Three Square Meals Ch. 94

“Hey, handsome.” Alyssa kissed John’s shoulder as she slipped her arms around his waist, cuddling him from behind.

Faye had dimmed the lights in the bedroom, which made the violet glow from the twins’ eyes all the more apparent.

John turned away from the Maliri girls and glanced over his shoulder to smile at her. “Sorry, I was miles away there.”

“I don’t think you have anything to worry about,” she said, looking down at the bonding sisters. “Tashana’s so much stronger than she was...”

“Actually, for once it’s not her I’m worried about,” John replied, his attention on Irillith.

Alyssa felt his concern and clarified, “That’s kind of what I mean. Tashana is not going to let anything bad happen to her sister; she really has forgiven her for what happened.” The blonde hesitated for a second, then continued, “Or at least realised it was pointless to hold a grudge, not when Irillith’s not the same girl she was before.”

“I know her intentions are good, but that still must’ve been a hell of a shock for Irillith,” John said, stroking the Maliri girl’s arm. Irillith remained completely oblivious, deeply entranced in her violet-eyed connection with her twin. “She must’ve just got a horrendous snapshot of a decade of abuse...”

His blonde Matriarch uncoiled herself from around him and sat beside Tashana. Mimicking his soothing caress of the twin’s arm, she said, “This is something different... They’re not bonding in the way I’ve done with the girls. Remember I said their portraits merged and the two roses blurred?”

“The images in your mind? Yes, I remember,” John said, wondering what was happening to the two girls.

“They’ve merged with your portrait, appearing as girls now, just like the others... But with them it’s different, they’re like... together now,” she said, struggling to describe what she was seeing. “If I look at them, instead of each moving to be held by you like Calara, Sakura, and Jade do, the pair move together. It’s like I can’t separate them.”

“Those portraits seem to be symbolic, so what do you think that means?” John asked, glancing across the supine blue girls at the troubled blonde.

Alyssa gave him a helpless shrug. “Me and Athena are both drawing a blank, but when the twins wake up, maybe they can let us know. She says ‘hi’, by the way.”

John looked at her in surprise, then smiled and waved. “Hello, Athena.” He paused to study Alyssa closely for a moment. “How’s she doing? I mean... how are you doing?”

Alyssa smirked at him. “It doesn’t really work like that. She’s present in my mind, but I control all my senses. She’s very happy and enjoys helping me.”

“What with?” John asked, looking at her in fascination.

“Stuff...” Alyssa replied enigmatically. She looked down at the twins and slid a hand from Tashana’s arm to caress her cum-filled stomach, before brushing it over Irillith where their bellies touched. “Are you excited about tomorrow?”

It took John a moment to realise what she was talking about, but the eager anticipation in her eyes as she stroked those swollen blue tummies soon made it clear. “To be honest, I haven’t really had a chance to think about being with the Young Matriarchs. I’ve been too worried about Edraele and getting her healed up again.”

Alyssa sat back and studied him for a moment, then held out her hand. “The girls will be here in a minute to keep an eye on the twins, they’re all going to bed soon. Why don’t we head over to the Officers’ Lounge and have a nice quiet chat?”

“Sure,” John readily agreed, climbing off the bed and throwing on some clothes.

John followed Alyssa into the corridor, exchanging smiles and greetings with the girls as they passed them on the way to the bedroom. The lithe blonde still had a pair of heels on, and with him barefoot, they were about the same height. It felt strange to be at eye-level with her as they walked side-by-side.

She gestured at the double doors to open them with a telekinetic push, then led him over to the sofas. Kicking off her shoes, Alyssa tucked her legs underneath her as she reclined on the seat. Patting the sofa next to her, she gave him an inviting smile.

“So... what do you want to talk about?” John asked cagily as he sat beside her.

She raised an eyebrow. “How about we start with you and the Young Matriarchs. They’re all very excited at the prospect of getting a visit from Mr. Stork in nine months’ time...”

John blinked then rubbed at his face. “Crap... I hadn’t even thought about that. I was just thinking about being with them for the first time.”

Alyssa watched him for a moment then unfolded herself, resting her feet on the coffee table and crossing those long, shapely legs. Patting her lap, she said, “Come and lie down here, you’ll be more comfortable.”

He did as she asked, resting his head on her warm thighs and relaxing as she started running her fingers through his hair. “That feels good...”

After giving him a few minutes to get settled, she asked gently, “So why all the doubts?”

“They’re quite young for Maliri, it might be wiser for them to wait for a few years...” John prevaricated.

Alyssa shook her head, already prepared for that one. “Leena and Tsarra are both in their fifties and the other three are in their thirties... They’re more than mature enough to think about having children and they’re all very keen to start rebuilding their noble Houses. I’m younger than them, even taking into account how long-lived the Maliri are, and we’re planning on getting me pregnant in less than six months...” The last was said with a tone that made it clear that topic was not up for discussion.

John looked up at her and frowned. “Alright, they might be old enough, but do they really know me well enough to make that decision? Having children is a huge, life-changing event, and I don’t want them rushing into it because the Maliri genetic attraction is pushing them to do it.”

Brushing his hair away from his face, Alyssa said, “You spent weeks getting to know them on Genthalas and letting them get to know you. I’ve seen how they are with you, and they’re genuinely smitten; you saving them from a bloody civil war helped push raw physical attraction into being thoroughly besotted. Besides, most Maliri are conceived with little more than an awkward greeting, a couple of pumps and a squirt... By comparison, you’re taking things at a glacial pace!”

He rolled his eyes at her crude imagery and couldn’t help chuckling.

Alyssa gave him a knowing smile. “What’s really bothering you?”

John looked into her eyes, then turned to tenderly kiss her toned belly. “It should be you first...”

Her gaze softened and she leaned down to kiss him. “It will be... but now isn’t the right time for me.”

He was surprised at how emphatically she said that. “You’re normally pushing me to get you pregnant as soon as possible...”

“I still really want that more than anything, but I finally see why you’ve wanted to hold off,” she said, looking at him wistfully. Turning to glance out the window at the stars, she continued in a quiet voice, “Somewhere out there is another Progenitor, who’s completely focused on killing you... and let’s be realistic... all of us as well. Considering how intense the fighting’s become, me and the girls can’t face these kinds of battles while pregnant, it’s just not practical. Besides, the chance of me losing our baby is too horrible to even think about!”

John nodded, letting out a sigh. “That’s the only thing stopping me now. I used to worry about you girls not being ready and being too young, but that’s changed. If you’re mature enough to save billions of lives on Terra, I think it’s fair to say you’re mature enough to decide when you want to have children.” He hesitated for a second, then added, “I was worried about the Change and how much that was influencing your enthusiasm to get pregnant, but you’ve done a great job convincing me your feelings are genuine.”

“That’s good to hear,” she said, looking pleased. “You just have to look at Sakura for proof. She joined much later, after you already knew about the personality tweaks you made at the start. I think it’s fair to say she’s just as enthusiastic about starting a family with you as the rest of us!”

He couldn’t help smiling fondly at the thought of the raven-haired beauty looking up at him with doe-eyes. “Yeah, true enough...”

Alyssa could still feel the doubt and hesitation in his mind and prompted him gently, “Those are all sensible concerns, but I know there’s something else. Why don’t you tell me the real reason?”

John looked up at her and was quiet for a long moment. “If Rachel’s right about this, and I’m sure she is, I’ll be able to choose if they have a boy or a girl. I’m going to let the girls make that choice...”

The blonde nodded, expecting as much, but her eyes widened a second later. “What happens if they ask you for a son?”

He turned away for a moment, unable to meet her probing gaze. Alyssa gasped in shock when she heard his thoughts and when he faced her again, she could see the haunted look in his eyes.

“Oh John... I’m so sorry,” she murmured, her voice filled with sympathy as a tear rolled down her cheek.

“I’m a Progenitor... It’s what we do best,” he said softly.

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Captain Galen Skotari sat behind his desk in his Ready Room and fidgeted in his chair. In his numerous years in the military, he’d always been impressed at how ship captains always seemed to be in the middle of something vitally important. However, since becoming a Captain himself, he was convinced they were all in on some vast conspiracy to make the job seem busier than it actually was.

He’d gone through his XO’s status report an hour ago, but he decided to check again in the vain hope that something new and interesting had been added since then. According to his Chief Engineer, their heavy cruiser the Antaeus, had no outstanding mechanical problems. The Medical Bay was empty, without any of the injuries from minor accidents that usually seemed to keep them busy. Finally, there were no disciplinary issues that he needed to look into, aside from the furtive surly looks he got from the crew when they thought he wasn’t watching. He could hardly blame them for that though, not when he was responsible for provoking Commodore Maddox into lumbering them with a second week-long patrol.

All seemed to be going well and without anything left to do, he was growing increasingly bored. He considered getting another cup of coffee, but he’d had three already this evening which probably wasn’t helping. Maybe it was time to switch to tea...

Rolling his eyes at the weighty decisions he was left pondering, he rose from his chair, exited his Ready Room and walked onto the Bridge. It was getting quite late, so there’d be a change of shift in the next twenty minutes. He nodded a greeting to Commander Alice Hoplander, who responded with a respectful inclination of her head, then walked up the steps to take his seat in the Command Chair.

“Good evening, Commander. Are the lizards behaving themselves?” he asked, glancing at the holographic Sector Map in the centre of the Bridge, which depicted the border between the Kintark Empire and Terran Federation with a glowing red line.

“Evening, Captain,” his XO replied, turning in her seat to look his way. “No signs of Kintark encroachment onto the Terran border so far.”

They’d already passed along this route on the outbound leg of their patrol, so it was even less likely they’d run into anything interesting on their return to Port Medea.

Waving a hand at the outer edges of their sensors, he pointed towards the vessel that was flying on a parallel course to them on the Kintark side of the border. “How long have they been shadowing us?”

“Nearly two hours, Captain,” Hoplander replied, glancing at the data readout on her console. “According to the transponder code, it’s the cruiser Gorkan’tor.”

“Have they made any threatening moves?” he asked, trying to avoid sounding hopeful.

Hoplander shook her head. “Nothing so far, just staying right on the edge of our long-range sensors.”

Captain Skotari grinned and said, “How about we have a bit of fun with them?”

“Are you sure that’s wise?” his XO asked, eyebrows climbing.

“We used to do this with the Kintark all the time,” Skotari replied, waving away her worries. Turning to look at the Pilot station, he called out, “Lieutenant Goodwell, take us right up to the border, but whatever you do, don’t cross into Kintark territory!”

Lieutenant Robert Goodwell glanced up at him with tired eyes and seemed like he was going to say something, but nodded and changed course.

When Galen turned back to look at his XO, he saw that the older woman had risen from her seat and was now crouched down beside him. He could see her face was lined with worry as she whispered, “I don’t think this is a wise course of action, Sir. The peace with the Kintark is fragile...”

Skotari frowned at her. “We’re not actually going into Kintark Space. They’d have to be insane to attack us just for flying close to the border!”

“But still...” Commander Hoplander protested in a hushed voice. “Surely it’s best not to provoke them?”

“Objection noted and overruled,” Skotari replied firmly. He gave her a reassuring smile. “It’ll be fine, they’ll play along.”

He turned back to look at the long-range sensors, then blinked in surprise. Instead of the Kintark cruiser mirroring their actions and shouldering up to the border in a display of bravado, the lizardman ship had actually backed away from the border! The Gorkan’tor was still matching their speed and flying parallel to them, but was staying just at the limits of his cruiser’s long-range sensors.

“What the hell?!” he muttered in confusion.

Commander Hoplander shared his look of surprise, as equally shocked by the Kintark patrol vessel’s actions as he was.

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Alyssa was quiet as they returned to the bedroom, lost in her thoughts. It had been nearly an hour since the twins had started bonding and when they arrived, Tashana and Irillith were just starting to stir. Alyssa squeezed John’s hand, and they shared an intimate look before she gave him a tender kiss and released him.

Climbing onto the bed, he put his arms around the Maliri girls and gave them a gentle squeeze. “How are you two feeling now? That looked like it was tough going; are you both alright?”

“We feel fine,” Tashana replied, stretching and giving him a warm smile of satisfaction. “We’re united again just as we were always meant to be.”

Irillith nodded a moment later. “It was horrible facing the truth behind everything we’d put us through, but we feel much better now.” Her lovely smile was an identical match to her sister’s. “There’s no need to worry about us, we feel great!”

Dana frowned and darted a nervous glance at John. “That’s awesome you feel so good, but what’s with the fucked-up way you’re talking?”

Tashana looked at her in confusion. “What’s the matter? We don’t think there’s anything wrong?” She looked startled then, her violet eyes widening. “We don’t seem to be able to say ‘we’ any more...” Her eyebrows climbed higher as she continued, “We decided to become a Digital Operations Specialist...”

“We trained to be an archaeologist...” Irillith blurted out, a look of astonishment appearing on her face.

They both began to speak at once, echoing each other’s words. “We spent thirteen years in the Unclaimed Wastes... we spent the last decade working as a Cyber-security specialist for our mother... Our favourite food is toffee ice-cream... we like strawberry the most... our favourite colour is... red... blue....”

The twins looked at each other in shock.

“Any idea what’s happened?” John asked, turning to Rachel.

The brunette had been studying the two girls in fascination, but she quickly turned to look at him. “It’s like their minds have completely merged, losing their sense of personal identity...”

John opened his arms to the frightened twins and hugged them both as they came to him. “Is this permanent?” he asked in alarm.

Rachel stroked Tashana’s shoulder to sooth her. “Perhaps their bonding was amplified because they were both full of your cum at the time? It does act as a psychic catalyst... If that was the case, this is probably just a temporary side-effect as their minds sort everything out. I don’t think there’s anything to worry about; you’d never do anything to hurt them.”

He looked down at the startled sisters who had calmed down after hearing Rachel’s theory. “If this was my fault, I’m sorry...”

Tashana gave him a gentle kiss. “There’s no need to apologise, it’s just a little disorientating. We think that Rachel’s right.”

“We’re able to experience all of each other’s memories and thoughts,” Irillith said giving her twin a loving smile. “We never knew how fondly we thought of our childhood together.”

Dana groaned and rubbed at her temple. “You two are making my head spin!”

“Maybe we should call it a night,” John suggested rubbing the twins’ arms. “I’m sure after a good sleep you two will be fine.”

Tashana shared a smile with Irillith then looked up at him. “We think this is too good an opportunity to be missed. We really want to get to know our sister.”

“You feel the same way?” he asked Irillith.

“We want to share everything with us,” the blue skinned girl replied emphatically.

John nodded and gave them both a supportive smile. “Okay, but try not to stay up too late. We’ll be rendezvousing with the Maliri fleet tomorrow afternoon, so make sure you get plenty of rest before then.”

“We promise,” Tashana agreed and both twins gave him a tender kiss, before waving everyone goodbye and leaving the bedroom.

Once the sisters were out of earshot, Dana grimaced and shook her head. “I guess I’ll love them regardless, but I hope they change back to normal! That ‘we’, ‘us’, shit is freaking me out!”

As everyone started getting ready for bed, John pulled Rachel aside. “Do you genuinely believe this is only temporary, or were you just saying that to calm them down?”

After taking a second to consider how to respond, Rachel replied, “I have no way of knowing for certain; this is uncharted territory. Either way, this kind of intimate mind-sharing will give them real insight into one another.” She stroked his cheek and added, “If you did have a hand in it, I’m sure it’ll work out for the best...”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence,” he replied with a smile, pulling aside the covers and getting into bed.

Alyssa and Calara snuggled in beside him, with the rest of the girls joining after they reappeared from the bathroom.

The Latina glanced up at him and asked, “John, I just wondered how long you plan on meeting with the Maliri for?”

“A few days at least,” he replied, putting his arm around her. “My main priority is healing Edraele, but there’s a number of other things we need to do and I’m not sure how long they’ll take.” He reeled off his mental checklist: “Transfer the Trankaran ores, get the parts for Faye, discuss how best to help the Ashanath and Trankarans-”

Dana grinned as she interrupted, “Knock up a bunch of very sexy, very horny blue babes!” She sat up and shivered with excitement. “Please can we watch you with them! Please!”

John glanced around and saw that all the girls were looking equally aroused. “It really doesn’t bother any of you at all?” he marvelled.

“To see my Master prove his virility?” Jade purred, her vertical black pupils wide enough to eclipse her emerald eyes. “I’ve dreamt of this moment since I met you!”

“I told them what we discussed earlier, about you feeling bad about it not being us first,” Alyssa said quietly. When he glanced her way, she shook her head imperceptibly confirming that was all she’d discussed with them.

“You don’t need to worry, we all understand,” Calara said in a soothing tone, stroking his chest. “The Young Matriarchs are sweet girls; we all think they’re lovely.”

“And they really need you,” Sakura said emphatically. “Those women are duty bound to start rebuilding their Houses! Without you to assist, they’ll have to visit the border stations for a liaison with a Maliri male. From speaking with the Maliri on Genthalas, I don’t get the impression those men are particularly interested in taking an active interest in their children.”

He raised his hands and smiled. “I appreciate the enthusiasm, but I’m not going to make any promises... about anything. I want to speak to the Young Matriarchs and handle this delicately, okay?”

They murmured their agreement, all of the girls just as thrilled by the prospect as Jade.

“I might be wrong, but none of you are particularly sleepy, are you?” he asked, arching an eyebrow.

The answering grins were all the confirmation he needed.

He glanced at Jade and said, “I appear to be outnumbered, fancy helping me even things up a bit?”

The Nymph prowled over the covers and grinned as she knelt submissively before him. “Take me whenever you’re ready, Master... I would say that we’ll make your mates cry out your name in ecstasy, but they’re polite girls and they know it’s rude to speak with their mouths full.”

John laughed as he moved to kneel behind the dark-green beauty on the bed, then slid into her deliciously hot and wet pussy. Her internal muscles rippled as she guided him up to the hilt, fifteen tentacles snaking out of her lithe body and approaching the five wild-eyed Terran girls. John could only groan in disbelief as he experienced one torturously slow penetration after another, as Jade triple-penetrated the five writhing girls, matching his languid thrusts by inching her dark-green replicas of his cock inside them.

It turned out Jade was right; they were all too stuffed to do much talking.

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When John awoke the following morning, he stretched in satisfaction, still feeling that dull ache in his quad from the enthusiastic orgy the night before. Normal sleeping conventions had been abandoned, and he was buried under a tangle of slender limbs, the girls still lying roughly where he and Jade had fucked them all unconscious.

Faye fluttered onto the bed when she saw him stir and gave him a cheerful wave. “Hey!”

John put a finger to his lips to urge her to be quiet. “Everything alright, honey?”

“We crossed into Maliri Space three hours ago,” she replied in a barely audible whisper. “Aside from that, no problems!”

“Perfect, thank you.”

Unfortunately, their muted conversation woke up Jade and the Nymph shared a loving smile with him as she sat up on the bed. With Jade’s help, he was able to extricate himself from the pile of blissfully sleeping girls and he beckoned her into the bathroom once he’d climbed off the bed.

“Thanks for last night, that was amazing,” he said, once he’d closed the bathroom door behind them.

The Nymph grinned at him as she bounded into the shower cubicle and turned on the jets of hot water. “I loved it too, Master!” she exclaimed, a bright smile on her beautiful face. Her expression turned coy as she added, “I thought I’d worn you out last night, but I’m always here for you if you need more relief...”

John stepped into the water with her and gave her a hug. “That’s a very tempting offer, but let’s wait for a bit, I’m still recovering at the moment... I will need your assistance with Edraele later, if that’s okay?”

She coiled her arms around him and nuzzled into his neck. “Of course, I’ll be delighted to help.”

They enjoyed a nice relaxing shower together, Jade taking the opportunity to give him one of her incredible massages that left him feeling like his bones had turned into jelly.

He gave her a grateful kiss when she was done. “I’m going to check on Irillith and Tashana, then call the Maliri fleet to make sure they’re all okay. Feel free to go back to bed if you want a lie-in.”

Jade followed him out of the bathroom, then switched to telepathy to avoid waking the girls. \*I’ll come with you and keep the twins company.\*

Alyssa waved at them sleepily as they passed the bed, a languid smile on her face. \*They’re in Tashana’s room...\*

\*Sorry for waking you up, honey,\* John said softly. \*I’ll try and keep my thoughts quieter.\*

\*S’okay,\* the blonde teenager mumbled, snuggling into Calara and dozing off again.

Jade waited for him patiently as he got dressed in the walk-in-wardrobe then accompanied him to Tashana’s bedroom. The Nymph was still delightfully nude and the light reflected off the dark lustre of her skin as she padded along beside him. John opened the door and saw that the Maliri sisters were sleeping serenely, having fallen asleep in each other’s arms at some point in the early hours.

\*I’ll watch over them,\* Jade thought to him, before standing on tiptoe to give him a parting kiss. She waved goodbye, then crept into the room and onto the bed, moving with cat-like agility – which was unsurprising, considering her nature.

When John stepped out of the grav-tube onto the Bridge, Faye was waiting for him, a look of gleeful anticipation on her face. “I can’t believe we’re nearly there!” she exclaimed, leaping off the Command podium to land lightly at his side.

“How long will it take to finish your body?” John asked, smiling at her cheerful exuberance.

“Dana says a few days,” the happy sprite replied. “The parts the Maliri are bringing are very important, but she has no experience with them so wants to make sure she gets the installation perfect.”

John walked down the ramp to his Ready Room, glancing at his diminutive elfin companion. “She’s been very coy about what Luna’s bringing with her. Why all the secrecy?”

Faye smiled fondly and replied, “She just wants to help maintain the illusion that I’ll be a real girl when my body arrives.” She looked up into his eyes and continued earnestly, “I don’t think hiding my nature from you is a good way to start our relationship, but I want you to like me more than anything. What do you think?”

John stopped by his Ready Room door and smiled at her. “I think you’re adorable and you haven’t even got a body yet!”

The purple sprite blushed deeply at that, then reached out to trace her fingers across his arm. “The Maliri are bringing synthetic skin with them. Installing cybernetics is considered shameful in their society, so if someone loses a limb and is forced to get a cybernetic replacement, their artificial skin is extremely realistic to avoid detection. Dana isn’t able to replicate it with the Mass Fabricators, so she asked Luna to bring a plentiful supply with her.”

“So your actual body is already complete?” John asked in fascination.

She nodded enthusiastically. “I’ve been running my initial tests and motor functions are all performing perfectly!”

He tried to picture it in his mind, then simply asked, “What does it look like?”

“Really awesome!” Faye replied, sounding a lot like Dana. She hesitated for a moment, then added, “Would you like to see?”

“As long as you don’t mind, I’d love to,” he replied.

Faye bit her full lower lip then gestured behind him to the centre of the Bridge. He turned to look where she was pointing and a holographic image appeared before him. Her chassis was sparkling white, immediately revealing the material used in its construction. The synthetic body was slightly shorter and slimmer than the holograph of Faye fluttering nervously beside him, which he could only assume was to allow for the synthetic skin that would be grafted to her lithe frame.

The robotic body was obviously feminine in shape and form, possessing an alluring beauty all of its own. Crisscrossing the shimmering white body were glowing blue lines, reminding him a little of the bright power stripes on the Justice Laser rifle. The glow from these were muted though, casting a soft sapphire light over its snowy-white limbs.

“Alyssa designed the outer casing,” Faye said self-consciously. She giggled and glanced up at him. “She said Dana couldn’t be trusted with aesthetics after the maintenance bots!”

“She did a wonderful job... You look beautiful,” John said, admiring the sleek lines of the feminine figure.

“You really think so?” Faye asked quietly.

He turned to look at her and nodded. “Not quite as adorable as the girl standing before me, but that would have been an impossible task.”

Her cupid-bow lips lifted into a huge grin and she bounced up and down with joy. “I’m so glad you weren’t repulsed!”

John laughed and shook his head. “No, far from it.”

Faye dismissed the holograph with a wave of her hand. “Please don’t say anything to Dana. I knew you’d be okay with seeing it like that, but I think she just wanted to make sure.”

“Sparks really cares for you, Faye. She wants you to be happy, that’s all.”

“I know,” the purple sprite replied, with a happy sigh. “I’m so lucky to have a friend like her...”

“Friends,” John corrected her with a smile. “We all care about you.”

Faye blushed a deep plum colour again, then glanced at the door to his Ready Room. “I better not keep you any longer. I’m sure Luna must be eager to speak with you.”

“Thanks for trusting me with that, honey,” John said, looking into her big luminous eyes. “I’m glad I didn’t disappoint you.”

She had a dreamy expression on her face. “That’s quite alright. You’re wonderful, I knew you’d be fine...”

John left the moon-eyed sprite with a smile, then entered his Ready Room and walked to his desk. He scrolled through his list of contacts and found Lilyana, the House Valaden Fleet Commander who he knew was on their flagship. Now they were safely inside Maliri Space, he knew he didn’t have to worry about the Admiralty snooping on any calls as the communication lines wouldn’t be routed through Terran Comm beacons. He swiped across her name and waited for the call to reach the Galaena Serine.

He didn’t have to wait long before the crossed blades logo of House Valaden appeared and only five seconds after that, the sigil faded away to be replaced by Lilyana’s beautiful face.

The House Valaden Fleet Commander gave him a warm smile, her aquamarine eyes twinkling as she played self-consciously with her long white hair. “It’s wonderful to see you again, Protector.”

“It’s great to see you too, Lilyana, the longer hair really suits you,” he said kindly, this being the first time they’d spoken since topping her up a second time on Genthalas. “I’m really sorry to have kept you waiting so long. I’m sure you’ve heard about our terrible trouble with the Trankarans...”

“That’s quite a mouthful,” she said with a coy smile, before blushing at her own boldness. “That’s quite alright about the wait; Luna explained you were helping the Trankarans with an emergency.”

John smiled at her innuendo, then asked politely, “May I speak with her please?”

“Of course, she should be here any moment,” the Fleet Commander replied, before glancing offscreen when a melodic chime echoed around her office.

Rising from her seat, she smiled to her left and was quickly replaced by Luna, who looked overjoyed to see him. “I’m so glad you’re here, John!”

“Just a few more hours,” he replied, looking at her with concern. “Is everything alright? Any problems with Edraele?”

The interim leader of House Valaden quickly shook her head. “No, nothing like that, she’s fine. It’ll just be a relief to have her back again.”

“Heavy lies the crown?” John asked, studying the flustered former-assassin.

Luna hesitated for a moment then nodded. “I’ve grown close to Edraele and really missed her, but standing in for her as Matriarch has been... challenging. Fortunately, Tsarra Perfaren came to the rescue; she gave me some incredibly useful advice and helped me keep the Governors in line.”

“I’m sorry I put you in that position,” John apologised. “I hope you understand that I wouldn’t have done so if I didn’t think you were the best woman for the job.”

“That’s quite alright,” she replied, blushing at his praise. “It’s given me a new appreciation for both the pressure Edraele’s under and the way she handles it so effortlessly. I’ll do whatever I can to help her when she’s back in her rightful place as Matriarch.”

“So I don’t need to worry that power’s gone to your head?” John teased her, raising an eyebrow. “No desperate desire to cling on as Matriarch of House Valaden?”

“Definitely not!” Luna declared vehemently.

He gave her a supportive smile. “Just a few more hours and it’ll be over with. We should arrive at about two in the afternoon.”

She returned his smile, her unblinking yellow eyes quite mesmerising. “I’ll be counting the minutes...”

With that they ended the call and the Valaden insignia replaced Luna’s face on the holo-screen before fading away a second later. John leaned back in his chair and suddenly realised he had a clear morning ahead. He had been planning on looking into Tashana’s research notes with her and Irillith, but with both of them sleeping he needed to come up with something new.

\*Calara’s restless as well this morning; I think she’s spent too much time in the kitchen,\* Alyssa informed him, sounding drowsy. \*I’m sure she’d love a chance to get all sweaty with you in the Dojo...\*

John grinned as he sprang from his chair, a sparring session with the feisty Latina would be the perfect way of spending the morning. He jogged across the Bridge and then headed down to Deck Two, meeting the Latina as she left his bedroom.

“Give me thirty seconds to get dressed!” she exclaimed, looking just as eager as he was.

By the time he’d returned in his sparring gear, Calara was just returning to the corridor, looking pumped up and ready for action. They managed to keep a lid on the banter until they reached Deck Three where they knew their voices wouldn’t carry back to the bedroom.

“No powers this time?” he asked her, nudging her with an elbow. “Or are you planning on cheating again?”

She laughed and rolled her eyes at him. “That’s fine talk coming from you. If I remember rightly, you started it!”

They reached the door to the Dojo and he hit the button and gestured for her to proceed inside. “Ladies first... to hit the mat.”

“You’re really looking for a beatdown today,” she marvelled as she padded out onto the mats.

They squared off against each other, both grinning in anticipation. As they closed the distance, John paused and said seriously, “Even without your powers, you realise you’re good enough to stand a very good chance against your father in a sparring match.”

Calara froze in surprise as she realised he was telling her the simple truth. She lowered her guard and replied, “That’s never been my goal, but I always wanted to prove myself to-”

She didn’t get to finish the sentence as John swept her legs out from under her, sending her crashing to the mat. He tutted and winked at her. “But not if you let him sucker-punch you like that!”

The Latina couldn’t help laughing as he gave her a playful grin and showboated for an imaginary crowd. “Wow... That was a real dick move...”

He gave her an unapologetic shrug. “I’m fairly sure that was one of your earliest lessons; don’t let yourself get distracted, especially by someone who knows how to push your buttons. Looks like my student still needs her sensei.” Backing away warily, he fell into another guard stance. “Now show me what you’ve got.”

His teasing had fired Calara up for a no-holds barred session that kept him on his toes, literally and figuratively. They spent a couple of hours sparring on the mat, naturally switching from offense to defence when either one managed to get the upper hand. Very well matched against each other, it was just the slightest misstep that proved John’s undoing and the Latina surged in close, tangled her legs with his and toppled him over backwards, landing on his chest.

“I win!” she exulted between deep breaths, her brown eyes burning with the passion of her victory.

“And it was well earned, you were magnificent,” he replied, panting for breath himself.

She relaxed then, but the smouldering look in her eyes didn’t go away. “We didn’t discuss the victor’s prize...”

He placed his hands on her hips and gently stroked her flanks with his thumbs, feeling her sweat slicked skin under his fingertips. “Anything you want, gorgeous.”

She rose to her feet and offered John a hand, then led him through to the adjoining bedroom, her alluring smile making all sorts of delicious promises. They showered together then fell into bed, where their lovemaking was slow and sensual – a dramatic contrast to the frenetic sparring. Lying together afterwards, John spooned the blissfully happy girl, caressing her curves as she relaxed in his arms.

“You’re going to think I’m some kind of hopelessly love-struck teen, and I can’t believe I’m saying it again, but I’ve never felt so happy before,” Calara said, with a contented sigh.

“Because we’ve made the engagement official?” John asked, kissing her olive-toned shoulder.

She nodded and turned slightly so she could look at his face. “I didn’t like keeping this from some of the girls, even if it was done with the right intentions.”

“How about becoming my official wife?” John asked, giving her a knowing look.

Calara blushed immediately, then nodded again. “The other girls would have hated being there at your side for the PR pieces, but I’ll be honoured to be there with you!” She paused for a second and frowned. “Actually, that sounds really bad. I don’t mean they’d hate being at your side...”

John cradled her head with his hand and silenced her backpedalling with a kiss. “It’s okay, I know what you meant. Alyssa and the others were right; this means much more to you than any of them and I’ll be the proudest man in the galaxy to have you on my arm.”

She gave him a radiant smile and snuggled in closer. “It’s not just that. For the first time in months I’ve not been feeling guilty about having a big family wedding. The last thing I wanted to do was upset any of the girls, but now it feels like I have their permission to go ahead with it. That kind of ceremony isn’t what any of them are really looking for, but it’ll mean a huge amount to me and my family.”

“Family is very important,” John agreed, stroking her tummy again. He had a distant look on his face as he caressed her, thinking about the upcoming meeting with the Young Matriarchs.

Calara watched him quietly for a moment, then whispered, “Those girls don’t know just how lucky they are, but they will when you’re there for them to help bring up your children. I think you’ll be a wonderful father.”

“My grandparents did a great job of giving me a loving childhood, but there was always that nagging doubt at the back of my mind; about why my real parents didn’t want me... I don’t want my children to ever feel that way,” he said, gazing into her eyes.

She pulled him down for a kiss and they relaxed together for a few minutes until John glanced at the ship’s chronometer on the wall.

Calara saw the look and asked, “Nearly time?”

He nodded and patted her swollen belly. “Jade’s already on her way. We need to load her up for Edraele.”

As if on cue, the naked Nymph padded into the bedroom. “Hello you two.”

The Latina stretched, a smile of anticipation on her face. “Hello, sexy...”

Jade climbed onto the bed, her eyes darting from the inviting curve of the Latina’s cum-packed womb to look at John. “The twins were still asleep when you called me.”

“I’ll head up there and wake them,” John said, as he got out of bed. “We’ll be arriving in the Delta Arietis system in twenty minutes.”

Scooping up his gym gear, he padded out of the bedroom to the sound of Calara’s excited gasps, as Jade enthusiastically went to work. He didn’t think twice about strolling along the corridor naked and he couldn’t help smiling when he realised how much his attitude to the Invictus had changed since he’d served on it as a marine.

Travelling up to Deck Two, he spotted one of the cleaning bots appearing out of his bedroom, so he bundled up his clothes and lobbed them down the corridor towards it. Unfortunately, his gym gear wasn’t quite as aerodynamic as he’d hoped and it looked like it was going to fall short. The bot put on a sudden burst of speed and ducked under the sweat-stained clothing, neatly catching it in the hamper on its back.

“Good catch!” he called out with a grin.

To his surprise, the cleaning bot did a funny kind of shuffle back and forth on its tracks, while doing a fist pump with its skinny mechanical arms. It looked a lot like a zero-g football victory dance. John kept a suspicious eye on it until he reached Tashana’s room, then hit the button to open the door and glanced back down the corridor to look at the bot again. It had already disappeared inside Calara’s room though, on the hunt for more dirty clothing.

The lights were out in the bedroom, but John could see movement under the covers. Entering the room, he saw two sets of sleepy violet eyes gazing in his direction.

“That was good timing,” he said quietly as he sat on the end of the bed. “How’re you both feeling this afternoon?”

“Alyssa woke us up,” Irillith explained with a yawn.

“Did we really sleep until the afternoon!” Tashana exclaimed, looking at him in surprise.

John nodded and patted their legs through the covers. “What time did you go to bed last night?”

“Six, maybe Seven?” Irillith admitted with an embarrassed smile.

Shaking his head, John replied, “There’s no need to feel self-conscious; I’m glad you had the opportunity to really get to know one another.” Looking at them with concern, he continued, “But you haven’t answered my question yet... how are you feeling?”

“I feel fine,” Tashana said experimentally.

Irillith shared a smile with her. “Me too, great actually!”

John blew out a sigh of relief. “I love the fact that you’re twins, but last night was a sharp reminder how much I also love you as individuals.” He beckoned them over. “Come here and give me a hug.”

The Maliri girls untangled themselves from the covers and eagerly moved to join him so he could put his broad arms around them both.

Looking at Irillith first, he said gently, “I’m sorry you got a nasty shock last night. I hope you understand why I kept the truth from you about what happened to Tashana; she needed that time without any reminders to give her mind a chance to heal.”

Irillith gave him a quick kiss to reassure him. “You have nothing to apologise for, I know I agreed to have my memories altered. The most important thing was that Tashana got the time she needed to recover.” She had a thoughtful look on her face as she continued, “I did a terrible thing to her, but being able to share all her thoughts and feelings last night... I could see that she’s truly forgiven me, or at least the old version of me that betrayed her.”

“You’d never do anything like that now,” Tashana agreed, her voice full of the absolute conviction that came with knowing her twin as well as she knew herself. “Punishing you for what happened back then would just be punishing myself now.” She looked up at John and added, “We’re both putting all that behind us and moving ahead with our lives.”

“Our lives with you,” Irillith agreed, hugging John closer.

“That’s wonderful to hear,” John said, stroking their backs as they leaned into him. He looked at each of them in turn. “I’m relieved that everything’s out in the open between you two, but that still leaves one other person...”

The twins glanced at each other and said at the same time, “Our mother...”

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The Invictus dropped out of hyper-warp in the Delta Arietis system, the pale orange sun casting a warm glow over the huge formation of golden-hulled Maliri ships. The massive fleet of vessels was led by four battleships at its centre, surrounded by six heavy carriers, thirty cruisers and a host of destroyers. The Maliri didn’t use corvettes, but wings of sleek fighters raced around the outskirts of the system on patrol.

Flaring as brightly as the sun, the six huge Trankaran engines pushed the Invictus forward at startling speed, bringing the battlecruiser closer to the Maliri fleet. Several wings of fighters formed up on the glistening white ship, providing an honour guard as it angled through the ranks of cruisers and headed towards the Galaena Serine. At fifteen hundred metres, the House Valaden flagship dwarfed the Invictus, which measured merely half its length. However size was not the only thing that mattered and every Maliri in the system knew who the white ship belonged to and just how powerful it was.

Retro-thrusters flared along the length of the Invictus’ hull, bringing them to a gentle halt alongside the Shandrass-class battleship. A golden crystal-plated docking collar extended from the flank of the Maliri ship, engulfing the battle-cruiser’s outer airlock door.

A cloud of purple pixels coalesced into the diligent sprite. “We’ve docked with the Galaena Serine!” Faye announced to the group waiting in the corridor outside the airlock.

“Thanks Faye,” John replied. “Can I leave the Invictus in your capable hands?”

She nodded enthusiastically. “Of course!”

“I’ll be back in a few minutes, once I’ve got the bits we need,” Dana said, giving the purple sprite a conspiratorial wink.

Alyssa put her arm around the redhead. “Actually, I might need you for a little while first.” She gave the elfin girl an apologetic look. “Sorry, Faye. I know you’re keen to get your body finished, but we’ll be here for a few days. I promise I won’t keep Dana too long.”

“That’s quite alright!” Faye replied, waving a hand to dismiss her apology.

The redhead looked intrigued as she glanced at her blonde friend. “So what do you need me for?”

“Ah, you’ll see soon enough,” Alyssa replied, giving her an enigmatic smile.

There was a beep from the airlock sensor panel confirming that there was atmospheric pressure on the other side of the door, so John put his hand on the DNA reader. A green light swept across his hand, then chimed when it confirmed his genetic code, the airlock door spiralling open a moment later.

Standing on the other side of the portal was a cluster of beautiful Maliri women, their faces lighting up with joy to see their guests. Abandoning decorum, the Young Matriarchs and the three House Valaden assassins all swept through the airlock to embrace John and the girls. He gathered Luna in his arms first, feeling her sag against him in relief.

“It’s so good to see you!” she gasped, looking up at him with anxious yellow eyes. “I’ve been so worried.”

“Why don’t you take me straight to Edraele, then we can discuss everything else later?” John suggested.

The former assassin nodded. “Of course. She’s in a Medical Bay on Deck Six.”

The group crossed over into the elaborate golden-arched corridors of the Maliri battleship and Luna led them to a set of lifts. While they waited for one to arrive, John had an opportunity to properly greet Almari and Ilyana, Luna’s fellow assassins, hugging them both. The lift doors opened with a musical tone and fortunately it was large enough to hold the entire group. That was when the five Matriarchs embraced him, giving him an opportunity to see the excitement and anticipation in their beautiful young faces.

Tsarra Perfaren was the last and he brushed his fingers through her short white hair. She closed her eyes at his gentle touch, shivering with delight as he caressed her.

“Would you like a little help growing that out?” he asked with a playful smile.

Opening her dark-green eyes again at his question, she looked up at him under dark lashes and nodded, licking her lips in a subconscious gesture.

John gave her a brief kiss, brushing his lips against hers. “Later, I promise.”

The lift chimed again, letting them know they’d reached Deck Six. Tsarra reluctantly peeled herself away from John, giving him a lingering look then blushing a deep shade of blue when he met her intense gaze.

“This way,” Luna said, striding out into the corridor.

The Medical Bay wasn’t far from the lifts and was a substantial facility. Scores of large pieces of medical equipment were spaced evenly around the huge bay, the bulk of the machinery finished in gold, but with clear crystal canopies covering many of the objects.

Their entrance was met by an aloof woman with short dark hair, wearing a long flowing Physician’s robe, and carrying a holo-tablet tucked under one arm. “This is a Medical Facility, not a conference room!” she said indignantly as John’s entourage of sixteen women entered the room.

Luna narrowed her eyes at the Medic. “Medical Facility implies some kind of healing capability, Amadee. You’ve had two weeks to heal Edraele, but all I’ve heard are platitudes and excuses.”

John entered the room last and said, “It’s alright, Luna. What happened to Edraele isn’t something you can cure with conventional medicine. Just show me where she is and we’ll get her back on her feet.”

“Over here,” Luna replied, walking towards a row of golden pods on the far side of the medical bay.

Amadee had an irritated frown on her face as she turned to look at John, but that vanished the moment she set eyes on him. She gaped in open-mouthed astonishment as he walked past her, then flushed when he gave her a friendly smile.

“Could you open the cryo-pod for us please, Amadee?” he asked politely.

The Medic blinked in shock, then hurried to follow his request, her long blue fingers pressing buttons on the console beside the pod. She moved a sliding bar across a holo-panel, the temperature inside the pod quickly normalising to room temperature. It flashed orange when the thawing process had completed and Amadee pressed another button to open the cryo-pod door.

John saw that Sakura was staring at the pod with a pensive expression, so he put his arm around her and squeezed her shoulder. “You doing okay?”

She glanced up at him and nodded. “I just hope I never have to go in one of those things again.”

“You won’t,” he said with confidence. “Not with me and Rachel here to keep you safe and well.”

The cryo-pod door swung wide open, giving them their first view of the House Valaden Matriarch. Edraele looked ghostly pale, her normally vibrant sky-blue skin appearing wan and sickly. Irillith gasped in shock and clung to her sister, who was similarly aghast at the state of her mother.

“I had no idea she was as badly hurt as this,” John said in a hushed voice, glancing at Rachel.

The brunette gave him a worried frown and approached the cryo-pod, her grey eyes already glowing with a bright inner light as she placed her hand on Edraele’s chest. A grey mist rolled down her arm to shroud Edraele and Rachel murmured, “Species: Maliri - Catatonic... lifeforce drained.” She turned around to look at John in alarm. “She’s been severely weakened! I don’t think I can heal this kind of psychic damage!”

“It’s alright, let me,” he replied, before patting Jade on the shoulder. “You know what to do, honey.”

The Nymph approached Edraele and gently opened her mouth with one hand then slipped two fingers between the Maliri Matriarch’s pale lips. Those digits began to pulse a moment later as Jade began to pump all the cum she’d stored directly into Edraele’s stomach. John stood beside the Nymph as she fed the unconscious woman, placing one hand on his Matriarch’s gradually rising belly and the other above her heart.

“Brace yourselves, ladies,” he murmured, as his eyes began to glow with a fierce blue radiance. “I’ll need a lot of power to heal her...”

Alyssa felt the sudden massive draw of psychic energy and she tapped into the rest of the girls to help spread the load.

John could feel just how badly Edraele had been injured by the Astral leviathan, which had almost extinguished her life force to keep the portal between realities open as long as possible. He thanked the stars he’d cut their bond when he did; she probably wouldn’t have survived another ten seconds being drained like that. He focused on pouring healing energy into her body to rejuvenate her withered essence, helping her grow strong and healthy once again.

After several long moments, Edraele’s eyes fluttered open in shock, her hands lifting instinctively to try and pull Jade’s fingers from her mouth.

John caught her hands in his and said in a soothing tone, “Easy now, there’s nothing to worry about. Jade’s just helping me heal you...”

Edraele calmed immediately as she recognised him, clasping his hands in both of her own. She looked up into his glowing eyes, her brow furrowed and a questioning look in her anxious purple gaze.

“I had to cut our bond... that thing would’ve killed you if I hadn’t,” he explained gently. “Just relax, we’ll bond again once the healing is complete.”

She nodded slightly, looking relieved as she let Jade slowly pump several pints of cum into her stomach, rounding out her abdomen.

John could feel Edraele’s tattered psychic presence smoothing out as he healed it, her body regaining its lost vigour. When he was satisfied that she was fully healed, he stopped the draw of energy from Alyssa and the glow from his eyes slowly faded away.

“Holy shit... that took so much power!” Alyssa gasped, leaning wearily against him.

“Sorry, beautiful, there was no other way,” he replied putting an arm around the blonde to help support her. He glanced around the group and saw that the rest of the Invictus girls were looking tired now as well.

Jade eased her fingers from Edraele’s lips and murmured kindly, “There we go, little kitten. All better now...”

With John’s help the Maliri Matriarch sat upright, looking bright and alert once again. “It’s so wonderful to see all of you again!” Edraele exclaimed in a mix of delight and relief, looking around at the throng of visitors in the Medical Bay.

Jade moved aside to give Tashana and Irillith room, as the twins darted forward to embrace their mother.

“I was so worried about you!” Irillith exclaimed, her voice catching as she hugged Edraele tightly.

“I really missed you too,” Tashana said, joining her sister in the three-way hug. “So many wonderful things have happened while you were asleep. I can’t wait to tell you all about them!”

Edraele put her arms around her daughters, hugging them back with a joyful smile on her face. “I’m so glad you’re both here, my angels.”

John studied his Maliri Matriarch and could see that despite how happy she was to be reunited with her girls, there was still a look of yearning in her eyes when she glanced at him. Stroking Irillith and Tashana’s backs, he said, “Why don’t you let me rebond with Edraele, it shouldn’t take too long. Then we can all get together to talk about everything that’s happened.”

They reluctantly let Edraele go and John helped her off the cryo-pod bed. She stood a little unsteadily, unused to the heavy weight rounding out her waistline, so John put his arm around her to help support her. She looked up at him with a grateful smile, and it seemed like she wanted to say more but held whatever it was back.

“I’ll take you to your private suite,” Luna suggested, stroking her Matriarch’s arm affectionately.

Edraele returned the caress with a fond glance at her bodyguard, then glanced around the Medical Bay. She spotted the stunned physician who was gaping at her fully recovered patient and greeted her with a smile. “Hello, Amadee. If I was in your tender care, I can only assume we must be on the Galaena Serine?”

“T-That’s correct, Matriarch!” Amadee managed to stammer. She gaped at John and marvelled, “What did you do to heal her?!”

Rachel brushed her hand along the astonished physician’s arm. “Perhaps I can help explain? In exchange, you must tell me more about your Medical Lab! Some of this equipment is fascinating...”

Amadee nodded mutely, gazing at her with wide eyes.

Alyssa gave Edraele a warm hug. “I’m so glad you’re okay! We’ve all been really worried about you.” She glanced at John and added, “We’ll all go and have a rest somewhere to recover. See you in a few minutes.”

John guided Edraele across the medical lab, following Luna towards the door. “We’re at the rendezvous point in the Delta Arietis system. You’ve been unconscious in cryo-stasis for just over a week.”

“Delta Arietis...” Edraele murmured in confusion. “That’s a long way from the original rendezvous point.”

“We’ve been pretty busy,” John said cryptically, stepping aside to let her leave through the door first.

Edraele glanced back at the girls, sharing a smile with Alyssa and giving her a brief nod, before following Luna into the corridor. The three of them walked in silence, something obviously on Edraele’s mind, but she was keeping it to herself for the time being. After another ride in the lift, Luna guided them into a luxurious suite, then led them past a meeting room and a well-furnished lounge before stopping at a high-arched door.

“You’ve no idea how much I’ve missed you, Edraele,” she said softly, her yellow eyes filling up with emotion as she turned to look at her.

“Everything will be fine now, my darling,” the House Valaden Matriarch replied in a soothing voice, embracing her lover. “Once John and I have reconnected, I promise we’ll spend some time together, just you and me.”

Luna nodded and gave her a tender kiss, before waving them goodbye as she turned to leave the quarters. The bedroom door opened in front of John, seemingly of its own accord and he followed Edraele into the luxurious bedroom.

As soon as they were alone, she fell into his arms, her brave facade crumbling at last. “Oh John! That Astral beast was terrifying!”

“I’m so sorry I exposed you to that,” he said as he held her tight. “I never would’ve breached the Astral Plane if I knew that thing could exploit our presence!” Scooping her up in his arms, John carried her onto the big bed, then lay down beside her.“

“I need to bond with you again!” Edraele said plaintively, fear and worry etched on her face. “It’s worse not having your soothing thoughts to cling to!” Her psychic presence hammered on the mental fortress shielding his mind, desperate to be joined with him again.

“Shh, I’m here now,” John murmured, tilting her chin up with his hand and giving her a gentle kiss.

Gazing into Edraele’s purple eyes, he opened his mind for her and felt her consciousness rush to merge with his own.

Edraele sighed with relief, the tension in her eyes fading away as she felt his titanic mind moving to welcome and embrace her, swaddling her up in loving thoughts. She melted into his arms, letting out a soft moan of satisfaction and contentment as she was united with him again.

\*There you go, back at your rightful place as my Matriarch,\* John said, brushing his fingers through her silky white hair.

\*That feels so much better,\* she replied, a glorious smile lighting up her beautiful face.

He propped himself up on one elbow so he could look down into her eyes and said sincerely, “I’ve really missed you. You were only in cryo for just over a week, but it’s felt like months! So much has happened since then... I’ve lost count of the times I longed to hear your lovely voice giving me wise advice...”

Her face shadowed with guilt and she said, “I’m so sorry I let you down, there must’ve been something I could’ve done to-”

John shook his head and silenced her with a kiss. “It definitely wasn’t your fault! That monster hijacked our breach into the Astral Plane and used you and Alyssa to keep the portal open. There was nothing you could’ve done to prevent it.” He hesitated and looked troubled. “I should be the one feeling guilty...”

“You? Why would that be?” she asked him, concerned to see his pained expression.

“When you were injured, we could’ve raced back into Maliri Space to come and heal you straight away. Luna told us that your doctors said your condition was stable, so I...” He paused, the guilt he felt etched plainly on his face. “...I decided to visit the Trankarans first, to speak to them about an alliance, as well as make the trade for the ore we need. I figured it would save us about a week of extra travelling time, but I felt terrible about leaving you hurt and unconscious.”

Edraele’s eyes softened to see his anguish and she brushed her fingers against his cheek. “Being in command means you often have to make difficult choices, which I’m sure you remember from your time as a Marine officer. Now you’re effectively leading an entire empire, which means making impossibly hard decisions on a daily basis! You made exactly the right decision and I’m proud of you for doing so, John.” She gave him a quick kiss and added, “I would’ve been disappointed if you’d ignored your wider responsibilities to rush to my aid... touched, but still disappointed.”

“Actually, I thought you’d feel something like that, which is one of the reasons I made that choice,” John admitted with a wry smile.

“I’m delighted to hear I was able to offer you sage counsel even while unconscious,” Edraele, said looking pleased. Her purple eyes searched his face and she continued, “So tell me what I missed!”

John rolled onto his back and looked up at the ceiling to gather his thoughts. “There was so much, I’m not sure where to start...”

The Maliri woman turned onto her side, moving carefully with the heavy weight of cum in her stomach. “I haven’t felt this huge since I was carrying the twins,” she said with a light laugh.

“I didn’t want to take any chances, you were badly hurt,” John said shifting to face her and placing a hand on her tummy. “And I like seeing you full of my cum...”

“I wasn’t complaining,” she replied, leaning forward and brushing his lips with hers. “I know you want to wait until we have children, but I yearn for that moment.”

They kissed again and when they parted, John said quietly, “We need to discuss the Young Matriarchs too...”

Edraele shook her head, giving him a look filled with sympathy. “There’s no need, Alyssa’s explained everything to me already. Everything...” When John looked at her in surprise, she put her arms around him and held him close. “Don’t worry about a thing, we’ll take care of you, okay?”

John enjoyed the physical affection, her maternal hug reminding him of the caring embrace he’d received from Maria Fernandez. As Edraele brushed her fingers through his hair and stroked his head, he mused that it shouldn’t be that much of a surprise, considering how much of Edraele’s behaviour and personality he’d modelled on Calara’s mother.

“Maria sounds like a fascinating woman,” Edraele murmured in his ear. “Considering you could have chosen to remake my personality in any way you saw fit, she must have made quite the impression, if you chose to make me emulate her.”

He winced, having forgotten to guard certain thoughts from Edraele in the way he normally would have done, having got out of practice in the last week. Sitting upright, he gave her an apologetic look. “I’m sorry. I had no idea what I was doing back then, and with your mind wiped I was left with a completely blank slate. Maria’s a lovely woman and a doting mother to her daughter and three sons... I’ve seen how much Calara loves her and just thought Irillith deserved to have someone like that in her life.”

“That was a lovely thought, there was no need to keep it from me,” Edraele said with a gentle smile, her angular eyes full of emotion. “I really hope that one day I can have that kind of relationship with my daughters too.”

“I hope so. They both really want that as well,” John replied, reclining on the bed again and brushing a lock of hair from her face. “While we’re talking about your daughters’ future happiness, I’m sure they’ll tell you soon, but I proposed to Irillith and Tashana two days ago.”

Edraele’s face lit up with joy. “Oh congratulations! I assume they both agreed?”

“They did, quite enthusiastically. I’ll let them fill you in on all the details,” he replied, returning her happy smile. It faded a second later as he continued, “I would’ve preferred to speak to you in person beforehand to get your blessing, but unfortunately circumstances were working against me. I’m sorry. I hope you aren’t disappointed?”

She laughed then, the light carefree sound making his heart soar. “Oh, John... don’t be so silly! Of course you had my blessing, you must have known that before you even thought of asking?”

“I hoped so, but I didn’t want to make any rash assumptions,” John said with a self-conscious grin.

Edraele paused for a moment and frowned. “Actually, if I had turned you down, then I could have kept you for myself...”

“Well if you were so unkind as to exclude your daughters, then you and fourteen others at present...” John said with a chuckle, knowing she was joking.

“You know I only jest. I’m delighted for them and for you too.”

He looked into her eyes and said, “I proposed to all the girls on my ship, but there’s someone else who I can’t live without either, a woman who is going to play a big part in my future.” He reached into his pocket and pulled out the rich purple amethyst ring, the colour exactly matching her enchanting orbs.

“Oh John, it’s beautiful,” Edraele murmured breathlessly, gazing at the ring in awe.

“Edraele Valaden, will you do me the honour of being my wife?” he asked, a broad grin on his face.

Edraele managed to tear her eyes from the ring to look at his face instead. She looked ecstatic, but the overjoyed expression shifted into a thoughtful one. “Not yet, I haven’t earned it,” she told him firmly.

John stared at her in shock. “What do you mean you haven’t earned it? You’ve dedicated your life to being my Matriarch! Not that you needed to ‘earn it’, but that alone would be more than reason enough!”

She shook her head, an enigmatic look on her face. Her playful expression was quite reminiscent of Alyssa’s teasing smiles, also reminding him that it wasn’t just Maria’s personality he’d modelled hers on.

“I’ll explain later and you’ll understand. Trust me, I promise you’ll approve,” she said, giving him a sultry look.

“Okay... I do trust you,” John said, putting the ring back in his pocket again.

Edraele watched it disappear from sight with a tinge of regret on her face, but she brightened again and asked eagerly, “What other exciting events did I miss? Those Astral monsters have a lot to answer for, making me sleep through my daughters’ engagement!”

“Yeah, we’ll find a way to start hitting back,” John agreed, his eyes narrowing. “I’m sick of running and hiding from those bastards.” After a moment’s pause, he continued, “We stopped at Jericho to see Maria, which is probably why I was reminded of her when you hugged me.”

“You two hugged?” she asked, raising an eyebrow.

John gave her a look of amusement. “It was strictly platonic and that’s all it’ll ever be between us. Yes, I find her a very attractive and intriguing woman, but I’d never do anything to break up her marriage. Maria might be playfully flirtatious, but she’s loyal too, she wouldn’t stray from Jack.”

“Ah, the choice for my new personality becomes all the clearer. Now I’m even more intrigued about Maria,” Edraele murmured, tracing a finger along the muscles in his arm. “What could be more alluring than the unattainable?”

John couldn’t help flushing and shook his head, “That’s not why...”

“Ah yes, you wanted me to be the perfect mother for my daughters,” she said seriously, but with a smile teasing at her lips. “No one could find fault with such selfless motives...”

He laughed and rolled his eyes. “I don’t think there’s any way I can respond to that without getting myself in trouble. Anyway, Calara and I told her everything. We brought everything out in the open so that there wouldn’t be any secrets between them.”

“If Maria hugged you, I assume she took it well?” Edraele asked, watching him in fascination.

“She was amazing,” John replied, giving her a wistful smile. “She just took everything in her stride and was so supportive and understanding. I hadn’t realised how much I needed to just feel... accepted and... cared for... I suppose.” He hastily added, “Not that it’s a reflection on any of you three! Our relationship is just different.”

“Three?” Edraele asked in surprise.

“I’ve been getting closer to the girls on the Invictus. Jade’s been growing more powerful and was able to set up a permanent telepathic connection with me,” John explained as the Nymph and Alyssa both contacted him to say they weren’t offended.

“Jade is a remarkable girl,” the Maliri woman said with a thoughtful look on her face. She shook that off a moment later and continued, “If you’d prefer me to adopt a ‘different’ kind of role with you in our relationship, I’m sure that could be arranged.” Tracing a finger along his jawline, she murmured, “After all, I am 112 years your senior. I’m sure it wouldn’t be too difficult to slip into a more... maternal role.”

John shook his head firmly. “I appreciate the offer, but I like our relationship exactly the way it is.” He slid a hand between one of the slashes in her long dress and brushed his fingertips over the taut skin of her curved midriff. “I have firm plans for you, Tashana, and Irillith. Just focus on taking care of your daughters and the Maliri girls in your care and I’ll be very pleased with you.”

“I very much enjoy pleasing you, My Lord,” Edraele purred, snuggling into him.

“I know you do. You’re a wonderful Matriarch,” he agreed, enjoying the tremor of excitement he felt pass through her luscious body. He gave her a look of longing then shook his head, “Later. We’ve got all the girls waiting for us.”

She glanced at the door. “Should we go and join them?”

John nodded and sat up, then offered her a hand. “I can tell you the rest on the way, or give you an overview at least.”

“An overview?” she asked curiously, climbing off the bed.

“Of the battle with the Kirrix,” John replied, helping steady her. “I hadn’t realised how much the Glowing Queen’s rebellion had destabilised the Trankaran Republic... they were still paralysed with indecision months later, leaving them exposed to a massive Kirrix invasion.”

“I really did miss a lot,” Edraele said quietly, shaking her head as they walked from the bedroom. “The Glowing Queen was the other Progenitor’s puppet wasn’t she?”

John looked at her in surprise for a moment. “Ah, that’s right; that all happened before you joined me.”

“If I recall, I was planning to turn you into my obedient lapdog at the time,” Edraele said, arching an eyebrow and adopting a cold aloof expression. She rolled her eyes at herself and murmured, “God, I used to be such a malignant bitch!”

He laughed and kissed her hand. “Fortunately, you had quite the epiphany.”

“I certainly did,” she replied with a smile. “So what happened in the battle? I hope no one was injured?”

“We took cam-footage of the entire battle, so you can see for yourself,” John said, walking hand-in-hand with her through the plush quarters. “Basically Chancellor Niskera had arranged a meeting with a dozen ambassadors from the minor empires, but the planet she’d chosen was invaded by the Kirrix.”

Edraele pursed her lips thoughtfully. “A dozen of them? She must have the patience of a saint.”

John chuckled and nodded his agreement. “That she does.” He glanced at the Maliri Matriarch out of the corner of his eye and continued, “Maliri Space is huge, are there any minor empires within the Protectorate?”

She looked uncomfortable and after a long moment, shook her head. “Do you remember the Fulmanax?”

He stopped and turned to look at her. “I could hardly forget... especially after what happened to them.”

“They were the last,” Edraele said bluntly, unable to meet his gaze, a look of deep remorse crossing her beautiful face. “I personally oversaw the genocide of three other alien species on the outskirts of Valaden territory. Rampant Xenophobia has been a very unfortunate consequence of Valada’s decision to withdraw from intergalactic affairs.”

John was appalled by what the old Edraele had done, but he could see how plagued with guilt his Maliri Matriarch was. He gently lifted her chin so she had no choice but to look at him. “What have I told you before about feeling guilty about the old Edraele’s actions?”

“I know, but she did such terrible things...” Edraele replied, struggling to meet his gaze.

He stepped closer and cupped her face in his hands. “This is important Edraele. Tashana and Irillith have been through a lot, but they’re both putting the past behind them, hoping for a happy future with you and me. I don’t hold you personally responsible for anything the old Edraele did, but if you really want to atone for her crimes, do so by being the best leader for your people you can be. No more guilt... okay? It doesn’t help anyone and it will harm your relationship with your daughters. I don’t want to see them get hurt again, they’ve both suffered through enough for two lifetimes...”

Edraele looked shocked at his blunt words, then her expression softened. “You’re right, moping about the past isn’t achieving anything.” There was a firm resolve in her eyes as she continued, “I want to be there for my girls and give them the loving mother they always deserved. I won’t risk doing anything to put that in jeopardy!”

“Good girl,” John said quietly, pulling her in for a hug. He stroked her back and whispered in her ear, “They really do love you. Just give them a chance to show you how much.”

She clung to him for a while, until finally pulling back with a look of gratitude on her face. “I can see why me trying to play the maternal role with you would never work, I need your support too much!”

“That’s quite alright, I like our relationship just as it is,” John replied, giving her a warm smile.

Edraele squeezed his hand and then continued walking out of the opulent quarters. “So where were you with your story? You told me that Niskera had chosen a planet for a conference?”

“Yes, a planet called Khalgron near the Kirrix invasion corridor,” he replied.

The Maliri Matriarch frowned and asked, “Wasn’t that asking for trouble?”

“There was method in her madness,” John replied with a wry smile. “Khalgron has a mix of climates and terrain, which are roughly similar to each of the ambassadors’ homeworlds. Niskera was hoping it would make the delegates empathise with the planet’s plight and get them to pull together to fight against the Kirrix invaders...”

Edraele nodded thoughtfully. “It does make sense, but it was a real gamble to host an event like that so close to danger. Niskera sounds quite reckless...”

“It’s probably fairer to say that she’s optimistic and a little naive,” John corrected her.

“It sounds like you admire her?” Edraele asked, giving him a knowing look.

“I do,” he replied with a shrug. “She’s compassionate, very driven, one of the most selfless people I’ve ever met...”

\*And a handy person to have around in a power cut...\* Alyssa interjected with a telepathic grin.

John rolled his eyes at the blonde. \*I’m not sure you’re exactly in a position to be making jokes about what happened with Niskera, young lady...\*

Edraele studied him curiously for a moment, then her eyes widened in shock. “You turned Niskera into your own Glowing Queen!” she exclaimed looking astonished.

“It sounds like you don’t approve?” John asked with a grimace.

“On the contrary, I think it was inspired!” Edraele replied her face lighting up in elation. “If Niskera has as dramatic an effect on the Trankarans as white-haired Maliri do on our dark-haired sisters, she should be able to unify them immediately.” She gave him a look of sincere admiration. “And united under your banner too!”

John could feel how delighted Alyssa was at Edraele’s glowing praise, but she was definitely trying her hardest not to be too smug about it. \*You get a B for effort,\* he told the blonde with amusement.

Edraele studied John in fascination. “That was a very bold, proactive move for you. You really have changed while I was asleep!”

He paused and slowly shook his head. “Actually, I didn’t want that for her.”

“You didn’t?” Edraele asked in confusion. “But it’s a perfect solution for everyone involved! The Trankarans can unite under a strong leader rather than that farcical republic nonsense and actually accomplish something for once. While you now have a strong and loyal ally in the Trankarans, who can help in the fight against the other Progenitor!”

Seeing that they still had things to talk about, John guided Edraele through the lounge to a sofa. He sat down beside her and said quietly, “But what about the personal cost to Niskera?”

“Personal cost? What do you mean?” Edraele asked, looking bewildered.

“She’ll never be like a normal Trankaran again,” John said quietly. He reached for the Maliri woman’s long hair and brushed his fingers through the silky strands. “The transformation into the Glowing Queen is far more profound than simply giving you white hair.” He could see Edraele about to object and headed off her protests. “I know there’s negative implications about women who have long hair amongst the Maliri, but trust me when I say it’s very different with a Trankaran. Do you know what the Trankarans look like?”

“I’ve spoken to their ambassadors over holo-comm,” Edraele replied. “Tall, blocky, look like they’re made from rock, with rather coarse brutish features?”

John nodded. “Yes, that’s right.” He traced his finger along her slender blue arm, making curved patterns that gave her goosebumps. “Imagine one of them with swirling lines over their whole body and those patterns glowing with an inner light, which pulses like a heartbeat. That’s what the Glowing Queen looks like and any Trankaran who sets eyes on her worships her like she’s some kind of goddess.”

“I can see why Niskera might have had reservations,” Edraele said, looking down at her arm and trying to imagine what that would be like.

He shook his head. “Alyssa suggested the idea to her, but once Niskera realised how effectively she’d be able to rally her people, there was no convincing her otherwise. Like I said before, she’s very selfless.” Leaning back on the sofa, he continued, “She had no regrets after the change was complete and loved her new appearance, but I do worry about her future. I think it’ll be difficult for her to find long-term happiness amongst the Trankarans after changing so much, but I suppose we’ll have to see how it pans out.”

Edraele gave him an affectionate smile. “Your concern for her is very admirable...”

“But...?” John said, realising it was coming.

She inclined her head. “Like I said, sometimes in your position, you’ll be faced with impossibly hard choices. Do you sacrifice one person to save billions?”

John chuckled as he rose from his chair and said, “It’s quite ironic that you’re giving me that advice.”

“Ironic? How so?” Edraele asked, looking up at him curiously.

John offered her a hand. “Let’s rejoin the others and I’ll get Faye to send us the footage of the battle against the Kirrix. I said almost the exact same thing to Sakura after the fight; you’ll see why when you’ve seen it.”

\*Head back to the Invictus. We’re all in the Officers’ Lounge at the moment,\* Alyssa informed them both.

Edraele appeared to be suitably intrigued as they left the suite and took the lift down to Deck Twelve. After crossing into the Invictus, they headed up to Deck Two and found the girls from his crew, the Young Matriarchs and Edraele’s three bodyguards sitting together on the sofas. The conversation came to a screeching halt as soon as John and Edraele entered, which he normally would’ve taken as a very ominous sign. However, the eight Maliri girls linked to Edraele all rushed over to see her, finally getting a chance to give her a hug and tell her how relieved they were that she was alright.

The affection between the Matriarch and her girls was obvious to all, and John glanced at Irillith and Tashana who were watching their mother being doted on by her wards. He could see the look of... not envy as such, but more hope and longing on both of their beautiful faces. Irillith glanced his way, then nudged her twin and they both smiled in his direction when they saw he was focused on them.

Realising Edraele would be occupied for a minute, he approached the sisters and crouched down in front of them. “You two okay?”

Tashana leaned closer and whispered, “It’s just a little... unsettling... to see how much they love her and how much she cares about them. Edraele’s just so different now from the woman I knew growing up.”

Irillith edged forward on her seat and murmured in a soft voice, “She’s not the same woman, that’s the reason why.” Putting an arm around her sister she continued, “But the new Edraele really does care for us.”

John placed a hand on theirs. “Her feelings for you both are absolutely genuine. We just talked about you earlier... she wants the same thing you do.”

Tashana slid one hand to her slim stomach and raised an eyebrow.

He smiled and nodded. “Yes, definitely. But first she wants to be there to care for you in a way your mother never was before. Just give her a chance, you’ll see.”

The twins leaned forward to hug him and he enjoyed their embrace along with the soft kisses they each planted on his cheek. When they sat back he turned to see Edraele and Alyssa were now seated in the centre of the horse-shoe layout of sofas, a space obviously intended for him left between them.

John took a seat between them and put his arms around both Matriarchs. “This feels lovely,” he said, glancing at each of them in turn.

“How your home on Valaden will be,” Edraele said, reaching across him to clasp Alyssa’s hand.

The blonde let out a happy sigh and snuggled closer. She glanced at Faye, who was fluttering impatiently behind the sofas. “We’re all set, Faye.”

“Okay, just one second!” the sprite replied, bringing up a holo screen in front of her audience.

While Faye was getting the footage ready, John looked around the room and was pleasantly surprised to see that the girls from his crew had spread out amongst their guests. There was lots of furtive whispering going on as they chatted quietly to the Young Matriarchs and the trio of bodyguards. Even Alyssa had turned away from him to speak to Tsarra, who was seated beside the teenager. The short-haired House Perfaren Matriarch glanced his way over the blonde’s shoulder and gave him a shy smile, before focusing on Alyssa once again.

John knew his playful Matriarch was up to something, but he hadn’t quite figured out what. When he looked at Edraele, she burrowed into his shoulder and rested her head on his chest. He caught the hint of a smile as she deliberately avoided making eye contact with him.

Faye cleared her slender holographic throat to get everyone’s attention. “May I present to you, the Battle of Khalgron!”

The overhead lighting dimmed to soft side-lighting and Faye’s impressive collage of the battle began to play. This was the much longer footage that the sprite had showed John and the girls in the aftermath of the battle, and even though he’d seen it once before it still made for compelling viewing. For nearly an hour they watched raw footage of the girls blowing apart hordes of Kirrix troops, while the Invictus fought against impossible odds against the vast insectoid fleet.

There was a hushed quiet through the movie, punctuated only by the occasional sharp intake of breath or gasp of fear. John could only imagine how dramatic the footage must be to the Young Matriarchs, who would never have seen just how intense combat could be. To his surprise even Edraele jumped at several frightening moments, and he could feel the tension in her body as the battle drew to a close. When the movie ended, Faye slowly raised the lights to let everyone’s adjust to the brightness, illuminating nine stunned blue faces.

“I had no idea...” Edraele murmured, gaping at him in awe. “You’ve all become so powerful!”

Looking around he saw similar looks of shocked disbelief from the Young Matriarchs and surprisingly, all three assassins as well.

“I’m sorry, we didn’t show you the battle to scare you,” John explained, darting a worried glance at Alyssa. “We thought it would be easier to just show you the footage than describe what happened with the Kirrix.”

“You’re like gods!” Kali Loraleth blurted out, staring wide-eyed not just at John, but the rest of the girls as well.

Dana grinned and nudged the young Maliri woman playfully with her elbow. Leaning closer she whispered something in Kali’s ear that made her blush a dark blue. Whatever the redhead said shook her out of her shocked state very quickly, as Kali giggled and shot a speculative glance in John’s direction.

Alyssa had an arm wrapped around Tsarra who appeared to be just as stunned as the rest of them had been. The blonde glanced at John and said, “It’s important they all got to see this. If... I mean when we get into a fight with the Progenitor, he’ll be using armies of women using those Reaper Cannons just like Irillith did. We have to prepare and get ready for that, because I don’t think we’ve got any chance of avoiding it.”

The Terran girls took that as a cue to start talking quietly to the Young Matriarchs, while the twins and Jade spoke with the assassins. John could feel the tension in the room dissipating and he glanced down at Edraele to see her lost in thought, her expression deeply troubled.

Stroking her shoulder to get her attention, he asked softly, “I didn’t expect you to be shocked by that. You were there every step of the way through the Battle of Ashana and at Regulus.”

She shook her head, an unsettled look on her face. “It’s completely different just hearing your thoughts to actually seeing the kind of danger you put yourselves in. Now I can’t help thinking back to Ashana again and you running out of psychic power mid-battle! I had no idea what kind of danger that put you in!” Her purple eyes looked haunted and it was obvious she was badly shaken. “Alyssa’s right, we’ve got to ramp up the amount of power we give you... I can’t leave you exposed like that again!”

“It wasn’t your fault,” John said to calm her. “We pulled through the fight and no one got hurt... well nothing we couldn’t patch up anyway.”

Unfortunately, the reminder of Rachel being shot by neutron bolts and screaming in agony did little to assuage the Maliri Matriarch’s anxiety.

John was about to try a different tack when Alyssa stood in front of their sofa, holding out a hand expectantly to each of them. “Come on, it’s time we three had a chat.”

Edraele rose unsteadily from her seat, but not from a tummy full of cum which she had largely absorbed; she was still reeling from seeing those intense firefights. John stood as well, looking at Edraele with concern. He darted a quick glance at Tsarra to check she hadn’t been left on her own, but the young woman was now speaking to Calara and Leena Ghilwen.

Alyssa led them out of the Officers’ Lounge with a confident strut, then put her arm around Edraele as they walked down the corridor to their bedroom. “Hey, don’t be upset...” she said with an encouraging smile. “Remember the plan? We’re going to fix those power issues over the next few days!”

Edraele nodded, shaky at first, then with a sudden decisiveness. “You’re right, we should have thought of this months ago!”

John stepped aside at the bedroom door to let his two Matriarchs in, then followed them to sit on the bed beside them. Alyssa and Edraele moved back a little across the covers to give him room to join them, glancing at each other in that telltale way, which the girls always did when they were deep in telepathic conversation.

He watched them for a minute, before he laughed and said, “I thought the three of us were going to have a chat? Maybe you can let me in on whatever secret plans you’ve been hatching?”

Alyssa smiled at him and he could tell she was desperately trying to curb her excitement, which was as intriguing as it was alarming. She glanced at her fellow Matriarch and the two approached him, pushing him back on the covers then lying down on top of him beside each other. The physical contact was very nice, as was the thought that he had two of the most powerful women in the galaxy wrapped in his arms. One was at least his equal in psychic power, while the other essentially ruled the most powerful species in this corner of the galaxy.

“Yes, and we’re here to satisfy your every whim,” Alyssa said with a seductive purr.

“Anything you desire, My Lord...” Edraele agreed, with a similar smouldering look in her eyes.

John was hard as steel in seconds with the promise in their lovely eyes and his hands roamed lower, exploring their delicious curves. He managed to compose himself with a herculean effort and said, “Okay you get full marks for the seduction routine, but didn’t we come in here to talk?”

Alyssa shared a glance with Edraele and then gave him a coy smile. “Later... you two have unfinished business first.”

“I want to earn my engagement ring,” the Maliri Matriarch agreed, an eager gleam in her eyes.

He frowned and said, “I told you before you don’t need to earn it. What’s this about?”

Alyssa leaned closer and whispered, “Edraele’s right... the rest of us earned ours the hard way. She’s no exception.”

“This is essentially an XO meeting after all,” Edraele reminded him. “Don’t you have a tradition you like to uphold?”

Sudden understanding came like a bolt from the heavens and John couldn’t help laughing. “You won’t accept my wedding ring until we’ve had anal sex?!”

“A ring for a ring, it’s a fair exchange,” Edraele replied with a shrug, a playful twinkle in her eyes.

Alyssa giggled and nodded. “You buggered all your fiancées before proposing. Poor Edraele will feel left out if you don’t make her squeal on your huge cock before she agrees to be your wife. After all, you plan to regularly fuck us in the ass while we’re pregnant, so you should give the poor girl a chance to try it before she agrees to an eternity of being taken by you in any way you like...”

John smiled and said contritely to his Maliri Matriarch, “I apologise. I hope you can forgive my lack of courtesy...”

“You’re forgiven,” she said with a playful smile.

Alyssa grinned at them both. “Now, we’re going to the bathroom, so I can prepare her for you.” She pretended to hesitate for a second before she added, “She’s never taken anything back there before. Do you mind if I warm her up first, or do you want her ‘virgo-intacta’ as it were?”

Edraele saw his look of surprise and said, “Remember it’s a terrible cultural taboo amongst the Maliri. What you’re about to do my bottom is considered to be very naughty...”

John couldn’t help grinning at Alyssa as he said, “Make sure she’s ready, I don’t want this to be painful in any way.”

The blonde bowed subserviently, glancing at him under her long lashes, the feverish look of excitement in Alyssa’s cerulean eyes quite apparent. “Whatever My Lord commands...”

His two Matriarchs climbed off the bed then walked hand-in-hand to the bathroom. He watched Edraele saunter towards the door, admiring the taut curves of her cheeks and hardly believing that she was going to allow him to plunder her spectacular ass.

John heard the shower activating and relaxed on the bed, waiting for his two Matriarchs to return. Even though he was eagerly looking forward to being with Edraele, he’d used up a sizeable portion of his psychic energy in healing her earlier, so he seized the opportunity to have a brief rest before they returned. The comfortable bed lulled him into a light sleep and try as he might, he struggled to keep his eyes open.

\*John, we’re ready for you now...\* Alyssa murmured to him telepathically, her voice whispering through his mind.

John started awake and flushed with embarrassment. “I’m so sorry! I tried to stop myself from falling asleep, but I must’ve been-” Edraele glided into his line of sight and he stopped mid-sentence when he set eyes on her.

She was wearing a stately purple Matriarch’s gown, which emphasised her rank and status, while showcasing her stunning figure. Her long white mane was up in an elaborate hairstyle, a few tendrils hanging down to frame her exquisitely beautiful face. Alyssa had expertly applied cosmetics to the Maliri woman, highlighting her high cheekbones and delicate features, the overall effect making Edraele look unquestionably regal. With her perfect poise, she was the epitome of a majestic Maliri Queen.

Edraele arched an elegant white eyebrow as she looked down at him. “I obviously didn’t do a very good job of seducing you, not when you fall asleep the moment my back is turned...”

John sprang across the covers and practically vaulted off the bed so he could stand beside her. “You look absolutely breathtaking!” he exclaimed, his voice ringing with sincerity.

Alyssa drifted over to join them, looking similarly gorgeous in an elegant long evening dress, although she’d deliberately made an effort not to outshine her fellow Matriarch. “We sensed you’d fallen asleep, so I took some time to properly wrap up your present for you...”

He reached out to touch Edraele, but his hand wavered an inch from her slender torso. She looked so magnificent, he felt reluctant to risk sullying this flawless work of art standing before him. Edraele smiled as she heard his thoughts and stepped closer so that his fingers brushed her waist, initiating that first contact between them.

Enthralled, John murmured, “I don’t know why I’ve not seen it until now...” He walked around her, trailing his fingers around her waistline as he admired every inch of her statuesque figure and elegant bearing. He traced the curve of her hip with his fingertips, drifting on to the firm swells of her upper cheeks, then back around to caress her toned stomach. “You were born to be Queen.”

Edraele looked startled and shook her head. “I promise that wasn’t what I was trying to imply. I remembered how much you love formal wear, so I just-”

John gathered her in his arms and kissed her, dipping her backwards as he did so. Edraele swooned in his embrace, her eyelids fluttering as she responded to his passionate kiss. When he lifted her so that she was standing before him again, she had a distinctly non-regal blush to her azure cheeks.

Alyssa approached them and slid a hand across the Maliri woman’s back, stroking her affectionately. “It makes sense. The rest of the Matriarchs all treat Edraele as their leader anyway. Why not make it official?”

John nodded, studying the shocked woman standing before them. “There’s no one in the entire Protectorate I trust more.” He looked into Edraele’s purple eyes and continued, “You know how much I value your opinion. What do you think, Matriarch Edraele Valaden? Would you like to become Queen Edraele of the Maliri Protectorate?”

Edraele managed to overcome her awe and stood taller, holding herself with pride. “If you choose me as your Queen, I will serve you to the absolute best of my ability, my Lord.”

“I know you will, I don’t have any doubt about that,” he replied with a smile. “But is it a wise move politically? Will your official appointment as the highest ranked woman in the Maliri Regency put our alliances with the other Houses at risk?”

She thought about it for a moment, then shook her head. “Even if it weren’t for the dramatic effect you’ve had on the demeanour of the other Matriarchs, I can’t see any of them openly objecting, or even resenting it privately for that matter. Alyssa is correct, the Matriarchs have deferred to me on all the occasions we’ve met to discuss matters affecting the Protectorate. Relations between us have transformed from being vicious and homicidal to almost... pleasant, now.”

John gathered her hands in his and said quietly, “Is it a role you’d be comfortable with though? I know you’d embrace the title if you believe it’s what I want you to do, but what do you want, Edraele?”

The Maliri woman gazed off into the distance and shook her head in amusement. “As you know, I still have all of my former personality’s memories. There were two things Edraele craved more than anything in the galaxy and she would have been willing to make any sacrifice to obtain them. First, was a cure for the tumour in her head, to avoid the agonising death that awaited her...”

Reaching up, John caressed her temple. “That was something I would have been more than happy to help her with, if only she’d asked. And the second?”

“To be Queen of the Maliri,” Edraele said with a wry smile. “It’s ironic that she’s been given the two things that she desired the most, yet isn’t here to actually savour them.”

“It’s unfortunate what happened to her,” John said, a look of regret on his face. He brightened then and squeezed her hand. “But by choosing the course she did, we were able to eventually meet... and I like this version of you very much indeed.”

Edraele smiled at him for the compliment, but she stepped closer and gazed into his eyes, her expression serious. “Don’t feel any regrets about what happened to Edraele; she was a monster and deserved a far worse fate. If my former personality had been given the title, she would have abused her power to crush her enemies and exact vengeance for the innumerable grudges she held. Under her, the Maliri Kingdom would have become a terrifying presence in the galaxy. She would have made life intolerable for the people under her rule, and wasted no time subjugating the neighbouring empires.”

“And what will the new Edraele do, if given that opportunity?” he asked, searching her face.

“Whatever I can to protect my people from the Progenitor that threatens their survival,” Edraele said earnestly. “But they’ve also suffered for too long under tyrannical leadership, so I’ll strive to give them the opportunity for a happy and prosperous future, free of the terrors of the past.”

“Good answer,” Alyssa said, hugging her fellow Matriarch from behind. “I think she’ll make a wonderful Queen.”

“So do I,” John said, nodding his agreement. “I’ll defer to your expertise on making the official announcement, my Queen.”

Edraele looked touched and she reached up to caress his cheek. “Thank you for trusting me with something so important. I promise you’ll never regret the decision for one moment.”

They shared a three-way hug, with John and Alyssa warmly embracing the new Queen of the Maliri Protectorate.

When they eventually separated, Edraele gave John a coy look. “I believe we had something else planned this afternoon before we were sidetracked. I don’t know about you, but I’ve been looking forward to this very much...”

John had his hands on her waist, but he let them slip down to her bottom and gave it an experimental squeeze. The feel of her firm cheeks yielding to him, had him as hard as steel in an instant and Edraele smiled when she felt the heat from his erection against her belly.

“Perhaps we should move to the bed?”

“We’re all wearing far too many clothes, too,” Alyssa agreed. John gave their elegant outfits a look of regret and she quickly corrected herself. “Or we could leave them on...”

He shook his head and ran his fingers over Edraele’s back. “The gown looks wonderful on you, but I wouldn’t want to ruin it. I want to leave you in a state of well-satiated exhaustion by the time we’re done...”

Alyssa grinned at him, looking thrilled. “We? I was expecting to just be a spectator.”

“What do you think?” John asked Edraele, gently rubbing her back. “I’m sure you’d have a great time with just me, but with Alyssa involved too...”

Edraele glanced over her shoulder and smiled at the blonde, “Would you like to help John break me in for the first time?”

“You’re so fucking sexy,” Alyssa purred, leaning closer and kissing the blue-skinned beauty.

While the two of them kissed, John took the opportunity to further explore Edraele’s body. He brushed his hands across her chest, following the supple curves of her breasts with a light touch of his fingers, before massaging and teasing her erect nipples. The Maliri woman moaned into Alyssa’s mouth, responding instantly to his expert touch.

Edraele pulled away from the blonde teenager and said in a voice full of arousal, “There’s only one rule, but it’s one I’m going to insist on. No telepathy! I want to hear every lewd thing you’re saying to John while he’s riding me...”

“Are you sure?” Alyssa murmured, a hand sliding inside a fold in Edraele’s dress and darting lower. “I’ll probably be asking him how your tight little ass compares to the other two Maliri he’s fucked like that...”

Edraele could only groan and nod her head, unable to respond as she trembled to Alyssa’s skilful touch.

“How do you want us?” the blonde asked John with a sultry smile. “The way you broke in Tashana was fun, we could always repeat that...”

John stared into Edraele’s eyes. “Tashana initiated the whole thing. She was magnificent; bold and confident, just like her beautiful mother.”

Edraele kissed him again, moaning into his mouth as she panted with lust. John undid the clasp holding her hair up, then took a firm grasp of her long snowy mane and tilted her head back, causing the Maliri woman to gasp with excitement. With her slender neck exposed, he was able to kiss her vulnerable throat, enjoying the way she quivered at every brush of his lips.

John paused between kisses and met Alyssa’s smouldering gaze. “Strip off and get on the bed. I want Edraele to lie on top of you. That way you can help keep her relaxed and watch how she reacts when I enter her for the first time.”

“I fucking love you so much!” Alyssa gasped, rushing to remove her long dress.

The blonde was nude in a surprisingly short time and she grinned as she stepped behind Edraele to help her remove her Matriarch’s trappings. Edraele made no move to help her, standing and gazing at John with lust-fogged eyes as Alyssa unfastened the formal dress. Neither of the girls had been wearing underwear, so John was soon able to feast his eyes on Edraele’s dark blue nipples. They were no more than an inch across, coming to two perfect conical points on pert breasts that sat high on her chest, practically begging to be kissed. John did exactly that, tasting her skin and feeling her nipples stiffen to teasing flicks of his tongue.

Edraele tangled her finger in his hair and clung onto him for balance. “You turn me on so much,” she groaned, wavering as he lapped and stroked her.

Alyssa finished unfastening the last of the clasps and the long dress fell to the floor, pooling around the Maliri’s feet. She kissed Edraele on the shoulder and looked into John’s eyes over the woman sandwiched between them. “She’s all ready for you...”

John pulled back, then watched as Alyssa climbed onto the bed, leading Edraele with her. The blonde lay back and spread her legs, then guided her exotic blue lover to lie on top of her, their firm breasts pressing together. She hooked her legs over Edraele’s then used her strong muscles to gently part those firm azure thighs. After wrapping her arms around the Maliri too, they began to slowly kiss, the movement of their lips as loving as it was sensual.

With a start, John realised he was still fully dressed, so he quickly removed his clothes and joined the pair on the bed. Both girls reacted immediately, with Edraele lowering herself submissively and tilting up her hips, while Alyssa grasped those perfect blue globes and gently pried them apart. John knelt behind Edraele and lined himself up with her glistening anus, pressing the broad head of his cock against the puckered knot of muscle. The size difference was glaring and if he hadn’t already stretched out all his girls, he’d never believe that she’d be able to take him. Taking a firm grip on Edraele’s trim waist, he kept his shaft lined up with his other hand and gently increased the pressure.

Edraele pulled up from Alyssa, then tossed her long hair over one shoulder. Her purple eyes had a wild look in them as she gazed at him. “Do it! Claim my body!”

John pushed harder and her sphincter was forced to stretch impossibly wide to accommodate the huge girth of the anal intruder.

“By the gods, you’re enormous!” Edraele groaned, grabbing the sheets in clenched fists.

“Just relax for him, let him slide all the way inside,” Alyssa murmured, slipping a hand between them and stroking the older woman’s clit.

Edraele had already been on a hair trigger and the blonde teenager’s expert touch set her off. She cried out, as she climaxed, her body clenching and relaxing as she responded to the ferocious orgasm. John chose that opportune moment to push several more inches inside her, making Edraele squeal with the overwhelming new sensations. Her thighs shook as she tried to buck against him, her body desperately riding out her release.

John held still then and let her recover, stroking her trembling flanks as she came down from her ecstatic high. “Ready for more?” he asked, when she sagged against Alyssa.

The Maliri turned to look at him and nodded, biting her lower lip in her passion. “Give me everything you have, but take it slow... I want to feel every inch!”

She raised herself up so that Alyssa could watch her react to being fucked in the ass for the first time. The blonde spread Edraele’s cheeks apart again, so that John could watch his cock gradually penetrating her, that slick blue ring wrapped snugly around his shaft.

“It feels amazing, doesn’t it?” Alyssa purred as she gazed into Edraele’s eyes. “That massive cock hot in your belly, stretching you out to make you fit...”

“I feel so full...” Edraele groaned, pupils widely dilated as she stared open mouthed at the teenager beneath her. “I can’t believe all of you took him like this!”

“There’s still a few more inches to go,” the blonde replied, gently massaging the other woman’s trembling asscheeks. “Just relax, he’s loving it...”

Edraele flicked her mass of hair out the way so she could look back at John over her shoulder. “Is that right? You love violating my ass? The old Edraele would have scratched your eyes out if you tried this with her!”

“But you’re a good obedient girl, aren’t you?” John replied with a knowing smile. “You get off on this...” He sank the last few inches into her taut blue body, watching the look of shock and wonder on Edraele’s face as she felt him nudge incredibly deep inside her.

“Fuck...” she whimpered, her thighs trembling as she teetered on the brink of another orgasm.

Alyssa let go of Edraele’s muscular cheeks, so they bounced back to trap John’s cock. She moved both hands up to cup Edraele’s full breasts, gently caressing them to heighten her state of arousal but keeping her from finishing. “Ready to be broken in?” she crooned, tilting her head up to tenderly kiss the woman straddling her. “You ready to earn that nice shiny ring?”

“Please...” Edraele begged, a desperate need in her eyes as she gazed back at John.

He took a firm grip on her waist and slowly withdrew half his length, drawing a low moan from the impaled Maliri.

“That feels so wrong...” she groaned, turning to stare wild-eyed at Alyssa again.

The blonde grinned at her, “Just wait for it...”

John thrust all the way up to the hilt inside Edraele again, his quad slapping against her sopping pussy.

“Fuck!” she screeched, her hands twisting the bedsheet tighter in her fists.

Alyssa pinching her nipples at the same time set her off and Edraele wailed through her second climax. John established a steady rhythm, driving in and out of her frantically clenching ass, while savouring every moment inside this spectacular woman. She felt wonderfully hot and just as deliciously tight as any of the Terran teenagers he’d taken in the same way. He took his time to admire her luscious blue body, toned, limber, and athletic just like the rest of his girls. Her firm buttocks rippled with each impact as he hilted himself inside her, Edraele letting out soft grunts every time he plunged deep into her belly.

Alyssa grinned at him around Edraele’s shaking body. “It’s even better knowing she’s a Queen, isn’t it? Such a powerful woman submitting to you... letting you do whatever you want with her magnificent body.”

John nodded in agreement, gathering Edraele’s flowing mane of snowy hair in his hand and pulling her back against him. She cried out as she arched backwards, repositioning her hands on Alyssa’s firm chest to support herself.

“How’s that feel, beautiful?” he asked the writhing woman, turning her head so he could stare down into her disbelieving purple eyes.

Edraele’s body was overwhelmed with pleasure, cresting her climax as he stroked in and out of her with powerful undeniable thrusts. “So good...” she moaned, unable to do anything except take the pounding.

Alyssa had an eager gleam in her eyes as she asked. “Want me to make her even tighter?”

John clasped one of Edraele’s hands in his then moved it to her tummy, where they could feel the bulge the head of his cock was making high in her abdomen. “You feel pretty stuffed. Think you can take even more?”

Edraele gaped at the blonde when she heard her thoughts and realised what she was planning. “That’ll never fit!”

Alyssa grinned at her. “Tashana took both of us like a trooper... and that didn’t sound like a ‘no’ to me!”

The Maliri cried out as Alyssa began to push a telekinetic replica of John’s cock into her pussy, stretching both of Edraele’s holes to capacity. Edraele felt every millimetre rubbing against the ribbed surface of her G-spot as the second cock entered her, while Alyssa’s nimble fingers began to stroke her clit in time to John’s thrusts. The Maliri Queen wailed in ecstasy as she came again, clamping her eyes shut as she was double-penetrated for the first time.

“Try not to pass out just yet,” John whispered in her pointed ear, as Edraele twitched limply in his arms. “We’re getting to the best part soon.”

That roused her and she dragged open her heavy eyelids to gaze up at him. “Do it... I want to feel you filling me...”

John eased her forward so she was lying on Alyssa once again, their breasts squashed together as Edraele hugged her tight. Edraele gave the blonde a passionate kiss as she whimpered through their combined plundering of her body. Now that John didn’t have to support her in his arms, he was able to take a firm grip around her waist and pin her in place. He thrust forcefully inside Edraele, his quad making wet squelching noise every time it slapped against her soaked pussy. On that contact, he could feel the motion of Alyssa’s psychic phallus as it alternated strokes with him.

Edraele sobbed her way through another climax, while Alyssa hugged her close, whispering naughty things in her ear. Her cerulean eyes flashed with excitement as she sensed John’s impending climax, and Edraele lurched upright as she felt it too. With a final roar of release, John fully impaled her as his quad lurched, blasting the first long spurt of cum into her quivering body.

“I can feel it!” Edraele gasped, hand going to her stomach as she felt the surges of cum shooting into her and warming her insides. She mewled with pleasure as Alyssa continued fucking her at a languid pace, while John’s cock throbbed away, pumping the full contents of his quad into her pliant blue body. Her belly began to swell to hold the epic quantity of his release, growing heavy with the weight of cum she was taking. The curves grew more pronounced until her tummy was resting against Alyssa’s toned midriff.

“That’s it, take every last drop,” Alyssa crooned, caressing Edraele’s swollen belly. “Just imagine how big you’ll get when he fucks you like this when you’re pregnant...”

“Like carrying twins again...” Edraele murmured, a dreamy look on her face.

John sagged against her back, his balls feeling numb after such a stupendous climax. He kissed her shoulder and reached around to stroke her huge tummy. “That was incredible, thank you.”

“I finally see what all the fuss was about,” Edraele murmured, turning to kiss him. “And why Irillith has become so obsessed with it...”

He shared a tired but well-satisfied smile with her. “The Valaden women are all very good girls.”

Alyssa eased the force projected cock out of Edraele, then dispelled it with a wave of her hand. “Jade’s on her way,” she told them both, patting the huge tummy full of cum pinning her to the bed.

“Looks like I’ll be able to experience another first,” Edraele said, before her voice trailed off into a sigh of regret as John gently withdrew from her snug passage.

They had just helped Edraele move into position between them, when the Nymph bounded in through the door in all her natural glory. Jade’s emerald eyes gleamed as she spotted the kneeling Maliri and she prowled closer then climbed onto the bed. Edraele smiled as Jade gently massaged and parted her cheeks, then jerked in shock as she felt the Nymph’s prehensile tongue burrowing its way inside her. Biting her flushed lower lip, she moaned with pleasure as Jade went to work with her normal enthusiasm.

“That’s why we had to get you squeaky clean beforehand,” Alyssa explained, brushing her fingers through Edraele’s hair. “Jade says she filters out any... impurities... but still.”

John met the Nymph’s hungry gaze and asked, “Would you like some too? If so, split it between the three of you.”

Jade sent him a grateful telepathic smile and ripples of light began to pulse out from her tummy a few seconds later. \*Thank you, Master,\* she thought to him as she greedily sucked out all of his cum.

John lay back on the bed, enjoying listening to Edraele’s breathy cries and watching Jade’s light show while he waited for them to finish. When Jade was done emptying Edraele, she gathered the two Matriarchs in her arms and fed them both from her huge cum-filled breasts, whispering quietly to both women as they drank from her.

The Nymph stretched when the girls had finished and gave John a lazy smile. “I might have a little nap if that’s okay with you?”

“Of course, honey,” John agreed as Alyssa and Edraele cuddled up against him. The Nymph crawled under the covers and was asleep in moments, her soft purrs still audible to his sharp ears. Turning to look at the blissfully happy women in his arms, he continued, “So what mysterious plans have you two been hatching?”

Alyssa glanced up at him and smiled. “I think for the next few days, you should focus entirely on Edraele and her girls. The rest of us have got lots to keep us busy and besides, we get all your attention the vast majority of time; this only seems fair.”

“We can all stay on the Invictus if that’s okay with you?” Edraele asked, a hopeful look in her eyes.

“That sounds like a great idea to me,” John agreed, looking at each of them in turn. “But we’ve done something similar before on Genthalas, so I expected something like this. What else is going on?”

Alyssa shared a smile with Edraele and reached across him to brush her fingers across her slightly curved blue tummy. “Every woman on this ship wants to see you father children with the Young Matriarchs, but we all know you have reservations about it. I was thinking it over and I realised there’s five of us Terran girls and five of them...”

“Yes, that’s true,” John agreed, brow furrowing in confusion. “And?”

“So we can partner up with each of those Maliri girls and take them under our wing!” Alyssa said with excitement. “Trust me... this way will be much more fun than you just knocking them up in some big orgy!”

“You know that was never the plan...” John said, rolling his eyes at her.

Edraele kissed him on the chest to get his attention, so he turned to glance at her. “You’re already fond of my girls, but I’m sure you’d prefer to spend lots more time getting to know them all really well before you father children with them. They all find that quite adorable, but they’re already thoroughly smitten and eager to rebuild their Houses with your help. You on the other hand, can’t afford to spend several weeks dedicated to falling in love with each and every one of them.”

Alyssa nudged him and laughed. “Yeah, we know what you’re like, you old softie...”

“They’re all lovely girls, unspoiled by the vicious Maliri society that twisted their mothers and elder sisters. There’s plenty of time for you to grow closer when they’re carrying your baby inside them,” Edraele said gently, reaching across him to caress her blonde counterpart’s youthful tummy. “I know you wanted Alyssa to be first, but if we follow her plan, you can experience that twice...”

“Twice?” John asked in confusion. “I don’t understand.”

“Just trust us, okay?” Alyssa said, running her fingers over the muscles in his chest. “Everyone will have a great time and we’ll all get what we want.”

Looking thoughtful, John was suddenly reminded of something the blonde had just said. “You mentioned just the Terran girls are involved? What about Jade and the twins? Or the three former assassins?”

“Luna, Almari, and Ilyana aren’t in any great rush to have children,” Edraele explained. “They don’t have the same pressure to rebuild their Houses as the Young Matriarchs. We all thought you would probably want to wait until the fight with the Progenitor is over with first.”

“Irillith and Tashana want to spend this time with Edraele, and Jade was happy to wait,” Alyssa replied, darting a glance at the glowing girl behind her. “I think she’s far more excited about rescuing the surviving Nymphs and rebuilding their species with your help.”

John didn’t bother to argue. The last thing he wanted to do was free the Nymphs from sexual slavery only to turn them into his broodmares, as much as they’d probably love the idea. He knew Jade had very definite plans in that regard, but it was something he needed to take up with her, if and when they were able to actually locate any surviving Lenarrans.

“So, who did you pair off with?” John asked studying the young blonde.

Alyssa gave him a soft smile. “Tsarra Perfaren. She’s a real sweetheart and was already thinking about having children before all that business with Tashana and the Maliri civil war.”

“I did promise her some help with growing her hair,” John said, returning her smile. “I’d love to spend some time getting to know her.”

“She would adore that,” Edraele said stroking his chest.

“How about the rest of the girls?” John asked, wondering who had paired off with the remaining four Young Matriarchs.

Alyssa sat up and said, “Everyone’s waiting for us in the Briefing Room. Why don’t we head up there and you can see for yourself?”

John nodded and replied, “Let’s get a quick shower then we can join them.”

The three of them climbed out of bed, but instead of heading for the bathroom, John walked over to his hastily discarded clothes. Fishing through his trouser pockets, he pulled out a certain piece of crystal Alyssium jewellery and returned to join the waiting pair.

“There’s no excuses now,” he said with a smile, dropping to one knee and presenting the rich purple Amethyst ring to Edraele.

She gave him a shy smile in return and held out her hand. “I accept your proposal, with all my heart.”

John slid the ring onto her finger, then stood and gathered her into his arms. “Thank you,” he said before giving her a tender kiss.

They gave Edraele a few moments to admire her engagement ring and John enjoyed her earnest praise for the skill with which he’d crafted it. Heading into the shower afterwards, he hugged both of his Matriarchs close, the three of them relaxing together under the soothing hot water.

Alyssa glanced up at him, sensing his great mood and asked rhetorically, “Happy?”

“I really am,” he admitted, rubbing her back. “I’m so glad you all loved the engagement rings; everything with you girls feels like it’s going wonderfully. Not only that, but it finally seems like we’re getting a handle on the trouble the other Progenitor keeps stirring up. We’ve had to fight some crazy battles, but we managed to get through them all and twist most of the problems he’s created to our advantage.”

“Yeah, it was handy him showing you how to create a Glowing Queen,” Alyssa agreed with a grin. “Now Niskera can properly unite the Trankarans and turn them into strong allies for us.”

“It does seem like everything’s going well,” Edraele agreed. “If the Progenitor had struck against the Maliri immediately, we were so splintered as a species, we would have crumbled without much resistance. Now we’re coordinated and working together in a way we haven’t been for millennia. Given another few weeks, we should be able to fully refit all the existing fleets at Genthalas.”

“We do need to talk about what to do with those forces,” John said, lost in thought. “I don’t want to leave the Protectorate vulnerable by any means, but the Ashanath and the Trankarans both need our help.”

Edraele nodded and said, “I’m sure the Young Matriarchs will be interested in that discussion.”

“Let’s not keep them waiting any longer,” John agreed.

They soaped each other down, with John only lingering briefly over their curved stomachs. He could feel the active connection he had with both his matriarchs and relished the sensation of close intimacy that brought with it, just as much as he enjoyed the feel of their soft skin. After drying off and dressing, they headed up to the Command Deck, exchanging a friendly wave with Faye in passing as they crossed the Bridge to the Briefing Room.

The room was the busiest John had ever seen it, with some additional chairs brought through so that everyone could sit. He took his place at the head of the table, with Alyssa and Edraele taking the empty seats beside him. Faye had moved from her usual spot and hovered to one side so that she wouldn’t be in the way, as the twins and Edraele’s bodyguards were all seated at the end of the table.

Greeting everyone with a smile, John said, “Sorry to keep you waiting; we had some important matters to deal with.”

Edraele smiled and lifted her hand to show everyone her new engagement ring. It took a couple of minutes for the excited reaction to die down, with the group all offering her their warmest congratulations. While they were occupied, John took a moment to study the seating arrangements and see which of the Young Matriarchs had been paired up with the Terran girls from his crew. Calara was sitting next to Leena Ghilwen, the eldest of the original four Maliri Matriarchs, while Dana had been paired off with Kali Loraleth, the youngest. That left Sakura with Valani Naestina, and Rachel with Nyrelle Aeberos. Nyrelle saw him looking her way and her dark-blue eyes sparkled as she gave him a flirtatious grin.

John winked at her in return, then glanced around and saw that everyone had settled again. “It’s great to see all of you here in one big group. I’m sure I was the last one to know about your Matriarch’s plans for the next few days, so I won’t go over that again.” The excited glances between the girls confirmed that his suspicions were correct.

“There’s a number of very important issues I wanted to speak to all of you about, but before we start, I wanted to make an announcement. I’ve chosen Edraele to be my Queen, so that she can provide decisive leadership for the Maliri Protectorate.” There was another burst of excitement from the Matriarchs as they rushed to congratulate Edraele. John was relieved to see that they all seemed to be delighted, each one genuinely happy for the woman they all clearly saw as a close friend and loving mentor.

Edraele thanked the girls graciously, then smiled at John. “We can inform the rest of the Matriarchs in the next holo-conference. Perhaps you and I should discuss beforehand how we make the announcement to them?”

“Of course, I’m sure you’ll have a much better idea of how to inform them without ruffling any feathers,” John immediately agreed.

“I don’t believe there’s anything to be overly concerned about. I’m sure they’ll be quite amenable to the decision,” Edraele said, reaching across the table to clasp his hand. “They were already well aware of the shift in the status quo; their agreement to see you instated as our... Protector... essentially confirmed that.”

“That’s good to hear.” John squeezed her hand in return, then turned to face the Maliri. “The next thing I want to discuss today is the Trankarans. As you know from seeing the footage of our battle with the Kirrix, the Trankaran Republic is in a desperate situation at the moment. They’re trying to fight off an invasion, but they’re still recovering from a hugely disruptive civil war. I’ve taken steps to help rally the Trankarans under Chancellor Niskera, who is now connected to Alyssa in much the same way as you are to Edraele, but they are still desperately in need of assistance.”

There were looks of surprise at that and Tsarra asked, “Does that mean you can speak with her telepathically now, Alyssa?”

The blonde shook her head. “I can contact Niskera, but she’s not able to use telepathy to talk back to me...” She smiled innocently at John. “...at least not yet.”

He ignored her teasing and said, “Which has left me with a few serious problems. While Niskera should be able to quickly move the Trankarans onto a war footing, they’ve already lost a significant number of ships to the Kirrix. I know this fleet was originally intended to guard the Ashanath while they rebuild their forces, but I’d like to redirect it to assist the Trankarans instead.”

Kali felt intimidated in the presence of all these amazing people, but she steeled herself to speak up, her voice quiet and full of concern. “My Queen, I know you said that you wanted all our forces to work as one, but this fleet is made up entirely of House Valaden ships. I wouldn’t feel comfortable making any decisions regarding them.” The rest of the Matriarchs turned to look at Edraele, nodding their agreement.

“There’s no need for the title, Kali. Please continue to call me Edraele,” their new monarch said to the shy young woman, giving her a warm disarming smile. She turned to look at John and continued, “As to decisions regarding Maliri forces; I’m happy to offer counsel, but we gave full control of our military assets to you, Protector. You may utilise them in whatever manner you deem most appropriate.”

John leaned back in his chair a pensive frown on his face. “I’ve discussed this with my girls and they agreed that assisting the Trankarans is the wisest strategic decision, but that raised a number of questions. Firstly, how do we get this fleet to the Trankarans? There’d be an uproar in the Terran Federation Admiralty if I let a huge Maliri armada sail across Terran Space. I could probably bull my way through any objections, but the questions it would raise and the fallout that decision would generate would be a nightmare.”

Edraele shook her head. “No, that wouldn’t be a wise course of action. We have enough to deal with at the moment without creating more enemies.” She smiled then and raised an eyebrow. “Why not simply send the fleet through the Brimorian Enclave?”

He blinked at her in surprise. “There’s no way they’d allow that would they?”

“I don’t see why not. They have a millennia-old treaty with the Maliri Regency granting us unopposed passage through their territory, in exchange for trade with us and a non-aggression pact,” she replied with a shrug.

John laughed, the tension draining from his body. “Well that makes everything much simpler then!” He glanced at Irillith and added, “How come you never mentioned that earlier?”

Irillith looked just as surprised as he was. “I wasn’t aware of it! As far as I know, the Maliri haven’t left our territory in centuries, if not far longer.”

Edraele gave her daughter a warm smile. “To be fair to Irillith, not many Maliri are aware of the ancient deals struck with our neighbours. I only investigated them because I was seeking alternative routes to attack belligerent Maliri houses bordering the Brimorians.”

“Okay, so assuming the Brimorians don’t try and refuse the fleet passage through their territory,” John said, looking thoughtful. “The second problem is the question of communication with the fleet. Kirrix scout craft have destroyed the comms beacons around the outskirts of the invasion corridor into Trankaran territory. That means the fleet would be cut off from us when they engaged the Kirrix forces. We did think about using telepathy to get around that problem, but that raises the question of who to send with the fleet...”

Almari sat taller and declared, “I’d be proud to offer my assistance, John.”

Ilyana smiled at Edraele and said, “I think it would be wise if I accompanied Almari. If either of us is incapacitated for any reason, the other will still be able to help communicate with the Fleet Commander. However, I think it very unwise to leave our Queen unprotected, so I suggest Luna stay with Edraele to ensure her safety.”

Edraele gave her two bodyguards a grateful smile, knowing the real reason why they had suggested leaving Luna at her side. “I greatly appreciate it, thank you both.”

Luna nodded, squeezing Almari’s hand under the table. “I’ll keep her out of trouble.”

John looked startled and said, “I’d forgotten that you’ve all bonded with Edraele. That would be amazing, thank you! I thought we might have to try and quickly improve the connection with the Fleet Commander or something like that.”

“While Lilyana would be overjoyed at the opportunity to be more intimate with you, and it would certainly be a very sensible long-term plan, I’m afraid that would take too long,” Edraele said, looking thoughtful. “I suggest we dispatch the bulk of this fleet to aid the Trankarans as soon as possible. We can hold one battleship in reserve to transport us back to Genthalas.”

Dana cleared her throat. “Don’t forget that the fleet is hauling a crapload of materials for the Ashanath. They were going to use that stuff to start plating the Maliri ships in crystal Alyssium.”

Edraele glanced at John. “There are three cruisers loaded with all the materials you requested for the Ashanath. Perhaps we should send those ships to rendezvous with a second fleet we route to Ashana? The vessels here in the Delta Arietis system have been pulled so far out of position, they’d only arrive in Ashana a few days earlier than a new fleet sent directly from Genthalas.”

“Have you got a second fleet ready to go?” John asked Edraele. “I don’t want to strip too many ships from the defence of Maliri Space, but I promised the Ashanath High Council that we’d help protect them until they can rebuild their own forces.”

“And an opportunity to armour our ships in crystal Alyssium should not be wasted,” Edraele agreed. She glanced at the Young Matriarchs and continued, “Unless there has been a change to the refit schedule while I was incapacitated, a second Valaden fleet should be fully refitted now, with the first of the House Loraleth fleets completed within days. I suggest we send my second fleet to the Ashanath, and Kali’s forces can be tasked with patrolling the Protectorate’s borders, at least until the House Aeberos and House Naestina fleets have completed their refit. We can re-evaluate fleet allocations in two weeks’ time when they’re both fully operational as well.”

Kali laughed as she nodded. “Emalayne will be very upset with me when I tell her she has to protect the entirety of Maliri Space!”

“It seems like a sensible plan,” Valani said, looking thoughtful. “I can’t see any problems with it.”

“I agree,” Nyrelle said, sharing a smile with her fellow Matriarchs. “When Valani’s fleet and mine are ready, we can help out Kali with border patrols.”

“Actually, we should rotate out the fleets that are guarding the Ashanath as a high priority,” Leena suggested. “By the time the next fleet arrives at Ashana, the House Valaden forces there should be fully upgraded with new armour. We can then send them on to reinforce the fleet aiding the Trankarans and keep sending more upgraded forces until the Kirrix have been dealt with.”

Calara nodded her approval. “It’ll be like a production line: Refits at Genthalas, armour upgrades with the Ashanath, then combat experience fighting as a unified force against the Kirrix. All of those will be invaluable when the wider battle with the Progenitor begins.”

“Sounds like we have a plan then,” John said with satisfaction. “The Invictus is full of ores we traded with the Trankarans, so that can be loaded into the battleship returning to Genthalas.” He turned to face Edraele with concern. “But will you be safe travelling in a single unescorted vessel?”

Edraele nodded, looking surprisingly confident. “I highly doubt any of the Maliri Houses would turn on us at this point. Even if they did, all the ships in this fleet have been refitted with Tachyon Drives, so it would be extremely hard to intercept us. The only threat dangerous enough to cause a problem would be if the Progenitor ambushed us himself, but being brutally realistic, even if we sent the entire fleet back to Genthalas, I’m not sure it would be powerful enough to stop him.”

John wasn’t sure if he should feel relieved or even more worried as he realised she was right. Turning to look at the pair of assassins that would be accompanying the fleet, he said, “Talking of safety, I want to make sure you’re both adequately equipped. I’d like Dana to give you whatever equipment she can assemble before you leave.”

The redhead gave them a broad grin. “Don’t worry, I’ll get you geared up! Come down to Engineering after this meeting is finished and I’ll see what I can find...”

“We have a lot of old weapons we aren’t using any more,” Sakura reminded them. “Now that we’re using Reaper Cannons and Quantum rifles, why not give all the old Justice Laser rifles and Punisher rifles to the Maliri Marines in this fleet?”

“That’s a great idea,” John said, looking pleased. He turned to look at Almari and Ilyana. “I’d rather you didn’t expose yourselves to ground combat with the Kirrix, but those guns should be a big help if it can’t be avoided.”

“Thank you for going to all this trouble,” Almari said, nodding in gratitude to him and Dana.

Ilyana looked delighted. “That would be wonderful, thank you!”

He turned to Luna next and smiled as he said, “I want to make sure you have our best gear too when you return to Genthalas. We’ll equip you in the same way before you leave.”

Luna’s yellow eyes flashed as she returned his smile. “I’ve seen how effective your equipment is. Having access to that gear will make it far easier to keep Edraele safe!”

Looking around at the group, John said, “I suggest the bulk of the fleet departs for the Trankaran Republic in say... four hours? That should give us plenty of time to transfer guns, ammo, and armour to the flagship.” When there were no objections, he relaxed back in his seat. “That was everything I wanted to raise today, thanks very much for all your invaluable suggestions. Does anyone else have anything they wanted to talk about?”

Kali raised a tentative hand and when he looked in her direction, she replied, “It’s probably nothing, but in the last couple of weeks, the Kintark along the Maliri border have been acting very strangely. House Loraleth controls a significant portion of our border with the Kintark, so we’ve tracked their behaviour for many centuries. They don’t attempt to cross the border, except for traders visiting Genirath station, but they did something recently that my analysts have never seen before...”

John glanced at Edraele with concern. “I remember you mentioned this a few days before you were incapacitated.”

“That’s correct, but I’m not aware of any new developments,” she replied, glancing at Kali and raising an eyebrow.

Nyrelle frowned in confusion. “What’s the problem? I thought everything had calmed down now?”

Looking at Kali again, John asked, “Has something changed in the last week?”

“No, but that’s the problem!” Kali exclaimed, looking worried.

John gave the House Loraleth Matriarch a reassuring smile. “It’s okay, just tell me what happened.”

“Well, after the Kintark withdrew all their regular forces from the patrol routes and garrison points along the border, they were quickly replaced by Elite units from the Emperor’s Praetorian Guard Fleets,” Kali explained. “When I raised it with Edraele, she didn’t think the Emperor would risk committing them to battle, not after such a crushing defeat at the Battle of Regulus.”

“It still seems highly unlikely,” Edraele said after a moment’s pause. “They could be massing more forces just outside our sensor range, but why tip their hand by replacing their border forces with elites? That would be like broadcasting an imminent invasion and the Emperor certainly isn’t inept enough to make that kind of blunder.”

Kali darted an anxious glance at John. “But we still haven’t brought our defensive forces up to full strength yet, so the Kintark might be getting ready to attack!”

John shook his head, a doubtful expression on his face. “I thought the Maliri kept their forces far back from the border anyway? The Terran Federation has no idea what your ships are capable of because they’ve rarely seen any, except for a few patrol cruisers at Geniya. I assumed you adopted the same policy with the Kintark and if so, they would have no idea you’ve stripped your ships from the border for the refit.”

“That’s very true,” Edraele confirmed with a smile. “We usually have an excellent idea of what opposing forces are up to with our extended range sensors, so I know I sometimes forget that they can’t see us in return.”

“Any idea what they’re up to, Commander?” John asked Calara.

The Latina frowned in confusion. “I can’t imagine for one moment that the Kintark would launch an assault on the Maliri, they must know that would be suicide. It sounds more like some kind of show of strength to me, to discourage Maliri encroachment into Kintark territory. But why would the Kintark move all their strongest forces to the Maliri border? If they are planning further action against the Terran Federation, surely they’d need those elite units to shore up their depleted forces?”

John turned to face the fluttering sprite. “Faye, has there been anything on the Holonet about any skirmishes in the Dragon March?”

She shook her head, looking at him with her big luminous eyes. “No, nothing! Quite the opposite actually, there’s been several news reports discussing how quiet it’s been. Most speculation is now about whether the Kintark Empire have been cowed into submission after such a humiliating loss at Regulus.”

“I don’t think that’s particularly likely. We better keep a wary eye on things, just in case.” John said, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. He straightened and smiled at Kali. “Thanks for keeping me informed. Do let me know if there’s any further changes, okay?”

“I will,” she replied, looking greatly relieved.

“That just leaves our plans for the Invictus,” John said, steepling his fingers. “I mentioned earlier about transferring all the materials we received from the Trankarans, over to the remaining battleship that will be taking Edraele and her girls back to Genthalas. I plan to stay here for a few days, getting to know our lovely guests. That should give Faye plenty of time for her maintenance bots to move our cargo.”

“Sure, I’ll get my boys on it as soon as they’re done transferring the weapons and armour!” the purple sprite exclaimed, looking pleased to be given such an important task.

He gave her a grateful nod, then swept his gaze around the group. “When we eventually part ways, I intend to head into Brimorian territory and see if we can acquire some of their shield technology.”

Dana rubbed her hands together in anticipation. “I’ve been waiting for that shit for ages! I can’t wait!”

John smiled at her then rose to his feet. “Unless there’s anything else, then we need to focus on getting Almari and Ilyana ready for their trip to Trankaran Space. If I’m not still banned from Engineering, I’ll keep you ladies company.”

Dana shot a quick glance at Faye as she sprang to her feet. “Just give us two minutes to tidy everything away!”

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“The Antaeus will be finishing its patrol at 22:00 as scheduled, Commodore Maddox,” Galen Skotari said, his tone respectful, although he felt anything but that for his Commanding Officer.

“Anything interesting to report, Captain Skotari?” the older man replied, staring at him under his peaked cap.

Galen hesitated for a moment, considering whether or not to report the Kintark cruiser’s bizarre behaviour. Knowing the kind of stern rebuke he was likely to receive, if he admitted that he just had a hunch something was wrong, Galen wisely decided to stay silent. “It’s been as quiet as our last patrol, Commodore.”

“Very good,” Maddox said, having the good grace to look a little guilty. In an attempt to be magnanimous, he continued brightly, “You and your men can begin your delayed shore leave upon your return.”

Galen tried to sound appreciative as he replied, “Thank you, Commodore. I’m sure they’ll be very glad to hear that.”

The older man nodded, looking pleased with himself, then reached for the button to end the call. “Commodore Maddox out.”

The holo-screen shifted to the Terran Federation logo, the golden image of a winged sword pointing to star on a black background.

As soon as Maddox’s face faded away, Galen rolled his eyes. “You utter dick...” he muttered under his breath.

Getting to his feet, he tried to shake off his bad mood as he left his Ready Room and eagerly marched towards the Bridge. He nodded to his XO before walking to the Engineering Station.

“How’s it going, Chief?” he asked the older, bald man sitting at the Station. “Been makin’ something good?”

“Hmm, I’ve never heard that one before,” Chief Engineer Makins said with a smile. “Actually yes, my team have just finished customising the probe as you asked. It won’t activate until we transmit the signal.”

“Perfect, nice job,” Galen replied, patting him on the shoulder. He turned and walked to the Command Podium then took his seat. “Still no change with the lizards, Alice?”

“No, Sir,” Commander Hoplander replied. “Their cruiser’s been shadowing us all day, staying at the limits of our sensor range.”

Leaning forward in his chair, Galen said, “Okay, Chief, drop the probe. Lieutenant Goodwell, bring us about and pull directly away from the border.”

Chief Makins had his eyes fixed on his console. “Probe away, Captain!”

“Changing course, Sir!” the helmsman replied, looking eager as he followed his Captain’s orders.

Galen stared at the Tactical Overlay on the holographic System Map, watching the Kintark cruiser turn and start heading closer to the border, while keeping the same distance from his own ship. It looked like the Gorkan’tor was in pursuit of the Antaeus, even though it was merely matching their standard hyper-warp speed. The Kintark ship approached to a respectable distance from the border between the two empires, then slowed to a halt, appearing to be waiting patiently in case the Antaeus returned.

“Okay, Chief, hit it!” Galen called out, grinning as the Gorkan’tor fell into his trap.

The probe lit up like a beacon on the map, sending out a blazing active sensor pulse that enveloped the stationary Kintark vessel. It reacted almost immediately, reactivating its FTL drive again and turning to scurry away from the sensor probe.

All eyes on the Bridge turned towards the Chief Engineer. “Tell me we got something, Chief!” Galen called out.

“What the hell...” Makins muttered under his breath, a look of bewilderment on his face.

Galen exchanged a glance with his XO and saw that Commander Hoplander was as full of anticipation as he was. Makins tapped a few buttons on his console and displayed the sensor readings for the Gorkan’tor. The Sector Map disappeared and was replaced by the holographic image of a long blocky vessel, with a mass of engines on the back and what appeared to be clusters of cargo containers at the front.

“That’s not a Kintark cruiser!” Galen exclaimed. “It’s just a freighter!”

Chief Engineer Makins looked as astonished as his Captain. “The Kintark must have switched transponder codes!”

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John, Almari and Ilyana stood outside the closed door to the Engineering Bay, waiting patiently for Dana to open the door. He glanced at them and smiled, seeing the looks of nervous anticipation on their faces.

Just as he was about to speak, the door swished open to reveal his redheaded Chief Engineer. “Okay, you can come in now!” she said cheerfully, waving them into her Workshop.

Ushering the two assassins in first, John noticed an area of the Engineering Bay had been walled off with opaque forcefields. He had a fairly good idea what was concealed behind those shimmering barriers.

Dana bounded over to the two armour equipping frames mounted against the wall and said, “Why don’t you try these Paragon suits on first? I know the fit will be perfect, but I’d like to run through the features with you both.”

The two Maliri women obediently followed Dana’s instructions as she asked them to remove their shoes and step into armoured Paragon boots. John watched as they slipped their hands into the gauntlets then activated the thumb buttons, bringing the armoured panels down around them. Robotic arms sealed them within the body armour and he gave them a reassuring smile when he saw a flicker of apprehension on their faces. The helmets were lowered onto their heads and they were fully armoured in three seconds.

“Now just hit the button on your palm to lock the armour into place,” Dana explained, followed by a series of rippling clicks a second later. “There, all done!”

Almari and Ilyana looked stunned at how quickly they’d gone from being unarmoured, to fully geared in Paragon suits. Their looks of shock increased as Dana started explaining all the functionality in the suits, starting with the shield generators.

Leaving them to get acquainted with the Paragon armour, John walked over to one of the big storage crates containing blocks of crystal Alyssium. He removed the lid with a wave of his hand, then beckoned towards the glistening white cube, drawing off a stream of metal which he gathered in a sphere beside him. Hearing a peal of laughter behind him, he turned around and saw Almari wobbling in the air, using the anti-grav generators in the arms and legs to steady herself.

“I can fly!” she gasped in delight.

He returned her smile, knowing the simple pleasure in experiencing the suit’s flight mode for the first time. Ilyana giggled a moment later, as she floated off the ground and swirled around in a graceful pirouette. Having drawn off enough crystal Alyssium, he returned to the pair, who touched down on the ground again, eyes bright with excitement.

John said, “You two prefer pistols and swords, right?”

Ilyana turned and nodded. “Luna’s the real expert with a blade, but we’re both highly trained with swords.”

“And a pistol would be preferable to a rifle,” Almari agreed. “We favour fighting at close quarters and a pistol is ideally suited for that.”

“Okay, I’m sure we can find something you can use, right Sparks?” John said, glancing at Dana.

She nodded eagerly. “I’ll strip down a couple of the Reaper pistols and turn them into more compact laser pistols. They won’t need the Quantum part of the weapon so I’ll take that out entirely. They’ll still be big pistols, but not the supersized hand-cannons they are now!”

“Need me to make a new gunframe?” John asked.

“Yes please,” she replied, grabbing the holo-reader off her workbench. “I’ll sketch out a model for you now...”

The redhead appeared to be fully absorbed in her work, so John turned to look at the assassins. “Can you picture the kind of sword you prefer in your mind? Edraele can show me and I’ll do my best to make one for each of you.”

Almari shared a look of surprise with Ilyana, then they both frowned with concentration, doing as John asked. Edraele showed him the images a few seconds later, the swords vaguely reminding him of a Katana. The blade had a slight curve to it with a single cutting edge and a sharp point for impaling a foe.

“Okay, let’s give this a shot,” he murmured, picturing the sword in his mind and drawing off a stream of liquid metal.

The crystal Alyssium flattened and elongated, smoothly flowing into the shape Edraele had projected in his mind. It only took a few moments to forge the weapon, the crystal lattice hardening a second later.

“How’s that feel?” he asked, floating the sword over to Almari.

Almari’s cobalt-blue eyes were wide with astonishment after watching him create a sword before her as if by magic. She tentatively reached for the handle of the blade, then grasped the hilt in a firm grip. Once her senses had confirmed that it was as solid as it appeared, she took a few experimental swings, nodding her approval.

“It feels very nice, but the balance is a little off. Can you add a bit more weight to the pommel please?” she asked, after carefully appraising the sword.

John made a few alterations to the image he had in his mind. “Sure, just throw it to me and I’ll make the changes.”

Almari tossed the blade to him in a gentle arc and he plucked it out of the air using telekinesis. He melted it with a swift gesture, then added a bit more metal and reshaped the blade to her specifications. When he floated it over to her again, Almari had forgotten all her earlier hesitancy and she grabbed the sword, eager to try it again. Swirling it around in a figure-of-eight she spun and slashed, attacking a legion of imaginary foes.

“I love this sword!” she finally exclaimed, eyes sparkling with joy.

“Let Ilyana have a go,” John said with a smile. “If she likes it too, I’ll make the same for her.”

The sword met Ilyana’s approval, so John melted it down, then prepared a similar weight of crystal Alyssium and began to shape and reshape the metal. When he’d reached deca-shaped, he finally crafted two identical swords, but this time he added the House Valaden crest in fine detail on the pommel. The assassins were delighted with their new weapons, loving them even more when John showed them how the incredibly strong blades were able to chop through titanium like it was butter.

He left them to practice and returned to Dana, who was putting the finishing touches on the new laser pistol schematic. She grinned at him and showed him the holo-reader, revealing an elegant and much more compact heavy pistol. It didn’t take him long to shape the various components she would need to make the new weapons, leaving just a small orb of crystal Alyssium when he was done. He left that on her workbench, finishing just as Almari and Ilyana removed their Paragon body armour. Then glided over to join him, thanking him profusely for the new swords and armour.

Dana jerked a thumb in the direction of their Paragon suits. “I’ll tweak their armour to add magnetic sheaths for their swords, then get the armour-equipping frames moved to the Galaena Serine. Putting the pistols together will probably take me an hour or two, but I’ll have them done long before you have to go.”

John glanced up at the holo-cameras, “Faye, have you got a minute?”

The purple sprite flashed into existence a moment later. “Sure! What can I do to help?”

“Can you gather up all the Justice Lasers and Punisher rifles, along with say... twenty thousand rounds of 20mm caseless and at least a thousand grenades for the integral launchers? We need that shipped over to the Maliri flagship please.”

“I’ve already got my boys emptying the weapon racks in the forward Armoury and the Firing Range,” she replied. “I’ll make sure we gather enough crates of ammo too!”

“Fantastic, thanks,” he said with an appreciative smile. Faye grinned in return then disappeared in a flash. Turning to look at the assassins, he continued, “We’ve got a few hours to kill before you leave. Fancy taking a look at our training dojo?”

They both looked surprised but eager as they nodded their agreement.

“Thanks for the help, Sparks,” John called over to the redhead.

“No problem,” she replied distractedly, her multi-tool whirring as she took apart the first of the Reaper pistols she’d brought with her from the weapon racks in the Briefing Room.

John led the two Maliri girls out into the corridor, then offered them each an arm. They hooked theirs through his and fell into step beside him as they walked towards the grav-tubes. Travelling up to Deck Two, they stepped out into the corridor that led to the Officers’ Quarters to find Calara waiting for them outside her room.

“I’ve got sparring gear you can borrow,” she called out to the two Maliri women, beckoning them closer.

John slipped his arms out of theirs and gently patted them both on the bottom. “Go and get changed and I’ll meet you down there.”

They looked surprised then excited at the prospect, both breaking into a loping jog in their eagerness to get ready. Calara opened the door for them and waved John goodbye, as she disappeared inside her room with the two assassins. He went into his own bedroom to get ready, quickly changing into his sparring gear and returning to the corridor. There was no sign of the girls yet, so he headed to Deck Three and entered the equipping room, then walked through to the dojo itself.

He was particularly fond of the teakwood training hall with its view of Mount Daisen, so he programmed the computer with that in mind. Smiling to himself, he made a few tweaks to the settings and added a timer, before activating the program. By the time he’d finished, the door opened beside him and the two assassins padded into the room.

“Have fun!” Calara said with a grin, waving them goodbye.

John strolled across the mats, turning around and beckoning the two Maliri girls to follow. “I’ve heard you have quite the reputation as a fighter, Ilyana...”

Her smile was reflected in her turquoise eyes. “I enjoy putting myself to the test against a challenging opponent.”

“Perhaps I’d better spar with Almari first then, to warm myself up,” he replied with a grin, looking at the second girl. “If you’re willing?”

“Of course,” she said with a smile, which faltered only a moment later. “But won’t you be able to easily defeat us? I saw you fight the Kirrix monstrosities... with your speed and strength... we can’t possibly beat you.”

John held his hands up disarmingly. “Don’t worry, I won’t use any powers...”

Almari’s smile was back with a vengeance as she adopted a fighting stance then charged towards him. John was barely able to block her right-handed strike in time, before she followed up with a left hook. She was a very aggressive fighter, attacking all-out right from the start. Her technique was fascinating, using a Maliri style of unarmed combat that he’d never seen before, let alone tried to defend against.

They fought for a frantic ten minutes, John desperately defending against her wild flurries of punches and kicks, but taking more than a few stinging hits. Almari was in excellent physical shape and she showed no sign of tiring as she rained down blows on his defences. Despite the varied number of strikes she was launching at him, he eventually managed to notice vague patterns in the way she fought. He could see the look of surprise and frustration on her face as she was unable to take him down and realised that she must normally overwhelm her opponents rapidly and was simply recycling those chain of attacks.

As she shifted her weight to her back foot to lash out with a kick, he surged forward, knocking her off her feet and bringing her down to the mat. She struggled for a moment, but he had her securely pinned.

“Good fight,” she said with a grin, tapping him on the arm to concede her defeat.

“You’re very good,” he said in open admiration, releasing her from the hold. “What gave me the opening was the way you repeat your attacks. Sakura used to do the same thing with swords, that’s probably how I spotted it.”

Almari nodded gratefully. “I’ll be mindful of that in the future, thank you.”

Rising to his feet, he offered her a hand, then turned to look at Ilyana. “Would you like to go next?”

She raised an eyebrow and replied, “Are you sure you wouldn’t like to rest first?”

He shook his head. “No, I’m used to long training sessions. Whenever you’re ready, beautiful.”

Ilyana smiled at him then prowled closer as Almari backpedalled out of the way. There was something very different about the way Ilyana moved, a languid confidence to her smooth gait that was alluring as it was unsettling. She didn’t raise her hands into a defensive posture, but simply glided closer.

John decided to go on the offensive himself, after defending so long in the last bout. He lunged out with a punch to the chest, but Ilyana weaved to one side, easily avoiding his blow. He followed up with a left then another right and she made no attempt to block, simply dodging to the right then left to avoid his punches. It was fascinating to see her fight, having never gone up against such a slippery opponent before.

He tried a kick to see how she’d try and avoid that, spinning at his waist and bringing his foot around in a sweeping arc at chest height. She dropped to her haunches, back arched as she ducked under the blow, before bouncing up like a coiled spring and leaping forward to grapple him. Coiling herself around him like a snake, her arm circled his neck as she clung to his back. “Easy now...” she whispered in his ear, applying a phenomenal amount of pressure that brought him to his knees and had him seeing stars.

John tapped on her arm to concede the bout and she immediately relaxed her chokehold. “Wow, that was impressive,” he said as he shook his head to get the blood flowing again.

“It’s a fighting style called Kerith’merane,” Ilyana informed him, backing away to give him space. “I’ve been an adherent to its techniques for many decades.”

John looked up at her and smiled. “It’s so easy to forget your true ages. You both look like you’re in your early twenties.”

Ilyana laughed and shared a grin with Almari.

“A Terran girl in her twenties,” John corrected himself as he got to his feet again. “Okay let’s go again, you slippery minx!”

“I’m not sure what a ‘minx’ is, but I’m sure that wasn’t complimentary,” Ilyana replied, calmly approaching him again.

John didn’t want to chance trying to explain what it was, concentrating instead on fighting much more defensively now. He decided that kicks would leave him too exposed, so he focused on quick jabs and strikes to keep Ilyana dodging rather than moving in for a grapple again. It worked for a couple of minutes, until she caught his right wrist on one of the slightly longer punches, then rushed towards him. John managed to get a kidney punch in with his left before she got to grappling range, but she accepted the hit with a grunt, then was all over him like an octopus. Tangling her legs with his, she followed him down to the mat as he toppled over, taking advantage of his momentary disorientation to apply another debilitating choke hold.

He tapped out again, then shook his head in amazement, a deep chuckle rumbling in his chest. “I’ve never fought anyone as good as you with chokes and holds.”

“Thank you,” Ilyana replied, inclining her head politely.

“I hope that kidney punch didn’t hurt too much,” he apologised glancing at her toned blue torso.

She gave him an affectionate look as she squatted beside him. “It was a strong punch, but I’ve endured far greater pain. In truth, I barely felt it.”

“Still, I’ll heal you afterwards,” John offered, reaching out to brush the backs of his fingers across her lower torso.

“Another reason to enjoy training with you,” she replied with a grin, offering him a hand. “Would you like to fight again?”

“Only if you teach me some of your Kerith’merane techniques,” John replied with an eager smile, as he accepted her hand and rose to his feet.

Ilyana looked appalled, her eyes widening in shock. “The sacred disciplines must not be taught to anyone who has not pledged themselves to their teachings!”

“Oh, I’m sorry! I didn’t mean any offence,” he hastily apologised.

Almari laughed and rolled her eyes at her fellow assassin, while Ilyana’s turquoise eyes sparkled in amusement. When John looked at the pair in confusion, Almari explained, “The Maliri aren’t a spiritual people. She’s just teasing you.”

Ilyana stepped closer and said quietly, “Even if my words had been true, I would still teach you anyway.”

John stroked her cheek, feeling a surge of affection for the earnest woman standing before him. It was lovely to see the two of them letting their guard down around him and revealing their more playful sides. “Minx can mean two things; a cunning young woman, or a boldly flirtatious one. I think both versions apply to you...”

They shared a smile, both enjoying the intimacy of the moment. Ilyana gave him a quick kiss, then proceeded to give him a gruelling introduction to the Maliri unarmed fighting style she favoured. The assassin was a good instructor and he remembered Irillith mentioning that Ilyana had given her some combat training when she was younger. Almari was happy to stand patiently to one side, but after watching them fight for hour, she noticed that dark clouds were brewing above the mist-shrouded mountains outside.

“John, the holo-simulation is changing,” she said, turning to watch the gathering storm.

Ilyana stepped back from the debilitating choke hold she was demonstrating to him and stood with the other Maliri to admire the crackle of lightning.

Almari turned to look at John and said, “Why is there electricity shooting from the clouds?”

“You haven’t seen lightning before?” John exclaimed in surprise.

She shook her head, then jumped at the booming peal of thunder that echoed through the dojo.

He smiled at her and said, “I just added the weather effects to make a more dramatic setting. Lightning is an atmospheric phenomenon that occurs on Terra during heavy storms; you never get that on Valaden?”

“The climate is very placid all year round,” Almari explained. “I’ve never seen a rainstorm that severe before!”

“I like it! It’s making my heart race!” Ilyana gasped, her eyes following the searing flash of another jagged lightning bolt as it ripped across the sky. She gave John a coy glance. “Would you like to feel?”

He stood in front of them and placed a hand on their blue chests, feeling their pounding heartbeats through their smooth skin. “Thunderstorms can be very exciting,” he agreed, gazing into their eyes. “I know a few other ways to get the pulse racing...”

“Really?” Almari asked, gazing at him under her long lashes. “What might they be?”

John stepped back and gave them a teasing grin. “I want both of you to fight me... at the same time.”

Ilyana looked excited now. “Are you going to use your powers?”

“Some,” John admitted, gliding across the mat to put some distance between them.

The two assassins shared a grin and squared off against him, both eager for the fight. John slightly increased his strength and speed, being very careful not to exceed the normal natural limits for his body. When he was ready, he beckoned the girls forward with a confident gesture.

They split up to attack him from opposite sides, but John was moving quickly now and darted around to put Almari between him and Ilyana. He attacked aggressively, sweeping out Almari’s legs as she charged towards him, the Maliri girl landing on her back with the wind knocked out of her. Springing past the downed girl, he moved to grapple with Ilyana, moving quickly enough now to have a chance at countering her moves. She grinned in approval when he used the counter-hold she’d just taught him, then did a new move which he hadn’t seen yet, ducking under his grasp and grabbing hold of him like a limpet. John would have certainly lost at that point, but he used his superior strength to pry her vice-like grip from his throat and deftly pin her instead.

When Ilyana tapped him on the arm, he helped her and Almari up, then looked at each girl in turn. “Would you both like to move that fast and be that strong?”

Their eyes lit up with excitement and they both nodded, looking like they could barely believe their pointed ears.

“That’s the most I can enhance your bodies without actually giving you psychic powers,” he explained. “I don’t want to go any further than that today, not when I won’t be there to mentor you through any new abilities.”

“I understand,” Almari replied looking thrilled. “To even have that edge would make a tremendous difference!”

Ilyana managed to curtail her excitement for a moment and studied him quietly. “Would you show me how you fight when you’re not holding anything back?”

“Of course,” he readily agreed. He glanced at Almari and added, “Would you like to see too?”

She grinned at him and nodded, joining Ilyana in backing away across the mat. John waited patiently for them to attack this time, making no aggressive moves as he willed his full strength into effect and ramped up his psychic speed. Just as the girls got within striking range, he surged forward, moving in a blur. Grabbing hold of Ilyana, he tossed her up in the air, then lunged at Almari and caught her in an unbreakable grip. Guiding her gently but inexorably to the mat, she stared at him in shock, powerless to resist against such titanic strength.

Almari’s eyes darted to Ilyana, who was sailing upwards in slow motion, mouth opened in a startled cry. John gave the pinned assassin a quick smile and a kiss, then released her and turned his attention to Ilyana. He effortlessly plucked her out of the air, then whirled around and brought her to the mat beside her fellow Maliri. She struggled for a moment against his implacable strength, then lay limp, realising it was futile.

John released her and knelt between them. “How was that?”

“Terrifying,” Ilyana admitted, staring at him in awe.

“I’ve never felt so totally helpless,” Almari murmured, a similar look of wonder on her face.

“I didn’t mean to frighten you,” John apologised, placing a hand on their toned stomachs and gently caressing them both. “You know you don’t have any reason to be scared of me, don’t you?”

Ilyana gave him a reassuring smile. “I wasn’t scared of you, not exactly. But getting a glimpse of how powerful you are... that really set my pulse racing!”

Almari nodded. “That was better than any thunderstorm!”

John offered them both a hand, helping them up so that they knelt in front of him. Gathering them in his arms, he pulled them close. “There’s other things we can do that are even more exciting...”

Almari kissed him first, moaning into his mouth, her lust for him quite apparent. Ilyana was just as excited when he kissed her next, her turquoise eyes smouldering with desire. John rose to his feet and the girls wrapped their arms and legs around him, taking it in turns kissing him as he carried them effortlessly through to the bedroom.

He made love to Almari first, starting gently and letting her get used to being stretched to take him. When she clung to him and begged for more, he increased the pace, coaxing her through multiple orgasms as she gazed lovingly into his eyes. After her fourth, he switched to Ilyana who spread her velvety smooth blue thighs for him, eager to be taken by so powerful a man. He took his time with her too, building her up to a tremendous climax that left her reeling. After three more, she was lying limp in his arms, kissing him slowly with a look of wonder in her eyes.

His quad was aching at this point and both girls could sense his need for release. Almari brushed her fingers across his shoulder drawing his attention. “How would you like to cum, John?”

“I need to feed you, to help you grow stronger,” he replied, turning and placing a hand on her slender stomach.

Ilyana drew him down for a kiss. “I want to feel you filling my womb with your cum,” she murmured, her voice full of yearning.

“I’d love that too,” Almari agreed, a similar look of need in her eyes.

John paused in his thrusts and took a steadying breath. “Do you want to feed each other?” he asked, with the hint of a smile.

The assassins took a moment to understand what he was saying, then flashed sultry smiles at each other as they nodded. John eased back to give Almari room to straddle Ilyana, then picked up the pace again, holding onto Almari’s firm hips as he drove his throbbing cock into her friend. The two girls began to kiss as he rode them to the finish, their soft cries of pleasure urging him onwards. It didn’t take him long and he thrust up to the hilt inside Ilyana, filling her womb with his cum and making her belly swell with his load. Half-way through he plunged into Almari, pumping the rest of his cum into her and feeling her clamp down on his shaft as she climaxed with him.

When he was drained dry, he flopped back on the bed, barely having enough energy to turn and watch the assassins, as they moved into an enthusiastic sixty-nine. Once they’d sucked the cum out of each other, they snuggled up beside him, rounded tummies feeling warm against his flanks.

“I want you to take good care of each other when you’re away in Trankaran Space,” he said quietly, looking down and making eye contact with each of them in turn. “You’ll be far away from me and I don’t want anything bad to happen to either of you.”

“I won’t let Ilyana get hurt,” Almari said, sharing a smile with the other Maliri girl.

Ilyana nodded. “I’ll keep Almari safe for you, I promise.”

“I’m sorry for putting you both in danger like this,” John said with regret. “One day, when this is all over, there’ll be no more fighting for either of you. No more being assassins or bodyguards, you can just enjoy being mothers, looking after our children. You’ll be the VIPs then and it’ll be my job to protect you and keep you safe.”

Almari reached across him to stroke Ilyana’s curved tummy, then let out a soft sigh when Ilyana reciprocated. “I’d love that so much,” she murmured, looking up at him with hope in her eyes.

“You really care about us, don’t you?” Ilyana whispered, her gaze softening.

“Of course. You’re both wonderful girls,” John replied, hugging them closer. “I’d love to spend eternity with the pair of you...”

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Edraele and Alyssa shared a warm smile as they eavesdropped telepathically on John’s conversation, while sitting together on the Ready Room sofas.

“Ilyana and Almari are so happy,” Edraele marvelled, taking a sip of her drink, before returning the cup to the coffee table.

Alyssa nodded, kicking off her shoes and tucking her legs underneath her. “He’s amazing with my girls as well.” She drank some of her own coffee, then continued, “I don’t know how he does it, but he manages to bring out the best in them with just a few kind words. Have you checked their connections to you yet?”

Edraele relaxed and closed her eyes, focusing inwards on the array of mental compartments that represented over a thousand Maliri girls. The light blazing from the two assassins eclipsed most of the network and she gasped at the strength of that glare.

Alyssa laughed and gave her a knowing smile. “Yeah, and all they did was beat each other up, screwed, then had a bit of loving pillow talk. Imagine what those girls would be like if John had spent months caring for them!”

The Maliri Matriarch felt the thrilling new ripples of energy flowing through her psychic connections, her skin tingling at the feeling of untapped power. “I don’t know how you can handle so much energy...”

Giving her a playful grin, Alyssa said, “You’ll be able to see for yourself soon.”

“I must admit, I was sceptical at first,” Edraele said, looking at her hands and summoning a spiral of purple telekinetic darts that raced around her fingertips. “But you were right... At this rate, I’ll be able to supply John with as much energy as he needs.”

“And I’ll be able to focus on keeping all the girls going,” Alyssa agreed, with a smile of satisfaction. “I don’t want us to ever run out of energy like we did at Khalgron.”

Edraele nodded sombrely. “That holo-vid was awful. I’m so sorry you had to face that battle alone, it must have been a nightmare trying to provide power to everyone!”

“With you and Jade out of action? Yeah, it was,” Alyssa admitted, reaching across to clasp Edraele’s free hand. “I’m so glad you’re back again.” She paused for a second, then added, “And not just for that reason, or because you’re my friend and I was worried about you. It’s nice to be able to talk with someone who understands what it’s like being a Matriarch.”

“It really is,” Edraele replied, joining the young blonde on her sofa and wrapping her in a loving embrace.

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Rolling over in the bed, Niskera studied Orinaden’s incredibly handsome face as he slumbered. She’d noticed the Legionnaire months earlier, admiring his broad frame and strong, noble features, but had felt too intimidated by how good-looking he was to even consider approaching him. When she had seen how he’d reacted to her new appearance, gazing at her with unabashed reverence, Niskera had been unable to resist bringing the very eager male to her bedchambers.

Sex with Orinaden had been amazing and she’d feasted her eyes on this beautiful example of Trankaran masculinity as he’d taken her. He’d been similarly enraptured, gazing in awe at her glowing features and only closing his eyes to praise the Great Maker at his climax. She had resisted the urge to correct him, although she’d been sure to thank the Great Protector as she found her own release. Still, as tremendously satisfying as it had been to bed such a ridiculously handsome male, she was surprised to find her thoughts drifting to another...

The soft chime from the runes on the comm system drew her attention and she quickly rose from the bed to answer the call, not wanting to disturb Orinaden in his slumber. Fleet Warden Thandrun’s broad face appeared in the holographic screen, his amber eyes widening in wonder when he saw her, just as they had the scores of other times they’d met over the last week.

“I apologise for disturbing you, my Queen. I wished to inform you that we’ll be moving into orbit with Trankara in a couple of minutes,” he explained, giving her a respectful bow.

Niskera managed to suppress a sigh, having hoped that her old friend would have got over her change in appearance by now. “Thank you, Thandrun. I will prepare myself and join you in the shuttle bay shortly.”

Closing the call, she turned to glance at Orinaden and saw that he was gazing at her with wide eyes, a look of startled disbelief on his face.

She glided over to sit beside him on the bed, before leaning down to give him a tender kiss. “You were magnificent, Orinaden, thank you.”

“It was my pleasure, Q-Queen Niskera!” he stammered, gaping at her in amazement.

Niskera caressed his head affectionately, then rose from the bed and walked to the bathroom to get ready. She paused as she caught a glimpse of her reflection in the long mirror, still finding the glowing lines that swirled around her body fascinating to see. Just as she was about to move away to wash, she hesitated and studied her dark-grey body closer, trying to imagine what she’d look like as one of those slender and dainty Maliri girls. It was difficult at first, but got progressively easier as she imagined herself wrapped around John in the throes of ecstasy. Shaking her head at her own foolishness, she stepped into the dark pool of water and began to scrub herself clean.

Today was going to be one for the historical records and the thought of the shockwaves she was about to send through Trankaran society was more than a little intimidating. Still, it had been over six months since she had last visited her homeworld and she longed to see Trankara’s majestic volcanic ranges, as well as the beautiful lava lakes that blanketed the planet.

Orinaden had fallen asleep again when she returned to the bedroom, so she dressed quietly in her layered set of Chancellor’s ceremonial robes. Managing not to disturb him, she slipped out the door, then strolled down the corridor to the elevators. Although the refugees from Khalgron weren’t permitted on the secure upper levels of the battlecarrier, the corridor was still busy with the Anvil’s crew going about their business.

There was no way of hiding her approach, broadcast as it was by pulsing amber light, so the Trankarans whirled around and bowed in reverence to her as she passed. Niskera gave them a benevolent smile as she always did, their faces reflecting their delight as they gazed at her in wonder. Although it saddened her to see her people act so deferentially, it was still a pleasant feeling to see their unabashed joy at her presence.

Fortunately, there was a lift waiting for her, so she was able to walk straight in without waiting and had the lift to herself as she descended. When the doors opened, Thandrun was waiting for her outside with an honour guard of twenty legionnaires. They all snapped to attention at her appearance, managing to overcome their awe to offer her a respectful salute as she walked out into the corridor.

She smiled at Thandrun as he fell into step beside her. “Do you think the Senate has any idea?”

He shook his head, a broad grin on his face. “No, My Queen. We’ve monitored communications from the fleet to the homeworld to check, but no one would disregard your request in any case.”

They boarded the blocky rust-coloured shuttle, the legionnaires filing through to the big loading area at the back. As soon as everyone was aboard, the shuttle rumbled as the engines were powered up, the ship taking off from the shuttle bay decking with a flare of retro-thrusters.

Thandrun had started to relax now, as he usually did after being in her company for a few minutes. “Are you nervous about addressing the Senate, Niskera?” he asked, giving her a sympathetic smile. “If there’s anything I can do to help, please let me know.”

“You’re very kind, Thandrun,” she replied, patting him on the arm. “Thank you for the offer, but I believe I should be able to manage.”

She glanced out the window, seeing the red glow of the planet as the shuttle swept through the clouds on its approach to the capital. Thandrun left her to her thoughts as she gazed out over her homeworld, admiring the lights from the robust cities built into the mountain ranges. Niskera reminded herself that should her meeting with the Senate go badly, all of this could be lost to the Kirrix and she felt a flutter of nerves in her stomach.

\*Don’t worry, Niskera, I know you’ll be amazing,\* Alyssa’s soothing voice murmured, echoing through her mind. \*You must be arriving at Trankara now, so I wanted to wish you good luck with your meeting and let you know that help is on the way. John has met with the Maliri; they’re sending a huge fleet of very powerful ships to help defend the Republic. You can expect their arrival in ten days.\*

Niskera felt a surge of relief and was overwhelmed with gratitude towards John and Alyssa. Her jubilation was only marred by a pang of regret, that she wasn’t able to communicate her profound thanks.

\*I can’t hear your thoughts, but I can sense your emotions,\* Alyssa reminded her a second later. \*You’re quite welcome. We’ll be sending additional fleets every few weeks until you’ve fought back the Kirrix and reclaimed your worlds.\*

Barely able to contain her elation, Niskera whirled around to beam a radiant smile at the Fleet Warden sitting beside her.

“What is it?” he asked, bemused to see her joyful expression.

“The Maliri are on their way! We have ten days to marshal our forces before they arrive,” she exclaimed, reinvigorated with a new sense of purpose.

He looked shocked then delighted. “Not that I doubt your word, Niskera, but how do you know?” he asked curiously, still finding it hard to believe that the Maliri had left their territory after so many years.

She tapped her temple and gave him an enigmatic smile. “Alyssa just informed me; the Terran girl is gifted with Telepathy.”

“How remarkable,” he murmured, slowly shaking his head in amazement.

There was a rumble through the shuttle and they both felt the heavy pull of gravity as retro-thrusters flared to slow the ship’s descent. A few seconds later the shuttle trembled as it touched down on the planet’s surface.

Rising from her chair, Niskera drew up her robe’s hood to conceal her glowing features and tucked her hands into the folds of the garment. She followed Thandrun down the ramp from the shuttle, with the legionnaires assuming a protective formation around her.

“Vamred, how wonderful to see you!” Thandrun boomed, his deep voice echoing across the landing platform.

Niskera glanced under the low hood of her robe and saw the Senator approaching in a hurry, his grey face drawn in panic. “You’re too late!” he gasped. “Senator Barumdrolin raised a motion to begin the election of a new Chancellor this morning! The Senate is planning to hold a vote on it as we speak!”

“We better get to the Senate chamber then!” the Fleet Warden thundered, clapping his friend on the shoulder. “Lead the way, Vamred!”

Vamred stared at him incredulously for a moment, then turned and walked briskly towards the runed entranceway to the citadel beyond. He glanced over his shoulder to look at Niskera, frowning in obvious confusion at her hooded appearance. “I’m very relieved to see you again, Chancellor. I tried my best to delay the Senate, but I’m sure you know how obstinate Senator Barumdrolin can be!”

“Do not worry, Senator Vamred,” she replied, her smooth voice calming his fears. “All will be well in just a few minutes. Your loyal service to the Republic will not be forgotten.”

Vamred stumbled a step, eyes widening as her melodic voice sent shivers up his spine. “Niskera?! What’s going on, Thandrun?”

Thandrun steered his friend onwards and boomed, “No time to waste with questions, Vamred. We need to interrupt that vote, remember?”

The confused Senator marched onwards, darting curious glances back over his shoulder as the Fleet Warden kept him moving. “Yes, we have to stop them annulling her Chancellorship...” he murmured, trying to catch a glimpse of Niskera under her cowl, seeing a curious amber glow where there should have been shadows.

Three of the huge legionnaires responded to a glance from Thandrun, lengthening their pace, then neatly interposing themselves in front of the Chancellor, blocking Vamred’s view. Niskera silently thanked the Fleet Warden as she marched with her cohort of soldiers towards the Great Spire, where the Senate would be in attendance.

The gigantic runed doors were sealed as they approached, but a wave of Thandrun’s armoured hand had the legionnaires on guard rushing to open them. The group filed through into the massive auditorium, with row upon row of circular plinths occupied by the Senators representing the various worlds within the Trankaran Republic.

Senator Barumdrolin and Senator Dhunarlum were standing in the middle of the central disc, with Dhunarlum in the middle of an impassioned speech to his bored audience. Never the most captivating of speakers, he was struggling to hold the attention of the Senate and there was a quiet background rumble as the hundreds of Senators spoke in gravelly whispers to their colleagues. The noise increased in volume as Niskera marched out of the centre of her phalanx of soldiers, with Thandrun hovering protectively beside her as she strode into the centre of the vast room.

“There is no need for this motion!” Thandrun boomed, his commanding voice echoing around the chamber. “As you can see, Chancellor Niskera is here, safe and well!”

Rounding on the intruders, Senator Barumdrolin frowned in disapproval. “You are too late, Niskera. The Senate has already agreed with the proposal. You are no longer Chancellor of the Republic and we are now putting forth speeches to champion our candidacy for the role.”

Senator Dhunarlum looked smug as he gave her a polite incline of his head. “You are welcome to put forth your own proposal for why you would be best suited for the position. However, I’m sure you must be fatigued after putting yourself in such jeopardy with the Kirrix. Perhaps a nice rest would be preferable?”

The two senators shared a glance, with Barumdrolin allowing himself a half-smile at his fellow Senator’s sly retort. The rumbling from the rest of the Senators intensified as they discussed the dramatic reappearance of their deposed Chancellor.

Niskera took a moment to compose herself, but found she was already eager and willing to challenge these two interlopers. Standing straight and tall, she said, “You have my thanks, Senator Dhunarlum, I shall take you up on your offer to make a speech.”

Their shocked expressions when they heard her mellifluous voice was nothing compared to the consternation when she threw back her hood. Senator Dhunarlum’s eyes grew so wide, they looked like they would roll out of his head, and Senator Barumdrolin crashed to his knees, a look of awe on his slab-like features.

There were shocked gasps from the Senators, as all eyes were riveted to Niskera and the pulsing orange swirls about her head. She unclasped her outer robe and shrugged it from her shoulders, revealing the sleeveless dress she wore underneath. All about her, murmurs of “The Glowing Queen!” could be heard rebounding within the chamber.

Raising her arms up high, Niskera slowly turned, leaving them in no doubt about the transformation she had undergone. Light poured off her glowing body, shining an amber radiance across the shocked faces of the Senators. Now there was deathly silence in the Senate as over two-hundred senators gaped at her in wonder.

“Noble Senators,” she called out in her rich melodic voice, as she lowered her arms. “I bring tragic news; the Great Maker is forever lost to us, never to return... But fear not, for it is time to rejoice! His kin, the Great Protector, has returned in his stead and blessed me as his herald!”

She paused to allow the spine-tingling effect of her new voice to work its magic on the Senate, turning slowly again to mesmerise her audience with her glowing eyes.

“He is eager to see the Trankaran Republic restored to the glories of our past and has offered us an honoured place in an alliance with the Ashanath and the Maliri! He wishes to see us delivered from the terrible threat the Kirrix pose and a fleet of the Favoured Ones is on its way to ensure our salvation. Yes! The Maliri were the Great Maker’s servants those long millennia ago, as were the Ashanath, and as were we!”

There was a shocked murmur amongst her audience, the stunned senators gaping at one another as she unleashed one incredible revelation after another.

“I propose that we mobilise the Republic to a full war footing! We must prepare ourselves for the return of the Favoured Ones, to prove to them that we are strong allies and worthy of standing proudly at their side!” She paused for a moment and her voice lowered a few octaves as she continued sorrowfully, “Or at least I would, but I am no longer your Chancellor, or even a Senator, and am in no position to make such a suggestion...”

Senator Vamred shook off his shock and stepped forward to kneel before her. His voice was full of emotion as he said earnestly, “The rebels were misled and united behind a false Queen! Truly Niskera, you were meant to lead us as the Glowing Queen of the Trankarans!”

Thandrun knelt at his side and thundered, “All hail Queen Niskera!”

All around the auditorium the sound of Senators crashing to their knees built to a deafening crescendo, as did the deep voices booming their agreement. “Hail Queen Niskera!”

Niskera turned, looking around the enormous room and nodding as she saw that to a rock-brother, every senator had knelt to pledge allegiance to her. Raising her hands to silence the senators chanting her name, she said solemnly, “I feel deeply honoured that you would allow me this opportunity to serve you as your Queen. The road ahead of us is a long and hard one, but when our course is done, we will stand with our heads held high at the Great Protector’s side. Not as servants as we once were to the Great Maker, but as good friends and loyal allies!”

“Can it really be true?” Senator Dhunarlum murmured, looking up at her in wonder as he knelt on the platform. “You would raise us up to be friends and allies with a god?!”

“It is true,” she replied with a beatific smile. “For the Great Protector wishes it to be so. He is kind and benevolent, seeking only to protect our people from the darkness which threatens us.”

Turning to look at the audience, she raised her arms again. “Rise my friends, for we have a great deal of work to do. I propose full amnesty for the rebels, as we shall need every rock-brother to stand shoulder and shoulder with us for the coming conflict! I also bring gifts of technology from the Great Protector himself and we must ensure that the star forges are in full operation once again, building mighty ships the like of which have never been seen before!”

Her glowing eyes narrowed and this time when she spoke, there was a harder edge to Niskera’s voice that the Senators had never heard before. “The enemies of the Trankarans shall rue the day that they invaded our worlds!”

The roaring ovation she received made the very stones of the Great Spire tremble to the sounds of their adulation. Niskera smiled in relief at the Senators, feeling the heavy weight of fear and dread she’d been carrying for months finally lift off her shoulders. The Trankarans were truly united once more, for the first time in over nine millennia.

\*Congratulations, Niskera,\* Alyssa said softly. \*Long live the Queen...\*