up, John? You look like you swallowed a turd.”

Deciding to just come straight out with it, he replied, “I’m sorry, honey, but I’m not sure you’re the best choice of pilot for the Valkyrie.”

Her face fell and she looked forlorn. “I’m really sorry I screwed up. If you let me try again, I promise I’ll be more careful next time!”

Shaking his head, he replied, “Don’t blame yourself. It’s not your fault, it’s mine.”

“What?” Dana asked in confusion. “How could it be your fault?”

John sat up a little and placed his fingers on her temple, then traced them down her body, across her sternum, then lower over her ribs to rest on her abdomen again. “When I enhanced all of you girls, you each received the same amazing bodies, but you also gained specialised gifts beyond that.” He smiled at her as he added, “It can’t be news to you that you’re incredibly smart and a truly amazing engineer.”

She blushed at his praise and shrugged. “Yeah, I guess there’s no point in being modest. I am awesome with tech.”

“Exactly,” he agreed. He stroked the side of her head again as though he were handling a precious jewel and continued, “That single-minded dedication to your work has literally transformed our lives. Every technical innovation we have has been down to you and I’m not exaggerating when I say that all our victories were only possible due to that hard work. You’re like the unsung heroine behind everything: Saving Terra, the wins against Nexus, the Kintark, the Drakkar, I won’t list them all, but you know what you’ve accomplished.”

Dana was quiet for a moment as she digested that, remembering all the battles they’d been in. Then she beamed at him, saying breathlessly, “I hadn’t really thought of it like that before. That’s really fucking cool!”

“Too right, you are,” he agreed with a smile. He looked into her eyes and said sombrely, “Unfortunately, that single-minded focus that makes you so amazing with tech, is making you vulnerable in battle. I’ve nearly lost you twice now for the same reason. The first time was against Kindralax and then yesterday against the Drakkar; both times due to target fixation. Once is a mistake, twice is a pattern, three times...”

“Is a habit,” she finished quietly, eyes going wide.

He sighed as he continued, “We might be able to train you out of it, but I’m not sure I want to take that chance, especially with something as dangerous as the Valkyrie. At least when we’re fighting on the ground, I can be there to protect you. I can’t do anything to keep you safe out in space.”

She let out a heavy sigh and said, “Alright, I see your point. Who were you thinking of instead?”

“Sakura,” John replied, watching Dana’s face for her reaction. “She’s not had any combat piloting experience, but I know she was into hoverbikes in a big way. I’m sure she’ll pick it up very quickly.”

“She should find it fairly easy to learn; piloting the mech isn’t that difficult,” Dana reluctantly agreed.

He nodded, continuing, “If you can greatly improve the control sensitivity and the mech’s responsiveness, I think we could be looking at something pretty special. Sakura’s also had far more combat experience than any of us, me included.”

Dana frowned at that. “Hang on a minute, I thought you were a marine for ten years?”

John smiled at her and explained, “Most of that time was spent waiting around on ships. Training, giving orders, overseeing logistics as I climbed through the ranks, that kind of thing. Sakura spent almost two solid years in non-stop combat. It was spread out over seven decades because of the cryostasis, but that’s not the point. Her combat instincts are extremely refined and I’m sure that’ll translate just as well into ship battles.”

She chuckled and said, “Alright, I don’t feel so bad now. I can’t really compete with that, can I?”

“That’s the spirit,” he said with a smile. “You’re also in a much better position to help during ship combat as the Invictus’ engineer, with handling repairs, using the tractor beam, rerouting power, that kind of thing. Sakura hasn’t got much to do unless we get boarded and let’s face it, with me and Alyssa around, anyone boarding has got no chance.”

Nodding decisively now, Dana said, “That makes a lot of sense actually. I agree, I think she’ll make an excellent pilot.”

“Thanks for being so understanding,” John said gratefully. “I meant what I said earlier, I wasn’t just buttering you up. I consider you the lynchpin to the entire team.”

She blushed and stroked his face as she said, “You’re very sweet. Thanks for trying so hard not to hurt my feelings.”

“You’re welcome,” he said, leaning down to give her a kiss.

“Time to get naked yet?” she asked eagerly, biting her lower lip with anticipation.

He laughed and replied, “Nearly, I just wanted to talk to you about one other thing.”

“My new psychic abilities?” she asked, somehow managing to get even more excited. “I still can’t believe I was able to just make the mech’s fist and the gun’s handle magnetic! That was totally crazy!”

John nodded in confirmation, giving her a broad grin. “Yeah, your ability is quite different from anything the other girls can do.” He hesitated for a moment, then continued cautiously, “I’d like to be able to tell you the specifics, but I’m afraid I’m not entirely sure what they are.”

“But you rewrote my genetic code! You must know what you did?” she marvelled, gazing up at him with a look of wonder on her beautiful face.

“It doesn’t work like that. Or at least, Athena doesn’t think I’m ready for that precise level of control. When I enhanced your third helix I just had a vague idea, I was clutching at straws for a way to try and help you.”

Dana stroked his arm affectionately and asked, “What were you thinking about at the time?”

John looked away, his eyes unfocused as he tried to remember his exact thoughts. “I was trying to give you a way of grabbing the mech’s gun; altering the metal to make it more magnetic was the only thing I could think of.” He gave her an apologetic smile and added, “You might need to do some experimenting and find out more precisely what you can do.”

“I can’t wait to find out!” she gasped gleefully. “Shit! This is even more fun than if you’d just told me straight out - it’s like the gift that keeps on giving!”

“No regrets then about joining the psychic club?” he joked, but his face was pensive as he gazed down at her, worried about the extent to which he’d enhanced her nubile body.

She saw the tension in his face and quickly sat up, moving to straddle his lap. She cupped his face with both hands and planted a gentle kiss on his lips, a warm smile appearing on her face. He started to speak, but she kissed him again to silence him.

“We’ve spoken about this before; how you enhance girls like I used to upgrade guns for the Diablos.” She smiled as she leaned back and waved her hand over her lithe, athletic figure and continued, “Your normal handiwork is really fucking impressive, but that just made me look like a hot Maliri girl and there’s millions of them.” Her voice dropped a few octaves as she added intently, “My normal work was good too, but my favourite was the custom work I did. I used to put a little bit of my soul into each of those custom jobs - they were like a labour of love for me. Now you’ve made me like Alyssa, the special custom job that you devoted months to working on. So no, I’ve got absolutely no regrets whatsoever!”

John felt greatly relieved and replied, “Thanks, Sparks, I’m really glad you see it that way.” He smiled as he added, “I appreciate the metaphor, although I’d really rather not think of you girls as weapons. I am glad you realise how special you are to me though, it’s important you know that.”

“Why don’t you show me how special I am?” she asked him coyly, unclasping her bra and releasing her spectacular breasts. There was no sag whatsoever as she removed the lingerie, her perfect tits sitting high and pert on her chest.

They just stared into each other’s eyes as they removed the rest of their clothing, until Dana lay back, drawing him with her. They maintained that intense eye contact as she spread her legs for him and he pushed his way inside her, her luscious young body yielding to his penetration. Her eyelids fluttered as he sank all the way up to his balls, her pliant flesh moulding around his shaft and squeezing him in encouragement as he fully impaled her.

“Am I yours?” she murmured, arms and legs wrapping around him like a limpet.

Cradling her head in his hands, he nodded, saying, “You’re my special custom job that I’ve grown so attached to, I’m never going to let go. I’ve put too much of my soul into you.”

“Oh, John...” she whispered breathlessly, eyes welling up as she gave him a loving kiss.

They were quiet as they moved together, staring into each other’s eyes as he held her protectively. He’d never felt this level of connection to her before, it felt so much deeper and far more intense than normal. She felt it too, the golden coronas around her pupils flaring wide with her arousal. Dana was the first to climax, and the second, then the third, so she was practically sobbing with ecstasy when he finally held her still and drove all the way into her womb as he flooded her with cum.

She held onto him as long as she could, until her rapidly growing tummy made her relax her grip, letting him lean back and give her more room to expand. Dana didn’t take her eyes from his as he filled her though, interlacing her slender fingers with his broader ones as he pumped her full of his sperm. The temptation for John to bring this act to its logical conclusion and have her carry his baby in her swollen belly was just as intense as it had been with Rachel. Dana could tell and the doe-eyed look of yearning didn’t make it any easier for him to resist.

Finally, he was done, his quad drained dry and she drew up her right leg then rolled to the side, so that he could spoon with her without having to pull out. He gladly did so, wrapped his arms around her and placed a possessive hand on the heavy weight now rounding out her waist.

“It’s never been like that before,” Dana said quietly, placing her hand atop his. “You made me feel so special. Thank you.”

He drew back her hair and placed a loving kiss on her cheek, using that simple gesture to silently convey his strength of feeling for her. She sighed with contentment, then snuggled into his arms, relaxed and deliriously happy.

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Edraele groaned in agony as she finally awoke, cringing from the throbbing headache that made her feel every rhythmic pulse in her brain. This was worse than any hangover she’d ever experienced, more akin to the splitting migraines that her tumour used to trigger.

“Are you alright, Edraele?” someone asked, sounding deeply concerned but very far away.

“Painkillers, in my drawer,” she mumbled desperately, her hands moving up to massage her temples.

She was vaguely aware that there were warm bodies nestled against her flanks, one of them shifting away and leaving her feeling suddenly vulnerable and exposed. When they returned a few moments later, she put her arm around that female form, hugging her fiercely as she held herself tense, still, and rigid to avoid jostling her pounding head. A short moment later, gentle hands moved hers away from her head and she felt the cool metal of the dispenser against her temple. The familiar waves of pain-relief swept through her body, soothing away the thumping in her brain and finally letting her relax.

“Thank you so much...” she said gratefully, still not daring to open her eyes.

“Shh, let us take care of you,” someone murmured and Edraele felt movement on the bed as her companions shifted around her.

Caring hands lifted her gently, before settling her back into someone’s warm embrace, a firm pair of breasts providing her a lovely pillow. Dexterous fingers began to massage her head, while many more sets of hands began to stroke her body, soothing away any remaining tension. She sighed with relief, her eyes fluttering open to find herself surrounded by Almari, Ilyana, and the Young Matriarchs, who all looked on with worried faces.

She smiled at them now and said, “Thank you, my darlings. I feel so much better now.”

“What happened, Edraele?” a richly timbred voice asked from above her head, the question tinged with an undercurrent of worry. “I’ve never seen you in so much pain before.”

Edraele glanced up and saw Luna’s anxious yellow eyes staring down at her. Smiling at her bodyguard, she reached up to caress her cheek and said, “I think I overdid it, Luna. I’m alright now, the pain has subsided.”

“You should still rest for a while to recover, so just lie back against me,” Luna said, brushing a stray lock from Edraele’s face before continuing to massage her temples. “What do you mean, you overdid it?”

Letting out a rueful sigh, Edraele glanced down at the concerned faces of the Maliri women who surrounded her on the bed. “John needed psychic energy to fuel his abilities - he was fighting Drakkar and trying to save the Ashanath from extinction. I exhausted my normal power reserves, so I was forced to pull some from each of you, too.”

“I felt you draw energy from me,” Kali murmured, staring at her with wide indigo eyes. She was lying on the bed beside Edraele, pressed against her left flank.

Edraele stroked her back and asked with concern, “I hope I didn’t hurt you, my sweet girl?”

Shaking her head, Kali replied, “No, but it felt very strange, like a strong tugging sensation.”

“Are the rest of you unharmed too?” Edraele asked, looking around anxiously at the cluster of women on the bed.

Leena smiled at her, cuddling her right flank and replied, “We’re all fine, Edraele, just concerned about you. What happened? Why were you so badly affected?”

Edraele looked at them guiltily, reluctant to reply, but she could tell they weren’t going to relent until they had an answer. “John still needed more energy, but I wasn’t prepared to risk harming any of you by taking more than was safe - you’re all far too precious to me for that. I... tapped into some of my own life-force to aid him instead.”

There were shocked gasps from all around, the girls looking horrified. “Did he make you do that?” Tsarra asked in alarm.

“No, absolutely not!” Edraele exclaimed. She leaned forward to clasp the House Perfaren Matriarch’s hand and begged her, “Please don’t tell him! He’d be mortified!”

“I promise, I won’t say a word,” Tsarra said earnestly.

Edraele gave her a grateful smile. “You’re a good girl, thank you so much.”

“I feel like I’ve let you down,” Valani murmured, looking abashed and glancing at the rest of the group.

“Of course you haven’t, my darling. Why would you think that?” Edraele said reassuringly, reaching out to gently stroke the girl’s smooth cheek.

Nyrelle nodded sombrely and said, “We all have Edraele. If we’d built stronger connections with you, you could have safely drawn more energy from us. Then you wouldn’t have felt it necessary to harm yourself.”

Shaking her head, Edraele replied, “You mustn’t blame yourself for th-. Oh!”

She glanced down in surprise as two full sets of lips surrounded her nipples and began to lap and suck on them. Kali and Leena’s smiling eyes looked up to meet her curious gaze as they gently started to nurse at her breasts. Edraele’s only regret was that she had nothing to give them and she smiled back as she cupped their heads, stroking them affectionately.

“We need to work much harder to help you,” Nyrelle said earnestly, placing her hands around Edraele’s left thigh and slowly drawing it back. She darted a lusty glance at Valani, who did the same to the right.

Tsarra knelt between her splayed thighs and Edraele stared at her in surprise as the green-eyed girl nuzzled into her pussy for the first time. Her tongue was quick and eager as she followed Ilyana’s and Almari’s advice, the two former assassins stroking her short white hair affectionately as they murmured words of encouragement.

When Valani and Nyrelle began to suck on her toes, Edraele arched her back and cried out with pleasure at the sensory overload.

“Just let us know when you get too exhausted to continue. We’ll play together until you recover, then we can start again,” Luna said, giving her a loving smile. “By the time we’re done, you’ll have more energy than you know what to do with. You’ll never have to put yourself in that position again.”

“Oh! My beautiful angels!” Edraele screamed, bucking against Tsarra’s probing tongue as she reached a thunderous climax.

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John had dozed off with his arms around Dana, so it came as a shock when Edraele’s distinctive voice suddenly filled his mind with her frantic cries.

\*Edraele! Are you alright?!\* John thought to her, sitting bolt upright in alarm.

A long keening cry of ecstasy reverberated through his thoughts, and he immediately relaxed, being extremely well versed with the sound of a woman mid-orgasm. He chuckled and Dana rolled onto her back, giving him a languid smile.

“Everything okay?” she asked, noting him sitting up on his haunches.

John placed a hand on her rounded tummy and stroked her as he smiled. “Edraele just gave me a rather vocal wake-up call. It seems like it’s not just us having fun this morning.”

The redhead giggled, then stuck out her hand for assistance. “Help me up, would you? That reminds me, I need to go and feed your load to her daughter...”

He did as she asked, then quickly dressed while Dana just gathered her clothes in a bundle and stood there wearing only a smile. Offering her an arm, they walked towards the door leading to the Lagoon, with John hitting the button to open the way for his curvaceous partner. Sounds of splashing water reached his ears and when they strolled out across the arching bridge, he spotted a bevy of exotic beauties in the clear aquamarine pool.

Jade leapt clear of the crystal surface as she raced around the lagoon, her aquatic form giving her plenty of propulsion to drive through the water. Meanwhile Irillith and Tashana were shrieking with laughter as they splashed each other in a frenetic water fight. John stopped at the top of the arch, admiring the twins in their matching white bikinis and enjoying hearing them have so much fun together.

\*I’m sorry John,\* Edraele panted as she tried to respond to him. \*The Young Matriarchs and my bodyguards... they’re trying to... Oh my...!\* Her voice trailed off and he felt a rich surge of pleasure over their empathic bond.

\*Tell me later, beautiful. I’m just glad you’re okay,\* he thought to her amiably, a relieved smile on his face.

“Oops!” Dana suddenly exclaimed, taking advantage of his distracted state and deliberately shoving him off the bridge.

The last thing he heard before he plunged headfirst into the water was the sound of her peals of raucous laughter. He’d barely had time to right himself to swim back up towards the surface, when he felt strong arms circling him and saw Jade’s gorgeous face inches from his own. She smiled at him as she propelled him upwards, holding him safe in her arms as they broke the surface.

“Are you alright, John?” she asked, easily supporting his weight as she floated in front of him.

He laughed and looked up at the giggling redhead on the bridge, wagging a finger at her and said, “I’m going to get you back for that, you little imp!” Turning to look at Jade, he gave her a kiss and added, “I’m fine, she just caught me by surprise.”

He stripped off in the water, throwing his clothes and boots over to the beach and waving at the other girls. Irillith returned his wave, until Tashana jumped on her back, ducking her sister under the water with a big splash. He smiled at their antics, then spotted Sakura and Rachel, who were lying on sun loungers watching the rest of the group. They waved back at him, beaming grins on their faces.

Jade slipped around behind him, her cool skin gliding across his as she kissed his neck. “When I said I wanted to try swimming in the Lagoon for the first time, everyone wanted to come along.”

“Does it get my Nymph’s seal of approval?” he asked, kicking lazily in the water to keep himself afloat. “Let me know if there’s any improvements you’d like to make, Dana and I designed this Lagoon with you in mind.”

“I absolutely love it,” she purred in his ear, literally in her case as he could feel the reverberations in her throat. “It’s large enough and the water’s sufficiently deep for me to really stretch my fins.”

“Perfect,” he said, turning around to give her a kiss.

When their lips parted, she stared at him intently, emerald eyes gazing into his. “John, would you mind if I asked you a personal question?” she inquired politely, suddenly seeming unsure of herself.

“Of course,” he agreed, twisting around so that she was facing him now.

She took a deep breath then asked, “Why do you treat me differently to the other girls?”

He shook his head and frowned as he replied, “I promise I don’t mean to. Please don’t think I don’t care abo-“

Pressing her lips to his mouth, she silenced him with a tender kiss, her long tongue wrapping around his. It began stroking him reassuringly and he relaxed and enjoyed the strangely soothing caress, mainly concentrating on keeping them both afloat as he trod water. Jade wrapped her limbs around him and deliberately trapped his arms and legs, stopping him from swimming so that they sank silently below the smooth surface of the water.

John was a good swimmer and able to hold his breath for a long time, but his eyes widened after they’d been underwater for over a minute. The Nymph stroked his head soothingly as she continued to kiss him, but she exhaled into his mouth now. Cool, fresh oxygen filled his lungs and he blinked at her in surprise as she supplied him breathable air. She reached for his hand and brought it up to her neck, letting him feel the gills that were letting her breathe for them both. It was a disconcerting but strangely comforting feeling to be entirely dependent on her for survival and he relaxed, letting himself get used to the surreal experience.

Eventually he swam backwards, carrying the dark-green girl into one of the little grottos that was cleverly concealed around the edge of the Lagoon. They broke the surface and he sat down on a submerged rock shelf that was actually a comfortable seat, then placed his hands on her hips, feeling her cool skin beneath his fingertips.

Jade pulled back, her long tongue slipping back into her mouth as she smiled at him lovingly. “I know how much you care about me. Please don’t be alarmed, that wasn’t what I was asking.” Twisting slightly in his lap, she gestured out at the Lagoon and added, “You built all this for me. I just wondered why?”

He smiled at her and answered, “Dana has her workshop and I built the Training Dojo for Calara and Sakura.” He paused, then grinned as he added, “Alright, the Dojo was for me as well, but the same applies to the Lagoon. You know I enjoy a good swim.”

“The trip to Oceanus?” she asked, a curious expression on her face.

John faltered, knowing full well that he’d chosen that luxurious destination specifically with her in mind.

Jade waited patiently, placing gentle kisses on his cheek as her cat-like eyes stared into his, “Take your time, I’m in no hurry,” she said with a small smile, letting him know that she expected an answer.

He sat back and really thought about it, stroking her back as she nuzzled at his throat, her cool lips intent on kissing every inch of his skin. Finally, he looked down at her and said quietly, “I suppose I just wanted to be different to the other men you’ve known.”

She laughed uproariously and exclaimed, “Oh, Master! Please trust me when I tell you you’re nothing like them. At all.”

Shaking his head, he continued, “Don’t get me wrong, I love the physical side of our relationship, but that’s what all your previous masters have always expected of you. With the trip to Oceanus and building the Lagoon, I just wanted to do something nice that was purely focused on your enjoyment, with no expectations in return. Seeing you look so free on Oceanus was absolutely priceless.”

The Nymph sat there quietly, her vertical pupils expanding into deep black pools as she gazed at him. She reached out a shaking finger to trace his jawline and whispered, “I wish I had something special to give you, other than my body, to show my love for you in the same way.”

He pulled her in close and said earnestly, “Jade, you already have! You’re with me of your own free will. In over ten thousand years, no other man - not even your creator - has been able to say the same thing. I couldn’t ask for a more precious gift.”

Jade didn’t say a word, but simply enfolded him in her arms and rested her head against his chest. He could feel her trembling as she clung to him, the beautiful girl quite overcome with emotion.

They sat together like that for some time, John stroking her hair with one hand, the other wrapped around her comfortingly. Without the obvious sexual frisson that was normally such an integral part of their relationship, such a simple thing as a tender hug felt far more intimate than the most heated of their lustful encounters.

For her part, Jade just listened to the powerful beat of her Master’s heart, sounding so strong and vital in his chest. He had restored her own crystalline heart, bringing her back to life again when she thought she had drawn her last breath. The rhythmic sound filled her every thought, the resplendent crystal within her chest pulsating in perfect synchronisation to that same insistent beat.

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Alyssa let out a muffled moan. She felt just like that time she’d swiped that miner’s stash of rotgut and then got hammered with Sparks – it had taken an entire day before she’d been able to see again. Her tongue felt thick in her mouth and she winced against the light as she tried to open her eyes.

“Alyssa!” Calara gasped with relief. “Thank God you’re alright!”

“Lights are bright,” she grumbled, covering her sensitive eyes with her forearm.

“Faye, the lights!” the Latina called out urgently, the illumination in the room immediately dimming to a muted glow. “Thank you!”

Rolling over, Alyssa buried her face in her girlfriend’s shoulder, sighing with relief as Calara caressed her throbbing head. Through the foggy shroud over her mind, she vaguely remembered that her boyfriend could work wonders. Perhaps he had the ultimate hangover cure up his sleeve? Or more accurately, in his pants.

\*John! Can you load me up?! My head’s pounding!\* she muttered weakly.

\*We’ll be right there!\* he responded the moment she had finished speaking, his thoughts sounding like a granite drill battering her subconscious.

Alyssa chose not to respond, just in case doing so prompted further conversation. She carefully withdrew her thoughts from everyone else as well, just in case they decided to all speak to her at once. If they did so, she wasn’t sure she’d be able to refrain from throwing up all over her girlfriend and considering Calara was being so caring, and felt so nice, it hardly seemed like a fair way of repaying her. She just nestled against the Latina’s neck, feeling the soft smoothness of her breasts squashed against her own.

The sound of lots of bare feet running down the corridor reached her ears and she felt the tremors on the bed as people climbed on to join her and Calara. In the months that she’d known John, this was the one time she felt really reluctant to give him a blowjob, not relishing all that bobbing for a second. She suddenly remembered that Jade would be able to help her out and suckling from her massively inflated bosom sounded just the ticket. Jade would croon a lullaby to her while stroking her hair – it would be perfect; a little maternal affection was just what she needed right now.

It therefore came as a bit of a surprise when she felt a pair of soft hands tentatively touching her forehead.

“She really is a Progenitor... but different! You two aren’t the same!” Rachel gasped, sounding astonished. “Alyssa isn’t masked by a shroud the way you are! Her aura is so beautiful!”

Alyssa really loved the girl, but her perfect diction sounded gratingly loud and annoying this morning. It didn’t really help that she wasn’t making the slightest bit of sense either.

“Can you help her?” John asked curiously.

Frowning at this unnecessary delay, Alyssa wondered why he wasn’t buried down Jade’s throat, the eager Nymph just as eager to feed her as she was to get loaded up.

“She’s suffering from shock due to empathic psychic resonance,” Rachel declared boldly. She faltered then, adding, “But, I’m not sure what that means, exactly.”

Calara’s quiet voice washed over her, the girl’s deliberate use of a whisper making Alyssa fall in love with her all over again. “Alyssa was in quite a bit of distress, could you just heal her, please?”

“Sorry! Yes, of course!” Rachel murmured in barely audible tones, putting her back in Alyssa’s good books again.

Alyssa felt soothing waves pouring out from the point that Rachel’s fingers were touching her head, the light contact suddenly reminding her of the gentle brush of cotton wool. That soft fluffiness pervaded her every thought, wrapping up her mind in a misty swirl that left her shivering at the exquisite touch. The gentle fog faded away just as quickly as it had cuddled her subconscious back to health and she felt sharp, clear, and pain free once more.

Her eyes snapped open and she rolled away from Calara, then did a double-take when she laid eyes on Rachel. The brunette’s stormy-grey eyes had softened, lit with an inner light that reminded Alyssa of one of Gravitus’ moons, shining through a cloudy night sky.

Her face lit up in delight, having not been genuinely surprised by anything in months. It was an unfortunate drawback to being in constant telepathic communication with everyone around her, but one she gladly accepted for the wondrous perks she gained in exchange. She sat bolt upright and saw that all her adoptive sisters were there, sitting around her on the bed in a semicircle.

\*Okay my loves, bring me up to speed,\* Alyssa requested from everyone in the room – except Faye of course and also Tashana, who couldn’t respond telepathically with her yet.

She closed her eyes and listened to John and six of the girls fill her in on everything that had happened since she’d been knocked unconscious on the Legacy. She smiled as she listened to their tales, greatly relieved to hear that they had won the battle and saved the Ashanath. However, she was particularly interested in John’s version of his recent intimate encounters with the girls, while comparing them to their own fascinating perspectives.

There’d been a marked shift from Calara, Sakura, and Rachel in the strength of their feelings towards John, but Dana and Jade were practically giddy with excitement as they filled her in on all the touching details of their talks with him. She opened her eyes again, quickly studying the redhead and the Nymph and smiled as they darted adoring looks John’s way.

“You have been a busy boy,” Alyssa said to John playfully, then stretched in the tantalising way that she knew he loved. “Maybe I should get knocked out more often!”

John was kneeling beside her and he lifted her in his arms, repositioning her so that she was straddling his lap. “Please don’t,” he requested emphatically, embracing her tightly in a heartfelt hug. “I’m not sure I can go a whole day without hearing your voice.”

“Oh alright, since you asked so nicely,” she replied, hugging him back and letting out a happy sigh.

He kissed her on the shoulder, then asked, “What happened? Rachel said something about psychic shock?”

He released her from his tight embrace then settled back against the headboard, so she twisted around to sit in his lap, snuggling back against his muscular chest to face the gathering of girls. She noted Tashana’s enormously rounded tummy, which explained where John’s most recent load had gone. She felt doubly thankful that he’d enhanced Rachel to be able to heal, thereby saving herself several hours of feeling like death until his quad restocked.

She took a deep breath, then replied to John’s question, “The old parts of the Legacy are all from an ancient Progenitor vessel, as I’m sure you’re all well aware. What you probably don’t know, is that the ship is filled with the psychic imprints of all the women who died there.” She shivered as she recalled the horrific deaths all those Maliri girls had suffered. Her expression was grim as she added, “I saw hundreds of women have the life sucked right out of them, leaving them little more than hollowed-out husks. It was the most horrible thing I’ve ever seen.”

“I’m sorry you had to witness that,” John said gently, putting his arms around her again. “I’ve seen the same thing in the nightmares on the Astral Plane.” His voice caught as he added, “Anyone who could do that is utterly vile.”

Alyssa turned to look at him, concern written all over her face. She couldn’t hear his thoughts when he was on the Astral Plane, so she hadn’t realised he’d been tormented by visions of her and the girls having the life sucked from them. They shared a quick kiss, before she settled down in his arms once more.

She glanced at the twins, then around at the rest of the group and announced, “It was Mael’nerak’s ship, I’m sure of it.”

“How can you be so certain?” Tashana asked, before sharing a conflicted glance with her sister. They put their arms around each other for support, then turned to watch Alyssa with equally pensive expressions on their identical blue faces.

“The vast majority of the women being killed were Maliri and it was obvious that they were the crew aboard that ship,” Alyssa explained, giving the twins a sympathetic look. “Mael’nerak might have turned good in the end, but he was an evil bastard in his prime. I saw him suck the life out of a bunch of invading Thralls – they definitely weren’t Maliri as they had yellow skin and bright red hair.”

“Can you remember any details about what you saw?” John asked, massaging her shoulders.

“It was from his really early days; Mael’nerak looked just like those first images we saw of him in the Nexus files. White robe, short goatee, stern faced, which must date it from at least forty-thousand years ago. If I had to guess, I’d say that echo might have even predated his invasion of the Achonin.” She glanced at Tashana and asked, “Unless you’ve read about another Progenitor invasion he fought off, prior to the one we all saw in your memories?”

The Maliri girl shook her head and replied, “Valada never mentioned Mael’nerak fighting off anyone else. It’s possible that something happened in the time before she was made into his Matriarch, but I’ve not seen any mention of thwarted Progenitor invasions.”

John asked quietly, “So, if his ship got destroyed, does that mean Mael’nerak didn’t survive his assault on this other Progenitor?”

“Are we certain the Ashanath didn’t reclaim the ship on Arcadia? The one Jessica Blake found,” Irillith interjected before anyone could speculate on John’s question.

Dana shook her head and replied, “No, I don’t think so. The ship that crashed on Arcadia was badly damaged but still in a much better state than this one. Mael’nerak’s ship was totally fucked.”

“We can ask them this afternoon,” John said, smiling with anticipation at getting some answers. “Ularean’s promised to tell us everything this time.”

“It’s just a shame they weren’t completely honest with us from the start,” Calara said, giving him a look of regret.

“If you’d pushed them too hard at the time, you might have been in trouble,” Rachel said quietly. “They were obviously very frightened of you and people make rash decisions when they’re afraid.”

John nodded, then shrugged helplessly as he said, “Events played out the way they did, so we just had to roll with them. You knew they were hiding something, but we just didn’t have the leverage to get them to open up about it.” He looked around the group and continued, “Anyway, now that Alyssa’s back in the land of the living, now’s probably a good time for the battle recap.”

“Sorry to keep everyone waiting,” she said airily.

He squeezed her gently in his arms, then looked around at the women on the bed, making eye contact with each of them in turn. “I’ve already been through the battle with Calara, so I know what happened on the Invictus while I was aboard the Legacy. There’s no point in going through everything in laborious detail, but I’ll just go through the key points.” He took a deep breath before continuing, “Before we get into that, let me just say that this was by far the most intense combat we’ve been involved in so far. Every one of you made me proud; you worked together flawlessly as a team, protecting each other and meeting our objectives. Thanks to all of you, the Ashanath were saved from extinction at the hands of the Drakkar. Well done girls, you were magnificent.”

The crew beamed with his generous praise, sitting taller and grinning at one another as they looked around at their friends. John smiled as he watched them react, pleased to see them looking so happy.

When he’d let them enjoy the moment of victory for a little while, he spoke up again, “There were a few rather dramatic developments during the battle that I’ll quickly mention. Dana and Rachel both have new psychic talents now and you’ve all seen what they were able to do. Sakura’s powers have continued to expand to include Cryokinesis, which is the ability to manipulate ice. Alyssa and I will help train you where we can, but I suspect that you’ll simply need to practice and get more familiar with the full range of capabilities at your disposal.” He glanced at Irillith and added, “Using that electric field to short out the Drakkar’s shields was inspired. Well done coming up with that.”

The Maliri girl smiled at him as she replied, “It wasn’t too hard to adjust the strength and volume of the electrical field. Once their shields were out, Tashana and me were able to tear them to pieces with railgun rounds.”

“I wish we’d had you two with us the first time we got boarded!” Dana exclaimed, patting Irillith on her bare blue shoulder and darting a grin at Tashana.

Tashana smiled back at her hesitantly, still feeling conflicted about gunning down the Drakkar marines. John was watching her at that moment and he took note of her slightly pensive expression, resolving to talk to her about it when he got a chance.

\*You saw that too?\* Alyssa prompted him. \*She feels regret about something.\*

\*Thanks, beautiful. I’ll try and find out what’s bothering her,\* John replied thoughtfully.

She tensed for a moment, then said carefully, \*I think I know what it is. I’ll tell you about it later.\*

John stroked her shoulder in acknowledgement, then glanced at Dana and said, “Let’s move on to talking about our equipment.”

“Actually I have something I wanted to mention,” Rachel interjected, turning to look at the redhead beside her. “I don’t think our current guns are adequate against shielded opponents. If Alyssa hadn’t been able to use telekinesis to batter her way through the Drakkar, we’d have been in serious trouble. Having to split different weapon types up between teammates is just halving our firepower as Alyssa couldn’t fire her Punisher rifle until their shields were down and my Justice Laser wasn’t able to penetrate their armour.”

“I could miniaturise a Progenitor Power Core and upgrade the rifle that way,” Dana suggested thoughtfully. “We haven’t been using the integral grenade launcher much, I could combine the best of both weapons and try an over-and-under railgun and laser combo?”

John shook his head in amazement and replied, “You could do that?”

She grinned at him and replied, “Yeah, it shouldn’t be too hard. I won’t be able to increase the firepower too much though, as we’re still limited by heat dissipation on the barrels.”

“How about the Drakkar’s gear?” Alyssa asked curiously. “Did anyone get a chance to loot their dead?”

John winced at her unfortunate choice of phrase and said, “I’ve spoken to Ularean, his people are going to collect undamaged samples of all the Drakkar’s weapons and armour for Dana to take a look at.” He turned back to look at the redhead and added, “Those guns of theirs had a lot of penetrating power. Getting hit by one felt like being battered by a sledgehammer.”

Rachel nodded emphatically and said, “I was very lucky I was hit by a glancing blow on the helmet, considering the trauma I suffered to my shoulder.”

“Their guns were much more advanced than anything they used in our last encounter with them,” John said soberly. “If the Progenitor could supply them with that black armour for their ships, there’s no reason the weapons and armour didn’t come from him too.”

Sakura frowned as she recalled hacking through the black battlesuits and said, “The Drakkar’s armour was very sturdy. Even my crystal Alyssium blades struggled a little with slicing through it.”

“Maybe this Progenitor gave the Drakkar some kind of low-grade version of the gear his Thralls use?” Irillith speculated. “We’ve previously spoken about the armour plating the Progenitor gave them being a crude version of the armour on his black ship.”

“Shit! We’ll be able to find out if that’s true!” Dana gasped in delight. “I’ll be able to study the black armour on the Legacy and find out!”

“Do you think you’ll be able to reproduce that armour plating, if that is true?” Calara asked, eyes going wide at the thought. “That would be incredible if that’s the case. Considering how powerful the Progenitor ship’s guns are, just think how tough that ship’s armour must be!”

“I don’t see why not!” Dana said with a joyful grin. Her smile suddenly faded as she added, “Unless it’s fabricated by some kind of process which John hasn’t felt like sharing with me yet.”

Holding his hands up in the air, John protested, “Hey! It’s not me blocking our access to this tech!”

“I know, I was just teasing you,” Dana replied, blowing him a kiss.

The girls laughed at her banter, all except for Sakura who frowned with worry. She said quietly, “If the armour the thralls use is greatly superior to the Drakkar gear, exactly how tough is that going to be? I think we need to be prepared to face battle-armoured Thralls eventually.”

Tashana sat up with interest and said, “I’ve seen stylised depictions of Thrall body armour, it’s definitely fully shielded if the images weren’t exaggerated. It showed shots bouncing harmlessly from ovals surrounding the women.”

“Oh! I actually saw some of the psychic echoes wearing Thrall body armour!” Alyssa suddenly blurted out, eyes widening as she remembered. She tilted her head back to look up at John and added, “I thought I was being creative when I designed our Paragon suits, but I know where I got the inspiration now. They look extremely similar to Thrall armour!”

Everyone went quiet at that bit of news, glancing at John when he said, “Is it just me who finds that profoundly disturbing? We’re instinctively guiding ourselves down the same path that other Progenitors have followed.”

“Yes, but at a much slower pace,” Dana said grimly. “We’re being throttled by whatever you can force out of your Progenitor Guide.”

John nodded, his expression bleak at the thought. After letting out a sigh of frustration, he forced himself to smile as he said, “Alright, let’s get back to the battle review.”

“The new weapons on the Invictus were well worth all the effort we put in on the refit,” Calara said, smiling at Dana in appreciation. “Being able to repeatedly fire the Nova Lances was incredibly useful and coupled with the Singularity Drivers, our firepower was devastating!”

The redhead smiled with satisfaction, then asked, “What about the Heavy Cannons and Gauss Cannons?”

“They were certainly very effective,” the Latina replied thoughtfully. “Being able to strip off the black armour plating like that left ships vulnerable for the Ashanath to finish off - any we didn’t just kill outright that is.”

“You don’t sound very impressed,” Dana said, looking crestfallen.

Calara gave her an apologetic smile. “I’m sorry Sparks. It’s just that after seeing the Nova Lances and Singularity Drivers in action, I’ve been a bit spoilt with sheer destructive power. The new munitions based weaponry weren’t as dramatic, but they did work exactly as you designed them to.”

Dana’s eyes narrowed as she said, “Hmm, maybe I’ll have to get a bit creative.”

“The Photon Lasers on the Raptor were an excellent upgrade to the old Beam Lasers,” Jade said enthusiastically in an attempt to cheer her up.

The Latina nodded enthusiastically and said, “The Raptor and the Valkyrie tearing apart cruisers like that was incredible! If we could upgrade the Invictus’ Beam Laser batteries to Photon Lasers that would be a massive upgrade!”

Dana winced as she replied, “The amount of power needed for that would be insane!” Tapping her finger on her chin, her mind whirred as she mulled over a number of possible areas of future research, then continued, “Those Photon Lasers were just initial prototypes. I’ll keep looking at ways to improve them; maybe I can make them more energy efficient.”

“Thanks, Dana,” Calara said gratefully.

John turned to look at his Chief Engineer and said, “While we’re discussing the Valkyrie, that reminds me about something important. The Invictus took a few nasty hits to the hull in that battle and if she’d suffered serious damage, you’re the best chance we’ve got at keeping our main source of firepower in the fight. I’ve been thinking about it and it might be a wise precaution to keep you on the Bridge in future battles, just to be on the safe side. What do you think, honey?”

Dana looked at him in surprise and her expression softened as she realised what he was doing. “You’re right, making sure the Invictus is fully operational is the most important thing I could be doing.”

He looked around at the gathering of girls and asked, “Is anyone else an expert at damage control and coordinating emergency repairs?”

They all shook their heads, having no experience or expertise in that field.

John smiled at her apologetically, and said, “In that case, I’ll have to insist you stay at your Engineer Station, Dana. We can’t risk the Invictus taking damage and not having you around to fix it.”

Dana let out a dramatic sigh, then said, “Alright, but I’ll really miss piloting the mech, that was fun!” She glanced at Faye and added, “We should definitely increase your team of maintenance bots. If we take major damage, I’ll need your help to actually patch the ship back together again!”

Faye nodded eagerly, her purple face lighting up at the prospect of being able to assist her friend. “I can directly oversee as many robots as I have avatars, but for simpler work I could control lots more! As long as they have programs for their tasks, they should be fairly autonomous.”

“We’ll start with bringing your team up to twelve for now,” Dana said thoughtfully. “Then if we need to go into emergency repair mode, all of your avatars can coordinate their work. We can’t predict the severity of any damage we take, so I think you’ll struggle to create repair programs sophisticated enough to handle so many random factors.”

“That sounds like a good idea to me!” Faye exclaimed, bobbing her head in agreement.

John looked around at the girls and said, “Unfortunately that leaves the Valkyrie short a pilot. I’ve got someone in mind who I think would be perfect for it, but I haven’t had a chance to speak to her about it yet.”

When he turned to look at Sakura, her almond-shaped eyes widened in surprise and she blurted out, “You want me to fly the Valkyrie?”

He nodded firmly and replied, “You flew a hoverbike, so piloting isn’t something totally new to you. You’ve got exceptional combat awareness and Dana’s working to improve the mech’s control mechanisms to make it very responsive. For someone as athletic as you, I think you’ll be a superb choice for it.”

Sakura mulled the idea over for a few seconds, nodding slowly as she thought about it. “I have been feeling like a bit of a fifth wheel on the Bridge. Unless we get boarded, I’m not really able to contribute in most ship battles. It was so different when we boarded the Legacy though! Saving all those Ashanath from the Drakkar, then rescuing Rachel and Alyssa felt tremendously rewarding.”

“I’ll still need you for boarding actions and ground missions,” John said firmly. “If you’re up for piloting the mech, then you’ll be able to assist in the same way during space combat.”

“I get the same feeling saving friendly ships from hostile ones,” Calara said, darting a perceptive look at John. She met Sakura’s gaze when she looked her way and continued, “I think John’s right. With your athleticism, focus, and temperament, you’re the perfect choice as a replacement pilot for the Valkyrie.”

Sakura smiled at her gratefully, then turned to beam at John with enthusiasm as she exclaimed, “Alright, I’m your girl!”

He grinned back at her. “Fantastic! I knew I could count on you.”

Sakura giggled then, her brown eyes sparkling with delight.

“What?” he asked, looking at her curiously.

She grinned at him as she explained, “You know you’ve really gone for the cliché now? Putting the only Japanese girl on your crew in the giant mecha!”

He laughed and nodded, spreading his hands helplessly. “Sorry honey, it was unavoidable really. I could only resist for so long.”

Alyssa shook her head and her cerulean eyes twinkled playfully as she said, “Actually we haven’t gone for the full cliché yet! To do that, we’ll need to dress you up in a school uniform and have our resident tentacle monster violate you.”

“I’ve got a great outfit you can borrow!” Dana gasped with delight.

“You only have to ask and I’m sure something could be arranged,” Jade purred, smiling flirtatiously at the Asian girl.

When they saw the lusty look on Sakura’s face, everyone cheered and burst into laughter, making her blush furiously.

“Hey! I can’t help having a few naughty fantasies!” Sakura objected, grinning at her friends.

While Calara gave her a playful hug and the girls all giggled with each other, Alyssa glanced up at John and said, \*I’m impressed, you handled that very delicately. Thank you for making such an effort to spare Dana’s feelings, she really appreciated it.\*

\*I felt bad about effectively taking the mech away from her, but she’s too vulnerable out there without either of us to keep an eye on her.\* John explained, winking at Dana when she blew him a grateful kiss.

\*We nearly lost her months ago aboard that Drakkar battleship because she was so fixated on blowing up its reactor,\* Alyssa replied, gently stroking his arm. \*We both think you made the right call.\*

He leaned down to give her a kiss, while waiting for the girls’ laughter and chattering to subside. When they finally quieted, he sat up straight again and smiled at them as he tried to recall the other points he wanted to raise.

“There was one last thing I wanted to bring up before we end the post-battle review. Now this one is mainly my fault, but I think we badly overextended ourselves in this battle. We were so busy going for the big win and trying to help everyone, we were courting disaster by taking too many risks,” he said, before turning to look at Calara. “Commander, what was our primary objective in this battle?”

“To destroy the nineteen black-armoured Drakkar battleships and eighteen cruisers, thereby relieving pressure on the Ashanath forces, Admiral,” she replied promptly, in a clear voice.

He nodded and said quietly, “Which we achieved and is a breathtaking accomplishment. However, just think about the amount of mission creep we had.” He raised his hand and began ticking off items, “We intercepted the cruisers going for the Ashanath carriers, then cleared the way for the Ashanath strike craft to shoot down the planetary raiders. We protected the Legacy from dropships, then boarded it to rescue the Ashanath High Council. Finally, we took out scores of dropships to save the remnants of the Ashanath forces from boarding actions.”

The girls shook their heads in amazement, realising the sheer scale of everything they had achieved.

“I don’t want to take away anything from our victory, which was truly outstanding,” John began, looking worried. “But, we were in real danger of spreading ourselves too thin, which is when bad things started to happen. The Invictus took damage because we re-entered the battle rather than hanging back to fight at a distance and recharge our shields. Rachel was injured because Sakura and I weren’t there to back her up - we boarded the Legacy from three entry points to save as many Grey crew as possible. This also meant that when Alyssa was incapacitated, the shock distracted everyone and the Invictus got boarded.”

“We pulled through by the skin of our teeth, but it could have all gone very badly wrong. Now, if you see me getting sucked into this kind of over-commitment in the future, I want you to let me know. Saving the Ashanath was a worthy goal and I’m very glad we did so, but it wasn’t our fault they got attacked and you girls shouldn’t have to pay the price because they didn’t adequately protect their homeworld.”

Alyssa turned around and said quietly, “We all understand.” She smiled at him and stroked his face as she added, “Immortality might seem like a blessing, but to spend an eternity grieving for girls you’ve loved and lost – that would be a terrible curse.”

He nodded, pulling her into his arms, then beckoned the other girls in for a group hug. Calara, Sakura, and Jade from the left, Dana, Rachel, and Tashana from the right, surrounding them, and leaning in for a hug. As Irillith paused to peel away her spirit form, John beckoned Faye closer and she knelt behind Alyssa as Irillith wrapped her arms around her.

“All of you are the most precious thing to me,” he said earnestly. “Always be careful and take special care of each other, because I don’t want to lose any of you. Okay?”

They all murmured their agreement, nodding and smiling first at him then each other.

He smiled back at them and said, “Alright then, we’ve got the normal after-battle work to do, so we’ll fly down to Ashana now and repair the Invictus.” Glancing around at the semi-clad girls, he added, “I absolutely love the bikinis, but we better get showered and semi-presentable since we’re off to meet the leaders of the Ashanath.”

“I’m sure they’d appreciate it more if we turned up like this,” Alyssa said with a sly grin. “You know the Greys are all obsessed with curves?”

John chuckled and replied, “You’re naked at the moment! We want to find out information from them, not give them a collective heart attack!” As the girls laughed along with him, he smacked her on her pert little rump and continued, “Come on, time for a shower, then we can all head up to the Bridge.”

“Just wait until you see Ashana!” Dana exclaimed as she nudged Rachel. “It’s fucking crazy!”

“I haven’t seen it either,” Tashana admitted, her curiosity piqued.

Irillith smiled at her as she gave Faye a kiss on the cheek and released her from her arms. “I’ve never been, but I’ve seen plenty of images of the place. I’d love to see it in person.”

The group broke apart then and they all headed into the shower. Alyssa waited for John at the foot of the bed and took his hand as he climbed off – he was last after being in the centre of the group hug.

\*Nice motivational speech, handsome,\* she said, giving him a tender kiss as they walked into the bathroom.

He glanced her way, unsure if she was being serious or sarcastic. \*Are you sure? It felt like I got a bit too bleak at the end there. It wasn’t quite the rousing toast to a glorious victory I’d originally planned, but I got a bit caught up in it and let my emotions get the better of me.\*

The girls welcomed them into the warm cascades of water and as everyone got soaped up, Alyssa glanced at him over her shoulder. Calara and Sakura were busy getting her very clean, but she focused on him as she replied, \*As we discussed before the battle, the girls aren’t a normal crew. Believe me, everything you’ve been saying to them has been having a big impact.\*

\*I’ve just been honest about how much they mean to me,\* he said in confusion.

She smiled at him and replied, \*I know. Keep doing that, they love it.\*

The crew quickly showered, dried, and got dressed, gathering in the huge bedroom while they waited for everyone to get ready. Alyssa sent out a few mental commands to coordinate their attire and the girls began to reappear in smart business wear, as their militaristic uniforms would have felt inappropriate. John had dressed relatively quickly in his charcoal suit, so he got to see each girl as she made her appearance.

“You look like you’re having fun,” Alyssa quipped as she sauntered out of the walk-in wardrobe in a fetching pencil-skirt suit.

John was stroking Irillith’s slender stomach and Tashana’s slightly rounded cum-filled one, the Maliri twins grinning at him indulgently. He laughed and said, “I feel like I’ve died and gone to heaven!”

Noting the sister’s identical business suits, Sakura smiled and said, “It’s like a before and after picture!”

He stepped back to admire the whole group, but just as he was about to tell his girls how stunning they looked, he paused. The two blue-faces of the Maliri twins and their long white hair made them look exactly like the Thralls on the stone monoliths, then there was the identical Amazonian body shape shared by all eight women. Considering that the Ashanath seemed to know far more about Progenitors than they’d originally revealed, he wondered if it was wise to bring the whole crew. The Greys were his allies and he didn’t want to terrify them into silence.

“We saved their species from extinction,” Alyssa reminded him gently, running her elegant fingers along his shoulder and caressing his neck. “They won’t be afraid of us, not now.”

Nodding his agreement he said, “Alright, let’s head to the Bridge and we can take the Invictus down to Ashana.”

He led the way up to the Bridge, primarily to avoid following after all the girls. As much as he would have loved to follow in their wake, he knew he’d never be able to concentrate after seeing them all gliding along in high heels and the enchanting effect they had on their tight derrieres. He jogged up the steps of the Command Podium as the girls fanned out to take their stations, Alyssa smirking at him in amusement as she took her seat at the Executive Officer’s Station to his right.

A quick glance up at the holographic Tactical Map swept away all thoughts of beautiful women. He stared in silence at the melancholy battlefield where the Battle of Ashana had taken place, the massive sprawl of wrecked spacecraft like an archipelago of battered islands in that vast, dense sea of debris.

The beleaguered Ashanath survivors were picking their way through the derelicts, still rescuing trapped colleagues from vessels that had been merely crippled rather than destroyed. He watched a pair of cruisers attempting to tow a marooned battleship from the centre of the metallic wasteland, the huge disc having lost all its engines to Drakkar Beam Laser fire. Everywhere he looked, the salvage and recovery efforts were in full swing, with civilian vessels aiding the few remaining military ships in their endeavours.

The extent of the devastation inflicted on the Drakkar meant that their ships were too badly mauled for crew to have survived. The Ashanath wouldn’t have been brave or foolhardy enough to attempt such a rescue in any case, knowing recovery teams were more likely to be attacked and eaten than met with gratitude for their salvation. It made for grim viewing and John had soon seen his fill.

“Take us down to the shipyard please, Jade,” he requested, averting his gaze from the scenes of carnage.

“Course is already set,” she replied with a smile, having remembered the way from their last visit.

She pushed forward with the throttle and the Invictus’ six massive Trankaran engines blazed with an orange flare of light as the battlecruiser began to accelerate forwards. A green guide path led their way down towards the surface and the reddish-orange planet grew larger and larger in the screens as they descended through the atmosphere. It was a dry, arid world, the dusty red surface dotted with silvery-grey settlements that glinted as they reflected the light from the system’s yellow sun.

Each cluster of buildings primarily consisted of tall, lofty towers and perfectly rounded domes, with each settlement built atop floating islands of orange rock. The island homes of the Ashanath were anchored to the surface of the planet by glowing beams of white energy, creating a strange multi-levelled vista on the otherwise flat plateau they were flying over.

“I see what you mean!” Rachel marvelled, staring at the screens in amazement. “It’s like the outer crust of the planet is trying to float away, but the Ashanath have desperately tethered as much of it as they can.”

“It’s due to the low gravity on their homeworld,” Dana explained sagely. “It makes those floating rocks easy to manipulate and manoeuvre into position. You won’t notice the difference when we land at the shipyard as they’ve built artificial gravity into each of those levitating islands.”

John turned to look at the Maliri twin to his left and asked, “What do you think of the Grey’s homeworld, Tashana? Dramatically different to what you’re used to on Valaden, I’d imagine?”

She tore her eyes away from the view and smiled at him as she replied, “I have visited a number of different planet types before while searching for Progenitor relics.” She glanced back at the view of Ashana and continued, “You’re right though, their homeworld is nothing like most of the worlds in Maliri Space. The majority of Maliri planets are lush and full of life; I find it hard to believe that anything can flourish in such a dry, inhospitable ecosystem.”

Jade brought the Invictus lower and they soared low over silver settlements, close enough to see the shallow gullies and troughs in the earth.

John pointed out slender columns sticking up out of the orange dirt around one particular raised floating rock. “That’s a condenser farm, the planet is covered in them. Those columns pull water from the atmosphere and draw it down into subterranean reservoirs. Most of the vegetation on Ashana is below the planet’s surface, grown in vast underground caves.”

“What kind of plant-life do they have here?” Rachel asked him in fascination. “Are there any Terran species, or all indigenous to Ashana?”

“I’ve only seen one of the reservoirs once, I did some sightseeing about five years ago,” he explained, thinking back to what he’d seen. “The Grey’s are vegetarians and processed lichen makes up the bulk of their diet.”

Jade wrinkled her nose and said, “That doesn’t sound very appetising.”

“They’re culinary masters with Fungi and algae, but you’re right, I think you have to be an Ashanath to appreciate the taste,” he said with a smile.

The crevices in the surface of the planet began to get more pronounced, until they ran off into a huge series of canyons and ravines. Floating above the fractured ground was a colossal plateau, far bigger than any of the other floating islands. Its upper surface carried a shining silver city, with hundreds of towers reaching skyward and casting long shadows over the domes that formed the roofs of the building below.

Jade dipped the Invictus into that rocky canyon that led under Ashana’s capital, slipping into the traffic flowing towards the hangars beneath the city. Now that the Drakkar invasion had been averted, Ashana was open to business once more and all the merchant vessels that had fled from the city were now flooding back. The Nymph stayed under the port speed limit, weaving between Bract merchantmen and Trankaran heavy traders as she neared the centre of the enormous facility.

The shipyard was in the northern sector of the city, so she peeled away from the main flow of civilian traffic, following the deep rents in the ground as she wove her way closer. When they got closer to the drydock area built into the underbelly of the city, they could see that every docking bay was filled with battered Ashanath discs except for one, near the centre of the drydock. It was a different hangar to the one they had landed in last time, the Invictus having grown too large with the refit.

A warning chime let them know they had reached their allocated landing area and Jade followed the green guide path up to the inverted drydock above them. Using retro-thrusters to slow their ascent, she lifted the battlecruiser into the welcoming embrace of a set of massive robotic arms. Each enormous limb ended in a broad docking clamp, with the magnets firmly affixing to the Invictus’ hull. The arms raised the ship while rotating it through one-hundred-and-eighty degrees about the horizontal axis.

There were several Ashanath waiting for them in the hangar, one of them wearing distinctive white robes of a High Councillor. They appeared to be a welcoming committee and were waiting patiently beside covered trolleys.

“We better not keep our hosts waiting,” John said, rising to his feet. He smiled at the purple girl who was perched on his Command Console and added, “Would you mind keeping an eye on the ship please, Faye? I’ll leave a comm channel open on my watch, so you can listen to our discussion with the High Council.”

She gazed at him with her big eyes and gave him a big smile. “Of course! I’ll keep the ship safe. We have twenty-two dead Drakkar in the simulator room on Deck Three and a Drakkar dropship attached to the hull. Would you like me to begin the cleanup operation?”

“That would be very helpful, thanks Faye,” he said, smiling at her in gratitude. He turned and offered Alyssa an arm and they glided down the illuminated steps of the Command Podium together, before following their excited shipmates into the grav-tube.

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Faye watched them leave, the smile dying on her face as she switched to watching them on the ship’s internal cameras. She began to nibble anxiously on a nail as they left the ship, while her secondary avatar reran the images of Dana in the Valkyrie being rammed by the Drakkar dropship. She flinched as she saw her friend bloodied and battered in the pilot’s chair all over again, while not being able to do anything to save her. Her tertiary avatar was occupied reviewing the footage of Rachel getting shot in the shoulder, the brunette’s beautiful face twisted in pain. Faye experienced that same acute feeling of helplessness all over again, a vicious feedback loop that ratcheted up her worry for her friends.

The galaxy was such a dangerous place and the girls meant so much to John. It had been unbearable to see him get injured and Faye knew how much he’d be hurt if anything happened to one of the crew. She hated the thought of them being away from the Invictus’ protective shell, where she was unable to help protect them...

“It’ll be alright, he’ll keep them all safe,” she murmured nervously to herself, a flicker of light rolling up her purple form.

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“Sergeant Gibbons?!” Lieutenant Grace Wallis called out as she strode through the barracks.

One of the Port Medea troopers nodded towards the shower block. “He’s takin’ a shower Lieutenant, just got off the mornin’ shift.”

The young woman smiled at the trooper in gratitude, then strode purposefully towards the back of the barracks. “David, are you in there?” she called out loudly, so she could be heard over the splashing sound of running water.

“One second, I’ll be right out!” he called back, the shower turning off a few seconds later.

The Terran Federation Lieutenant leaned against the wall while she waited, glancing out of the window at the blue-white light from the Iota-Leonis system’s bright star. One of the border patrols was just returning to Port Medea, the distinctive predatory shape of the cruisers silhouetted against the glare from the sun. She watched them glide closer, their grey titanium hulls unmarred by plasma burns – it looked like another quiet patrol. Maybe the talk around Port Medea was right? Perhaps the Lion really had broken the Kintark at the Battle of Regulus...

“What can I do for you, Lieutenant?” Sergeant Gibbons asked, breaking her out of her reverie.

She turned to smile at the wet, bare-chested man, who had a towel wrapped around his waist. “I’ve got some great news, David! Your orders just came through!”

He laughed and shook his head in disbelief. “You’re shitting me?!”

“No, I promise! Look...” She held out the holo-reader with the executive orders listed clearly for him to see.

There it was, right before his eyes: Immediate transfer authorised for Sergeant David Gibbons to Terra’s elite ComGuard. “Holy shit!” he muttered, the reality finally starting to sink in.

“The finest unit in the Terran Federation...” the young woman marvelled. “Congratulations, David!”

He scratched the short stubble on his cheek self-consciously and muttered, “I don’t feel like I earned it. I bet it was that commendation from the Lion that swung it.”

Shaking her head, Grace was earnest as she replied, “Don’t doubt yourself! I couldn’t have asked for a finer Sergeant - I would’ve been lost without your guidance over the last few months. I was greener than Kintark plasma fire when I joined this unit, but you stopped me from fucking up too badly!”

He winked at her and said, “True, keeping you out of trouble was tougher than fighting off a dozen lizard marines singlehanded!” He smiled at her affectionately then added, “Take care, Ma’am. If I ever hear of a vacancy for a Lieutenant in the ComGuard I’ll put in a good word for you.”

“The guys with the biggest guns get the best girls?” she asked him with a laugh, quoting the unit’s informal motto. “I’m not sure I’m the right fit, I’m a straight shooter!”

Sergeant Gibbons laughed along with her and said, “Yeah, those guys have quite the reputation.”

She hesitated for a moment, then glanced to her right to make sure no one was nearby. When she saw the coast was clear she gave him a tight hug, not caring about the water dripping from his chest. “I’m going to miss you, Dave. Thanks for everything.”

He patted her slightly awkwardly on the shoulder and whispered, “I’ll miss you too, Grace.”

Gazing out of the window behind the young woman, his mind raced as he watched the ships patrolling outside Port Medea. A transfer to Terra - he could hardly believe it.

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John placed his hand on the DNA reader, and the green light swiped across the panel as it scanned his genetic code. The airlock door spiralled open and a gust of dry air swept into the corridor. After the pristine atmosphere aboard the Invictus, it felt dusty in his throat and briefly made him want to cough.

“After you, ladies,” he said politely, ushering the girls through.

They left the airlock and walked out into the large docking bay, with the girls who had never visited the planet before looking around curiously. He saw Alyssa, Calara, Dana, and Jade grinning at him mischievously, while darting furtive glances at the new girls.

\*Go on, you know you want to,\* Alyssa said, trying to stifle a laugh.

He smiled back then turned to look at Rachel, Irillith, Tashana, and Sakura before he said, “Hey girls, what’s that up there?!”

The four of them immediately looked upwards, then shrieked in alarm, crouching to the ground as though desperately trying to cling on for dear life. With the artificial gravity of the docking bay, they were now looking upside down at the surface of the planet, giving them the disconcerting feeling that they were about to fall towards Ashana.

Sakura’s eyes flared with a white light, before the glow faded away just as quickly when she realised they weren’t about to fall to their deaths. Rachel groaned as she realised he was playing a trick on them, while Tashana laughed good-naturedly. Irillith gave him a level stare of disapproval, although a smile teased at her luscious lips.

“He pulled that shit on us as well,” Dana said with a grin, slipping her arm around her girlfriend.

“Consider it a rite of passage,” Alyssa chuckled as she put her arms around the twins.

John held his hand out for Sakura, squeezing it gently as she stood straight once more. “Sorry, honey, I didn’t mean to scare you.”

“Yes, you did,” she replied with a chuckle. The Asian girl looked thoughtful and added, “I wasn’t scared though, just... *ready*.”

“What do you mean?” he asked, as he stroked her hand with his thumb.

She shook her head and replied hesitantly, “I’m not sure. It was an odd feeling.”

They were interrupted by the white robed Councillor gliding across the docking bay to greet them as he said in his eerie voice, “The High Council has gathered to meet with you, JohnBlake. We are eager to answer any questions that you might have.” He turned to gaze at Alyssa and his telepathic voice throbbed with gratitude as he exclaimed, \*It is wonderful to see you again, Alyssa! I am so grateful to all of you for saving my people from the depredations of the Drakkar!\*

Immediately recognising the Grey’s distinctive telepathic voice, Alyssa replied aloud, “It’s fantastic to see you too, Talari! Thanks for coming to meet us.”

Councillor Talari responded with a short bow, then said, “We have gathered the samples of Drakkar weaponry and armour that you requested, JohnBlake.” He turned to face the covered grav-sled, before gesturing towards it with a hand.

Dana bounded over to the covered trolley and threw back the silver sheet that concealed the items beneath. With the cover thrown back, they saw a bulky black battlesuit, one of the sinister looking black rifles, an even more ferocious-looking rotary cannon, and one each of Vekrok’s powered swords and maces.

“Awesome! I’ll check them out when I get back,” Dana said gratefully. She turned and pointed towards the Cargo Bay, adding, “Can you guys leave the gear in there, please?”

The moment she had finished speaking, the huge door into the Cargo Bay began to lift, Faye having overheard the entire conversation. The Ashanath ground crew accompanying Talari gave Dana a short bow, then started to move the grav-sled towards the ponderously rising door.

John met Talari’s black-eyed stare and asked, “Shall we go and meet with the High Council?”

“Of course, JohnBlake,” Talari replied. “If you would care to follow me, I shall lead you to the audience chamber now.” He turned around and walked at a smooth pace towards the doors at the back of the hangar. There was an Ashanath-style gravity tunnel there and he rotated around in the anti-grav field, then disappeared out of sight, ascending up through the plateau at a slow pace.

John led Sakura into the base of the tunnel and they followed Talari’s lead, turning in the artificial gravity before using the metal rungs in the walls to propel themselves after their Ashanath guide. The rest of their group fanned out so they wouldn’t bump into each other, rising up through the tunnel towards the surface of the enormous city.

“Are the High Council meeting us in the same place as last time?” John asked, wondering if they had an air-car ride ahead of them to get to the lofty tower when they had first met Ularean.

“For your convenience, we are meeting at a much closer location this time,” Talari explained, tilting his bulbous head down so that he could see John floating along the tunnel below him. “This location is also near the medical facility where Ularean was being kept for observation after RachelBlake’s miraculous healing efforts.”

“How is he today?” Rachel asked, her voice tinged with concern for her patient.

Talari turned to look in her direction. “Ularean was suffering from exhaustion, but he has fully recovered today. The Ashanath Collective owes you a considerable debt for saving him. He has served as a wise and capable Senior Councillor for seventeen years; his loss would have been felt keenly by the High Council.”

“You’re welcome, I was just glad I could help,” Rachel replied, throwing John a warm look of gratitude.

John glanced through the long glass windows that flanked the tube and saw they were rising through a well-lit cavern in the centre of the city’s landmass. Strange phosphorescent lighting was provided by the lichens surrounding the limpid pool in its centre, the light making a forest of Etherite crystal trees shimmer before his eyes. He watched glowing winged insects buzzing over that underground lake, the creatures darting around erratically as they hunted for food.

“Take a look at that cavern girls,” he said quietly, bringing the otherworldly view to their attention.

They made appropriately impressed gasps as they turned to look through the windows themselves, pointing out the abundance of exotic animal life in the huge cave. Rachel was particularly animated, taking pictures of the alien flora and fauna to catalogue and research. John got distracted watching the fascinating subterranean scene, so before he knew it, they were nearing the surface and the cavern disappeared from view. Talari stepped out of the tube at the top level and they all followed, gathering on the pavement until the whole group had arrived. The road was covered in light swirls of red dust, a thin layer of it giving the silver road a bronze cast.

“We are to meet in that building,” Talari informed them, pointing a thin, reedy arm at the imposing silver edifice a few hundred metres down the street.

There were several Ashanath civilians walking along the pavement beside the boulevard and they stopped to stare at John and the girls. Alyssa could hear their thoughts and she gave them a flirtatious wink and a put more sway in her hips as the Ashanath gazed in wonder at the gloriously shapely women. John ignored the gaping spectators and followed Talari across to the large domed building, then through a big arched door. Strange runes and Ashanath glyphs surrounded the curved doorframe and he couldn’t help wondering what they meant as he strolled inside.

Silver-armoured Ashanath soldiers were on guard duty in the foyer area, but they took one look at the High Councillor accompanying the group and stayed at attention, making no attempt to halt their progress. John spotted a couple of them blinking as they watched the eclectic group pass through another set of doors, heading deeper into the building.

He’d been expecting a reception room or more corridors, so it came as a bit of a surprise when Talari guided them into a large, circular meeting room. The High Council were already there waiting for them, seated on eight of the nine chairs facing them in a semi-circle. Opposite were nine vacant, comfortable-looking chairs which had obviously been set out for John and the girls. The white robed Grey in the centre chair rose from his seat and bowed respectfully to them.

“I wish to offer a warm welcome to the saviours of Ashana,” the Senior Councillor said, his impassive face not showing any hint of emotion. “Our species was facing extinction and if you had not intervened, we would have lost everything.”

“I’m just glad we were able to make it in time to help,“ John said, smiling at the diminutive alien. He looked at the Senior Councillor curiously, noting that he seemed much more robust after a full night’s rest. “Are you feeling better now, Ularean? Rachel was just asking after you a moment ago.”

“Filled with a newfound zest for life,” Ularean replied, his whispering voice and unexpressive face hardly conveying the vigour he proclaimed. “I will never forget what you have done for me RachelBlake.”

Rachel gave him a kind smile and said, “It always feels wonderful to see a patient make a full recovery after surgery.” Her full lips lifted into a grin as she added, “Although this is the first time I’ve done a post psychic-surgery consultation!”

“How are your people doing after the battle, Ularean?” John asked sympathetically. “We saw the state of the battlefield, it looked like the casualties your fleet sustained were horrendous.”

“Our wounded number in the tens-of-thousands,” the Senior Councillor replied. “Almost every medical centre on the planet is providing succour to those injured in the battle.”

John studied Ularean for a moment, then said quietly, “There was no need for the battle to have been that close. Your forces sustained terrible losses, but that could have been prevented if you’d trusted us enough to tell us about the Legacy beforehand. We would have planned accordingly and integrated that ship and its weapon into the defence of your planet - the entire battle would have played out very differently.”

“I am extremely sorry, JohnBlake,” Ularean murmured, sounding full of remorse. “There was a culture of secrecy around the Legacy that stretched back thousands of years. At the time, the thought of revealing details about the vessel to you simply didn’t occur to anyone in the High Council. I promise that we shall place our full trust in you from now on.”

“That’s good to hear,” John said with a smile. “We’re your allies Ularean and we’ll need to work together to avoid such disasters in the future.”

Ularean gave him a solemn nod. “It has become clear that you are a steadfast ally, JohnBlake. Thank you.”

“I’d like to help with your wounded if you’d like some assistance?” Rachel volunteered, walking up to stand at John’s side.

He gave her a worried look and said, “Psychic healing takes up a lot of energy. I’m not sure you’ll be able to heal more than a handful, so be careful not to exhaust yourself.”

The brunette smiled at him and said, “I’m still a doctor. I can try and help with conventional medicine too.”

“We would certainly appreciate your assistance, RachelBlake. I am sure you must be curious to hear the extent of our knowledge on Progenitors , but we will gladly escort you to the nearest treatment centre after our discussion is complete,” Ularean said, the voice module managing to convey his gratitude.

“You’re right, I’d love to hear whatever you can reveal about Progenitors,” she said, giving him a grateful nod.

Ularean gestured towards the nine chairs. “Please be seated and we shall begin. We have arranged for refreshments should any of you be thirsty.”

There were cylindrical goblets perched on slender tables at the side of each chair and John took the central seat opposite Ularean, then gladly took a sip from the glass, the dusty air having made him feel quite parched. The girls sat down too, as did Ularean and Talari, a momentary silence descending on the group with no one sure where to begin.

“You may consider us an open book, JohnBlake,” Ularean finally said, his words reinforced by nods from the rest of the High Council. “Ask us whatever you wish, we will answer honestly and to the best of our ability.”

“Thank you, Ularean,” John said, smiling at him in gratitude. He leaned forward in anticipation and continued, “If it’s alright with you, let’s start with the Legacy. You obviously rebuilt a wrecked Progenitor vessel, but where the hell did you find it?”

“Our ancestors recovered the remains of the Progenitor vessel nearly nine-thousand years ago,” Ularean explained. “It had been destroyed in a cataclysmic battle.”

None of the Ashanath High Council moved, but a holographic map suddenly appeared in the centre of the room. It was an empire map and clearly showed the existing boundaries of the various empires in this section of the galaxy. A red hexagon began to blink towards the top of the map, very close to the border between the Terran Federation and the Trankaran Republic.

“That’s the Zeta-Pegasus system,” Alyssa said thoughtfully. She sat bolt upright in her chair and gasped, “Wait! You found the Legacy in the Niryean Rift?!”

“That is correct. It was discovered on the outer reaches of the system,” Ularean replied with a slight nod.

Dana glanced at Rachel in confusion, but her girlfriend gave her an equally blank look in return, so the redhead asked, “Err, what’s the Near-Ian Rift?”

John grinned at her and said, “I can’t believe you’ve never heard of the Niryean Rift! The place is legendary amongst spacers!”

She pointed to herself and replied, “Asteroid-orphan out on the Rim, remember? I’ve never even heard of it!”

“Shipping’s been going missing there for centuries, Sparks,” John explained, giving her an apologetic smile. “The system is densely packed with rich asteroid belts and it sometimes draws in miners bold or crazy enough to try mining there. Sometimes they come back rich men, sometimes they don’t...”

“With no wreckage ever found... It’s as though their ships disappeared without a trace!” Alyssa elaborated in a theatrically spooky voice. She abruptly went quiet, lost in her thoughts.

John turned to look at her curiously and asked, “What’s on your mind, beautiful?”

Alyssa smiled at him, before she glancing at the Senior Councillor and asked politely, “Ularean, can you zoom into the Zeta-Pegasus system and mark where you discovered the Legacy, please.”

Ularean didn’t reply, but without making so much as a twitch, the map zoomed in to the Zeta-Pegasus system. The star at its centre was a blue giant, casting its cool light over the multitude of asteroid belts in the system. The patterns of the dense asteroid belts were strange, forming looping spirals quite unlike any that John had seen before. On the extreme outer edge of the system, a red hexagonal mark appeared, highlighting where the Legacy had been found.

“Holy shit...” Alyssa cursed under her breath. Leaping from her chair – an impressive feat in four inch heels – she waved excitedly at the map, spinning her slender hand in a counter-clockwise motion. “Can you wind this back, Ularean?”

He tilted his head slightly to one side, looking at her intently as he said, “I must apologise, Alyssa, I’m not entirely certain what you mean. Could you elaborate, please?”

“No problem, I wasn’t being clear,” she said, giving him an apologetic smile. “If you can, I’d like you to project how this system would look ten thousand years ago. Rotate the asteroid belts back counter-clockwise, taking into account the drift that would occur from the different lengths in orbital paths from the star.”

“It might take a minute or two to process the calculations and model our predictions...” he replied, issuing the appropriate telepathic orders to begin work immediately.

“That’s fine,” she said with a quick nod, before walking closer to the map to take a closer look.

John watched her in bemusement, wondering exactly what she’d seen that had got her so excited. In just over a minute the Ashanath’s calculations were complete and the image in the map began to revolve backwards. It started off slowly, but he gradually increased the speed, sending the asteroid belts spinning around the sun like hands on a clock face. As Ularean wound back the centuries, the asteroid belts began to straighten out, forming long neat lines rather than the swirls that had been there before.

“Stop!” Alyssa suddenly blurted out. “That’s a bit too much, wind it forward now for four seconds at the same pace.”

Ularean did as he was bid, moving the asteroid belts forward now, clockwise around the blue star.

“Freeze!” the blonde exclaimed, before turning around to beam at John in delight. “I knew it!”

John slowly rose to his feet and approached the map, gazing at the Zeta-Pegasus system. All the asteroid belts were laid out in rigid lines now, all pointing directly towards a single point of focus to the lower right of the map. The streams of rock swept away from seven distinct points around the map, all at different orbital paths around the star.

“They were all planets,” he marvelled, glancing at Alyssa in amazement.

Dana nodded and blurted out, “Yeah! Until something blasted the shit out of them and wasted the entire fucking system!”

“How remarkable,” Ularean murmured, gazing at the map in awe. Several members of the High Council rose from their seats and were now staring intently at the image.

“What kind of weapon could do that?!” Calara whispered, giving John a look of consternation.

Shaking her head, Alyssa replied in a sombre voice, “I don’t think a weapon did this. Or at least not a conventional one.” She glanced at Dana, nodding as she added, “Yeah, that’s what I was thinking too.”

“Can you share with the rest of the class?” Rachel asked, nudging Dana with a playful elbow.

“It’s just a guess, but it all fits,” the redhead said, tapping her chin thoughtfully. She shared a look with Alyssa before continuing, “Mael’nerak must have sabotaged his wormhole generator, or at least done something to disrupt the fabric of space-time. The force from the explosion destroyed the planets in Zeta-Pegasus, leaving behind asteroid belts in their place.”

“The remains of his ship must have been carried out here by the blastwave,” Alyssa explained, tracing the path from the centre of the explosion to the point where the Ashanath had discovered the Legacy. “It would explain why that area of space is so unstable, with miners getting sucked into randomly spawning wormholes and then vanishing.”

Tashana looked strangely ambivalent as she murmured, “At least we know what happened to Mael’nerak now. He sacrificed himself to defeat the other Progenitor and must have destroyed the rest of their fleets in the process. That’s why he was never able to return to Valada.”

“It looks that way,” John agreed, nodding slowly as he considered Alyssa’s hypothesis.

“The system was the site of a vast starship graveyard,” Ularean clarified, his eerie voice sending shivers up John’s spine. “I have read the records and the Legacy was the only partly salvageable vessel, every other ship was smashed beyond any hope of recovery. Our ancestors gathered what they could of the derelict Progenitor vessel and towed it back to Ashana.”

“I wonder why the Maliri never found it?” John pondered curiously, watching as the High Councillors returned to their seats.

“From the war maps we saw in Valada’s video archive, Zeta-Pegasus was deep amongst the systems that the other Progenitor had conquered,” Alyssa said thoughtfully. “Maybe it was too deep in enemy territory?”

Shaking his head, John replied, “The other Progenitor’s invasion had been halted, presumably by his death. If Mael’nerak destroyed the bulk of his opponent’s fleet as well, there would’ve been nothing to stop the Maliri from recovering the wreck.”

Tashana glanced his way and said confidently, “The Maliri only had a handful of ships left after the war as Mael’nerak took his fleets of Thralls with him. In the recording, Valada said that she recalled all her people and then rebuilt their fleets. When they sealed themselves off from the Ashanath and the Trankarans, what used to be Mael’nerak’s territory contracted to the space where the Regency exists today.”

“Why didn’t the Trankarans find the Legacy?” John wondered, looking at the map. “Zeta-Pegasus looks like it’s right near the border with the Republic. This was thousands of years before the Terran Federation existed, so the Trankarans should have stumbled across it long before the Ashanath got there.”

Ularean had been waiting patiently while they discussed this amongst themselves. When John posed that question, the Senior Councillor spoke up once again in his whispering voice, “The wreck lay dormant for over a thousand years, before my ancestors extended the borders of the Ashanath Collective sufficiently far to encompass Zeta-Pegasus. The Trankarans possess a quite different mindset to Terrans. You are both a mostly benign people, but the Trankarans are much more conservative and reserved in their outlook and not inclined towards aggressive expansionism.”

John paused a moment and meeting Ularean’s black-eyed gaze, he asked quietly, “Why did the Ashanath Collective give away so much territory, Ularean? When humanity first developed space flight, the Ashanath had a huge tech advantage and you could have stopped us in our tracks. I’ve always wanted to know the reason.”

“It was hoped that humanity would mature as the centuries passed and grow out of their need to assert their territorial dominance. As it transpired, that has not come to pass, but we have been content to cede worlds and remain at peace,” Ularean explained in his eerie voice.

“Maintaining the peace is an admirable goal, but you’ve given away three-quarters of your territory!” John exclaimed, shaking his head in confusion.

Ularean paused for a moment, holding a silent telepathic conversation with the rest of the Council, before saying, “We had not colonised those worlds, so to lose them was no great loss. We are kindred peoples, JohnBlake, both created by the same Progenitor Master. It was far more important to maintain a united front with our energetic new neighbours, standing together against more hostile and outwardly malevolent species. The Terran Federation provides a strong buttress against the Kirrix and the Drakkar, who have become a much greater threat in recent years. Without the Federation’s continued support, the Ashanath Collective would have eventually fallen.”

“So you already knew your people were created by Mael’nerak,” John noted, giving the High Councillors a wry smile. “We only recently found out that he created Terrans as an experiment.”

“Please accept our apologies for not being forthcoming about our shared lineage when we first met with you,” Ularean explained. “The idea of a Progenitor here on Ashana was terrifying. We had no wish to become slaves once again.”

“We had to find out about the origins of humanity the hard way,” John explained, his tone grim. “Mael’nerak built an AI called Nexus and established it as the caretaker over his experiments on Terra. He set Nexus up with a Quantum Annihilator buried in the moon, just in case he wanted to bring it all to an abrupt end. It seems that Mael’nerak was slain before he finished his experiments.”

“Word reached us of your confrontation with the Rogue AI,” Ularean confirmed with a brief nod. “When our distant ancestors spread out from Ashana to explore nearby worlds, they immediately recognised humanity as a distantly related species to our own. Please believe me that we had no idea such a threat was looming over Terra. Had my people known, they would have taken steps to eliminate that danger before humanity first travelled amongst the stars.”

Leaning forward in his chair, John asked, “Do you know the real reason behind Mael’nerak’s experimentation with Terrans?” Or why he created the Ashanath?”

“We do not know the background to your species, but the purpose behind our own creation is known to us,” Ularean answered quietly. “Mael’nerak was active amongst the first several generations of the Ashanath, spending centuries living on our homeworld and training my people.”

“Training them?” John asked intently. “To do what?”

“He taught them how to harness their psychic potential,” Ularean murmured, while the rest of the High Council stared at John with their huge black eyes.

“Do you have any idea why Mael’nerak would create an entire species of psychic creatures?” John asked, quite fascinated at the thought.

“Mael’nerak was quite open with what he wished to accomplish,” the Senior Councillor explained. ”The Ashanath were created as an experiment in collective psychic consciousness.”

“Your telepathic Command Web!” Alyssa exclaimed, eyes widening in surprise.

Ularean turned to her and bowed as he replied, “That is correct, Alyssa. Your presence there made quite the impact, thank you for providing leadership to our fleet while the High Council was incapacitated.”

She grinned at him and said, “You can thank Calara for that, I was just passing on her orders.”

John stayed silent while Ularean inclined his head in gratitude to the Latina, frowning as he mulled over the Senior Councillor’s revelations.

Correctly guessing the reason for John’s pensive expression, Ularean said, “As to Mael’nerak’s true motives, I am afraid he never shared them with my people. He taught the Ashanath how to form thought-clusters and create Astral sub-planes, but never explained why he did so.”

“What about the monoliths you showed us?” Jade asked, her face alight with curiosity. “Is there anything more you can tell us about those now?”

Councillor Talari rose from his chair and replied, “Please accept my most sincere apologies. I am afraid I deceived you regarding the origins of the stone monoliths. When you arrived on Ashana, it was apparent that JohnBlake had not yet subjugated the Maliri, so I-“

“I still haven’t and I don’t intend to either,” John said firmly, glancing towards Irillith and Tashana. “I’ve allied with the Maliri Matriarchs to stop them murdering each other, but I haven’t ‘subjugated’ them.”

Talari bowed to him and said quickly, “I am sorry for my poor turn of phrase. You have already proven on numerous occasions that your motivations are benign; I meant no offense.”

“That’s okay, sorry to interrupt you,” John replied, encouraging him to continue with a smile.

The High Councillor paused for a moment to collect his thoughts then continued his explanation, “The stone monoliths were not taken from the destroyed homeworlds of conquered species, but from the Gaia-classification world that your people call New Eden. The temple where they were discovered was a Thrall recruiting facility and the monoliths described the history of Mael’nerak’s various conquests. The surrounding Maliri settlements had been badly damaged by an orbital bombardment, which left the temple partially demolished.”

Tashana’s violet eyes sparkled with excitement as she exclaimed, “That sounds just like the Thrall facility I found in the Epsilon-Aquarii system!”

“I don’t remember ever hearing about ancient alien ruins on New Eden,” Rachel murmured, her brow wrinkling in confusion as she glanced at Sakura.

The Asian girl shook her head. “I don’t recall anyone mentioning them to me either. If there was anything like that on the planet, it was long-gone by the time my parents settled there.”

A second later, Rachel’s eyes widened as she suddenly blurted out, “The Ashanath must have destroyed them!”

“That depends on your perspective, but is essentially correct,” Talari said in his whispery voice. “When it became clear that humanity was on the cusp of interstellar flight, the ruins on New Eden were carefully excavated then brought back to Ashana seven hundred years ago. We removed all trace of Maliri settlements on the Gaia worlds that were eventually ceded to the Terran Federation.”

“Why would you do that?” Tashana asked, frowning in disapproval at the thought of tearing up an archaeological site in such a fashion.

Talari turned to look pointedly at the Maliri twins and replied, “If we had left clues as to the real nature of the Maliri, it would have not ended well for humanity.”

John let out a sigh. “Yeah, I see your point.”

Tashana’s lovely blue face became a mask of confusion as she admitted, “I’m afraid I don’t understand. Would you mind explaining, please?”

He smiled at Tashana and Irillith as he replied, “If you hadn’t realised already, Maliri women are stunningly beautiful.”

“The men are very handsome too!” Alyssa interjected with a playful grin. “Ceraden will have women throwing themselves at him if he ever decides to indulge his curiosity about Terran girls!”

“I’ll have to take your word for that,” John said with a chuckle. His smile faded as he continued, “When humanity does eventually realise that there’s a species of gorgeous blue space elves on their doorstep, things will probably get ugly very quickly. If they find out that the women outnumber the men twenty-to-one, there’ll be a flood of men rushing the border.”

Irillith shook her head and replied, “What about the ‘Warning’? Surely Terrans wouldn’t be so foolish as to risk certain death by invading Maliri Space!”

“Slavers, pirates, the desperate, they’d all still take the risk if the reward was high enough for capturing Maliri women. The Maliri would respond by annihilating any ship that trespassed in their territory, which would quickly ratchet up the tensions between the two empires,” John explained quietly.

“Maybe it would be better if we didn’t attend the award ceremony after all,” Tashana suggested, looking alarmed.

“It might be worth thinking twice about it,” John was forced to reluctantly agree.

Jade had been listening to the conversation with a pensive expression on her face. She finally looked at Talari and asked mournfully, “Why did the Ashanath give Lenarra to the Terran Federation if you knew humanity would react that way to exotic female aliens? By handing over my planet, you doomed the Nymphs to extinction!”

“That decision was made several centuries ago, long before any of us were born,” Ularean replied, although his voice sounded remorseful despite the neutral tones of his voice modulator. “The High Council at the time were intent on appeasing Terran demands and averting any chance of war. I am afraid they did not stop to consider the ramifications for your species.”

Jade nodded her understanding, her emerald eyes heavy with grief for her lost Lenarran sisters. Calara was sitting next to her and she reached out to stroke the Nymph’s arm sympathetically. Alyssa simply got up and walked over to kneel at Jade’s side, then pulled her into a comforting hug.

John gave Jade a concerned look, then turned to ask Ularean, “Can you tell us any more about Nymphs? We know they’re another of Mael’nerak’s creations, but that’s all we’ve been able to discover so far.”

“I wish that I could give you the answers you seek, but I am afraid I do not know,” the Senior Councillor replied sorrowfully.

The room went quiet, the silence broken by Alyssa whispering comforting words to Jade. Eventually the Nymph sat back with a sad look on her face, but she gave John a smile and gestured for him to continue. He nodded, then turned back to look at the High Council.

John met Ularean’s black-eyed stare and said, “I think that covers pretty much everything I wanted to discuss about the past. Thank you for being so forthcoming.”

“You are welcome, JohnBlake,” Ularean replied, giving him a respectful bow.

“Which brings us to the present,” John said with a smile. “There’s several items we definitely need to discuss.”

“I had a few questions about the Legacy if you don’t mind me butting in?” Dana asked, sitting upright in her chair.

Shaking his head in amusement, John waved for her to proceed. “It’s fine by me, ask whatever you want.”

She smiled at him gratefully, then looked at the High Council. “Do you guys have the plans for the Legacy handy? I’d like to talk them through with you, if that’s okay?”

Ularean turned to look at a Councillor to his right and replied, “Councillor Rathus was responsible for overseeing the final stages of the Legacy’s construction.”

Rathus nodded and said in a quiet but authoritative voice, “The Legacy was carefully studied and researched, before gradually being rebuilt over the centuries, but there was a considerable degree of reluctance to complete the project. Our ancestors worried that the use of such a powerful Progenitor artefact would draw undesired attention to the Ashanath, so it was kept secret and hidden in an underground facility. When JohnBlake appeared on our homeworld, amidst sightings of another active Progenitor, it was deemed prudent to take steps to finish construction of the vessel.”

The map of the Zeta-Pegasus system vanished before being replaced by detailed schematics of the huge silver and black ship. They could see the small area towards the rear of the ship that was originally part of Mael’nerak’s vessel.

Dana grimaced at the mostly silver ship, the design looking irritatingly discordant to her. “How did you come up with the design?” she asked, doing her best to keep her disapproval from her face.

“There were depictions of the Progenitor’s ship in the material that was retrieved from New Eden,“ Rathus explained, gesturing to the angular and threatening shape of the design. “It was hoped that by mimicking the appearance of a Progenitor vessel, opponents would be intimidated into avoiding a confrontation with us.”

“And if that failed, you’d just blast them with the Quantum Flux Cannon you strapped to the front?” Dana asked with a grin.

Rathus nodded and replied, “That is correct.”

She hesitated then rose to her feet, walking over to the schematic floating in the centre of the room. Seeing the Legacy like this emphasised how wrong it all looked to her and she pointed to the massive cannon while saying quietly, “This is only an auxiliary weapon. It should be back here, on the upper aft hardpoint.”

Rathus blinked rapidly at her in shock, his eyelids fluttering as he struggled to focus. “You are correct, it was originally positioned as you describe. This was the only weapon that was salvaged with the derelict and was vastly more powerful than any weapon we possessed, so it was moved to form the Legacy’s primary gun.”

“Did you make schematics for the Quantum Flux Cannon?” Dana asked hopefully. She frowned as she added, “I’d love a look at the original weapon, but it looked like the Drakkar blew the crap out of it with that torpedo strike.”

Rathus slowly shook his head as he replied, “We were never able to understand how the technology worked and were wary of dismantling it for fear of being unable to reassemble such a potent weapon.”

“Fuck...” Dana swore, shoulders slumping in frustration.

“So the Quantum Flux Cannon is irretrievable then?” Calara asked, sounding profoundly disappointed. “We’ve got no way of rebuilding it?”

“I’m afraid that is correct,” Rathus said, nodding in confirmation. “All we have are scans of the weapon taken during our research, but they lack sufficient detail to allow anyone to reconstruct such a complex piece of technology.”

John gestured towards the holographic image of the Legacy and said, “Can you show us the scans anyway? It might still be interesting to see them.”

The image of the silver spacecraft disappeared a moment later and a bewilderingly complex set of images appeared in its place. The scans formed a confusing three-dimensional shape, with the exterior of the Quantum Flux Cannon sharp and distinct, while the interior was hazy and poorly defined. John threw a brief glance at the weapon and found it predictably mystifying, before his eyes quickly returned to Dana. She let out a groan of frustration, then swayed slightly as she rubbed at her temples.

He’d been hoping for just that kind of reaction and he leapt from his chair, then darted over to support her in his arms. “Are you alright?” he asked with concern.

Dana grinned at him and said in a low voice, “Oh, yeah...”

He returned her grin, knowing exactly what had just happened.

Leaning into him, the redhead pressed her lips to his ear and added, “If we’re going to tease these schematics out of my mind, you’re going to have to keep me stuffed full of cum. It couldn’t have worked out any better!”

He winked at her and said, “I’m looking forward to helping you with your research.”

She giggled and nodded eagerly, before turning back to look at Councillor Rathus. He had a look of confusion on his normally impassive face, startled by her blissfully happy reaction to what had been such terrible news.

“Rathus, can you show me the rest of the Legacy? But just the Progenitor bits this time, without all the silver shi-...” Dana caught herself just in time, then finished with a bright smile, “Just an image of the original pieces you recovered would be awesome!”

“We have detailed deck plans of the Progenitor section that was recovered,” Rathus confirmed, turning to look at the holographic image as it changed.

Without the Ashanath’s reconstruction efforts getting in the way, John found it fascinating to see what had actually survived the cataclysmic event that had destroyed the rest of Mael’nerak’s ship. The rear of the vessel had been torn away, as had the front half, leaving an elongated wedge-shaped section approximately three-hundred-metres long. The port side showed heavier damage than the starboard with almost none of the external armour still intact on the left of the ship. The starboard side still retained a decent strip of black armour plating, which the Ashanath had moulded into the external hull of the Legacy.

“The hull must have shielded the Quantum Flux Cannon from the blast,” Dana murmured, her delicate finger tracing a section towards the upper-rear of the ship. “That’s where the cannon was originally mounted.”

She closed her eyes for a moment and pictured the schematics for the Progenitor’s black ship in her mind. One of the Power Core Chambers had survived as had the Tachyon Drive Room, which was how the Ashanath had been able to reverse-engineer both pieces of Progenitor technology - or at least, they’d been able to create pale imitations of the original tech. However, Dana already had schematics for those locked away in her mind, so they were of no further interest. She opened her eyes again, studying the areas of the ship they needed to look at in more detail.

Turning to look at John, she said, confidently, “There might be some other gems hidden away there. I know where we should start looking when we have a stroll around the Legacy.”

He glanced at Ularean and said, “We’ll go up and take a look after this meeting, as long as that’s still alright?”

The Senior Councillor nodded as he said, “You may explore the vessel at your leisure, JohnBlake. We will attempt repairs at some point in the future, but with the amount of damage the Legacy has sustained, such efforts will have to wait. It is in no condition to attempt an atmospheric re-entry at this time.”

“That reminds me, thanks for gathering the Drakkar gear for us,” John said with a grateful smile. Throwing a pointed glance at the Maliri twins, he added, “We acquired some samples of it from the marines that attempted to board the ship, but it wasn’t in good shape. The Drakkar were met with a robust defence.”

Irillith grinned at him, but Tashana’s smile was only half-hearted, the girl distracted by some troubling thoughts. He reminded himself to speak to her at the earliest opportunity and find out exactly what was bothering her.

“We were happy to gather the equipment for you, JohnBlake,” Ularean replied. “We should be the ones thanking you for letting us keep the rest for our own research purposes.”

“You’re welcome,” John said magnanimously.

“As for the other favour you requested of us, we will begin salvaging all the Onyxium from the wrecks as soon as the recovery operation is complete,” Ularean stated, glancing at Rathus who nodded his agreement.

“We should be able to acquire a considerable volume of Onyxium from the ruins of the Drakkar wrecks,” Rathus said in his hushed, eerie voice. “It might take a few weeks before we can complete the smelting process, separating it from the steel alloy the Drakkar use, but we should amass a sizeable amount for you to collect. Initial estimates are very promising, despite the level of damage you inflicted on the majority of their vessels.”

John shook his head and replied, “We’re already carrying more than enough Onyxium for what we need, right Dana?”

“Yeah, we’ve got tons of the stuff. We only need a relatively small amount to form the lattice in crystal Alyssium,” the redhead confirmed.

“Then why did you ask us to salvage it for you?” Rathus asked in confusion.

John looked around the council and said quietly, “Correct me if I’m wrong, but it looks to me like you’ve lost almost all your fleet assets? I doubt you’ve got enough ships to adequately patrol your borders, much less repel any further Drakkar aggression should they launch another attack.”

Ularean visibly slumped as he replied, “You are not incorrect in your assessment, JohnBlake. Our fleets have been devastated by the Drakkar.”

Nodding sombrely, John leaned forward and said, “What I propose is this: I’ll speak to the Maliri Matriarchs and request that they send a sizeable fleet to protect the Ashanath Collective. They’ll be able to keep you safe while you rebuild your forces.”

Ularean blinked at him in surprise and said, “They would do this for us?”

\*That’s not a problem is it, Edraele?\* John asked, reaching out to his Maliri Matriarch.

\*Of course not, John. I will gather and dispatch a fleet as soon as the refit process is complete. They should arrive at the Ashanath Collective in sixteen days,\* she replied, sounding very relaxed in a well-sated kind of way.

Focusing on Ularean again, John nodded and said, “They’ll send a fleet as soon as they’re able to. You can expect them in just over two weeks.”

“We’re profoundly grateful,” Ularean murmured, sounding stunned at this unsolicited offer of protection. The blinking from the rest of the Council emphasised their equal astonishment at John’s tremendous offer of help. That John was also clearly in direct telepathic contact with the Maliri Matriarchs didn’t escape their attention either.

He smiled at the Ashanath, then turned to look at Dana and asked, “If you take a look at the Ashanath Psi-shapers, do you reckon you could upgrade them?”

She grinned at him and replied, “Yeah, that won’t be a problem at all. I studied the tech when I built the Psi-scanner and I’ve already come up with a few ways to improve it.”

“Great!” John exclaimed enthusiastically. He glanced at the High Council and added, “I need the Psi-shaper to be powerful enough to give Ashanath Engineers the boost they need to shape crystal Alyssium. I’m not expecting quad-shaping or anything like that, but just the basic plating should still be a huge upgrade.”

Dana’s blue eyes widened at the thought, before she quickly nodded. “Yep, that’ll be easy. I can whip up the schematics for an upgraded Psi-shaper in twenty minutes.”

Meeting Ularean’s startled gaze, John said, “I’d like you to start upgrading all the Psi-shapers in your dockyard as soon as Dana gives you the schematics for them. You’ll be able to use them to make much stronger Etherium for when you start repairs to your fleet. Then after the Maliri arrive in a couple of weeks, I’d like you to assist them with replating all their ships in crystal Alyssium armour. I’ll ask the Maliri to bring all the rest of the materials you’ll need, so you’ll be able to start work immediately.”

“We would be glad to assist you and the Maliri,” Ularean said with a nod. “To know that such powerful allies will be protecting us is a tremendous relief.”

John smiled at them and said, “Ultimately, I want you to be able to defend yourselves, but rebuilding your forces will take quite some time.” He frowned as he added, “I think you should consider a new doctrine in ship design - your current ships are far too reliant on energy weapons. We can provide you new technology for ordnance based weaponry, as well as give you blueprints for improved engines, heatsinks, and enhanced scanners. I’d strongly recommend you incorporate all that into the next generation of vessels you start constructing.”

Ularean’s small mouth opened in shock, the rest of the High Council sharing a similar reaction. When he was able to speak again, he exclaimed, “Your generosity is overwhelming, JohnBlake!”

“We’re allies, Ularean, we need to support each other,” John said quietly. “I want to see your people strong and well protected, and you’ll need to be if you’re going to stand with me and the Maliri against the coming storm. I’m more convinced than ever that the Progenitor who’s been stirring up trouble is intent on invasion. The Drakkar were his puppets before and it seems obvious he was behind their assault on Ashana. If he’s tried to wipe out the Ashanath once, there’s no reason he won’t do so again, but leading a fleet of Thralls next time.”

There was a deathly quiet in the room, before the High Council all bowed towards him as one.

“The Ashanath Collective will fight at your side, JohnBlake,” Ularean declared. “You can count on us to support you when the time comes.”

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When the meeting ended, the group split up, with Sakura accompanying Rachel to the medical facility to help treat the Ashanath wounded. John gave them both a kiss goodbye and a warning to Rachel not to overdo it, before falling into step with the Maliri girls as they made their way back to the ship. They were both quiet, having had a lot to think about after the meeting with the Ashanath.

“Are you girls okay?” he asked, slipping his arm around them both as they stepped into the grav-tube.

They both turned around to smile at him, with John pulling them in for a warm hug as they floated in the long tunnel.

“I’m glad we found out what happened to Mael’nerak,” Irillith said, as they descended in the gravity field. She then added wistfully, “I was just thinking how sad it was that Valada never found out what really happened to him; the way he sacrificed himself to protect her and the rest of the Maliri.”

Tashana nodded and continued, “It’s tragic that she spent the rest of her life never knowing that he actually cut off their connection because he loved her, not because he was rejecting her.”

“Ultimately, he saved both of you as well,” John said with a smile. “For that, I’ll always be grateful to him.”

They both snuggled in closer at that, resting their heads on his shoulders. John kept his arms around the two girls as they floated down in the lift, just enjoying the physical intimacy of the three-way hug.

Tashana glanced up at him and said quietly, “You said before that you’re planning on speaking to each of us after the battle. There were a couple of things I wanted to discuss with you too, if that’s alright?”

John nodded and said, “Of course, but I’m afraid you’ll have to wait a little while before I get back to the ship. I’m planning on flying to the Legacy with Dana to see if she can find anything interesting. We can speak as soon as I return.”

“That would be wonderful, thank you,” she replied, giving him a grateful smile. Tashana glanced at her sister and they shared a look before she continued, “Irillith wasn’t sure if you were going to see us individually or as a pair.”

He turned to look at the other Maliri girl and found her watching him with an eyebrow raised, the slight hint of a smile on her lips. He couldn’t help flushing at the knowing look she gave him and quickly coughed to cover his embarrassment.

Hugging them closer, John said honestly, “I’m not going to lie, I love the fact that you’re twins, but I don’t want to start treating you differently to the rest of the girls. It’s important that I give each of you the full attention you deserve. It wouldn’t be fair to do otherwise.”

They smiled at him happily, then darted a quick glance at each other and leaned in to plant a tender kiss on each of his cheeks. “It would be selfish not to share sometimes,” Tashana whispered, her lips against his right ear, her voice full of promise. Her sister’s breath tickled his left as Irillith added, “We both know what you really want to see... and be a part of.”

Unfortunately, this intriguing conversation was prematurely ended as they reached the bottom of the grav-tube and reoriented themselves. John stared at them both in awe as they peeled away from him and glided across the docking bay hand-in-hand, turning to give him a coy look over their shoulders.

Alyssa slipped her arm around his waist as she stepped out onto the deck and stopped to admire the view. \*Please let me watch your first proper threesome with them,\* she asked him breathlessly. \*I won’t join in, but to see you ride one sister after another... Oh. My. God...\*

He grinned at her and said, \*That sounds like a perfectly reasonable request to me, XO.\*

Dana bounced past him, a spring in her step despite the high heels she was wearing so effortlessly. “I’ll go draw up the schematics for the improved Psi-shaper!” she called out to him over her shoulder. “I’ll be done in about twenty minutes, then we can head off!”

“Alright, I’ll meet you in the Raptor,” he called back. “We better get geared up so you can take a look at the outer hull.”

The redhead gave him a thumbs-up while walking swiftly back towards the Invictus. The rest of the girls drifted by at a more leisurely pace and John held out a hand to catch Jade’s arm.

The Nymph smiled at him and pre-empted his request by saying, “I’ll just get changed out of this suit, then I’ll meet you in the Hangar.”

“Thanks, honey,” he said with an appreciative smile.

“I’m happy to ferry you over there,” Alyssa offered, glancing up at him with her big blue eyes.

He shook his head and replied, “I don’t think that’s wise, beautiful. We’ll be wandering around in all the old Progenitor sections of the ship, so I don’t want to expose you to those psychic echoes again, not after what happened last time.”

Alyssa shivered at the thought, then nodded her agreement. “I could always just stay with the Raptor while you’re aboard the Legacy,” she suggested hopefully.

He laughed, turning to put his arms around her and asked, “Why so eager to come along? I know you’d get bored sitting around in the gunship waiting for us, you’ve got too active a mind.”

“Can’t a girl just want to be with the man she loves?” she asked, batting her long eyelashes at him.

John grinned at her and nodded. “Sure, but I know you far too well to fall for that one.”

Alyssa grimaced and turned around to gesture in annoyance at the Invictus with its battle damaged armour plating. “That needs fixing. If I stick around here, I’m going to end up having to do it,” she admitted grudgingly.

He ran his fingers through her long golden hair and said, “There’s no desperate rush to get it repaired and you’ve done more than your fair share of psychic shaping in the past. I don’t want you to do anything you really hate - I love you far too much for that - so just relax with Calara this afternoon and I’ll work on it when I get back. Besides, I need the practice. Eventually I want to get good enough at psychic shaping that you’ll never have to look at another armour plate again.”

She let out a breathy moan, biting her lip as she writhed against him. Her eyes twinkled as she gasped, “I don’t think you’ve ever said anything so sexy before! Keep going, I’m nearly there!”

John laughed heartily at her joke and she grinned mischievously, delighted to have given him a good chuckle. “Enjoy your afternoon, beautiful,” he said with a smile, releasing her from his arms. “I’ll look forward to seeing you when I get back.”

Alyssa paused for a second, giving him a tender kiss before stepping away. “Don’t worry about the armour, I’ll be a good girl and fix it for you while you’re away,” she said with a loving smile.

He offered her his hand as they walked back to the ship and said, “Good girls get rewarded. Just let me know what naughty treat you’ve got in mind and we’ll have some fun tonight.”

“Actually, I’ve got something exciting in mind. I’ll have a chat with Calara and see if she’s up for it!” she replied, eyes sparkling with lust now, rather than mischief.

John gave her a brief kiss goodbye when he reached the ship, leaving Alyssa to her happy thoughts. He smiled to himself as he strode towards the grav-tube, wondering what she had in mind. After using the sluggish Ashanath anti-gravity fields, the grav-tube on the Invictus felt wonderfully quick and he thanked his lucky stars once again for finding Dana. He was about to walk back to his bedroom to change out of his suit, but he decided to stay in the grav-tube instead, floating up to the Command Deck.

Faye was there of course and the purple girl looked tremendously relieved when she saw him again, giving him a cheerful wave. He returned it with a smile, then jogged across to his Ready Room, conscious that he didn’t have much time before he was scheduled to fly to the Legacy aboard the Raptor. The moment he sat down in the big leather chair behind his desk, he tapped a button on the console, bringing up the comm interface. Scrolling half way down his list of contacts, he swiped his hand across the relevant name, then eased back in his chair while he waited for the call to go through.

After a short wait, a very familiar face appeared as a holographic image before him. The older man’s uniform was neatly pressed and his bushy grey moustache matched the flecks in his salt and pepper hair.

“John! It’s great to see you, thanks for calling!” Vice Admiral Harris exclaimed, the broad grin on his face making his moustache lift with his upper lip.

John marvelled at the change in his old friend. The stress he’d been under last time had obviously eased, his worries melting away along with it. “You look ten years younger, Charles!” he exclaimed in surprise. “What’s your secret? Have you finally decided to retire and follow in my footsteps?”

“Was I really looking that haggard?” Charles asked, chuckling in response. He shook his head and replied, “After your handiwork at the Battle of Regulus, the Kintark war has basically ground to a halt! Olympus had to accommodate a sudden rush of repairs to fix all the ships damaged in the battle, but we’ve broken the back of that now and at least half those ships have returned to service.”

“So it’s been quiet since then?” John asked with interest.

Charles nodded, grinning at him as he replied, “In the last three weeks, not a single ship’s come back for repairs from the Dragon March! The truce is holding, so maybe things can finally calm down again.”

“That’s really great news,” John said with a smile, pleased for his old friend. He didn’t say anything, but he was surprised at how much Charles had been affected by the stress of the ongoing conflict with the Kintark.

\*Your friend rose through the ranks commanding a starship,\* Edraele thought to him quietly. \*A man of action can have trouble adjusting to the more abstract nature of senior command. I’ve seen it before with newly promoted Fleet Commanders; they want nothing more than to be back in command of a battleship, actively involved in the thrill of combat. It can be frustrating for them until they learn to adjust, but some never do.\*

Before John could reply to her, Charles asked, “So to what do I owe the honour of this call from the ‘Lion of the Federation’? I hope you aren’t calling to say you can’t make the award ceremony, Admiral Devereux would be distraught!”

“Don’t worry, we’ll be there,” John said with a grin. “Just to give you fair warning though, I’ve expanded the crew since the last ceremony.”

Charles laughed at that, shaking his head in amusement. “Let me guess, another stunningly beautiful young woman? I hope you didn’t poach her from the TF military; we’ve had words about that before!”

John shook his head and smiled self-consciously. “Don’t worry, the new girls aren’t from the service, but my crew is up to nine now.”

“Nine!” Charles blurted out, gaping at him in astonishment. “Now I know I’ve left retirement far too late! The thought of keeping nine women entertained sounds positively terrifying!”

“Sorry for the short notice, but I’ll be able to give you an exact headcount tomorrow,” John said with a smile, choosing not to comment. “I know one of them definitely won’t be able to attend and I’m not sure about two others.”

Over his shock now, the Vice-Admiral gave him an easy-going shrug. “An hour or two’s notice will be fine, but thanks for the warning.” His shrewd, hawk-like eyes narrowed as he added, “You didn’t just call me to brag about how many gorgeous young women you’re fraternising with, did you?”

Shaking his head, John admitted, “No, you’re right, I’ve got something important I need to discuss with you. I want to acquire some technology when we arrive at Olympus station. I know that by now, the R&D boys will have been all over the Kintark ships we captured at the Battle of Regulus. We’re after heatsinks and not just the generic Kintark variety, but the state-of-the-art gear in their elite ships. Have you found anything along those lines?”

Suddenly cagey now, Charles eased back in his chair and replied, “If such devices had been discovered, their existence would be considered highly classified. Radically advanced heatsinks could prove a game-changer should the Kintark initiate hostilities again. If we’d found any, of course.”

“Of course,” John agreed with a wolfish grin.

Charles hesitated for a moment, then said apologetically, “My hands are tied on this one, John. I know you’re extremely wealthy now, but I’m afraid credits won’t be enough, no matter how many you offered.”

John raised an eyebrow and said, “I’ll decline to mention that the Kintark were only captured after my intervention, because mentioning that would obviously be in poor taste.”

Giving him a look of regret, Charles put his wrists together to mime having his hands tied, and said, “Obviously.”

Leaning forward in his seat John said, “Actually, I wasn’t intending on buying that technology, I wanted to make a tech trade.”

“Really?” Charles asked, his interest suddenly piqued. “What are you offering in exchange?”

John grinned at him and replied, “Let’s just say that if you can get permission to start negotiations, I’ll make the deal so sweet you’ll be begging me to take those heatsinks off your hands. Trust me, what I’m offering will be worth it.”

Charles gave him a huge smile, his eyes gleaming acquisitively. After a moment, a look of confusion crossed his face and he asked, “Why come to me and not go directly to Devereux? I know you two are on friendly terms - she can’t wait to see you at the ceremony.”

Giving his friend a warm smile, John replied, “Just looking out for an old comrade-in-arms. Tell Lynette that I’ll only broker the deal through you, if you think that’ll help your career.”

“You’re not going to give me any clues as to what you’re offering, are you?” the older man asked, his eyes crinkling as he smiled.

“Let’s just say I’m looking forward to surprising you,” John replied, winking at him playfully.

Charles chuckled, then relaxed in his chair. “I’ll see what I can arrange. Thanks John, I really appreciate this.”

“I still owe you for selling me the Invictus,” John said with a laugh. “We’ll consider ourselves square after that.”

“You know we already were,” Charles said quietly, giving him a grateful smile.

John returned his smile and said, “It’s been great to speak to you again, but I better run. Let’s meet up for a drink before the ceremony and we can sort out the tech trade then.”

“I’ve got a wonderful bottle of whiskey with your name on it,” Charles said and the two men exchanged salutes before they closed the call.

\*Why go to all the theatrics of a trade deal if you were already planning to give the Terran Federation a suite of new technologies?\* Edraele asked, as John rose from his seat and began making his way to the Bridge. \*I’m sure Irillith would be able to acquire the Kintark heatsink technology for you from their data archives in a relatively short amount of time.\*

\*I suppose I just miss the haggling,\* John said with a smile, having thoroughly enjoyed his conversation with Charles.

He greeted Faye with a grin, then stepped into the grav-tube to go and get ready for his return to the Legacy.

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It came as a surprise when Senior Councillor Ularean himself announced that he’d be guiding Rachel and Sakura to Medical Centre. The two girls followed him as he guided them from the council chamber on the short walk to their destination. The hospital itself was a huge building that showed no outward signs as to its true purpose, looking more like some kind of busy starport than a medical building. There was a flurry of activity above the facility, with a steady flow of small silver discs landing somewhere up on the roof.

Rachel paused to watch them for a moment, then asked, “What are all those ships, Ularean? Are they medical transports?”

“That is correct, RachelBlake,” Ularean replied, halting politely as he waited for her. “They are ferrying wounded from the fleet to this hospital.

She nodded then continued walking, falling into step beside him. “How many wounded are being treated here?” she asked, as Ularean led them though the broad entranceway into the building.

“The latest count has exceeded nine-thousand but more are arriving by the hour,” the Senior Councillor explained in his eerie voice.

Sakura couldn’t help noting that security seemed surprisingly light, only spotting a couple of guards as she followed Ularean through spotlessly clean silver corridors deeper into the hospital. She felt a flicker of a memory, but managed to suppress it by concentrating intently and not letting it overwhelm her conscious mind. The surge faded as quickly as it arose and she relaxed once more, letting out a shuddering breath as she trailed after her two companions.

\*Are you alright, lovely girl?\* Alyssa asked her sympathetically.

Sakura gave her a brief nod, before remembering that the telepathic blonde wouldn’t have been able to see it. \*Shinatobe plied her trade in hospitals on a number of occasions,\* she replied, her tone grim. \*Death already stalks the halls in these places, so when a client requested a more subtle approach to fulfilling a contract, it was easy to hide the real reason behind her victim’s untimely demise.\*

\*I’m not a fan of hospitals either,\* Alyssa agreed, an undercurrent of sorrow in her voice. \*All that pain and grief focused in one place...\* Her voice trailed off as she was lost in her own memories.

They passed through a big set of doors at the end of the corridor, leading into the vast open ward beyond. The Ashanath medical facility was quite unlike any that Rachel had been in before. Admittedly her experience had been strictly limited to Terran Federation hospitals, but the difference was quite remarkable considering the sheer volume of wounded being treated here. Had this been a Terran facility, the cries of pain from so many injured would have built into a heart-breaking chorus, but the thousands of Ashanath were almost completely silent.

An Ashanath medic wearing a long silver coat glided over to join them, a holographic display floating along at its side. The doctor bowed respectfully to Ularean, although the Grey’s eyes were fixed on his guests.

“This is Facilitator Makiri,” Ularean murmured, inclining his head towards to new arrival. “She is the Senior Medical Practitioner here and runs this hospital.”

Makiri turned to face Rachel, bowing to her respectfully as she did so. “You are most welcome at Ashana Medical Prime, RachelBlake,” She said, staring at the brunette with her huge black eyes. “I believe that I have you to thank for saving Ularean. You did so utilising psychic healing, no-less?”

Rachel smiled at the thin, bulbous headed alien. “I just did what I could to heal him. With the Ashanath’s psychic ability, such a thing must seem fairly mundane to you.”

“On the contrary,” Makiri replied, her whispering voice warbling with a strange note. “There are over a billion Ashanath in the Collective, but not one has manifested such an astounding gift.”

“None of you?!” Rachel blurted out, shocked at the thought.

Ularean shook his head, replying, “We are all telepaths. The more potent amongst us have developed additional abilities, but the kind of Psychic-healing that you performed on me is unheard of.”

She nodded thoughtfully, then turned to look at Makiri. “I’m not sure how much of that I’ll be able to do now, but I’m a great diagnostician. I’ll definitely be able to make a difference in identifying critical injuries that might have been missed on an initial assessment. I assume you’ve triaged all these patients?”

The Ashanath medic turned to point towards the closest Ashanath injured, who were lying on small silver cots, overlaid by detailed holographic body-scans. “Those bearing only light wounds are at this end of the ward, while the critically injured personnel are at the other.”

“Isn’t there a significant risk of infection in such a large open space?” Rachel asked, glancing over the hundreds of neat rows of silver cots.

“Each treatment area is separated by force-fields to limit the risk of contamination,” Makiri replied, stepping over to the closest cot. Her arm was ringed in a shimmering blue field as she waved it through the decontamination field.

Feeling greatly relieved, Rachel smiled at the Grey medic. “Let’s start with the most severely injured and work back from there,” she said, glancing across at the far side of the enormous room.

“Of course, please follow me,” Makiri replied, leading the small group along the broad aisle between the cots.

The injures became progressively worse as Rachel glanced at the wounded with a professional eye. Unlike the aftermath of the Battle of Regulus, the number of patients suffering from burns was relatively small with no raging plasma fires to scorch personnel. Instead the injuries ranged from oxygen deprivation due to life-support failure, through to broken limbs and various lacerations caused by explosions. When they reached the far side of the ward, the Ashanath there were barely clinging to life, with most in artificially induced comas. Some were showing terrible bite marks in their flesh, identifying them as survivors from the Legacy – the various crewmembers that John and the girls had personally saved from being eaten by the Drakkar.

Rachel walked over to the closest, seeing the horrible wound to his torso that looked more like a shark bite with double rows of teeth having torn into the poor creature’s body. She reached out a hand to brush his arm, getting a reading from his aura. Species: Ashanath – mortally wounded, critical injuries to intestines and kidneys. She knew exactly what she would need to do to fully heal him and if she merely applied her will to regenerate his ragged flesh, the Ashanath soldier would be able to get up and walk out of this room. He would be in a state of exhaustion but otherwise fully recovered.

She hesitated before she did so, glancing around at the hundreds of equally wounded Ashanath all around her. There were so many and she knew she wouldn’t be able to save them all.

\*Remember what John said earlier. Healing takes up a lot of psychic power and you’re still very new at this,\* Alyssa cautioned telepathically, her sombre voice brushing through Rachel’s mind. \*I can feed you energy to help, but be careful and don’t wear yourself out.\*

Rachel’s mind was whirring as she turned back to the Ashanath lying before her. \*I’ve just had an idea,\* she replied quietly, lost in thought as she began to gather her will.

Focusing on the very worst of the small alien’s injuries, she reached out with her mind to start healing his wounds. Her grey eyes shone with a soft light as his body was shrouded in a misty aura. She started rebuilding the chunk torn from his kidney, before carefully knitting his intestines back together, working methodically to undo the worst of the damage to the Ashanath soldier. Although she could have rebuilt the rest of his ravaged body, she stopped herself even though it felt wrong not to take this process through to its logical conclusion.

Makiri blinked rapidly as she stared at the organs being reconstructed before her huge black eyes. She turned to look at the young woman and said in wonder, “I had heard the legends about the Progenitors, but never thought I’d be able to see one at work...”

Rachel shook her head and smiled. “I’m not a Progenitor, just a regular Terran girl I’m afraid.”

“You are far beyond that, RachelBlake,” Ularean interjected in his whispering voice.

Sakura stroked the brunette’s arm and said quietly, “He’s absolutely right. You saved both of us, so you can consider that testimony from two expert witnesses.”

Rachel gave the Asian girl an affectionate smile, before glancing at Makiri who stood in silent awe beside her. “I’ve healed the most critical of this patient’s injuries. Are you able to clean and then close his wound with artificial skin grafts?”

The Ashanath medic nodded emphatically. “Of course, RachelBlake. His recovery is all but guaranteed now.”

“Excellent, thank you,” the brunette replied, walking over to the next Ashanath in the adjacent cot. Conservation of energy and focusing purely on the most critical of injuries - that was the key to saving as many lives as possible. She enveloped the next Ashanath in her misty aura and began to go to work, focusing on his fractured skull and cerebral damage, while ignoring his broken arm and leg.

\*Very clever, beautiful,\* Alyssa purred, opening their connection wider and pouring more Eldritch power into the glowing doctor.

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“Hey! What kept you?” Dana called out to John as he jogged across the Hangar towards the Raptor.

He gave her an apologetic smile as he strode up the front-loading ramp. “Sorry to keep you waiting, Sparks. I just gave Charles a quick call.” He winked at her as he added, “We were right! They did find more advanced heatsinks after Regulus!”

“Holy fucking shit!” Dana exclaimed, bouncing up and down with excitement.

John hit the button on the wall to close the ramp. “I haven’t got specifics for you yet, Charles was being very secretive, but I’ll trade for them as soon as we arrive at Olympus,” he explained, while offering her an armoured gauntlet.

She grinned at him through her clear-crystal faceplate and took his hand as they walked from the loading area to the grav-tube in the corridor beyond. “When I get my hands on those, I’ll be able to upgrade our rifles and all our ship-based energy weapons!” she gushed, as they floated up to the Command Deck.

Nodding thoughtfully, John smiled back at her as they walked into the cockpit. “You should be able to study the Drakkar gear on our flight back. By the time you get your hands on the new heatsinks, I’m sure you’ll be able to come up with some fascinating new weapon designs.”

“It feels like it’s my birthday! I love getting tech as presents,” the redhead exclaimed with a happy sigh.

Jade turned in her seat, smiling at the pair of them. “I hope this birthday goes better than mine did!”

John chuckled as he walked over to her, removing his helmet so he could give her a quick kiss. “Yeah, that last one was a complete disaster. We’ll try and make sure you don’t get killed again next year, okay?”

The Nymph gave him an adoring look as she replied, “I know you’d bring me back to life again, Master. The day might have started out badly, but it ended wonderfully!” Her loving smile turned playful as she added, “Now, should I be a good girl and stick to port speed, or are we in a hurry?”

“Definitely in a hurry!” Dana blurted out as she sprang to her feet.

John patted Jade on her dark-green shoulder. “You heard the girl, you better step on it.”

Jade’s emerald eyes gleamed as she turned back to the gunship’s flight controls. The Raptor was already hovering in the docking bay as she had swung out of the Invictus before the loading ramp had fully closed. Pulling back on the stick, she thrust the throttle forward, launching the small white ship away with a roar of its huge engines. The Raptor rocketed out of the shipyard and swept through the canyons at a blistering pace, until they rejoined the merchant traffic on the main route into the city.

John winced as she rolled and darted the nimble craft around the cumbersome trade ships, avoiding them by mere metres as she raced past. Turning to Dana he asked, “I can’t watch this, fancy being my distraction?”

She nodded eagerly and quickly removed her helmet as he sat down and placed his own Paragon helmet in a spare chair. Dana straddled his lap and leaned in to give him a very tender kiss.

“Perfect,” he said, placing his hands on her slim waist.

Dana glanced down at their armoured bodies and shook her head as she replied, “This is much more fun without a Paragon suit.”

“I can still get at the best bit,” John said with a smile, stealing another quick kiss. As she beamed at him in delight, he continued, “How did everything go with the schematics for upgrading the Psi-shaper? Any problems?”

She gave him a disapproving frown for doubting her. “Of course not! Have you forgotten who you’re talking to? I greatly enhanced the power amplification and also added some feedback inhibitors to limit the chance of accidental overload. That means someone like Alyssa could use it without snapping the thing in half like last time.”

“So both of us could use a Psi-shaper?” John asked in surprise. He gave her an eager grin as he continued, “How many times could we shape crystal Alyssium using one of those?”

Dana gave him a rueful smile. “Unfortunately, you’re both too strong for it to enhance your telekinetic abilities any further. It’ll boost the living shit out of the Ashanath Engineers, but for you guys it’ll just lighten the strain. You’ll be able to shape much more metal without tiring yourself out.”

“That’ll still be incredibly useful,” John said, nodding as he mulled over the practical applications. “We’ve only got quad-shaped armour on the Invictus, so we’ll need to upgrade that eventually. Anything to make re-plating a seven-hundred-and-fifty metre battlecruiser a bit easier is very welcome, believe me!”

“In that case, you’ll be pleased to know I asked Councillor Rathus to make two extra to take with us!” Dana said with a grin.

John returned her grin then said playfully, “I think you’d make a marvellous wife for an eligible bachelor. How about it? Interested?”

The redhead shook her head, a hint of a smile playing on her lips. “That sounds like a lovely offer, but unfortunately I’m already engaged.”

“I hate the guy already,” John said with a mock frown.

Dana’s sky-blue eyes sparkled as she replied, “Ahh, he’s alright. He does insist on roughly buggering me and my girlfriend though!” She leaned in and added in a whisper, “Apparently he’s also quite determined to get both of us knocked up at the same time. Can you imagine!”

John laughed at that, hugging her tight as she giggled happily.

“Sorry to interrupt,” Jade said, smiling at them over her shoulder. “We’re just on final approach to the Legacy.”

“You were a lovely distraction, Chief Engineer, thank you,” John said appreciatively, as he lifted Dana off his lap and set her down on her feet.

“Anytime!” the redhead smirked, before putting her Paragon helmet back on again.

John walked over to look through the cockpit canopy, studying the battered remains of the silver vessel. He turned back to look at Jade, while pointing towards the rear of the ship. “Can you bring us in nice and close to the rear on the starboard side, please? We’ll start with the original armour plating then head inside.”

“I’m already heading that way,” Jade replied with a smile, having anticipated his request.

He leaned in to give her a grateful kiss, saying, “Of course you are, my wonderful little Nymph.”

As John and Dana walked out of the cockpit, she called out to them, “Exit via our port airlock. I’ll dock the Raptor with the same airlock you use to enter the Legacy, then wait for your return.”

“Fantastic, thanks honey,” John replied, before putting his Paragon helmet back on.

By the time they’d reached the rear cargo area and entered the Port airlock, they could already see the black hull of the ship through the porthole. Dana hit the button to decompress the airlock chamber and after three seconds’ wait, when a light on the wall shone with a bright green glow, she hit another button to open the outer airlock door. Jade had brought the gunship to within ten metres of the Legacy’s hull and by kicking off from the Raptor, they were easily able to float across to the other vessel without bothering to activate their Paragon suit’s flight mode.

John was the first to land and he caught Dana before setting her down. She nodded her thanks before looking down at the armour plating beneath her feet.

“Woah!” she gasped, as her mind was suddenly flooded with a riot of new information.

“Everything alright?” John asked, placing a comforting hand on her shoulder.

Dana nodded absent-mindedly, staring in awe at the dazzlingly complex analysis of the black metal plating. A sprawl of chemical formula danced across her vision, the symbols and notation all written in Progenitor Glyphs. “I wish you could see what I’m seeing,” she murmured under her breath, her mind memorising and cataloguing the bewildering amount of data. “I’m fine, just give me a minute.”

Seeing that the young woman seemed to be fascinated by what she was seeing, but not under any duress, John turned around to look at the Legacy. They weren’t far from the point where the Quantum Flux Cannon would have been mounted - he could clearly see the indentations on the weapon hard point where the huge weapon had been attached. Other than that depression in the hull, the rest of the black armour was a field of flawless obsidian, unblemished over the ages. However, the same couldn’t be said for the silver plating on the front of the ship.

The rest of the Legacy was a pitted and pockmarked scene of devastation, cratered by the impact of Heavy Cannon shells and burned by Beam Laser fire. He walked over to the join between the old and the new sections of the Legacy, then crouched down to study the trench left behind by one of the Drakkar beams. The column of energy had melted a deep trough across the Etherium plating, before the beam had touched the black surface of the original hull. At that point the original tear in the hull of Mael’nerak’s ship had been exposed, but beyond that there was absolutely no damage of any kind.

John ran a gauntleted hand over the perfectly smooth black surface, suddenly feeling quite overwhelmed with awe. This relic from a bygone era was at least seventy-thousand years old; the ship had borne witness to countless centuries of warfare, including the brutal genocide of the Achonin at Mael’nerak’s hands. The Progenitor who had built this vessel had made a colossal impact to this corner of the galaxy, literally founding and shaping the species that now teemed in their billions across hundreds of worlds.

\*Yeah, total mindfuck isn’t it?\* Alyssa whispered into his thoughts. \*If it wasn’t for Mael’nerak, I wouldn’t even exist.\*

\*I wish I could see that vessel with my own eyes,\* Edraele said softly. \*It must feel like being in the presence of our Creator.\*

\*John’s thoughts are making it seem a lot nicer than the bleak reality,\* Alyssa said with a humourless laugh. \*Trust me, when you’re inside, it’s definitely not an uplifting spiritual experience – or at least it wasn’t for me.\* She hesitated before adding quietly, \*That might just be because of all the women that died horribly inside. It felt more like a descent into hell than traipsing over fluffy white clouds.\*

John caught movement out of the corner of his eye and he turned around to see Dana squatting down next to him.

She looked at him with concern and asked, “Maybe I should be asking if you’re the one that’s alright?”

He gave her a reassuring smile and replied, “I’m okay, just thinking about this ship’s past.” Glancing at the black armour plating, he added, “Find out anything interesting?”

Dana’s answering predatory grin was nearly as alarming as it was exciting. “You bet your sweet ass I did!” she exclaimed. Dropping forward onto her knees, she patted the hull and added, “We were right, the Progenitor gave the Drakkar a cheap knock-off. This shit is the real deal.”

John nodded towards the trough created by the Beam Laser and said, “Yeah, I saw the results myself, the armour wasn’t even scratched by that Drakkar beam. Just how resilient is it?”

The redhead’s brow furrowed as she replied, “It’s actually hard for me to give you any kind of sensible estimate without doing some testing. I’m barely able to follow all the formula I saw and what I’ve seen so far hints at all sorts of new fields of research that I never even imagined could exist.”

“Can you replicate it?” John asked intently, staring into her eyes.

She hesitated for a moment and he could see how difficult it was for her to answer. Finally, she said in a quiet, sombre voice, “Seeing the formula behind all this makes me feel like a little child, dabbling in things she doesn’t understand. I should be able to recreate it, but it’s going to take weeks of study.” Dana let out a self-deprecating laugh and continued, “It makes my ‘ultimate material’ claim seem like a toddler boasting about building her first sand castle.”

John gave her a worried frown as he said, “If you’re right, and I don’t doubt for a minute that you are, then that means we’re still hopelessly outclassed against the Progenitor in his ship.”

Dana’s smile was grim as she pointed at the tear in the hull. “It makes you wonder just how powerful that blast in the Zeta-Pegasus system was, if it could rip through this armour plating like tissue paper.”

John slowly rose to his feet. “Powerful enough to annihilate every planet in the system.”

“Mael’nerak wasn’t fucking around,” Dana said, nodding her agreement as she accepted his hand and stood too.

They stood there in silence for a moment, staring at the ragged tear where the explosion had devastated the Progenitor vessel.

“We better get moving,” John finally said, turning around to look for the airlock that he knew was nearby.

Dana smiled at him and clapped her hands in excitement. “I can’t wait to see what’s next on this Progenitor mystery tour!”

They walked across the silver-plated section of the hull, being careful over the more treacherous and uneven surface until they reached the airlock. It was the same one John had entered on his first visit to the Legacy and when the airlock re-pressurised, he hit the button to open the door then strode purposefully into the corridor.

“We need to head in this direction,” he said, pointing to the right. “The original Progenitor section of the ship isn’t far.”

“Lead the way,” Dana said, falling into step beside him.

She slipped her arm through his as they walked, glancing up at him as she did so. When John looked down at her arm interlinked with his, he stared at it for a moment then couldn’t help laughing.

Starting to pull her arm back, Dana asked self-consciously, “What?”

John caught her arm and drew her close once again. “Sorry, honey. I wasn’t laughing at you, that feels nice.” He hesitated, then smiled as he explained, “It just felt like we were about to go on a romantic stroll in the park.”

Dana giggled and said, “I know exactly what you mean.” She leaned into him and they shared a smile as they proceeded deeper into the ship.

It didn’t take long until they found the point where the Drakkar dropship had bored through the hull. Dana didn’t comment and just raised an eyebrow as she stared at the vast circular blade that had carved its way through the armour plating. They continued onwards, following a ramp down until they reached the jagged line that marked the end of the Ashanath construction and the original Progenitor section of the vessel. Both of them stopped at that point, with Dana studying the new architecture in fascination, while John felt an altogether different sensation.

The walls were just as oppressively black as John remembered and the macabre crimson lighting still looked like it was filtered through a thick film of blood. A shiver ran up his spine as he felt that same sense of comfort at the sight.

Dana glanced up at him in surprise as she felt the shiver in his arm. “You don’t normally scare easily,” she said, before stopping to look at him curiously. “That wasn’t a tremor of fear I felt, was it?”

John slowly shook his head and replied, “No. As disturbing as it might sound, seeing this part of the ship feels like... coming home.”

The redhead glanced into the murky gloom beyond, then wrinkled her nose in distaste. “I love you to bits, but I think I’d have to draw the line at living somewhere so depressing! This place makes Karron seem cheery and upbeat!”

\*I don’t want to be the kind of girl that dictates how my man decorates his home,\* Alyssa thought to both of them, \*but I’m afraid I’ll have to put my foot down here.\* They could both hear the playfully teasing tone in her voice as she continued, \*Maybe we can just set up a jet-black room in the Invictus with blood-red lighting all over the place? Then you can go and hang out in your evil man-cave whenever you feel all dark and Progenitory!\*

John rolled his eyes at the pair of them, but grinned as he said, “Like I’d ever get a moment’s peace with all you girls demanding my constant attention!”

\*Yeah, you love it,\* Alyssa said with a telepathic smirk.

He smiled at Dana and pulled her into a hug. “That I do.”

She leaned into him and said earnestly, “Don’t worry, we’re all here to help keep you on the straight and narrow. We won’t let you turn into a bad guy.”

Despite the jokes and the gentle ribbing, Dana’s quiet words felt profoundly reassuring. John was suddenly overwhelmed with affection for the young woman and just nodded in gratitude, not trusting himself to speak around the lump in his throat.

Dana walked towards the black corridor, tugging his arm to follow. “Come on! We’ve still got some cool stuff to check out!”

John walked on with her, turning a few corners as they headed deeper into the bowels of the Legacy. The Ashanath had not yet had a chance to tend to their dead, focused as they were on still trying to save the living from the battered wrecks above their planet, so John and Dana soon came upon the frail corpses of Grey crewmembers.

“God, this is awful,” Dana blurted out, quickly turning her head away from the bodies strewn across the floor. The Drakkar had feasted on the Ashanath while they were still alive, and their still-intact faces were contorted in agonised death masks.

“Don’t look, honey,” John said, scooping her up into his arms.

He activated his psychic speed and glided past the scenes of carnage, quickly coming to the point where he’d caught up with the Drakkar marines who’d slaughtered the Ashanath. Glancing down at Dana, who had tucked her face into his chest, he said softly, “This is where I stopped the Drakkar who did that to the Ashanath. Do you want to see what happened to them?”

She looked into his eyes and said, “Did they pay for what they did?”

“Yes,” he answered simply.

Shaking her head she said, “Hearing that’s good enough for me. I don’t need to see the gory details.”

“I’ll take us straight to the Capacitor Room. You wanted to see that next, right?” he asked, studying her slightly-pale face.

Dana nodded and replied, “Yes please.”

He swept through the corridors, not pausing at the scenes of carnage where he’d dismembered the Drakkar in his mission to protect the Ashanath. She gazed up at him as they sped deeper into the ship, smiling when he glanced down at her from time to time. John was able to make very quick progress this time, now that he wasn’t having to fight his way through rampaging packs of Drakkar soldiers. He slowed to a halt when he reached the room filled with giant capacitors, gently setting Dana down on her feet.

Dana turned around to look at the room then jerked backwards as she glanced at the huge Progenitor devices. “Oh, wow!” she marvelled, staring at them in awe.

In her mind’s eye, it was almost like she could see *into* the device, understanding at a glance precisely how it was put together. A three-dimensional view exploded outwards, outlining everything she needed to know to create a schematic for the enormous capacitors.

“Good news?” John asked, watching her carefully for any sign that she might be in trouble.

She turned to give him an ambivalent look. “Mixed,” she replied with a slight frown. “I know exactly how to build one of these capacitors. I’ll need to scale them down a bit for the Invictus, but that’s not difficult at all. With some of these babies installed, we can greatly improve the energy absorption of our armour before worrying that they’ll blow due to overloading.”

“That’s great news!” John exclaimed enthusiastically. “That gives us everything we need doesn’t it?”

Dana shook her head and pouted. “I was hoping you’d have to keep feeding me for a few weeks before we found that out!”

He laughed and said indulgently, “I’m sure we’ll have our work cut out for us figuring out how the Quantum Flux Cannon works. You’re probably still going to be on your knees for weeks.”

“Yeah, that’s true!” the redhead enthused, bouncing up and down at the thought.

Glancing around the corner of the massive machine, John saw the bloody scenes beyond, where Alyssa had torn apart the Drakkar. He looked back at Dana and said, “Alyssa got a bit carried away over there. Do you want me to take you past all that?”

She nodded, looking a bit green at the thought. “Yeah, if you could, I’d appreciate it. I’m still feeling a bit queasy.”

John effortlessly swept her up in his arms and smiled as he asked, “Okay, where to next?”

“I’d like to take a quick peek at the Tachyon Drive room if that’s alright?” she requested, keeping her eyes firmly fixed on his face as he walked past the bloody remnants of the black Drakkar battlesuits.

“I thought you already knew everything about that?” John enquired with a puzzled frown.

She shrugged and replied, “It’s still worth checking.”

Glancing at the map in his HUD for directions, John reactivated his psychic speed, then rushed through the sinister corridors to their destination. The huge sphere in the centre of the room looked exactly like the Tachyon Drive on the Invictus, but he put Dana down again so she could examine the room. The redhead spent five minutes looking around, but she eventually gave him a reluctant shrug. “This place is a bust. Nothing new here.”

“It was definitely worth having a look, just in case,” John replied with an easy-going smile. “Where would you like to go next?”

“The Power Core chamber,” Dana replied decisively. “I’ve got a feeling there might be a few hidden gems in there!”

She stood with her arms upraised, an expectant smile on her face as she waited for him to pick her up. John grinned as he did just that, before accelerating away carrying the giggling girl with him. Their next destination wasn’t far away but he paused at the open door, stopping before entering the chamber itself.

“I just remembered, I caught up with several Drakkar in there,” he explained, giving her an apologetic look.

“I’ll just grin and bear it,” Dana replied reluctantly as he put her down.

When they walked into the Power Core chamber, the teenager’s eyes grew round as saucers and she couldn’t help staring at the dismembered Drakkar all over the floor. “Holy shit! You chopped that fucker in half!” she gasped, gaping at the alien marine that John had carved into two separate chunks with a single vertical blow from head to groin.

He nodded as he said bleakly, “I didn’t have any time for finesse. This group were about to eat a group of Ashanath they’d trapped in here, so I just killed the Drakkar in the quickest, most brutally efficient way I could.”

Dana managed to tear her eyes from the butchery in the room, gazing up at the Power Core in the centre instead.

“I knew it! They’re still here!” she gasped with excitement, all thoughts of slain Drakkar swept from her mind.

“What?” John asked in confusion.

She pointed at a number of large hexagonal devices spaced evenly around the room and explained, “The Ashanath didn’t replace the Power Regulators! Those are the Progenitor originals.” Grinning at him, she added, “While I go take a look at them, can you see if you can open up any maintenance access panels around the Power Core? We might be able to snag the schematics for Progenitor Power Couplings too!”

While Dana let out excited gasps of delight as she examined the Power Regulators, John did a quick circuit around the Power Core to see if he could see a way of accessing the power cabling below. The decking appeared black and featureless to him and there didn’t seem to be any obvious way of opening up the hatches. As he completed his second circuit, he suddenly felt drawn towards a panel of buttons backlit in purple. Letting himself be guided by instinct, he pressed three buttons on the right, making Dana jump as there was a tortured shriek of metal on metal.

“You did it!” she squealed jubilantly.

When he turned around to look for his young companion, she’d already disappeared from sight, having dived straight into the maintenance ducts beneath the floor. A series of excited squeaks filled the room and also guided him straight to her.

“Got what you were looking for?” John asked, squatting down by the open maintenance hatch.

“We cleaned up!” Dana crowed, springing to her feet and doing a little dance.

He smiled at her, then glanced at the much thicker cable in the centre of the bundle. It was nearly a metre in diameter. “What’s that thing for?” John asked, pointing it out as he glanced around at the other hatches. “I can’t see anything that big in the other bundles of Power Couplings.”

Dana halted her little dance as she explained, “That one supplied power to the Wormhole Generator.” With a look of profound regret, she added, “Actually, that was the first thing I looked for on Rathus’ plans for the original section of the Legacy. Unfortunately, that bit of the ship is long gone; the lower aft section was ripped away in the explosion.”

John helped her out, then asked, “Is there anything else you need to take a look at?”

“Nah, that covered it,” Dana replied, a huge grin on her face. “Most of the rest of the ship got trashed. It’s a goddamn miracle that any of this survived intact.”

John closed the maintenance hatches by pressing the same three buttons, then asked, “You seem pleased with what we found. Can you explain how those devices will be useful?”

“Sure! I’ll tell you all about it on the way out,” Dana replied, smiling at him as she hooked her arm around his once again.

\*Hurry back,\* Alyssa added with a teasing note to her voice. \*Tashana needs loading up again and from listening to Irillith, it seems like she’s in the mood to share...\*