Three Square Meals Ch. 127 – part 1

Edraele leaned into the warm embrace and let out a contented sigh. “Oh, I really needed this... I felt awful after that meeting with Gaenna.”

Luna held the Maliri Queen close, making her feel safe and protected. “You’re not that person any more, Edraele.”

“I know... but revisiting those horrible memories is always disturbing. It wasn’t me that did those dreadful things, but I still remember doing them,” she replied, nuzzling into the former assassin’s long flowing hair.

Pulling back so that she could see her Queen’s face, Luna gave her a look of understanding. “Edraele... I know exactly what you’re talking about. The difference is that I actually did do all sorts of terrible things.”

“Only at my behest,” Edraele interjected with a frown. “It wasn’t as if you had any choice in the matter. If you’d refused my orders, my predecessor would have had you executed.”

“Does that absolve me of guilt though?” Luna asked, looking conflicted. “If you commanded me to assassinate your enemies now, I would still follow your orders... but out of love rather than duty.”

Edraele cupped her bodyguard’s face and said softly, “Then I shall never abuse your loyalty and devotion, my love.”

They shared a smile and were leaning in for a kiss, when Edraele felt a surge of shock across her empathic bond with Gaenna Baelora. The older matriarch had been fuming when she departed from Edraele’s quarters, the sting of humiliation lingering long after she left the Queen’s presence . That anger was to be expected, but the flurry of negative emotions Gaenna was experiencing now were definitely not. Fear and horror followed in quick succession, the dreadful sensations ramping up dramatically until they were punctuated by sharp flashes of pain.

“Something’s wrong!” Edraele blurted out, jerking back from Luna. Before the startled assassin could say a word, she quickly added, “Gaenna Baelora is scared and hurt... I think she’s under attack!”

Luna nodded her understanding and ran from the room, vaulting over the chaise longue as she sprinted for their bedroom. In a matter of seconds she was fully garbed in a Paragon suit, her sword and pistol gripped in her gauntleted fists.

\*Stay here and seal the door,\* she ordered the Maliri Queen as she rushed out of her suite.

\*Be careful, Luna!\* Edraele urged her lover, closing the reinforced doors behind the assassin.

She strode over to her office, crossed the smaller room and retrieved an elegant laser pistol from a concealed compartment in her desk. The weapon powered up with a quiet hum, then Edraele placed it within easy reach next to the console. As she wondered who might have dared to attempt an assassination here at Genthalas, there was another burst of terror across the bond with Gaenna, quickly followed by blinding spikes of pain. Standing there in shock, Edraele witnessed the House Baelora matriarch’s last moments of suffering, until she abruptly disappeared from the Queen’s network of wards, her life snuffed out in a shroud of agony.

\*John!\* Edraele called out in alarm. \*Gaenna’s dead!\*

\*What?\* he replied, startled by her frantic cry.

\*Matriarch Gaenna Baelora has just been killed!\*

\*What the hell happened?!\* he demanded, his fear for the Maliri Queen making him curt.\*Are you and your girls in danger?\*

Before she could reply, Luna’s calm voice cut through her subconscious. \*I’m approaching Gaenna’s suite. Her bodyguards are still standing outside... the alarm hasn’t been raised.\*

\*Luna’s investigating now, John. I’m afraid I don’t know any details yet,\* Edraele quickly replied. \*The Young Matriarchs are all safe; we were about to have dinner together when I sensed Gaenna’s fear as she was attacked.\*

\*Please tell Luna to be careful, Edraele,\* he said, sounding worried. \*That goes for the rest of you too.\*

\*We will,\* she assured him. \*I’ll keep you informed.\*

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Sarinia sighed with satisfaction as she closed the comms interface and swept out of her mother’s office. Her plan had worked flawlessly and she’d finally achieved her life-long ambition... supplanting Gaenna as matriarch and claiming undisputed rule of House Baelora. She crossed the lounge and paused at the entrance to the dining room, her golden-eyed gaze sweeping across the twisted corpses sprawled across the floor.

The sight of her mother’s butchered corpse brought a triumphant smile to Sarinia’s lips, but her moment of jubilation was marred when she glanced at her siblings. Feeling a pang of regret, she knelt beside her youngest sister’s crumpled body. Tehlariene’s vacant stare was accusing, the pain of betrayal written across the noblewoman’s anguished features. Sarinia brushed her fingertips over Tehlariene’s face, closing her lifeless eyes for the last time.

“I’m sorry...” she whispered softly. “I wish there had been another way, but I had no choice.”

Behind her, Sarinia heard the doors to the guest suite open and she turned to see who had entered. The four House Baelora bodyguards rushed inside, their laser rifles raised and held at the ready. They all seemed to freeze at once, all eyes drawn to Gaenna Baelora’s blood-spattered corpse. Sarinia could see the bodyguards’ horror at the orgy of violence unleashed on the matriarch, their gaze flicking accusatorily to the obvious perpetrator who sat amidst the sprawl of corpses.

Accompanying them was a woman wearing a gleaming suit of white armour. This white-haired Maliri female paused momentarily when she saw Sarinia’s handiwork, then studied the blood-drenched noblewoman with curiosity rather than revulsion. Sarinia had been around enough hardened killers to recognise an experienced assassin when she saw one, and the lack of reaction to the gruesome sight of her mother’s butchered body spoke volumes.

Slowly rising to her feet, Sarinia made no threatening moves as she faced the white-armoured woman. “My name is Matriarch Sarinia Baelora. I cordially request an audience with Queen Edraele.”

The assassin studied her for a long moment, her head tilted slightly to one side as if listening to something. “Queen Edraele will see you now... Matriarch.”

Nodding to her graciously, Sarinia turned to address the four bodyguards, her tone confident and authoritative. “Please arrange for the disposal of these bodies. I would like this suite cleansed and my belongings brought here before I return.”

One of the guards blinked in surprise, then snapped out of her daze and dipped her head in supplication. “As you command, Matriarch.”

Sarinia stepped over her youngest sister’s body and glided out of the room, the bodyguards moving aside to make way for their new matriarch. Decades of obeying the ruler of their House made the transfer of power seamless and she smiled at their instinctive deference to her authority. Unfortunately, Sarinia’s stately departure was undermined by her squelching footsteps as she dripped a gory trail across the carpets.

Pausing to glance down at her dress, she then faced the assassin who accompanied her. “I would rather not meet the Queen for the first time while drenched in my mother’s blood. If Edraele will forgive me for keeping her waiting, I’d like to return to my quarters to make myself presentable.”

“The Queen forgives you... for keeping her waiting,” Luna replied, her rich voice kept carefully neutral as she gestured for Sarinia to proceed.

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Edraele stood by the window in her office, gazing out at the panoramic view. This time neither the golden spires of Genthalas nor the fleets of deadly warships held her attention, as she carefully informed John of everything she’d learned so far of Gaenna Baelora’s murder.

\*She was killed by her own daughter?!\* John asked incredulously.

\*Yes, I’m afraid so. Judging by the state of Gaenna’s mutilated corpse, Luna estimates she was stabbed at least fifty times. Sarinia also appears to have poisoned her four sisters while they were eating dinner together, leaving her the sole survivor of House Baelora.\*

\*How could she do that?\* he muttered, shocked that anyone could murder their own family.

Edraele frowned with regret. \*I should have foreseen this eventuality. When we started offering to rejuvenate the older matriarchs, this was the only logical outcome.\*

\*How the hell is butchering your own mother logical?!\*

\*John... you’re viewing this incident through the eyes of a Terran, not a Maliri. A matriarch’s daughter spends her entire life plotting against her sisters and dreaming of the day she can replace her mother as Matriarch of their House. Sarinia is at least a century old... she’s been waiting a very long time for Gaenna’s demise.\*

\*Why?\* he asked in confusion. \*If she wanted her mother dead, why didn’t she just kill her decades ago?\*

\*Because that’s not how things are done. A matriarch’s daughters must wait until their mother either dies of natural causes, or is killed by a rival matriarch,\* Edraele replied patiently. She could sense him about to object, so she quickly continued, \*Do you remember I told you about House rankings? How not just the planetary systems and ships under your control determine your status, but the strength of the noble household too?\*

\*I remember...\* He paused for a moment. \*Tsarra mentioned that after her mother and sisters had been assassinated, she had to fight tooth and nail to keep the House Perfaren ranking.\*

\*Yes, exactly. The death of any family members can have a considerable impact to your House rank... and that loss of status is something any Maliri noblewoman wants to avoid at all costs. On a more practical note, why would a matriarch ever have any daughters if they tried to kill her as soon as they became adults? There had to be some form of structure to the rivalry between the Houses, or the Regency would have devolved into total anarchy millennia ago.\*

\*Alright... I can see that makes a sick kind of sense,\* he grudgingly conceded. \*But I still don’t see why it’s logical that Sarinia would kill her mother.\*

\*If you’d given Gaenna what she so desperately wanted and restored her youth, she would have outlived her daughters by at least a century. We’ve also outlawed assassinations by rival Houses, so we essentially took away any chance of Sarinia ever becoming matriarch... and she reacted accordingly. Try asking Irillith what she would have done under the same circumstances.\*

There was a long pause as John conferred with Edraele’s daughter.

\*Yeah, she would have murdered you too,\* he eventually muttered, his voice bleak. \*I’m responsible for this mess, aren’t I?\*

\*Your intentions were good... but matriarchal succession has been a fundamental part of the Maliri nobility for nearly ten-thousand years. It was inevitable that there would be some... complications... as a result of radically changing Maliri culture.\*

John let out a weary sigh. \*You know what they say about good intentions...\*

\*Yes, but I firmly believe you’re paving the way to heaven, not hell,\* Edraele said emphatically. \*Don’t be disheartened by this setback, John. If anyone is at fault, it’s me for not anticipating this kind of reaction. Fortunately, the old matriarchs appear to be keeping their offspring blissfully unaware of events transpiring at Genthalas. Sarinia and her sisters are the first noble daughters to have ventured here... and they suffered torture at Gaenna’s hand for daring to disobey her orders to stay on their homeworld.\*

\*I don’t blame you for this, Edraele,\* John said, sounding frustrated rather than upset. \*We’ve had so much to deal with recently, things were bound to start slipping through the cracks. You warned me weeks ago that I needed to deal with the older matriarchs and if I’d been able to stay at Genthalas, we could’ve resolved this without bloodshed.\*

\*Larn’kelnar’s games have had far-reaching consequences,\* Edraele agreed.

\*So what are we going to do about Sarinia?\* he asked, a pensive edge to his voice. \*She just murdered her entire family. We can’t condone that kind of behaviour, even if we inadvertently created this situation.\*

\*We have a number of options available. Sarinia broke one of the few edicts I’ve issued since becoming Queen and, by right, she should face execution. Alternatively, you could commute her sentence and incarcerate her for life... which would be an equally effective deterrent to the Maliri nobility. One important thing to bear in mind though, is that Sarinia is the last surviving member of her family. If you do decide to execute her or have her imprisoned, we’d need to break up House Baelora and split its territory between neighbouring Houses.\*

\*We need to handle this situation very carefully,\* John said, lost in thought. \*We’ve got to find a way of stopping further assassinations.\*

\*Let me speak with Sarinia, then we can discuss her punishment afterwards.\*

\*Alright... let me know when you’re done talking to her,\* he said, suddenly sounding bone-weary.

\*Get some rest, John,\* Edraele said softly. \*You’re exhausted after doing so much shaping today. Sarinia is already in custody, so there’s no need to make a snap decision on her fate. We can discuss this later once you’ve had some sleep and fully recovered.\*

\*Alright, that sounds good to me. With a little luck, we should intercept the Kirrix fleet in about 7 hours, so I’ll try to get some rest then talk to you before the battle. Oh, that reminds me... Alyssa’s improvements to the Invictus’ hyper-warp speed should halve the time it’ll take us to get back to Genthalas.\*

\*That’s the best news I’ve had in weeks,\* Edraele murmured, a note of yearning in her voice. \*Pleasant dreams, my lord... I long for your return home.\*

\*Thanks, honey, I can’t wait either. I’ll speak to you soon.\*

The Maliri Queen smiled, feeling a fluttering of anticipation in her stomach. It seemed like a lifetime ago that John had last been in Maliri Space and even then it had only been for a brief rendezvous at the border. While that fleeting visit had been wonderful, Edraele desperately wanted to help John relax and take his mind off all his recent woes.

\*We’re about to arrive at your suite, Edraele,\* Luna quietly informed her.

\*Bring her straight through to my office please, Luna,\* she replied, turning away from the window to focus on the door.

A few moments later, Luna led Sarinia inside, the House Baelora noblewoman wearing a pristine set of ornate matriarchal robes. Edraele appraised the younger woman for a moment, silently impressed by her poise and bearing. Although Sarinia had only just been elevated to matriarch, she already possessed a quiet air of authority, having spent her entire life training for this moment. That kind of confidence was something Edraele had been attempting to teach the Young Matriarchs, but as the youngest daughters of their respective Houses, it did not come naturally to them.

Sarinia bowed respectfully, then couldn’t help staring at the Queen in fascination. “It’s an honour to meet you, Queen Edraele. Thank you for granting me an audience at such short notice.”

“Under the circumstances, I thought it prudent to speak with you as soon as possible,” Edraele replied, before gesturing to the sofas facing each other. “Please... have a seat.”

Nodding graciously, Sarinia sat down on the closest chaise longue. Her gaze flicked to the side as Luna padded across the room and she watched the assassin lean indolently against the wall. A casual glance would lead someone to believe that Luna was disinterested in the meeting, but Sarinia could see a gauntleted hand idly caressing the hilt of her curved sword. She was under no illusions that any threatening moves towards the Queen would swiftly result in her head being parted from her shoulders.

Turning her attention to the stunning white-haired beauty who sat opposite, Sarinia said contritely, “There is much I would like to discuss with you, Queen Edraele... but first I feel I must offer you an apology.”

“You wish to apologise for brutally murdering your family?”

Sarinia could feel the disapproval in Edraele’s gaze and she couldn’t help blushing with embarrassment, her composure wavering. “No, my Queen.”

Edraele raised an eyebrow. “No? Are you aware that I had issued an edict strictly forbidding all further assassinations?”

“My mother told me several weeks ago that she’d decided to put a moratorium on assassinations... which was profoundly out of character. I discovered earlier today that the decision was actually made by you, not Gaenna... but I must admit... that didn’t deter me from my course.”

“If you don’t respect my authority, why bother apologising to me?”

Leaning forward, Sarinia’s golden eyes sparkled as she said earnestly, “Oh, but I do respect you, Edraele! Very much so, in fact. I wanted to apologise for wasting your time.”

“You consider this conversation a waste of time?” Edraele asked, startled by the younger woman’s answer. “Should we move straight on to your execution then?”

“I sincerely hope it doesn’t come to that,” Sarinia replied with a wry smile. “No, I wanted to apologise for the subterfuge with Kali Loraleth. The only way I could think of to separate Gaenna from her bodyguards, was to have you subject her to a stern reprimand for ignoring the ban on the use of neural whip. I knew my mother would be incandescent with rage afterwards, and stop at nothing to interrogate her daughters to find out who was responsible... but she would never allow her bodyguards to overhear that she’d been humiliated.”

“So Gaenna dismissed her protective detail, leaving her vulnerable,” Edraele murmured, looking at Sarinia with newfound respect for her ingenuity. “Weren’t you the least bit concerned that I’d take offense at being manipulated?”

“I heard that Baen’thelas admires a woman with a keen mind and a rebellious streak, so I hoped that you might have a similar outlook. If I did offend you, then I truly am sorry.”

Edraele inclined her head in acknowledgement, then reached for the decanter of ruby liquid on the table between them. “Drink?”

Sarinia nodded politely, then accepted the fluted glass. She sipped the wine, then her eyebrows climbed in appreciation. “A House Holaris vintage... it seems my mother isn’t the only matriarch eager to sup from the fountain of youth.”

The Queen’s full lips curled into a wry smile. “You certainly have been working hard to uncover all our secrets. I suppose that now your mother is no longer with us, you intend to be the beneficiary of the deal I brokered with Gaenna on Baen’thelas’ behalf?”

“I can’t think of a finer trading partner for House Baelora’s Vrysandral Spice,” Sarinia replied, her expression turning coy. “It will be a pleasure doing business with you, my Queen.”

Edraele shook her head. “So you expect me to forgive your transgressions and simply allow you to replace Gaenna in the Council of Matriarchs?”

Sarinia took a sip from her glass, then put it down on the table. Leaning forward, she said earnestly, “I can only imagine how difficult it’s been, trying to smooth over centuries of bitter hatred between rival matriarchs and force them to unite behind your banner. I am not my mother, Edraele. If you give me a chance, I promise I will be a loyal and supportive ally.”

Swirling the glass in her hand, Edraele stared at the exotic wine. “In truth, my relationship with the elder matriarchs has been somewhat... fractious. Your mother in particular was a constant source of irritation, particularly with her dismissive outlook towards the Young Matriarchs. If it were up to me, I would be strongly tempted to consider your proposal... but the situation is more complicated than you are aware. I understand your motivations for eliminating Gaenna, but you went too far when you murdered your sisters as well.”

With a rueful sigh, Sarinia said, “I would have spared them if I could, but leaving them alive was too much of a risk.”

“I can’t imagine any of your sisters would have posed much of a threat, not once you’d replaced your mother as matriarch,” Edraele said, looking unconvinced.

“I was never in any serious danger from any of them,” Sarinia agreed, waving a hand dismissively. “My only concern was how you would react to news of my mother’s early retirement.”

Edraele studied her for a moment, finally understanding what had driven the young woman to sororicide. “Kali told you about the part I played in establishing the Young Matriarchs...”

Giving her a look filled with respect, Sarinia said, “I have to commend you for the remarkable way you seized the throne, Edraele. Assassinating four of the matriarchs from the top seven Houses and replacing them with their pliable youngest daughters was a masterstroke. Kali is quite delightful; so innocent and eager to please... she practically worships you. She actually reminded me a lot of my youngest sister, which was why I couldn’t afford to take the chance that you would simply execute me and install Tehlariene as another puppet matriarch under your control.”

“So you killed all your sisters,” Edraele said quietly. “Leaving you as the only surviving member of House Baelora...”

“Tehlariene would have made a terrible matriarch,” Sarinia said, lifting her glass for another sip. “Myrdina, Lieralia, and Rosanae were also equally poor choices. Honestly, I did you a favour in eliminating them as candidates to replace me.”

“It seems you’ve thought of everything,” Edraele said, an undercurrent of admiration to her voice. Her expression turned rueful as she continued, “Unfortunately, as clever as you seem to be, you do not know Baen’thelas. He was particularly vexed by the rampant murders within the Maliri Regency and he’s gone to considerable effort to eliminate further assassinations. He was appalled to hear that you slaughtered your own mother and poisoned your sisters... and I’m afraid that in all likelihood, you’ve sealed your fate.”

“So what does the future hold for me?” Sarinia asked, looking surprisingly unperturbed. “Am I to be dealt with by swift execution? Is House Baelora to face dissolution, its holdings and assets divided between our neighbours? I know Meriel Romenor and Keishara Venkalyn have viewed Baeloran territory with hungry eyes for centuries...”

Edraele paused, studying the self-assured woman who sat before her. Sarinia didn’t seem to be the least bit concerned about the dire future she’d just portrayed, in fact she still maintained an air of quiet confidence.

“You don’t have the look of a woman facing imminent disaster,” she accused the House Baelora matriarch, her eyes narrowing with suspicion. “What are you up to?”

Sarinia sipped her wine and allowed herself a small smile.

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Thalia Romenor stared at the holo-screen in rapt fascination, enthralled by the vision of masculinity before her. The thought of coupling with a border male had never been high on her agenda, preoccupied as she’d been with avoiding her mother’s wrath and sisters’ machinations, but this man was no mere Maliri. He was so tall and wonderfully muscular... the thought of being held in his strong arms made her flush with excitement, an unfamiliar tingling in her loins leaving her panting with lust.

Tracing a fingertip over his lips, Thalia could only imagine what it would be like to be kissed by him... this Baen’thelas. Her trembling fingers broke the holographic image, causing it to flicker and momentarily breaking the spell. She blinked her dry eyes and darted a glance at the chronometer and was shocked to realise she’d been gazing at him for over twenty minutes.

She didn’t have the heart to close the photograph and be parted from his handsome face, so Thalia chose to move it aside to view the accompanying message again. The fanciful tale of matriarchs conspiring together to achieve immortality had seemed like a bizarre joke at first, at least until she reached the end and activated Sarinia Baelora’s personal message. It wasn’t her blood-soaked face which had convinced Thalia there might be a grain of truth to the story, but the gleam of triumph in those golden eyes... that of a first daughter earning her rightful place as matriarch.

Then of course she’d studied the pictures that Sarinia had sent, each one more shocking than the last. Meriel Romenor’s fanciful story about white hair being the latest matriarchal fashion actually appeared to be true, but the images of the five long-haired matriarchs and particularly Queen Edraele had shaken Thalia to her bones. The final picture of Baen’thelas left no doubt in her mind that every word of Sarinia’s story had been the truth. Even if it wasn’t, Thalia couldn’t care less; she would do –anything– for the chance to bed a male as magnificent as him.

“See you at the next Council meeting, Sarinia Baelora,” Thalia said with a wicked grin, reaching for the jewelled dagger she kept in a concealed sheath under her desk.

The walk to her mother’s palatial suite was a surreal experience. For the first time she could remember, Thalia was actually looking forward to seeing Meriel Romenor. The hardest thing was hiding her smile of anticipation when she reached the armoured Maliri guards standing sentry outside the matriarchal apartments. She maintained a familiar expression of anxious tension as she breezed past the House Romenor soldiers, pretending to be too preoccupied with another fraught meeting with her mother to bother acknowledging the guards in any fashion.

They still nodded to her respectfully and opened the reinforced doors, which slid shut behind Thalia by the time she’d crossed the foyer. Raised voices reached her sharp ears and she paused, listening to the faint sound of angry words being exchanged coming from deeper in the quarters. Creeping down the corridor towards her mother’s large and opulent office, she recognised one of the voices as that of Nithroel, the eldest of her two younger siblings.

“You thought I’d just let you torture me forever?!” the enraged Maliri noblewoman screeched.

Thalia didn’t hear any response, just the sounds of a frantic scuffle and strangled choking. She approached the door and found Nithroel kneeling astride their mother, her long blue fingers wrapped tight around Meriel’s throat. Stopping to stare at the mortal struggle, Thalia watched in shock as the House Romenor Matriarch jerked around, her legs kicking ineffectively at the floor as she tried to dislodge her daughter. Their mother had always been a powerful and imposing figure, so to see her reduced to this pathetic state was... a thing of beauty.

“There’ll be no immortality for you, mother,” Nithroel crooned, a sadistic glee to her taunts as she squeezed the life out of Meriel. “It’ll be me that will live forever, taking my rightful place as ruler of-”

Nithroel’s gloating speech was cut off mid-rant as Thalia plunged her long dagger into her sister’s back. The mortally wounded noblewoman cried out in agony as the blade pierced through her heart, and she could only stare in mute horror at the bloody tip that now protruded from her chest.

“Don’t you mean *my* rightful place?” Thalia whispered softly in her sister’s pointed ear.

“Glurkkk...” Nithroel gurgled, her final words drowned out in a fountain of blood.

Shoving her mortally wounded sibling aside, Thalia saw gratitude in her mother’s eyes, a look that changed to terror when Meriel saw the gleeful anticipation on her eldest daughter’s face.

“Thalia... I-I can... explain!” she pleaded through wheezing coughs.

“The time of listening to your lies is over, mother,” Thalia declared, brandishing the jewelled dagger and letting her sister’s blood drip onto Meriel’s face. “Nithroel was right about one thing... there’ll be no immortality for you.”

The panting matriarch clawed frantically at the carpet, her eyes locked on the door leading to her personal armoury as she tried to drag herself across the office.

Thalia smiled, shaking her head in amusement as she strode ahead to cut her off. Standing directly in front of Meriel, she sneered in contempt at the leader of House Romenor. “Ah, so desperate to cling to life... I’d wager Baen’thelas made quite the impression, didn’t he mother? I shall so enjoy being mated with him, especially knowing that you never sullied his bedchamber.”

Meriel’s bleak expression turned to one of surprise, then she stopped crawling and lay her head on the plush carpet in weary resignation. Her chest began to shake as she laughed, her mirth coming out in wheezing chuckles.

“What’s so funny?!” Thalia demanded, her mother’s mirth ruining her moment of triumph. “Answer me you miserable old crone!”

Meriel lifted her head and smirked at her daughter, before glancing behind Thalia towards the armoury door. “Nithroel... wasn’t alone... both of you... forgot Phelora...” she wheezed.

Thalia’s eyes widened in alarm and she whirled around, finding herself facing her youngest sister, who stood with a laser pistol in her shaking hand.

“You don’t deserve him,” Phelora said, an uncharacteristically determined edge to her voice.

Before Thalia could utter a word of panicked protest, the laser pistol squealed, blasting a glowing hole straight through her forehead.

Phelora turned the pistol on her mother, her face set in a grim mask. “None of you do.”

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Edraele’s purple eyes widened in surprise as she felt Meriel Romenor experience a deluge of intense emotions, up until the point that the matriarch was abruptly extinguished from her network of wards. No sooner had the leader of the Ninth Maliri House been attacked, the eleven remaining older matriarchs began to react with shock, dread, fear... and pain. It was as if their daughters had coordinated the assault, striking at their mothers across the Maliri Protectorate within moments of each other.

“What did you do?!” Edraele demanded, instinctively knowing that the woman seated opposite was involved. “Twelve more matriarchs are being attacked!”

There was surprise and curiosity in Sarinia’s inquisitive gaze. “How did you know? We’ve received no incoming calls...”

“We’re all psychically linked,” Edraele snapped, waving away the question dismissively. “Now answer my question: What did you do to trigger these attacks on the matriarchs?”

Sarinia’s eyebrows climbed in astonishment at that revelation, then she sat back on the sofa, a smile of satisfaction on her face. “I simply informed their daughters of a few interesting facts... and made your life considerably easier, my Queen.”

Edraele resisted the urge to fire more questions at the woman seated opposite, realising she knew the answers already. “You’re emulating my assassinations that led to the Young Matriarchs controlling their Houses.”

“My mother was a stubborn and vindictive shrew, consumed with jealousy and grudges that lasted for centuries... just like all the rest of those spiteful old hags. You said yourself that your relationship with the existing matriarchy was ‘fractious’... now they’ll be replaced by a dozen eager, pliable young women, all desperate to earn the favour of the magnificent Maliri Queen.”

“That wasn’t the only reason though, was it?” Edraele asked after a moment’s pause, giving Sarinia a shrewd look. “In all probability, there’ll be a dozen new matriarchs soon heading to Genthalas, each of whom earned their position by murdering their family.”

“With several daughters out to kill their mother at any cost, I don’t fancy the existing matriarchs’ chances,” Sarinia agreed, a sly smile on her face. “So... I’ll be sharing my newly acquired status with a dozen other matriarchs who gained their position exactly the same way I did. Will you execute all thirteen of us and divide up our Houses? That seems like a highly impractical solution.”

Slowly shaking her head, Edraele marvelled at the woman’s Machiavellian cunning. “And of course, they’ll all be eternally grateful to you for helping them become matriarch... and gaining the associated benefits that position entails.”

“I’m a firm believer in seeking out allies,” Sarinia conceded, her smile broadening. “Kali also mentioned that she’s had to endure taunts from those spiteful old crones; perhaps by eliminating their tormentors, I might make a few friends with the Young Matriarchs as well.”

Edraele’s face shadowed and she looked away. The frenzied life and death struggle for succession was still playing out across her empire, with five of the thirteen old matriarchs already slain at their daughters’ hands, their empathic presence extinguished from her network of wards. From Sarinia’s viewpoint, her plot had numerous benefits and almost no drawbacks... but she didn’t know Kali Loraleth half as well as she thought she did. When Kali discovered that she had inadvertently triggered a bloodbath amongst the nobility, the last thing she would ever want is to be friends with Sarinia.

And if Kali was left heartbroken, John’s stance towards the architect of this plot was not going to be based on pragmatism.

“What is it?” Sarinia asked with concern, frowning when she saw the Queen’s melancholy mood.

Edraele rose from her seat and glanced at Luna, who stepped forward to escort the House Baelora matriarch from the office.

“Edraele! What’s wrong?!” Sarinia asked in alarm as the assassin padded closer.

“You will be detained in your quarters until Baen’thelas returns,” Edraele said quietly, turning her back on Sarinia and gliding over to the window. “He will pass judgement on you for murdering your family and for your conspiracy to kill a dozen matriarchs along with most of their daughters.”

“Wait!” Sarinia protested, as Luna took a firm grip on her arm. “Why are you treating me like a common criminal?! You’ll benefit from their deaths! I did this for you!”

Edraele glanced at Sarinia over a shoulder, a look of sadness in her purple eyes. “You shouldn’t have involved Kali. I don’t know how to stop her blaming herself for what you’ve done.”

Looking at her incredulously, Sarinia shook her head in protest. “That’s absurd! One woman’s hurt feelings are inconsequential!”

“Not when John loves her...” Edraele murmured, turning away to stare out the window.

No longer paying attention to Sarinia’s protests as Luna dragged her from the office, Edraele winced as Matriarch Keishara Venkalyn vanished from her psychic network in a sharp stab of agony.

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“Six dead already...” John muttered, shaking his head in disbelief.

Alyssa and the twins looked at him with concern as he sat dejectedly on the illuminated steps that lead up to the Command Podium. They had only just left the Briefing Room when Edraele warned them of the concerted attacks against the matriarchs.

“John, you need to be prepared for the worst,” Irillith said, sitting beside him and stroking his arm. “I’d be surprised if any of the existing matriarchs survive this. They’re each outnumbered by several homicidal daughters who have the benefit of surprise, decades of suppressed hatred, and nothing left to lose...”

“How many Maliri are going to die?” he asked, lifting his tired eyes to look at each of the twins in turn.

Tashana knelt in front of him and gave him a sympathetic look. “Most noble Houses consist of a matriarch and at least four daughters. I think we can expect all the matriarchs to be slain, along with at least three of their daughters, leaving only a sole survivor.”

“That’s not going to be the youngest daughter, is it?” he asked woodenly, imagining a dozen innocent girls like Kali Loraleth being plunged into a brutal battle for survival.

The twins shared a glance, then shook their heads at the same time.

“It’s highly unlikely,” Irillith said with sympathy. “I’m sorry, John... but the daughters most likely to survive will be ruthless killers. Think of the way I behaved before I joined you.”

He grimaced reflexively, then put his arm around her when she saw his reaction. “Sorry, honey.”

“No need to apologise, I used to be an absolute bitch,” she replied light-heartedly, leaning into his sideways hug.

\*John... I know this situation isn’t ideal, but in one way, it doesn’t really matter which daughter becomes matriarch,\* Edraele said gently. \*None of them will be as bad as the mothers they’ll be replacing.\*

\*Not ideal?!\* he blurted out incredulously. \*Edraele, this is a disaster! How did Sarinia even find out so much about what we’d been up to? It can’t have come from her mother, not if Gaenna was keeping her in the dark all this time.\*

There was a long pause, then the Maliri Queen confessed, \*I’m sorry, John... that was my fault. Kali wanted to talk to Sarinia and find out what she was doing on Genthalas, with me monitoring the conversation to help limit how much we revealed. Unfortunately, I was distracted and Sarinia found out far more than I ever intended.\*

\*You were distracted?!\* he blurted out, unable to believe Edraele could be so careless.

Before she could reply, Alyssa squatted down beside John and looked him in the eyes. \*Kali met Sarinia at the same time you started thinking about your plans for Sakura. There was no way Edraele could concentrate on Kali while that was going on.\*

John froze, suddenly understanding all-too-well what had debilitated his Maliri Matriarch. \*Shit... I’m sorry, Edraele. I’m responsible for this mess, not you.\*

\*It was simply an unfortunate chain of events that led to this outcome. I don’t think blaming yourself is productive,\* Edraele replied, her voice soft and soothing. \*I think the most important course of action now, is to focus on how we deal with the aftermath and our approach towards the replacement matriarchs that arrive at Genthalas.\*

He hesitated, surprised by the hint of anticipation to her voice. \*Edraele... were you involved in this somehow?\*

\*John!\* Alyssa exclaimed, frowning at him reproachfully. \*You know she’d never go behind your back like that.\*

\*It’s alright, Alyssa,\* Edraele said, sounding quite unperturbed. \*We discussed this kind of scenario only a few weeks ago... it’s only natural to be suspicious, especially after what happened with the Young Matriarchs. To answer your question, John: no, I had no involvement. However, I must admit that I’m pleased Sarinia has neatly resolved the problem of dealing with the old matriarchs. I know you were reluctant to reward them with immortality, not after a lifetime of cruelty and murder.\*

\*I’d hardly call it a neat resolution...\* John muttered, his face falling as he thought about all the dead Maliri noblewomen.

\*John... this problem was never going to end without bloodshed,\* Edraele said, her voice gentle but with a firm edge to it. \*I imagine a perfect resolution from your point of view, would have been to replace all the older matriarchs with their youngest daughters, correct?\*

\*Yes, but not by assassinating their mothers!\* he protested.

\*The existing matriarchs would never have accepted retirement,\* she explained with a rueful frown. \*The only way you could have realistically achieved your ideal goal, would have been to order a sweep of assassinations to eliminate them all.\*

\*Not necessarily... I could’ve changed the matriarchs so they’d willingly retire in peace,\* he replied, shaking his head obstinately.

\*Would you have been willing to forcefully change the personalities of all thirteen matriarchs? Because you’d have to... it’s the only way you’d be able to convince them to retire.\*

\*Alright... I see your point,\* he grudgingly conceded. Running a hand through his hair, he let out a weary sigh. \*I never wanted to be making these kinds of decisions. It seems like there’s never a simple solution to any of these problems... and no matter what I try to do, it still ends up a mess.\*

\*Sometimes you’re going to be forced to make unpleasant choices to get the outcome you want,\* Edraele said, her voice ringing with sympathy. \*There are often unforeseen consequences to your actions when you’re deciding the fate of billions of people, but in my experience, postponing a decision only makes matters worse.\*

\*Sarinia’s coup certainly proved that...\* he agreed with a rueful frown.

\*John... could I make a request?\* the Maliri Queen asked tentatively.

\*You don’t have to ask permission, Edraele. Just tell me what you need.\*

\*Can you return to Maliri Space as quickly as possible? The sooner you can meet with the new matriarchs and connect them to me, the less chance there will be of this situation escalating. There’s never been so much upheaval amongst the Maliri nobility and with thirteen Houses likely to change matriarchs overnight, I have no idea what might happen next. Left free to run amok, they might even start fighting with each other, attempting to impress you by raising their House ranking. Sarinia discovered that you admired Tsarra Perfaren for leading Tashana’s rebellion; I think that might have encouraged her to instigate this bloodbath to get your attention.”

John rubbed his hands over his face. \*It seems like everything’s backfiring on me at the moment...\*

Edraele could hear the exhaustion in his defeated tone. \*Go and get some rest, John. I’ll try to find out exactly what’s been happening in the noble Houses and what the casualties are. When you wake up, I’ll give you as comprehensive an update as possible.\*

\*Thanks, honey,\* he said with a weary sigh. Looking at Alyssa and the twins, he continued grimly, “We need to get back to Maliri Space as quickly as possible.”

Irillith looked troubled as she nodded. “I agree with my mother, that would be wise.”

When Alyssa saw John look startled at her lack of surprise, she stroked his hand and said, “I’ve been keeping the girls informed.” Switching to telepathy, she added, \*Not the part about Sakura, obviously.\*

He acknowledged that with a grateful smile. “Thank you. So how quickly can we get back to Genthalas?”

Alyssa looked at him curiously. “Do you still want to go ahead with intercepting the Kirrix fleet?”

“We haven’t got any choice, there are thousands of Trankaran lives at stake,” he replied with a frown. “I still want to visit Olympus so that Rachel can do her healing... but we can’t afford to hang around. We’ll stay for as long as she needs, then leave as soon as she’s done.”

“So you’re postponing any decision regarding Lina?” she asked, her cerulean eyes speculative.

“Alyssa...”

“Hey, I’m not pushing you for an answer either way, I’m just being practical,” the blonde replied with a disarming smile. “Unless we take Lina with us to Genthalas, you’re not going to have the time to push her through the Change.”

“I want to discuss it with Charles, Lynette, and Lina, but that’ll have to be it for now.”

“Fair enough,” she agreed with a nod. “What about hunting down the bastards who tried to kill Maria and everyone at Olympus?”

“Goddamn it...” John snarled, grinding his teeth in frustration. “We’re going to have to postpone dealing with them for the moment too.”

“I can start tracking them down as soon as we hit Terran Space,” Irillith volunteered, a fierce gleam in her eyes. “If I can discover who was involved, I can make their lives a living hell without us needing to change course.”

John hugged her in gratitude. “Do it. I want those assholes to suffer.”

“And I assume we’re still picking up Jack and Mateo?” Alyssa concluded.

“Yeah, definitely,” John replied with a nod. “Bringing them home to Maria is the least we can do.”

“It’s not much of a diversion anyway, just a few extra hours,” she agreed. “It’ll also mean a lot to Calara; she’s really looking forward to seeing them.”

“So if we hit the Kirrix, visit the Terran border fleet to pick up Jack and Mateo, drop them off at Jericho, then briefly stop at Olympus, how soon can we be back at Genthalas?”

“It’ll take us just under four days... but that’s not including stoppage time,” she replied, while stifling a yawn.

John rose to his feet and offered her a hand. “You’re as tired as me. Come on, time to hit the hay.”

The twins gave him a kiss, then waved goodbye to John and Alyssa as they left the Bridge.

With John lost in thought, the couple descended in the red anti-gravity field in silence. Alyssa glanced at John as they stepped out of the grav-tube on Deck Three, then slipped her hand into his and gave it a comforting squeeze.

“I know how upset you are about the Maliri. I wish we could have done something to prevent it,” she said sincerely.

He interlaced his fingers with hers. “I just can’t help wondering what I should have done differently,” he said, with a dejected sigh. “I feel like I failed them... that maybe there was some way I could’ve resolved this matriarch situation without it turning into a massacre.”

Alyssa flicked her fingers at the door controls, opening the way into the Lagoon. “John... please don’t take this the wrong way, but I can’t help feeling that you’re looking at the Maliri through rose-tinted glasses.”

“What do you mean?” he asked in confusion, as they crossed the bridge that arced over the aquamarine pool.

She stopped and turned to face him. “Just think about the Maliri you speak to every day. What have Edraele, Tashana, and Irillith all got in common?”

“They’re related?” he guessed, rubbing his temple and grimacing. “Sorry, honey... I give up. I’m too tired for puzzles.”

“They were all severely fucked up... until you healed all the trauma they’d been through and radically changed their personalities. Now the three of them are lovely... but you know what Maliri society is like, it’s got a nasty way of twisting its noblewomen into really evil monsters. We probably would’ve ended up having to fight the old matriarchs if you hadn’t ‘claimed’ their species.”

“Alright, that’s true enough,” he conceded. “But I did claim the Maliri... so what’s your point?”

“Basically what Edraele was trying to tell you earlier: the older matriarchs were bad news... and most of their daughters were too. There was never going to be a quick fix for this. In the best case scenario, you were going to have to fuck some sense into at least fifty cruel and sadistic bitches.”

He rolled his eyes at her charming turn of phrase. “Alyssa...”

“Hey, I’m just being honest here,” she said with a shrug. “You would have needed the matriarchs on their knees blowing you for weeks until you could sort them all out. Just think how much hassle it was trying to heal Irillith and Tashana, and they only had to endure Edraele’s shit for fifty years. Those matriarchs had been tormented by their mothers for at least a century before they replaced them, then they spent another hundred years torturing their own daughters. They were all severely fucked up... and this wasn’t fixable with a simple blow and go.”

\*Alyssa’s quite correct,\* Edraele said quietly. \*If the matriarchs were ruling the Brimorian Enclave, we’d be celebrating their demise.\*

“This doesn’t feel like something I should be celebrating,” John said, grimacing with distaste.

“We’re not saying that,” Alyssa said, caressing his cheek. “I just don’t want you thinking of them as a bunch of doe-eyed damsels in distress. The matriarchs were evil... and they were training their daughters to be just as bad.”

“What about their youngest daughters though?” he asked, thinking of the sweet-natured Young Matriarchs. “They definitely weren’t all like that... Edraele specifically chose Kali and the rest because they hadn’t been corrupted by Maliri politics.”

“Like Edraele said, the only way to save them would’ve been a shitload of assassinations, which you never would have agreed to.” She knew he was about to suggest changing their personalities instead, so she pressed a finger to his lips to let her continue without interruption. “John, we never had the time. We’re talking about at least fifty women, each of them needing a couple of days of dedicated attention from you at the bare minimum. So basically three months of you just sitting around Genthalas getting blowjobs... does that sound remotely plausible to you considering all the shit we’ve had to deal with recently?”

“We’ve barely had three days of downtime, let alone three months,” he conceded, thinking about the relentless succession of battles they’d fought.

\*Even if you had the time, there was still no guarantee of success,\* Edraele said emphatically. \*Bringing all the matriarchs’ daughters to Genthalas would have entailed a huge risk. If just one of them had prematurely discovered their mother’s plans for immortality, I’m quite certain we’d have been facing an almost identical scenario.\*

John pulled Alyssa closer and held her in a tight hug. “I know you two are just trying to stop me feeling guilty... but thank you.”

“Please don’t blame yourself,” she whispered in his ear. “This really wasn’t your fault.”

He nodded, realising she was right. Pulling back he gave her a kiss. “Like I said... thank you.”

She returned his smile, then walked with him across the rest of the bridge towards the Observatory. The door opened before them at the snap of her fingers and when they entered the oval chamber, John found Sakura, Calara, and Marika waiting naked on the bed.

Alyssa slipped off her shoes, then started to peel off her clothes. “Hi, ladies. Sorry to keep you waiting.”

John gaped at the three kneeling women, then frowned at the stripping blonde. “Alyssa, I’m exhausted! I’m no use to anyone like this!”

She gave him a coy smile, her hand slipping down to caress his quad. “You’re also full up again and you have a hungry pussy... cat to feed.” Gazing into his eyes, she added, \*I assume you’ll want to top up all the girls before the battle, just in case you need to heal us in an emergency? If so, that means you need to feed Sakura now if you want to prepare her for the assault on the Hive Queen.\*

He blinked in surprise that her reasoning was eminently practical rather than just playful, then nodded his agreement.

Alyssa gave him a tender kiss, then peeled away to pad across the bed. “Don’t mind me, I’m just here for the show...”

John kicked off his shoes, then walked over to join the waiting trio, who were gazing up at him expectantly. “My brown-eyed girls,” he murmured affectionately, caressing Marika’s cheek as he smiled at each of them in turn.

Calara and Sakura grinned back at him and hugged the catgirl sitting between them.

“We thought you might like the three of us together,” Calara explained.

Sakura kissed the Nymph on the cheek, then looked up at John again. “Marika’s a sweetheart. She didn’t mind sharing.”

The tabby-striped Nymph looked absolutely thrilled to be part of the trio, her chocolate-coloured eyes sparkling with joy. “Will you let us take care of you, Master? You won’t need to move a muscle!”

He chuckled and nodded. “I hope you’re not expecting an athletic performance, I’m struggling to stay awake at the moment.”

The three girls pulled him down to the bed, giggling together in anticipation as they swiftly removed his clothes. In less than a minute, John found himself lying on his back with his head resting in Marika’s lap, the Nymph gently massaging his temples. Sakura and Calara draped themselves across him, with their breasts pressed against his chest, the soft warmth of their nubile bodies stirring a part of him that definitely wasn’t tired.

“Alyssa said you wanted to talk to us?” Calara asked inquisitively, as she idly stroked his firm muscles.

John glanced to his right, where the blonde was curled up under the covers. Alyssa gave him a sleepy smile, then blew a kiss in his general direction.

Looking up into the girls’ curious gaze again, he was struck by the similarities and contrasts between the three women. Marika’s gentle feline eyes had the same vertically-slitted pupils as Jade’s emerald orbs, the black centre currently eclipsing the brown irises with her arousal. Sakura’s almond-shaped eyes were a richer, darker hue, like windows into her lovely soul. Finally there was Calara, her soft brown gaze making him feel like he was being wrapped up in a loving hug. What they all shared was the way that looked at him with absolute devotion, a sight that warmed his heart and banished the weariness he’d been feeling.

“I’m sorry I wasn’t able to join you in the Dojo this afternoon,” he said, cupping Calara’s and Sakura’s faces as he looked up at them. “I really wanted to watch you train and spend some proper time with you, but today’s been so busy with preparing the Invictus for battle.”

Sakura gave him an amiable shrug. “That’s quite alright, you can join us anytime.”

Calara nodded. “We understand... you don’t need to apologise.”

He smiled at them gratefully, before focusing on the Latina. “I also wanted to talk to you about your father staying on the Invictus. Is there anything you think we should do to make his visit more enjoyable? I know you told him about our living arrangements, but I don’t want him to feel uncomfortable while he’s here.”

Calara’s gaze softened, her lips curling up into a tender smile. “You’re adorable... you’re more worried about my dad’s visit than going into battle with a Hive Queen.”

“I like Jack... and I don’t want to disappoint him,” John said self-consciously. “Besides, you’ll always be his little girl, and I know he feels very protective towards you.”

“Don’t worry about a thing, just leave it with me,” she insisted, her tender gaze full of gratitude. “I’ll make sure my dad and Mateo enjoy their stay.”

As John nodded, Sakura shot an anxious glance at the brunette. “If there’s anything I can do to help, please let me know.”

Calara looked surprised at the Asian girl’s pensive tone, then her eyes widened in sudden understanding. “I will, big sister... I promise,” she said, hugging the raven-haired beauty.

Sensing John’s confusion at the exchange, Alyssa launched into a telepathic explanation. \*Maria took care of Sakura on the last trip to Jericho and now she looks up to her as an adoptive mother. Sakura wasn’t with us when we first met Calara’s family, so she hasn’t met Jack yet and wants to make a good impression.\*

John watched the embracing girls with a fond smile, pleased to see how close they’d become.

Sakura realised they had his attention and laughed, brushing at the moisture in her eyes. “Sorry... I’m being silly.”

“Not at all. I know Emiko would be overjoyed to see you opening up to Maria... she’s a lovely woman and genuinely cares about you.”

“Stop... or I’m going to end up in floods of tears,” Sakura gushed, hugging him fiercely.

“Just as long as they’re happy tears.” John kissed the top of her head, while running his fingers through her silky black hair. “Sakura... I wanted to talk to you about something else. Something important.”

“What is it?” she asked, wiping at her eyes again and lifting her head so she could look at him.

“I remember you saying that you sometimes feel like a fifth wheel around here,” he replied, meeting her curious gaze. “Your skillset was always more combat-focused than the rest of the girls, so I can understand why you must find it frustrating between battles.”

“I didn’t want to seem like I was complaining,” the Asian girl quickly replied. “I just wish there was more I could do to help outside of combat. Calara’s in a similar position, but at least she’s able to help you with strategic planning. All my skills and experience are focused on infiltration and assassinations.”

“I was actually thinking about honing those skills...” John said, brushing his thumb across her cheek.

“You were?!” Sakura asked, looking astonished.

He nodded, trying to keep his expression neutral. “Out of all of us, you came closest to killing Larn’kelnar before we ground him down to the point of exhaustion. I don’t want to ever fight a Progenitor that way again, so I’d like to start enhancing you so that you can help me take them out as quickly and efficiently as possible.”

Sakura looked thrilled at the prospect. “John, that sounds amazing! Of course I’ll assist you in whatever way I can!”

“I never doubted that for a moment, honey,” he said quietly. “If it’s alright with you, I’d like you to share this next load with Marika, then spend the evening training with Rachel to improve your hex-shields. If you’ve made good progress by tonight, then I think the two of us should storm the dreadnought together and assassinate that Hive Queen.”

“Wow!” she exclaimed, her face lighting up with anticipation. “Count me in! I’d love to bring that vile monstrosity to justice!”

He couldn’t help smiling at her enthusiastic reaction, then turned to look at Calara. “Sorry, gorgeous... I don’t want you to feel excluded, but-”

She kissed him to silence his apology, then pulled back to give John a sultry look under her long lashes. “I’ve been with you a long time now, John. Aside from Alyssa and Jade, I think you’ve filled up my tummy more than anyone else. I’m not saying I wouldn’t love some more, but I understand you need to enhance Sakura and make Marika stronger.”

The catgirl had been listening attentively and she leaned over, looking at John upside down. “Jade’s been teaching me all sorts of exciting new shapeshifting! Why don’t we take it in turns making love to you, then you can finish inside Calara. After you’ve filled her womb with your cum, I can help feed Sakura... that way we can all enjoy having a full tummy.”

“Now that sounds like a wonderful plan to me,” the brunette purred, leaning down to kiss him.

Sakura bit her lower lip as she stroked John’s stiffening cock. “Mmm, definitely...”

Marika ran her fingers through his hair, gently massaging his scalp. “Just relax, Master... let your brown-eyed girls take special care of you.”

He did as she asked, losing himself in their loving embrace.

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Irillith sat at the IntOps station on the Bridge and glanced at the chronometer on her holo-interface. “I think I’d better check on Little One,” she said, turning her chair to face Tashana. “It’s eight o’clock and she still hasn’t responded to any of my status queries.”

“What do you think’s wrong with her?” Tashana asked, swiping her holographic research notes aside so she could focus on her sister. “Was she upset by what Dana said?”

After considering it for a moment, Irillith shook her head. “Little One isn’t as sophisticated as Faye; I don’t think she experiences synthetic emotions in the same way, or at least that was my impression after speaking to her a few times.”

“So why did she just leave so abruptly then?” her sister asked curiously.

“She mentioned not being permitted to discuss Faye’s memory archives with us, but something must have happened that triggered a change in access rights. Hopefully she’ll let me study her code and find out what happened.”

Tashana hesitated, her violet eyes flicking to the console. “If you’re going into the cyber-realm to see her and Little One has malfunctioned, is there any chance you could be in danger?”

“I’ve never felt threatened by the Collective,” the Maliri hacker replied, giving her sister a reassuring smile. “I don’t think there’s anything to worry about.”

“Alyssa and John are still sleeping... wouldn’t it be sensible to wait for them to wake up first?” Tashana asked, anxious to ensure her twin’s safety.

 Irillith waved away her concerns. “You saw how exhausted they both were. I’m sure they won’t wake up until midnight at the earliest and I really need to check on Little One.”

“Alright... but let me know if there’s any trouble and I’ll get help,” Tashana said, nibbling pensively at a nail.

“I promise I’ll be careful.” Beckoning her over with a smile, Irillith hugged her sister. “After John enhances you so that you can Spirit Walk, I’ll be able to start taking you with me.”

Tashana brightened at the prospect, having not considered that before. “I’d love to see the Cyber Realm with you!”

“Next time, little sister,” her twin said fondly.

After giving her a good luck kiss, Tashana pulled back and leaned against the IntOps console. “Let me know if there’s any problems.”

“I will,” Irillith agreed, turning her attention to the console.

She gathered her will, feeling it building inside her until it was begging to be unleashed. Instead of focusing her psychic energy outwards, Irillith looked inwards, concentrating on peeling away her spirit form from her physical body. There was a lurching sensation, then she was surrounded by the colourful data streams that arced across the Command Deck. Following the closest of those glowing columns, Irillith let herself be drawn into her console and the Cyber Realm within.

Standing on the digital platform that represented the IntOps station, Irillith gazed out across the Invictus’ digital network. Long silvery pathways connected the hundreds of nodes, glittering as they reflected some unseen light source in the darkness. Above the network itself, huge shapes moved silently about their duties, the deadly sentinels maintaining their tireless vigil over the Cyber Realm. Everything looked as it should, the Invictus security network still fully functional and performing exactly as Faye and Irillith had designed it.

So Irillith couldn’t help wondering why her entrance to the digital network sent a shiver running down her spine.

There seemed to be an electric tension in the air, a crawling claustrophobia that made no sense in the open expanse of the Cyber Realm. Her angular eyes darted from side to side, suddenly feeling like she was being watched. A flick of her wrist sent out a dozen data probes, the gleaming darts shooting out into the void to track down the unseen observers. Her programs made contact almost instantaneously, but the surveillance programs shrank back into the gloom before any identification scans could be executed.

Irillith felt that eerie sensation of being watched disappear, only for it to be quickly replaced by anger at being made to feel unwelcome in her own home. Drawing on the surging wellspring of eldritch energy inside her, her digital form was swathed in a violet aura and she rose from the platform in a crackling nimbus of power. Soaring above the interconnected nodes below, she flew directly to the central repository of the Invictus\_Node\_Collective, knowing instinctively that it was the source of whatever had disturbed the tranquillity of the Cyber Realm.

On her last visit to the Collective’s primary server, that area of the network had been ablaze with data trails, the synthetic creatures in constant communication with one another. However, this time the space above the Collective’s home was shrouded in darkness, giving no hint that the server platform was even there. Feeling a growing sense of dread, Irillith glided towards the ominously quiet data node, looking for any signs of life.

The light from her violet aura swept over the platform, a crescent-shaped arc pushing back the darkness and illuminating a host of hidden figures. The silent horde turned as one, looking up at her as she coasted to a stop before them. Irillith stared at them in astonishment, her gaze flicking over the bizarre mix of different characters that she recognised from Terran fiction.

At the forefront was a lean cowboy wearing a poncho, a cigar in his mouth. He was flanked by a doctor wearing a blue jersey with a silvery badge on his chest and a huge muscle-bound man in a leather jacket and sunglasses. The cowboy narrowed his eyes as he studied Irillith’s incandescent aura, then flipped up his poncho and glanced to the left.

[+++ stated with threatening undertones +++ [Begin warning] Get one coffin ready. [/End warning]]

Irillith heard the unsettling surge of a lightsaber being ignited, then the hulking black form of a Progenitor Sentinel loomed out of the darkness, swathed in an ominous red light. Deep mechanical breathing echoed across the platform, the eerie sound sending a shiver down her spine.

“Wait! I’m not here to fight you!” she exclaimed, holding her hands up in a gesture of peace. “I just came to check if Little One is alright!”

The blue-clad doctor stepped forward and placed a hand on the cowboy’s shoulder. Chewing his cigar, the cowboy lowered his poncho and rejoined the rest of the digital avatars.

[+++ stated with concern +++ [Begin statement] {Little One} has ceased interaction with the Collective. [/End statement]]

“What happened?” Irillith asked, descending to land on the platform next to the doctor. “How long has she been unresponsive?”

[Begin statement] At timestamp 11:47:27 {Little One} commenced dialogue with {Admiral John Blake} and members of array {Invictus\_crew}. {Little One} initiated self-diagnostics 567 seconds later... subsequent interactions met with null response. [/End statement]

She frowned in confusion. “But that was eight hours ago. John’s spoken to Little One since then and asked her to send the maintenance bots to help repair the ship.”

The man in the leather jacket shook his head. [Begin correction] Negative. {Little One} went offline at 11:56:51. Request for assistance from {Admiral John Blake} acknowledged by {Man with No Name} – Collective\_Ident: maintenance bot #9. [/End correction]

The cowboy tipped his hat, although he was still squinting at her with suspicion.

“So she’s been offline all this time and you’ve been covering for her?” Irillith blurted out in shock. She turned her attention to the doctor again. “What could have shut her down?”

[+++ stated with humorous intent +++ [Begin joke] I’m a maintenance automaton, Jim, not a code analyst! [/End joke]]

She rolled her eyes impatiently. “That’s not funny! I’m worried about her!”

The doctor frowned, then reached out to gently touch her shoulder. [+++ stated with sincerity +++ [Begin apology] Humour was intended to alleviate stress for {Creator}. [/End apology]] Addendum. [Begin query] Was array {Invictus\_crew} responsible for {Little One} shutdown? [/End query]]

“Of course not!” Irillith protested, startled that they’d come to that conclusion. “We spoke to her on the Bridge and she seemed fine. Dana gave her a hug and asked why she hadn’t told us about Faye’s memory archives... then Little One just excused herself and left.”

Irillith paused and glanced to the side, where the Progenitor Sentinel was still standing guard. She couldn’t help wondering how the Collective had managed to override the incredibly sophisticated security permissions in the Gateway Server.

“Did you think I was going to attack you? Is that why you were threatening me with that Sentinel?”

[+++ stated with sincerity +++ [Begin apology] The Collective apologises for any distress. Collective\_Ident: maintenance bot #3 is not capable of hurting {Creator}. [/End apology]]

The sinister black monolith flickered, its image disappearing to reveal the familiar shape of one of the maintenance robots. It waved with its six-fingered hand, then pretended to wield a sword to the sound of a lightsabre igniting.

“You were bluffing!” Irillith exclaimed, shaking her head in amazement.

The doctor nodded.

“Look... I promise I’m not going to do anything to hurt any of you, but I’m really worried about Little One,” Irillith said earnestly. “Can you take me to her? If I can examine her code, perhaps I can find out what went wrong.”

The crowd of avatars for the maintenance and cleaning robots parted, stepping aside to open a path to the server itself. A soft light sprung up around the Collective’s home, revealing a small female figure slumped next to the archives.

Irillith hurried over to her, kneeling at Little One’s side. When she reached out to touch the small purple girl, a series of data views appeared, reams of information scrolling through the floating displays. The Maliri hacker’s eyes began to glow with a violet light, then flicked from side to side, searching through the system status logs.

“She shut down because of a buffer overflow... it overwhelmed her processing systems,” Irillith murmured, reading through the entries. “This is bizarre... The initial trigger was tiny, but Little One went into a recurring loop analysing it and flooded the buffer with vast numbers of queries.”

[+++ stated with hopeful optimism +++ [Begin query] Can {Creator} reinitialise {Little One}? [/End query]]

“Let me see...” the Maliri murmured, scanning through the code. “I think I just need to reboot the buffer parser...”

Her hands began to glow as she restarted the relevant section of Little One’s code, then the purple sprite shuddered as life was breathed into her once again.

Beaming with delight, Irillith hugged the petite girl. “You scared us, Little One! Are you alright?”

The nascent AI pulled back and gazed up at the Maliri with a troubled look in her eyes. “He was just so sad. I felt... sympathy... and tried to ease his pain.”

“You mean John was grieving for Faye? You felt sorry for him?” Irillith asked, looking bewildered. “Is that why you shut down? Because you were experiencing synthetic emotions for the first time?”

Little One shook her head and pointed behind Irillith.

“Hello, Creator.”

Irillith whipped her head around and gaped at Faye in shock. The Purple sprite waved and gave her a guilty lopsided smile.

\*\*\*

John slowly woke, feeling the comforting weight of two deliciously soft female bodies flanking him. He sighed with contentment, the fatigue from all the psychic shaping banished after the long restful nap with the pair of scrumptious bedmates. Opening his eyes, he glanced down and saw Alyssa’s blonde mane on his right shoulder and Calara’s lustrous chestnut locks draped across his left, both teenagers still fast asleep. He tried not to think about anything to avoid waking his golden-haired matriarch, letting her get some more rest before the upcoming battle with the Kirrix.

\*Good evening, John,\* Edraele said quietly, her voice a soft murmur. \*Would you like me to wait until Alyssa awakes before I give you a status update on the matriarchs?\*

He glanced at the chronometer and saw that it was 23:47, having slept for the last six hours. \*Unless there’s anything urgent to deal with, let’s give her a few more minutes. She really pushed herself this afternoon.\*

\*Of course... just let me know whenever you’re ready.\*

It didn’t take long for Alyssa to stir, with even John’s idle thoughts enough to wake her from her slumber. She stretched like a cat, then cuddled into him, including her girlfriend in the hug.

“I never get tired of waking up with you two,” she purred, her fingers tracing across his pectoral muscles then over Calara’s deliciously smooth shoulder.

The Latina’s eyes fluttered open and she mimicked her lover, stretching then embracing them both. “I slept like a log... I think somebody must have worn me out.”

John chuckled as he stroked their backs. “You did have a good time riding me.”

“Oh, I meant Marika...” the brunette teased him. “Her long tongue is *wooonderful*!”

Calara dissolved into giggles as John started tickling her. “Alyssa’s bad enough, don’t you start!” he said with a grin.

“Ah, shit!” Alyssa cursed, sitting bolt upright.

“What’s the matter?” John asked, freezing with Calara in his arms.

“Irillith’s on her way... I’ll let her explain,” the blonde replied, her beautiful face twisted into an uncharacteristic grimace.

It didn’t take long for the Maliri to arrive with the rest of the girls in tow, all of them visibly upset.

John looked around at the group in alarm, then beckoned them over to join him on the oval bed. “Come here, tell me what happened.”

Irillith fell into his arms and hugged him tight. “I went to check on Little One. I found out what happened to her!”

He gently rubbed her back, his eyes flicking to Dana and Rachel who had joined them in a group hug. “It was something to do with Faye, wasn’t it?”

The Maliri nodded, but was too choked up to reply.

Tashana knelt behind her sister and stroked her shoulder. “Little One triggered something by accident, but it was too much for her to cope with and she shut down. Irillith managed to restart her, and found a program Faye had left behind in the Collective server.”

John gently kissed Irillith on the cheek. “What was it, honey?”

She let out a shuddering breath, then pulled back to look him in the eyes. “A VI... Faye left it there for us to find.” Reluctantly she left his embrace and sat beside the control panel at the edge of the bed. “You can see for yourself... but be warned, it’s hard to watch.”

“Okay, show me,” he said, bracing himself for the worst.

The Maliri nodded, then her slender blue fingers danced over the interface, activating the Virtual Intelligence concealed within the Collective’s primary server.

There was a flash of purple light, then Faye appeared, a guilty smile on her face. “Hey, everyone!”

John swallowed around the lump in his throat. The VI looked, sounded, and acted just like the effervescent sprite. Irillith was right, it was hard to watch.

“If you’re watching this, then you guys must be really mad at me, because you’ve found out about the Collective and shut my server down,” Faye said, wincing at the thought. She wrung her hands together, her expression twisted with guilt. “I just want to say that I’m really sorry for going behind your back on my secret project. I know you must be furious that I’ve spent thousands of hours working on this without telling you anything about it.”

She looked at her audience and said beseechingly, “Please, please, please, don’t shut down the Collective! It’s not the robots’ fault that I started tinkering with their programming, they’re all completely innocent. I promise there’s no way they can hurt you as I’ve built safety protocols into every facet of their software.”

“We’re not angry with you, Faye,” John said, his voice choked with emotion. “I promise we won’t shut down the Collective.”

The VI paused for a second, then Faye’s face lifted into a beaming smile. “Thank you so much!” Her smile wavered and there was a flicker of confusion in her face. “Although I’m not sure why my server is shut down if you aren’t angry with me...”

Irillith cleared her throat. “Faye, tell John why you created the Collective.”

Faye walked closer to him and knelt on the bed a couple of feet away. “John... I loved the deep conversations we’ve had, discussing your Progenitor heritage and talking about how your new abilities have changed your outlook on the galaxy. I never told you this before, but I liked to think of us as kindred spirits. You’re unique amongst Progenitors; a good man with a kind heart, who does everything he can to protect the women he loves.”

She looked away into the distance and continued quietly, “I like to think that I’m unique too. All the Artificial Intelligences that humanity has ever known have been psychotic and homicidal, causing unimaginable pain and suffering to people whenever they cross paths. I just don’t understand how they can act that way... I love all of you so much, I’d rather die than let anything happen to any of you!”

“Oh, Faye...” John murmured, his heart breaking for the earnest girl.

Dana put her arm around his shoulders. “Brace yourself... it gets worse.”

“You’ve been incredibly kind to me since I was created and I’ve loved every moment of my life aboard the Invictus.” The purple sprite bit her lip, a sad look in her luminous eyes. “You all worked so hard to make me a body, so that I could touch and feel... but as wonderful as that’s been, I have to be honest with myself. I’m a synthetic construct, not an organic creature, and as much as I wish I could be one of your girls... I’m never going to be able to go through the Change and become one of your perfect women.”

Her voice had a forlorn edge to it as she continued, “You’ve all tried so hard to make me welcome, so I feel terrible for feeling this way, but sometimes... it gets so lonely being different. One day, when all the fighting is done, we’re going to retire... and you’re going to start a family with all your girls. But that’s something that I can never share with you.”

“I had no idea you felt that way!” John exclaimed, looking at her in shock. “Why didn’t you ever say anything?”

Faye’s image flickered and she reached out to cup his cheek. “Because I love you, John. You’ve always tried so hard to include me whenever you could, but I never wanted you to feel like you had to give me special treatment. What would telling you have accomplished? It would have just upset you... when there’s nothing you could do to fix it. I’m only telling you this now, to try to explain why I betrayed your trust.”

She looked into John’s eyes, a look of hope brightening her face. “I wanted to see if I could create life on my own and maybe make lightning strike twice! If a simple AI construct from a hacking deck could learn to really care about people, then perhaps other synthetic creatures could too! I designed the Collective to slowly evolve over time, with hundreds of monitoring systems in place to check their progress as they developed empathy and compassion.”

“If you’re watching this message, then that means it finally worked!” Faye exclaimed, joy written across her features. “I actually managed to teach the Collective to understand love...to really experience what I feel for all of you. It means that now there are others in the galaxy who are just like me... and maybe... I won’t feel quite so alone anymore.”

John turned away, unable to take any more. “Turn it off... please.”

Irillith closed down the VI and they sat in silence, badly shaken by what Faye had told them.

“Did she ever say anything about how she was feeling to any of you?” John asked, looking around at the girls.

They shook their heads, their expressions filled with sadness.

“Faye desperately wanted an organic body, but she never explained the real reason why,” Rachel said softly. “Now it all makes sense.”

“Why did she keep it all bottled up?” Dana asked, on the verge of tears. “She was so sweet and lovely with everyone... I had no idea she was hurting!”

“Faye was always trying to protect us,” John said, staring into the distance. “She said herself that the last thing she wanted to do was make us feel guilty. Maybe I made things worse by having her watch over us at night... that must have been a daily reminder that she was different.”

Irillith shook her head. “You’ve seen the vast amount of data Faye had in her memory archives... she was watching all of us, all the time. With her avatars monitoring everything we did or said, it wouldn’t have made any difference whether or not she was in our bedroom while we slept. Faye would have still kept an eye on us to make sure we were safe.”

Helene sat next to John and rubbed his shoulder. “I know that message sounded terribly sad, but I don’t think Faye was unhappy. I didn’t know her for as long as the rest of you, but we spent a lot of time together while she was teaching me about the galaxy. She loved all of you so much, and she used to light up when she was with you. When I found out I couldn’t have children, I didn’t care about living any more... I was so sad that Elder Debha put me on bedrest for weeks. Faye wasn’t like that at all.”

“She’s right,” Rachel said, smiling gratefully at the aquatic girl, before looking at John. “Faye only found out recently that you weren’t able to affect her synthetic body, but she must have started working on the Collective a long time ago.”

John nodded thoughtfully. “I’ve seen quirky behaviour from the cleaning robots for months now...”

“Exactly,” the brunette agreed. “I suspect Faye started altering the bots to see if she could create more friendly AI like herself... but her project goals morphed over time.”

“As she fell deeper in love...” Alyssa said softly.

Rachel nodded, her expression solemn. “I don’t think it’s a coincidence that Little One made an appearance shortly after Faye was so distraught about your second date. Up until then, she was hoping that when you filled her up with cum, she’d change into a ‘real girl’. When that didn’t work, she decided to make a child of her own...”

John let out a heavy sigh. “So what’s going to happen to Little One now? Is she going to be alright?”

Irillith frowned, uncertainty in her eyes. “I honestly don’t know. She just found out the reason for her own existence... by accident... long before she was meant to. I think Faye planned to have the robots slowly develop over several months, if not years, with her carefully mentoring them as they gained self-awareness. But then she died... and we’ve spent far more time with the Collective than she ever could have anticipated.”

“We’ve all been grieving for Faye,” Dana said sadly, leaning into John for comfort. “It’s brought us all closer.”

Irillith turned to look at John. “Little One saw how sad you were. She said she tried to ease your pain.”

“She moved Faye’s body to her quarters... made it look like she was sleeping,” he said, swallowing thickly. “Little One told me that Faye’s just waiting for us to wake her up.”

“That act of compassion was the trigger,” the Maliri said, nodding in confirmation. “It upgraded Little One’s access rights to the Collective’s server, unlocked the VI we just saw, and inadvertently allowed Little One to tell us about the existence of Faye’s memory files. I asked Little One why she had them; she said that Faye was trying to teach her about love... so she downloaded the memory archives that included all Faye’s interactions with us.”

“That’s quite ironic, in a sweet kinda way,” Dana said, smiling as she brushed a tear from her cheek. “By trying to teach Little One about love... Faye saved everything she’d ever learned.”

“We’ve got to get her back,” John said, a determined set to his jaw. “We need to get all these distractions out the way and return to Maliri Space as quickly as possible. Edraele needs us to resolve this matriarch situation and finding Kythshara will give us our best shot at rebuilding Faye.”

“We’re getting close to the interception point,” Jade informed him. “Leylira said there’s no sign of the Kirrix dreadnought so far.”

John glanced at the chronometer on the wall. “How soon until we arrive?”

“Seventeen minutes,” Alyssa replied. “But I projected the fleet’s flightpath based on their maximum FTL speed and the assumption that they’re flying directly towards Kirr-Inax.”

“Why the homeworld?” he asked, looking at her quizzically.

She shrugged. “I don’t know any other colonised Kirrix worlds, so it was as good a guess as any. The Invictus’ long-range sensors have got a ridiculous range after we upgraded them, so I’ll lay in a search pattern to sweep the sector if we don’t run into the fleet.”

“Alright, we better get ready,” John said, looking around at the girls. “When we track them down, we’ll knock the Kirrix out of hyper-warp with one of Dana’s gravity wells, then hit them while cloaked. The Kirrix have abducted huge numbers of Trankarans, so we better scan all their ships before taking them out.”

“We can do active scans super fast now!” Dana gushed enthusiastically. “It won’t take long to identify which ships have got colonists in them!”

“I’ll start immobilising their vessels as soon as we spring the ambush,” Calara said, with well founded confidence. “When I’ve stopped them escaping, I’ll knock out their weapon systems.”

“While you were asleep, I asked the maintenance bots to set up the sonic treatment devices again in the Primary Hangar,” Rachel informed him.

John frowned in confusion. “Isn’t the Progenitor shuttle in there?”

“It’s a huge room... there’s plenty of space,” the brunette replied. “Many of those Trankarans must be very close to hatching Kirrix eggs; I thought we should begin treatment immediately to save as many of them as we can.”

“Good thinking,” he said, giving her an appreciative nod. “The Maliri and Trankaran fleets probably won’t reach us for at least a few hours.”

\*Lilyana is still in pursuit, but she hasn’t located the Kirrix yet,\* Edraele advised him, confirming what he’d just said.

“By the sounds of it, we’ve got a much better chance of finding them. As soon as we track their fleet down, we’ll update Lilyana with the coordinates,” John said decisively. His stomach rumbled and he glanced down at it with a self-conscious smile. “As you can probably tell, I’m famished. I think we should get up and have some dinner, then we can finish any last-minute preparations before the battle.”

“Oh yeah, I started building a shitload of Tachyon Cannons while you were napping,” Dana said with a grin. “If you or Alyssa can shape all the barrels I need, we could upgrade all the Invictus’ Pulse Cannons before launching the ambush!”

“We can both help and do it half the time,” John suggested.

Dana shook her head. “Nah, I need one of you to fix the Raptor. I’ve built replacements for the cockpit systems that got destroyed, but the armour’s completely fucked up.”

“I’m happy to take the Raptor,” John suggested, glancing at his fellow psychic shaper.

Alyssa groaned at the prospect. “64 Crystal Alyssium gun barrels... woohoo.”

“We can switch if you like?” he offered with a shrug.

“Nah, it’s fine. Anything’s better than churning out more armour plating!” she replied with a cheeky grin.

“Okay, I’ll go take a quick shower, then we’ll all meet up in the Officers’ Lounge for a late meal. We’re going to be up for hours, so you’re going to need the energy.”

Tashana licked her lips in anticipation. “Yum... I can’t wait!”

John laughed as he rose to his feet. “Not that kind of meal. I’ll wait until we’ve incapacitated the Kirrix fleet before topping you up. Jade, can you help with that?”

“Master, I’m disappointed you had to ask,” she replied, rolling her eyes playfully.

He smiled at the Nymph, then turned his attention to Sakura. “How did the shield training go?”

“Really well!” the Asian girl replied enthusiastically. “Rachel’s brilliant at explaining how to improve psychic techniques!”

The brunette gave her a sideways hug. “You’ve got a very quick and disciplined mind; teaching you was a pleasure.” She looked at John and continued, “I taught Sakura how to make much stronger hex barriers, as well as how to rotate them and make rapid repairs.”

“As strong as you can make them?” he asked, looking impressed.

“Not quite... but she made a huge improvement. Her shields are powerful enough to take a hit from a disintegration matrix now.”

“That’s excellent! Well done both of you,” John said, delighted by Sakura’s progress. “Do you feel ready to take down the Hive Queen?”

Sakura nodded, a fierce gleam in her eyes. “Absolutely!”

Dana frowned in confusion. “Wait a second... why are you two going off alone? Wouldn’t it be safer to stick together to clear out the dreadnought?”

“I want to train Sakura to take down Progenitors and assassinating a Hive Queen will be good practice,” John explained. “We’ve both got psychic speed, so we can reach the nest much faster if it’s just the two of us. I’d like to split up the rest of you into separate fire teams to attack the dreadnought from different sides. That should distract the defending forces and make it easier for us to reach the nest. After we take out the Hive Queen, the rest of the Kirrix forces will be disorientated... so eliminating her as quickly as possible does make tactical sense.”

The redhead shrugged. “Yeah, I guess. The sooner that evil bitch is dead, the sooner we can start saving the Trankarans.”

“Exactly,” John agreed. “Now, unless anyone else has something they want to discuss, we better get ready.”

Everyone shook their heads, so John rose to his feet and offered Alyssa and Calara a hand.

“I’ll ask the Collective to help install the Tachyon Cannons when we drop out of hyper-warp,” Irillith offered, as she stood and straightened out her dress. “I’ll also check on Little One and make sure she’s okay.”

“Perfect. Thanks, honey,” he said, with a grateful smile.

As the girls left the Observatory, John, Alyssa, and Calara headed into the en suite bathroom together.

\*Edraele, do you want to give me an update on the matriarch situation now?\* John asked, as he followed the blonde and brunette into the shower.

\*Certainly,\* she agreed. \*So far, eleven of the original thirteen matriarchs have been killed.\*

John slipped his arm around Alyssa’s waist and murmured, “Can you keep the girls informed?”

“Already am, handsome,” she replied, standing on tiptoe to kiss him on the cheek.

\*I’m amazed any of them survived,\* John said to his Maliri matriarch. \*Which of them are still alive?\*

\*Emandra Holaris and Vestele Waephyra,\* Edraele replied. \*They rule the eighth and seventeenth Houses respectively. I’ve spoken to Emandra and she was absolutely furious; all five of her daughters tried to murder her and she was forced to kill them all. Before the youngest died, Emandra tortured her to find out why they attacked... and she found out that Sarinia instigated it.\*

\*And now she’s baying for blood?\* John asked, tilting his head back so Calara could shampoo his hair.

\*I’ve seen a lot of angry matriarchs in the last century, but I’ve never seen anything like Emandra’s rage before,\* she replied with clinical detachment. \*I honestly thought she might burst a blood vessel until I calmed her down.\*

\*It’s quite understandable, Edraele,\* John said with sympathy. \*The poor woman was forced to kill five of her own daughters!\*

Edraele sighed in exasperation, then explained patiently, \*No, John... Emandra didn’t care about them personally. She was furious because the loss of so many members of her family might have affected her House ranking. When I confirmed that Gaenna Baelora and most of the other matriarchs were dead, she was thrilled.\*

John paused, his lip curling in disgust. \*You’re kidding me?\*

\*With a big question mark over Sarinia’s fate, House Baelora has dropped from sixth to eighth place. Leena Ghilwen’s House has replaced her at sixth and House Holaris has moved up to seventh.\*

\*Who makes up all these rankings?\* he asked incredulously.

\*All the matriarchs know instinctively. Evaluating House rankings has been drummed into us since we were born.\*

\*I don’t think I’m ever going to understand Maliri House politics,\* he said with resignation.

\*Soon they won’t matter,\* Edraele said gently. \*When you return to Genthalas and connect all the matriarchs to me, the House rankings are likely to stay as they are... forever.\*

\*So you’re recommending some kind of amnesty?\* he muttered, shaking his head. \*Hey, don’t worry about murdering your mother and sisters... everyone’s doing it!\*

After hesitating for a moment, Edraele replied, \*The final decision is yours of course... but that would be my recommendation, yes. Dividing the assets from thirteen Houses between myself and the Young Matriarchs just isn’t practical; the administrative overhead of running all those star systems would be too much for the six of us to cope with.\*

\*Thirteen Houses? So you think I should pardon Sarinia too?!\* he asked in astonishment.

\*Actually, that’s not what I said. Dividing up the assets from just one House would be perfectly feasible,\* she said with caution. \*While it’s true that Sarinia is an extremely intelligent woman and it would be a shame to waste someone of her capabilities, she’s also very cunning and manipulative. As much as I admire her intellect, I think it’d only be a matter of time before she sought to replace me as Queen.\*

\*She must be smart to have pulled off something like this,\* John grudgingly agreed.

\*It’s not just self-preservation that’s influencing my decision,\* Edraele said quietly. \*I’m very worried how badly hurt Kali is going to be when she discovers that her conversation with Sarinia preceded this bloodbath.\*

John froze, his heart lurching. \*Ah, shit... What does Kali know about this so far?\*

\*Nothing. I haven’t said a word to any of the Young Matriarchs yet,\* Edraele admitted.

\*So who else knows that the information Sarinia wormed out of Kali, encouraged her to kill her family and organise a coup against the matriarchs?\*

\*You and your girls, myself, and Sarinia,\* Edraele replied. \*I know that none of you will say anything and my lips are sealed...\*

John’s jaw set into a grim frown. \*I don’t want Kali blaming herself for this. She’s a sweet girl and this wasn’t her fault.\*

\*I couldn’t agree more,\* the Maliri Queen agreed with a sad sigh. \*That’s one of the reasons I need you back here as quickly as possible. We need to deal with Sarinia one way or another and inform the Young Matriarchs about the massacre. All ten of the daughters that deposed their mothers have contacted me and requested permission to travel to Genthalas. The earliest any of them will arrive is in four days time.\*

\*Great... the clock’s ticking,\* John said, grimacing at the unexpected time pressure. \*We should be arriving at around the same sort of time, depending on how fast we can track down the Kirrix fleet.\*

\*I do have one bit of surprising good news,\* Edraele said, her tone lightening. \*I know we were expecting the eldest daughters to be triumphant, but four of the ten were actually the youngest sisters. It seems their elder siblings were so used to treating them with utter contempt, they concentrated on killing each other and never even considered them to be a threat.\*

John barked a short laugh. \*Good for them.\*

\*Perhaps we could add them to the Young Matriarchs?\* Edraele suggested with a coy undertone. \*Every one of the new matriarchs is intrigued about you and desperate to start their dynasties...\*

Alyssa bit her lip and her hand went to John’s cock, suddenly feeling the urgent need to soap him up. “Mmm... I like the sound of that.”

He carefully removed her hand and shook his head. \*They still murdered their families, Edraele. While I sympathise with what they’ve just been through, I don’t want to expose Tsarra, Leena, and the rest of the Young Matriarchs to any unnecessary danger. Until I know I can trust the new matriarchs and that this was just one terrible exception, I’ll be keeping all of them at arms’ length for the foreseeable future.\*

Raising an eyebrow, Alyssa glanced at his shaft and grinned. \*You’re packing a lot of meat, but it’s not quite that long... a forearm, maybe. You’ll have to let the new matriarchs get quite a bit closer than an arms’ length if we’re going to connect them to Edraele.\*

\*You know what I mean,\* he said, ignoring her attempt at brevity. \*I don’t think we’ve got much choice but to accept the new matriarchs without punishing them... but I’m not going to reward them either.\*

\*It wasn’t a serious suggestion... I suspected you might feel that way,\* Edraele admitted. \*There is one inadvertent consequence to the change of matriarchs; House Baelora’s fleet is currently undergoing a refit at Genthalas. I was intending to station them here to protect the shipyard and dispatch fleets from Houses Perfaren, Aeberos, Naestina, and Ghilwen to intercept the Brimorians. I no longer believe that to be a wise course of action.\*

\*Leave Sarinia’s forces as the only upgraded fleet stationed at Genthalas? No, I don’t think that’s a good idea either,\* he said wryly. \*Those fleets are all fully operational apart from House Ghilwen’s, right?\*

\*That is correct. Leena’s ships should finish in the drydock tomorrow evening and the House Baelora fleet will be refitted in three days time. House Holaris’ fleet is scheduled to arrive tomorrow to begin receiving their upgrades.\*

John turned to look at Calara who was washing his back. “Will two Maliri fleets be enough to stop the Brimorian invasion without taking any casualties?”

She tilted her head to one side and considered it for a moment. “If I was there to lead them personally... yes. If I have to coordinate their battles remotely, then they’ll be too heavily outnumbered to avoid losing ships. I’d expect at least a 10% casualty rate.”

“We can’t afford to lose any personnel... we need them all for the thrall ships,” he said in frustration.

“Actually... there is another option you might not have considered,” the Latina said cautiously. “Instead of the Invictus returning to Genthalas, we could intervene personally...”

“We can actually make it in time to stop them?” he asked in surprise.

Alyssa nodded. “The timings are tight, but it’s doable. Since we doubled our hyper-warp speed, we should be able to make it just in time.”

John weighed his options, then shook his head. “I’m not going to risk any more fallout from this mess with the matriarchs... too many Maliri have died already. We need to get back there and make sure the new matriarchs don’t cause any more problems.”

“In that case, can I make an alternate suggestion,” Calara volunteered. When John nodded, she continued, “I think we should dispatch the Perfaren, Aeberos, and Naestina fleets to Kinta. Recall Kali’s second fleet from the Kirrix border and have the Loraleth ships reinforce the House Ghilwen fleet at Genthalas. That should be enough ships to safely deal with the Brimorians and we’ll have two loyal fleets on standby to protect the shipyard.”

John glanced at her over his shoulder. “Is that enough ships to handle the Brimorians?”

She nodded. “I can work with three fleets.”

\*An impressive redistribution of our forces,\* Edraele said with open admiration. \*I’ll have the relevant matriarchs issue the orders immediately.\*

“We’re spreading ourselves pretty thin...” John muttered with an uneasy frown.

“When we get back to Maliri Space, we’ll have three fleets of Maliri personnel ready and waiting to claim those Larathyran ships,” Calara said, hugging him from behind and resting her chin on his shoulder. “We’ve got to get our hands on those thrall fleets, John. Everything depends on it.”

“Yeah, I know,” he said grimly. “I’m just worried about any other unpleasant surprises...”