Three Square Meals Ch. 73

Matriarch Tsarra Perfaren nibbled apprehensively on her thumbnail as she stared at the holo-map projection of House Perfaren territory. Biting her nails was an unfortunate new nervous habit she'd acquired, but considering the stress she was under, such weakness was understandable. She had bags under her eyes from lack of sleep, and her exhausted dark green orbs flickered over the holographic images, darting from one enemy fleet insignia to another. Large fleets from Houses Valaden, Loraleth, Aeberos, and Naestina, still held position along her border, poised to strike at any moment into House Perfaren Space.

"It's been nearly two weeks! Why don't they get this over with?!" she finally blurted out, as she whirled on her Fleet Commander. "You're supposed to be my most senior military advisor, give me some useful advice!"

Aadya flinched at her matriarch's desperate plea, but she shook her head as she replied regretfully, "I've no idea, Matriarch. Delaying their assault makes no sense at all." She let out a weary sigh, equally as fatigued as Tsarra, and pointed at the territory map as she continued, "Any two of those fleets would be a match for our own forces, but we don't stand a chance against all four. Even the most amateurish Fleet Commander could simply attack with all their forces, and we'd be powerless to repel them from our borders. With our fleets destroyed, they could annex all our worlds at will."

"Maybe their alliance isn't as strong as I feared!" Tsarra exclaimed, clutching at straws. "Perhaps they don't trust each other to attack, as they fear betrayal from the other Houses?"

"I'm afraid our sensor probes don't support that conclusion, Matriarch," Aadya replied, reluctant to quash Tsarra's wildly optimistic theory. She pointed to the crossed-blades insignia of the House Valaden fleet, and added, "We've seen supply ships from House Loraleth docking with the Valaden fleet, as well as personnel shuttles travelling between those forces. That kind of inter-fleet co-operation makes me believe Loraleth and Valaden are firm allies, and we already know that Aeberos and Naestina have been in league with each other for years."

"This is agonising!" Tsarra gasped, slumping in her chair. "Are they just trying to drive me mad with worry?!"

Aadya studied her youthful matriarch for a moment, and asked quietly, "Have you attempted to make contact with any of the Matriarchs? Perhaps we could try and broker some kind of treaty?"

Tsarra grimaced as she snapped, "Of course I've tried, do you take me for an imbecile?!"

"I'm sorry, Matriarch, I meant no offence," Aadya quickly apologised.

The young House Perfaren Matriarch took a deep, shuddering breath, then gave the other woman a sad apologetic smile, and said, "Please forgive me, Aadya, I didn't mean to snap at you." Her haunted eyes flicked to the map again, and she added, "I've tried making contact with all of them, but they're refusing to take my calls."

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It was deathly silent in the Invictus' Galley as they stared at the slowly-rotating technical schematics, the intricate blueprints illuminated by an eerie violet glow, cast from Irillith's eyes.

"That's the Progenitor's ship..." John finally managed to mutter, as he stared in astonishment at the technical readouts of the huge vessel.

There was no mistaking the sinister-looking profile of the vessel, which they'd only seen in brief glimpses up until this point. The ship was tall in the stern while relatively narrow across the beam, and the long, angular superstructure swept forward, until it split about one-fifth of the way to the aft. From there, the lower section formed the sharp point of the prow, with the upper section set back slightly.

"It's over two kilometres long," Dana said in a hushed voice, her eyes wide in awe.

Rachel turned to look at her, and asked, "How do you know that?"

"All those weird symbols... they're Progenitor runes," John replied for her, and Dana nodded her agreement.

"What about gun batteries?!" Calara asked urgently. "Have you got blueprints for the Progenitor's weapons?"

Dana shook her head, and replied, "No, but we can see all the weapon hardpoints. That fucker's armed to the teeth!"

"How about the engines, or manoeuvring thrusters?" Jade asked, glancing warily at the ferocious-looking vessel that loomed above them. "Can you tell anything about its flight capabilities?"

Dana's sky-blue eyes darted over the holograph studying it in detail, as she replied, "The Tachyon Drive, Power Cores, Power relays - I can see where everything should be, but all the juicy details are missing..." She paused a moment, then pointed at the lower levels near the rear of the ship, "Holy fuck! That's the Drive Room for the Wormhole Generator!"

"You were right," Alyssa said, glancing at the redhead. "The Progenitor is definitely opening wormholes to get around!"

Having already memorised the schematic, Dana glanced at Irillith with concern, and reluctantly let go of her hand. Just like that, the schematics for the Progenitor ship winked out in a violet flash, and Irillith blinked slowly, as she massaged her temples.

"I'm really sorry about that," Dana apologised to the Maliri girl, remembering how that kind of projection had left her with a pounding headache. She gave her a worried frown, and asked sympathetically, "Are you alright?"

Irillith looked pleasantly surprised as she smiled back at the redhead, and replied, "My eyes tingle a bit, but there wasn't any pain!"

John was greatly relieved to see she hadn't been hurt like last time, and said, "Athena said you weren't ready before, but you've definitely grown more powerful since then. I guess this confirms it."

Rachel had been staring at Irillith thoughtfully, and she laughed then, shaking her head in amusement. They all turned to look at her, wondering what she'd found so funny.

"What is it?" Dana asked, turning to look at her lover curiously.

The brunette smiled at her, and replied, "Do you remember how stressed-out you were about Irillith coming aboard? You thought she was going to steal all our tech. It's no wonder John's Progenitor-side couldn't care less, though, he had far more advanced schematics locked away in his mind already. It must all be there in John's mind - everything a new Progenitor needs, to get himself started on a life of galactic conquest."

"So if he keeps loading me up, we'll get the whole lot?" Dana asked, with an acquisitive gleam in her eyes. "All the badass tech the Progenitor has?"

Alyssa shook her head, then darted a quick glance at John, and replied, "Your Progenitor side..."

John nodded glumly, and said, "He must be stopping me from unlocking everything. I'm going to have to confront him to claim the rest of it."

Sakura shook her head, and looking thoughtful she said, "Not necessarily. I was able to help you harness psychic speed, which was an ability your Progenitor-side used. Perhaps if you're given just the right encouragement, you'll be able to reveal more technology?"

Rachel's face brightened, as she said, "I think you're right! John's prepared Dana as a proxy for all these schematics, and when we've actually seen Progenitor hardware, it's been the catalyst for her to discover something new."

Dana grinned as she said, "Yeah, that's true! We got the Progenitor Power Core and Tachyon Drive from the Ashanath's ripped-off versions, and then looking at the crashed Progenitor ship gave us the schematics for the whole thing."

"We need to pay a visit to the Ashanath, see what else they might have found," John said, nodding his agreement.

"Don't forget the crashed ship on Arcadia!" Calara said enthusiastically. "If it's still there, that could be a real treasure trove of tech upgrades!"

Alyssa looked at John then, and asked, "So does this change our plans? Do you want to bother refitting the Invictus if we can just build a copy of the Progenitor's ship?"

He thought about it for a moment, then asked Dana, "How long would it take to construct our own version?"

"Several months, but I'm not sure it's worth it. At least, not yet," she replied with a sigh. "We'd have to fit it out with all our own tech for power couplings, Terran shield emitters, all that kind of stuff. Until we can acquire all the upgrades to properly equip the ship, it wouldn't be as powerful as the one the Progenitor is using. We'd get creamed trying to go toe-to-toe with him."

Alyssa looked apprehensively at the redhead sitting beside her, as she asked, "It's bad enough trying to plate the Invictus in Crystal Alyssium, let alone something that huge!" She paused for a second, then added with a frown, "Have we even got the materials to build something that big?"

Dana shook her head as she replied, "No, we don't have enough Onyxium for that, and it's not an element I can manufacture. It's a really good point though: If we do think about constructing a completely new ship, we should definitely use Crystal Alyssium for the superstructure, and not just the armour plating. At the moment, the Invictus is like an egg; tough on the outside, squishy on the inside."

"We'll stick with the current plan," John said, after considering their options. "Upgrade the Invictus, then try and secure some more tech schematics. There's no guarantee we'll even find anything we need with the Ashanath, and for all we know, they only found the Tachyon Drive and Power Core. As for Arcadia, it's deep in Kirrix Space, so it makes sense to upgrade the Invictus before we try and reach it."

"Sounds sensible to me," Alyssa said, nodding her agreement.

John looked around the table, and saw similar gestures of approval from the rest of the girls, agreeing with the path he'd chosen. "Alright, let's clean up after dinner, then go and get ready. We'll be arriving at Genthalas soon," he said, smiling at the thought of being reunited with Edraele.

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"We're just crossing the border between House Ghilwen and House Loraleth territory, Matriarch," the image of Fleet Commander Nymaleth said, her voice pleasant and respectful.

"That's excellent to hear, thank you Nymaleth," Matriarch Leena Ghilwen replied, delighted by the startling change in demeanour in her most senior officer.

Nymaleth smiled at her, and with a far-away look in her blue eyes, she replied wistfully, "I should be thanking you for your wonderful gift, Matriarch. Meeting John Blake was the greatest experience of my life, I've never met anyone quite so amazing..." She paused, then looked abashed as she continued, "I'm so sorry for the way I behaved towards you before; to question your orders was unconscionable."

Leena smiled at her, and said, "Don't worry about that, it's all in the past now."

"Edraele has been explaining your plans to me, and I want you to know that you have my absolute loyalty, I swear it," Nymaleth said, her voice fierce in its sincerity.

Leena paused for a moment, shocked by her Fleet Commander's earnest reply. She gave the older woman a grateful smile, and said, "Thank you, that's wonderful to hear."

Edraele stepped into view beside the young House Ghilwen Matriarch, and said in a kind voice, "We would've liked to explain our objectives to you in person, but I hope you understand that we had to move quickly to apply pressure on the Ghilwen border with House Holaris."

Nymaleth's eyes went wide, and she gasped as she saw the House Valaden Matriarch for the first time. "You're so beautiful!" she finally managed to murmur, entranced by Edraele's flowing white hair.

"Thank you, that's very kind of you to say, Nymaleth," Edraele replied, inclining her head politely. She studied her for a couple of seconds before she added, "Your new colouring is very becoming, too."

Nymaleth blushed a dark-blue, and her hand reached up to her short snowy-white hair. "I'm planning to grow it out, just as you suggested, Matriarch," she replied, now quite comfortable with an idea she had previously thought to be utterly scandalous.

"You'll look stunning, and John will love it," Edraele said, with an indulgent smile.

The Ghilwen Fleet Commander let out a happy sigh, then bowed her head respectfully to Leena, as she said, "I'll inform you when we safely deliver the Terran females to Genkiri Station, Matriarch."

Leena smiled at her in acknowledgement, then replied, "I look forward to speaking to you again. Have a safe journey, Nymaleth." With that, she closed the comm channel and sank back in her chair, looking up at Edraele in amazement. Her voice belied her shock as she said, "She seems like a completely different person! All the distrust and suspicion towards me, it's like they've been wiped away..."

The House Valaden Matriach sank gracefully to her knees beside the stunned young woman, and gave her a warm smile as she said, "This is why our plans are so important. Can you see now, why we must do everything we can to support John?"

Nodding and looking at her wide-eyed, Leena replied, "You're so wise, Edraele. I believed you before, but to see it for myself was astonishing." She flushed as she added, "I can't wait to meet him."

Edraele smiled at her fondly, and then pulled her in for a hug as she said, "You're such a good girl, he's going to adore you. I'll arrange for you to meet him tomorrow."

Leena let out a happy sigh, and hugged her friend tightly, her heart filled with gratitude.

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There was a purple flash in the Medical Bay and Faye blinked into existence, then called out, "Tashana, it's only me. Are you awake?"

"Yes, what is it?" Tashana replied testily, from where she lay on the hospital bed in the farthest corner of the room. She sat upright and pulled on her mask, narrowing her eyes as she glared at the irritating purple construct. Despite being scared, she'd been trying to get some rest while she could, knowing that soon she'd have to be sharp and alert, if she was going to be able to convince Edraele of the terrible danger they were facing.

The insipid AI put on one of those big smiles, no doubt designed to lull the unwary into a false sense of security, and said chirpily, "We'll be arriving at Genthalas Station in ten minutes! I just wanted to let you know, as we'll all be disembarking then."

"Alright," Tashana replied, feeling a shiver of fear run up her spine. "What does that mean for me?"

"If you leave too, you can see your mother again if you like, she'll be there on Genthalas. After that, you can get a shuttle down to Valaden if you want to return home," Faye suggested, her kind smile no doubt masking some insidious plot.

Tashana knew she'd have to act fast to try and get to her mother before the Progenitor could enthrall her, just like he'd turned Irillith into a slave. She rose to her feet, and said curtly, "Alright, show me to the airlock, I'm eager to see my mother the moment we land."

The AI looked delighted, and replied, "Of course! I'd be happy to help. If you just follow me, I'll lead you down there."

The door to the Medical Bay opened, and the purple sprite pranced over there, with her ridiculous wings vibrating all the while. Tashana grimaced at the saccharine sweetness of the AI's beaming grin as she beckoned her over, and reluctantly walked across the Medical Bay to follow after her. When she reached the corridor, she poked her head out and checked both ways, then prowled after the fluttering construct.

There was no sight of the Progenitor and his thralls, but she was in the lair of the beast, and knew they were all lurking around nearby. Her heart pounded in her chest, and she felt the skin on the back of her neck prickle with goosebumps as she walked warily after the AI's holographic image. All her senses felt on high alert, and her pointed ears listened intently for the slightest sound as she walked down the corridor. When she reached the end, there were two glowing fields, one red, one blue, and when she edged closer and glanced downwards, saw that there was at least a ten-metre drop to the bottom of the shaft.

"It's an anti-gravity field," the AI explained, her wide smile no doubt meant to be reassuring. "Just step into the red side, and you'll float harmlessly to the bottom."

Tashana balked at the thought of trusting her, but then she heard the sounds of cheerful laughter drifting down from the upper levels. Her pupils flared, and she realised how close to danger she actually was. Terror of the Progenitor overcame her fear of the lift shaft, and she stumbled into the red glow, bracing herself for a terminal fall. Surprisingly, the AI had been telling the truth, and she was cushioned by the anti-gravity field, and gently lowered to the lowest level.

Faye was waiting for her outside the grav-tube in the corridor beyond, and said, "The airlock's just this way. We'll be docking shortly."

She nodded and made a shooing motion at the AI, which skipped away down the corridor towards what was obviously an airlock at the end. There was a window beside the airlock door, and she could see the golden spires and crystal domes of Genthalas as the ship made its final approach. The lush greens and vibrant blues of her homeworld, Valaden, provided a spectacular backdrop to the glorious Maliri architecture of the huge space station, and her heart ached at the beautiful sight.

Tashana stumbled towards the door, feeling a riotous swirl of emotions. There was a fierce yearning to see her home once again, but it was mixed with trepidation about being reunited with her cruel, heartless mother. She despised Edraele for believing Irillith's lies and having her banished, but she was her only hope of repelling the Progenitor before it was too late. As much as she was thrilled about being back in Maliri Space once again, she felt a deep-seated horror at the thought of a Progenitor so close to her homeworld. The damage he could do when unleashed on the unsuspecting populace below...

"Are you happy about coming home?" Faye asked quietly, from where she stood just beside her.

Jumping out of her skin at the unexpected sound of the AI's voice, Tashana turned to stare at her, trying to recall what she'd just asked: "Are you happy?" She managed to choke back near hysterical laughter, and just nodded to shut the sprite up. Sadly her plan failed.

The AI grinned at her in delight, and said, "That's all everybody wants! We just want to try and make sure you're okay. John will be delighted to hear you're happy to be home."

Tashana turned back towards the airlock, knowing that those last few minutes were going to drag interminably. John... it was such an innocuous sounding name, not like Mael'nerak, which literally meant 'evil enslaver' in ancient Maliri. Perhaps the Progenitors had grown more subtle since Mael'nerak's time, and decided not to announce their nature with their very name.

"Yeah, I'm practically jumping for joy," she muttered sarcastically to the purple construct.

Faye's programming was oblivious to Tashana's sarcasm, so she clapped with glee, and exclaimed, "I'm so glad! John and the others will be here in a minute, they'd love to speak with you!"

Tashana's heart started pounding harder in her chest, and she shivered with fear. She turned back towards the grav-tube and heard the sound of animated chatter coming from the upper levels. The ominous sound of the mindless thralls laughing happily reached her sharp ears, and she quailed at the thought of being exposed to them again. Whirling around to look through the airlock window, she saw the telltale sight of golden arches, which meant they'd already landed in one of Genthalas' docking bays. She blinked in surprise, having not even felt a tremor when they'd touched down, but forced herself to shrug it off.

"Open the airlock!" she said sharply to the AI.

"But the others will be here in a minute," Faye protested, giving her a cautious and optimistic smile.

Tashana grit her teeth, fighting down the icy fingers of fear that crept up her spine, and snapped, "Open the fucking airlock!"

Faye paused a moment with a worried frown on her face, then nodded, and the outer airlock door spiralled open. Tashana dived through, glancing behind her again, and quailed as she saw figures descending in the menacing red glow at the end of the corridor. She hammered on the outer airlock door with her fist, and it spiralled open a second later, releasing her from the Progenitor's clutches.

The familiar smell of Maliri processed air filled her lungs, and what had once seemed so clean and fresh, now felt slightly stale after being on the Progenitor's ship. Still, that was a trivial price to pay for her freedom, and she lurched outside, desperate to flee before the others could join her. A quick glance behind her revealed the Progenitor had reached the corridor, and she whipped her head around, as she got ready to sprint to safety. There were several Maliri waiting to meet them, which brought her up short, and her angular violet eyes locked on the woman at their forefront.

Tashana's heart leapt with relief when she spotted the unmistakeable sight of her mother's finest ceremonial robes, and she started forward in a run to warn her of the danger. As her eyes lifted to her mother's face, she staggered a step, nearly sprawling onto the golden deck. "Oh my god, her hair!" she thought in horror.

Her mother. Edraele Valaden, Matriarch of House Valaden, was a thrall!

The long, flowing white mane brushed over Edraele's shoulders, framing her bewitchingly beautiful face. The tender look of motherly concern was jarringly out of place on the face of the icy cold woman she'd known for all her life, reinforcing in an instant that Edraele had been enthralled, and was now a slave of the Progenitor. Tashana froze in place, gaping at her in horror. Behind her mother were four other women, three of whom she recognised as House Valaden assassins, and the fourth was her distant cousin, Makaela. They all had medium-length white hair, thralls each and every one. A crushing weight of despair threatened to overwhelm her, as she realised all was lost. She was already too late.

"Tashana? Is that really you?" this false Edraele asked, her voice throbbing with a love that her malignant mother had never once shown. She looked at the golden-mask with and added with heartfelt sympathy, "I'm so sorry for everything you've been through! Is there any way you can forgive me?"

The sound of the Progenitor and his thralls approaching the airlock snapped Tashana out of her horrified stupor. Although she wanted to collapse on the floor and weep, she knew she had to get away, so she did the only thing she could think of. She stepped forward, and forced herself to sound convincing as she lied, "I'm so happy to be home, mother. I forgive you."

Edraele gave her an overjoyed smile, and opened her arms invitingly, as she said, "Everything will be alright, my lovely girl! We'll take care of you now."

Tashana stepped forward to accept that embrace, even though it made her skin crawl to feel the Progenitor's puppet put her arms around her. She counted to five in her head, to make the embrace seem authentic, then said quietly, "I'm exhausted, mother. Could I make use of some quarters to get some rest, please?"

"Of course, my darling!" Edraele replied, then turned to smile at her cousin and said, "Makaela, would you show my daughter to the suite you've prepared for her, please?" Such pleasantries sounded so wrong coming from her domineering mother, who used to make abrupt demands rather than polite requests.

Her cousin had always been a calculating, manipulative woman, who'd been obsequious towards her mother purely because she held all the power in House Valaden. Makaela had never shown even an iota of affection to Tashana before, so it was just as jarring when she smiled at her warmly, and said, "It's so good to see you again, cousin! I've arranged a lovely suite of rooms for your use, and if you'd like to follow me, I'll take you to them now."

Nodding at her enslaved cousin, Tashana said, "Thank you. It'll be great to get some rest."

Makaela looked pleased, and she turned and guided her towards the big doors that led out of the docking bay. Tashana felt like she was being watched, but she managed to resist the urge to turn around, knowing it was the Progenitor and his lackeys staring at her. Thankfully, it didn't take long for her enthralled cousin to lead her from the docking bay, and then they were in the station proper. There were many other Maliri based at Genthalas, and as she darted fitful glances at the women striding past, it came as a tremendous relief to see that they all still had short dark hair.

Perhaps it wasn't too late, after all. Edraele might be lost to the Progenitor, but he hadn't spread his corrupting influence through the rest of the Maliri, not yet, at least. She followed silently after fake-Makaela, listening to her friendly conversation, and making token replies so as not to arouse suspicion. House Valaden might be doomed, but there were still other options open to save her people.

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John watched Tashana walk out of the Docking Bay, the black-and-red figure disappearing out of view as Makaela led her out through the double doors. He turned back to Edraele then, and the look she gave him was full of gratitude and yearning.

"I can't believe you managed to return her to me!" she gasped, as she ran to him. "Oh, John, it's so wonderful to have you home again!"

He caught her in his arms, and they shared a passionate kiss, as she pressed herself against him. "You've been amazing, Edraele! We never would have got through everything without your help," he said honestly, when they finally broke their kiss.

"All I ever wanted to do was support you," she gushed, her tone earnest.

She looked flushed and very excited, and he couldn't remember seeing her look more beautiful. Edraele blushed as she read his thoughts, and he could see the flare of arousal in those lovely purple eyes. He tore his eyes away from her to look at her three bodyguards, who were smiling at them affectionately.

"Luna, Almari, Ilyana... it's wonderful to see you all again! Thank you for keeping Edraele and each other safe," he said, with heartfelt appreciation.

The three women gazed at him adoringly, and when Edraele patted his shoulder and stepped away from him, he gathered the three Maliri in a hug. They leaned into him, and sighed with contentment as he gave each of them a kiss.

Alyssa stepped up beside Edraele, and said, "I know you were planning on having engineers ready to help us with the Invictus refit. Are they ready to start yet?"

Edraele turned to give her an apologetic smile as she said, "Not quite yet, no. It's just turned midnight in Valaden time, so I was planning on having them gather tomorrow morning, when I hoped John might address them. We can begin work immediately after that."

Turning to glance at John, Alyssa smiled as she said, \*Let's stay on the Invictus for tonight. There's things we need to discuss with Edraele...\*

John nodded soberly, having not forgotten his decision to break the bond with Edraele.

The Maliri Matriarch looked at him in alarm as she read his thoughts, and said telepathically, \*Not yet! I have my surprise for you!\*

\*This is too important, Edraele. I need to free you from the bond, and the compulsion to obey me,\* he replied, sad to see the wild consternation in her eyes.

Alyssa turned to look at the girls, and said, "Change of plan ladies. We'll stay on the ship tonight, John and I need to have a chat with Edraele."

Irillith's eyes darted to her blonde Matriarch, and she asked hesitantly, \*By chat, do you mean what I think you mean?\*

\*Would it upset you, if it does?\* Alyssa replied, her cerulean eyes holding her friend's gaze.

Irillith thought it over for a moment, then shook her head slightly, as she replied, \*No, surprisingly it doesn't, not at all.\*

As the girls turned to head back through the airlock, John looked down at the three assassins still wrapped in his arms. They looked at him confusion, until Luna asked in a quiet voice, "What do you want us to do, John?"

Alyssa walked over to them, and hugged the Maliri women from behind as she said, "You beautiful ladies are going to be our guests, and we're going to take very good care of you."

The girls came over to join them then, with a pair attending each of Edraele's bodyguards. Calara and Sakura each took Luna's hands and coaxed her gently towards the ship, while Dana and Rachel wrapped friendly arms around Ilyana and followed after them. That left Jade and Irillith to greet Almari with warm smiles, and guide her through the airlock.

That just left John, Alyssa, and Edraele standing together, the Maliri Matriarch looking wracked with worry.

"Come on, it'll be alright," Alyssa told her, as she slipped an arm around her slender waist.

John followed after them, and then closed the airlock behind them as they re-entered the Invictus. Edraele was silent as they walked along the corridor to the grav-tube, and John shared a glance with Alyssa when she looked back at him over her shoulder. The girls were disappearing into the grav-tubes with the Maliri bodyguards, and it didn't take long for them to rise up in the blue anti-gravity field until they stepped out into the corridor on Deck Two.

The girls peeled off in their pairs, leading their wide-eyed Maliri guests into the Officers' Quarters along the deck. Luna paused before following Calara into her room, and looked like she was about to object at all three of Edraele's bodyguards effectively going off-duty at the same time.

"Edraele's with me and John, we'll look after her," Alyssa said, a reassuring smile on her face. She reached out to the unsettled assassin, and said, "Just relax with Calara and Sakura. I'm sure they'll be able to answer any questions you might have about us. I'm sure there must be plenty of things you're dying to know..."

Luna darted a longing look at John, and then bit her lip as she glanced into Calara's room. The Latina stepped out and took her hand again as she said soothingly, "There's nowhere safer for Edraele than with John and Alyssa right now, they'll keep her quite safe. In the meantime, I'll answer any question you ask, I promise."

When Edraele smiled at her and shooed her into the room, Luna grinned, and let Calara lead her away. The Maliri Matriarch watched the door close behind the assassin, then her smile faded as she glanced at John with worry. Alyssa slipped her tanned hand through Edraele's slender blue fingers, and tugged her towards the bedroom, with John walking along after them.

Edraele's smile returned when she saw the huge bed that she'd provided for them, and said, "The frame looks beautiful. It really sets off the white bedding."

"Yes, remind me to thank you for that later," Alyssa purred. "We loved your gift."

They walked over to the bed, with Edraele and Alyssa slipping off their high-heels as they climbed onto it, the two women sitting with their legs tucked underneath them. John kicked off his own shoes, and sat on the middle of the bed, watching Edraele carefully.

"I'm happy like I am!" she finally blurted out. She looked frightened and distressed as she added, "Please don't remove the bond, I don't want anything to change between us!"

John heaved a heavy sigh, not wanting to tell the shaken woman what she didn't want to hear, but doing so, nonetheless. "The bond we have at the moment takes away your free will, and forces you to obey me. I don't want to lose you, Edraele, you've come to mean a lot to me, but we can't continue with things the way they are. I'd rather you decided to leave me, than force you to stay without giving you that choice."

Edraele desperately wanted to disagree, to beg him to change his mind, but she could see the determined set to his eyes. She lowered her head, and said sadly, "I will do as you command, My Lord."

He reached out to her with his hand, then guided her over on the bed to him, before laying her back with her head against the pillows. Leaning down beside her, with Alyssa sitting opposite, he brushed his fingers along Edraele's jaw, catching the tear that trickled down her cheek.

"Thank you for everything you've done for me," he said to her. "You've saved so many lives with your wise advice. I don't know how I can ever repay you."

"Make love to me before you cut the bond!" she pleaded. "It's all I want!"

John frowned and slowly shook his head, as he replied, "I can't do that, not until you're free of my Progenitor-side's bond."

Edraele nodded while looking forlorn, already expecting his answer, but her heart still ached at the rejection.

Alyssa grasped her hand with one of hers, the other stroking it comfortingly as she warned her, "If this is the same for you as it was for me, this could be unpleasant."

John took a deep breath, then closed his eyes as he looked at the mental map of his Matriarchs and their wards. The connection from him to Edraele was there before him, glowing a bright white, although in comparison to his incandescent bond with Alyssa, it appeared faint and frail. He instinctively knew that he could focus his will on his bond with Edraele, and with a savage cut, their connection would be ended in just the same way his Progenitor-side had brutally ended his link to Alyssa and the girls.

He glanced at Alyssa, and she looked grim as she said, \*Best to get it over with. The sense of loss when our bond was cut was overwhelming, so we'll need to be there for her, to help deal with it.\*

Closing his eyes again, he took another long look at the thick eldritch cable that represented their bond, and began to gather his will. Rather than slashing through the ethereal connection though, he used his focused will to ease his consciousness back from hers, gently decoupling the intimate enmeshing of their minds that allowed her to read his every thought.

Edraele had spent over a century reaching into people's thoughts, using her ability to Spirit-walk to penetrate the subconscious of more Maliri than she could count. Her eyes opened wide in shock as she felt the colossal might of his mind brush against hers, before that vastness scooped her up in its gentle embrace, and carefully parted her from him. She could feel how much he still wanted her in that uneven meeting of minds, and even though it tugged at her heart to be separated from him, she knew she was welcome back if she chose to return.

Then, just like that, it was done, and Edraele and her web of Maliri wards dropped from John's mind. It was a strange feeling, as a vast space opened up in his mental map, with scores of Maliri no longer tethered to him in their own metaphysical compartments. As liberating as it was to absolve himself of that responsibility, he felt a pang of loss, missing the feeling of protectiveness they had inspired within him.

John opened his eyes, and looked down at Edraele, where he leaned on the bed beside her. "Are you alright?" he asked with concern. "Any pain?"

She stared at him in awe, and shook her head as she replied, "Your mind... it's breathtaking. I felt like I was in the presence of a god..."

He chuckled self-consciously, and said, "Well, I don't know about that, but I'm glad you're alright. Do you feel any different?"

Edraele continued to stare at him for a moment, before she blinked and looked astonished as she answered him, "No! I feel just the same way about you as I always did!"

Alyssa giggled, and they both turned her way in surprise.

"What's tickled you?" John asked, with his eyebrow quirked.

She grinned at them both, reaching out to stroke both their heads affectionately as she said, "You rebuilt her mind from nothing, remember? Of course she's not going to feel any differently!"

John looked at her in surprise, then down at Edraele, who beamed a gorgeous smile at him. "Reforge the connection, John, let me support you as I did before," she urged him. "There's nothing I want more than that!"

He leaned down and kissed her, opening his mind to her again as she moaned and writhed against him. It was a simple thing to guide her eager eldritch presence back to his, and she gasped with relief as their minds were enmeshed once more. Their connection was different now, more of a supportive partnership without that compulsion to obey him, and he closed his eyes as he felt a surge in his mind. The connection between them blazed like a Nova Lance beam, and row after row of Maliri flashed back into place, eagerly choosing to be linked with him once more.

His eyes tensed behind his closed eyelids as he felt a massive rush of sensation from all those women as they re-bonded with him. Edraele's bodyguards were the first to appear, with their immense gratitude to him for restoring their fertility, and he felt a similar sense of elation from the scores of engineers, nearly all of whom were now carrying new life inside them. The connection felt intensely intimate, and he gasped at the overwhelming wave of emotions that crashed over him. He pulled back from Edraele's soft lips, so that he could gasp for air.

"Wow!" Alyssa exclaimed, as she reeled from the flood of emotions that swept through his mind. Her eyes were wide as saucers as she blurted out, "What the hell was that?!"

He shook his head in amazement, and said, "I've no idea, but that was a hell of a rush!"

Edraele let out a satisfied sigh, and she smiled at him as she replied, "You were right, the new bond is different. I was able to share what I feel from all those women you helped, their huge sense of gratitude for the massive difference you made to their lives."

"That was amazing, thank you," he said, staring at her with newfound appreciation.

"You're quite welcome," she replied, gazing at him with her enchanting purple eyes. She leaned up and placed a tender kiss on his lips as she added, "May I have my reward now?"

Alyssa looked torn with indecision for a moment, before she asked reluctantly, "Would you like to be alone together?"

Edraele smiled at her, reaching up with her hand to guide the Terran teenager down to her. She paused while Alyssa was inches away, and whispered, "We're his Matriarchs, we have to work together as a team." With that, she pulled her down to kiss her enthusiastically, and the two women let out little sighs as their lips moved together, velvety tongues darting into each other's mouths.

They stripped off quickly after that, all three of them equally eager to get started. When they were all nude, John knelt on the bed and pulled them both into his arms, taking it in turns to kiss them both.

"We're both here to serve you," Edraele said earnestly, leaning into him, and squashing her breasts against the left side of his chest.

Alyssa nodded, copying the Maliri and pressing herself against him as she said, "You know we're both totally dedicated to you."

"I want you to be partners, not servants," John said firmly, although his cock throbbed with their teasing.

Both blondes gave him a knowing smile, then Alyssa leaned in and whispered, "I know your head's telling you to say the right thing, but your heart wants us to worship you. It's okay, you don't have to hold back with us, we know the real you."

Edraele nodded, and said in a hushed voice, "I spend every minute of my day listening to your thoughts. I love that you constantly fight your nature, and try to do the right thing."

"I love you too," he replied, hugging them close to him, his heart surging with happiness.

The two blondes shared an intimate look, then Alyssa spoke for them both as she said, "We know..."

Both of them leaned in and kissed him tenderly on the cheek, and he groaned with delight as he felt their diamond-hard nipples brushing against his muscular chest. Moving lower now, they kissed their way down opposite sides of his throat, soft lips caressing his flesh, and pausing occasionally to let their tongues flicker out so they could taste him. As they breathed out, the exhalation made the moist patches of his skin tingle, and he shivered at the dual teasing sensations.

When they moved down to his chest next, he made eye contact with each of them in turn, and they looked down submissively as they planted loving kisses on his torso. That deferential look was thrilling, and he reached out to cup the backs of their heads, as they moved lower down his body. He could feel their excitement over their empathic bonds with him, and the subtle change to their kisses, as their full soft lips curved up into smiles of satisfaction.

They were right. Alyssa and Edraele spent every waking moment tuned into his thoughts, and he kept nothing from them. That they were drawn to him, rather than shying away from his bouts of inner turmoil, filled him with a tremendous sense of relief.

As they kissed their way down his belly, he could feel their cheeks occasionally making contact with his throbbing cock. Rather than moving away, they leaned into him, the cool softness of their skin feeling delicious against the angry heat of his cock. Turning together, they positioned themselves on either side of his burgeoning length, and began to kiss their way up his shaft, wet tongues lathering him as they travelled up to his crown.

\*We better get you nice and wet, you'll be pushing this monster into Edraele's womb,\* Alyssa thought to him, her blue eyes twinkling when they made eye contact.

His cock lurched at the thought, and he saw her grin as she got the reaction she was looking for. When he glanced at Edraele, her purple eyes were smouldering with lust, and he could see the wanton invitation in that heated gaze. They lapped at his pulsating head until he couldn't take any more teasing, but he didn't have to say a word; they moved immediately, as they responded to his thoughts.

Edraele moved to lie on her back, legs splayed wide for him invitingly, which made her wet pussy glisten as the lips parted, tempting him onwards. He moved between her thighs and tasted her wetness, his tongue caressing her intimately, and darting inside before he dragged it up over her clit. She cried out at the exquisite sensations, then reached frantically for his head, to hold him still a moment.

"I'm so close!" she gasped. "Let me cum as you enter me!"

Alyssa was kneeling by her side, her eyes burning with lust as she watched the two of them together. As John sat up and shuffled closer between Edraele's parted legs, she knelt down and whispered in her ear. Edraele smiled at her and nodded, raising herself up so that Alyssa could snuggle in beneath her. Now John was looking at two eager faces beneath him, with Alyssa cradling Edraele between her thighs.

"I want to watch you as you fuck her for the first time," Alyssa purred, reaching around and grasping Edraele's big firm breasts and squeezing her taut blue flesh. When Edraele groaned, she gently kissed her on the neck, while roughly pinching her dark cobalt nipples.

John nuzzled his fat cock at Edraele's parted lips, swabbing the saliva-slicked head over her enflamed pussy. She whimpered with need now, staring at him with wild, frantic eyes, and he could tell she was only moments away from a titanic climax. The family resemblance between her and Irillith was so strong, he couldn't help but be reminded of the way her daughter would look just before screaming in ecstasy.

Alyssa laughed, and said, "You're so bad! She can read your thoughts, remember?!"

John blushed and was about to apologise, but Edraele didn't seem to mind in the slightest. She hooked her athletic legs around him and pulled him forwards, desperate to feel him filling her. To make up for his lascivious thoughts, he drove into her, giving her exactly what she needed. Edraele arched her back as he plunged deep inside her, her mouth open in a wordless scream of release, the combination of John's delving cock and Alyssa's tweaking hands far too much stimulation to be resisted for long.

He could feel her inner muscles pulsating around him, and she was hot, tight, and wet, as he drove deeper into her body. Despite having given birth to twins, she still gripped him like a fist, his girth stretching her pussy lips wide to take him. Pushing in all the way up to her cervix, he held still to let her adjust to having his massive intruder penetrate her depths.

"Oh god, that feels incredible," she panted, as she came down from her first climax.

Alyssa kissed her cheek, and purred, "You've still got lots more to go. Are you going to be a good girl and let him enter your womb?"

Edraele could only shiver with delight as she nodded, and stared at John with a fevered gaze. He leaned down now, covering her with his body, and feeling her excited nipples poking into his chest as he rested against her. "Ready for more?"

"Yes, my Lord. My body is yours to use for your pleasu- Ohh fuck!" her voice trailed off into a strangled shriek as he thrust hard, forcing her malleable body to yield, and letting him into her most sacred depths.

John kept up the pressure with his hips until his quad nestled on her ass cheeks, his whole throbbing length completely sheathed inside her. Edraele's eyes had rolled back, and she shuddered through another climax, her hands clawing at his back as he ravaged her.

Alyssa writhed against Edraele, incredibly turned on herself, and her eyes twinkled with mischief as she hissed, "You're buried up to the balls in Irillith's mother. You know what that makes you, right, motherfucker?"

"You love it, you raunchy little minx," he growled, then leaned it to kiss her roughly.

John was just as turned on as they were, and he ploughed into Edraele as she gasped and mewled, her speared body twitching and trembling as she came repeatedly. Alyssa reached down between them and strummed Edraele's clit with well-practiced hands, drawing one mind-blowing climax out of her after another.

The contractions from Edraele's flexing pussy pushed him over the edge, and he kissed her fiercely before roaring out as he came, filling her womb with thick ropes of cum. She clung to him, kissing him weakly in return, and whimpering as he pumped long blasts of spunk inside her, rapidly inflating her belly. His girth was too big for any of it to escape, so her abdomen expanded to take it all, stretching taut to accommodate the hefty load.

When he was finally spent, he sagged against her for a moment, before pulling back to avoid squashing her with his weight.

"It's okay," she urged him, pulling him back. "Let me support your weight, it feels lovely."

He relaxed against her again, and she planted loving kisses on his cheek, while Alyssa wriggled around so that she could kiss him too. Although it felt wonderful lying there like that, he was worried about squashing them and couldn't relax fully. He carefully pulled out of Edraele, then flopped down on the bed beside her, his chest still heaving as he recovered his breath.

"Now that was worth waiting for," she marvelled, gazing at him with an exhausted look of adoration.

Alyssa pulled herself free, then leaned down to kiss Edraele, and said, "Now that was so fucking hot!" She glanced at John hopefully, and added, "Any gas left in the tank? I'm really fucking horny!"

Before John could reply, Edraele smiled at her, and whispered something in her ear. Alyssa's eyes sparkled with excitement at whatever she'd said, then she sat up, and swung her lithe leg over the Maliri Matriarch, and lowered her pussy to her mouth. The blue-skinned woman was a novice at this, but Alyssa was extremely turned on, and it only took a few licks of her clit to tip her into a thunderous climax.

They cuddled up together afterwards, and Edraele smiled at John as she said, "Did I please you, my Lord?"

John chuckled, and replied, "You were fantastic, Edraele. Consider me very pleased."

She sighed with satisfaction, then relaxed, enjoying their gentle caresses as their hands ran over her cum-packed belly. A soft smile played on her lips as she added, "I'd forgotten how wonderful it feels, carrying a warm, heavy weight in your womb."

Alyssa smiled at John as she caressed her heavily rounded blue abdomen, and said, "We already know that Edraele will give you beautiful daughters. Are you looking forward to making her a mother again?"

He grinned at her, and glanced at Edraele, expecting to see that familiar, soft, doe-eyed look all the girls wore whenever there was talk of carrying his babies. He was shocked to see her happy smile wiped from her face, to be replaced by an expression of tortured guilt.

"What's wrong?" he asked her in alarm. "Alyssa didn't mean to upset you, she was only being playful!"

Alyssa nodded, and said quickly, "I'm really sorry, Edraele. Please don't be upset!"

"I know what you want from all your women, John," she replied, her voice thick with emotion. "But I've been an appalling mother, I don't deserve to have any more children."

John sighed and pulled her into his arms, as he said, "That all happened long ago, and everything was entirely the old Edraele's fault. I can't order you to stop torturing yourself with this stuff any more, but please stop. I hate seeing you get upset like this."

"I can't help it," Edraele replied, her eyes filling with tears. "The memories are still there, and I know what I put those poor girls through..."

He looked at Alyssa in frustration, and she closed her eyes, responding immediately to his unspoken request. Edraele's mind was open to her, and she flitted through, seeing the pathways still scrubbed clear of emotional responses, where John's Progenitor-side had ravaged her mind. Being careful not to disturb anything, she withdrew again, then frowned in confusion.

"It must be her mind trying to make sense of the memories," she said with a sigh. "The emotional pathways are still blank, but her higher consciousness must be trying to deal with them as best it can. She still knows what the old Edraele did to Irillith and Tashana, even though the memories themselves don't have corresponding emotions."

John stroked Edraele's back as she wept, and said comfortingly, "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have left you with this burden to deal with, it's not fair on you at all. Perhaps I should go in and just remove the memories completely?"

She shook her head, and wiping away her tears, she replied firmly, "No! Someone should know what I - I mean Edraele - did to those poor girls."

"Okay, it'll be alright," he said, pulling her in for a hug, while Alyssa cuddled her from behind.

They lay together like that for a while, letting Edraele recover from her unexpected outpouring of guilt. After calming down again, she looked ashamed by her outburst, and said to John, "I'm so sorry I ruined that moment, our first time together was wonderful."

He smiled at her, and replied, "There's nothing to feel bad about, it was fantastic for me too."

Alyssa nodded, then nuzzled into her affectionately, and said, "Thanks for letting me watch."

"You're always welcome," Edraele replied, kissing the top of her golden-maned head. She blushed a lovely shade of blue as she added, "I'd never even considered being with another woman in the past, but that definitely isn't the case now..."

Alyssa sat up with a start, and said enthusiastically, "Yeah, you need to get a lot closer to your girls! It's much easier to bond with them when you've licked each other to climax a bunch of times."

"My girls?" Edraele faltered, looking at her with trepidation.

The blonde giggled and replied, "No, not Irillith and Tashana, although that would be super hot." She glanced towards the door, and said in a throaty purr, "Your hard-bodied assassins. My girls tell me they're very quick learners..."

Edraele looked at her in surprise, then frowned as she asked, "They've been...?"

"Cumming their little blue hearts out," Alyssa finished for her with a smirk. "They were a bit nervous at first, but my girls know a thing or two about giving a lady a good time."

She gave Edraele a coy smile, and suggestively stroked her cum-packed tummy.

John laughed, and said to Alyssa, "Maybe let them work up to that? I doubt they're ready for your level of debauchery quite yet."

The blonde girl thought it over, and grudgingly admitted, "Actually, it wouldn't be much fun anyway. This'll only be their second time, so one taste of your cum will leave them dazed. That works fine when you're buried down their throat and they're passively feeding from you, but it probably wouldn't work if they were going down on Edraele, they'd probably just stop."

She appeared lost in thought for a moment, but John heard the soft padding of bare feet from the corridor less than ten seconds later. He immediately recognised Jade's confident, well-balanced stride, and her beautiful green face appeared at the doorway to their bedroom shortly afterwards.

"Hello everyone," she said, greeting them with a warm smile as she prowled over to the bed, and climbed on with feline-like agility.

"Hi Jade," John said, returning her smile. "Been having fun?"

She nodded, and grinned at him as she replied, "Almari's a lovely girl, and a real screamer!" Crawling across the bed to Edraele, the Nymph looked into her eyes as she added, "Would you like me to feed your girls?"

Edraele spread her legs in willing invitation, then let out a sharp gasp as Jade wasted no time in lapping away at her, then probing her depths with her long, prehensile tongue. As the Maliri Matriarch arched her back and quivered in ecstasy, John and Alyssa rubbed her taut stomach as the Nymph eagerly sucked out every last ounce of cum. It took a few minutes for Jade to lick her womb clean, and several more bucking orgasms.

Alyssa patted Edraele's slender tummy afterwards, and said to the insensate woman, "See? That was loads of fun!" She climbed off the bed, and helped Jade to her feet, the Nymph moving carefully with her massively stacked breasts. Giving John and Edraele a gleaming smile, she continued, "I'll go watch Jade top the assassins up. You two enjoy some time alone together."

John just held Edraele while she recovered, enjoying the unfamiliar feel of her in his arms. When she finally roused herself from her dazed state, he smiled as he said, "How about trying out a Terran shower? You said you were interested to see the difference."

She nodded as she returned his smile, and let him lead her into the bathroom, then through into the shower cubicle. Edraele glanced around at the unfamiliar facilities, and asked, "Do we need to wear nose plugs?"

He shook his head, remembering how the Maliri shower submerged the user from head to foot in a liquid cleaning solution. It was efficient, but not exactly fun. "No, Terran showers are quite different," he replied, waving his hand over the controls and activating the jets.

Edraele gasped as the water jets sprayed over them, sluicing their bodies in lovely warm water. John wrapped her in his arms, and pulled her against his chest as they let the water run over them.

"This feels so sensual..." she murmured, leaning into him and sighing contentedly.

John smiled at her, enjoying the close physical contact with this remarkable woman, and massaged her back with his strong hands. She relaxed, feeling like putty beneath his fingers as she let out a throaty groan of approval. "I thought you'd like Terran showers," he said, planting a kiss on her forehead.

Looking up at him, she looked deliriously happy as she said, "I feel so safe and protected in your arms like this." She stood on tiptoe to kiss him on the lips, and added, "Being a Matriarch can be very lonely. It feels amazing to just be looked after for a change. "

"When we settle down here permanently, I hope you'll always feel that way," he replied, staring into her beguiling purple eyes.

"I'm going to make such a wonderful home for you here, you won't want to leave," she said emphatically, squeezing him in a tight hug as though never wanting to let him go.

Their kisses were ardent as they held each other, losing track of time as the water pattered off their glistening bodies. John eventually led Edraele out of the shower, and helped her dry off in the jets of warm air, before guiding her back to the bedroom hand-in-hand. When they returned to bed they made slow, sensual love to each other, staring into each other's eyes as they revelled in the intimacy of the moment. They didn't speak, telepathically or otherwise, and simply expressed their feeling for each other physically.

Hours later, when Edraele's stomach was warmed by the heat of his cum, John cuddled up behind her, his arms enclosing her in a protective embrace. He placed a hand possessively on the rounded curve of her azure belly, and Edraele sighed with deep satisfaction as she felt his larger form wrapped around her. They fell asleep like that, which is how Alyssa found them when she slipped into bed behind John, and pulled the covers up over them all.

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Tashana paced nervously in her luxurious quarters, and despite the extravagant size of the suite with its numerous rooms, she couldn't help but feel trapped. Her mind raced as she thought back at her first shocking glimpse of her mother, and wondered how in the hell Edraele had ended up becoming enthralled to this Progenitor.

Her fingers ran up to her neck, and she felt for the tiny tracking implant that she knew was buried in her flesh. Logically, she knew she wouldn't be able to feel it, but knowing it was there felt like having some hideous parasite attached to her neck. She wanted to just tear it out, but to do so would tip her hand, and she couldn't afford to take any chances. Not while she was still trapped on the station and so very vulnerable.

No longer able to stand it in her plush cell, she marched up to the door, half-expecting it to remain firmly closed. Her heart skipped a beat for a second, but the crystal portal swung dutifully up into the ceiling, leaving her path to freedom clear. Tashana burst out into the corridor, then forced herself to walk at a measured pace that wouldn't draw undue attention. She wandered aimlessly to start with, staring suspiciously at each and every group of Maliri women that approached down the long open corridors, despite the lateness of the hour. It came as quite a relief that she didn't spot any more white-haired Maliri, and the rest appeared to be normal without any exceptions.

She realised that it must still be the very early stages of the Progenitor's infiltration of House Valaden, and perhaps the situation might not be as bleak as she had first feared. Gliding into a crystal-canopied observatory, she drifted across the large room, then sat in one of the gyroscopic chairs that she tilted back so that she could stare at the stars. The twinkling jewels peeking out behind the sweeping colours of dozens of nebulae provided excellent inspiration for her next course of action, and she mused over the specifics of how she was to escape.

"They're beautiful, aren't they?" a young woman suddenly said beside her.

Tashana jumped out of her skin, having been so lost in her thoughts that she hadn't been paying attention to the girl's cautious approach. She glanced at the Maliri who'd just disturbed her, and immediately relaxed when she saw her short dark hair.

The new arrival's airy soprano had a kind undertone to it as she continued, "I like to come here when I've got something on my mind..."

"Yeah, I know what you mean," Tashana replied, in her gravelly voice.

The girl looked at her curiously, those pretty teal eyes studying Tashana's masked face. She opened her mouth to ask a question, and Tashana instinctively knew that she was about to inquire about the golden mask, with its wry, mocking smile. She appeared to change her mind at the last moment however, and said politely, "My name's Valani, it's nice to meet you."

After a moment's indecision, where Tashana did her best to gauge the girl's motives, she came to the conclusion that she was harmless enough. Her attention was drawn to the two unassuming Maliri bodyguards who hovered near the entrance to the observatory, who were watching their interaction with cautious, evaluating eyes. "Ah, this young woman must be a bored noblewoman, then."

Slumping back in her chair, Tashana grunted, "Hello, Valani."

It seemed Valani was not so easily dissuaded, and she slid into the chair next to her, waving her delicate fingers over the tilting control so that it rolled back to face the ceiling. "The stars always seem so mysterious. It's like they're beckoning me to go exploring!" the young woman said, gazing out into the night sky. "I wonder what's out there?"

"Nothing but pain and suffering," Tashana muttered back, her voice terse as she gazed out at the vista of stars. Her tone was mocking, but it was directed at herself rather than the naive young woman, as she replied, "It's no place for a sheltered little noble girl."

Valani turned to look at her, and apologised quietly, "I'm sorry, you must find my wittering annoying. I'll leave you in peace, if I'm bothering you?"

Tashana felt guilty for upsetting the young woman, finding polite conversation difficult after so long. She twisted her head to look at her, and said, "I'm sorry... I didn't mean to be... rude."

The noble girl smiled at her, her teal eyes bright and innocent as she said, "It's alright, I don't mind. I was the one who interrupted you when you were thinking about something." She paused for a moment, and asked, "Are you alright? You seem upset about something."

Trying not to laugh at the absurdity of trying to calmly explain her current predicament, Tashana's mind raced as she realised the magnitude of the task ahead of her. How was she going to convince people that a member of an ancient race of space tyrants had stepped straight out of a child's fable, and was now attempting to enslave the Maliri? She realised the girl was still sitting quietly, waiting for an answer, and Tashana frowned as she glanced her way.

"A lot of people are in terrible danger. I'm trying to figure out how to warn them," she said, after a moment's hesitation.

Valani sat upright with a look of alarm on her pretty face, and exclaimed, "Maybe I can help?! I know someone who's very wise, she'll know what to do!"

Tashana gritted her teeth, and forced herself not to roll her eyes at the girl's youthful exuberance. The idea that some petty noblewoman would be able to assist against the Progenitor was laughable, but she bit down the bitingly sarcastic reply that immediately sprang to mind. She tried not to sound too bitter as she replied, "No, it's something I'll have to figure out myself."

"Oh, okay," Valani said, appearing crestfallen.

"Thanks for the offer, though," Tashana said by way of apology.

Valani smiled at her, and then that inquisitive look was back on her face, as she asked, "I don't mean to offend you, but why are you wearing that mask? It's got an... interesting expression embossed on it."

Tashana was half-tempted to remove the mask to show the wide-eyed girl exactly why, but she wasn't that cruel. Such a horrific sight would haunt the young woman's dreams for weeks, if not months. She let out a sad sigh before she replied, "I went out into the stars. There's terrible things out there, Valani. I hope you never have to tread the same path as me."

The girl reached out a with a tentative hand, and gently placed it on Tashana's arm, as she said softly, "It sounds like you've been through a lot. I wish I could help you."

Shrinking away from that well-meaning touch, Tashana snapped, "You've got no idea what I've been though!"

Valani jerked her hand away, and gasped, "I'm sorry, I didn't mean anything by it!"

Tashana rose from her chair, glancing once at the wary bodyguards who were now watching her like a pair of hawks. Feeling bad for upsetting the girl a second time, she sighed as she said to her, "You didn't do anything wrong. I'm just worried and I took it out on you."

With that she turned and strode away from the startled young woman, returning to the solitude of her quarters.

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The soft, lilting sound of Faye singing an achingly beautiful piece reached John's sensitive ears, gently rousing him from his sleep. He did his best to stretch with two curvy warm bodies cuddled up against him, and when he brought his arms down again, he pulled Alyssa and Edraele in closer. They murmured in their sleep, and snuggled up against him holding him tight.

"Morning, Faye," he whispered to the AI, to let her know he'd awoken.

She finished the notes she was singing, then fluttered over to the bed, and gave him a huge smile as she came into view. "Hi, John!" she greeted him brightly.

"Thanks for the lovely wake up call. Much nicer than the old jingle!" he said, giving her a playful grin.

Her cute purple face lit up with his praised, and she replied, "I'm so glad you like it. I was self-conscious at first, but it's much easier knowing you like the sound of my voice."

"Very much," he agreed. His view of the ship's chronometer was obscured by Edraele's voluminous white mane, so her turned to Faye and asked, "What's the time, please? And was there anything I should know about?"

"It's nine in the morning, local time," the digital girl replied pleasantly. "The Valaden homeworld is four hours ahead of Terran standard time."

John nodded, and said, "It's a good job we all had an early night, I don't feel that bad this morning."

"Hey, John," Alyssa said drowsily, his busy thoughts stirring her from sleep.

"Good morning," Edraele said, as she was woken in a similar fashion, glancing up at him from where she lay against his chest.

"Hello, my beautiful Matriarchs," he greeted them both cheerfully, with a broad smile on his face.

Alyssa looked at the Maliri woman across his muscular chest, and said with a teasing grin, "You must've really screwed his brains out last night. He's not normally this chipper in the morning!"

Edraele sat up and stretched, before she replied boldly, "I believe I left my Lord very satisfied."

John laughed, and he stroked Alyssa's shoulder as he said, "After buzzing around in my head for months, she knows all your tricks by now. I think you're going to have a hard time getting her to blush."

Edraele winked at the blonde when Alyssa pouted, then lay down again, and said, "Thanks for letting us have some time alone together. It felt really special."

Alyssa reached over John's chest to stroked Edraele's arm as she replied, "It was only fair. I've been hogging him for months, he's yours to have fun with now."

"Don't I get any say in the matter?" John asked them both with an arched eyebrow.

The blonde planted a lingering kiss on his chest, before she replied, "I know this Maliri temptress drives you wild, and you've been flirting together for months. You two should definitely make up for lost time."

She didn't need to say it, but the subtext was clear: enjoy each other while you can, before we have to leave Maliri Space once again. Edraele picked up on it immediately, and as sad as she was at the prospect of them leaving, she was touched by Alyssa's considerate gesture.

She leaned across John, and said, "I can see why he loves you so much. You're a lovely girl." With that she pressed her lips against Alyssa's and they enjoyed a very sensual kiss.

"Mmm, delicious," Alyssa noted, as she pulled back. The two women shared a look for a moment, then lay back against John, tracing mysterious shapes on his chest with their slender fingers. With their legs draped over him, they could both feel him stiffening as they caressed him, and Alyssa purred, "How are you going to take her this morning?"

Edraele spoke up before he could answer, and with a look of nervous excitement on her face, she said, "Actually, if it's alright with you, would you mind holding off for a few hours? I have my surprise for you later."

Alyssa sat up then, and her cerulean eyes sparkled in the light as she said, "I can't wait to see what it is!" She glanced at John, and added, "I bet she's lined up some luscious Maliri vixens to bury you in nubile flesh!"

John watched Edraele's face, but she just smiled enigmatically, and didn't give anything away. He chuckled, and said, "Alright, we better get rolling then. Is everything ready for us in the drydock?"

The Maliri Matriarch nodded, and replied, "The Engineers are assembling there to hear you speak, as long as that's alright with you, John."

"Of course," he replied, glancing down the bed at the purple sprite, who was watching and listening attentively. He smiled at her and added, "Could you move the Invictus to the drydock please, Faye?"

"I'll contact Genthalas flight control right away!" she replied, putting her Secondary Avatar to work.

"The girls will be here in a minute," Alyssa informed him, with Edraele nodding her confirmation.

The sound of voices reached John's ears then, as the girls brought their guests along with them. John's eyes darted to the doorway as they started to appear, gently leading Edraele's bodyguards over to the bed with them. Luna, Almari, and Ilyana all looked a bit dazed, and they blushed when John stared at them in fascination. The Maliri women were all nude, following the ship's standard dress code in the bedroom, but it wasn't their gorgeous athletic figures he was gazing at.

"I love the hair, you girls look gorgeous!" he exclaimed, making no attempt to hide his appreciation.

Ilyana raised a self-conscious hand to her shoulder-length white hair, and asked, "Do you really like it? I can't believe how much it grew overnight!"

"You all look stunning!" he agreed, enthusiastically.

The three assassins all looked very similar to Edraele now, with their flowing white hair and flawless azure skin. They climbed on the bed between their pair of bed-mates from last night.

Alyssa grinned at the three women, and asked, "So, did you all enjoy your walk on the wild side?"

She beamed at John in satisfaction when she saw the dark blue blushes from each of the assassins, the women mortified at being singled out in front of John and his girls.

"Ignore her, she's just teasing you," John advised the lithe Maliri women, and they smiled at him self-consciously.

John sat up with his back against the headboard, as the girls fanned out in a big semi-circle on the bed. Despite the vast size of the colossal bed, space was at a premium with John, eleven women, and a very feminine AI all sitting on the covers. He admired the mouth-wateringly beautiful girls, and they posed from him as he took a moment to admire them all. Luna, Almari, and Ilyana copied the others, rolling their shoulders back and arching their backs slightly to give him an awesome, gravity-defying view of luscious flesh.

\*Just think what a view that's going to be when we're all pregnant,\* Alyssa thought to him, her fingers lightly tracing along his arms.

John noticed she didn't make any disclaimers regarding Edraele, and he glanced at the blue-skinned woman to his left. Her purple eyes shone brightly, and her dark-blue lips were crafted into a benevolent smile, carefully masking the guilt he could feel emanating from her. Remembering the source of that remorse, he looked at Irillith, who seemed perfectly relaxed, although her eyes were locked rigidly on him.

\*Is Irillith alright being naked in front of Edraele?\* John asked Alyssa, concerned about the predicament that this was putting the Maliri girl in.

\*She's fine, but she wants to talk to you about it later,\* the blonde replied, refusing to elaborate.

He gave Irillith a brief nod in acknowledgement, then smiled at the gathered group, and said, "This feels like a gathering of the inner circle. I know we've got scores more Maliri bonded to Edraele, but my connection with each of you is different, and much more personal."

The girls understood the heartfelt sentiment behind his words, and smiled at him affectionately.

Turning to look at the Maliri assassins, he said, "It's lovely to have the three of you here, and I'm not trying to embarrass you when I say that I hope your hostesses took good care of you last night."

Ilyana smiled fondly at Dana and Rachel, and then looked at him coyly as she replied, "It was a magical night, and very enlightening."

John groaned, and looking at the redhead and brunette, he asked suspiciously, "What have you been telling her?"

"Everything a girl needs to know to adjust to our unique little living arrangements," Rachel replied with an enigmatic smile.

Dana grinned at him, and putting an arm around the exotic Maliri next to her, she said, "We like Ilyana a lot. Can we keep her?"

John frowned and shook his head as he replied playfully, "It was just a loan I'm afraid, she's already taken."

Dana pouted as she pretended to be upset, but Ilyana's angular turquoise eyes caught the light as she gazed at him, a beautiful smile on her curved lips.

"If you're going to flirt with everyone, we'll be here all day," Alyssa gently prompted him. Flashing a quick look at Edraele, she continued, "And I suspect we've got a busy morning ahead of us."

John nodded, and then looking at Rachel, he said, "Okay, Miss Project Manager, what're your plans for the refit?"

The tawny-haired brunette was already well prepared, and she picked up the remote she'd brought in surreptitiously and placed on the bed behind her. Pointing it at the holo-projectors, she said, "I've been drawing up plans over the last couple of days, and working with the girls to come up with a comprehensive list of all the tasks we need to complete. She frowned then, as she continued, "We've got a huge amount to do, John. The Invictus is going to be in drydock for weeks."

"The upgrade to our firepower will be phenomenal," Calara said enthusiastically. "It's going to be well worth it!"

Dana grinned at him, as she said, "The Invictus is going to be one mean fucker when we're done!"

John laughed and said, "Alright, you've got me fired up! What's the plan?"

Rachel pointed to the layered tasks, showing the various dependencies for the later stages, and said, "I've decided to break down the refit into phases, with teams allocated to each of us, and working on different areas to maximise our efficiency."

Everyone looked at the long list of tasks broken down into phased sets of activities, and John grimaced as he said, "I'm glad you stepped up to manage this. There's so much to be done!"

Rachel nodded as she replied, "If everything goes smoothly, I'll have shaved two weeks off the refit time by organising the work like this."

Studying the groups and scanning through the list, John frowned as he couldn't see his name listed. "Wait a moment, I'm not on the list." he said with confusion. "Don't you want to put me in charge of a team again?"

"You just want to do some more showing off," Alyssa said, winking at him knowingly.

Shaking her head, Rachel replied to him, "You'll be working on... 'team motivation'. Jade hasn't got a team either, specifically for that reason - so she can help you recruit more Maliri."

He frowned as he protested, "There must be something useful I can do! I can't just spend the next few weeks sitting around waiting to get group blowjobs!"

"You'll be able to assist with the heavy lifting while you recover between sessions," Rachel explained.

Calara smiled as she said, "There'll be plenty of opportunity for that. We've got lots of big guns to install."

Sakura grinned at him as she said, "I'm looking forward to seeing you show off! That doesn't sound like anything my wise sensei would get up to."

Jade smiled at her as she said, "He proved quite a hit with the Maliri engineers last time."

Edraele glanced at him, and said, "It's probably for the best you don't have a team, actually. There were -complications- after the weapons team spent so long around you."

Looking at her in surprise, John said, "You never said anything! Those women are all okay, aren't they?"

"Oh yes, they're perfectly happy. I'll explain later," she replied, a smile teasing the corner of her lips.

"And on that maddeningly cryptic note, we better get ready," John said, smiling at the gathering. "Time for a shower, then breakfast."

Faye raised her arm and looked at him with an eager smile on her face.

He chuckled, and said, "Go ahead, honey. You don't have to raise your arm to speak."

The sprite blushed a deep mauve colour, then said, "We'll be landing inside the drydock in four minutes!"

Edraele smiled at John as she read his thoughts, and said, "We can have breakfast, they won't mind waiting."

With a few telepathic commands from Alyssa, her entourage of six girls waved their guests goodbye as they retired to their own rooms to shower and get ready. That left John with Alyssa, Edraele, and her three bodyguards. John had been wondering how they'd all fit, so it was an elegant solution even though he missed the presence of his well-established group of girls.

The shower was a lot of fun though, and Alyssa explained to the Maliri how to wash and take care of their new lustrous manes of silky white hair. Seeing the three gorgeous blue-skinned women glistening under the water was an enticing view, but John distracted himself from their limber bodies by paying attention to Edraele and making sure she was exceedingly clean. After drying off, getting dressed, and having a quick breakfast, they finally left the Invictus via the huge door in the Hangar, rather than taking it in turns to troop through the airlock.

As the Hangar door rose up into the Invictus' hull, John got his first look at the teams of engineers that were waiting for them, and was astounded by the sheer number of Maliri arrayed before him. They appeared to be split into five distinct groups, watching each other warily as if expecting betrayal at any moment. He heard a shocked gasp from behind him, and when he turned around, he saw that Irillith was gaping at the vast throng of personnel gathered in the drydock.

"House Valaden doesn't have this many spacecraft engineers!" she exclaimed, staring in astonishment at the hundreds of Maliri personnel. "Where did they all come from?!"

Edraele had a proud look on her face as she said to John, "I promised you as many engineering staff as you might need, and have made appropriate arrangements to facilitate that. I've assembled eight-hundred engineers, who will be at your disposal for the entirety of the refit."

"This is excellent news, Edraele!" Rachel exclaimed, looking delighted. "Based on Irillith's estimates for available resources, I only factored in two-hundred engineers. However, with this many personnel available, it'll save considerable time on the refit."

The Maliri Matriarch frowned slightly as she half-joked, "It appears I've made a terrible blunder. I should've sent all the engineers away instead, then you wouldn't have to leave."

John smiled at her, and said, "You've seen how much Rachel's got planned. We're still going to be here for quite some time!"

Looking relieved to hear it, Edraele said, "If you'll just excuse me a moment, I'll address the personnel."

With that, she walked towards the podium and lectern that had been set up in front of the crowd, and gracefully ascended up the steps. "May I have your attention, please," she said in an even, pleasant tone, her voice boosted by amplifiers installed in the lectern, and drawing the attention of the crowd. "Many of you will have heard of me by reputation, but please let me introduce myself. My name is Matriarch Edraele Valaden."

At this the distracted muttering stopped in the space of a heartbeat, and clearly audible gasps of fear could be heard throughout the drydock. All rivalries were forgotten now, as the engineers stared at her in terror. Edraele was a picture of unruffled elegance, and knew exactly what she was doing. She waited patiently for several long moments, without saying a word, her full lips set in a disarming smile.

The fear from her reputation gradually began to fade, as row after row of wary blue faces watched her, this vision of serenity quite unlike the horrifying rumours they had all heard. It was like a spell started to fall over the women, their pensive gaze flickering over Edraele's long, flowing hair as they drank in her startling appearance. When she spoke again, the crowd listened on tenterhooks.

Her voice was clear and welcoming as she said, "Many of you are not from House Valaden, so I wish to thank you for journeying here to assist in this vitally important project. I know you are fearful at being here in the heart of Valaden territory, but please rest assured, you are all under my personal protection. I consider you to be honoured guests, and wish to make your time at Genthalas as enjoyable as possible." Turning to look back at John she gestured to the crowd, and added, "Perhaps you'd like to say a few words, John?"

Makaela, the Commander of Genthalas Station had been waiting with the assembled engineers, and she walked over to join John and the girls with a wide smile on her face. He nodded to her in greeting, then strode up the several steps to the podium, before looking out over the sea of hundreds of blue-skinned Maliri engineers. They stared at him in enraptured fascination, and being gaped at by nearly a thousand Maliri women was more than a little unsettling. John placed his hands on the seemingly delicate lectern made out of Maliri crystal, gripping the edges firmly to stop his hands from shaking.

\*Just look at those Maliri girls, they can't get enough of you,\* Alyssa said, her voice soothing. He could sense her amusement as she continued, \*You could declare your name was 'Bethany the Pirate Princess', and rather than having you committed, they'd be lining up to join your scurvy crew.\*

Echoing the young blonde, Edraele said, \*There's no need to be apprehensive. I think it's fair to say that they'll be a receptive and exceedingly forgiving audience.\*

John stared out over the sea of dark-haired women, and after clearing his throat nervously, he began to speak. A sophisticated audio system was cleverly concealed within the lectern, and it transmitted his voice across the drydock so that he could be clearly heard by his entire audience.

Reassured by his supportive Matriarchs, his voice was strong and confident as he said, "My name's John Blake, and it's an honour to meet all of you. The reason you are gathered here, is that you'll be working to refit the vessel before you: my ship, the Invictus. My crew will help oversee the work in case you have any specific questions, but I also plan to assist where I can, and hope to speak to each of you individually over the coming weeks."

At the mention of meeting him in person, a rippling wave of heady sighs echoed across the Docking Bay, with hopeful - if rather disbelieving - expressions on the Maliri's lovely faces.

He tried not to get distracted, and concluded his speech by saying, "I'd like to thank you in advance for your help on this project. Please believe me, when I say that the work you'll be undertaking will make a profound difference to the future of the Maliri. For the last refit, the previous teams of engineers were diligent and very hard working, and Edraele and I rewarded them appropriately. When the refit is complete, I hope to be able to arrange a special reward for all of you, too."

That titbit triggered a murmuring echo of frantic whispers, as the women gossiped with one another, wondering what he could be referring to. John gave them a warm smile, which had the closest Maliri swooning, then he descended from the podium to return to Edraele and the girls.

Irillith's sharp eyes had been darting around the huge throng of engineers, and when John rejoined them, she whirled around, and hissed in a hushed voice, "I spotted House insignias from Loraleth, Ghilwen, Aeberos, and Naestina! They're all enemies of House Valaden!" Eyes narrowing as she stared at Edraele with suspicion, she continued, "What have you been up to, mother?!"

Edraele gave her daughter a beatific smile, then beckoned to John, and said, "Come, let me show you my surprise."

John nodded and fell into step beside her, with Alyssa and Irillith following too, all of them eager to see what the House Valaden Matriarch was about to reveal. Makaela greeted everyone with a friendly smile, then joined Rachel to discuss the division of the Maliri engineers into work teams.

The small group followed Edraele as she led them deeper into Genthalas Station. Nobody said a word as they walked along, matching the House Valaden Matriarch's stately pace, everybody lost in thought. Irillith was trying to make sense of seeing engineers from enemy Houses working for her mother, while Alyssa watched John and Edraele walking arm-in-arm with a smile of satisfaction on her lips. John stole an occasional glance at the elegant Maliri stateswoman, studying her face, and trying to figure out what she was up to. Edraele's purple eyes flicked his way occasionally, and she blushed at his intense scrutiny, but didn't reveal any further details about her surprise.

With everyone distracted, they seemed to reach their destination in no time, and Edraele nodded then smiled at the soldiers guarding the entrance to her private suite. The Maliri guards were wearing ceremonial armour and ornate, open-faced helmets, and they presented arms while nodding to her respectfully. Their professional composure was shattered when they glanced over the people keeping her company, and their eyes settled on John.

"Close your mouth's, ladies," Edraele requested with a playful smile. "It's unbecoming to gawp like that."

They did as she asked, their mouths snapping closed, but they continued to stare at John in wide-eyed astonishment as Edraele and her entourage entered her quarters. The Valaden Matriarch's suite in Genthalas was plush and luxurious, showing a fine sense of style with the elegant furniture. She led them through the entrance lobby and across an ornate sitting room, before approaching a door to one side which opened before her.

Edraele glided inside, leading him by the hand into what appeared to be an impressive study. There was a large, imposing desk in one corner, which faced towards a wall partially covered in viewscreens. The rest of the wall was a sweeping floor-to-ceiling crystal window, which provided a spectacular view of Genthalas' golden spires and crystal domes. Beyond the sprawling space station dozens of freighters and warships were going about their business, silhouetted against the planet Valaden in the background.

Sitting in pairs opposite each other on a number of chaise lounge chairs, were a cluster of four young Maliri women. They all turned to look at the group as Edraele and John entered the study, and they rose slowly to their feet, their excitement quite evident on their beautiful azure faces.

"Oh, wow!" an indigo eyed girl gasped, while the rest let out breathy sighs, all equally as awestruck.

Edraele smiled at them affectionately, and said, "Ladies, it's my great pleasure to introduce John Blake to you."

They stepped forward and curtsied respectfully. The girls' attention was entirely focused on him, and they all appeared to be completely spellbound as they gazed at him in wonder.

Turning to him next, Edraele said, "John, these wonderful young women are: Leena Ghilwen, Kali Loraleth, Nyrelle Aeberos, and Valani Naestini."

John was intrigued to know why Edraele was so excited about introducing him to these four girls, and their surnames definitely sounded familiar. He gave them a friendly smile, and said, "It's lovely to meet all of you."

However, Irillith let out a strangled gasp as she stared at Edraele, her face betraying her absolute disbelief. Her cascade of troubled thoughts raced through her mind, the Maliri girl shocked to the core, and her blonde Matriarch picked up on them immediately.

Alyssa glanced at John in alarm, then managed to lighten her worried expression before she gave the four girls a disarming smile, and said, "It's really nice to meet you, ladies, but would you mind excusing us for a moment?"

The young Maliri women managed to tear their intense gaze away from John to glance at Edraele, and when she smiled at them and nodded, they reluctantly left the room. It appeared to be a struggle for them to leave his presence, and they lingered for a moment, darting longing glances at John before they stepped through the study door, pulling it closed behind them.

"You assassinated four Matriarchs?!" Irillith blurted out incredulously, shattering the peaceful quiet the very instant the study door had closed. She blinked, her mind whirling, before she added, "Wait! They're all the youngest daughters... You must have murdered their sisters, too!"

John looked at her in shock, and said, "Murdered?! What are you talking about, Irillith?!"

"Ask my mother!" Irillith retorted, her violet eyes accusatory as they snapped back to the House Valaden Matriarch.

Edraele was perfectly composed, although she looked regretful as she said, "I wish there could have been another way, but after decades of bitter fighting with their mothers, the old Matriarchs hated me too much to listen to reason. I was forced to eliminate their elder sisters too, as they'd been indoctrinated by the same blind hatred, and groomed to follow a similar path as their despotic mothers. It was unfortunate that events had to play out this way, but in order to obey John's orders to subjugate the Maliri, I was left with no other choice."

John had been staring at her in shock, and when he heard this, he protested, "I never told you to start murdering people! I specifically asked you to stop the torture and killings!"

Frowning for a moment, Edraele replied, "That's true. It was quite the conundrum at first, trying to obey what seemed to be conflicting commands." She smiled brightly at him, and continued, "But I managed to find a solution, which allowed me to follow both sets of orders to the letter!"

"Conflicting commands?!" John asked indignantly. "I never-."

Alyssa let out a long sigh, then raised a hand to halt him as she interjected, "Wait a second, John." Turning to Edraele she asked gently, "What specific orders have you had from him?"

Edraele smiled at her, and replied, "John's first command was to always address him as 'My Lord', until he subsequently asked me to only refer to him that way when we're intimate together."

"Okay, what next?" Alyssa prompted, her tone patient and encouraging. "Can you remember the specific wording of any other orders?"

Looking thoughtful for a moment, Edraele replied carefully, "He said: 'You will help me subjugate and enslave the Maliri, broken little toy. Your people will make fine servants to begin my conquests'."

John looked appalled as he exclaimed, "Fuck! My Progenitor-side must have left Edraele orders before you stopped him!"

Alyssa nodded soberly, then looked at Edraele again as she asked, "You said there was a conflicting order. What was that?"

Edraele gazed at John as she replied, "You said: 'Do everything you can, to improve the lives of the Maliri living on the planets under the control of House Valaden'." Her face lit up with a bright smile as she continued, "It was then I understood! If I helped you subjugate all the other Noble Houses, they'd be under the effective control of House Valaden! Then I'd be able to implement policies to ban torture and all the political assassinations on their worlds as well. I've made alliances with the new Matriarchs, and they've done exactly that."

John gaped at her in shock, rendered mute by her frank admission of what she'd been up to while attempting to follow his unwitting commands.

"While I was forced to assassinate a dozen Noblewomen to achieve your goals, we've saved so many lives in the process! Torture has been banned outright on all planets under our control, and there's only been fifty-seven murders while you've been away, rather than an estimated two-thousand-three-hundred-and-seventeen fatalities based on trending averages." Her purple eyes gazed at him reverently as she added, "I immediately understood the benign wisdom of your orders, and it made me proud to serve the greater good. You'll make a magnificent King."

"King?!" John blurted out, his jaw dropping as he stared at her.

Edraele nodded, and smiled at him as she replied, "Of course. This domain is called the Maliri Regency for a reason; the Matriarchs only assumed the mantle of leadership because we had no Progenitor to lead us. I've taken steps to begin the annexation of the rest of the Maliri Houses, and soon every world in Maliri Space will be under your control. You can assume your rightful place as our Monarch."

John's knees felt weak, and he staggered over to the nearest chair before slumping into it. "Holy fuck..." he blurted out in horror.

Edraele looked alarmed at his reaction, and asked, "What's wrong, John? I thought you'd be delighted!"

"Will you give us a minute, girls?" Alyssa asked Irillith and Edraele, her tone polite but firm.

They nodded obediently, then glided from the room to rejoin the young Matriarchs, mother and daughter glancing at John before they left with concerned looks on their beautiful faces.

John blocked Edraele from his mind, and his eyes were wild as he stared out the window for a moment, until he gasped, "What the fuck have I done?!"

Alyssa walked over to sit beside him on the chaise lounge, tucking her feet underneath her as she placed a comforting arm around his shoulder. She was quiet for a while, then replied quietly, "By the sounds of it, you've already helped thousands of Maliri."

He twisted in his seat so he could stare at her, and balked, "You can't seriously be condoning this madness?!"

"It kind of makes sense in a fucked up way. You've seen how screwed up Maliri society is; they were basically dead-set on wiping themselves out. With you in charge, you can easily stop all the pointless killings and internal wars, and get the men to come back to their homeworlds so they can rebuild the population. You were already trying to help them sort this shit out, but now it'll be much easier," she reasoned, watching his face for a reaction.

"I can't run an empire, that's insane..." he protested. "I wouldn't have the first clue how to even start!"

"Edraele seems to have everything pretty well under control. I doubt she'd bother you with anything trivial, only the really big stuff like wars and things," she said thoughtfully.

John shook his head, and replied, "I can't trust her in that position, not after what just happened! It wasn't her fault, but who knows what other commands my Progenitor-side left her with?"

Alyssa leaned in and gave him a kiss, as she said, "It'll be alright. If I can set up a telepathic bond with her, then I'll always know what she's thinking. I can tell you if she's planning anything that I know you wouldn't like."

John didn't respond for a while, then he stared into her eyes as he said, "I need some time to think it over. This isn't something I should just do on a whim, there'll be literally billions of people affected by my every decision."

Alyssa leaned in and gave him a tender kiss on the lips before she said, "I'll leave you alone to think things through, but please don't block me out. I promise I won't disturb you, but I can't help you if I don't know what you're thinking, alright?"

John nodded distractedly, and glancing at the door, he said, "I think I better speak to Edraele to stop her panicking." He let out a sigh, and tapping his temple, he added, "It's probably best I keep her out of here while I mull things over, though. She's only going to get upset if she listens to all that, especially if she thinks she's disappointed me."

"Of course," Alyssa replied, giving him a sympathetic smile. She rose from her seat, then murmured, "I agree with her, by the way. I think you'll be a brilliant King."

He gave her a troubled smile, and watched as she slipped out through the door. There was some hushed conversation in the room beyond, and a few moments later Edraele glided into the study, closing the door behind her. Her poise and bearing appeared calm and unruffled, but he could see the desperate worry on her face as she sought him out.

"I'm so sorry, John!" she gasped, her stately demeanour abandoned as she rushed to him.

Opening his arms, he embraced her, and when he felt her trembling against him, he felt a pang of regret for shutting her out of his mind. "Don't worry, I'm not upset with you," he murmured, his voice soothing.

"I thought I was doing exactly what you wanted!" she said remorsefully, pulling back so she could look into her eyes. Edraele faltered for a moment, then added, "I couldn't tell the difference between the two sets of orders. I just thought I was being a good Matriarch and helping you."

John gave her a reassuring smile as he brushed a stray lock of white hair from her azure face, and cupped her cheek. As she closed her eyes and nuzzled into his hand, he let out a heavy sigh and said, "I'd never have condoned the assassinations, but you were right before. What you've done has saved a lot of lives."

She gave him a chagrined look, and said earnestly, "I promise I wasn't trying to twist the intent behind your orders. They both seemed equally 'right', and I knew I had to obey them."

Stroking her cheek with his thumb in a comforting gesture, he said, "It was my mistake. When you started calling me 'My Lord', I should have realised that my Progenitor-side could have left you some other orders as well. If I knew what I was doing, I'd have asked Alyssa to check your subconscious to see if there were any more commands buried in there." He stared into her probing purple eyes as he continued, "We'll remove them later and check to make sure there aren't any other surprises."

Edraele gave him a sad smile, and said, "Speaking of which, it might be wise if I avoided planning any more surprises for the time being."

"Surprises are good, but maybe something not quite so momentous next time, okay?" he requested, leaning in and giving her a brief kiss.

She nodded, then looked like she wanted to ask him something, but bit her lip anxiously instead.

John knew what she wanted to speak to him about though, and said, "I need some time to think everything though before I make a huge decision like this. We'll talk again tonight, but I'd like to keep my thoughts to myself for a few hours, alright?"

Edraele nodded, and replied quietly, "I really am sorry for shocking you like this. I just wanted to make you happy."

He smiled at her, and said, "I know, you're a good girl." Putting on a brave face, he continued, "Don't worry, everything will all work out for the best."

Looking greatly relieved, Edraele leaned in and gave him a loving kiss before turning and gliding from the room. The door closed with a soft click behind her, leaving him alone with his thoughts.

John walked over to the long clear-crystal window, and stared out at the panoramic view. Maliri Space was quite beautiful, painted as it was in a glorious array of colours by the hundreds of Nebulae that populated this part of the galaxy. While it made for some breathtaking scenery, the colourful backdrop masked the twinkling of stars which normally gleamed against the blackness of space.

Although it was harder to make them out, he knew the hundreds of populated star systems that made up the Maliri Regency were out there. Looking at that vast sprawl of stars, there were billions of people living on those worlds, blissfully unaware of the titanic shift in power that would affect each and every one of their lives. Control of the most powerful empire in this corner of the galaxy was his for the taking... he only had to choose to seize it.

The stars had always been a source of strength to him in the past, a source of wonder and hope that encouraged him onwards. Now each star represented a vast number of potential problems, and they were problems that he'd be expected to know how to resolve. The crushing weight of responsibility threatened to overwhelm him, and he placed the palm of his hand against the crystal window, before resting his pounding head against it.

How the fuck had it come to this?

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Dana strolled through the set of ornate golden doors, and into the familiar curving control room for Genthalas' primary Fusion Reactor. She glanced around the monitoring stations, and grinned when she spotted the Lead Technician before calling out to her in greeting, "Hey, Alyndra! How's it going?"

The white haired technician looked up in surprise, then gave the Terran girl a wide smile as she strode briskly over to greet her. "Dana! It's so wonderful to see you again!" she said cheerfully, sharing a hug with the redhead.

"You too," Dana said affectionately. She pulled back from their embrace, and smiled at the Maliri as she added, "Want to make some more elements?"

Alyndra's eyes twinkled at the prospect, and she replied with a playful smile, "Will you be firing anti-matter into my biggest Power Core again?"

"Yeah, we need some more of that shit, definitely," Dana replied in an off-handed manner. She leaned forward then and added in a whisper, "But how do you fancy learning some wild new physics as well?"

The Lead Technician's eyes widened at the prospect, and she nodded with enthusiasm. "What have you got in mind?" she asked, practically breathless with anticipation.

Dana gave her a mischievous wink, then looked around behind her, and beckoned Makaela over to join them. The Genthalas Station Commander had been following hot on her heels, under orders to supply her with anything and everything she could possibly need. The other technicians in the room looked intrigued, remembering full well what happened last time this astonishing Terran girl had swooped into their lives. They quickly gathered around too, listening avidly as the redhead outlined her intricate plans in meticulous and terrifying detail.

"That's utter madness!" Alyndra balked when she'd heard enough. "I thought your last stunt was crazy, but this is utterly insane!"

Dana grinned at her, and replied, "The last one worked didn't it?"

Alyndra fought down her mind's utter rejection of the Terran girl's plan, but seeing the resolute gleam in Dana's sky-blue eyes, she asked, "I'm not going to be able to talk you out of this, am I?"

"Nope, afraid not!" Dana replied with a wicked chuckle. Patting the appalled Maliri technician on her shoulder, she added consolingly, "We're just going to be accelerating particles to hyper warp, then slamming them into beryllium bricks in a five-thousand-G gravitational field. What could possibly go wrong?"

The laughter from her audience sounded more hysterical than humorous, and the redhead gave them a disapproving frown for their lack of trust.

"I can gather the required components and materials, but shouldn't we evacuate this section of the Station first?" Makaela asked, sharing a worried glance with Alyndra.

Dana shook her head, and said, "Nah, don't worry about it, I know what I'm doing."

The Maliri gave her a reluctant nod, then Makaela contacted the appropriate teams via a comm device on her wrist, and begin gathering everything they needed.

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Rachel smiled with satisfaction as she surveyed the scenes of organised chaos, looking down over the drydock from her vantage point high up on the maintenance gantry. Hundreds of Maliri engineers were swarming over the Invictus, either by standing on the topdeck itself, or using grav-platforms to access the flanks and underbelly of the ship.

Glossy white armour plating was piled high in the anti-gravity fields that had been created on both sides of the vessel, as the engineering teams worked quickly and efficiently to denude the Invictus of armour. Where the assault cruiser had once been a sparkling white, now wide swathes of it were a dull grey, as the original Titanium superstructure beneath was exposed to view. The topdeck had already been completely stripped of plating, only leaving the lower half partially covered.

"My team's nearly done," Calara informed the tawny-haired girl, as she strode across the gantry to join her. "How's everyone else getting on?"

"It's a little bit slower going for those working on the lower areas of the ship," Rachel said, smiling at the Latina in greeting. She pointed to the scores of floating platforms, and continued, "Having to use the grav-platforms is a bit inconvenient, but we're nearly there. About half-an-hour to go I'd imagine."

Calara looked up at the massive Cutting Lasers being manoeuvred into position, suspended from the ceiling by huge articulated arms that aimed and powered the laser array. She grimaced and said, "I'm not sure I'll be able to watch this. We're about to cut our home to pieces!"

"At least it's not a marauding enemy ship doing it," Rachel replied, smiling at the conflicted young woman.

"Yeah, that's true," the brunette agreed, returning her smile. She glanced around to make sure there were no Maliri in earshot, then asked in a whisper, "Any news from Alyssa on John? All I know, is he's heading back here."

Rachel stroked her arm, and said, "You'd be the first one she'd tell." She paused for a second, then corrected herself as she added, "Actually, she'd inform all of us simultaneously, but you know what I mean."

Calara nodded, and said, "Yeah, it's just... what a bombshell! I feel so sorry for him, having to make that kind of momentous decision."

"You don't like the sound of 'Queen Calara' then?" Rachel asked airily.

The Latina flushed, and pointedly chose to ignore the question. She turned her attention to the broad bank of holographic projections in front of Rachel, and looked at the steps involved in each phase of this project. She pointed to one of the central images, and asked, "How's the crystal growing coming along? Will Makaela be able to make enough for us?"

"Her staff have made a start already and brought some additional crystal fabrication plants online," Rachel replied with satisfaction. "Every facility in Genthalas will be producing different sections of the new crystal superstructure, and Sakura's engineers will assemble the new hull as soon as each piece arrives in the drydock. I've scheduled each section's arrival to match our construction team's capacity, to make sure we'll be working at optimum efficiency."

Calara nodded but seemed distracted, having just spotted several grav-sleds floating out of the Invictus' Cargo Bay. She knew exactly what was in the ore containers, and more importantly, what that ore was going to be used for. The Maliri engineers were carrying away their cargo of Tyrenium ore, so that it could be refined and processed to remove all impurities. The pure Tyrenium would then be forged into an intricate lattice that would power the Singularity Generator, harnessing the titanic forces of a black hole, and turning them into a devastatingly potent weapon.

Goosebumps dimpled her smooth, olive-toned skin, and she felt a shiver of excitement at the thought of adding a pair of Singularity Drivers to the Invictus' arsenal. Weapons that would normally be mounted on a dreadnought would soon be hers to command.

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Jade's attention drawn by a group of Maliri engineers, who were busy stacking armour plating into neat piles. They had all stopped what they were doing, and had turned to stare at the man who'd just strolled into the Docking Bay.

"Hey, John!" she exclaimed happily, bounding over to greet him with a kiss. Her lips pressed against his, but she pulled back with a frown as she took in his tense expression, and added, "Are you alright?"

"Yeah, just big decisions to make," he replied, giving her an affectionate, if rather troubled smile.

The Nymph studied him for a moment, then stepping close enough to brush his ear with her lips, she whispered in a sultry purr, "Would you like me to distract you, Master?"

Guessing what she probably had in mind, he chuckled, and replied, "I could use some distracting right about now, thanks Jade."

Her cat-like eyes flared with arousal, and the vertical slits of her pupils expanded to deep black pools in moments. Jade held his gaze for a second, before turning to the group of Maliri women who were staring at John like rabbits in headlights. She beamed a sparkling smile at them, and said, "Come with me ladies, you're lucky enough to go first!"

She took his hand and started walking back the way he'd just arrived, leading him from the Drydock and into the corridor beyond. Behind them they could hear nervous, but very eager whispers coming from the Maliri engineers, who were following close behind.

"Where are you taking me?" John asked her, his eyebrow arched quizzically. "The bedroom in the Invictus is back that way..."

Jade led him ten yards down the corridor to a set of double doors in the opposite wall, and grinned at him as she opened them and walked inside. "Edraele planned ahead," she replied, then laughed as she added, "for you to get lots of head."

John smiled when he got a look inside the room, which had obviously been carefully designed for a very specific and unusual set of requirements. In the centre of the room was a very comfortable looking high backed chair, and surrounding it were piles of cushions. The floor was covered in some kind of very soft, springy kind of matting which yielded to his weight like an exceedingly comfy bed.

The Nymph guided him over to the chair, and beckoned the Maliri after her, the blue skinned women following inside obediently. When the last of the twenty five engineers had entered the room, she pressed a button on the high back of the plush chair, and the doors swung closed behind them.

"Now, you sit there, Master," she said, pointing helpfully at the chair. Turning to the Maliri, she continued, "Please make yourselves comfortable, ladies."

John followed her instructions with some bemusement, then watched in fascination as the Maliri girls sat in close concentric circles in front of him, sitting shoulder to shoulder. It didn't take long for them to all take a seat, and he looked out across the sea of lovely flushed faces. He felt a pang of guilt at just taking these women for granted, and cleared his throat before he said with a smile, "My name's John, but I think I told all of you that already."

The girls tittered, but there was no malice or scorn in their laughter. They sat there watching him as though basking in his presence, like beautiful flowers turned up to face the warmth of the sun.

"I'd like to get to know each of you a little, as long as you don't mind indulging my curiosity?" he asked, his tone gentle and disarming. Turning to the closest girl on his right, he asked, "What's your name, beautiful stranger?"

The blue-skinned woman looked to be a little older than Irillith, but just like the rest of her species, it was extremely difficult to gauge her exact age. To John she appeared to be in her late twenties, but he had enough experience with Maliri now, to know he was likely to be at least sixty years wide of the mark. The engineer blushed furiously at being the centre of his attention, but immediately replied, "My name's Tellathea, John."

He nodded and his voice was sombre as he replied, "A very pretty name for a very pretty girl." Glancing at the unfamiliar insignia on her jacket, he smiled as he added, "Have you been a House Valaden engineer for very long, Tellathea?"

She giggled and shook her head as she explained patiently, "I'm from House Aeberos! My Matriarch asked me to travel to Genthalas to assist you."

John feigned surprise, and leaned forward as he asked curiously, "I don't know anything about House Aeberos! Perhaps you could tell me a little about the planet you grew up on?"

As the Maliri woman nodded eagerly and began to describe her homeworld, Jade stepped out of her shoes, then slipped the dress off her shoulders and let it fall away to pool at her feet. Despite being entirely nude, none of the Maliri so much as glanced in her direction, they were that absorbed by John's gentle conversation with the Aeberos engineer.

Leaning down to John's pointed ear, Jade murmured, "Would you move forward a little please, Master?"

He wriggled forward as she requested, then started bringing more of the Maliri into the conversation, asking their names, and engaging in some playful teasing and flirting. Jade slid into the chair behind him, and began to massage his shoulders, frowning at the tension in his muscles as she probed him with her expert fingers.

"Shirt off as well, please," she requested politely.

John unbuttoned his shirt and pulled it off, exposing his muscular chest to twenty-five sets of very hungry eyes. There was a breathy gasp from the girls, and a momentary lull in the conversation before they began speaking again, responding to his subtle questioning designed to get them to open up about themselves, and reveal any injuries they might have. Jade started to knead the muscles in his back and shoulders, smiling with satisfaction as she felt the tension easing away with her skilful touch.

They spent an hour like that, with Jade gradually removing the rest of his clothing to allow her to continue her massage, while John got to know the entranced group of women. The Maliri were looking increasingly hot and flustered, and taking pity on them, the Nymph eventually suggested, "Why don't all of you get more comfortable, too?"

John was presented with the spectacular sight of a whole bevy of toned Maliri girls stripping off with eager abandon, and in very little time, they were all very naked. His cock throbbed at the mouth-watering sight, and Jade ran her cool fingers over his length, enjoying the lusty heat from his shaft. She smoothly sat astride him, while positioning his hot, hard head at the clenched knot of muscle between her firm cheeks.

"They're hungry for your cum, Master," she crooned to him. "Will you let them empty your balls for you?"

"You're such a good, horny little Nymph," he growled, grabbing her hips with both hands.

Knowing that she could easily accommodate his wide girth, John pulled her down onto his lap, enjoying hearing Jade's startled gasp. She had already lubricated herself in preparation for this, but her muscles gripped him like a fist, only letting him penetrate her inch by gloriously tight inch. He used his strength to fight against her inner muscles, spreading her wide to take him, and enjoying the challenging look in her gorgeous emerald eyes. He finally managed to overcome her teasing resistance, and was soon face-to-face with her as she settled in his lap, his entire length buried inside her.

"You've overpowered me, Master," she murmured in a hushed voice, her skin heating up as she got more turned on. "Now I'll have to reward you."

She closed her eyes as she concentrated, and John saw a flurry of movement from behind her, as over a score of undulating tentacles sprouted from her back to reach the kneeling Maliri. The end of each smooth limb was shaped into an exact replica of his cock, and he could feel the contact as the multitude of dark-green appendages nudged up against soft female lips. Each woman lapped eagerly at the phallic tentacle with a velvety tongue, and Jade transferred the sensation to his own throbbing tool.

"Fuck... I'd forgotten how amazing that feels," John groaned, holding on for dear life. He grabbed her hips to keep them still and tried to force more of his cock into her, which she matched by pushing into hot little Maliri mouths, spreading their flushed lips wide.

"They're desperate to serve you, Master," she crooned, while massaging him with her inhuman muscles. "I can't wait to feed them your cum, but you only have to say the word, and we can impregnate them too..."

Jade's body was feverishly hot with excitement, and she rolled her hips, making his eyes roll back in his head. John didn't give her that order, as she knew he wouldn't, but the thought of it was tremendously exciting to them both. Pressing her firm breasts against him, she leaned in to nibble at his earlobe, while keeping him fully impaled in her ass. There was no need to move, as her rippling internal muscles were simulating the feel of all those mouths worshiping his cock.

She tilted her head to one side, sweeping her long dark hair out of the way, so that he could see the Maliri girls sucking eagerly on the swaying green tentacles. Tellathea moaned with delight at the sweet taste of his pre-cum, then made eye contact with him as she visibly relaxed, letting Jade ease the pulsating viridian cock into her throat. John felt every inch of penetration, and let out a strangled cry as the Nymph pushed deeper into more willing mouths.

It was impossible to hold out against such intense stimulation, and he clung to Jade as he came, shooting out long bursts of cum from his throbbing quad. His four balls worked overtime to satisfy the relentless suction, and John writhed on his chair as he cried out in ecstasy. Jade funnelled his cum to each of the eagerly sucking Maliri, and their eyes glazed over as his spunk shot down their throats into their welcoming stomachs.

John collapsed back in his chair, while Jade hugged him and murmured loving endearments in his ear, her curving tentacles slowly withdrawing into her viridian body. Unable to even think for a couple of minutes, John simply held the Nymph in his arms as he recovered his breath. When his eyes finally flickered open, he smiled as he saw the Maliri curled up together on the comfortable cushions and padded floor, all of them slumbering with contented smiles on their serene blue faces.

"You'll make a wonderful leader for the Maliri, Master," Jade said to him, breathing the words into his ear. "You're ideally suited to rule them."

That shocked him out of his blissful daze, and he pulled back a little to stare into her probing eyes. "That's why I should turn Edraele down flat," he replied adamantly, shaking his head. "I don't want to enslave them like the Mael'nerak did!"

Jade gave him a tender kiss, and whispered, "No, you misunderstand me. Your natural instinct is to protect and nurture them, not to enslave and dominate." She twisted slightly to look at the sleeping Maliri, and added, "You could have just taken them and used them for your pleasure, but you chose not to. Instead, you made the effort to get to know all of them first, and you're going to heal all their scars and injuries. What tyrant would bother to do that?"

Thinking back to the threesome with Edraele and Alyssa, he replied falteringly, "I'm not the saint you make me out to be, Jade. I enjoy submissive women far too much..."

Her pupils had expanded to almost fully eclipse the emerald green of her eyes, and she gazed at him intently as she said, "You play at being dominant with me and the girls, but there's never any maliciousness or sadistic intent. Your desire is always to bestow pleasure, and never to inflict pain."

"I don't know, Jade," he replied, a haunted look in his eyes. "I'm not sure I can trust myself with that kind of absolute power. It could be a terrible mistake..."

She gave him another loving kiss, and said earnestly, "You've given me free will, ambition, and my independence. Please believe me when I tell you that I've known some truly terrible men in my time, and if you were like them, I would refuse to serve you. I'd walk away, even though it would break my heart to do so."

"But I thought... your nature? You need a master, don't you?" John asked, stunned by Jade's sombre declaration.

"I've grown far beyond the simple creature you saved all those months ago, and it was you that encouraged and nurtured that growth. I'm with you now through choice, not because of some instinctive compulsion to obey," she replied, her finger tracing along his jawline in that familiar loving gesture of hers. She gazed at him adoringly as she continued, "You're my Master because I love you, and I know I could never find anyone more worthy."

"But you still call me, Master..." he faltered.

"Because I want to, not because I must," she replied, and leaned in to kiss him, her soft lips gentle and tender as they brushed against his own. It was a delicate kiss, but one that clearly communicated the strength of her feelings for him.

"I love you too, Jade," he replied sincerely, pulling her in for a hug as she started to purr with blissful contentment.

John stroked her back as he gazed off into the distance, his thoughts racing as he mulled over what the Nymph had just told him.

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The lights were dimmed inside the luxurious office in the mercantile district on Geniya Station, the sweeping desk dark and silent. The comms interface built into the desk suddenly sprang into life and began to chime urgently, the bright glow from the holo screen lighting up the entire room.

Ceraden cinched the robe around his waist using the auto-locking clasps attached to the velvety fabric, then hurried to answer the distinctive sound of the high-priority call. He rushed to the desk with his long blue fingers poised to swipe across the name on the comm-interface, but when he saw the identity of the caller, he froze with indecision. It seemed to him as though the insistent chimes were becoming angrier with his reluctance to answer the incoming call, and despite his better judgement, he finally swiped his hand across the flashing name with a dark feeling of foreboding.

The crossed blades insignia of House Valaden popped into view on a holographic image, before fading away a few seconds later. It was replaced by a face that was as terrifying as it was beautiful, the regal woman's features framed in a white cowl and topped by a golden diadem. Matriarch Edraele Valaden stared at him with cold eyes, her dark expression revealing that she was not in the best of moods.

"Ah, Matriarch Valaden, it's so wonderful to see you!" Ceraden said to her, trying to sound as sincere as possible before bowing his head respectfully. "All is well I trust?"

"You can save the insincere pleasantries, Ceraden," Edraele replied, her tone haughty and irritable. "I was looking over your balance sheet for the last two months, and profits have crashed. I've decided to revoke your charter with House Valaden on Geniya Station."

Any indecision was shaken out of him in an instant, and he immediately replied, "There's no need to be hasty, Matriarch! The Terran war with the Kintark has affected everyone, as has the increased instability in the Ashanath Collective. Everything will settle down in due course."

"I have no intention of being placated by excuses, Ceraden. You males have grown insolent and lazy out on the border stations, and I refuse to indulge you any further," she snapped, looking down her nose at him.

"Wait, Matriarch!" he objected, his mind racing. "There must be something I can do to convince you to let me retain my charter?!"

She studied him for a long moment, like a person staring at an insect and deciding whether to let it live, or crush it underfoot. Her smile was chilling when she finally replied, "I have need of a courier from Valaden to Geniya station. Return here to transport this package for me, and I'll extend your charter for another year."

Ceraden was shocked and terrified at the thought of returning to Valaden, but he managed to keep the horror from his face as he said in a rush, "There must be something else I could do? Transportation back to Valaden can be difficult to come by at the best of-."

"Nonsense," Edraele replied brusquely, cutting him off. "You can travel back with the Valaden engineers I sent to Geniya, they're due to return any day now."

He froze, unable to think of any reasonable objection to her plan, which Edraele seemed to take as tacit consent. She gave him a curt nod, then closed off the call before he could object. Slumping back in his chair he stared at the blank viewscreen, and cursed vehemently in Terran, finding the crude language far more colourful and descriptive than Maliri. He sat there for several minutes, drumming his fingers on the desk as he wracked his brain to try and come up with some way out of this predicament.

Ceraden always knew it was a huge risk when he'd sought out this charter for House Valaden, but Edraele's House was by far the richest in the Maliri Regency, and hungered for more imported goods. There was a reason why it was so lucrative though, and it wasn't just because of the huge volume of materials that were traded and shipped to Genthalas Station. Dealing with the highly volatile Valaden Matriarch was a very risky proposition, and now it appeared that it was time to pay the piper.

He heard the soft padding of feet behind him, and a woman's sultry voice said enticingly, "Come back to bed, Ceraden my love."

Turning his chair, he watched as the ravishing Maliri woman sauntered into his study entirely nude. Her short shock of snowy white hair contrasted beautifully with her flawless azure skin, and he felt himself stiffen at the delicious sight of her.

"Myriana, my goddess, you look absolutely ravishing!" Ceraden said, gazing at her in awe. He tried to shake off the bewitching spell the mere sight of her cast on him, and added apologetically, "I'd love to, truly, but I have some important business to take care of first. I really should attend to-."

She silenced him with a kiss, her dark-green eyes soft and loving as she gazed at him. "We need to celebrate, my handsome virile man," she crooned, sliding forward to straddle him.

He realised what she was saying, and was genuinely delighted as he said, "My dear, that's such wonderful news!"

Reaching for his hand, she placed it on her slim abdomen, and her eyes were full of emotion as she replied, "Thank you so much, Ceraden. I never thought in my wildest dreams that I'd ever have a baby..."

Ceraden gave her a beaming smile, overjoyed to see Myriana looking so deliriously happy. When she'd arrived on the station just a few weeks ago, he'd taken one look at her, and knew he had to have her. Throwing decorum to the wind, he'd heedlessly abandoned the normal conventions where she was expected to proposition him, and had ended up courting her like a lovestruck fool. It had been an astonishing surprise to find out that quite unlike the aloof and unpleasant noblewomen he'd encountered in the past, this gorgeous woman had been kind, and sweet natured. She possessed a wonderful sense of humour and he found himself entirely smitten with her.

As much as he wanted to spend all day in bed with Myriana, he knew he had to try and find some way out of this delicate situation with Edraele. Letting out a mournful sigh, he said, "I'll join you as soon as I can, my gorgeous seductress. First I need to find some way out of returning to Valaden." He shivered as he added, "I'm quite fond of my skin being attached to my body, thank you very much, so the last thing I need is a meeting with Edraele!"

Myriana appeared disappointed for a moment, then looked at him askance, and it almost seemed like she was listening to something. A wide smile appeared on her face as she said, "This is perfect! I can accompany you on your journey back to Valaden and get all my affairs in order before returning with you to Geniya! Now we never have to be apart!"

The thought of spending more time with her certainly did sound appealing, and he'd been dreading the thought of her leaving him for several weeks when she made that journey. Maybe a trip back to Valaden might not be so terrible after all, if he were to spend the entire trip in Myriana's delightful company. He could even try and find a proxy to take the package for him, thereby circumventing having to meet Edraele at all.

Sliding off his lap, Myriana started to glide back to the bedroom, glancing at him coyly over her shoulder as she murmured, "Besides, now I'm pregnant, there's something else I'd love to try with you. It's very sinful though, so I understand if an upstanding nobleman like yourself would be offended by the idea. I guarantee none of those stuck up noble girls will have let you try this before..."

Catching her meaning, all thoughts of Valaden were scattered from his mind as Ceraden's eyes widened in shock. Myriana's oral mastery was quite astonishing, the beautiful girl having no qualms about kneeling for him submissively and deep throating him with ease - something the noble women he'd been with before wouldn't even countenance. If she was offering him what he thought she was, he could only imagine the pleasures that lay in store... He stared at the glorious round orbs of her ass as she sashayed across the room, rolling her hips suggestively before stopping to let him admire the view. When he lifted his astonished eyes to look at her face, she gave him a playful wink and disappeared through the door to his bedroom.

He lurched out of the chair and practically sprinted after her, fully resolved to follow this remarkable woman into the darkest depths of hell itself.

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John stood on the platform behind Rachel, high up on the maintenance gantry that overlooked the Invictus. The fore and aft of his ship were cradled in supportive stanchions, keeping their colossal mass stable as the vessel was carefully split in half. He wrapped his arms tighter around the brunette, and shivered as he watched the two sections of the assault cruiser being slowly pulled apart by the massive tractor fields being applied in the drydock.

They'd shut down all power on the ship, leaving Faye's server running on an emergency backup while the rest of the vessel went dark. Once the Cutting Lasers were in position, the beams had made a neat incision through the superstructure, burning a glowing line through deck after deck. The powerful lasers had sliced straight through the power relays, but it was faster than moving them, as they were planning on upgrading them to the Maliri versions anyway.

Sensing his apprehension, Rachel tilted her head back to look at him, and said affectionately, "You're as anxious as Calara."

He gave her a gentle squeeze, and said in a quiet voice, "That ship's older than you are, honey, and she was my home for ten years when I served on her as a marine. It feels wrong carving her up like this..."

With a sympathetic smile, Rachel replied, "I'm afraid we haven't finished yet, Admiral. We still have to perform an incision through the upper foredecks to allow us access to the Mass Driver rails."

John nodded grimly, and watched in silence as the two halves of his ship were steadily pulled apart, metre-by-metre. As per Dana's plan, they'd cut the Invictus into two unevenly sized pieces, with the line of incision just ahead of their bedroom on Deck Two. Directly below that level were shield generators, reinforced bulkheads, and navigation systems, with all the living space unaffected as it swept backwards from the grav-tube.

The only room that was going to be drastically affected was the Hangar Bay on Deck Nine. Long before they had even warmed up the cutting beams, Jade had taken off with the Raptor and carefully parked it to one side, positioning it in preparation for its own upgrades. It was probably John's imagination, but the gunship appeared to be watching its bigger sibling with an air of sad resignation.

A score of Maliri engineers had already moved the massive Cutting Laser into position, and the huge device was now pointing at the front section of the Invictus. This piece of the ship was two-hundred-metres long, and ended just after the length of the Mass Drivers' magnetic rails, with deck after deck now open to view. The tractor fields continued to manoeuvre the front of the ship into perfect alignment with the Cutting Laser, and John could see lots of frantic activity below as engineers ran back and forth, making final checks.

"I hope she can put it all back together again," he grumbled under his breath.

Rachel smiled at him as she said, "Dana certainly hasn't failed you yet, Humpty Dumpty. I'd be quite astonished if she started now."

He heaved a sigh, and conceded, "No, she's a brilliant girl, she knows what she's doing."

Still, it was hard to watch as the cutting beams went to work again, the bright blue lances of energy scything through the Titanium superstructure, and burning deeply into the hull of the assault cruiser. The lasers moved towards the rear of this part of the ship, cleanly slicing open the topdeck to expose the two-hundred-metre long Mass Driver rails beneath.

Feeling the tension in his arms, Rachel's voice was reassuring as she said, "Reconstructing the Invictus will take a considerable amount of time, but when all our tasks are complete, she'll be a formidable ship."

"Cutting through the superstructure like this can't be good," he fretted, watching as the blue beams continued to carve their way through the Invictus. "When we bolt it back together again, we're bound to compromise the hull strength."

Rachel turned in his arms, and said patiently, "Dana has already explained all this. We'll be reinforcing the hull with Crystal Alyssium, so it'll be significantly stronger than before." She studied him for a long moment, until she added, "Do you want to talk about what's really on your mind?"

He laughed humourlessly, and replied, "You already know, I assume?"

"Yes, of course," she answered simply, lifting her hand to trace her fingertips over his chest while she gazed into his eyes.

Her dexterous fingers seemed to be moving in specific patterns, rather than just random swirls, and he glanced down at her slender hand. "What are you doing?" he asked, distracted by her delicate touch.

She blushed for a moment, then smiled at him as she confessed, "Writing 'I love you', over your heart."

He smiled at her affectionately, but his smile faded as he admitted, "It's not just nerves stopping me from following Edraele's plans. I'm really worried about being put in a position of absolute power like this, especially with everything still unresolved with my Progenitor-side. Imagine the nightmare if he manages to get loose and defeat me; we'll have set him up with everything he always wanted!"

Rachel's stormy grey eyes were fierce in their conviction as she said, "I've seen you do the right thing time and time again. I know you'll make the correct choice here, too."

He pulled her close and rested his chin on her shoulder as he stared out at the Invictus. The Cutting Lasers had finished their work, and the upper decks were now being painstakingly lifted off the lower hull, revealing the four Mass Driver barrels beneath. He felt just like his ship at that moment, as it was pulled in different directions, and he desperately craved some stability.

"Thanks for trusting me, I hope I don't let you down," he said to Rachel, feeling deeply unsettled.

"You won't," she replied, hugging him comfortingly.

While they stood together, she listened to Alyssa's telepathic voice, while her Matriarch provided some detailed insight into his troubled state of mind. It only took her dazzling mind a few seconds to know just what to say, and she smiled to herself, pleased that she might be able to help him.

Pressing her lips to his pointed ear, Rachel whispered, "The Invictus is being pulled apart, but it'll be so much stronger when it's rebuilt. Just like the ship, you're going through some disturbing changes, but people learn and adapt to circumstances. I think this will fortify you for your confrontation with your Progenitor-side, rather than weaken you and leave you vulnerable. You'll grow into the role that's been thrust upon you, and be all the stronger for it. The same applies to the Maliri, and the tremendous good that you'll be able to facilitate throughout their society."

He listened to her carefully, ever respectful of her staggering intellect, and nodded as he digested what she was telling him. As he thought it over, he felt a certain sense of comfort in her words, the heavy burden of doubt lifting from his shoulders.

"Thank you," he replied, feeling better already.

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"Very nice, Makaela," Dana replied, as she cast an appraising eye over all the equipment set up in the vast Docking Bay. "We'll just need to haul in the magnetic rails, and with a few tweaks here and there, we'll be good to go!"

"We won't be able to maintain gravitational forces of that magnitude for long," Alyndra said looking worried.

The redhead grinned at her, and said, "Don't worry, we'll be done in no time. We won't need to run the rails at full power, I'll just juice them enough to launch particles into hyper-warp, and the heatsinks I've developed will keep them from burning out for long enough to do what we need to. We'll dump enough material through in a constant stream, until we fully saturate the beryllium, and force it to change to its super-heavy state."

"How long will it take to modify the equipment?" Makaela asked, looking out over the sea of devices that were being connected to the power grid by a large contingent of Maliri Engineers.

Dana tapped her chin thoughtfully before she replied, "I reckon about four hours to reconfigure the rails and give them a final stress test to check they'll work in a continuous fire mode." She glanced to her left, and smiled as she added, "Looks like they're on their way."

Her two white-haired Maliri companions turned to look in the same direction, and stared out through the transparent atmospheric shielding that protected all those inside the Docking Bay. A compact golden Maliri tug had swung into view, hauling its long cargo behind it, and its shiny hull glinted in the light from the bluish-white star at the heart of the Epsilon Aquarii system. They watched as the tug crept carefully through the cavernous entrance to the bay, before retro-thrusters flared to slow its speed as it positioned itself above the designated landing zone.

The four Mass Driver barrels were bracketed by an intricate looking harness with anti-grav generators built into each of the four corners. They were linked to the control systems in the tug, and the cargo floated down to land safely on the deck of the Docking Bay. As soon as it had settled on the floor, engineers clustered around it to decouple the harness from the tug, and got ready to move it into position for what Makaela considered to be Dana's glorified science experiment.

"We're about to make some new elements, ladies!" Dana said to her two Maliri companions, sky-blue eyes sparkling in the light. She nudged Alyndra and Makaela with an elbow, and added in a playful whisper, "I don't know about you two, but doing this sort of groundbreaking stuff makes me really fucking horny!"

Makaela glanced at the redhead, and gave her a nervous, shaky smile. Of all the things she felt about using a converted Mass Driver to fire hyper-warp accelerated particles within the confines of her Space Station, sexual arousal was definitely not one of them. She glanced across at Alyndra, and was surprised to see the technician nod at the Terran girl, a gleam of excitement in her eyes. It looked like it wasn't just Dana who found such wildly reckless experiments thrilling.

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Irillith's flawlessly beautiful face was posed in the perfect mask of concern as she pleaded, "I know you're furious at me, but I'm begging you, Tashana. Please take a look at the attached video archives, they'll prove-."

"Go fuck yourself! Treacherous whore!" Tashana snarled, stabbing her finger down on the vidscreen control and cutting off her sister.

She'd refused to take the first half-dozen calls, but Irillith's persistence had eventually worn her down. Despite her better judgement, Tashana had finally accepted the incoming call that evening, curious to hear what Irillith could possibly have to say for herself. It had only taken one look at her twin's face to remind her of everything she'd lost. Twin... to use that word was laughable when you compared the mangled ruin of her own features, with the radiant vision of feminine beauty that had been speaking to her mere seconds ago.

Tashana felt her rage simmering beneath the surface, the seductive call of the flames whispering to her subconscious. All she had to do was surrender to that burning sense of hatred, and she'd be able to incinerate this place, leading everyone in a merry dance as she swathed them in her alluring amber blaze. Her mother, her sister, her cousin, the thralls, this inferno building within her was happy to play with everyone.

Tamping down her rage, she reminded herself that not everyone had been lost, not yet at least. There was still time to avert disaster and try and save the Maliri from -him-. She felt a shiver of fear course through her, and the spark burning within her was doused once more. Letting out a shuddering sigh, she steeled herself for what she needed to do next. Tashana had a plan now, she just needed to see it through, and she grabbed her red jacket from the back of the chair and tugged it on.

Her quarters felt oppressive and stifling, but that was okay, she needed to leave now anyway. Striding towards the door, it opened as she approached, and Tashana glanced either way to check it was clear. There wasn't much foot-traffic near the guest quarters, so she slipped out of her room without seeing a soul. It had been years prior to her banishment since she'd stepped foot on Genthalas, but she knew the layout of the station fairly well, and it was easy to find her way around.

Keeping a wary eye out for other Maliri, she strolled along the corridor, heading towards her intended destination. She started to see lots more Maliri on her route, as she was walking into a much busier part of the station, but it came as a huge relief to see they were all dark-haired women. She ignored the occasional inquisitive glances, knowing they were merely due to curiosity about her golden mask. There were soldiers here too, amongst the merchants and base personnel, but they paid her no undue attention beyond a cursory glance.

Her heart was pounding in her chest by the time she reached her goal. She stopped in the huge Docking terminus, and glanced around until she found what she was looking for; one of the holographic registers that listed the ships landed in each Docking Bay. It was being used by a sour faced Maliri merchant, who seemed to be glowering at one of the bay listings, probably furious at some petty rival or something equally trivial.

"Are you done?" Tashana snapped after a minute, her patience wearing thin.

The Maliri woman was startled out of her reverie, and turned to look at Tashana before blinking in surprise at the sight of the golden mask with its mocking smile. The merchant scowled, and replied dismissively, "I didn't order a jester. Go and bother someone else."

Leaning forward Tashana growled, "You better fucking move, while you're still able to walk."

The barely concealed threat in Tashana's gravelly voice had the merchant scuttling away in no time, glancing back fearfully over her shoulder as she fled. Tashana watched her leave, just in case she pulled a weapon, then turned back to look at the holographic list of all the occupied Docking Bays. Genthalas seemed busier than she remembered it, with more merchant traffic around than the last time she'd been at the station.

Scanning down the list she saw one bulky freighter after another, or at least as much as any Maliri vessel could be considered bulky. Still, none of these ships were what she was looking for. She needed something fast and relatively small, so that she could easily overpower the crew, and would have no trouble manning it herself as she made her escape. Reaching the end of the list she was dismayed to not find anything that fit the bill, and blowing out her breath, she reluctantly started to consider stealing one of the cumbersome merchant ships.

A flashing icon near the bottom of the list caught her attention, and she pressed it curiously, wondering what it signified. The Docking Bay listings disappeared as they were refreshed, and Tashana looked on in amazement as a second set of occupied Bays were listed. She was astonished to realise that her mother had expanded the operational sections of Genthalas, bringing more of the massive station online for the first time in centuries. Of course, it made sense when she thought about it, and she shivered with fear as she felt the repercussions the Progenitor was already having on House Valaden.

Turning her attention to the ship listings again, she scrolled down through the military ships and trading vessels until she froze, staring at one of the entries in surprise. Oh that one was just perfect! Letting out a throaty chuckle that drew a few curious glances from passers-by, she whirled away from the holograph console and walked briskly towards the Docking Bays to take a closer look at the ship she'd chosen.

She had a lightness to her step as she strode along the wide corridors. This stroke of luck would make everything so much easier, and she smiled behind her mask, feeling a sense of hope that she might just be able to escape from this nightmare after all. As she was approaching one of the docking bays, she heard a deeply chilling sound coming from inside which instantly dispelled her bright mood and froze her in her tracks. She could hear joyful laughter and light-hearted chatter. Such sounds were horribly out of place anywhere in Maliri Space, but especially so on Genthalas station, and she knew there was only one explanation for it.

Moving swiftly to dart behind a blocky vending station, she ducked out of sight, pressing herself up against the broad cabinet. Lots of footsteps were approaching along the corridor, and she didn't have to wait long before a score of white-haired thralls glided past her hiding place. She could see the broad smiles on their faces as they laughed and joked with one another, all their natural guarded suspicion evaporated in the company of their fellow slaves.

Tashana felt a surge of pity for the enthralled Maliri, and shook her head with regret as she watched the smiling, happy women stroll away up the corridor. She was too late to save them, but it wasn't too late to save the rest of her people from enslavement. Stepping away from the vending machine, she was about to continue on towards the docking bays, when she heard more cheerful conversation from up ahead.

She was forced to duck back a second time as another big group of Maliri left the nearby Docking Bay and walked past her concealed position. Just like the first group, they were all white-haired, and smiling and talking pleasantly without any signs of distrust or guarded wariness. It was obvious that the Progenitor was moving fast to consolidate his position, and quickly building an army of thralls to do his bidding. She counted twenty-five Maliri as they walked past her, all completely oblivious to her presence.

From listening to fragments of their conversation about working on a ship refit, the thralls seemed to be engineers rather than soldiers, which left Tashana more than a little confused. It would have made more sense for the Progenitor to sweep through the barracks first, dominating the garrison of troops stationed at Genthalas, before turning his attention to support personnel. She shuddered as she realised he might have done so already, and his insidious control of the Maliri on this station might be proceeding faster than she had anticipated. However as she mulled that over, Tashana recalled seeing the dark-haired soldiers back in the Docking Terminus, so that theory didn't quite seem to fit.

She paused for a moment and glanced down the corridor longingly. The Docking Bay she needed was just up ahead, but it was too dangerous to loiter around here, not with this many thralls about. It was clear that a scouting mission was too risky, and she'd just have to trust everything would work out when she put her plan into action. Not wanting to risk running into any more thralls, she backed away up the corridor, moving furtively behind the white-haired Maliri engineers who'd just finished their shift.

Her tension lifted when the thralls took a left turn and appeared to be travelling towards the dining concourse where she knew there were dozens of restaurants. She waited until they'd all disappeared from sight, then rushed along the corridor as she made her way back to the guest suite. Her mind was a blur of worried thoughts, and she wasn't paying as close attention as she should have been. As she half-jogged along the corridor, and took a quick glance over her shoulder to check that she wasn't being followed, someone walked out in front of her. They crashed into each other, sending both of them tumbling to the floor in a tangle of limbs.

Tashana scrambled clear, and darted a look at the woman who'd crossed her path. Expecting a stern rebuke for clumsiness, her own profane retort was already on her lips, but it died when she saw the woman's white hair.

"Oops! I'm really sorry about that, it was totally my fault!" the thrall said with an embarrassed chuckle. She let out a happy, wistful sigh as she continued, "Today's just been so amazing, I was lost in my own little world!" Rising to her feet, she had a kind smile on her face as she offered Tashana a hand to help her up, and asked, "Are you alright?"

Tashana stared at her in shock, and nearly took the woman's hand in her distracted state. She managed to gather her wits in time, and snatched her fingers away at the last second, before she stammered, "I-I'm fine, don't worry." She scrambled upright, and started to slowly back away from the thrall.

The Maliri woman looked at her with concern, and asked, "Are you sure? You're welcome to join me and my friends for dinner if you haven't eaten yet? It's the least I could do to make up for knocking you down like that. I just need to go and get my-."

Whatever else the thrall said fell on deaf ears as Tashana turned and fled along the corridor, desperate to get away from this corrupted woman. She rushed back to Genthalas' guest suites, but was reluctant to return to the confines of her luxurious prison. Instead she wandered into the observatory again, with its spectacular crystal canopy full of stars, and slumped despondently into one of the gyroscopic chairs.

Tashana hadn't been seated for long, when she heard a woman's angry voice coming from beyond the doors. She was instantly on edge, and glanced over at the entrance to the observatory wary for danger. When the doors opened, she relaxed when she recognised the young woman who swept into the room.

"That stubborn old goat! Why must she be so damnably awkward!" Valani exclaimed in exasperation. Muttering under her breath, she continued, "Leena doesn't know how lucky she is!"

It was strange to see the kind, placid girl looking so angry, and Tashana sat up in her chair, and asked, "Are you alright, Valani?"

Those pretty teal eyes looked at her in surprise, and Valani gasped, "Oh! I didn't know you were in here! I'm so sorry for barging in on you like this, you must be appalled at my behaviour!"

Tashana smiled despite herself, and gestured to the seat beside her as she said, "I think I'll get over it. Grab a chair if you want."

Valani gave her a grateful smile, then plonked herself down on the adjacent gyroscopic chair, and let out a heavy sigh.

"It sounds like you're upset with someone. What's the matter?" Tashana asked, curious to know what could have riled her up so much.

"All she has to do is sit on House Perfaren's border like I asked! It's not like I've told her to invade or anything!" Valani exclaimed, sounding deeply frustrated.

That certainly wasn't what Tashana was expecting to hear, and she frowned as she tried to make sense of it. "Who are we talking about exactly?" she asked the pensive young woman.

"Amalaeth, my Fleet Commander," Valani replied, rolling her eyes as she said the woman's name. "I'm starting to think I should have just replaced her when I took control, but the girls thought it would be sensible to keep her in place, just as they've done."

"Your Fleet Commander?!" Tashana exclaimed, looking at the younger woman in shock. "But that means you're a..."

"Matriarch Valani Naestina at your service," the girl replied, giving her an impish grin. She frowned for a moment, and added apologetically, "Sorry I didn't tell you before, but people start acting a bit funny when I tell them I'm a Matriarch."

Tashana glanced at the cagey bodyguards guarding the doors, and this young noblewoman's ever-watchful security suddenly made a lot more sense. She was about to reply to Valani, and tell her that she understood, but something the Naestina Matriarch had just said made her pause. Watching her carefully, she asked, "You mentioned 'the girls' earlier. Who are they?"

Valani's face lit up as she replied, "Leena Ghilwen, Kali Loraleth, and Nyrelle Aeberos are all new Matriarchs like me. We get together to chat about how to deal with running our Houses, but most of our advice comes from-."

"Wait a minute, all four of you are here on Genthalas?!" Tashana balked, cutting her off abruptly as she stared at the girl in shock.

Nodding exuberantly, Valani replied, "They've been absolutely wonderful! I would have been so lost without their support." She frowned then, and admitted, "I guess I just let Amalaeth get to me because I'm still disappointed about this morning. We'd been waiting to meet him for weeks, but we only got to say a brief hello..."

Tashana looked at her in dread, and asked in a hushed whisper, "Waiting to meet who?"

Valani let out a breathy sigh as she replied, "Oh my goodness, he was so handsome! Edraele said he's really busy with the refit at the moment, but she'll try and arrange another meeting for us tomorrow." Her teal eyes sparkled with excitement as she added, "I know you'd love to meet him, you should come along too! Edraele says he's going to help transform Maliri society! Isn't that amazing?"

Everything suddenly clicked into place, and Tashana felt a creeping feeling of horror threaten to overwhelm her. This Progenitor was vastly more cunning than she'd given him credit for, and was wasting no time in using Edraele to secure his stranglehold over the Maliri Regency. With four more Matriarchs under his control, John Blake would soon be able to seize absolute control over the Maliri in a lightning-fast and bloodless coup! She had to get out of here, and warn the other Houses. At this rate, the Maliri would be utterly doomed, forced to live out a horrific existence as mindless slaves, used up in a never-ending series of terrible wars.

She leapt from her chair, and was about to flee from the Observatory, when she suddenly remembered the kind young woman sitting next to her. Valani reminded her so much of herself before her life had been ruined. Optimistic, friendly, and hopelessly naive, at least until that had been beaten and raped out of her in the Unclaimed Wastes. Tashana couldn't just abandon this lovely young woman to her fate.

She stared intently at the startled girl, and said in a hushed, urgent voice, "It's not safe for you at Genthalas, Valani. If you have any sense, you'll avoid John Blake like the plague, and leave on the first transport out of here!"

Shocked by Tashana's impassioned request, Valani just stared at her mutely, then watched as the peculiar, golden-masked woman stalked from the room.

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