Three Square Meals Ch. 89

“I could see it all...” Calara whispered, her voice filled with awe. “I knew what you were going to do, but I changed what should have happened! I twisted the outcome in my favour!”

John reached up a hand to cup her face. “You’ve been on the cusp of this breakthrough for weeks. I laid the groundwork for you months ago...”

“That’s why I never miss! I’ve always been so sure where my shots were going to land!” she gasped, staring at him in shock as it suddenly became clear. Her face twisted in confusion a moment later. “But that started as soon as I joined you! You gave me triple-helix DNA months later!”

“I didn’t really know what I was doing right back at the start. There was also only so much I could do, limited to just two DNA strands,” John explained as he brushed her cheek with his thumb. “When you first joined me and Alyssa, I subconsciously enhanced your remarkable mind so that you could make very accurate predictions. You’ve used that for very complex problems, like hunting down the Drakkar Raider’s base of operations, to the comparatively much easier tracking of targets with the Invictus’ guns. Think of your psychic ability as the new and improved version... Calara 2.0 if you like.”

She shook her head in wonder. “I really was the first... I thought you’d forgotten about me.”

He chuckled and smiled at her fondly. “I love you! I could never do that!” His laughter died out and he looked at her with concern. “I’ve had to make substantial changes to your third helix so that you can use this ability. Are you sure you’re comfortable with this level of power? It’s on a completely different scale to anything I’ve tried before.”

Calara beamed at him and lunged forward to shower his face in kisses. “I love it! It’s like it’s tailor made for me!”

John tried to reply, but it was difficult with an exuberant teenager kissing him in delight. He gave up after a few seconds and just held her in his arms, giving her a deep, passionate kiss as she mewled with happiness.

When she had calmed down a little, he pulled back and stared into her deep brown eyes, her long brown hair fanning out around his face like a curtain. “You’re right, this ability is customised specially for you. It needs someone with your incredible analytical mind to take full advantage of the potential power this offers. Do you understand the difference you could make, coordinating fleet battles? Are you ready for that much responsibility?”

Calara had a fierce gleam in her eyes as she nodded. “I won’t let you down, Admiral! You know you can rely on me!”

He nodded sombrely. “I already do, Commander.”

She sat upright with an eager grin splashed across her face. “Let’s do some more sparring! I want to keep practicing!”

John smiled at her raw enthusiasm. “Alright, but not too much. You’ll need to take it easy to start with, I don’t want you exhausting yourself. Okay?”

Calara sprang to her feet and offered him a hand. He had a feeling he better get used to her helping him up off the mat...

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“I don’t know how Edraele copes with it all!” Luna exclaimed, glancing at the holo-screen with a worried frown. “I had no idea how much a Matriarch has to deal with! It seems like everyone wants my decision on everything!”

Tsarra gave the flustered assassin a supportive smile. “It certainly can feel overwhelming. When I became Matriarch of House Perfaren after my mother’s death, I struggled for months. My Fleet Commander was amazing though... Aadya really helped me through that transition period.”

“Lilyana’s been accommodating, but she’s kept her distance,” Luna said, slumping in her chair and gazing despondently out the window of the Maliri battleship.

Their ship, the Galaena Serine, was leading an impressive fleet of House Valaden vessels through Maliri Space, as they hurried towards the border with the Terran Federation. The view from the window was dominated by the bright orange swirls of a spectacular stellar nebula, one of hundreds that populated the Maliri Protectorate.

“Lilyana knows that you covering for Edraele is only a temporary measure. Perhaps she didn’t think you’d have to make any major decisions?” Tsarra suggested. She shrugged and rose from her chair, walking around the desk to stand beside Luna. “Let me help instead, I’m sure we can make some headway working together.”

“That would be wonderful, thank you,” Luna said gratefully. “Being an assassin was so much easier! Focus on the target and eliminate it; there was a reassuring simplicity to it all.”

Kneeling down beside her, Tsarra darted her a smile. “You should probably refrain from killing any of your planetary governors. I’m not sure John or Edraele would approve.”

“It’s so tempting though,” Luna murmured, staring wistfully at the screen. “Salihna’s asked me to make a decision on thirty-nine different things!”

Tsarra’s beautiful face twisted into a frown, her dark green eyes narrowing in suspicion. “Show me...”

Luna did as she asked, bringing up the dozens of different queries raised by the Planetary Governor on Valada. Tsarra started scanning through the list, a scowl marring her lovely features. “That fucking opportunistic bitch!” she finally snapped.

Looking at her in alarm, Luna asked, “What’s the matter?”

“She’s deliberately trying to overwhelm you. This is a power play!” Tsarra growled in anger.

“I don’t understand. What do you mean?” Luna asked, a worried expression on her face.

Forcing down her anger, Tsarra took hold of the assassin’s hand and squeezed it gently. “Salihna’s taking advantage of the fact that Edraele’s incapacitated. She’s hoping to make you so daunted by all these decisions that she can offer to step up and ‘help you rule’. I’ve seen this kind of stunt before, I had senior officials try the same thing with me.”

“What are we going to do?!” Luna asked in alarm. “I can’t fail John or Edraele!”

“Shh, it’ll be alright,” Tsarra said, giving her a supportive smile. She looked at the assassin curiously. “How good are you at looking haughty?”

Luna looked down at the House Perfaren Matriarch and narrowed her eyes in irritation.

Tsarra laughed and shook her head. “No, that won’t do. You just look a bit annoyed.” She studied the other Maliri for a moment, tapping her finger on her pursed lips. “Try this instead: Sit up straight, like you’ve got a rigid crystal beam running down your spine. Yes! That’s right. Now, look down your nose at me like I’m a pitiful insect, but it’s beneath you to squash me. Good! Now, colder eyes... No, crueller! Like you’re deciding whether to have me skinned alive, so you can use me to upholster your sofa. Perfect! Now you look just like my mother.”

“I’m sorry,” Luna said softly, giving the younger woman a look of sympathy.

Tsarra stroked Luna’s hand and smiled at her. “That expression won’t do at all. Go back to the mean one.” She nodded with satisfaction when Luna did as she asked. “Now, here’s what we’re going to do...”

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Salihna grinned at herself as she stood in front of an ornate mirror in Edraele’s quarters, located in the upper levels of the palace on Valaden. Turning slightly, she admired the way the Matriarch’s official robes of office complimented her figure and her immaculately styled short dark hair. She looked intimidating and powerful, someone not to be trifled with!

Edraele had been away from the palace on Valada for a few months now, ensconced up in Genthalas station and preoccupied with the massive fleet refit program. The House Valaden Matriarch also seemed to have undergone a dramatic personality shift as of late. While Edraele still possessed a fearsome presence and her shocking new appearance was strangely compelling, she wasn’t the terrifying tyrant she used to be.

Word had reached Salihna that Edraele had been suddenly incapacitated, which had meant a power vacuum that she was more than eager to fill. News that one of Edraele’s bodyguards had been appointed as interim leader of House Valaden had been as shocking as it was infuriating, but this was still a prime opportunity to seize more personal power.

A chime from Edraele’s desk made Salihna jump, but she relaxed a moment later and sauntered over to the console. For a second she considered answering the call wearing the Matriarch’s robes, but she quickly changed her mind and pulled them off. There were limits to how bold she could risk being... for the moment at least.

Sitting down in the chair, she grinned wolfishly when she saw the name of the caller. Swiping her hand across Luna’s name, she sat upright to look more authoritative. “Ah, Luna, how wonderful to see you,” she began, her tone warm but with just the right amount of condescension. “How can I help you today?”

Luna’s cold-eyed stare was chilling, sending a shiver of fear down Salihna’s spine. “I was wondering if you could recommend a successor? You’re clearly utterly incompetent as a Planetary Governor.”

Salihna overcame her shock and decided to go on the offensive to regain the upper hand. “What?! How dare you speak to me like that!”

The former assassin produced a wicked-looking knife and began to spin it around her fingers with deadly precision, not taking her unblinking eyes from Salihna for an instant. Her expression didn’t even flicker as she did so, making the haughty look of disdain even more terrifying. “If you aren’t grossly incompetent, then you must be planning treason. Please let me know which it is and I’ll deal with you accordingly.”

“Luna, please! I’m sure there must have been a simple misunderstanding!” Salihna faltered, backing down quickly.

“You’re delaying crop harvesting for my decision on the exact volume of grain to be stored? To risk food shortages for such a triviality can only mean one of two things: incompetence or treason. These other thirty-eight requests follow a similar vein and compound your crimes,” Luna declared, damning judgement in her yellow eyes.

“Those messages weren’t even meant for you... Yes, they were meant for someone else!” Salihna floundered, wincing at how desperate she sounded.

Leaning forward, Luna had a faint smile on her face as she asked, “Do you know how many Governors I’ve... retired... for Edraele?” Her voice dropped a few octaves into a deathly whisper. “Those missions were always my favourite. Bringing down someone in power who’d overstepped their bounds... it was always worth taking my time to really savour that experience.”

“Luna, I’m begging you! It was just a mistake!” Salihna pleaded.

Sitting back in her chair, Luna studied her with clinical detachment. Salihna could almost feel that vicious-looking knife slowly slicing into her flesh and she quaked in terror, knowing her life hung in the balance.

“Only the weak and simple-minded make mistakes,” Luna said, her blade catching the light as it danced around her fingers. “This was your one and only warning, Salihna. Make sure you don’t require my attention again.”

“I won’t, I promise!” the governor gasped in a rush.

Luna closed the comm channel without further comment, leaving Salihna sagging in the chair with relief. She glanced down at the Matriarch’s robes that she’d discarded on the floor, her eyes widening in fear. As she scooped them up and sprinted for the wardrobe, there was only one thought on her mind. “Please get well soon, Edraele!”

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Tsarra’s green eyes shone with admiration. “Wow! You were amazing!”

Luna turned to her and blushed. “Not too much with the knife?”

Tsarra giggled and quickly shook her head. “I was starting to get frightened and I knew you were only pretending!”

The assassin put down the blade then rose from her chair to embrace the House Perfaren Matriarch. “Thank you so much. I’ll never forget you helping me like this.”

Tsarra hugged her back and gave her a gentle kiss on the cheek. “You’re my friend. I’m so glad you asked me.” When they parted, she glanced down at the hundreds of messages on the holo-screen with an eager grin. “Okay! Who shall we call next?”

Luna laughed, feeling greatly relieved. She smiled as she sat down in the chair again, eyes narrowing as she picked out the next Planetary Governor from the list...

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“Any idea why we’re being summoned to the Lagoon?” Calara asked as she walked into the bedroom.

“No idea, just following orders!” John called back to her from the walk-in-wardrobe. He was dressed in swimming trunks, just as Alyssa had requested. “I hope it involves dinner though. I’m starving!”

He strolled out to join her, then froze mid-stride.

Calara gave him a knowing smile. “You like?” she asked playfully, turning for him and modelling her spectacular swimwear.

“Wow...” he murmured staring in awe.

John swallowed, his tongue suddenly feeling thick in his mouth. The Latina was wearing a maroon bikini that left just enough to his imagination. The colour complimented her olive skin magnificently and he couldn’t help tracing his fingers over her lean stomach.

“I forgot how much you love seeing me in a bikini,” Calara said quietly, enjoying the look of wonder in his eyes.

\*I hadn’t,\* Alyssa said, her voice ringing with satisfaction. \*Now, hurry down to Deck Three, we’re all waiting for you!\*

John shared a grin with Calara, then strolled along the corridor beside her, trying his hardest to keep his eyes on her face.

“It’s okay, I want you to look,” she said indulgently, the extra bounce in her step making the view even more breathtaking. She smiled at him as he openly admired her stunning body. “Which do you prefer me in? Bikinis or formal wear?”

It was a critically important question and one that deserved his serious consideration. John paused as they stepped out of the grav-tube on Deck Three, truly conflicted. “Would you turn around for a moment so I can admire the view? It’ll help me give you a more informed answer...”

Calara bit her lip to stop herself from laughing, then did as he asked, looking at him coquettishly over her shoulder. “How’s that?”

John stepped up behind her, gently cupping her firm cheeks in his hands. “Absolutely perfect,” he murmured as he squeezed her taut young flesh with great care.

“Bikinis by a hair’s breadth then?” Calara asked him airily.

He kissed her on the shoulder, his hands sliding around her waist to stroke her slim tummy. “It’s honestly a really hard choice. You look truly stunning like this, showcasing your body in a bikini, but you look so elegant in formal wear...”

She leaned back so her head was resting on his shoulder as she looked up at him. “I love both too, but there’s something special about looking demure and immaculately groomed, then kneeling down for you so you can feed me your cum...”

“Have I told you how much I love you today?” he asked, leaning over to kiss her.

“You didn’t need to,” Calara murmured, with a breathy sigh. “I feel it every time you touch me...”

\*Come on guys!\* Alyssa protested. \*Just join us in the Lagoon, then you can fuck like rabbits!\*

Calara laughed and rolled her eyes. “We better not keep her waiting any longer. I’m sure whatever it is will be fun.”

John released her, readjusted his shorts to accommodate his thickening length, then smiled as he offered her a hand. She giggled as she took it, walking in step beside him and flashing him a flirtatious smile. When they reached the end of the corridor, John hit the button to open the way into the Lagoon. The double doors swished open and they strolled inside, feeling the lovely warmth wash over them from the tropical paradise within.

“Congratulations!” the girls cheered when the two of them walked into the room, a raucous round of applause following immediately afterwards.

John and Calara looked at each other in surprise and confusion, as they walked down the gentle slope towards the cluster of bikini-clad beauties on the beach.

“What’s the special occasion?” John asked, as Alyssa glided up the ramp to join them.

“Calara joining the psychic club!” the blonde exclaimed, throwing her arms around her lover and giving her a tender kiss. “We’re all so proud of you!”

The Latina looked overwhelmed for a moment, then grinned in delight, hugging Alyssa back fiercely. “It was so exciting! I couldn’t believe it when it happened!”

John stood back and watched with a smile on his face as the rest of the girls rushed over to join them. They fussed over Calara, listening in fascination as she told them all about her exciting new psychic ability and how she’d unlocked it. His heart skipped a beat to see her looking so elated, her radiant smile making her look incredibly beautiful.

\*This was a lovely idea, thank you,\* John thought to Alyssa, flashing her an appreciative smile.

She walked over to join him, slipping her arm around his waist as she stood by his side. \*We don’t take enough time to celebrate the little victories,\* she said, glancing up at him, her full lips lifting into a smile as enchanting as Calara’s. \*Just because we had to cut the vacation short, doesn’t mean we can’t still have some fun.\*

He put his arm around her shoulder, nodding his wholehearted agreement. He was about to reply when a delicious aroma wafted over to his nose. “Is that a barbecue I smell?” he asked in surprise.

“What do you fancy?” Dana asked, bounding down the slope to the beach where an elaborate barbecue had been set up on the sand. “We’ve got burgers, sausages, and great big shrimp!”

“Sparks, you’re a life saver!” John said with a huge grin, his rumbling stomach echoing its agreement.

Alyssa stroked his arm affectionately. “Go and get yourself something to eat. I’ll grab you a beer.”

After giving her a grateful smile, he strode across the beach to join the redhead. “I’ll start with a burger!”

“One burger coming up!” Dana said, using a pair of tongs to grab a thick quarter-pounder and sandwiching it inside a sesame-seed bun.

“I didn’t even know we had a barbecue,” John marvelled, examining the substantial cooking device. He gratefully accepting the burger and the bottle of ketchup she handed him. “Thanks Sparks, this looks amazing!”

“We didn’t until this afternoon,” she explained, grabbing one of the sausages for herself and putting it in a roll. “Rachel suggested it and once I’d designed one to her specifications, Faye had the maintenance bots put it together.”

“A real team effort then. Well done, ladies!” John said, turning to grin at Rachel and Faye.

The purple sprite fluttered over the sand, looking overjoyed at his reaction. “I’m so glad you liked it!”

“That’s not all I like,” he said, admiring her skimpy turquoise bikini. Faye’s wings fluttered even faster when she saw him gazing at her figure.

“Ah, nothing beats a barbecue on the beach,” Rachel said, grinning at him as she sauntered over to join them.

Dana smiled flirtatiously as she handed over the hot-dog. “At least it’s me giving you some meat this time and not a biker!”

Rachel laughed as she took the food, rolling her eyes at her girlfriend. “You’re a fine one to talk about bikers! I seem to remember you having a great time with a certain biker-girl not too far away from here.”

“That’s entirely different,” Dana said with a pout, slipping her arm around Sakura. “She’s fucking gorgeous and gets you lubed-up just as much as me!”

Sakura blushed furiously, but John noticed she didn’t object when Rachel leaned in and gave her a gentle kiss. Not to be outdone, Dana kissed her immediately afterwards, Sakura’s eyes widening as they showered her in affection.

“Dinner and a show, fantastic!” Alyssa exclaimed with delight as she handed John a bottle of chilled beer.

“I’ll drink to that!” he said, clinking bottles with the blonde. “Cheers!”

The rest of the girls gathered around, helping themselves to the ample supply of food sizzling away on the barbecue. The conversation went quiet for a while as everybody savoured the tasty grilled meat.

“This is my first ever barbecue,” Jade finally said, breaking the silence as she finished off a shrimp.

John smiled at her fondly. “What’s the verdict?”

“The food’s delicious and I love how you can’t take your eyes off us,” the Nymph replied, her emerald eyes twinkling as they caught the light. “I think we should do this more often.”

“Have barbecues or wear bikinis?” Irillith asked, arching an eyebrow as she glanced at John.

“Either way, you’ll get no complaints from me!” John said with a laugh, before looking around the rest of the girls. “Is this anyone else’s first barbecue?”

Alyssa fluttered her eyelashes and tried to look innocent. “This is my first time...”

She failed, much to everybody’s amusement.

“Mine too! I think it’s fucking awesome!” Dana chimed in, before taking a big bite of her hot dog.

Calara and Sakura nodded, confirming their barbecuing experience, while the Maliri twins shared a broad smile.

Studying the deluxe barbecue, Tashana said, “We used to cook outside on camping trips, but nothing as grand as this.” She glanced down at the impressive amounts of her flawless blue skin she had on display. “We tended to wear a lot more clothes though!”

“Not a fan of bikinis then?” John asked, admiring the way her impressive breasts filled out her struggling halter-top.

Tashana grinned at him, the brilliant smile lighting up her face. “I love them! Alyssa told us you were trying to decide which outfits you like seeing us in the most... I’m definitely a bikini girl!”

Irillith shook her head, looking down at her own white thong and string top before glancing at John. “While this certainly feels liberating, I agree with Calara. It’s thrilling to see the effect I have on you when I get dressed up. I still remember the way you looked at me the first time you saw me in a long dress.”

Following their lead, the rest of the girls offered their own opinions on this most controversial of subjects.

“Bikinis, without a doubt,” Dana said, cupping her pert breasts and pushing them up to create a dramatic cleavage that threatened to spill out of her green top. She giggled at John’s look of fascination. “That’s why!”

Rachel laughed and shook her head. “I’d choose an elegant and refined gown; something that flatters my figure and makes the imagination run wild. It’s like wrapping up a present for you to enjoy at your leisure. It’s all part of the foreplay...”

“I prefer not wearing anything at all,” Jade declared, darting a lustful glance at John. “Clothes just get in the way of shapeshifting, as well as lots of far more entertaining things we could be doing together.”

“I like bikinis!” Faye exclaimed with a dazzling smile. She glanced over her shoulder at her iridescent wings. “These make wearing a formal dress a bit challenging.”

John smiled at her, before turning to look at Sakura. “How about you, gorgeous?”

“Bikinis,” she replied firmly, before biting her lip and posing provocatively for him.

The neon green swimwear contrasted wonderfully with her golden-brown skin, filling John with the overpowering urge to caress her beautiful body. When she was sure she had his undivided attention, she began to move sensually, gyrating as if to music.

Sakura watched John’s open-mouthed amazement with a satisfied smile. “You can’t get that kind of reaction in formal wear...”

“We need music!” Rachel gasped. “Let’s turn this into a beach party!”

“Just tell me what tunes you want!” Faye eagerly agreed, her luminous eyes glowing with excitement.

While the girls gathered around to discuss the playlist, John turned to look at Alyssa. “Which do you prefer, beautiful?”

She brushed her fingers down the back of his neck, giving him goosebumps. “What I prefer depends entirely on your mood,” she said softly. “Sometimes you’re looking for the voyeuristic thrill a revealing bikini provides. I love the way your eyes roam over my body as I listen to you think about all the delicious things you want to do to me. Other times you like me to look elegant, classy, and refined. I adore pretending to be a good, respectable girl for you; at least until you get me into bed, where I can show you just how naughty I really am...”

“Good answer,” he replied, pulling her in for a passionate kiss.

It didn’t take long for music to fill the air and the couple parted to join in the fun. John wasn’t the only one with a drink and there was plenty of laughter as the beer started to have an effect. The girls cheered and whooped as they danced on the sand, urging him to dance with them. They each took a turn dancing with him, competing with one another to be more outrageous in their flirting.

The lighting in the Lagoon was synchronised with the ship’s internal clock and as it turned eight in the evening, the lights dimmed to a warm crimson to simulate sunset. As the party rolled onwards, night fell over the lagoon, with wicker torches bursting into flame and casting flickering torchlight over the beach.

“That wasn’t me!” Tashana giggled, pausing in her dancing to take a sip of drink.

While Jade had been having a great time on the beach, she couldn’t help throwing longing glances at the water.

John caught the last one and immediately asked, “Who else fancies a swim?”

There were plenty of eager volunteers and they all ran into the water, laughing as they splashed one another. Jade dived gracefully into the lagoon, then cavorted around them using her turquoise fins to swim quickly through the water. After the initial flurry of activity subsided, Faye changed the music to slower, more mellow tunes. She sat on one of the deck chairs, watching her friends with a wistful smile. The change in music relaxed the girls and they gathered together, becoming a lot more tactile.

John loved the feel of their slender bodies in the water, his fingers sliding over slick skin as they brushed against him. There were eight girls in the Lagoon, but sadly he only had the one set of lips. The girls paired off as they waited their turn with him, with Alyssa and Calara joining him first. He held the Latina in his arms and smiled as she wrapped her legs around his waist, pressing herself against his throbbing shaft. Alyssa hugged her from behind, kissing her neck and throat as she slipped the bikini top from her lover. With both John and Alyssa focusing on Calara, they soon had her moaning with arousal, desperately grinding against him as she clung to his body.

“Let me take care of you, baby,” Alyssa purred, taking Calara’s hand and gently peeling her from John.

The Latina gave him a wistful final glance before she let herself be led away. Alyssa guided her to the beach, where she removed the last part of Calara’s bikini, then lay her down by the edge of the lagoon. With the water lapping around them, the blonde moved down her lover’s glorious body to kneel between her spread legs. Calara’s soft cry of pleasure made it abundantly clear just how good Alyssa was with her tongue.

“Have you been abandoned?” Rachel asked playfully, sliding around behind John and kissing his ear.

“It’s our turn now!” Dana said with an eager grin, throwing her bikini top towards the beach and then gliding towards him in the water.

John was sandwiched between the redhead and the brunette, duelling tongues with Dana before turning to kiss Rachel over his shoulder. They were perfectly coordinated with each other and John suspected Alyssa might be guiding them at first, before he noticed their darting eyes and figured out their method of unspoken communication.

Dana saw that flicker of understanding and gave him a coy smile. “She loves me and I love her... we both know what the other one wants.”

“To please you...” Rachel murmured in his ear, before giving him a breathy kiss that sent shivers running down his spine.

Glancing towards the couple on the beach, Dana gave him a wicked grin. “Who do you want to see get eaten out? Me or Rachel?”

“Not another impossibly hard question!” John protested, smiling as the two girls giggled and rubbed their bare breasts against him. Finally, he gave Dana a kiss. “How many times do you think you can make her cum?”

“At least five!” the redhead exclaimed, her sky-blue eyes filled with desire.

Rachel whispered, “Thank you!” in his ear, before joining her lover and heading towards the sand. She blew him a kiss before lying down beside Calara, tugging the bows on her bikini bottoms and then splaying her thighs for her impatient lover. Dana wasted no time, eager to start Rachel on her journey towards a quintet of climaxes.

John understood this game now and he turned to see who was next. Tashana and Irillith were gazing lovingly into each other’s eyes as they kissed, but Sakura and Jade turned and swam towards him, answering that particular question.

“Hello,” he greeted them both with a playful smile, catching Jade in his arms as she launched herself towards him. He glanced between the two girls and raised an eyebrow curiously.

Sakura blushed and shook her head. “Jade’s a wonderful, beautiful girl, but we haven’t paired off... not officially at least.”

“We only have eyes for you,” the Nymph purred, sliding around behind him so that Sakura could take her place in his arms. She smiled lovingly at the Asian girl and added, “Not that I don’t love pleasing her too.”

“The feeling’s mutual,” Sakura said, leaning over his shoulder to give Jade a kiss. She pulled back and gazed into John’s eyes. “I hope you don’t mind?”

He laughed and shook his head. “That you two aren’t in a relationship? Of course not! As long as you’re both happy, so am I.”

“Such a kind master...” Jade purred, planting feathery kisses on the back of his neck as she nuzzled into him.

Sakura lowered her eyes submissively, leaning forward to copy the Nymph, her soft kisses brushing over his neck and throat. John sighed as the two girls worshipped his skin with their lips and flickering tongues, occasionally catching Sakura’s eye as she shifted position. Each time she respectfully averted her gaze and he caught the hint of a smile as she focused on caressing his body.

“Would you like me to make Sakura cum for you, Master?” Jade asked quietly, pressing herself into his back. Her body had warmed with her arousal and he knew how good it would feel to bury himself inside her and seek his release.

John was tempted to agree, but he paused and lifted Sakura’s chin instead. “I want you to make Jade cum for me... at least to start with.”

“Whatever you say... Master,” Sakura said, her dark brown eyes smouldering with lust.

“Good girl,” he said approvingly, kissing each of them in turn before they glided towards the beach.

He watched as they carefully undressed each other, with Jade lying down beside Rachel, who was gasping through an explosive climax. The Nymph gave the Asian girl a lovely smile, running her fingers through Sakura’s raven tresses as she began to pleasure her.

Two sets of hands glided over John’s shoulders and drew his attention to the last couple in the water with him. He turned around and pulled the twins towards him, wrapping his arms around them both. “Good timing, I was starting to get lonely,” he said, greeting each of them with a kiss.

“You aren’t bored of being fawned over yet?” Irillith asked, giving him a teasing smile.

John pretended to consider it for a moment, before grinning at them and shaking his head. “Are you kidding? I’m loving every minute of this!” He glanced down at the identical bare breasts squashed against his chest. “By the way, I love your matching outfits...”

“I’m glad you like them. They’re very comfortable,” Tashana replied playfully, followed by a soft kiss.

“I think we come in your size,” Irillith purred in agreement. “You should try us both on, see if we’re a comfortable fit.”

“Actually, I tried on your sister already today, she was perfect! A nice snug fit that stretched around me without any discomfort. I should probably check you too... In fact, I intend to in just a few minutes,” John bantered back.

Irillith grinned at him, then looked surprised when she realised what he was saying. “I thought we were going to perform for you on the beach like the others?”

“I’d love to see that, but Alyssa and I need to have an XO meeting to discuss something important. We wondered if you’d be able to help?” John asked, keeping his expression neutral.

Reacting instinctively, Irillith let out a low moan, her violet eyes flaring wide as she stared at him with naked lust. She managed to control herself a moment later, darting a nervous, apprehensive glance at Tashana.

“Don’t worry about me,” her twin replied with an indulgent smile, misreading her sister’s worried frown. She darted an excited glance at the beach. “Alyssa just asked if I’d like to have some fun with Calara. I’m looking forward to it!”

Irillith started to stammer a reply, but John silenced her with a kiss. “If you’d like to join us, why don’t you head up to the bedroom and get ready? You have nothing to worry about, the girls will take good care of Tashana.”

Kissing her sister goodbye, Tashana grinned as she said, “I’m very envious! I want to hear all about it later, okay?”

“Okay...” Irillith murmured, doubt in her eyes.

They waded ashore, where the sisters went their separate ways. Irillith walked across the sand towards the ramp, darting nervous glances at her sister, while Tashana knelt down beside a rather flushed and breathless Calara.

Alyssa smiled as she sat up, her face glistening in the light. “Calara’s going to look after you while we’re away,” she said to the Maliri girl.

The Latina blinked away her lust-fogged haze and grinned at Tashana, beckoning her down to the sand. “It’s your turn now, beautiful. Lie back and let me return the favour...”

John offered Alyssa a hand and he saw a feverish look of excitement in her eyes as she rose to her feet. He could tell she’d been looking forward to this, ever since he’d told her of his plans for Irillith.

\*She’s going to love it!\* she said, her telepathic voice trembling with anticipation.

\*Was the XO meeting just a clever excuse for some time alone with her, or did you actually want to talk about something?\* John asked, putting his arms around her lithe figure and gently squeezing her ass.

\*I actually do want to talk to you about something and I think it’s important.\* She stood on tiptoe to give him a kiss, then glanced towards the doorway at the top of the ramp. Irillith had disappeared from sight. \*Come on, let’s get a shower. Irillith’s going to get ready in her own room.\*

\*Save the XO chat until afterwards,\* John said firmly, holding her back a moment. \*We’ll focus on Irillith first.\*

Alyssa nodded her understanding and they walked hand-in-hand across the sandy beach, pausing at the ramp to glance back at the girls. The crystal-clear water in the Lagoon looked black now in the darkness, but the writhing female forms were illuminated by the gentle torchlight. It was a breathtaking view and they stopped to admire the girls for a moment. Jade arched her back as Sakura brought her to a climax, her soft moans carrying across the beach to John’s eager ears.

\*The barbecue was a wonderful idea,\* he said, gently squeezing Alyssa’s hand. \*I think everyone had a great time.\*

She leaned into him, then placed a tender kiss on his cheek. \*They really did.\*

They walked down the corridor on Deck Three in companionable silence, letting the excitement build for their illicit meeting with the Maliri girl. John and Alyssa shared a loving smile as they stepped into the blue anti-gravity field, rising up a level where they walked out into the corridor and headed towards their bedroom. John heard the shower running when they passed Irillith’s room and he wondered what she was thinking about right at that moment.

“Do you really want to know?” Alyssa asked him with a playful grin.

“She’s worried how Tashana’s going to react to this?” John guessed.

The blonde laughed and shook her head. “Actually, she listened when you told her not to worry about her sister. Irillith’s thrilled about tonight and mentally preparing herself for it.”

He laughed along with her, knowing how Irillith enjoyed her theatrics. They went into their bedroom and stripped off their swimwear before entering the shower. There they took their time washing each other, enjoying the feel of the soap gliding over wet skin, but not making any real effort to move onto anything more amorous.

When they were spotlessly clean, they dried off and headed back to the bedroom, where John paused for a second, suddenly unsure. “What to wear?” he asked his young companion.

“Wait here... I know just the thing to set the right tone!” Alyssa replied, darting into the wardrobe and returning a minute later with two black silk bundles in her hands.

John looked at them in bemusement until she handed one over to him and he realised it was a black silk bathrobe that came down to just below his knee. Alyssa’s was far shorter, revealing a tantalising view of her long athletic legs. He put his bathrobe on and walked over to the bedside cabinet, retrieving the items he needed and slipping them into his pocket.

“Here she comes,” Alyssa said, her cerulean eyes sparkling as they caught the light.

They stood together by the bed, waiting for their guest, the imperious click of Irillith’s high heels announcing her imminent arrival before she breezed into the bedroom. She’d gone to considerable effort with her appearance and looked glorious in one of her long dresses. Irillith was wearing artfully applied makeup that made her look even more devastatingly beautiful and a few meticulously curled tendrils of her long white hair had been styled to frame her face. John was astonished that she could make such an amazing transformation in so short a time.

Her violet eyes narrowed with anger as she glared at his bathrobe. “You look like some lecherous playboy!” she sneered with disgust. “It’s bad enough that you summoned me for this ‘meeting’, but I can’t believe you had the audacity to dress like that. How dare you be so presumptuous!”

John and Alyssa walked towards her, with John suppressing a smile at her indignant facade. “Shh,” he said soothingly. “There’s no need for all that. You should save your energy...”

“...You’re going to need it,” Alyssa finished for him, trailing her finger along Irillith’s bare arm and up her shoulder as she walked behind her.

Irillith looked a little less sure of herself with Alyssa’s active involvement in whatever John had planned for her.

John nodded his approval as he studied the elegant Maliri girl. “You were right, you look magnificent in formal wear.”

She flushed slightly at the compliment, a hint of a smile teasing her lips before she fought it down. “This hollow flattery won’t get you anywhere! Just because you have a silver tongue, don’t think you’ll be able to charm me into bed!” she exclaimed, her violet eyes flashing dangerously.

Ignoring Irillith’s baiting, John walked around her, nodding appreciatively as he followed the beautiful curves of her body with his hungry gaze. “You’re probably aware that I’ve been trying to spend some time alone with each of you girls to show my appreciation. I must apologise for leaving you until last, but there was a good reason for it, I promise.”

Irillith was about to launch into a defiant retort, but Alyssa caressed her shoulder, bronzed fingers brushing along the Maliri girl’s collarbone and making her shiver at the seductive touch. “Let him talk for a moment, you can pretend to be angry later...”

John stopped in front of the quivering woman and gave her a warm smile. “Thank you for everything you’ve done for us. I won’t list it all or we’ll be here all evening. You’ve been absolutely wonderful in so many ways, Irillith.”

Alyssa stepped closer and placed a soft kiss on her shoulder. “You were the first Maliri girl in history to be stuck with two Progenitors watching over you and we’ve both been in awe of the incredible woman you’ve become.”

Stunned by their heartfelt declarations of affection, Irillith could only blush and give John a shy smile in return.

He stepped closer and ran his hands over her hips to encircle her waist, stroking her gently. “With Tashana joining the crew, I’ve not been able to reward you properly until now, not in the way I knew you’d love.” He smiled as he added, “She took me by surprise this morning. She’s a lot... bolder... than any of us gave her credit for. Tashana can handle this, don’t worry.”

There was a flicker of doubt in Irillith’s angular eyes. “I’m not so sure... you don’t understand how shameful-”

“Oh, we both understand how the Maliri feel about this,” Alyssa purred in her ear. “It’s the forbidden nature of the act that drives you so wild, isn’t it?”

Irillith flushed a darker blue, her breathing getting deeper as she grew more excited. She gazed into John’s eyes and nodded imperceptibly, biting her lower lip as she did so.

“Good girl, thank you for being honest,” he said softly, brushing his thumb across her cheek. “Taming your ferocious temper is normally very exciting, but tonight isn’t about me. We’re here to reward you and I know exactly what you need.”

Alyssa had been gently massaging Irillith’s shoulders, but following his cue, she brushed her fingers to the sides taking the straps of Irillith’s dress with them. Irillith gasped in surprise as the dress slid down her body to pool at her feet, leaving her standing naked before them.

Reaching into his pocket, John retrieved a slim silver collar and held it before Irillith’s shocked eyes. “Do you trust me?” he asked intently.

There was no hesitation from her as she nodded, darting a wide-eyed look at the collar. With his other hand John carefully tilted up her chin, exposing her throat to him. Irillith was trembling with all the adrenaline coursing through her veins, her quivering intensifying as he ran a finger down her neck. She let out a quiet moan when he raised the collar and slipped it around her throat, the clasp locking into place with an ominous click.

“You look stunning,” Alyssa murmured, brushing Irillith’s hair to one side so that she could kiss her slender neck above and below the collar.

She left them then, slinking across the bedroom to the bed and discarding her robe as she climbed onto the covers.

“Come with me,” John said in an authoritative tone, clasping Irillith’s hand and leading her towards the bed.

She came with him willingly, her full attention on Alyssa who lay down on her back, her head towards them. Alyssa tilted her head back and gave the Maliri girl an alluring smile, licking her lips to make them moist.

“Your high heels look very sexy, but I need you to remove them now,” John told Irillith, watching her every move. When she did as he asked, he helped her onto the bed, then turned her and guided her to straddle the supine blonde. “Alyssa’s here to intensify your pleasure, but she’s promised not to let you pass out too quickly...”

Alyssa curled her hands around Irillith’s thighs to hold her firmly in place, her bronzed fingers a stark contrast to the Maliri girl’s blue limbs. The blonde opened her mouth and began to lovingly caress Irillith’s pussy with her tongue, drawing a mewling cry from the panting Maliri beauty. John watched the muscles in Irillith’s taut abdomen contract as she panted for breath, the neat oval of her tummy rippling as she moved.

“Hold out your hands,” John ordered her, while reaching into his pocket for the next two items. He slipped the shiny cuffs around Irillith’s wrists, locking them in place with a quiet click. “These are anti-grav cuffs. I asked Dana to make them for you especially.”

Irillith moaned with undisguised lust, her eyes staring at him in disbelief as he raised her hands above her head and crossed them at the wrist. Pressing a discreet button on the cuffs, they activated with a quiet hum, locking her in place.

“Comfortable?” he asked, meeting her stunned gaze. “Just nod if you are.”

She nodded slowly, her hips undulating at a languid pace in time to Alyssa’s gentle oral attention.

Retrieving the last item from his pocket, John discarded the robe as he stood before her, revealing his iron-hard cock. He slathered some lubricant from the tube along his shaft, then massaged it in until his entire length was glistening in the light. “You know where this is going,” he said, meeting Irillith’s wild-eyed stare. “If you don’t want this, let me know now, before I bury myself in your ass.”

Irillith’s long groan of need was all the confirmation he needed. John climbed onto the bed then moved around behind her, sitting astride Alyssa’s lean stomach as he stared at Irillith’s gorgeous blue body. The muscles in her back were rippling as she writhed on Alyssa’s tongue and he reached out to trace a finger down her spine, circling the dimples of Venus on her lower back, before brushing his fingers over her flexing buttocks. Irillith groaned, her trembling intensifying as she twisted her head to one side to look at him over her shoulder.

Shaking his head, John reached for her head, gently applying pressure so that she faced forwards and looked down. “Look into Alyssa’s eyes when I enter you. She loves you as much as I do, she wants to see every moment of pleasure in your eyes.”

Irillith did as he asked, glancing down between her heaving breasts to meet Alyssa’s intense sapphire stare. They locked eyes as the blonde Matriarch gently mouthed her pussy, writing “I love you” on Irillith’s clit with her tongue.

“Oh my God...” Irillith whimpered, already feeling overwhelmed by sensation.

John smiled when he saw Alyssa’s hands shift position, moving up Irillith’s thighs to grasp her cheeks and slowly but firmly pull them apart. Irillith moaned as her ass was exposed to John’s eager gaze, the wrinkled dark-blue knot of muscle winking at him as she flexed in anticipation. He could see that she’d prepared herself for him, the lube glistening in the light.

Reaching out with his hands, he took a firm hold of the Maliri girl’s hips then shifted his weight, lining the head of his cock against her ass. “Ready?” he asked with a slight grin, knowing full well that Irillith was desperate for him to take her.

“Please!” she begged, her breath coming in ragged pants.

John held her in a tight grip and pushed forward, watching in fascination as her anus began to stretch to take him. Irillith cried out, the muscles in her back tensing up as her body was forced wide open to accommodate him. After her previous experiences with anal sex, she had no reluctance this time and relaxed immediately, thoroughly submitting her body to this throbbing invader. John couldn’t help groaning at her vice-like grip and he stared down at the point where they were joined, her ass stretching to its limit to take his girthy cock.

“Such a good girl,” John said, his tone calm and soothing as he pushed half-way inside her.

His voice had the opposite effect to that which he’d intended, and Irillith locked up, shaking uncontrollably as she had her first climax of the night. He held still and savoured her body clamping down on his shaft, feeling the muscles ripple around him as she sobbed through her orgasm.

Stroking her body until she’d calmed, he leaned forward to whisper in her ear. “You’ve taken half. Ready for more?”

She whimpered with need, slowly nodding her head. He couldn’t see her face as it was masked by the shroud of flowing white hair, her head tilted forward slightly so she could stare into Alyssa’s eyes.

\*Her pupils are so wide!\* Alyssa whispered, her voice throbbing with excitement. \*I’ve never seen her so turned on before. Give her the rest!\*

John pushed forward again, his progress aided by all the lube as he slid deeper into her pliant body. Alyssa hadn’t stopped her gentle lapping, so Irillith was building to another climax with every inch John slowly stuffed into her.

“I’m so fucking full!” Irillith groaned, her whole body vibrating with the overload on her senses.

Pushing in the last inch, John only stopped when he was fully hilted inside her, his quad swinging forward and resting on her soaked pussy. Irillith bucked at the contact, jerking against him as she came a second time. Alyssa let go of her asscheeks, so they locked John in place, then held onto Irillith’s thighs as she penetrated her pussy with her tongue.

Irillith wailed out, “Oh, Fuck!” as she thrashed through her orgasm.

John gritted his teeth to stop himself from joining her. He fought valiantly to suppress the urge to blast her full of cum as she clenched rhythmically around his entire length. Closing his eyes, he took deep breaths to centre himself and regain control; they had a long night ahead of them and they were just getting started.

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Tashana gave Calara a lazy smile, running her fingers through the Latina’s brown hair as she gazed into her caring brown eyes. “You Terran girls are so exotic,” she murmured, sighing with delight as Calara gently nuzzled into her pussy.

Calara couldn’t help laughing at that, pulling back for a moment. “That’s funny coming from a beautiful blue alien temptress.”

“Maybe we’re both xenophiles?” Tashana replied, sharing a grin with the brunette. “I always thought Terran girls were gorgeous, but I never thought I’d end up with one doing this to me!”

“Shh, stop distracting me! I’m trying to make you cum,” Calara replied, smiling as she returned to her task.

Tashana relaxed, her eyes hooded with arousal as she waited for the Latina’s tongue to touch her again. Her body was suddenly blitzed with an overwhelming surge of pleasure, causing her to arch her back and screech in shock. This was different to anything she’d felt before, like her asscheeks had been parted and something huge had been gently stuffed inside her bottom. Her eyes rolled back in her head and she experienced a thunderous sympathetic climax with her twin.

“Holy shit, Calara!” Dana exclaimed, giving the Latina a look of admiration. “When you’re done tongue-fucking her, do me next!”

Rachel laughed and shook her head. “Tashana’s feeling what Irillith’s experiencing... You know what John’s doing to her sister right now.”

“Oh, right...” Dana said with a knowing grin.

She glanced at her tawny-haired lover and they smiled at one another before eagerly sitting up, moving around to flank the convulsing Maliri girl.

“We’re going to make you feel so good,” Rachel said softly, brushing Tashana’s hair from her face and smiling at the wild-eyed look of disbelief in those violet orbs.

Calara began to lovingly lap away at her, while Dana and Rachel took an erect nipple into their mouths and began to tease her breasts. At that precise moment, John fully impaled Irillith, triggering an ecstatic scream from Tashana that shattered the peaceful tranquillity of the Lagoon.

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John leaned forward, resting his weight on Irillith’s back as he plundered her ass with long, relentless strokes of his cock. He moved his hands from her waist to grasp her breasts, squeezing them roughly as he rode her. With her hands anchored above her head by the grav-cuffs and Alyssa’s strong grip on her thighs holding her in place, Irillith could only kneel there and take the pounding, groaning in bliss with every thrust. Every time he fully impaled her, Irillith’s blue cheeks rippled with the impact and she cried out as his heavy quad slapped wetly against her sopping pussy.

Her body was racked by another climax, but this one wasn’t triggered by John’s cock, or Alyssa’s loving tongue. This was a twingasm from her sister and it left Irillith reeling.

“Oh God... Tashana,” she moaned weakly, her eyes rolling in her head as she shared in her twin’s ecstasy.

“There you go. Keep making her cum, beautiful,” John murmured. “She’s feeling everything you are...”

The next crashing wave of pleasure was triggered by John’s cock plundering her depths. Irillith sobbed as she clenched around him, equally excited and ashamed at knowing Tashana was sharing in her debauched bliss. All other thoughts melted away, her mind focused entirely on the pleasure she and her twin were sharing.

John lost count of her thunderous climaxes, Irillith eventually just hanging limply, the occasional whimper or moan the only indication that she was still conscious. Movement at the door drew his attention as Jade walked into the bedroom, carrying Tashana in her arms. She brought her over to join them, placing her carefully on the covers.

Following Alyssa’s telepathic instructions, the Nymph helped the dazed girl kneel on the bed facing her sister. The sight of her groaning twin roused Tashana from her orgasm-induced stupor and she surged forward to hug her. John eased back, taking his weight off Irillith and smiled at Tashana over her twin’s shoulder.

“Do you want to see?” he asked, glancing down to where he was joined with Irillith.

Tashana stared over her sister’s shoulder and down her back, gaping in awe as Alyssa gently spread Irillith’s trembling asscheeks. Her anus was stretched impossibly wide around John’s cock, his shaft sliding out a few inches before he stuffed himself inside her again. Tashana’s mouth opened in shock as she watched him plunder her twin, Irillith letting out a soft grunt with each full penetration. Tashana looked up to stare at John and realised he was studying her to gauge her reaction.

“Are you going to take me like that?” she asked in a breathy whisper.

He paused for a moment, then slowly nodded, keeping his eyes fixed on hers. “Yes, but only when you’re ready for it. You’ll have to ask me to do this with you...”

Tashana moaned with arousal, echoing her sister. She blinked slowly at him then smiled as she kissed Irillith on the shoulder, keeping her gaze on him all the while.

\*I’m so sorry, Tashana,\* Irillith whimpered to her. \*You must be disgusted with me, but I can’t help myself... I love this so much.\*

Pulling back, Tashana ducked down to look into Irillith’s glowing eyes. “No! I don’t think that at all! I think you’re wonderful!” she said earnestly.

\*I love you, little sister,\* Irillith sobbed, biting her lip all the while, with John hilting himself inside her once again.

“You weren’t speaking!” Tashana gasped in amazement. “I could hear your thoughts!”

John took a firm grip on Irillith’s hips, lurching forward and groaning as he started to cum, sending long spurts of thick spunk deep into the Maliri girl’s bowels. Irillith was lost to a titanic climax, her eyes rolling back as her body was wracked by euphoric bliss. She came long and hard, her belly bulging outwards with the huge volume of cum being pumped into her. Tashana squealed as she felt it all, sharing in every wave of pleasure as John unloaded in her sister. With a final cry they both passed out, knocked senseless by the intensity of the shared climax.

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“Well, that was a surprise,” Alyssa said with a wry smile, curling up against John as they watched the twins. “I didn’t expect them to start developing telepathy with each other!”

Jade was carefully supporting the sisters’ heads, holding them to her swollen breasts as she fed the dazed girls. They let out soft moans of delight as they suckled from her, filling their stomachs with John’s cum.

“I missed it completely,” John admitted, putting his arm around Alyssa and smiling at the gentle, maternal expression on Jade’s face.

“I’m not surprised. You were a bit preoccupied at the time,” Alyssa replied with a quiet laugh. “It’s just one way at the moment though. Irillith spoke telepathically to Tashana.”

John looked down at her with an intrigued expression on his face. “I wonder why?”

“Perhaps you need to ease your huge cock into Tashana’s tight little ass and coax it out of her?” Alyssa purred, an unmistakeable glimmer of lust in her cerulean eyes.

He laughed and hugged her tighter. “You’re insatiable!”

“Actually, I haven’t been sated once yet tonight,” Alyssa replied, in a breathy whisper. “But I’m really fucking horny after watching you wreck the twins!”

“I’m definitely going to need some recovery time first, but there are other ways I can take care of business while you wait,” John replied with a smile.

She gave him a tender kiss, then hesitated. “I’d love that, but can we have that chat now? It shouldn’t take long, but it is important – or interesting at least.”

Stretching out on the ample spare space on the huge bed, John propped his head up with one arm and patted the covers beside him. Alyssa followed obediently, lying down beside him and smiling up at him as he rested a hand on her smooth tummy.

\*You have my undivided attention, beautiful. What’s on your mind?\* John asked, gently caressing her.

She closed her eyes for a moment and just enjoyed the simple pleasure of his caring touch. When her long eyelashes fluttered open once more, she gazed into his eyes and said, \*Do you remember me talking about metaphysical portraits in my mind? How they represented all the girls linked to me?\*

He nodded thoughtfully. \*Sure, I remember. The Terran girls appeared as crystal pictures of their faces, Jade was represented by a mosaic of tiny stones, and the twins were depicted by a couple of intertwined roses.\*

\*Yes, that’s it exactly. Well... those portraits have been changing,\* she said, an unreadable expression on her face.

\*What do they look like now?\* he asked, his curiosity piqued.

Alyssa took a deep breath then began to describe what she could see...

The flat crystal images of Dana, Calara, Rachel, and Sakura had all shifted into a standing full-body portrait of each of the Terran girls. They looked magnificent, eyes glowing brightly now that their psychic powers had been unveiled.

That wasn’t the only change though and the next was even more dramatic. Previously, the portraits of the girls had surrounded the image of John, clustered tightly together in the centre of her mind. While John still looked the same as he’d always done and two of the girls flanked him as before, the other Terran girls had actually *merged* with his portrait. Calara and Sakura stood beside him now, their faces filled with love and respect as they gazed at him with shining eyes.

When Alyssa focused on Calara, her perspective shifted, showing John holding the Latina in his arms. The two of them now appeared to be in full-dress uniform, matching Stellar Cluster medals adorning their chests as Calara looked at him in awe. She glanced at Sakura next and John shifted to hold the Asian girl, both of them wearing the smart clothes they’d worn on their visit to New Eden. Sakura gazed at him in wonder, a look of total devotion in her eyes.

“What do you think it means?” John asked, his voice quiet and thoughtful.

Alyssa slowly shook her head. “That they’re closer to you now more than ever? I’ve discussed it with Athena, but she wasn’t exactly sure either. This kind of stuff wasn’t in her Progenitor-guide handbook.”

John smiled at her joke then glanced across the bed at the trio of exotic girls. “What about Jade and the twins? Any changes there?”

Following his gaze, Alyssa smiled fondly. “Jade’s two-dimensional stone mosaic has shifted and she looks just like the rest of the girls now. She’s standing beside you, but still in her own portrait, separate from the main image.” She hesitated, a look of uncertainty in her eyes. “I told you before that Irillith’s and Tashana’s portraits merged a while ago, with their blue roses entwined together. They’re in a state of flux at the moment though; there’s something happening, but I can’t tell what exactly...”

“What do you mean?” John asked, puzzled by her vague reply.

She shrugged and gave him a look of apology. “They’ve gone hazy and started glowing... I can’t really tell you much more than that.”

John nodded, reaching down to give her a quick kiss to smooth away her frown. “How come you didn’t bring this up before?” he asked pulling back to watch her face.

“During our last XO meeting you mean?” Alyssa asked, a coy smile teasing her lips. “Partly because we were very enthusiastic in our catching up and neither of us were feeling particularly talkative. I also wanted to wait until you’d seen each of the girls before I told you about the changes you were triggering in them. Calara getting her powers was another factor; I was curious to see if her portrait would change in the same way when her third helix was activated.”

“There’s no need to wait for a meeting next time, just let me know if anything significant changes in the girls that you think I should know about,” John said gazing into her beguiling cerulean eyes.

“Will do,” she agreed amiably, before turning her head to one side to glance at the twins. “They’re getting sleepy... do you want to tuck them in? After you’re done I’d like to take you up on your offer to leave me thoroughly satiated...”

He grinned at her, giving her a parting peck on the lips before moving across the bed to join the rest of the girls. The Maliri sisters had cuddled up with Jade, with the Nymph stroking their backs as they snuggled into her.

“I’ll look after them until you come to bed,” Jade said, giving him a lovely smile.

“Thanks, honey,” John said, returning her smile with a grateful one of his own, before turning his attention to the twins. Placing his hands on their rounded cum-stuffed stomachs, he gently stroked the two girls, drawing soft sighs from them both.

“Love being here with you...” Tashana murmured, giving him a sleepy smile. He kissed her and stroked her hair for a few moments until she was out like a light, exhausted after experiencing such a relentless chain of climaxes.

Irillith was equally shattered, barely able to keep her eyes open. She looked up at John as he gently unclipped the grav-cuffs that he’d deactivated earlier from her wrists, an almost disbelieving look of gratitude on her face. He reached for the collar around her graceful neck and she bit her lip then shook her head slightly.

“You want to go to sleep with it on? Alright, I’ll take it off later when I come to bed,” he said indulgently, leaning in for a kiss.

“Thank you,” she breathed, her heavy eyes falling to her slumbering twin as she fought to stay awake.

John ran his fingers through Irillith’s luxurious mane of long white hair. “You’re exhausted. Get some rest, we can talk about what sexy little vixens you and your sister are another time.”

She laughed quietly then closed her eyes as he stroked her. In a matter of seconds, she was out like a light. He pulled the covers up over the three girls and waved goodbye to Jade as she hugged her sleeping wards protectively. A noise by the door drew his attention and when he turned to look, he saw Calara leaning against the frame sharing a kiss with her blonde lover. Alyssa flashed John a sultry come-hither look then padded out into the corridor with an extra sway to her hips.

“The others are waiting in my quarters,” Calara said with a grin of anticipation. “Alyssa thought you might want some backup.”

“Such a thoughtful girl,” he said with a chuckle, climbing off the bed and following the delightfully nude Latina out of the bedroom.

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“Beginning final approach, all passengers prepare for debarkation,” the shuttle pilot said over the internal comm, her voice calm and professional.

Lieutenant Commander Ryan Murphy groaned, wincing against the glare as the lights in the shuttle’s passenger cabin were brought up to full illumination. He’d been out drinking the night before, making the most of his final night of shore leave on Terra, but he was definitely suffering for it this morning. He felt more than a little worse-for-wear, having partied hard with the wonderful college girls he’d been very fortunate to befriend on his second day of leave.

There was nothing like your planet coming within seconds of being vaporised to give people a profound new appreciation for life. Tammy and Veronica had proven to be very appreciative, drawn to his navy uniform like moths to a flame. He’d seen his chance meeting with them as a stroke of incredible good fortune, an opportunity to forget his worries and just have some fun.

It had certainly started out that way, drinking for free in all the bars they visited, his uniform the only currency they needed. The girls helped him celebrate his recent promotion before tumbling into bed with him at the end of the evening. When he’d lurched awake at night, shaking with fear as he relived nightmares of the Battle of Regulus, he’d been profoundly grateful to them both. They’d held and comforted him as he told them about the horrors he’d seen and the friends he’d lost to the Kintark’s terrible plasma fire...

“Wow! Look at the size of that thing!” a young man said, his voice bubbling with excitement and rousing Murphy from his reverie.

Murphy glanced to his right across the aisle and saw a couple of fresh-faced men leaning forward in their chairs to stare in wonder at the holo-screen displayed in the front of the cabin. They were both ensigns by the rank insignia on their new flight jackets and he guessed they must be straight out of the Academy. He didn’t need to look to know what they were gaping at, but he turned anyway, eager to see his first glimpse of home. Watching along with them, he recognised the distinctive shape of the Retribution of Zeus and shared that same sense of awe they were feeling.

“I still can’t believe we’ll be flying fighters from the flagship!” the second teenager exclaimed. “We were so lucky to get this assignment!”

The vast grey hull of the biggest ship in the Terran Federation fleet soon filled most of their view, with the shuttle slowly approaching to dock with the colossal Fleet Carrier. Murphy knew the real reason why those cadets had been assigned to the Zeus and luck had nothing to do with it. Only nineteen fighters out of one-hundred-and-forty had survived the Battle of Regulus... these young men were there to replace the dead.

He let out a sad sigh, remembering the day nearly three years ago when he’d first arrived on the Zeus. Commander Summers had been there waiting in the docking bay, Angel greeting him with a warm smile as she took that raw recruit under her wing. That act of kindness had meant a lot to him, overwhelmed as he’d been. Murphy glanced at the cadets and shook off his maudlin mood.

“Welcome to the Zeus, lads! I couldn’t help overhearing you’re joining the flight crews,” he said, keeping his tone friendly and open.

“Yes, Sir!” the closest ensign replied, snapping a nervous salute.

His companion was more relaxed and he grinned at Murphy proudly as he saluted too. “We’ll be flying Rapiers!”

“It’s a great fighter,” Murphy said, nodding sagely. “You’ll be faster and more agile than anything in the sky. Well, quicker than anything those bastard lizards have got anyway!” He couldn’t help remembering that lightning-fast gunship that had appeared from out of nowhere and saved his ass. He’d enthusiastically joined in the toasts to the Lion and the Lionesses back on Terra, thinking only of that green goddess and her enchanting smile.

“You’re a fighter pilot?!” the nervous ensign asked, eyes-widening in awe.

Green lights flashed by the exits, warning them that they’d touched down aboard the Fleet Carrier, although the shuttle coming to a shuddering halt had already given that away. Murphy rose from his seat and grabbed his bag from the adjacent locker as he did so. “Yeah, name’s Lieutenant Commander Ryan Murphy, but you fellas can call me Leprechaun.”

“I’m Ensign Baker, this is Ensign Halifax,” the bolder one of the two said.

Murphy smiled at them as he walked towards the door. “Once you’re settled in, come and find me. I’ll give you lads some pointers.”

“Thank you, Sir!” Halifax gasped, looking astonished and excited.

“Will do, Leprechaun!” Baker said with a cheerful grin.

Murphy winked at them, then left them to collect their kit-bags as he strolled out of the shuttle airlock and across the docking stanchion. He was surprised to see a familiar face waiting for him at the end of the platform, his friend standing at ease, although his rigid posture looked anything but. “Binary! How’s it going?” Murphy asked, clapping his wingman on the shoulder.

The man’s stern posture relaxed slightly, a brief smile flickering on his face. “Good to see you, Leprechaun. Did you enjoy your vacation?”

“You should have come with me,” Murphy said, smiling at his fellow fighter pilot as they left the hangar. “The civvies are all over anyone in a uniform!”

Binary nodded thoughtfully. “I believe you experienced the ‘Lion effect’. I’ve heard a number of other officers discussing the positive benefits of John Blake’s recent defence of Terra. They seemed most enthused about their recent interactions with civilians.”

“Yeah, I can imagine,” Murphy said with a wry smile, striding down the corridor. He frowned as he glanced at Binary who was keeping pace beside him. “Have you met our new CO yet?”

“I have. He requested your presence on the flight deck the moment you landed,” Binary informed him solemnly.

Murphy groaned in exasperation. “Right now? I wanted a shower and a nap! I’m not back on the roster until this afternoon...”

“He was most insistent,” Binary replied, tapping his companion on the shoulder and taking a left fork in the corridor.

Looking wistfully down the right fork, which would have led to a steaming hot shower then six hours of blissful sleep, Murphy sighed and reluctantly followed Binary to the left instead. He could only imagine the kind of ball-busting hardass that would make him rush straight back on duty – didn’t this new guy know that it was tradition to get blitzed on your last day of leave?

Murphy plodded along beside Binary as they passed more Hangars until they reached the scores of fighter launch bays, commonly known as the flight deck. There was a lot of activity here, far more than usual for this time of day in a non-combat situation. He could sense the excitement in the air as a couple of airmen jogged past, talking animatedly with each other.

“Nice of you to show your face, Leprechaun! Glad to see you didn’t drink yourself into a coma!” a loud, cheerful voice shouted to him from the maintenance gantry overlooking the fighter bay.

“Gator?! What’re you doing here?” Murphy exclaimed, astonished to see one of his flight instructors from the Academy and saluting reflexively.

The tall, moustachioed man strolled towards him with a wide grin on his face. “It’s Captain Lewis to you! You weren’t the only one to get promoted recently!”

Murphy blinked at him in surprise. “They gave you command of the whole squadron?! Congratulations!”

“We lost a lot of good men at Regulus. When they called and offered me the post, I leapt at the chance.” He turned to Murphy’s companion, nodding to him gratefully as he added, “Thanks for bringing him here, Binary.”

“Happy to be of service, Captain,” Binary replied. “If you have no further need of me, may I be dismissed?”

Captain Lewis looked at him in surprise. “Don’t you want to check out the new fighters?”

“I requested the technical readouts for the new Claymore variants from one of the technicians. I intend to study them back in my quarters,” Binary announced, in his flat unemotional voice.

“Be my guest,” the bewildered officer said, gesturing back the way they’d arrived.

Murphy was used to his wingman’s eccentricities, so he simply smiled at his friend before he walked away down the corridor. Turning back to look at his Commanding Officer, Murphy had a gleam in his eyes. “What’s this about new fighters?”

“They’re state of the art! Fresh out of the Shipyards at Olympus!” Gator replied sounding excited. He jerked a thumb back towards the fighter bay. “Come and have a look...”

They walked briskly towards the maintenance gantries that led down into the fighter bay. There were dozens of pilots gathered along the railings staring at the new fighter in awe.

“Holy shit!” Murphy cursed under his breath, his eyes widening as he stared at the brutal-looking piece of military hardware.

The Claymore had three multi-barrelled Gatling Lasers jutting out of each wing, along with a big blunt-nosed barrel built directly into the central fuselage. It was much bigger than the Rapier fighters that Murphy had flown since leaving the Academy, at least twenty-metres long with two huge engines on the back. Although it looked very intimidating, Murphy could only imagine what a gunship with that much mass would handle like.

Gator grinned at him. “Want to take one out for a spin? I can’t wait to see what they can do!”

Murphy looked at the Captain in confusion. “The Claymore looks more like a gunship than a fighter. With all due respect, Sir, I’m a fighter pilot. That beast must handle like a slug in treacle!”

“I’ll tell you what,” Captain Lewis said reasonably. “Be my wingman for a test flight and if you don’t like the handling, you can stick with the Rapiers, no questions asked. Sound fair?”

It was a reasonable enough request, but Gator had always been a reasonable man. “Sounds like a fair deal, Captain. I’ll get suited up.”

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John yawned as he awoke, being careful as he stretched so that he wouldn’t wake the Maliri twins who were draped over him. He smiled at the sleeping girls then glanced at the ship’s chronometer. He did a double-take, surprised to see that it was nearly ten in the morning. That explained why it was just the three of them left in bed, the rest of the girls having obviously got up earlier.

\*You earned a lie-in after last night’s sterling performance,\* Alyssa said, sounding particularly contented today.

John smiled as he remembered the loving orgy in Calara’s room, with Alyssa squarely at the centre. It had been an energetic evening, but he’d slept-in for far longer than he’d intended to and he tried to recall the details of their flight path to work out their progress. \*I better get up. We must be reaching the Trankaran border soon?\*

\*We’ll cross into Trankaran Space in thirty-two minutes,\* his blonde Matriarch informed him. \*I’m up on the Bridge at the moment in case there’s trouble.\*

\*Sensible precaution,\* he agreed. \*Alright, give me a few minutes to have a shower and I’ll head straight there to join you.\*

At that moment the Maliri girls began to stir, blinking drowsily as they stretched. \*Oops,\* Alyssa murmured, a playful undercurrent to her voice.

John rolled his eyes, knowing full-well that she’d just deliberately woken the girls up. Still, he did want to talk to both sisters and it was better to do it now, rather than leaving them alone in case they had any worries about last night’s events.

“Good morning, my Maliri beauties,” John said, smiling at the twins in greeting.

“Good morning, John,” they replied simultaneously, their identical voices creating an affectionate, reverberating echo. They rolled over so that they could look at him properly, leaning their soft warm breasts against his chest.

He caught the embarrassed glances they were darting each other and he decided to nip that in the bud immediately. Reaching up to caress them both, he brushed his fingers against their cheeks before sliding his hands back to massage their heads. They both relaxed with his soothing touch, leaning into his hands as he stroked them.

“I’ve never seen either of you look that satisfied before,” he told them both, before turning to look at Tashana. “It seemed like you had a great time. Did you enjoy everything that happened last night?”

Tashana blushed as she nodded. “I loved it! I’ve never experienced that much pleasure before... I didn’t even know that was possible!”

“Good girl,” John said, praising her for her honesty. Turning to look at Irillith he continued in a firm voice. “Your sister enjoyed *everything* about last night. Did you have a good time as well?”

Realising immediately that he was trying to reassure her, Irillith gave him a loving, grateful smile. Her embarrassment faded away as she realised Tashana hadn’t changed her mind after her initial positive reaction to seeing John impaling her ass. She felt immensely relieved that her sister hadn’t been overcome with revulsion and felt almost giddy at Tashana’s calm and welcoming acceptance.

She leaned down to gently kiss John’s wrist, lowering her eyes submissively for only a second... but it was enough to convey the message she intended. “I felt like I truly gave myself to you last night; it was absolutely wonderful. Thank you for being so thoughtful with all your prior preparations.”

One of her slender blue hands drifted to her neck as she smiled at him coyly, but he already knew what she was referring to.

Looking at each of them in turn, he said quietly, “There’s over a thousand Maliri linked to Edraele, but you two are special. I’m not planning to take any of those girls that way, but I would very much like a repeat performance with both of you sometime.” He gazed into Tashana’s eyes as he spoke, making his intentions quite clear.

Tashana nibbled at her lower lip, then smiled at Irillith. “When it’s my turn, would you be there for me too? He’s just so huge, I’ve no idea how it’ll fit! I always feel bolder and braver when you’re around.”

Irillith leaned over John and gave her twin a tender kiss. “Of course. I promise I’ll take good care of you.”

“It seemed like there were some unforeseen side-effects at the end of the night,” John reminded them quietly. “Do you remember being able to hear Irillith’s thoughts, Tashana?”

She gasped, her violet eyes widening in awe. “I totally forgot about that!”

He smiled at her and pulled her down for a kiss. “I’m not surprised! You were both barely conscious by the time we finished.”

Looking equally astonished Irillith blurted out, “I don’t remember that at all! Are you sure that happened?”

John nodded as he replied, “Alyssa heard you speaking to your sister with telepathy. It definitely happened.” He gave them a quizzical look and continued, “Can you try again this morning? I’d be interested to see if you can do that again.”

Equally intrigued by the idea, the twins turned to gaze into each other’s eyes, both concentrating on trying to send a telepathic message to her sister.

“I heard you!” Tashana exclaimed a second later. She smiled as she added, “You said: ‘I love you, little sister’... I remember now, you told me the same thing last night!”

“I wonder why I can’t hear you?” Irillith asked, frowning with disappointment. They both turned to look at John, two sets of angular violet eyes hopeful for an answer.

John shook his head. “I’m sorry girls, I’ve no idea why; it wasn’t something I initiated. I discussed your telepathy with Alyssa last night, but she wasn’t sure what triggered it either. It might be linked to Irillith being bonded with her, but neither she nor Athena was certain.”

“Maybe it was a budding ability that was always there, but you nurtured it into something more substantial?” Irillith asked him, before glancing at Tashana. “Do you remember that tingling sensation when we were children? I’ve felt that a number of times since we rescued you.”

“Me too!” Tashana exclaimed, beaming at her sister.

Irillith gave John a sultry smile. “Maybe you just need to feed Tashana a few more times, then she’ll be able to speak to me with telepathy too...”

“Unless I’m already using telepathy with Irillith, but you need to feed her more so she can hear me?” Tashana replied, leaning down to plant a delicate kiss on John’s chest.

“Either of you could be right,” John said, stroking their hair and smiling at them.

“Perhaps we better share then, just to be sure,” Irillith murmured, copying her sister and kissing his chest. They flicked excited glances at each other and began to trail soft kisses down his torso.

They’d made a compelling argument and John saw no reason to disagree...

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Murphy adjusted the straps on his flight suit to make sure it was comfortable and pulled on his helmet as he approached the massive Claymore ‘fighter’. Rather than a lifting canopy like the Rapiers, there was an airlock mounted in the side of the vessel, allowing him easy access to the spacious cockpit. Sliding into the comfortable pilot’s seat, he attached the straps of his flight suit to the standard locking mechanisms on the chair.

He hit the big green button on the console to begin the power-up routine and as the engines rumbled to life, he went through the standard safety checks. Despite the size difference of the ship, the control interface was remarkably similar to a standard fighter and he fell into that familiar routine, following the normal startup checklist.

A light flashed on his console and a soft chime filled the air, alerting him to an incoming hail. He swiped his hand across the interface and Captain Lewis smiled at him in greeting. “Let me know when you’re ready to launch. I’ve cleared our test flight with Zeus traffic control.”

Murphy nodded distractedly, his hands moving on auto-pilot as he activated a variety of displays showing the local system map, power output and... “What the hell?!” he exclaimed waving his hand over the readout to refresh it. He gave the Captain a rueful frown. “Sorry, Gator, this Claymore’s malfunctioning. My power readouts are broken and I can’t fly with them out of action, it’s against regs.”

“It isn’t broken,” Captain Lewis said calmly.

Murphy frowned and refreshed the readout again. “Nah, this is completely screwed. I’m seeing at least ten times the power output than my Rapier’s old plant and my Mk III had recently been upgraded!”

The Captain smiled at him knowingly. “Like I said, that’s not broken; the Claymore’s equipped with a state-of-the-art power plant. It’s Ashanath tech... a gift from the Lion.”

Staring at the display in astonishment, Murphy’s hand froze over the console as he glanced at the weapon loadout. “A fucking Gauss Cannon!” he blurted out in shock. He’d been expecting to see the six Gatling Lasers and had forgotten about the maw of the heavy calibre weapon built into the gunship’s hull.

“All that power’s there for a reason,” his old instructor said with a chuckle, making Murphy feel like he was back in the Academy. “You’ve got shields now as well... You can see the shield status on the damage control display.”

Murphy shook his head in amazement, bringing up damage control. Sure enough, he saw an image of the Claymore but it was swathed in bright green. The Rapiers had been too small to mount Shield Generators, a problem faced by fighters in all the major Galactic Empires. Well, apart from the Brimorians, but fortunately those creepy bastards kept themselves well clear of the Terran Federation.

“Alright, I’m all set,” he replied, taking a casual grip on the flightstick.

All that power, the shields, and the impressive weapon loadout was all well and good, but a ship this bulky probably handled like a bomber... There was a good reason the poor suckers flying those deathtraps had such a low life expectancy.

“Okay, I’ll link up with you out in the black. Take it easy now, Leprechaun,” Gator warned him. “You need to be caref-.”

Murphy rolled his eyes and grinned at the holographic image of his Captain as he cut him off. “It’s basically a gunship, Gator!” he scoffed, grabbing the throttle and jamming it forward. “How fast can it be...”

Whatever cautionary words Captain Lewis said in reply were drowned out by the roar of the huge engines as the Claymore roared down the launch tube. The massive thrust pinned Murphy to his seat as his ship blasted out of the Zeus and into space.

“Holy Fuck!” Murphy screamed, eyes like saucers as he desperately pulled back on the throttle.

He stared at the speed indicator in amazement. Even at half-thrust he was travelling at his old Rapier’s maximum velocity. Pulling back on the stick to avoid a squadron of destroyers, he could feel the g-force pressing down on him as the nose of the Claymore lifted effortlessly. The turn rate was astonishing, leaving him staring slack-jawed at the readouts.

“Trankaran engines and retro-thrusters, another present from the Lion,” Captain Lewis said with a wry smile. “I hope you enjoyed that little stunt, they’ll slap you with a fine for exceeding acceptable launch-tube escape velocity.”

“Hell, that was worth it!” Murphy exclaimed, a wild grin on his face. He pushed the throttle forward and banked the Claymore around to form up on Gator’s wing. “I fucking love this fighter!”

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John stepped out of the grav-tube onto the Command Deck, smiling at Alyssa as she gave him a cheerful wave. As he approached the Command Podium, he glanced around for Faye, surprised to see she wasn’t sitting on his console.

“Where’s our resident purple pixie?” he asked, taking a seat in his Command Chair.

Alyssa smiled and handed him a plate with a bacon sandwich that smelled absolutely divine. “I told her I’d keep an eye on the Bridge. Faye’s overseeing the maintenance bots at the moment with all her avatars; they’re busy building new heatsinks for the defence grid. When we stop to have a chat with the Trankarans, she’s going to upgrade all the Pulse Cannons for us.”

“As our flame-haired tech genius would say: ‘Faye really is fucking awesome!’,” John said with a grin, before taking a big bite of the sandwich. He groaned in delight, savouring the perfectly grilled bacon. Swallowing down that first mouthful, he raised an eyebrow as she glanced at the blonde. “Was this Calara’s handiwork?”

“Actually, I thought I’d take care of my man this morning,” Alyssa replied, looking pleased by his reaction to the breakfast she’d lovingly prepared. “Consider it my way of saying thank you, for services enthusiastically rendered last night.”

He laughed and took another bite, letting out a happy sigh as he chewed. As amazing as this sandwich was, he was actually feeling a bit thir-.

“Here you go,” she said, handing him a mug full of hot coffee.

John looked at her in surprise for a moment, then smiled gratefully. “You’re just a golden-haired telepathic angel, aren’t you?”

“I arrived straight from heaven, to reward you for being such a good boy,” Alyssa deadpanned, the sparkle in her bright blue eyes the only thing giving her away.

“I’m fairly sure the things you like getting up to wouldn’t be considered acceptable angelic behaviour...” John said, arching an eyebrow.

Before Alyssa could reply, there was a soft chime from her console and a light flashed on the comm interface. She leaned forward in her seat and glanced at the caller ID, before looking at John in surprise. “We’re being hailed by an Admiral Kester aboard the Heimdall.”

John frowned and shook his head. “The name doesn’t ring any bells. I thought Charles introduced me to most of the Admiralty.”

Her hands darted over the console and the sector map sprang into life in the centre of the bridge. The holographic image cast a soft blue light over the Command Deck, showing the long border between the Terran Federation and the Trankaran Republic. They were far over to the ‘right’ of the holographic map, a long way from Port Megara. Sure enough, a short distance from the line demarking the border, they saw a substantial fleet of ships, led by a huge vessel tagged by its transponder code as the ‘Shield of Heimdall’.

“Must be a dreadnought,” Alyssa said thoughtfully. “It follows the same kind of naming convention.”

“But what’s a Terran Federation border fleet doing all the way out here?” John mused out loud. “We’re way off the beaten track.” He finished off the last of his bacon sandwich and hid the plate behind the console before taking a big sip of coffee. “Okay, put him through.”

Alyssa swiped her fingers across the name and the holographic viewscreen flickered to life, displaying a secure channel logo. That faded a few moments later and a smartly dressed Terran officer appeared on the screen, his epaulets and rank insignia identifying him as an Admiral. The sharp glimmer of intelligence was quite apparent in the brown eyes that studied them.

“Ah, we meet at last, Vice Admiral Blake,” the officer said, inclining his head politely. “As I’m sure you can well imagine, your reputation precedes you. My name’s Admiral Anthony Kester, I command the Federation forces along the Trankaran border.”

“I didn’t think we’d met before, Admiral Kester,” John replied, saluting the smartly uniformed man.

The Admiral smiled as he shrugged helplessly. “I would’ve loved to have attended that little soiree in your honour on Terra, but you know how it is... duty calls.”

“What duty brings you all the way out here?” John asked, before narrowing his eyes cautiously. “I’ve heard there’s been problems with the Kirrix...”

Kester nodded grimly. “Got it in one. Something big’s happening in Trankaran Space. We’ve been repelling Kirrix incursions originating from *inside* the Trankaran Republic!”

John shared a worried glance with Alyssa before turning back to look at the Admiral. “Have you spoken to the Trankarans? We made contact with Fleet Warden Thandrun a couple of days ago... We’re on our way to meet him.”

Admiral Kester frowned, his eyebrows climbing in alarm. “I’d strongly discourage you from following that plan. I was maintaining a regular dialogue with Thandrun, but we lost contact with the Trankarans yesterday. Oh, and when I mentioned Kirrix incursions, I wasn’t talking about the odd hive-ship sneaking across the border raiding for civilians. We’ve repelled fleets led by battleship-class Kirrix vessels!”

Pausing to consider that for a moment, John said in a sombre tone, “I appreciate the warning, Admiral. We’ll keep our eyes open.”

The older officer looked startled at John’s calm reaction to news that would have terrified a regular cruiser captain. He stared intently at them for a few seconds, until a wry smile suddenly appeared on his face. “Apologies, Lion, I forgot who I was speaking with for a moment.” He tipped his peaked hat and added, “I hope you have a pleasant journey. Please pass on my regards to the Fleet Warden. I always liked Thandrun... I hope you can rescue the Trankarans from whatever trouble they’re in.”

“Will do, Admiral,” John replied, smiling back at him. “As I said before, thanks for the heads up.”

“My pleasure, Lion,” Admiral Kester replied, saluting him respectfully before ending the call.

Alyssa turned and grinned at John. “Why can’t the rest of the Admiralty be like him? He was the first Admiral we’ve met that I genuinely liked!”

“Caldwell and Mishra seemed quite sensible,” John said, thinking back to his meeting with the senior officers running the war with the Kintark Empire. He smiled and added, “Ah, but you didn’t meet them, did you? I had Calara with me instead.”

Alyssa nodded, then glanced across the Bridge at the Sector Map. “Well, I suppose we better keep our eyes peeled; we should reach the rendezvous point in an hour-and-a-half. What do you want to do if we run into Kirrix ships?” She shivered with revulsion, remembering their last encounter with the parasitic insectoid race.

“We’ll just have to play it by ear. I’ll stay up on the Bridge and we can make that call depending on what we come up against,” John said cautiously, following her wary gaze to the glowing holographic map.

The Invictus hurtled across the border between the two empires without incident, leaving the Heimdall and the Terran forces far behind them as the sparkling white cruiser swept into Trankaran territory. This area of space was devoid of all life, with not a single active sensor contact appearing on the Invictus’ long range sensors. After recently travelling through the bustling Terran core worlds, it was disquieting to see it so deserted.

It didn’t take long before they encountered the debris fields. The first group of wrecks were a trio of Trankaran cruisers that had been involved in a devastating firefight. Trankaran ships had incredibly thick armour and the ravaged vessels had suffered hundreds of weapon hits before being overcome. The shattered wrecks made for ominous viewing, John and Alyssa sharing a look of concern.

“We better get Calara up here just in case,” John said, staring at the derelict ships.

“She’s on her way,” Alyssa murmured quietly, her eyes fixed on the holographic map.

The Latina arrived within the minute, nodding to them both before jogging down the ramp to take her seat at Tactical. She glanced up at the images of the Trankaran cruisers, her eyes narrowing as she studied their lacerated hulls. “They were hit by a swarm of Kirrix Drones,” she said soberly. “I recognise the patterning of impact craters from the battle footage taken during the last purge.”

“The Kirrix use automated fighters?” Alyssa asked in surprise.

Calara shook her head. “No, their Drone ships are actually manned by living Kirrix. The fighters are small though and got mistaken for robotic drones. After that, the name just stuck.”

They passed several asteroid belts, with dozens of what appeared to be abandoned Trankaran mining vessels drifting amongst the massive floating rocks. When they got closer, Calara focused their sensors on the bulky civilian ships and once they appeared in the Tactical View, it was easy to see the damage they’d sustained. The weapon hits were all focused on their engines, the Kirrix having disabled the mining vessels to prevent their escape.

“So the miners could be collected for infestation by the hive ships,” John said, his expression bleak. “This is a lot worse than I thought. The Trankarans must have been completely overwhelmed!”

Calara checked the results of the sensor scans. “No life signs,” she said, confirming his suspicions.

“Are you sure the Kirrix can use Trankarans for... infestation?” Alyssa asked, looking deeply unsettled. “Aren’t their bodies too tough?”

The grim look on John’s face spoke volumes. “The Kirrix can breed with just about any living creature. Even though the Trankarans are silicon based life-forms it doesn’t make any difference. Kirrix grubs have razor-sharp teeth to chew their way out of a host... The Trankarans are very sturdy, but they can’t survive that kind of internal damage.”

Calara pointed towards a large cluster of debris on the map. “That’s why the Terran forces lost contact with the Trankarans! The Kirrix must be systematically destroying all the comm beacons to keep the Trankarans isolated.”

John looked at her in surprise, wondering how she knew about the Trankarans being cut off.

Alyssa quickly explained, “I kept all the girls up to date during our conversation with Admiral Kester. It was easier than explaining it all again later.”

Calara was lost in thought for a moment, her brow furrowed in confusion. “If the Trankarans have been overwhelmed, they must have been aware of how many Kirrix ships invading. I wonder why they didn’t ask the Terran Federation for help?”

“Maybe they did... but High Command decided not to bother,” Alyssa replied, her tone making her opinion of them abundantly clear.

“I can’t believe High Command would just turn their back on the Trankarans!” Calara protested. “The Kirrix are a blight on all species!”

“Let’s not jump to any hasty conclusions,” John cautioned them both, leaning back in his chair. “We’ll rendezvous with the Fleet Warden and find out the full story from Thandrun.”

The two girls nodded, then focused on the Sector Map again, looking out for any signs of trouble. Despite John urging caution, he couldn’t help wondering if Alyssa might have been right. If her hunch did turn out to be correct, then building any kind of intergalactic alliance might prove even more difficult than he’d originally thought. He was absorbed in his worries and lost track of time, until he was brought back to reality by Alyssa gently squeezing his hand.

\*Sorry, I didn’t mean to make you worry,\* she thought to him, crouching down beside his Command Chair.

He looked into her bright blue eyes and slowly shook his head. \*No need to apologise. With everything happening recently, the Trankarans being abandoned by the Terran Federation might well be a distinct possibility.\*

She leaned in and kissed him, giving him a supportive smile. \*We’ll find out soon, we’re approaching the Delta Corvus system. Calara spotted the Trankaran fleet on the long range scans.\*

John looked across the Bridge at the Sector Map then blinked in shock at the sight. The Trankaran fleet had taken a hammering, their forces reduced to roughly half the previous numbers he’d seen during their last visit. The dark-red hulls of the remaining ships were scarred and pitted, providing stark evidence of the intensity of the combat that those vessels had faced.

Not that it was needed...

The massive battlecarrier flagship and its supporting cluster of six battleships were surrounded by a dense sea of debris, the aftermath of what must have been a ferocious battle. The wreckage of yellowish-brown insectoid-shaped ships numbered in the hundreds, with scores of broken Trankaran ships scattered throughout the carnage. Two enormous battleships had been brought down by the Kirrix, their broken but still-intact hulls standing like monolithic crimson tombstones, marking the final resting place of thousands of Trankarans. Dozens of bulky, rust-coloured Trankaran cruisers and destroyers were carefully picking through the wreckage, presumably searching for survivors.

“We must have missed the battle by a matter of hours,” Calara said, her face filled with bitter regret. “If only we could have made it in time...”

“We couldn’t have got here any faster,” John said quietly. “As soon as Thandrun requested a meeting, we dropped everything and rushed to Trankaran Space.”

Calara sighed and gave him a forlorn look. “It’s just frustrating, knowing how much difference we could have made.”

“The Trankarans’ sensors aren’t as powerful as ours, so they probably haven’t seen us yet,” Alyssa said, turning to look at John. “Should we hail them to let them know we’re coming?”

He nodded, unable to tear his eyes away from the scenes of destruction. “I doubt they’re in the mood for any surprises right now. Let’s give them plenty of notice that we’re heading in-system.”

Alyssa scrolled down the list of contacts in the comm interface and stopped at the personal contact details for Fleet Warden Thandrun. She swiped a slender finger across his name and they watched the holo-screen as the call attempted to connect. There was no answer for a minute, before text appeared on the screen, prompting to see if she’d like to leave a message.

“I’m not surprised he’s busy,” John said, darting a meaningful look at the battlefield, or more specifically the starship graveyard in the Delta Corvus system. “Trying hailing the Kerhom's Anvil instead. We can let the bridge crew know we’re about to arrive.”

She nodded, selecting the enormous battlecarrier and hailing them. This time her call was answered almost immediately, a granite-faced Trankaran appearing in the holo-screen as the comm channel opened up. The bulky alien looked haggard and upset, his blunt, slab-like features turned down into a mournful frown. He blinked in surprise when he saw who was calling, a faint smile appearing on his startled face.

“Welcome to Trankaran Space, Lion of the Federation! The Fleet Warden warned us to expect your imminent arrival,” the Trankaran communication officer rumbled in his deep voice.

“We picked up all the debris on our long-range scans,” John said, his tone sombre. “It looks like you guys managed to survive one hell of a battle. Is there anything we can do to help with the recovery efforts?”

The comms officer looked shocked for a moment, as he was able to see from the comm signal just how far away the Invictus was and how powerful that meant its sensor systems were. He recovered quickly and shook his head. “Your kind offer is much appreciated, but Fleet Warden Thandrun requested that you dock with this vessel as soon as you arrive. He wishes to discuss an urgent matter with you.”

\*Twelve minutes, ten seconds until we arrive in the Delta Corvus system,\* Alyssa surreptitiously informed John.

He’d been expecting Thandrun to request an immediate meeting, so he nodded and replied, “We should be with you in just over twelve minutes.”

The comms officer was amazed for a second time as he realised just how fast the Invictus must be travelling in hyper-warp. Shrugging it off a moment later he gave them a broader smile. “I’ll inform the Fleet Warden of your imminent arrival.”

John nodded and Alyssa closed the comm channel. He turned to look at her afterwards and said, “Let’s get the rest of the girls up on the Bridge in case there’s further trouble. I’d like you and Calara with me for the meeting with Thandrun.”

“They’re on their way,” the blonde replied, rising from her chair.

It didn’t take long for the rest of the crew to start arriving and they greeted John with a smile before fanning out to take their stations. Rachel was the exception and she paused at the foot of the Command Podium, looking up at him with a question in her eyes.

John walked down the illuminated steps and placed a hand on her arm as he looked into her grey eyes. “Let me guess? You’d like to come along so you can offer to heal the wounded?”

“Is that okay?” she asked hesitantly. “Alyssa warned us that we needed to be cautious with our psychic ability usage; at least until you can re-bond with Edraele. I’d really like to help the Trankarans if I can, but it’s also a good opportunity for me to practice my psychic healing.”

“Sure, you can come along,” John replied, sharing a smile with her. “Just don’t tire yourself out. If the Trankarans ask us for assistance against the Kirrix, we might end up in combat as early as this afternoon.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll triage my patients,” the tawny-haired brunette said, nodding her understanding.

John looked across the Bridge at his Security Chief. “Sakura, would you mind keeping an eye on Rachel for me while we’re aboard the Anvil?”

The Asian girl sprang from her seat and jogged up the ramp to join them. “Of course! I’ll keep her safe.”

Alyssa placed a hand on John’s shoulder. “Let me watch over Rachel instead. That’ll free up Sakura to get some target practice with the Valkyrie and I’ll still be able to overhear your entire conversation with Thandrun anyway.”

He frowned for a moment, giving the excited Asian girl a worried glance. “We need the Invictus on standby in case we need to depart in a hurry and Trankaran Space seems to be crawling with Kirrix at the moment. I definitely don’t want her going off alone to shoot up asteroids.”

The blonde turned towards the Tactical map and waved her hand at the hundreds of wrecked insectoid spacecraft. “Sakura doesn’t need to find an asteroid field, this place is ideal! The Trankarans were kind enough to set up this lovely firing range for her and she can even get used to shooting Kirrix ships. She’ll be perfectly safe right here.”

John nodded thoughtfully, then turned to smile at Sakura. “You better get suited up. Make sure you contact the Trankarans and let them know what you’re planning, they’ll be jittery after the fight they’ve just been through.”

“Will do!” she agreed, beaming a sparkling smile at him, before dashing into the grav-tube.

Faye blazed onto the Bridge in a purple flash, bouncing up and down with anticipation as she gazed at John with her big luminous eyes. “John! Should I still proceed with refitting the heatsinks in the Pulse Cannons?”

Calara saw his momentary hesitation and gave him a confident smile. “It should be fine. With the huge sensor range we have, it’ll take any Kirrix ships at least ninety minutes to close with us. That should give the maintenance bots more than enough time to finish working on any Pulse Cannons they’re upgrading at that particular moment.”

Faye nodded enthusiastically. “Actually, with all twelve of my boys out there, it shouldn’t take much more than an hour to upgrade the full defence grid!”

“That fast?” John said in surprise, before giving the purple sprite a broad grin. “Okay go ahead, Faye.”

“Already on it!” she exclaimed with glee, blinking out of sight a second later.

“I’m leaving the Invictus in your capable hands, Dana,” John called over to the redhead. “Just let us know if you spot any Kirrix on the long-range scans.”

“We’ll keep our eyes peeled!” Dana said, turning her chair at the Engineer’s Station to give him a thumbs-up.

“After you then, ladies,” John said to trio of girls standing beside him as he gestured towards the grav-tube.

They descended in the red anti-gravity field, then walked briskly along the corridor on Deck Two towards their bedroom and the express grav-tubes. John felt his stomach lurch as he dropped down to the Combat Bridge, still finding the sheer speed of the accelerated grav-tubes startling to use. Alyssa glanced at their armour and guns for a moment, then raised an eyebrow as she turned to look at John.

“I trust Thandrun, I don’t think for one minute he’d try ambushing us,” John said, thinking about the calm and sensible Fleet Warden. He paused and looked at the three teenagers standing before him, then changed his mind with a frown. “Let’s not take any chances though. I doubt he’ll be offended but I’d rather deal with a bit of diplomatic fallout than put you girls at risk.”

No one objected and they walked over to the armour-equipping frames and stepped into Paragon Armour boots. Activating the thumb controls, robotic limbs brought armour plating down to fully enclose their bodies, the joints sealing with a series of clicks. Rather than taking a Quantum rifle, John just took one of the Quantum pistols, attaching the waist harness and sliding a couple of magazines into the pouches around the belt.

The girls followed his lead and once they were all equipped, they walked over to the second set of express grav-tubes, to sink down to the Secondary Hangar. All Faye’s avatars were busy taking direct control over the dozen maintenance bots, so she wasn’t there to greet them when they arrived in the Raptor’s cockpit. John was surprised to find how much he missed her cheerful presence and he watched Alyssa distractedly as she glided over to the Pilot’s chair then began powering up the gunship.

“Sorry, just little old me flying you today,” the blonde said, catching his eyes as she glanced over her shoulder, her own twinkling in the amber light from the glowing consoles.

John grinned at her and relaxed back in his seat. “I guess you’ll have to do.” He turned to smile at his two companions. “How are you girls doing? Everything alright?”

“I started attempting to track the Nymphs this morning,” Calara replied, her slight frown not boding well. “Attempting to follow the trail after more than three centuries is proving... challenging.”

“That trail’s pretty damn cold alright,” John agreed, giving her a sympathetic look. “Still, it’s early days yet. Don’t get disheartened, I know you’ll start finding some solid leads soon.”

The Latina relaxed a little and smiled back at him. “Don’t get me wrong, I’ve been relishing the challenge. If any of Jade’s sisters are still alive out there, I’ll track them down.”

“I know you will,” John said, his voice ringing with his confidence in her. He turned to look at Rachel who was sitting beside him. “How about you, honey? Has it been difficult getting back into your analysis of incurable diseases?”

The brunette shook her head, a bright smile on her face. “I’ve been able to make some great progress already! I’ve developed a cure for Thyron Fever.”

John frowned, having heard of that horrible disease. “I remember that about ten years ago... the outbreak was all over the news.”

“What happened?” Calara asked, leaning forward and listening with interest.

“It spread like wildfire through Thyron, a planet in the Dragon March. The entire system had to be quarantined, but the whole colony was wiped out within a week. Millions died... There were a lot of people pointing fingers on the holo-net,” he explained, remembering the shock and fear that had rippled through the Terran Federation.

“It’s extremely contagious,” Rachel agreed, her voice sombre. “The virus is airborne, so it can be transmitted very easily. The virus itself is also highly mutable, so I can sympathise with the medical teams that were attempting to treat it.”

“Please don’t tell me that one was bio-engineered as well,” John said, grimacing at the thought.

She shook her head giving him a reassuring smile. “Thyron Fever was simply down to mother nature feeling particularly vicious. I looked into the planet’s history and Thyron was a newly terraformed jungle world the Terran Federation acquired from the Kintark. The planet was teeming with lifeforms and I suspect the virus jumped species from an indigenous creature, finding Terrans to be an ideal host. In any case, I was able to neutralise it by disabling its ability to bind to a cell’s receptor proteins, crippling its ability to replicate itself. The antiviral I’ve developed would render it harmless to a patient within the hour.”

“That’s outstanding work,” John said looking suitably impressed. “You’ve only been working on the cure for that for what... six hours?”

She winked at him. “Four actually! I completed my cure for Thyron Fever yesterday evening. I spent this morning researching a form of Pneumonic Plague. It killed tens-of-millions in the core worlds two centuries ago and still resurfaces occasionally out on the fringe. It’s particularly unpleasant; the victims drown in their own blood.”

Calara shivered, a flicker of fear in her dark-brown eyes. “That sounds hideous! There’s no risk of any outbreaks from your research is there?!”

Rachel smiled at the brunette reassuringly and shook her head. “I don’t have access to samples of the virus, so my research and subsequent analysis is purely theoretical.”

“How do you know the cures will work then?” the Latina asked in confusion. “Don’t you need to prove that they can actually neutralise all these horrible diseases?”

“They’ll work,” the tawny-haired girl replied, not a shadow of doubt in her mind. When she saw that Calara still looking unconvinced, Rachel continued, “After all your research into the Dragon March Traitor, did you need to speak with Admiral Norwood to know that he was guilty?”

“No... but all the evidence against him was absolutely damning!”

“This is the same kind of thing,” Rachel said with a shrug. “When I distribute the cures to the Terran Federation medical community, I’ll provide them advice on how best to perform safe trials. They aren’t necessary though, the anti-virals I’ve developed are flawless.” She blushed then and darted a self-conscious smile at John and Calara. “Sorry, I realise how arrogant that sounded!”

John put his arm around her. “No need to apologise. You’re both incredibly intelligent women and there’s no point being modest about your achievements. You can each accomplish truly remarkable things and to pretend otherwise would be disingenuous.”

Rachel smiled at him in relief. “You know what I really love about you? I don’t have to worry about playing games, like having to hide being bright, and I don’t have to try to work out how you want me to act. You just want me to be... me. I can’t tell you how refreshing that is! Everything’s just so *easy* being with you.”

Calara nodded, watching him with a loving look in her eyes.

“Hey! I’m not easy!” John joked, smiling self-consciously at the two girls.

“Yeah you are,” Alyssa called over her shoulder. “Don’t worry, we love that about you too!”

He laughed and looked her way, then blinked in surprise when he realised they’d already docked inside the Trankaran battlecarrier. The Raptor glided to a halt on the glowing landing pad and Alyssa’s hands flew over the consoles as she shut down the gunship. Rising to his feet, John offered Rachel and Calara a hand and they stood beside him while they waited for Alyssa to finish at the controls.

“All set?” he asked, as she rose to join them.

Alyssa nodded, slipping her arm around his. “It looks like things got pretty hairy here on the Anvil.”

“What do you mean?” John asked as they walked out of the cockpit.

“You’ll see in a minute,” she replied, her mouth twisting into a frown as they descended in the grav-tube.

He didn’t have to wait long to find out exactly what the blonde was referring to. As they walked down the loading ramp, his eyes widened at the carnage in the broad hangar. Several Kirrix dropships had landed inside the Trankaran ship and the insectoid marines had been met with fierce resistance.

The gunfight had been intense. Sticky green blood was spattered all over the deck and scores of yellow-brown Kirrix corpses littered the Hangar floor. Although the Trankarans had repelled boarders, they’d paid a heavy price to do so, with a number of their huge armoured forms lying still on the deck. That the Trankarans hadn’t yet had the time to inter their corpses showed just how recent the fierce battle had been.

“John Blake, it’s so good to see you again!” an eight-foot-tall Trankaran male rumbled, clomping towards them with loud, heavy footfalls. Despite the noise of his approach, Bhaken stepped carefully around the broken corpses on the deck, avoiding walking over fallen friend or foe alike.

John struggled with telling most Trankarans apart, but he recognised the friendly robed figure that greeted them in the Hangar. “Associate Bhaken! Thank you for coming to meet us. I’m glad to see you survived the battle unscathed.”

“It was a truly horrible business,” the mild-mannered rockman said, shuddering at the thought. His face fell and his dark-grey face looked mournful. “But I’m sorry to say that I’ve grown accustomed to receiving dreadful news. The past couple of months has seen an unrelenting string of disasters.”

“I hoped everything would get better for the Trankarans after we left,” John said, feeling sorry for their distressed guide. “That was only about two months ago. How did everything go downhill so rapidly?”

Bhaken looked at him quizzically for a moment. “My apologies, John Blake. I am unfamiliar with that Terran phrase.”

“How did the situation deteriorate so quickly?” John clarified for him.

Reluctantly, Associate Bhaken shook his head. “I would be more than willing to elaborate further, but I believe the Fleet Warden would like to discuss the woes that beset the Trankaran Republic with you in person.”

“That’s no problem, let’s go and see Thandrun,” John said with an amiable smile. Rachel cleared her throat, drawing John’s attention to her before he turned back to meet Associate Bhaken’s curious amber gaze. “Rachel Voss, my Chief Medical Officer, has volunteered to help with your wounded. She’ll be able to make a significant difference, she’s extremely capable.”

Bhaken’s expression brightened and he nodded enthusiastically. “The medical facilities aboard the Anvil are quite overwhelmed at the moment! Any assistance you can provide would be most gratefully accepted!” He waved at a couple of Trankaran soldiers who were kneeling beside the body of their fallen squadmates, beckoning them over.

Rachel’s eyes narrowed as she looked around the bloodsoaked battlefield. “Would you mind if we take a couple of these Kirrix husks when we leave?” Seeing Bhaken’s look of distaste, she quickly added, “I want to study their remains and see if I can discern any weaknesses. I’d be more than happy to share any pertinent results with your people.”

Nodding his understanding, Bhaken turned to give the two approaching soldiers a look of sympathy. “Please forgive me for disturbing your death-rites for these fallen rock-brothers. I would not dream of doing so under normal circumstances, but this Terran woman is a medic and needs your assistance to aid the living. Please escort Doctor Voss to the Primary Medical Facility.”

One of the Trankaran Marines snapped a sharp salute. “If you would care to follow us, we’ll show you the way, Doctor Voss.”

Rachel and Alyssa peeled away, following the enormous soldiers as they led them away to the right across the hangar. Associate Bhakan gave John a respectful bow, then partially turned to gesture back the way he’d arrived. John and Calara did their best to fall into step with Associate Bhaken despite his huge stride. It only took a few metres for the considerate Trankaran to measure his pace so that they could keep up.

They skirted around the biggest pile of Kirrix corpses, which were clustered near the exit from the hangar. The fighting here had reached the peak of ferocity, with the light-brown deck dripping in viscous green blood, while the grey walls were pockmarked by scores of hits from the insectoid creatures’ neutron guns. Bhaken glanced down at several Trankaran bodies, shaking his head with grief as they passed them to enter the corridor beyond.

He turned around to look at John and Calara, managing to keep walking backwards without pause while doing so. It was a surprisingly deft move for such a huge creature. “The Fleet Warden is up in the Command Chamber. It won’t take long to get there.”

Associate Bhaken spun around to walk normally down the corridor again, leading them past the sturdy buttresses that lined the way deeper into Kerhom's Anvil. Their passage was lit by glowing orange lines which threaded through the lofty grey metallic ceiling high above their heads. The ship seemed deserted at first, but John’s sharp ears heard bustling activity from deeper within the vessel and realised that the Trankarans were simply busy elsewhere.

They walked into a massive square elevator, which their guide activated by placing his hand on the glowing runes set into the wall. The platform began to tremble as they were lifted upwards, whatever mechanism it was powering the lift was certainly much noisier than the near-silent Terran equivalents. It didn’t take long to reach their destination, a low ringing note echoing as they stopped at one of the upper levels.

There was a short corridor beyond the lift with two guards at attention in front of the reinforced blast doors. Equipped in the same glowing heavy armour that they’d seen on the other soldiers, this pair were carrying molten rifles, the same kind of weapon that had nearly been the end of Irillith. The weapon had a segmented barrel, with throbbing red power lines running the length of the rifle, the slow throbbing making the guns almost seem alive.

The soldiers nodded respectfully to Associate Bhaken as he approached, with the guard on the right hitting a rune-marked panel to open the portal onto the Bridge. The Trankaran Bridge design was quite different to the Terran layout and Calara looked around in fascination as they followed their guide across the room.

There was a long straight path that ran along the length of the Command Deck, with scores of Trankaran Bridge crew working at stations deeply recessed into the floor. The lowered bridge stations meant that their heads were just visible at floor level, their blocky features underlit by the green and red glows from consoles. It was an efficient design, with the ship’s Captain able to look across the entire Bridge and easily make eye-contact with any of his officers.

The Captain’s Chair was centred on a slightly raised dais at the rear of the Bridge, but the imposing stone structure was empty. Bhaken led them past it without a second glance, his attention on a second set of guards flanking an ornate door. They snapped to attention then opened the door for him, but Bhaken paused there, turning to look at his guests. “The Fleet Warden is waiting for you inside,” he said, bowing to them respectfully.

John gave him a nod in gratitude, then he and Calara strode into the gloomy chamber beyond. It had dark-grey walls like the rest of the rooms and corridors in this vessel, but the glowing lights that were set into the ceiling only provided dim illumination. In the centre of the room was a ten-sided granite table with a glowing blue holograph shining brightly above it. It appeared to be a Tactical Map of the Delta Corvus system, clearly showing the debris field of smashed vessels around the battlecarrier.

Through that icy-blue light, John saw the familiar figure of the Fleet Warden in his hulking body armour. The Trankaran leader’s face was illuminated by the glowing crimson lines, throwing a blood-red light over his sombre features.

“It’s good to see you, Fleet Warden,” John said, walking around the table. “I’m sorry we had to meet again in such dire circumstances.”

The Trankaran officer raised a paw-like armoured fist and rubbed his tired face. He gave John a wan smile when he pulled his hand away, before extending his other hand in friendship. “My feelings exactly, Vice Admiral Blake,” he said in his deep, rumbling voice as the two of them shook hands. “I hope you’ll forgive me for the less than jovial greeting. It’s been a very long day.”

“Nothing to forgive, Thandrun,” John said, removing his Paragon helmet and giving the Trankaran an understanding look. “I only wish we’d been able to arrive sooner, then we could have helped you in the battle.”

“I appreciate the sentiments, Lion of the Federation,” Thandrun replied, smiling faintly. “But one vessel would not have made that great a difference. The Kirrix came at us with a vast horde... We were very fortunate that as much of our fleet survived the onslaught as it did.”

Calara had been staring at the map and she removed her own Paragon helmet before saying quietly, “With all due respect, Fleet Warden, I believe luck had very little to do with it. Your decision to cluster your fleet in defensive rings was an excellent tactic. If you’d attempted to engage the Kirrix using more traditional battle lines, they would have enveloped and overcome your forces piecemeal. The counterattack where you pierced through their lines to hit the drone carriers was an inspired move.”

“Thank you, Commander Fernandez,” Thandrun replied, looking startled by her warm praise. “How did you know how the battle unfolded? Did one of my men speak to you about it?”

She waved her hand towards the holographic depiction of the battlefield. “The debris patterns tell the full story if you know what to look for, Fleet Warden.”

John smiled at her, then turned back to look at the surprised Trankaran officer. “I don’t think I’ve introduced you to Calara before, but you seem to be well informed about my crew and our current ranks within the Terran military. I’m guessing that you saw the recent award ceremony?”

“That I did, Lion of the Federation,” Thandrun said, his slab-like features lifting into a broad smile. “It was a most impressive affair.”

Hesitating for a moment, John said rather awkwardly, “I hope you didn’t take offense at my jingoistic speech at the end of the ceremony. I wasn’t disparaging you or your forces.”

Thandrun chuckled, the booming sound of his mirth like an avalanche of boulders. “I’ve rallied troops before, Vice Admiral, I recognised a bit of hyperbole when I heard it. Do not worry... we Trankarans have long memories and we remember what you did for us.”

Feeling greatly relieved, John smiled at the friendly Trankaran leader. “Please, just call me John.” He glanced at the holographic map floating above the table. “From what we’ve seen so far, it looks like the Republic might need some help again.”

The Fleet Warden’s smile died on his thick lips and he gave John a despairing look. “I fear I’ve wasted your time in calling you here. I had hoped to ask for your assistance in rescuing Chancellor Niskera, but now... all hope is lost.”

John gave Calara a worried look. “What’s happened here, Thandrun? Everything seemed so positive when we left you and that was only a couple of months ago!”

Thandrun heaved a heavy sigh, then waved them towards chairs set up in the corner of the Command Chamber. The Fleet Warden slumped in a huge sturdy chair that was sized for his massive frame, while John and Calara sat in ones designed for Terrans. John recognised the smaller chairs from his previous meeting with Chancellor Niskera and realised Thandrun must have had them moved here especially.

“Where to begin...” Thandrun said, leaning back and staring up at the ceiling for a moment.

John studied the weary Trankaran for a moment. “Start from when we left you two months ago. We’d taken care of the Glowing Queen for you, ending the rebellion. In return, the Chancellor held up her end of our bargain, equipping the Invictus with your best military-grade engines. We completed a separate trade of technology in exchange for ores, then parted on friendly terms. What happened next?”

Squaring his shoulders, Thandrun nodded. “Alright... Well, as I said before, we had no more problems with the rebellion, as their forces capitulated without a fight. The trouble started after that, with the Senate tying itself in knots trying to decide what to do with the rebels.”

“What do you mean?” John asked, frowning in confusion. “If the rebels all surrendered peacefully, what was the problem?”

Looking full of regret, Thandrun replied quietly, “You must understand the nature of my people for this to make sense. Trankarans can be ferocious when provoked, but normally we are a calm and placid species. That calmness comes with a certain lack of decisiveness that can make decision-making amongst the Senate an incredibly laborious process.”

His amber eyes gazed off into the distance as he rumbled, “A Reconciliation Committee was created to investigate the behaviour of the rebels during their insurrection. Some factions within the Senate wished to inter the perpetrators for life, whereas others had heard how contrite the rebels were and wished to declare an amnesty. With the Committee deadlocked, no decisions were made... not one!”

“So what about the fleet of ships that had been in rebel control?” John asked, seeing where this was going.

“Left crewless until a course of action could be determined,” Thandrun replied, sounding haggard. “As some Senators wished the original crews to be reinstated, it was deemed ‘inappropriate’ to assign new crews to those vessels, even as a temporary measure.”

“But that’s ridiculous!” Calara protested. “That robbed you of half your fleet assets!”

“All new ship construction was also halted as the Republic’s shipyards had fallen under rebel control. The engineering crews have been incarcerated until their fate is determined,” the Fleet Warden admitted, looking shamefaced. “Please don’t think that the Chancellor had anything to do with this insanity. She did her best, but with the rebels captured, any sense of urgency dissipated amongst the Senate.”

“Then the Kirrix started probing your borders and you couldn’t crush them badly enough to deter further encroachment,” Calara reasoned, her expression grim.

“They’re a filthy parasitic race that thrives on weakness,” Thandrun said, his expression haunted as he confirmed her suspicions. “I warned Niskera that we were vulnerable, but I must confess that even I underestimated the Kirrix strength. They attacked en masse four weeks ago and have taken several well-established worlds... the civilians there numbered in the hundreds-of-thousands...”

John leaned forward in his chair, his face shadowed with worry. “This is far worse than the worst-case scenarios I’d pictured! Where’s Niskera now? What the hell happened to her?!”

The Fleet Warden sighed, his face filled with remorse. “When we realised what we faced, she contacted the Terran Federation asking for assistance. Invoking the mutual protection treaties signed by the Galactic League, she requested immediate aid against the Kirrix threat. Your High Command turned us down... they have withdrawn from the Galactic League and abrogated all treaties.”

“What the fuck are they thinking?!” John snarled, gritting his teeth in fury. “They must know how dangerous the Kirrix are to everyone!”

Sounding angry, Thandrun shook his head. “I have no idea! We always assumed that our relationship with the Terrans was based on mutual respect and friendship. This rejection was a bitter blow.”

Calara frowned and asked hesitantly, “Are the Maliri, Brimorians, or the Ashanath signed up to the same mutual-protection pacts?”

“The Maliri?” Thandrun replied, looking incredulous. “Of course not! No Maliri ship has left their territory in over nine-thousand years. The Brimorians refused to sign the pact when the Terran Federation did and the Ashanath have always been insular, uninterested in wider galactic politics.”

John shared a meaningful look with Calara at the mention of the Maliri. Turning his attention back to Thandrun, he prompted the glowering Trankaran, “And what did Niskera do then?”

The Fleet Warden’s face shadowed with grief. “She was always such a visionary. She sought to form a new Galactic League, with the Trankarans uniting all the minor empires into an alliance that could stand firm against the Kirrix. She invited representatives from a dozen species for a summit, hoping that they would rally to her cause.”

“Where did this summit take place?” John asked, in a hushed voice.

“Khalgron in the Alpha Tauri system,” Thandrun said, slumping further in his chair. “It fell to the Kirrix four days ago.”

“Why would you hold a summit so close to the border?!” John asked, shaking his head in disbelief. “That was a recipe for disaster!”

Thandrun nodded slowly. “In hindsight it surely seems that way, but at the time, it wasn’t a completely irrational decision. Khalgron was chosen because it’s a temperate planet with a climate well-suited to all the species invited to the summit. Niskera hoped that the representatives from the minor empires would identify with the world and by bringing the diplomats sufficiently close to the border, it would impress upon them the urgency of the Kirrix threat. When the location was initially decided, the Kirrix had only sent in a first wave of invaders. It was a second wave that pushed much deeper into our territory and eventually besieged the planet.”

“So what was your plan for me?” John asked in confusion. “If Niskera’s been killed, why did you call me out here to meet with you in person?”

“She isn’t dead, not yet at least. I spoke to her early this morning; her forces have retreated to an underground fortress bringing the representatives from the minor empires with them. They’re fighting a desperate defence against Kirrix ground troops,” Thandrun said, his expression forlorn. “I intended to use my fleet to break the siege of Khalgron and while my ships engaged the Kirrix, I hoped that you’d be able to fight your way through the ground forces to rescue the Chancellor and the diplomats.”

John leaned back in his chair as he finally understood. His said quietly, “Because we did something similar when we assassinated the Glowing Queen.”

“Our analysts had concluded that striking into the heart of rebel-controlled territory to eliminate their leader was impossible. The Glowing Queen was defended by an elite battalion and yet you managed to fight your way through hundreds of crack troops to eliminate your target. If anyone could have rescued Niskera, it would have been you.” The Fleet Warden darted a sorrowful glance at the tactical map and gestured to it with his hand. “Now my forces are in no fit state to fight a major engagement. Without us there to engage the Kirrix fleet, there’s no way you’d be able to infiltrate the planet, let alone attempt a rescue operation.”

Calara reached across the armrest of her chair to place her hand on John’s wrist and they shared a meaningful glance. When he nodded imperceptibly, she looked back at Thandrun. “Fleet Warden, do you have any data on the Kirrix forces besieging Khalgron?”

He frowned at her in confusion, but eventually said, “The Trankaran fleet escorting Niskera was destroyed attempting to protect the planet. Before they were overwhelmed, they transmitted details on the Kirrix’s full order of battle.”

“May I see that data please?” Calara requested, rising from her chair and walking over to the ten-sided table.

Thandrun pressed a number of buttons on an interface built into his vambrace. The tactical map flickered and disappeared, then was replaced by long lists of data accompanied by slowly rotating images of Kirrix vessels. He watched the highly-focused Latina, his brow furrowing as he attempted to puzzle out why she was so interested in that fleet of ships.

“Thandrun, where’s the rest of the Senate?” John asked, diverting the Fleet Warden’s attention away from Calara.

The Trankaran Naval Commander turned back to look at John and had a faint smile on his face. “When I announced my intention to rescue Chancellor Niskera, the Senators decided it would be sensible for them to reconvene back on Trankara. There were three substantial fleets that remained loyal during the rebellion. This was the largest, the second attempted to defend the Alpha Tauri system until it was destroyed by the Kirrix, leaving the third which the Senate took back to Trankara. I sorely miss those ships, but I don’t miss those Senators...”

Studying the Fleet Warden, John chose his next words carefully. “Now that the Senate’s back on Trankara, can you see them overcoming this deadlock? Will they be able to get your immobilised fleets ready in time to respond to the Kirrix threat?”

“If anything, I suspect the paralysis will worsen,” Thandrun said, his stony features looking even bleaker. “In times of crisis the Senate closely follows decisions made by the Chancellor. With Niskera missing and soon dead, the Senators will shift their focus to replacing her and electing a replacement. The politicking on that decision will take weeks to resolve!”

John considered his options for a moment, rubbing his chin with a gauntleted hand. This was an extremely bad situation, with significant risks involved whatever course of action he took. It seemed like he was stuck deciding between putting the Invictus and the girls in terrible danger, or walking away and letting the Trankaran Republic be conquered, abandoning their people to a horrific fate at the hands of the Kirrix. He had no way of knowing if the Kirrix had been goaded into this assault by the other Progenitor, but it seemed like an awfully big coincidence that they’d attacked at the precise moment when the Trankarans were at their weakest...

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Alyssa kept a watchful eye on her friend as she walked through the over-crowded medical facility, followed closely by an entourage of awed Trankaran medics. Rachel had removed her Paragon helmet and was carrying it under one arm, her long tawny-brown hair tumbling around her shoulders. Her other hand was held at the ready, so that she could gently reach out and touch each of the Trankaran wounded. And there were so many of them... Sprawled on robust gurneys, slumped against walls, even some lying untreated on the floors.

When the two girls had arrived, they had found the Trankaran doctors overwhelmed by the sheer numbers injured in the ferocious fleet battle with the Kirrix. Those doctors were short-tempered with Rachel when she first offered to help. Sceptical of what assistance a Terran medic could possibly provide without expertise in Trankaran physiology and irritated at having to waste time pandering to this tiny Terran female, they had been abrupt to the point of rudeness.

Alyssa had been impressed by Rachel’s composure as she calmly informed them that she was, in fact, an expert on the Trankaran physique. When they still remained unswayed, she simply smiled and offered to help with diagnostics; if the Trankaran doctors chose to heed her advice, that was entirely up to them. All objections had ceased the moment her eyes began to glow and her body was swathed in a soft grey aura.

Rachel approached a dying Trankaran marine and touched his arm, her misty shroud enveloping the mortally wounded rockman. The medics’ looks of shock had turned into ones of wonder as Rachel sealed the gaping hole in his chest using only her mind.

Ignoring their flustered demands for an explanation, she knelt beside a groaning marine, this one sitting on the floor and propped up against the wall. When she touched his bulky arm, the barely conscious soldier gasped, his eyes widening as he felt a gentle tingling in his chest. Offering the bewildered but rejuvenated Trankaran a kind smile, she rose to her feet and turned to face her stunned audience.

“I’ve healed the potentially fatal damage to his heart,” she calmly informed the coterie of stunned Trankaran medics. “His condition is no longer critical, but he’s still sustained a severe wound to his upper left torso and needs your attention.”

Before they could respond, she rose to her feet and moved on through the throng of injured Trankarans. So it went as they progressed through the Medical Bay, Rachel healing the mortally wounded, or advising the attending doctors of the conditions of all she touched. The Medics then moved to treat the worst of the injured, reluctantly tearing themselves away from this miracle sweeping through the injured.

Loud chaos made way for quiet order in Rachel’s wake, a soothing wave of benevolence and healing that glided through the medical facility and touched hundreds of Trankaran lives.

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John’s gaze drifted over to the ten-sided table and Calara turned away from her analysis of the Kirrix fleet data to face him. She wore a worried frown and he could see the anxiety in her dark-brown eyes. Despite her obvious doubts, she gave him a hesitant nod.

Thandrun missed the exchange, but saw the tense expression on John’s face and let out a heavy sigh. “I’m so very sorry for bringing you all the way out here for noth-”

“We’ll do it,” John said quietly, cutting him off.

The Fleet Warden shook his head. “I appreciate the sentiment behind the offer, but you don’t seem to understand. My forces are incapable of engaging the Kirrix at the moment...”

Leaning forward, John looked Thandrun square in the eye. “You’re right, your forces took a real beating and are in no shape to help. Leave everything to us.”

Thandrun looked at him in utter disbelief for a moment, then frowned, his expression darkening. “This isn’t a joking matter, Vice Admiral. I respected Chancellor Niskera and-”

“I’m not joking,” John said, his voice deadly serious. “You said earlier that one vessel couldn’t make that great a difference. If we had arrived before your recent battle with the Kirrix, you probably wouldn’t have lost a single ship. The Invictus is packing more firepower than a Terran dreadnought... in fact, we might even outgun the entire Terran Federation border fleet.”

“That’s preposterous!” Thandrun balked. “No ship is that powerful!”

“I know of at least two that are,” John said, his expression unreadable. He rose to his feet as Calara walked back to join them.

“I’ll begin preparing battle stratagems as soon as we return to the Invictus,” she murmured, sounding lost in thought.

John gave her a grateful smile, then turned to look at the stunned Fleet Warden. “Please can you transmit any data you think might be useful to the Invictus. The Kirrix fleet listings, the precise location of the underground fortress on Khalgron, floorplans and schematics too, if you have them. Finally, I’ll need a way to contact Niskera, I want to confirm her group is still alive.”

“You really mean it!” Thandrun blurted out in his rumbling voice, lurching to his feet. “I can’t believe you’re actually considering doing this alone!”

John studied the reeling Trankaran officer for a moment, then gave him a faint smile. “I actually came all this way to offer the Republic a place in the alliance I’m building. The Maliri and Ashanath have thrown their full support behind it and I’m working on the Terran Federation at the moment. I was intending to offer you a one-sided trade to help secure that alliance; advanced technology in exchange for Trankaran ores, but I no longer think that’s wise.”

Thandrun gaped at John, shocked by the thought of the enigmatic Maliri and detached Ashanath allying themselves with the Lion of the Federation. That look of amazement was soon replaced by one of despair. “But that’s everything we ever dreamed of! I beg you to reconsider, we’re desperate for assistance!”

John gave the hulking Trankaran a reassuring smile. “You misunderstand me. I still want the Trankarans to join the alliance, but I don’t want to waste time haggling with your Senate. I can see how much you need the help against the Kirrix right now, so I’m just going to give you the tech for free. As soon as we return to the Invictus, I’ll transmit several schematics for advanced technology. I can give you blueprints for the Ashanath’s most advanced Power Core and their fastest Jump Drive, Kintark Heatsinks, and Sensors from the Maliri. I only ask that if we don’t return, you do whatever you can to begin upgrading all your fleets as soon as possible, including a military coup if it comes to it. The survival of your species depends on you acting swiftly.”

“Why would you do this for my people?” Thandrun whispered in awe, his voice coming out as a gravelly murmur.

John looked sombre as he met the Fleet Warden’s look of amazement. “Because this mission to rescue Niskera is extremely dangerous... If it ends in disaster and something happens to me, at least that tech will give you a fighting chance against the Kirrix.”

“No, I mean, why would you offer such an overwhelmingly one-sided deal? You must know how dire our situation is at the moment... It would be easy for you to take advantage. What’s in it for you?” Thandrun asked, his face filled with doubt.

John paused for a moment then said quietly, “I’ll do what I can to rescue Niskera and protect the Republic, but if we survive this we’ll need to have a long talk. There are other threats out there beside the Kirrix.”

The Fleet Warden took a deep breath, the light of hope shining in his eyes for the first time in weeks. “I won’t forget this, John,” he said, the deep bass of his voice ringing with sincerity. “I wish you the very best of luck on your mission.”

The two men shook hands and John turned to leave, with Calara falling into step beside him. Thandrun placed a huge armoured hand against the panels of runes by the door, then watched them depart, not quite sure if he’d just dreamed the entire encounter. Associate Bhaken was waiting for John and Calara outside the Command Chamber and he greeted them with a warm smile. He happened to glance at Thandrun, and the Fleet Warden’s astonished expression made Bhaken dart a startled look at John and Calara.

“What did you say to the Fleet Warden?!” Bhaken whispered as they walked away, glancing back at his leader in surprise. “I’ve never seen him look at anyone like that before!”

“Could you take us back to the Raptor, please,” John asked politely. “We need to hurry; I’m planning to rescue Chancellor Niskera...”

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Alyssa was waiting for them in the Hangar and she greeted John with a wave when he walked out onto the deck. As he weaved his way around piles of mangled Kirrix corpses, he spotted movement inside the Raptor and a moment later, two Trankaran soldiers stomped down the loading ramp. Their blocky faces were twisted with disgust as they tried to wipe sticky green blood off their hands.

Rachel appeared a moment later, giving the pair of burly soldiers a grateful smile. “Thank you for the assistance, gentlemen. The two of you are far stronger than me!”

“After everything you did for our rock-brothers, it’s the least we could do, Doctor Voss,” one of them said, his tone full of profound respect.

His companion gave her a deferential bow and then the two hulking Trankarans walked away, returning to their fallen comrades across the hangar. Rachel watched them leave, then re-entered the gunship, disappearing from sight.

John turned and offered Associate Bhaken his hand. “It was good to see you again, Bhaken. Thank you for being our guide.”

The robed Trankaran had a shocked look on his face, still struggling to come to grips with the idea that they were sailing off to face the might of the Kirrix alone. He did his best to recover as he shook John’s hand and said earnestly, “I wish you every success in your mission, John. I’ve worked with Chancellor Niskera for over three years and have grown to greatly admire her; It’ll be a terrible blow if she’s lost to the Kirrix. I will pray to the Great Maker that all of you return safely.”

With a parting smile, John walked over to Alyssa with Calara in tow, the Latina still lost in thought. The trio walked up the loading ramp and into the Raptor, finding Rachel kneeling down beside a pair of Kirrik corpses, the yellow and brown insectoids arranged neatly on the deck. One of the Kirrix marines had been killed by a headshot, his helmeted head completely missing from the body. The second had been shot in the chest, his chitinous torso a melted and charred ruin.

Rachel saw John’s inquisitive gaze and she waved a hand at the two bodies. “These were the best specimens we could find; between them they make up a complete cadaver. The Trankaran soldiers were very thorough in their defence of the Anvil.”

Alyssa removed her Paragon helmet and leaned in to give John a parting kiss. “I’ll go start up the Raptor, see you in a minute.” She left the room with Calara in tow, leaving John and Rachel with the dead Kirrix.

He squatted down beside the brunette, looking down at the six-limbed marines. “It was before your time, but these look just like the ones that boarded our ship the last time we encountered the Kirrix. Do you think you can learn anything from studying them?”

She tilted her head to one side and carefully appraised the corpses. “A thorough autopsy will take me a couple of hours, I’ll be able to give you a synopsis of their physiology then. As soon as we return to the Invictus, I’ll ask Faye if she can get the maintenance bots to bring the bodies up to Medical, then I’ll get started immediately.”

“Thank you. I’ve got a feeling we’ll be seeing a whole lot more of them very soon,” John said, rising to his feet and offering her a hand.

“We’re really breaking a planetary siege by ourselves?” Rachel asked as she stood, looking up at him wide-eyed.

He sighed and nodded. “It doesn’t look like we’ve got a choice. The rebellion damaged the Republic far more severely than I originally thought; the Trankarans are in a very precarious situation at the moment.”

Rachel looked worried as she said, “This other Progenitor seems to really know what he’s doing. Creating the Glowing Queen was an extremely clever piece of manipulation; it required minimal effort on his part but caused dramatic consequences for the Trankarans...”

“Just like turning Admiral Lynton into one of his thralls,” John said, nodding in bleak agreement. “Between the Nexus Project and working with Norwood to wreck relations with the Kintark, Lynton nearly managed to bring down the Terran Federation single-handed.”

“The Progenitor definitely seems to have a Modus Operandi,” Rachel said, her mind whirring. “But why go to all this trouble? Everything we’ve learned about Progenitor technology seems to indicate that his ship is much more powerful than ours, let alone the Thrall fleets he must have at his disposal. Why didn’t he simply launch an invasion six months ago and sweep all these empires before him? None of them could have withstood a direct assault like that...”

“I must admit, I’ve got no idea what he’s doing,” John said, shrugging helplessly. “I’ve been wondering about the same thing myself.”

She looked at him askance for a moment, reaching up to brush his temple with a shiny white gauntlet. “I bet your Progenitor Guide knows what’s happening... If only we could talk to him, we might be able to convince him to work with us instead of fighting against you!”

John reached up to clasp her hand, bringing it to his lips and kissing her fingers as he gazed into her inquisitive grey eyes. “That’s not a road I want to go down just yet. I can’t risk giving him any opportunities to escape, not until I know I’m strong enough to face him. The danger to all of you is far too great.”

“I understand,” Rachel said, leaning in to give him a gentle kiss. “I wasn’t trying to push you into anything, it’s just frustrating not knowing.”

He gave her a wry smile. “Yeah, tell me about it.”

\*Sorry to interrupt, but I thought you might want to see Sakura in action,\* Alyssa said, her lovely telepathic voice a welcome distraction from these troubling thoughts.

The flicker in Rachel’s eyes let John know that she’d heard the blonde too and they walked through the door at the back of the room to take the grav-tube to the upper level. When they reached the cockpit, they found Calara standing behind Alyssa in the Pilot’s chair, the two girls looking out of the cockpit canopy to the starboard side. A staccato series of blue flashes lit up the cockpit and John led Rachel over to join them, intrigued to see how the Asian girl was getting on with her target practice.

Calara pointed at the Valkyrie for him, but John had already spotted the mech, its sparkling white hull making it stand out like a beacon amidst the sickly brown Kirrix wreckage. The mech pivoted, using the retro-thrusters built into its arms and legs to quickly face a new direction, the Valkyrie now aiming at the darkened hull of a Kirrix drone carrier.

With its bloated, segmented hull, the insectoid ship made John think of a gigantic mechanical termite queen. The huge strike-craft launching vessel had been gutted by Trankaran Fusion weapons, a dozen ugly blackened scars over its belly revealing where its hull had been sundered across several decks. Whatever critical damage those beams had inflicted had been enough to disable the fifteen-hundred-metre long vessel and now it was a lifeless derelict, lying cold and dark in the blackness of space.

The Valkyrie’s four shoulder-mounted Photon Lasers lined up squarely with the drone carrier and bright blue laser bolts lanced outwards to strike the target. Each weapon shot a trio of beams, with that stream of blazing destructive energy fired in pulses to maximise their damage and minimise the heat buildup. The azure cascade struck the drone carrier amidships, scything through the hull with enough power to punch straight through the stricken carrier and blast out the other side.

The brilliant ribbon of light faded out as quickly as it had blazed across space, the weapons cooling now so that they could be fired again in ten seconds. Sakura brought the Punisher Gatling to bear next, the rotating barrel spitting hyper-accelerated slugs into the flank of the Kirrix vessel. The monstrous carrier shuddered as it was struck by those shells and she strafed the Valkyrie’s fire vertically down the hull, the path marked by rippling explosions. Ochre-coloured armour plating was shattered by each hit, leaving a trail of deep impact craters from spine to belly.

Sakura shifted position slightly, the Valkyrie’s quad guns lining up with that path of devastation. A second deadly salvo of Photon Laser beams arced across space to scythe into the drone carrier, but this time Sakura slashed her fire down the hull, following the trench gouged out of the armour by the Punisher Gatling shells. Using the beam weapons like a surgeon’s scalpel, she cut a lethal incision through the Kirrix vessel, slicing it into two chunks, each side glowing a fierce orange as the ship broke apart.

“Not bad,” Calara said, nodding her approval.

“You think she’s combat ready?” John asked, watching as the mech turned to face them, waving a hand at the spectators.

The Latina pondered that question for a moment, before she smiled at John. “Considering that she’s only had an hour practicing with those guns she shows a lot of promise. Sakura’s disciplined and level-headed, I think you can trust her not to do anything reckless.”

“Duly noted, Commander,” John said, putting his arms around her from behind and giving her a kiss on the cheek.

They watched through the cockpit canopy as Sakura finished her training session, twisting the Valkyrie around with remarkable agility, retro-thrusters flaring with a bright orange light. As soon as she was aiming in the right direction, the engines on the mech’s back powered up to maximum, launching it through space and leaving an amber trail in its wake. She formed up on the Raptor’s port wing, accompanying them back to the Invictus.

Faye and four of her boys were waiting for them in the Secondary Hangar, the maintenance bots greeting them with a cheery wave as the Raptor touched down. Faye winked out and reappeared in the cockpit a second later, a sparkling grin on her face.

“Dana said you needed some help moving a couple of bugs!” she exclaimed, her wings fluttering with excitement. “I brought the boys to act as removal men for you!”

“Thanks, Faye,” Rachel said, giving her a grateful smile. “The two Kirrix corpses are in the forward loading area. Can you transfer them to Medical for me please?”

The cute purple sprite bobbed her head enthusiastically. “We’ll be super careful with them!”

John turned to look at Alyssa, watching her for a few seconds as her hands flew over the consoles, going through the shutdown routine for the gunship. “Could you ask everyone to gather in the Combat Bridge please? I’d like to brief them on what we’re going up against.”

“They’re on their way,” she replied, slipping her arm around his and accompanying him out of the cockpit. “You can skip the boring bit where you check to see if we’re all onboard with the plan. I kept the girls informed and they all support your decision one-hundred-percent.”

He looked at her in surprise as they dropped down in the grav-tube, then laughed when she winked and kissed him. “Well, I wouldn’t want to be boring...”

“Good!” she said with a grin, striding ahead of him for a moment so that they could manoeuvre past the maintenance bots.

Rachel watched two of the floating robots pick up the first of the corpses, then smiled at Faye when she saw the meticulous care they were taking of their deceased charges. The AI was a little distracted at that moment however, modifying and upgrading the bots programming so that the pair would work in perfect synchronisation and avoid tearing the corpses in half.

John led the way to the express grav-tube at the back of the hangar, pressing his hand to the DNA reader to reveal the concealed door. It slid open at the same time as the doors to the Primary Hangar, with Sakura jogging through a moment later.

“I love flying that mech!” she gushed, bounding over to join them.

“I had faith in the cliché,” John replied, nodding sagely.

She laughed and rolled her lovely brown eyes at him. Turning to grin at Calara, she said, “Firing the Photon Lasers was thrilling! I can see why you love your role as Tactical Officer so much!”

The Latina gave her an indulgent smile. “That was a fine bit of marksmanship. John’s definitely thrown you in at the deep end though; I began my career as a gunner on a corvette and that mech has at least five-hundred times the firepower I started with!”

“Do you have any advice you can give me?” Sakura asked as she followed Alyssa over to the grav-tube.

Calara thought about it carefully for a moment. “The Valkyrie isn’t a conventional vessel like the Raptor or the Invictus. It’s more like a highly mobile and extremely powerful gun platform. Take advantage of your small size and manoeuvrability to keep yourself out of trouble, the quad Photon Lasers will let you outgun anything smaller than a battlecruiser.”

John stepped into the grav-tube with Alyssa at his side, missing the rest of the conversation as they were catapulted up through five decks to reach the Combat Bridge. He walked towards the weapon racks, unclipping the gun belt from his waist and unloading the Quantum pistol before storing it away safely. Putting his Paragon helmet back on, he stepped into the armour-equipping frame at the end, the one sized for his bigger suit. It only took a few seconds for the robotic limbs to remove the armoured plates and he stepped clear, running his hand through his hair as he watched the girls remove their armour.

“I won’t stay for the briefing,” Rachel said, walking over to him and giving him a parting kiss. “I want to get the Kirrix autopsy completed as soon as possible.”

“No doubts about this mission?” John asked, stroking her arm as he looked into her grey eyes.

Rachel shook her head firmly. “None. I know how much you care about all of us and how careful you are about exposing us to danger. If you think we need to do this, then I trust your judgement.” Turning to smile at Alyssa, she continued, “Can you keep me informed?”

“Of course,” Alyssa said to the brunette, brushing hands with her as Rachel turned and walked away. The blonde slipped her hands around John’s waist and arched an eyebrow at him. “I thought you weren’t going to be boring?”

“I don’t want to be a domineering asshole,” he replied firmly. “I’m comfortable leading our group and making command decisions, but this isn’t the military. I don’t have the right to just throw all of us into combat without at least doing everyone the courtesy of letting them voice any objections.”

She leaned in to kiss him, her hands brushing through his hair. “If anyone had any concerns, I’d let you know,” she said softly, her voice calm and soothing. “The girls know you’re more than willing to listen if they have a problem with anything. We all trust you; just assume we fully support your every decision unless someone says otherwise. It’ll save a lot of time.”

He smiled and kissed her back. “Alright, as long as you promise to let me know if anyone has even the slightest doubts, okay?”

“Cross my heart,” Alyssa replied, tracing a slow cross over her ample cleavage.

John found his eyes drawn to her succulent bronzed flesh, then glanced up at the look of delight on her face as she listened to his thoughts. “I think I’ll need your help pre-loading the crew before battle, XO,” he said, caressing her back.

“Happy to serve in any capacity, Vice Admiral,” she said with a sultry smile, giving him a flirtatious salute.

He laughed as they separated and they walked hand-in-hand towards the ramp leading down to the Combat Bridge. Irillith and Tashana stepped out of the grav-tube ahead of them and waved at John when they saw him approach. He returned their friendly greeting, then followed the twins down to the lower level to join the rest of the crew. A holographic Sector Map was centred in the middle of the Combat Bridge, with their present position highlighted in green and the Alpha Tauri system circled in red. He looked expectantly at his blonde companion, knowing she was listening to his thoughts, and awaited her unparalleled Navigational advice.

“It’ll take us three hours, seven minutes to reach the Alpha Tauri system,” she informed him, having calculated a flight path the instant he’d decided to help the Trankarans. “I’ve plotted out a course already; I’ll lay it in right now.”

He patted her on the bottom, earning a cheeky smile as they split up to take their seats. John looked around the Combat Bridge and saw that all the girls were watching him attentively.

“Alyssa tells me that you’re all aware of my decision; that we’re going to aid the Trankarans against the Kirrix and attempt to rescue Chancellor Niskera,” he said, glancing at each of the girls in turn. He saw unquestioning support in the steady gazes focused on him and nodded, realising that Alyssa was correct. Turning to look at his beautiful olive-toned Tactical Officer, he continued, “I have it on good authority that we’re not running headlong into a suicide mission. I trust Calara’s judgement wholeheartedly and if she thinks there’s a good chance of saving Niskera, I think we should take it.”

“I’ll spend the next couple of hours analysing everything Thandrun sends us,” the Latina informed them. “I should be able to give you a more detailed briefing before we hit the Alpha Tauri system.”

Faye fluttered over to the Tactical Station. “While you were returning to the Invictus, the Trankarans sent us lots of data files! I uploaded all of them to your Tactical Console.”

“Fantastic, thank you!” Calara replied, swiftly checking through the list of documents. After a few seconds spent reviewing them, she smiled at John, looking relieved.

He nodded in return, then leaned forward in his chair as he addressed the group. “I’m not sure how much Alyssa has told you about my reasoning behind this decision, but I’ll tell you anyway, just to give you the bigger picture.” After taking a deep breath, he continued, “The Trankaran rebellion seems to have left the Republic crippled. I hoped they’d be able to get themselves back on their feet once the rebels gave up, but it seems the Progenitor knows them far better than I do.”

“The Trankarans were already floundering in the face of this Kirrix assault, but without their Chancellor, it’ll be much worse. It would be worth rescuing Niskera for that reason alone, but she seems to be a kindred spirit, trying to build alliances with the other galactic empires. If we can save her, I think she’ll be a strong supporter of the alliance we’re trying to build to stand against the Progenitor,” he said, carefully explaining his reasoning.

“The Chancellor seemed like an intelligent and capable leader,” Irillith said, her violet eyes studying his face as she remembered their last meeting. “It would be tragic to lose someone of her calibre.”

“I agree, I got the same impression,” John said, looking thoughtful. “Niskera might be able to encourage the minor empires to join our alliance as well. She’s obviously built up a rapport with them.”

“So what’s the plan?” Dana asked, bouncing in her seat. “We go in guns blazing and blow the crap out of the Kirrix?”

John looked at the exuberant redhead and smiled. “That’s one option. We could also attempt a stealthy approach, making use of the shuttle we took from Mikaboshi.”

“Pfft, sneaking around sucks ass!” Dana snorted, shaking her head and waving a hand dismissively. “Something’s bound to fuck up, then we’ll be caught with our pants down. Either way, if the Kirrix are laying siege to this underground fortress, we won’t be able to get in there without killing a shitload of them.”

“The stealth shuttle has very limited troop capacity,” Sakura said, looking doubtful. “Even if we were able to execute a smooth exfiltration and managed to slip the Chancellor and the alien representatives past the Kirrix, I doubt we’d have enough space to evacuate them all.”

“I just wanted to mention it so we could explore all our options,” John said, keeping his tone neutral. “So we’re decided then? We smash the Kirrix, teach them a lesson for attacking the Trankarans, and fight our way through to Niskera and her troops?”

“Fuck yeah!” Dana crowed, grinning in excitement.

Calara had a grin of anticipation on her face too. “We don’t really do stealth. I assumed from the start that we’d be planning a full-frontal assault.”

“Alright, it seems we’re all on the same page,” John said with a smile, leaning back in his chair. “I was thinking Jade, Calara, Dana, and Irillith on the Invictus. Your job will be to hit the Kirrix fleet, keeping them distracted while we send in a ground team to rescue Niskera.”

“Actually, I’m not going to be much use in a fleet battle,” Irillith said, giving John a rueful look. “Some of those Kirrix derelicts still had power, but their computer systems are completely alien to ours... The Invictus wasn’t even able to create a digital bridge to their ships! Without a rudimentary connection, I’m not able to subvert their systems. I can’t hack them...”

John shared a worried glance with Calara, seeing her expression grow more anxious as she was forced to re-evaluate her initial assessment of the impending battle. “That’s... unfortunate,” she said, looking grim. “Irillith turning enemy ships against one another is a phenomenal force multiplier. Give me a few hours... I’ll try to adapt our tactics to compensate.”

“Sorry,” Irillith said, giving them an apologetic look.

“No need for that, it’s not your fault,” John said, giving her a reassuring smile. “In that case, I’d like you to join the ground assault team with me, Alyssa, Rachel, and Tashana.”

Irillith nodded, an eager gleam in her eyes. “Of course, I’ll be happy to.”

“You haven’t mentioned me yet,” Sakura said, gazing at John and holding her breath. “Does that mean...?”

“Yes, you’ll be providing fire support in the Valkyrie,” John said, smiling as she pumped her fist in the air. “We could have used you for the ground mission, but the Valkyrie is packing too much firepower to let it sit out the battle. I’d like you to help clear our landing site on Khalgron.”

“I won’t let you down!” the Asian girl said, looking thrilled.

He gave her an appreciative nod, then turned to look at Faye, his expression serious. “We need a pilot for the Raptor, Faye. Are you comfortable flying the gunship while still acting as secondary gunner on the Invictus?”

“Absolutely!” she agreed immediately. “I can easily cover both roles simultaneously.”

“Excellent, thank you,” John said, looking pleased. “As soon as you drop us off on Khalgron, I want you to provide cover for Sakura while she keeps the Kirrix clear from our departure point. Once we’re all aboard, we all dock with the Invictus and get the hell out of there.”

“Shit, I forgot!” Dana blurted out, scowling in irritation. “I figured out how to eliminate that signal delay you mentioned, but I’ve been so distracted by Faye’s body, I haven’t had a chance to fix it yet. We’ll need to go outside on the hull to make the modifications, so unless we delay our departure, we won’t be able to upgrade the comms array before the battle. We can’t do it in hyper-warp.”

Faye gave Dana a shifty look. “Actually, I already fixed it.”

The redhead blinked at her in surprise. “How the hell did you manage that?”

The purple sprite twisted her hands together nervously. “You mentioned your plans to modify the pulse generator, so I’ve been checking your schematic repositories and waiting for you to draw up blueprints. The signal delay has been inhibiting my piloting efficiency by fourteen-point-three-seven percent, so I was very anxious to resolve the problem. I assigned two of my boys to upgrade the comms array while the rest worked on upgrading the heatsinks on the Pulse Cannons. I had intended it to be a surprise, so... Ta-dah!”

Dana couldn’t help laughing and she grinned at the sprite. “That’s awesome! Thanks for sorting that out.”

“I should be the one thanking you,” Faye replied, beaming at her in delight. “I’ll be able to react to threats almost instantaneously now!”

“Talking of upgrades, are there any last-minute preparations we can make?” John asked, looking intently at his smiling Chief Engineer. “We’ve got about three hours before the battle.”

Dana frowned and tapped a finger on her chin. “I’ve had some ideas, but they’re all for big projects. I’d like to upgrade the Gauss Cannons, Heavy Cannons, and Punisher Gatling to take advantage of the tech I developed for the Quantum rifles.”

“I was thinking more along the lines of anti-personnel weapons,” John said, looking thoughtful. “The Quantum rifles have incredible stopping power, but if the planet is crawling with Kirrix, ammo might become a problem. Can you upgrade a couple of the Justice lasers to take advantage of the new tech we’ve acquired?”

Dana suddenly sat bolt upright, a light of inspiration in her eyes. “Oh fuck! That would be perfect!” Springing to her feet, she ran towards the ramp. “I know just the thing! Give me an hour, then I’ll need one of you to do some psychic shaping!”

John watched in surprise as Dana sprinted up the slope, pausing only to grab one of the Quantum rifles from the weapon racks before she leapt into the grav-tube.

Jade rose from her chair and smiled. “I’ll go and see if she needs some help.” She glanced towards Calara and added, “Dana did some active scans of the Kirrix vessels while you were visiting the Trankarans. She uploaded the results to Tactical for you.”

“Those will be a big help, thank you,” the Latina said appreciatively.

As Jade passed John’s seat, he reached out to catch her hand. “Can you ask Dana about upgrading the Paragon suits with helmet cams? Jehanna requested some combat footage...”

The Nymph gently squeezed his hand. “I’m sure Jehanna will be very appreciative, Master.”

“Ah! So that was the real reason we’re charging into battle?” Alyssa asked, giving him a playful grin. “We’re risking life and limb to help you get laid?”

The girls laughed and John smiled at the good-natured ribbing. “Alright, I confess. Rescuing Niskera is just a cunning pretext to seduce Jehanna into bed again.”

Jade nodded thoughtfully. “The decision to fight the Kirrix makes more sense now. Jehanna’s a very beautiful girl... she’ll make a fine addition to your harem of permanent mates.”

Thinking she was serious, John looked at the Nymph in surprise, but the twinkle in her emerald eyes gave her away. He laughed as he rose to his feet. “You’re getting as bad as the rest of them. I’m sure Progenitors aren’t supposed to put up with all this teasing from their women.”

“Perhaps I need to be spanked for my insolence?” Jade asked hopefully.

John gave her a playful smack on her bottom, feeling her firm cheek tremble with the impact. “That’ll have to do for now, we haven’t got time for anything else,” he said with a smile. Looking around at the rest of the group, he added, “We better get to work. I’ll contact Niskera and confirm she’s still actually alive; we’ll abort the mission if they’ve already been overrun.”

“I’ve transmitted the tech schematics to the Trankarans and our flight-path is laid in,” Alyssa informed him, glancing at the sector map. “We’ll be jumping out of the Delta Corvus system in fifteen seconds. If Faye can watch the Bridge, I’ll take care of the psychic shaping Dana needs.”

“No problem!” Faye said, skipping over to the Command Station and hopping up onto John’s console.

“I’ll spend some more time practicing in the Valkyrie,” Sakura said, giving John a passing kiss, before jogging up the ramp towards the grav-tubes.

John turned to look at Irillith and Tashana. “Could you two check our gear please? We’ll need combat webbing loaded with lots of spare ammo and grenades.”

The sisters shared a smile and nodded, pleased to be working together.

Turning to look at Calara he said, “You’ve got two hours, thirty minutes, then we’ll reconvene to view your mission briefing.”

“...And preload everyone,” Alyssa added, darting a coy glance at John.

“That too,” he agreed, doing his best to suppress an eager grin.

The rest of the group split up then, hurrying off to complete their tasks. John decided to make the call from his Ready Room, so he took the express grav-tube up to Deck Two, then walked through his bedroom, past the Officers’ Quarters and up one more level. Faye was waiting for him on the Command Deck, perched on his Command Console, and she greeted him with an energetic wave.

“Didn’t I just leave you in the Combat Bridge?” John asked curiously, walking down the ramp towards his Ready Room.

“I actually prefer it up here on the Command Deck,” Faye replied, her face uncharacteristically serious. Wriggling her compact little bottom, she added, “This console is much more comfortable!”

John looked at her in confusion for a moment, wondering how a digital creature could find one console to be more comfortable than another. He caught the look of anticipation in her luminous eyes and realised she was joking. When he started to laugh, Faye looked delighted, a glorious smile lighting up her face.

“I’ve updated your comm interface with Chancellor Niskera’s contact details on Khalgron,” she informed him.

Impressed by her initiative, John gave her a grateful grin. “Fantastic! Thanks, honey!”

Entering his Ready Room, John strode briskly over to his desk and sat down in his high-backed leather chair. He activated the console, then searched for the new contact details, finding them highlighted in red to make them even easier to locate. Swiping his hand across Chancellor Niskera’s name, he sat back in his chair, wondering if they were close enough to make direct contact. After seeing the wrecked comm beacon that morning, he could only assume that the Kirrix would have destroyed any others they encountered.

The holo-screen flickered for a moment, until it solidified into a grainy image of the Trankaran Republic’s emblem. The hammer and anvil symbol wavered a couple of times, making John think he was about to lose the connection, but after thirty seconds it faded away to be replaced by Chancellor Niskera’s haggard face. She looked drawn with exhaustion and her orange, pupil-less eyes were riven with fear.

“Thandrun! It’s far too dangerous! You must not-” Niskera stuttered to a stop, her eyes widening as she realised who was contacting her. “By the Great Maker! Commodore Blake!”

“You’ve no idea how glad I am to see you’re still alive, Chancellor!” John exclaimed, not bothering to correct her on his rank. “We’re coming to rescue you! What’s your situation there?”

He could see that she was trying to be brave, but Niskera was clearly terrified, her broad, flat features twisted with anguish. The sound of gunfire echoed in the background, accompanied by rumbling roars and shrill high-pitched screams. There was a thump of an explosion and dust showered down on her head, making her cower in fear.

“It’s hopeless! The Kirrix are closing in... there’s too many of them!” She shook her head, wincing as she did so. “Tell Fleet Warden Thandrun to abort the attack on Alpha Tauri... Tell him that I order him to return to Trankara! My final message for the Senate is to beg them to forgive all rebels for past offences; the Republic must stand together to save our people!”

John shook his head firmly. “No. I’m coming to evacuate you and any survivors. You can give Thandrun whatever orders you like when you’re safely aboard the Invictus. We’ll hit the Alpha Tauri system in just over three hours, so I need you to hold on for just a bit longer.”

She looked at him in shock, unused to her commands being so bluntly ignored. There was a huge crash from somewhere in the fortress and Niskera looked over her shoulder, shaking with terror. She seemed to be on the verge of breaking under the strain; it was a haunted look that John had seen too many times in his past.

“The troops have been so brave, but they’re facing an endless swarm...” Niskera whispered, her voice wavering. “It’s only a matter of time...”

“Chancellor, keep it together!” John snapped curtly. “Your people need you to stay strong!”

Niskera looked like she’d been slapped, and she took a shuddering breath then nodded slowly.

Softening his stern tone, John’s voice was soothing as he said, “Niskera, we’ll be there soon, I promise.” When she looked more stable, he continued, “Who’s your highest-ranking military officer there? I need to speak with him urgently.”

“Sub-Warden Dhormun, I’ll get him for you,” she replied, giving him a brave but quivering smile.

Niskera’s anxious face disappeared from the screen and John could only listen impotently as the sound of intense fighting raged somewhere close by. After a couple of minutes wait, a male Trankaran’s angry face loomed into the camera.

“I don’t have time for this!” he snarled in a deep bass rumble, glowering at the screen.

“Are you alone Dhormun?” John asked abruptly, the look he gave the Trankaran causing the Sub-warden’s malachite eyes to momentarily widen.

The armoured Trankaran turned to his right and grunted, “Would you give us a moment please, Chancellor.” After waiting a few seconds, he turned to look at the screen again. “Alright, she’s gone.”

John leaned forward and said quietly, “We’re mounting a rescue mission, but we won’t reach the system for another three hours. Can you hold out until then?”

Dhormun’s eyes lit up with hope for a second, but his expression soon darkened. “I don’t know...” he admitted, his slab-like features set in a bleak mask. “The Kirrix sent in shock troops... creatures we’ve never seen before. They’re nearly impossible to take down!”

John fixed the Trankaran with a level gaze. “Dhormun, the Republic is on the verge of collapse. Without Niskera, your people are doomed. She must survive... at any cost... do I make myself clear?”

The Sub-warden slowly nodded, his expression hardening. “I understand. By my honour, we’ll protect her!”

“We’ll be there as soon as we can, you have my word,” John said, his voice throbbing with sincerity.

Dhormun raised a clenched fist in salute and was about to reply when there was another crash behind him.

“Sub-Warden!” a panicked Trankaran soldier called out. “They’re breaking through in the East wing!”

Turning back to look at the holo-screen again, Dhormun said defiantly, “We’ll hold, but don’t take too long...”

Abruptly the connection cut out and John was left staring at static. He eased back in his chair, unclenching his hands from the armrests and trying to relax the tension in his shoulders. Now wasn’t the time to let himself get keyed up for a fight, that time would come soon enough. He turned and looked out of the window to watch the stars sweeping by, losing himself in that glittering view.

He’d seen how desperate the Trankaran situation was on Khalgron and knew the Trankarans could be overwhelmed at any moment. Meanwhile, the Invictus was sailing headlong into a huge Kirrix invasion fleet, exposing the girls to tremendous danger. If Dhormun and his men couldn’t hold the line, then John would be putting the lives of his entire crew at huge risk for naught.

At that moment he realised the irony in the girls’ absolute trust in his judgement, when he was having such sincere doubts himself. He was half-tempted to ask Luna to sail across Terran Space to race to the Trankarans aid, but a decision like that would have serious ramifications and would need to be carefully considered. He was a Vice Admiral now and probably had the authority to grant them permission, but a fleet of previously unseen Maliri warships sailing brazenly across another Empire’s territory? He didn’t need to be a political mastermind to know that the Admiralty would have a few choice things to say about that!

Having to think about that kind of political fallout made him miss Edraele all the more, and he was startled to realise how much he’d come to rely on her wise counsel. Edraele’s incapacitation couldn’t have come at a worse time, but there wasn’t anything he could do about that now. As he lost himself in the stars once more, he wondered if the other Progenitor was out there right now, watching him dance around like a puppet as he dealt with one emergency after another.

Be the cat, don’t be the mouse...

If only it were that easy.

\*John, I’m sorry to interrupt,\* Alyssa said quietly. \*I think you should come and see this...\*

She sounded deeply unsettled and to hear such a reaction from the stoic blonde had him sitting bolt upright in his chair. \*What’s the matter?\* he asked in alarm.

\*Come down to the firing range, you need to see this for yourself...\* she replied.

John lurched from the chair and half-jogged towards the door. \*The firing range? Did Dana finish the upgrades to the Justice Laser already?!\*

Her troubled thoughts reached him a moment later. \*It’s been two hours... You were lost in thought and I didn’t want to disturb you.\*

The door swished open and John strode purposefully across the Bridge, nodding to Faye as she waved at him. He stepped into the red anti-gravity field, wishing that it worked just as fast as the express versions. He leapt out onto Deck Seven, his impatience at his slow descent stirring him into a jog down the corridor. Slapping his hand on the button next to the door into the Firing Range, he heard the high-pitched sound of laser fire, blue flashes from inside the range illuminating the wall next to him.

His eyes widened as he recognised that distinctive sound and he burst into the room, turning to stare at the girls standing in front of the lanes. Alyssa, Dana, and Tashana all stood to one side, their attention riveted to the fourth girl in the room.

Irillith was wearing a full suit of Paragon armour and holding a sleek, elegant... cannon. Her left hand was extended, supporting the big underslung gun by holding a grip half way down its frame, while her right hand held the trigger grip at her waist. It was a triple-barrelled weapon, one eerily similar to scores more John had psychically shaped for the Invictus.

A target dummy popped up and Irillith smoothly pivoted, a stream of blazing blue laser bolts screaming downrange and scything the dummy in half. Another appeared, then another, and she mowed them all down mercilessly. John walked closer, his eyes wide in shock. Irillith’s face was frozen in concentration, her expression grim as she strafed the cascade of laser bolts through her targets. The azure laser fire lit up her features, making her sky-blue skin seem strangely cold and uncompromising.

He felt a sudden thrill of... satisfaction? Or was it elation? Whatever it was, seeing an armoured Maliri girl wielding this kind of Pulse Cannon variant sent a shiver up his spine.

\*You feel it too...\* Alyssa murmured, stepping closer and slipping her hand into his.

John glanced at her and Alyssa suddenly seemed small and scared, like a child realising they were dabbling with something they should have left well alone.

He knew exactly how she felt.