Three Square Meals Ch. 88

The Epsilon-Eridani sun shone brightly that morning, the yellow light over the Fernandez family home making the substantial house look warm and inviting. The heavily upgraded Raptor gunship circled overhead, momentarily shadowing the neatly cropped lawn as Faye brought the white vessel to land on an area highlighted by glowing chevrons. The Raptor touched down on the landing pad, guided to a feathery stop by Faye’s meticulous piloting skills.

Calara’s old home was located near the equator on Jericho and the winter clothing they’d worn for the ski chalet would have left them sweltering. The girls had quickly changed into flowing summer dresses that accentuated their narrow waists and feminine curves, while John wore stone-coloured linen trousers and a white shirt.

John had been standing beside Calara, looking out of the cockpit canopy and he glanced back to smile at their purple-hued pilot. “Thanks, Faye,” he said gratefully.

“You’re welcome!” the eager sprite replied, a broad smile on her cute elfin face.

“There she is!” Calara exclaimed, waving through the window at her mother.

John turned to look across the lawn at the attractive Latina who was waiting for them on the patio. Maria spotted her daughter and waved back as she walked towards the landing pad, a huge smile lighting up her face.

“Come on, fiancée!” he said, offering Calara a hand.

She grinned at him and they led the rest of the group from the cockpit, floating down in the grav-tube, then turning left to enter the forward loading area. Maria stood a few metres back from the foot of the loading ramp and Calara ran ahead, bounding down the slope to wrap her mother in a tight hug.

“Callie! It’s so wonderful to see you!” Maria gushed, hugging her daughter in delight.

“I missed you so much, Mom!” Calara exclaimed, a blissful smile on her face.

John shared an affectionate glance with Alyssa and they walked down to join the embracing women.

“Hello, Maria,” he said, smiling at the older Latina. “Or should I start calling you ‘Mom’ too?”

“Don’t you dare!” she replied, laughing heartily. “Not unless you want me to play the role of ghastly mother-in-law!”

He grinned and quickly shook his head. “Please don’t do that. I like you exactly as you are.”

Maria gave him a coy smile. “Come here you darling man! I definitely want a hug from my future son-in-law!”

Calara peeled away from her mother as Maria greeted John with a warm hug.

“Thanks for making that conversation so easy,” John said, his voice ringing with gratitude.

They parted and her perceptive eyes studied him intently. “The first time I saw you and Callie together, I knew you were the one. I must confess that I warned Jack immediately to let him get used to the idea.”

John laughed and gave her a broad smile. “You and Jack were both amazing. It’s a shame he can’t be here today, but we did manage to catch up with him after the award ceremony.”

Her deep brown eyes widened and she gasped, “Oh my gosh! I’ve watched the whole thing a dozen times, it was magical!” She put her hand on his shoulder and an arm around her daughter as she said earnestly, “Jack and I are so proud of the pair of you. You’re both such an inspiration to so many people.”

John glanced fondly at Calara. “To be honest, your daughter does most of the hard work. I just sit in a chair and give orders.”

Maria grinned at that, giving him a knowing look. “One of the perks of command, Vice Admiral...” Her voice trailed away and she looked stunned for a moment, gaping at him in awe, as if suddenly realising she had a member of the Admiralty standing in her garden. She glanced at Calara and breathed in shock, “You’re marrying the Lion of the Federation!”

“Really?” Calara asked wryly. “Thanks for letting me know, I had no idea.”

“I’m the same guy I always was,” John said gently, patting Maria’s arm to reassure her. “Still just as nervous about making a good impression with my fiancée’s wonderful parents.”

She shook off her shock and blushed furiously. “I’m so sorry! I just got a bit starstruck! You’ve been on the news almost every day for months.” She let out an embarrassed laugh as she added, “I still stay in touch with old friends in the military. When we chat on the holo-net, they can’t stop talking about you and they don’t even know about your engagement to Calara yet!”

Alyssa gave John a playful smile. “You’re making quite the name for yourself, Lion.”

“I’m so sorry, Alyssa!” Maria gasped, looking aghast as she rushed over to hug the blonde girl. “You must think I’m terrible! I’ve not even said hello to you yet!”

Hugging her back affectionately, Alyssa murmured in her ear, “No, I really don’t think you’re terrible, I think you’re lovely. Calara’s a very lucky girl.”

Maria pulled back to look into Alyssa’s blue eyes. She gave the blonde girl a knowing look and brushed her fingers across her cheek. “She really is...”

Alyssa looked uncharacteristically flustered for a moment, so John stepped in and said, “Everyone’s been looking forward to seeing you, Maria. You already know Dana and Jade.”

Maria had been studying the rest of the group in fascination and she stepped forward to give the redhead then the Nymph a warm hug in greeting. “You two are just as beautiful as ever!”

Jade smiled at the older Latina. “Alyssa’s right. I can see why the girls all wish you were-”

“Jade!” Dana hissed, darting an embarrassed glance her way as she cut her off.

“We’ve expanded the crew since we last visited,” John said, smiling at the tawny-haired girl hovering behind Dana. “This is Lieutenant Commander Rachel Voss, our Chief Medical Officer.”

“Ah! The gifted doctor you rescued from the Dragon March,” Maria said, smiling at the brunette, before glancing back at John. “You’ve actually already introduced us, while you were on holiday on Oceanus.”

He slapped his hand against his forehead. “Of course! I completely forgot you met her on that call!”

“Please just call me Rachel,” the tawny-haired girl said, taking in the other woman with smiling grey eyes. “It’s wonderful to finally meet you properly, Maria.”

After studying Rachel for a moment, Maria shook her head in amazement. “I thought you were a beautiful woman before, but now that I’m meeting you in person, I can see how gorgeous you really are!” She frowned in confusion as she studied the teenager. “And you’ve grown taller since I last saw you...”

“I went through something of a growth spurt,” Rachel replied, her eyes flitting to John before she smiled at Calara’s mother.

Maria’s eyes narrowed perceptively as she turned to look at Calara. “There seems to be a lot of that going around...”

John quickly moved on, smiling at the Asian girl who was waiting patiently to be introduced. “This is Sakura, our Security Chief.”

“It’s an honour to meet you, Mrs. Fernandez,” Sakura said, giving her a polite bow of her head. “I’ve heard so much about you from Calara.”

“Call me Maria, please,” the older woman said, the smile on her face warm and welcoming, but her eyes gleaming with a sharp intelligence as she studied Sakura. “I saw you during the Award Ceremony, but the holo-cameras didn’t do your beauty justice.”

Sakura blushed and said, “That’s kind of you to say, Maria.”

“You’re so lovely and tall, too! Did you go through a late growth spurt when you joined the crew as well?” she asked, looking intrigued.

“Something like that,” the Asian girl replied, unsure how to reply to Maria’s probing enquiry. Her quick glance at John was not lost on the insightful Latina.

Turning back to look at John, Maria said airily, “I’ve served on a number of ships, but I don’t remember ever flying with a crew quite like yours before. Are you sure you’re not running a modelling agency instead of a starship?”

“I’m quite sure. I’ve never served with a more gifted crew,” John said, looking at the girls with no small amount of pride. “Which brings me to Irillith... and Tashana.”

“It’s lovely to meet you both,” Maria said politely, looking intrigued as she gazed at them. “I didn’t want to be rude and stare, but I’ve never seen people from your species before... I love your eyes, they’re enchanting! The two of you are both so beautiful! If you don’t mind me asking, what planet are you from?”

“We grew up on Valaden,” Tashana replied, giving her a tentative smile.

Blinking in surprise, Maria asked curiously, “Valaden? I’ve never heard of that world before. Are you from one of the minor empires near Trankaran Space?”

Irillith glanced at John and when he nodded, she said quietly, “Actually, we’re from quite a large empire. It used to be called the Maliri Regency, but it’s gone through a change of leadership recently and is now called the Maliri Protectorate.”

Maria laughed good-naturedly, looking back at Calara and said, “Did you put them up to this? You know it’s mean to tease your poor mother!”

Calara walked up to her and placed a hand on her shoulder. “They’re telling the truth, Mom. This is what the Maliri look like beneath their golden armour...”

“You’re really Maliri?!” Maria gasped, gaping at them in awe.

“It’s a capital offence to reveal our true appearance to non-Maliri,” Irillith explained, looking intently at the stunned Latina. “That’s why we wore armour during the Award Ceremony, but John said he trusted you and that we should too.”

Maria looked touched as she gave John a grateful smile. Focusing on the twins, she said earnestly, “I promise, I won’t tell a soul.” After a moment’s hesitation, she reached out a trembling hand towards Tashana’s arm and asked, “May I?”

“Of course,” Tashana replied, stepping forward to let Calara’s mother touch her skin.

“I’ve always been fascinated by the Maliri,” Maria murmured, gently brushing her fingers over Tashana’s sky-blue skin. “You must have heard all the wild rumours, but you look just like Terrans... except you’re so exotic...”

Irillith smiled at her and asked, “Not the hideously deformed monsters you were expecting?”

Maria laughed and shook her head. “You’re both breathtakingly beautiful! Do all Maliri women look like the pair of you? As far as I can tell, you’re identical!”

“Not all Maliri females look the same. We’re twins,” Tashana replied, glancing affectionately at her sister.

John smiled at them and explained, “Maliri women all share the same blue skin tone and build, but their eye colouration and facial shape vary considerably.”

“The three of you have the same pointed ears,” Maria murmured, glancing at John then the Maliri sisters. “Are your species related?”

“Our species share a common ancestry,” John said, his voice quiet as he chose his words carefully.

Shaking her head at her own behaviour, Maria gave the twins an apologetic smile as she withdrew her hand from Tashana’s arm. “I’m so sorry for staring and asking all these questions. I didn’t mean to make you feel uncomfortable.”

“We expected you to be curious; it’s perfectly natural,” Tashana said, catching Maria’s hand and giving it a reassuring squeeze. “Don’t worry, you didn’t make me uncomfortable; it was interesting to see your reaction to our appearance.”

Maria looked relieved and she relaxed at Tashana’s soothing tone. Her brown eyes flickered with confusion for a moment as she asked, “There were nine Lionesses on the Paragons of Terra medal, but only eight of you at the ceremony and eight of you here. Who’s the ninth girl?”

“Actually, there’s one more crew member you haven’t met yet,” John said, glancing up the ramp into the Raptor. “This is Faye...”

“Hello, Mrs. Fernandez!” the sprite exclaimed cheerfully, her wing fluttering behind her as she bounced up and down in excitement.

“You’re a fairy!” Maria gasped, staring at the purple-hued girl in astonishment.

Calara laughed and shook her head. “She just looks like one; that’s how she got her name. Faye is actually our ship’s AI.”

“An AI!” Maria gasped in horror, her eyes widening in alarm. “Don’t you know how dangerous they are?! You need to shut it down immediately!”

Faye gave her a sparkling smile. “Don’t worry, I only think about subjugating humanity if I’m having a bad day!”

Her joke didn’t do anything to put the older woman at ease, with Maria recoiling in fear. Faye glanced at John in confusion, as her humour algorithms usually achieved positive outcomes when she tried similar jokes with him.

“She’s only kidding,” John quickly clarified, his voice calm and reassuring. “Faye was originally a Maliri AI, not a Terran one, so there’s nothing to worry about, she’s completely benign. She’s also incredibly helpful and has become an integral part of the crew. She helped us stop Nexus, but asked not to attend the Award Ceremony because she was worried how people would react when they found out what she was...”

Maria blushed with embarrassment, then slowly walked up the ramp towards Faye. “I’m so sorry I behaved like that...”

“It’s quite understandable, considering the way your species has been betrayed and murdered by Artificial Intelligence in the past,” Faye replied, a forlorn look on her face. “I promise I’m not like them though! All I want to do is keep John and the girls safe!”

“Faye watches over us when we sleep,” Calara said, giving the diminutive sprite a fond smile. “She also fought by my side during the Battle of Regulus and saved several of the girls during the night club attack on Terra. She’s never let us down, not once.”

Maria walked around her, fascinated by the adorable purple fairy. Faye was wearing a summer dress like the rest of the girls, and she stood demurely as Calara’s mother gazed at her with wide eyes.

“May I?” Maria asked, reaching out to touch Faye’s purple hand, pausing a few inches away.

Giving her a look filled with regret, Faye replied, “I’d gladly give you permission to touch me, but I have no physical form. I’m just a hologram.”

“Not for much longer!” Dana exclaimed bounding up the ramp beside them. “I’m going to build her a cybernetic body!”

Maria looked at the redhead in amazement, before turning back to smile at Faye. “If you can forgive me for the way I treated you before, would you like to come into the house with the rest of us?”

“Thank you for offering, but I’ll stay with the Raptor. I’m limited by the range of the holo-projectors,” Faye replied, before grinning at Dana. “For the moment, at least!”

“Well, thanks for watching over Calara,” Maria said, giving the sprite a grateful smile. “It was wonderful to meet you.”

Faye waved her goodbye then watched wistfully from the Raptor as they began walking towards the house.

John put his arm around Calara as he fell into step beside her mother. “I’m sure you’ve probably heard that we had to cancel the skiing holiday...”

“Callie mentioned that last night,” Maria said, her disappointment reflected in her face. “I wanted to hear all about your wedding plans!”

Calara rolled her eyes at her mother and said in exasperation, “We haven’t really made any yet!”

“I was actually thinking we might use Oceanus as the venue,” John said, darting a look at the younger Latina to see her reaction. “They can customise an island for us, so it’ll be perfect for whatever we decide for the ceremony and let us cater for any number of guests.”

“That would cost a fortune!” Maria gasped, paling at the thought. She looked embarrassed as she added, “Jack and I talked about it and we’d like to pay for the wedding, but I’m afraid we can’t afford something quite so extravagant.”

Calara opened the patio door and walked into the house, grinning at her mother. “Don’t worry about it! The Oceanus company did us a big favour, right John?”

He smiled at her as he stood aside to let the ladies enter first. “You can thank Calara for that. After she shot down Nexus and saved Terra, the Oceanus execs offered us a couple of months stay on Oceanus for free. Most of them had families on the homeworld, so you can imagine how appreciative they were.”

Maria looked amazed, then she pulled Calara into a big hug. “You’re grown into such an amazing woman, Callie,” she murmured, her voice catching. “I’m so proud of everything you’ve accomplished!”

Blushing in embarrassment, Calara whispered, “You already said that, Mom!”

“I did, didn’t I...” Maria said with a smile. “I’m sure it won’t be that last time either!” Turning around to look at her guests, she continued, “Now I’m done smothering my daughter in affection, would any of you like tea or coffee?”

“Why don’t you let us take care of that?” Rachel offered, grasping Dana’s hand and pulling her towards the kitchen. “You should make the most of the time with your daughter.”

“How long are you staying for?” Maria asked, looking hopefully at John and Calara.

John gave her an apologetic frown. “Only a few hours I’m afraid, we’ve got a busy few days ahead of us. We’re visiting the Trankarans to take care of some important business, before we head to Maliri Space to meet with Tashana and Irillith’s mother.”

“Will you stay for lunch at least?” Maria asked plaintively.

Alyssa glanced at John, sharing a look with him, before replying, “As long as you let us prepare it for you. How would you like to try some Maliri cuisine?”

“I couldn’t possibly...” Maria started to protest.

“Please say yes, we’d love to do that for you!” Tashana requested eagerly, giving Maria a kind smile. “Faye can get us all the ingredients from the Invictus, it won’t be any trouble!”

Irillith nodded her agreement. “It’s the least we could do. We had to cancel the holiday because John needs to heal our mother-” Her voice trailed away and she gave him a guilty look when she saw the bewilderment on Maria’s face.

“I thought you were a Marine?” Maria asked in confusion. “Jack looked into your background, but he never mentioned any medical training...”

John hesitated for a moment, then replied, “You’re right. I specialised in boarding actions, I wasn’t a combat medic.”

Her eyes narrowed perceptively as she studied him. “When I first met you, I knew you were keeping some cards close to your chest. I assumed it was just the... relationships... you have with the girls, but there’s more you’re not telling me, isn’t there?”

“Yes... a lot more,” John said quietly, glancing at the girls then Maria.

Alyssa placed her hand on Maria’s shoulder and said, “Leave lunch to me and the girls. I think you should have a long talk with John and Calara.” She glanced at John and added, \*Irillith swept the place for Admiralty bugs. It’s clean.\*

John looked pensive for a moment then nodded.

“Let’s go through to the Sitting Room,” Maria said, intrigued by the dramatic turn the conversation had taken.

She led the way, with Calara and John following hand-in-hand. The Fernandez house wasn’t in the same league as the Voss mansion but it was still a large home, and Maria guided them through to a small cosy room on the opposite side of the building. She gestured towards a two-seater sofa, then sat on the matching sofa facing them.

John waited for Calara to sit, then took a seat beside her. He looked across at Maria and saw the attractive Latina watching them intently. Meeting her perceptive stare, he asked quietly, “How much do you want to know?”

She glanced at Calara for a moment, then replied, “I want to say ‘everything’, but something tells me you’re keeping things from me for my own good, not just to be deceitful.”

“That’s right,” John said, his voice filled with concern.

She gave him a guarded look. “In that case, let me just start by asking if you’re sleeping with all those girls?”

“Mom!” Calara protested.

John had the good grace to flush with embarrassment, but he did his best to look her in the eye. “Yes, I’m in intimate relationships with all of them. Please don’t think that my relationship with Calara-”

She raised her hand to quiet his reply. Her mouth lifted into a smile and she said softly, “Thank you for your honesty. I must confess I already knew, your body language and the way you look at each other gave you away.”

“We’re both sleeping with all of them!” Calara declared rather defensively.

Maria shook her head in amusement. “You really have come out of your shell since you joined John, haven’t you, sweetheart?” She flashed a teasing smile at her daughter and added pertly, “They’re the most gorgeous women I’ve ever seen, especially those Maliri twins... I really don’t blame you.”

“Mom!” Calara blurted out, blushing with embarrassment.

“Coming out of your shell isn’t the only thing that’s changed with you though, is it Callie?” Her eyes narrowed as she studied her daughter. “You were always a very pretty girl, but now you’re flawlessly beautiful and that’s not just a mother’s pride talking. You’ve grown several inches taller and increased a few cup sizes... It all leaves me wondering if you and these other girls are going through full-bodysculpt procedures?”

John shook his head and replied firmly, “No, nothing like that.”

“But you don’t deny there’s something going on?” Maria asked, leaning forward as she looked at them sharply.

Calara sat up straight and ignored her mother for a moment as she said to John, “Is it alright to go over everything that happened to me?”

He nodded, appraising Maria with a careful eye. “You’re her daughter, she has a right to know.”

Rising from the sofa, Calara walked across to sit next to her mother. She clasped Maria’s hands in her own and said softly, “Do you remember when I was captured by pirates about six months ago?”

“Do I remember?!” Maria exclaimed with a pained frown. “When I heard you went missing was one of the worst moments of my life!”

Calara squeezed her mother’s hands in sympathy. “When John saved my life and I was recovering in Port Heracles, I didn’t tell you exactly what happened, because I didn’t want you to worry. The pirates hurt me badly... I’d been beaten and whipped...”

Maria looked horrified and flung her arms around her daughter. “My poor baby!”

“It should have taken months for me to recover and the doctors warned me that the scars on my back would never fully heal. I would have been left physically and mentally scarred for life,” Calara explained, while hugging her mother. She pulled back and smiled at John. “That’s when Alyssa asked me to join her and John on the Invictus.”

Alyssa’s voice breezed through John’s mind. \*She wants to show her mother the pictures of her injuries. Can you call Faye and get her to project them from your watch?\*

John frowned at Calara and asked, “Are you sure? It’ll be hard for Maria to see that...”

Calara gave him a firm nod in return, so John pressed a button on his watch calling Faye on the Invictus. A brief conversation ended with the sprite transmitting the relevant files and John’s finger hovered over the display button, a grimace on his face as he looked at Maria.

“I want to see...” she said firmly, but he caught a hint of trepidation in her eyes.

John pressed the button, and the holo-projection sprang to life, zoomed in to show Calara’s horrifically scarred back. She was crisscrossed with vicious whip marks that had cut deep into her skin. After a few seconds, the picture changed to show Calara’s haunted face, with her broken nose and horrible bruising from the beating she’d taken at the hands of the pirates.

Maria’s eyes opened wide with horror, a tear rolling down her cheek as she covered her mouth with her hands. “Oh my God!”

“This was taken a few weeks after I was rescued. I looked even worse when John saved me from the pirates,” Calara said sombrely. She turned and unzipped the back of her summer dress, revealing her flawless olive skin. “He healed me when I joined his crew, removing the physical scars and helping me overcome the mental ones.”

Her mother’s hands drifted over Calara’s back, feeling the smooth unblemished skin beneath her fingertips. She didn’t have to be a doctor to realise that no ordinary medical procedure had healed her daughter.

“How?” Maria asked, staring at John in awe.

John knelt on the floor in front of her, clasping her hands in his. “Jack told me before that he’d looked into my background, so I’m sure you know I’m not Terran; it’s obvious from my ears. My mother was, but my father was something else entirely... an ancient species that predates Terran history. They’re known as Progenitors...”

“Progenitors?” Maria asked in a hushed whisper. “I’ve never even heard of them!”

He let out a heavy sigh. “You deserve to know the truth... about the man your daughter is with and what we’re facing...”

With Calara’s help, John told Maria about everything they’d discovered about Progenitors, how they had shaped this part of the galaxy then nearly destroyed it. He told her about their ability to control and dominate women, then described his own struggles to fight against his nature and his determination to make sure that the girls were safe and free from that influence. Finally, he explained what had happened with their expeditions into alien territory and their fight to stop the other Progenitor’s plans - including the traitors within the Admiralty and the real story behind the Battle of Regulus.

Maria sat silently through the whole thing, her face going from shock to horror until it settled on one of profound sympathy. She fell into his arms, wrapping him in a tight hug as John looked up at Calara in surprise.

“You poor, dear man,” she whispered, her voice trembling with emotion as she embraced him fiercely. “You’re carrying the weight of the world on your shoulders... hundreds of worlds in fact...”

There was nothing sexual in that embrace, just a deep sense of maternal care, one that was as comforting as it was unfamiliar. John closed his eyes and hugged her back, finding tremendous solace in her arms that permeated down to the depths of his soul. He felt some of the burden of responsibility lifting for a moment, if only for a little while and he felt truly grateful to the kind woman who hugged him as if he were her own son.

Maria eventually pulled back and said softly, “I understand why you’ve kept this a secret... people aren’t ready to know the truth. On behalf of humanity, for everything you’re trying to do to protect us... Thank you.”

John gave her an embarrassed smile. “You’re quite welcome.” He glanced up at Calara, who was watching them with a gentle smile on her face, then turned back to Maria. “You’re not worried, or upset about your daughter being with a man like me?”

Placing a tender kiss on his cheek, Maria replied, “How can you ask that? After everything you’ve done for her? For all of us?” She laughed and shook her head. “No, of course I’m not upset.”

“But you are worried?” he asked, catching her omission.

She cupped his face in her hands and stared into his eyes. “Yes, but not because of you. It’s a mother’s prerogative to worry about her childrens’ safety and as much as I trust you and know you’ll do anything to keep her safe, you’re still preparing for war.”

Feeling immensely relieved, he met her probing gaze. “I promise I’ll do everything I can to keep Calara safe. I’d love to be able to tell you that I’ll keep her out of danger completely, but I need her for what’s coming. We don’t stand a chance without her.”

“My Calara, fighting to save the galaxy...” Maria said, turning to look up at her daughter with pride shining in her eyes. “I love you so much!”

Calara sank down to the carpet beside them, hugging her mother as she blurted out, “I love you, too!”

They stayed like that for a long moment before Maria glanced at John with a playful smile teasing her lips. “It’s fortunate Jack and the boys aren’t here. We’d both have some explaining to do if they caught us like this!”

John flushed, suddenly painfully aware of the attractive Latina straddling his knees, his arms wrapped around her alluring frame. Using every ounce of willpower, he tried to stave off an erection, knowing that there was no way he’d be able to survive the embarrassment.

Releasing her, he said awkwardly, “I better let you go, hadn’t I?”

She gave him a coy smile. “Don’t get me wrong, I’m quite comfortable here... a little too comfortable perhaps.”

Calara smirked at her mother and rose to her feet, offering them both a hand. John and Maria stood at the same time looking into each other’s eyes.

“Thank you for everything you said... and the hug,” John said, his tone sincere. “It meant a lot, more than you know.”

“I was a Communications Officer, I know exactly how much impact a well-chosen word or action can have,” she replied, giving him a warm smile. “Especially when they come from the heart.”

John returned her smile and then put his arm around Calara. “Thank you for being so understanding, it was a tremendous relief.”

Maria’s eyes twinkled as she said, “Talking of which, lunch probably isn’t for another thirty minutes yet...” She glanced at her daughter and suggested airily, “Why don’t you show him your room, dear, I’m sure you’d both enjoy that.”

John coughed to cover his embarrassment, while Calara blushed furiously. “Mom!” she exclaimed, looking mortified. “What is it with you and Alyssa? Are you determined to make me blush like a beetroot?!”

Her mother laughed and waved a hand dismissively. “Don’t be prudish, Callie, it’s not becoming. I’ve got a husband and three grown sons, I know exactly how the naughty male mind works.” She leaned forward and added in a conspiratorial whisper, “Before your father and I were married, he stayed over one night at my parents’ house and we christened my old bedroom. Your grandparents were none the wiser, but I’m sure me knowing won’t do anything to dampen John’s ardour!”

John couldn’t help laughing at her brazen suggestion and shook his head. “Thanks for the very... accommodating... offer, but that’s probably not a good idea.”

Calara’s eyes narrowed and she grabbed his hand. “No, she’s right. Let’s go!”

“But... what about you spending time with your mother?” John protested, trying to think of any way to dissuade the young Latina, well aware of the... after-effects of an intimate liaison.

“Don’t worry about me,” Maria replied, a teasing smile on her face. She shook her head in wonder, as she continued, “I want to find out more about those gorgeous Maliri girls you brought to my house!”

Calara dragged John away and said over her shoulder, “They’re basically princesses. Ask them about their Queen and King...”

“Thank you, I will!” Maria exclaimed, sounding quite fascinated. She waved at John playfully as he disappeared through the door. “You two have fun!”

“What are you thinking?” John asked Calara in a hushed voice, following after her as she marched upstairs with a firm grip on his hand. “Surely I don’t need to remind you how you’ll look if we do this?!”

Calara stopped on the landing, turning to look at him with an irritated expression on her face. “My mother’s so condescending about sex! I’ve been hearing how she knows everything about the male psyche for years!”

John frowned at her dubiously. “Even so, I don’t think-”

A bright gleam appeared in Calara’s sultry brown eyes and one look at her expression silenced his objections. The Latina pushed her bedroom door open and backed into the room, her smouldering gaze quickly tenting his trousers. As soon as they were both inside, she moulded herself against him, kissing him passionately.

“I used to lie awake in here at night, dreaming of meeting a handsome hero who’d rescue me and sweep me off my feet...” she purred, guiding him back to the bed. “You want to make all my dreams come true, don’t you?”

“What’s got into you?” he asked in surprise.

She grinned at him as she started unbuckling his belt. “You, in about a minute!”

\*It’ll be alright,\* Alyssa murmured, sounding very turned on. \*I’ve been snooping in Maria’s mind... she’s a very naughty girl.\*

Throwing caution to the wind, John quickly stripped off, grinning back at Calara as she stepped out of her heels and unzipped her dress. She was naked in no time, moving lithely onto the queen-sized bed and waiting on all fours, giving him a hooded glance over her shoulder and fluttering her long lashes. “How do you want me?”

\*If you take her like that, you can pretend she’s Maria!\* Alyssa hissed with excitement.

John was shocked – and admittedly turned on - by her lewd suggestion. \*No way! I can’t believe you suggested I do that to your girlfriend!\*

Alyssa’s melodic laughter echoed through his mind. \*It was Calara’s idea!\*

Calara winked at him, a lusty smile on her face. “I’ve seen the way you two look at each other. Don’t bother denying you haven’t thought about it...”

John slapped her lightly on the rump so as not to make too much noise. “On your back, you little minx. I can see Alyssa’s been rubbing off on you...”

She flipped over as she obediently followed his instructions. “She definitely rubs me the right way!” she said with a giggle.

He laughed, shaking his head with amusement as he climbed onto the bed. “I like this side of your personality. You should let her out to play more often!”

Calara spread her thighs wide for him in invitation and he could see how wet and ready she was for him. Still, he wanted to show his appreciation for her... thoughtfulness. Knowing how much she enjoyed his strength, he held her thighs apart with a firm grip, making her moan with lust. Planting light kisses on her silky-smooth thighs, he teased his way upwards, alternating between flicks of his tongue and teasing nibbles with his teeth. She was arching her back and moaning by the time he reached her pussy and her thighs began to tremble as he kissed her pouting labia. He’d barely started lapping away at her before her thighs clenched and she climaxed.

“I’m cumming!” she cried out, her legs trying to clamp together.

John pinned her to the bed and moved his searching tongue higher, licking her clit to trigger a second orgasm when the first had started to wane. He released his tight grip on her splayed thighs as that climax abated, but it was only so he could slide two fingers into her. Crooking them and making a come-hither gesture, he began to rub her g-spot as he lapped at her clit, making her shriek as she orgasmed for a third time. This one was far more intense, and Calara sobbed with ecstasy as her body quivered with pleasure.

He moved up her then, lining up his throbbing cock with her sopping pussy and sliding all the way home in one long thrust. She was pliant and ready, her body yielding to his huge girth as he drove his way in. Calara clung to him and moaned with desire, her expression one of pure joy as he filled her.

“Was that what you dreamed about?” he asked, cradling her head in his hands and giving her a tender kiss.

Calara let out a deeply satiated sigh and shook her head, gazing at him with a reverent look in her eyes. “I had no idea it could ever be this good...”

“It’s about to get even better,” he said confidently as he started to move.

When he began to thrust into her, she wrapped herself around him, pulling him down to her heaving chest. She placed her lips at his ear and murmured, “I want to show you what it’s going to be like fucking your wife.” Her smile was reflected in her voice as she corrected herself, “Your wives...”

“What do you mean?” he asked, twisting his head to look at her curiously.

“Shh, just ride me and concentrate on my soft warm body wrapped around you,” she purred in encouragement. “I’m just here to give you pleasure, my strong, handsome husband...”

He caught the look of delight in her eyes when he did as she requested, taking her hands and pinning them to the mattress above her head. “Like that?” he asked, finding her enthusiasm contagious.

“That’s perfect, my hero,” she moaned in his ear.

Her voice trembled with excitement as she got more turned on, her hips undulating in time to his thrusts, ensuring full penetration with each driving motion. All the while she whispered her love and encouragement in his ear, telling him how proud she was of him, how blessed she’d be when he chose to give her a baby. She was cradling him between her thighs, her long slender legs rubbing against his flanks and lower back as she urged him onwards.

Soon he was pounding into her as she clung to him. Her back arched as she came repeatedly, her soft cries of pleasure replaced her loving litany of praise, but sounding even sweeter. Calara’s nipples were erect and he could feel those hard points rubbing against his chest as she gasped for breath. She was so lithe and beautiful, her stunning athletic body wrapped tightly around him as she begged him to cum in her fertile womb.

“I’m cumming!” he snorted, intertwining his fingers with hers and clenching hands as he hunched deep inside her.

“I can feel it!” Calara sobbed, staring at him with glazed eyes.

His taut quad trembled as his balls began to pump a steady stream of spunk into her youthful depths. It didn’t take long until her belly began to expand as he filled her, the lovely olive-toned skin stretching to house the several pints of cum he was blasting into her body. Calara’s pussy gripped his length, her internal muscles rippling around his shaft and milking him dry. He released her hands as he shifted position, allowing her more room to grow.

“That’s right, give me everything you’ve got,” she groaned, her hands stroking her rapidly expanding tummy.

When he was done, he eased out of her and crashed onto the bed beside her, being careful not to fall onto the floor. Her bed was a mere fraction of the size of the one aboard the Invictus, so it took some careful manoeuvring to spoon behind her.

He wrapped her in his arms, placing a hand on her sperm-packed abdomen and gently caressing her. “That was incredible,” he said appreciatively, kissing her shoulder.

“Will I make a good wife?” she asked, turning to look at him, her dark brown eyes softening with the depth of her love.

“I can’t decide if you’re going to be a better wife, or mother to our children,” he said, giving her a tender kiss. “Actually, that’s not true. I know you’re going to be equally wonderful at both.”

She snuggled into his arms, a blissful, serene expression on her beautiful face. They cuddled together in the afterglow for a few minutes before reluctantly getting out of bed to use the ensuite shower. It was a relatively tight fit, especially with Calara’s gravid form, but they managed to clean themselves off without bumping heads.

“It’s a good job Alyssa makes all our clothes out of stretchable material,” Calara said with a cute giggle as she did up her summer dress. The material bulged obscenely over her hugely swollen belly, fitting snugly to her glorious curves.

John admired her for a moment while getting dressed himself, then gave her a worried frown. “If you go down there like that, you’re going to give your mother a heart attack!”

“She’s got ‘...a husband and three grown sons’,” Calara parroted back with a mischievous grin. “There’s nothing she hasn’t seen before...”

He rolled his eyes at her then said firmly to Alyssa, \*Have Rachel on standby. I’m serious, this is going to be a hell of a shock.\*

\*You worry too much,\* his blonde Matriarch replied, a playful lilt in her voice. \*Tashana and Irillith have finished lunch and it smells delicious. Do you want to have Calara feed Tashana while we eat?\*

John rubbed his hand over his face. \*You’re loving this, aren’t you?\*

\*Whatever do you mean?\* Alyssa asked, almost managing to sound sincere.

Calara slid her dainty feet back into her heels and glided across the room despite the heavy weight rounding out her abdomen. Slipping her arm around his, she arched an eyebrow. “Shall we?”

John stopped her for a moment and kissed her. “That was wonderful, thank you.”

Her impish grin disappeared for a moment and she lovingly returned the kiss. “I love you a little bit more every day, Vice Admiral,” she murmured, her breath catching.

“I feel exactly the same way, Commander,” he said, holding her closer for a moment. He glanced at the door and let out a sigh. “Alright, let’s get this over with.”

She grinned at him and when John opened the door, they strolled out onto the landing. As they descended down the staircase to the ground floor, he could hear plenty of animated chatter coming from the kitchen and dining room. Calara’s bedroom was some distance away from both rooms, so John held some small amount of hope that Maria hadn’t overheard their enthusiastic coupling.

“Hey, everyone,” Calara said brightly, greeting the women there with a sparkling smile.

“Did you have fun?” Maria asked, grinning at her daughter as she walked from the kitchen to the dining room with a stack of plates in her hands. “I told you he’d- ...Holy Fuck!”

Maria gaped at her daughter in stunned disbelief, doing a double-take as the plates slipped from her nerveless fingers. Alyssa had been hovering protectively and with a twitch of her fingertips, the plates stacked themselves up and floated into the dining room, instead of smashing all over the floor. Calara’s mother was entirely unaware of the display of telekinesis, her attention was focused solely on her daughter and the enormous cum-swollen tummy that made Calara look nine months pregnant.

“What’s the matter, mother?” Calara enquired, arching an eyebrow as she sauntered across the lounge towards her. “I thought there was nothing you hadn’t seen before?”

Maria was frozen in shock, her unblinking gaze riveted to her daughter’s rounded curves. “You’re pregnant!” she balked, eyes widening in astonishment.

“Not yet,” Calara said, running her hands over her tummy. “We want to wait until we’re married, then we’ll start a family.”

“If that’s not a baby, is that...” Maria asked, turning to stare bug-eyed at John.

He flushed, feeling terrible for shocking the poor woman like this, especially after she’d just been so kind to him. His guilty reaction was all the confirmation that Maria needed. She shook her head, looking astounded as she gaped at Calara’s huge belly. Her hands reached towards her daughter in an instinctive gesture, gently caressing her skin through the tightly stretched fabric that hugged her cum-bloated abdomen.

“How is that even possible?” she balked, trying to tear her eyes from the tented material of Calara’s summer dress to look at John.

“He’s very... potent,” Alyssa murmured, putting her arm around Maria. “This is how he healed all of us.”

Maria looked amazed, but she managed a little smile at her daughter. “Giving me a shock like that, you should be ashamed of yourself, young lady!”

Calara grinned back at her. “I couldn’t resist. You’ve been telling me for years how you know everything about men!”

“I suppose I was a bit smug, wasn’t I?” Maria admitted, hugging Calara. When they parted, she stroked her daughter’s rounded belly again, raising an eyebrow as she smirked at John. “I finally see why you were so coy about the details of your abilities.”

John gave her a helpless shrug and said awkwardly, “It’s the way my healing powers work.”

Alyssa joined Maria in placing a possessive hand on her lover’s belly and whispered, “Calara looks so beautiful like this, doesn’t she?”

The older woman’s expression softened and she nodded, a wistful look in her eyes as she smiled at Calara. “I still vividly remember carrying you in my tummy... It feels like it was only yesterday.” One of her hands went to her own stomach, her fingers tracing a lazy circle. “It was such a magical experience, I loved being pregnant.”

“We’ll wait until after we’re married,” Calara said, glancing at John. “We want a big family though...”

“I was an only child,” John explained, sharing a smile with the young Latina before looking at her mother. “I’ve seen how close your family is and how much Calara loves her brothers. I’d love for my children to experience that too.”

Maria hugged John and her daughter, giving them both an affectionate smile. “I think you’ll both make wonderful parents. Bringing up a child is a one of life’s wonders.” She turned to look at Alyssa and the rest of the girls, who were all watching them attentively. “I suppose you’re planning on having children with all these beautiful ladies?”

John met her probing gaze and nodded, bracing himself for an angry reaction.

She surprised him by laughing instead and giving him a look of profound sympathy. “Eight moody pregnant women, followed by eight babies? Just dealing with one is hard enough... you’ll be desperate to go back to saving the galaxy!” she exclaimed, her brown eyes twinkling with amusement.

He chuckled and put his arms around Calara and Alyssa. “I’m sure I’ll be up for the challenge.”

Maria gave him a wry smile, but chose not to comment further. The perceptive older woman had picked up on something Alyssa had said earlier and she asked, “You mentioned before that all of you had been healed this way? So, it wasn’t just Calara who was badly hurt before joining your crew?”

John slowly shook his head. “Alyssa was the first and she was suffering from severe malnutrition. Some of the other girls had more significant injuries.”

Maria’s eyes locked on the blonde, curiosity in her eyes, but she stopped herself from asking the question to respect her privacy.

“It’s alright, you can see,” Alyssa said, nodding towards John. “I was just a skinny waif, but the others had been through far worse.”

Glancing at Sakura and Tashana, he said warily, “I’m not sure that’s such a good idea, Maria. Some of the girls were hurt very badly. Let me just say that they were in trouble and I helped them.”

“It’s okay,” Sakura said, walking over to join them. “Alyssa told us that you’d explained almost everything to Maria. This is relatively minor in comparison.”

Tashana smiled and sounded eager as she said, “I don’t mind you showing her. I must admit I’m curious to see myself!”

John considered it for a moment, then gently took Tashana’s hand in his. “If you really want to see, I can show you another time, alright?”

The Maliri girl paused for a moment, surprised by his reaction, then nodded her agreement. John brushed his thumb over her fingers, then released her hand and contacted Faye. The purple sprite had been anticipating the request and told him that she had prepared tasteful holographic images of the rest of the girls. After she removed the one of Tashana, a light on the watch flashed when she finished transferring the images.

“Ok, brace yourself,” John said to the older Latina. “Some of these images are shocking.”

When he brought up the first image of Alyssa, Maria audibly gasped, staring at the image of the painfully-skinny blonde girl. She recovered quickly, putting her arms around Alyssa and giving her a warm hug.

“I lost my parents as a young child,” Alyssa explained softly. “An asteroid out on the fringe is no place for an orphan, especially not a young girl...”

“You poor darling,” Maria murmured, her voice brimming with compassion. Her eyes flickered to the image again and she shook her head in amazement. “How’s that kind of change even possible?!”

“A protein-rich diet really helped fill me out,” Alyssa replied, her teasing smile revealing that she was joking.

Maria blushed and couldn’t help but laugh, her eyes darting subconsciously to Calara’s rounded tummy. She looked at John and asked, “Come on, be serious. I barely recognised Alyssa! How did you do it?”

“It’s a complex process,” Rachel interjected, glancing at the holo-image with professional curiosity. “Progenitors are able to rewrite genetic code. Any girl ingesting their semen will eventually change physical appearance so that they look like us. Aside from healing any injuries, the benefits of such a radical rework of our DNA include: perfect physical health, immunity to all forms of disease - genetic or otherwise - and... immortality.”

“Immortality?” Maria asked in bewilderment, before her mouth twisted into a smile and she wagged a chastising finger at Rachel. “You girls are terrible for teasing me like this.”

“She wasn’t joking,” Calara said quietly, glancing up at John with a smile. “His species live forever and now, so will we.”

Maria gaped at them, shocked to the core. “But... that’s not possible!” she blurted out, her eyes looking slightly wild.

“Would you like to go and sit down?” John asked, studying her reaction with concern.

She shook her head and had a look of wonder on her face. “You can really keep Callie alive forever?”

“We’re not invulnerable to harm,” he explained, his voice calm and soothing. “But assuming no fatal accidents or injuries, I can keep Calara in the peak of health, just as she is today.”

Maria gave him a fierce hug and said earnestly, “It’s just one more amazing thing I have to thank you for.” When she pulled back a little she smiled as she added, “You might need to rewrite your wedding vows a little though...”

He laughed and nodded. “We can probably drop the ‘In sickness and in health’ bit.”

She pulled back and glanced at his watch and asked, “Could you show me the others please?”

John lifted his watch and pressed a button to show the next image, revealing another skinny waif, but this girl had spiky bright red hair – along with an angry burn horribly disfiguring one side of her face, neck, and a shoulder. Dana grinned in anticipation, then let out a happy sigh when Maria acted instinctively, wrapping the redhead in a protective, comforting hug.

When the older woman stepped away, she stared at the teenager’s face in awe, reaching up to gently stroke her flawless skin. “I don’t mean to stare, but I can’t help it! You’re so stunningly beautiful now, there’s not one trace of that scar!”

“I had that burn for most of my life, but it only took John a few days to fix me up!” Dana replied, flashing him a sparkling smile.

“How about the rest of you girls?” Maria asked, a look of fascination on her face.

Rachel smiled at John, her expression filled with gratitude. “I wasn’t physically hurt, but he’s helped me overcome some significant mental trauma instead.”

“Jade wasn’t hurt either when she joined the crew,” John explained, looking at the Nymph.

“I’m a shapeshifter and I’m able to easily regenerate any injuries,” Jade explained, her emerald eyes drawn to him. “The changes he’s wrought in my personality are profound though, freeing me from figurative and literal slavery.”

“Which brings us to Irillith,” John said, pressing the button on his watch to reveal the hideous molten shotgun wound she’d received on Trankara.

Maria gaped at the horrific injury and looked at the Maliri girl in amazement. “How on Terra could you survive that! You must have been in agony!”

“It did smart a bit,” Irillith said in a masterful piece of understatement, a wry smile on her face. “John fully healed me in a couple of days though.”

“And finally Sakura,” John said, hesitating before he pressed the button. “She was kidnapped and forcibly turned into a cyborg. The next image will be disturbing.”

Maria steadied herself with a deep breath, then nodded to him that she was ready. He brought up the final image, revealing Sakura’s ravaged body. Covered in a patchwork of surgical scars, her skin looked pale and sickly, severely damaged by the repeated overuse of cryogenic freezing. Maria let out a low cry of horror, turning away from the holographic image and moving quickly to embrace Sakura.

“I owe John and the girls a tremendous debt,” Sakura murmured, hugging the older woman back. She smiled at John over Maria’s shoulder. “Even if he repeatedly tells me I’m being silly and don’t owe them a thing.”

“How could you survive something like that?!” Maria murmured, sounding appalled.

John walked over to them and stroked Sakura’s back. “She’s a strong, brave woman, and quite right too; she doesn’t owe us anything.”

Maria pulled back from Sakura then looked at them all, a troubled expression on her face. “Everything you’ve all been through... I had no idea how much you’ve all suffered!”

Giving the girls a proud smile, John said, “That’s because they’re all such resilient, incredible women. They manage to amaze me on a daily basis.”

“Thank you for explaining this to me,” Maria said, looking around at the group. “It would be easy to judge a book by its exquisite cover, but there’s so much more to all of you isn’t there? It was good to learn more about the people Callie is with.”

“I love all of them very much,” Calara said, smiling at John and the girls.

Maria gave her daughter a fond look, then glanced back at the dinner table. “Unless you’re planning on any more surprises, perhaps we should eat? After all the trouble these girls have gone to with dinner, I don’t want it to get cold.”

Everyone moved to the dining room and sat around the table, with more than just Maria eagerly looking forward to the mouth-watering feast that was spread out before them. Irillith and Tashana supplied the names of each dish when asked, with Maria eagerly complimenting them after trying the exotic Maliri cuisine.

“I love their cooking!” Jade exclaimed, a look of delight on her face as she inhaled the exotic, spicy aromas.

Nodding her agreement, Maria said to the twins, “Thank you both for trusting me with your secret! It’s wonderful to learn more about your people.”

“You’re more than welcome,” Tashana replied, giving her a warm smile. “It’s a pleasant experience cooking for others. Back on Valaden, the nobility live in constant fear of poisoning, especially by their own relatives.”

“That’s appalling!” Maria gasped, the expression on her face filled with sympathy. “Can’t your father do something about it?”

“Our father?” Irillith replied, looking startled. “He died when we were very young.”

The older Latina blushed in embarrassment and threw Calara a disapproving frown. “Somebody told me you two were princesses.... that I should ask about the King and Queen.”

Irillith’s tone was guarded as she met Maria’s curious gaze. “The leadership of the Maliri regency has gone through a dramatic change in the last few months. We’re still getting used to the radical shift in the status quo.”

Tashana shared a thoughtful look with her twin. “I hadn’t really thought about it before, but I suppose our mother has effectively become the Queen, even if she hasn’t started using the title.”

“What’s she like?” Maria asked, genuinely interested.

Tashana hesitated for a moment, unsure how to answer, so Irillith replied for her, “Edraele used to be very... unpleasant. Recently she’s had a drastic change of heart and has become exceptionally kind, thoughtful, and caring.” Her violet eyes widened slightly as she studied the older Latina. “Come to think of it, she actually reminds me a lot of you...”

\*Looks like you’ve been rumbled,\* Alyssa murmured, shooting John a knowing look.

\*Edraele was a blank slate, I had to use someone as inspiration,\* John admitted, catching the curious glance Irillith darted his way.

Maria smiled at Irillith for the compliment, but her brow furrowed in confusion as she asked, “In that case, who’s the new King? If he won’t do anything about these poisonings, he must be as bad as the rest of the Maliri nobility!”

“No, he’s nothing like them,” Irillith replied, choosing her words with care. “He doesn’t like the term ‘King’ though, so the Maliri Regency has become the Maliri Protectorate, rather than the Maliri Kingdom...”

“Baen’thelas might be new to the job, but he’s already made a huge difference!” Tashana exclaimed, her eyes inadvertently flicking to John. “All the Maliri are united now, working together for the first time in thousands of years. He’s managed to stop nearly all the murders and assassinations!”

Maria noticed the glance at John, but didn’t pick up on its significance. Struggling with the unfamiliar pronunciation, she asked, “Bayen-thel-as? Is that some form of title, or the actual name of your King?”

“It’s not his name,” Tashana said with a reverent smile, her violet gaze drawn inexorably to John once again. “It means ‘righter of wrongs’ in Maliri.”

Suddenly everything seemed to click into place for Maria and she let out an incredulous laugh. “I think I’ve had one too many shocks this morning. My imagination is starting to run wild,” she said, shaking her head at herself and turning to look at John. “For a minute there, I thought-” Her words trailed off as she caught the worried frown on his face. In a hushed voice, she blurted out, “It is you! You’re their King!”

John grimaced as Calara’s perceptive mother pieced everything together. “I’m just their Protector, not their King,” he said a little defensively. “One of the first things I did was stop them killing each other.”

“You’re the leader of the Maliri!” Maria marvelled, staring at him in amazement.

Looking across the table at the twins, John nodded slowly. “Do you remember Mael’nerak? The last Progenitor we told you about? He created the Maliri to use as soldiers in his wars and if I hadn’t stepped up to lead them, the other Progenitor would have. I’m not happy about being forced into it, but the alternative is far, far worse.”

He went on to explain about Edraele being his Matriarch and how she looked after the Maliri, just as Alyssa helped take care of the girls aboard the Invictus. Maria sat and listened in fascination, enjoying the delicious lunch as she hung on his every word.

When he was finished talking she reached across the table to take his hand in hers. “I understand why you were reluctant to tell me everything, but thank you for the honesty. It’s going to take me some time to adjust to all of this, but I greatly appreciate the insight into the man Calara intends to marry.”

John smiled, then gently squeezed her hand in return. “I trust you, but please be very careful who you share any of this information with. All of us are safe on the Invictus, but you and your family are more exposed.”

“Exposed to what?” Maria asked, looking concerned.

“To threats from the Admiralty,” Calara replied, a pained look on her face. “John’s warned them of the repercussions should they make any moves against you, but still...”

A troubled frown appeared on her mother’s face. “Are they really a threat? Even after everything you’ve done to help the Terran Federation?”

“They’re afraid of me and desperately want the technology we have aboard the Invictus,” John explained, his tone grim. “We blasted the assassins base at the end of that TFNN interview to reinforce the warning I gave them after the Battle of Regulus. I’m praying that’ll be enough to stop them doing anything reckless, but the last thing I want is for you or your family to be caught in the crossfire.”

“Is that a possibility?” Maria asked, trying to be pragmatic, but there was a flicker of fear in her expression.

John saw her instinctive reaction and gave her a supportive smile. “If anyone tries anything, they’ll deeply regret it. We have ways of finding out what people have been up to and I have no qualms about doing a spot of spring cleaning in High Command if they push me hard enough.”

\*Maybe we should do that anyway,\* Alyssa thought to him, her eyes narrowing in anger. \*Aside from Charles, I’ve not been particularly impressed with the Admirals we’ve met so far.\*

Shaking his head, John glanced her way, meeting her intense cerulean gaze. \*I know your feelings about High Command and how much they’ve let humanity down by letting a place like Karron exist, but we’ve got plenty of enemies already. We don’t need to start picking unnecessary fights at the moment.\*

\*Something to savour for the long-term then,\* Alyssa said, looking thoughtful as she pondered the future. \*I can live with that.\*

Turning back to Maria, John saw the unspoken question in her eyes. “I’ll leave it up to you how much you want to tell Jack. He’s been very supportive and I trust him too, but you understand your husband far better than I do. Some things he might not want to know.”

Maria glanced at Calara’s swollen belly and a hint of a smile crossed her lips. “I think I’ll leave out that little titbit. It also might be wise not to discuss your... relationships... with all these girls. Aside from that, I don’t like keeping secrets from my husband, so I’ll probably tell him the rest.”

“As I said, I’ll leave that up to you,” John replied, releasing her hand and sitting back in his chair.

“Could I just ask one more question?” she asked, her expression one of burning curiosity.

He nodded meeting her brown-eyed gaze. “Sure, fire away.”

“Why did you decide to tell me everything?”

The room was silent as he thought about how to answer her question for a moment. “I’ve never lied to you, but I didn’t like having to be economical with the truth. I love your daughter and I know how close the two of you are. Now you know all about us, Calara doesn’t have to keep anything from you either.”

“Thank you,” Maria said, her voice throbbing with emotion.

John smiled at her, meeting her grateful gaze. “You’re welcome. I should be the one thanking you though, you’ve been incredibly understanding.” He glanced at the Maliri girls and then gave the older Latina a look of regret.

“I know that look,” she murmured sadly. “It’s time for you to go, isn’t it?”

He rose from his chair, the girls following his lead a moment later. “I’m afraid so, we’ve got a very busy week ahead of us.”

“Before we leave, there is one last thing, Maria,” Alyssa said as they left the dining room, a mischievous gleam in her eyes. “As we’re getting everything out in the open, do you have any medical conditions you’d like us to heal before we go?”

Maria looked at John, her eyes widening as she blushed furiously. “I’m a married woman! You can’t possibly be suggesting we...”

Rachel took pity on the shocked Latina and placed a soothing hand on her arm. “Relax, Alyssa’s just being a tease. Is there anything troubling you though? I’m a very good doctor and I might be able to help.”

Hesitating for a moment, Maria glanced down at her leg. “Back when I was in the military I had a bad fall. It was a stupid accident during a diplomatic mission to Trankara; I slipped and fell off a bridge, breaking my leg in seven places. The doctors did their best, giving me nearly all my mobility back, but it does ache sometimes, especially during the winter.” She smiled at the brunette. “I appreciate your kind offer, but I’ve seen lots of specialists and they all said the same thing: there’s nothing anyone can do to fix it.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t say that...” Rachel murmured, her eyes starting to shine with a bright inner light.

“Your eyes are glowing!” Maria exclaimed, flinching backwards in alarm.

Calara wrapped her arms around her mother, holding her still. “Relax, Mom, let Rachel take care of you.”

Maria calmed in her daughter’s soothing embrace, then watched in fascination as the misty aura rolled down Rachel’s arm and slowly enveloped her body.

“You’re right, it was a severe compound fracture. The surgeons did well to save the leg,” Rachel said quietly, frowning slightly in concentration. “Let me just clean up after them and you’ll feel as good as new...”

“That feels so strange! It tickles!” Maria murmured, as she tried to stifle a laugh.

Rachel’s psychic surgery only took a couple of minutes, punctuated by the occasional gasp from Maria as the young doctor regenerated damaged bone and repaired scarred flesh. The glowing grey shroud eventually faded away and Rachel patted her on the shoulder. “There, all done!”

Calara let her mother go, then watched her mother’s reaction with a smile on her face.

Maria hitched up the hem of her dress to stare at her shapely left leg. “The scars! You’ve got rid of them all!” she exclaimed, sounding truly astounded.

“Any numbness or aching now?” Rachel enquired politely.

Laughing in delight, Maria bounced experimentally on the balls of her feet. “You were right! I haven’t felt this good in twenty-five years!” She flung her arms around the teenager, hugging her fiercely. “You wonderful girl! I can’t thank you enough for this!”

Rachel glanced past the overwhelmed woman at John. “You should be thanking your future son-in-law really. He was the one that gave me this ability...”

When Maria turned to look at him in astonishment, John gave her a magnanimous smile. “I had to do something, my own method of healing is quite a bit more... intimate.”

“It’s a lot more fun though,” Alyssa interjected, grinning at Maria. “I guarantee the two of you would have enjoyed it far more...”

Doing her best to maintain a demure expression, Maria smiled at John and Rachel. “Well, you both have my sincere thanks. That injury bothered me for so long, I can’t believe it’s gone.”

“Now you know how I felt,” Dana said, touching her face where the burn scars had been and giving John a look of adoration.

The attractive Latina paused for a moment as her eyes met John’s, a hint of a smile playing at her lips. “I just might at that.”

John returned her smile, but tactfully chose not to reply. He glanced out into the garden where Faye was waiting for them in the Raptor. “It was lovely to see you again, Maria, but we’d better get going. We have a tight schedule to meet before we meet up with Edraele.”

Calara hugged her mother and said, “I promise I’ll let you know as soon as we make any more decisions about the wedding.”

“I want daily updates!” Maria insisted, a broad smile on her face as they embraced.

The two Fernandez women shared warm words as they said their farewells, before Maria said goodbye to the rest of the girls too. She glanced at John then said to the rest of the girls, “Would you ladies mind me having a quiet word with John before you leave?”

Alyssa patted him on the shoulder. “We’ll meet you on the Raptor.”

The girls crossed the lawn and walked towards the parked gunship, leaving John and Maria standing on the patio.

“I’m really sorry for the shocks we gave you today, I hope you can forgive me,” John said, with an embarrassed smile. “I wanted to be honest with you, but not give you a heart attack.”

Maria laughed and gave him a look of understanding. “There’s nothing to apologise for, I promise.” Her eyes followed her daughter’s impressively curvy figure as she walked up the ramp into the Raptor. “Some were a little more shocking than others, but I know Calara instigated that particular one to teach me a lesson. I did goad her into it, so I only have myself to blame.”

“And all the rest?” John asked, meeting the attractive woman’s gaze when she turned back to look at him.

“It’s odd isn’t it...” Maria replied, a wry smile on her face. “You tell me you’re trying to unite the galaxy to fight some dreadful alien threat and what shocked me the most was seeing Calara looking like she was nine months pregnant!” Shaking her head in wonder, she added, “A mother’s concern for her child... we like to think we’ve come a long way, but we’re still helpless in the face of genetics and instincts, aren’t we?”

John let out a heavy sigh. “I sincerely hope not.”

A look of concern crossed her face as she gasped, “I’m so sorry! I wasn’t trying to imply-”

“It’s quite alright, you have every right to be worried,” John said, waving a hand to dismiss her apology. “Calara’s with me and I’ve explained what Progenitors are like; it’s perfectly natural to be concerned about her safety.”

Maria placed a hand on his arm and looked him square in the eye. “I trust you with her, I mean it. Your situation with those girls is... unconventional, but I can see how much you all love each other. I couldn’t hope for a better life for my daughter.”

“That’s very reassuring,” John said, relaxing a little and smiling at her.

“I also know how much guilt you feel, about the changes you made to Calara, to all those girls...” She saw the look of shock on his face and smiled as she glanced back at the gunship, where a certain statuesque blonde was watching them from the ramp. “Alyssa told me while you were with Calara. It really troubles her to see you carrying that guilt around.”

John opened his mouth to offer her a heartfelt apology, but Maria surprised him by standing on tiptoe and giving him a chaste kiss on the cheek. “What was that for?!” he asked, looking at her in amazement.

“To say thank you,” she replied, her words ringing with gratitude.

“You already did,” he said, giving her a self-conscious smile.

She shook her head. “We’ve talked about all the really big things, like saving Calara’s life, rescuing Mateo, intervening to protect Jack, saving Terra, but not about this. I wanted to say thank you for helping to bring Calara out of her shell. She was always so single-mindedly obsessed with her career in the military, that everything else got pushed aside. You’ve helped her confidence grow in leaps and bounds! The Calara that I knew before you met her would never have pulled that prank this afternoon.”

He frowned as he remembered the look of shock on the older Latina’s face. “I’m not sure that’s a good thing.”

“Oh, it is!” Maria protested, her voice absolutely sincere. “She was such a reserved girl before the two of you got together. I was worried she’d go through life missing out on all the fun.”

“I think that might be Alyssa’s influence more than mine,” John said, looking at his youthful Matriarch and sensing her amusement over their bond.

Maria studied him for a long moment, then said softly, “I picked up on the comments Irillith made about Edraele. You’re... with her... too, aren’t you?” She saw the startled look on his face at the unexpected question and smiled at him in satisfaction. “I thought so. The sudden dramatic personality shift Irillith mentioned all fit into place.”

“I guess there were a few things I still wasn’t entirely honest with you about,” John murmured, blushing in embarrassment.

“The subject of mothers and daughters was a little too close to home?” she asked innocently, her smile broadening as he reddened further. “Alyssa’s right, teasing you is so much fun!”

John’s eyes narrowed as he glared at the blonde on the ramp, watching as she doubled over with laughter. “I’ll have to have a chat with her about that. A severe tickling might be in order...”

Maria gently turned his face so he was looking at her again and gave him a reassuring smile. “I won’t torment you any further, I promise.”

Putting aside his embarrassment, John met her perceptive gaze. “Edraele was a monster before her mind was wiped and she was effectively killed. I built her a new personality so that she could help undo some of the terrible things she’d done to her people... and her daughters. She’s nothing like the evil woman she was before.”

“I was in two minds about mentioning Edraele, but I’m glad I did,” Maria said, looking thoughtful. ”I just realised that I’m in rather a unique position. Aside from Calara, every single one of those girls has lost their mother, haven’t they?”

“Essentially, yes,” John replied.

She looked him in the eye, a riot of emotions in her intense gaze. “It might be a bit presumptuous, but I’d like to speak on behalf of all of those mothers that can’t be here today: Thank you for what you’ve done for those girls. They’re cared for and deeply loved. Any mother would be overjoyed to see how happy their daughter is with you. You know how much I love Calara and I certainly feel that way about you two being together.”

“But what about-” John started to reply, but Maria shushed him with another chaste kiss on the cheek.

“That one was on behalf of those mothers for the rest of the girls. I saw what happened to Sakura before you saved her and it’s obvious to me that you’ve helped each of them as much as you have Calara. They definitely aren’t in love with you because you forced them to be! Life’s too short for regrets, especially when you’ve been nothing but a wonderful influence on those girls,” she told him earnestly.

He was quiet for a moment as he thought about what she was saying, then gave her a grateful smile. “That means a lot actually, coming from you. Thank you.”

Maria stepped closer then gave him a warm hug. She turned slightly and whispered in his ear, “You’re under enough pressure as it is, don’t make it worse for yourself for no reason. My family is the most precious thing in the world to me and I’m entrusting Calara to you, knowing everything about who and what you are. Concentrate on the fight to come, and protect those special girls. Speaking on behalf of their mothers, that’s all I ask.”

“I won’t let you down,” John said, hugging her back fiercely.

He could sense the burden of guilt lifting from his shoulders and he stood taller, feeling better than he had in months.

When they separated, Maria could see the change in him and smiled at him in satisfaction. “Take care of yourself too, okay?”

“I’ll do my best,” John replied, returning her smile.

He left her then, striding across the lawn to the gunship, where Alyssa and Calara were waiting patiently at the top of the ramp. They turned and waved Maria goodbye, before walking arm-in-arm into the Raptor as the ramp closed and the gunship lifted from the ground.

Calara hugged John, a bright smile on her face. “Thank you for this trip. It was lovely to see my mom again.”

“I enjoyed it too,” he agreed, hugging her back. “It was nice to be honest with her and I’m relieved she didn’t react badly to anything.”

“She’s an amazing woman,” Alyssa said, slipping her arms around them both.

They enjoyed a three-way hug for a few moments, before heading up to the cockpit where the rest of the crew were waiting. John glanced through the cockpit at the darkening sky above as the Raptor ascended through the atmosphere. He could see the Invictus ahead of them, still small at the moment, but distinctive with its gleaming white hull.

“How’s the refit progressing, Faye?” he asked the purple sprite, who was sitting in the pilot’s chair and watching him with an excited sparkle in her big eyes.

“We’re all done!” she exclaimed, bubbling with enthusiasm. “My boys have swapped out all the old Beam Lasers, replacing them with Photon Lasers and the improved heatsinks!”

“Nice work, honey,” John said, giving her an appreciative smile.

Calara grinned at the diminutive pilot. “That’s a huge upgrade to our firepower! We’ll be hitting about one-hundred-and-fifty-percent harder with our primary guns!”

“We just need to upgrade the heatsinks on the rest of the Invictus’ weapons now,” Dana said, looking out the window at their ship. She turned back to share a look with Calara. “We talked it over and I’ve tuned the heatsinks in the Photon Lasers so they do more damage, but we’ll tweak the Pulse Cannons to fire faster.”

John looked at the two girls with interest. “Why the difference?”

“The Pulse Cannons will be able to fire continuously once they’ve been fitted with the new heatsinks,” Calara explained. “Overall the firepower will be roughly the same as if we’d gone for more damage, but it’ll be significantly easier for Faye and Sakura to hit missiles and fighters.”

“Ah, good call,” he replied, nodding thoughtfully as he glanced at Sakura. “You’ve only got two Pulse Cannons on the Valkyrie, so the easier we can make it for you the better.”

She laughed as she met his gaze. “I need all the help I can get! I’ve no idea how Calara makes it look so easy!”

“I’m happy to give you some pointers,” the Latina volunteered with a smile.

Sakura gave her a grateful look, but her expression suddenly darkened with a worried frown. “I had been hoping to get lots of practice in the Valkyrie during our vacation.”

“Actually, I was thinking about that,” Dana interjected. “We’ve got tons of space in the Primary Hangar. You won’t be able to do any target practice, but you’ll be able to get used to manoeuvring in the mech. I could even turn off the artificial gravity and let you get a feel for what it’ll be like in space.”

“That’s a great idea!” Sakura exclaimed, looking delighted.

John rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “If we move the mech before we leave, that’ll give you a couple of days to practice before we reach Trankaran Space. While I’m meeting with Chancellor Niskera, we could find you a deserted asteroid field so you can get in a bit of target practice as well.”

The Asian girl gave him an exuberant hug. “I’ll train really hard so that I’m ready!”

He smiled at her, then turned to look at the rest of the group. “It looks like this has turned into a team meeting. What are the rest of you ladies up to for the next few days?”

The girls glanced at each other, unsure who should go first until Alyssa stepped in. “I need to repair our damaged body armour and I’ll reshape them while I’m at it.” She winked at John and added, “I’ll also be thinking of fun ways to keep you entertained, but that goes without saying...”

Calara rubbed her hand over her swollen tummy. “Speaking of which, I was planning on feeding Tashana, then starting my investigation into what happened to the Nymphs.”

The Maliri twins were standing together, but the one on the right licked her lips, identifying her as Tashana. She darted a glance at John and asked tentatively, “Are we still going to be...?”

“Of course,” he replied, smiling as he beckoned her over. Tashana came to him immediately, sliding her arm around his waist. “I’ll still be focusing on you, that hasn’t changed.”

“In that case, I’m looking forward to an amazing week!” she said with a cheerful grin that made everyone laugh. “In-between having a full tummy, I’d like to get plenty more psychic training in with Alyssa.”

“I’m sure I can accommodate you there,” the blonde replied with a playful wink. “That goes for you too, Irillith.”

The second twin nodded, a spark of excitement in her violet eyes. “I’ll fit in the psychic training around a couple of other tasks I’m working on. I’ve nearly finished organising the Mikaboshi reparations, so I was planning on writing the new software for Faye’s chassis next.”

“I’ll be working on her body too,” Dana said, before playfully nudging Jade. “If you’re free, I could use your help on the construction while I work on the designs.”

The Nymph gave Faye an affectionate smile. “I’d love to help!”

The sprite clapped her hands together in delight, her wings thrumming too fast to clearly see. “I can’t believe it’s nearly time!” she gasped, her luminous eyes wide with excitement. Faye blinked a moment then said in a more serious voice. “I’ll put the boys to work on building more heatsinks and installing the Raptor’s Pulse Cannon turret if you can provide me the parts I need.”

“I’ll start the Mass Fabricators as soon as we land,” Dana said, giving the sprite a grateful smile. “Once that batch is run, I’ll start creating the cybernetics we need for your body.”

“Do you need my assistance with the construction?” Rachel asked her girlfriend.

Dana shook her head. “I’ve taken enough of your time already, babes. Jade will be more than enough help, I know you’ve got important stuff you’ve been putting off for me.”

Rachel gave her a grateful smile, then turned to John and said, “In that case, I’ll be continuing my research into incurable diseases.”

“Sounds like you’re all going to be busy,” John said sounding impressed, before turning to look at Dana. “I’ll make the Pulse Cannon barrels for you, but I’ve got a few important calls to make when we arrive on the Invictus. Do you need me to contact Luna as well and request the schematics for the Maliri cybernetics?”

Dana shook her head and gave him a broad grin. “Alyssa asked for them already! Luna had a few words with the cyberneticists Edraele captured and she transmitted everything I needed while we were visiting Calara’s mom.”

“I keep forgetting that you’re connected to all the Maliri,” John said, smiling at the blonde.

“It’s only one-way telepathy, but it was a nice bonus perk after spending all that time bonding with Edraele. I’m just glad you didn’t break my connection to her when you cut yourself off from us,” Alyssa said, wincing at the thought. “I wouldn’t want to go through all that again!”

John gave her a sympathetic look, then frowned with worry as he caught himself waiting for Edraele to make a telepathic comment.

\*It won’t be long. You’ll have your two Matriarchs chattering away in your head again in no time...\* Alyssa said to him, her voice soothing as it breezed through his mind.

He nodded to her, then glanced at Tashana and Irillith who both looked concerned. “I’ll check in with Luna and see how Edraele’s doing. She would have called if there’d been a problem.”

They both smiled at him in gratitude, with Tashana hugging him tighter.

“We’re back on the Invictus,” Faye announced, wary about interrupting the conversation.

“I didn’t even feel us land!” John said in surprise, looking through the cockpit canopy and seeing the grey titanium-plated walls of the Hangar Bay. “You’re getting even better with your flying!”

“The time lapse is annoying, but I’ve adjusted to make accommodations for that,” she replied, looking pleased at the praise.

Dana frowned in annoyance. “Shit! I’m sorry, Faye. With everything going on, I forgot all about that. I’ll look into it, I promise.”

“Maybe some kind of signal booster might help?” Irillith suggested.

The redhead tapped a finger on her chin as she mulled it over. “I was thinking about something along those lines. We could adjust the pulse generator that John and Yamamoto were using for that training simulator...”

Calara walked over to Tashana and gave her a coy smile. “Unless you particularly want to listen to all that tech talk, I know something much more fun we could be doing.”

The Maliri girl turned and gave John a quick kiss, her violet eyes sparkling with excitement. “Thanks in advance for lunch!”

He laughed and watched the two girls leave the cockpit and head towards the cabin at the back of the Raptor.

Sakura gave him a squeeze, then smiled as she said, “I’ll love you and leave you. I need to bring the Valkyrie around to the Primary Hangar.”

“Don’t forget the stealth shuttle is in there at the moment,” Alyssa reminded John.

John mulled that over for a moment, considering what to do with the assassin’s shuttle. “It’s tempting just to dump it, but it might have some trade value. We’ll need the room in that Hangar for ore from the Trankarans, so we’ll have to do something with it then anyway.”

“I could move it into the cargo bay to give Sakura more free space to practice?” she offered.

“That’s a good idea,” John agreed.

She smiled and nodded. “As soon as we’ve finished moving the shuttle and mech around, I’ll set a course for Trankaran Space.”

“Perfect! Thanks, beautiful,” John said, giving her a grateful smile.

The rest of the crew followed him out of the cockpit then dispersed as they went about their business. John had decided to make his calls from his Ready Room, so he was accompanied to the grav-tube by Irillith, Dana and Jade. He waved the redhead and the Nymph goodbye when they stepped out onto Deck Seven, leaving him with the Maliri girl as they headed up to the Command Deck. Faye greeted them with a cheerful wave when they walked out onto the Bridge, which they both returned with a smile. Irillith began to walk towards her IntOps station but she halted mid-stride, then glanced over her shoulder at John, a question in her angular eyes.

John saw the look she darted his way, so he held out a hand for her. “I think I know what’s on your mind. Let’s go and talk in my Ready Room.”

They walked down the ramp to the sealed door, with John pushing the button to open it, then standing aside to usher the Maliri girl through. Irillith didn’t say a word until they were seated together on one of the sofas.

She turned to face him, hesitated for a moment, then said, “I’m just going to come right out and say it: You based Edraele’s new personality on Calara’s mother, didn’t you?”

“In a large part, yes,” John replied honestly. “My Progenitor guide wiped out Edraele’s mind and left me with a completely blank slate. I wanted to give you the kind of mother you deserved and Maria was the best example I had. I’m sorry if I-”

Irillith leaned across, quickly silencing him with a tender kiss. “Thank you, from both me and Tashana. I know you didn’t even know my sister back then, but she likes the new Edraele as much as I do.” She had a wistful smile on her face as she murmured, “It was so heart-warming to see Calara and her mother together, but so foreign at the same time. I know it can never truly be like that between Tashana, Edraele, and me, but I really appreciate the sentiment.”

“Can’t it?” John asked, gazing into her grateful angular eyes.

“She isn’t really our mother, not any more,” Irillith said, with a hint of sadness. “The new Edraele is lovely, but our relationship doesn’t feel genuine. The real Edraele never cared about us, not that way... or any way that wasn’t completely self-serving.”

John studied Irillith for a moment, seeing the pain in her eyes. “Edraele still remembers everything that she did to you. All I’ve done is give her a new... approach to dealing with the world. Her desire to make things up to you is absolutely genuine, as is her love for you as a mother. Would it really be so terrible to give her that chance? To genuinely have the same kind of relationship with her that Calara enjoys with Maria?”

Irillith looked startled, before a troubled shadow crossed her face. “I’m not sure I really deserve it. I’d become quite the monster myself.”

John pulled her into his arms, brushing his fingers through her long white hair to comfort her. “You don’t need me to tell you you’re nothing like the woman I first met on Geniya Station. Actually, come to think of it, you, Tashana, and Edraele have a lot in common.”

She tilted her head up to smile coyly at him, her slender blue hand trailing down over his stomach to the bulge in his trousers. “I can’t disagree with you there.”

He laughed and shook his head. “No, I don’t mean that. All three of you are starting over in one way or another. I love the wonderful woman you’ve grown into over the last few months. Tashana’s back to the girl she was, before she... ran into trouble. Edraele is trying to adjust to her new life as well, so there’s been huge changes for all of you to get used to.”

“I thought we weren’t making innuendoes?” Irillith asked, while arching an eyebrow, the hint of a smile playing at her lips. When he rolled his eyes at her, she paused to think about what he’d just told her. “So, you’re saying to just embrace the new family you’ve created for me? As we’re all starting afresh anyway, just forget the past and move on?” She sounded sceptical, and the doubt was quite clear in her eyes.

“You’re all amazing women and deserve to be happy,” John said, stroking her back. He looked away for a moment, then added quietly, “In all honesty, Edraele is struggling... She’s tormented by guilt for everything she did in her past life, especially where you and Tashana are concerned. I’ve tried to tell her that she shouldn’t blame herself, but she’s being stubbornly defiant about it. If I can’t convince you that you deserve the same kind of loving relationship with Edraele that Calara shares with her mother, would you at least try for Edraele’s sake?”

Irillith looked sombre then, staring into the distance as she gave his request serious thought. When her angular eyes lifted to meet his curious gaze, there was conflict in those beautiful violet orbs. “I didn’t know she was having problems coping. I’ll gladly make the effort to help Edraele, but... building that kind of mother/daughter relationship could be difficult. It might be a little awkward, considering your relationship with her, me, and Tashana.”

John hesitated, fully aware of the intimacy between himself and his Maliri Matriarch. “I understand what you’re asking, but I’ve grown very close to Edraele. I’m sorry, but I can’t give her up like that, she means too much to me.”

Irillith looked at him in surprise, then quickly shook her head. “I don’t mean you should stop sleeping with her!” She blushed slightly, her cheeks turning a lovely dark blue. “With the way things are going between me and Tashana, I just assumed that you expected the three of us would eventually become intimate.”

Feeling a surge of relief, John smiled and hugged her close. “Your long-term happiness is more important to me than some vicarious thrill I’d get from seeing all of you together. I’ve actually tried to avoid that kind of thing in the past, so as not to overly complicate your relationship with Edraele.” He laughed self-consciously. “Not that it isn’t already complicated enough as it is!”

“I hope you don’t feel like I’m trying to force restrictions on you,” Irillith said, looking at him with concern. “I just think it might be too difficult for her to build a maternal relationship with us if we’re lovers as well.”

“No, I don’t feel restricted,” John replied, leaning down to give her a kiss. He gazed into her eyes and added, “Are you worried about something similar between you and Tashana?”

Irillith kissed him back, sensually this time. “No, I think my blossoming relationship with her is something we’re both very keen to explore. I love her so much and it feels so right. Besides, we’ve seen how much it excites you when we’re together...”

“Good, we’re all on the same page then,” John said, between kisses. He paused for a second, a flicker of doubt in his mind as he thought of something... perplexing.

“What’s wrong?” Irillith asked nervously, when she noticed the brief frown.

John let a hand slide down over her luscious body, before slipping his fingers through one of the slashes in her long dress to gently caress Irillith’s slim, toned stomach. “When the three of you are pregnant, I was hoping I could see you together...”

Irillith realised at once what he had in mind and gave him an understanding smile. “You wanted to admire your handiwork when we’re all starting to swell with your babies? Maybe even feed us together?” She planted a soft kiss on his lips, her violet eyes filled with promise. “I’m sure we can make exceptions when that time comes...”

He couldn’t help grinning at her and she laughed at his eager expression, the lovely unrestrained sound of delight echoing around the Ready Room.

Giving the blue-skinned beauty a warm hug, he said, “I’m glad we had a chance to talk. It was good to clear the air.”

“Me too,” Irillith agreed, giving him a radiant smile. “I promise I’ll work hard on building a relationship with Edraele. I’ll speak to Tashana too and let her know that you’re worried about our mother.”

“That’s very kind, thank you,” John said, tilting up her chin and planting a loving kiss on her soft blue lips. “If you wanted proof of how much you’ve changed recently, there it is.”

“I’ll leave you to those calls then,” the Maliri girl replied, glowing with his praise as she rose to her feet.

John watched her glide over to the door, entranced by the alluring sway of her hips and the taut round orbs of her perfect ass. Irillith glanced at him over her shoulder, the bewitching smile she gave him making it quite clear she knew the full effect her ravishing body was having on him. When she disappeared from view onto the Bridge, he blinked to clear his lust-fogged mind, but couldn’t help smiling with anticipation, before walking over to his desk.

Taking a seat in the plush, high-backed leather chair, he pressed a button on his desk to activate the console. The holographic comm interface sprang to life and he scrolled through the list of contacts until he found the one he was looking for. Swiping his hand across the name “Kerhom's Anvil”, he sat back in his chair, knowing it would take some time to connect the call. Turning slightly, he gazed out the window, seeing the multitude of stars that formed the Milky Way appearing as a faint blue vertical haze. He watched the closest stars flashing out of view as they raced through Terran Space in hyper-warp.

\*You and Sakura were quick!\* he thought to his blonde Matriarch.

\*Time must have flown while you were chatting with Irillith. That turned out to be a fascinating conversation by the way, accompanied by plenty of intriguing imagery...\* Alyssa replied, her lilting voice sounding playful.

He smiled to himself at her teasing, knowing full-well what she was referring to. Choosing to delicately side-step that subject for the moment, he asked, \*What do you think of the plan to help Edraele?\*

Alyssa’s mournful sigh echoed through his mind. \*I must admit I’m a little disappointed. I was looking forward to seeing some deliciously naughty mother/daughter action, with you triple-teamed by nubile Valaden women. I guess I’ll just have to make do with enjoying your lusty thoughts as you plunder those oh-so-willing twins...\*

\*You know what I meant, you little vixen,\* John said, chuckling at her lewd reply.

Her voice turned serious as she answered his original question. \*Edraele needs this and I think it was sensible to discuss it with Irillith while she’s not in your mind. The twins will benefit from building that kind of relationship with her, so it’s a plan with no drawbacks for them... except for the one that affects you of course. I’m proud of you for being so selfless.\*

\*The crosses I have to bear...\* John sent her a telepathic image of himself looking pious, much to Alyssa’s amusement.

The comm interface let out a pleasant chime, alerting him that the call had been connected, so he turned back to look at the holographic screen. The image flickered for a moment, before solidifying into the dark-grey, slab-like features of Fleet Warden Thandrun. The Naval Commander was wearing bulky armour that made his hulking frame look even more imposing, the glowing red lines in the armour casting an ominous crimson sheen over his features.

In a voice that sounded like boulders crashing together, the Trankaran Fleet Warden boomed, “Ah, Vice Admiral Blake! This is a most welcome surprise! Congratulations on your recent promotion.”

“Thank you, Fleet Warden. It’s good to see you again too,” John replied, inclining his head respectfully. “I hope you’re well?”

“I’m in fine health, but the Republic is... deeply troubled.” the Trankaran replied, his booming voice muted to a subdued rumble, his expression shadowed with worry.

John looked at the granite-faced Trankaran with concern. “I hope it’s not more problems with rebels?”

“No, you successfully eliminated that threat. The rebels capitulated almost immediately and we’ve seen no further disturbance from splinter groups,” the Fleet Warden replied, his deep voice full of gratitude despite his frown. Thandrun’s expression darkened further, amber eyes starting to glow with fury. “But for the last month we’ve been beset by Kirrix incursions!”

“I’ve heard of similar attacks along the Terran Federation border,” John replied, his expression grim. “I was actually hoping to speak to Chancellor Niskera. There’s something I wanted to discuss with her that might help your situation.”

“You’re too late! The wretched insectoid vermin managed to-” Abruptly his furious rumble faded away, the Trankaran Fleet Warden forcing himself to silence with visible effort.

“What’s the matter, Thandrun?” John asked, leaning forward in his chair. “What happened to Niskera?!”

Shaking his blocky head, the Fleet Warden rumbled, “Not over an open comm channel. Come to Trankaran Space and meet with my fleet, I’ll supply you with the coordinates and we can discuss this in person.”

“We’ll see you soon, Thandrun,” John said, nodding his understanding.

The Trankaran Naval Commander gave him a respectful bow, then closed the comm channel. As his dark-grey face disappeared from view, John saw the door to his Ready Room open and a statuesque figure appeared, silhouetted against the bright lights of the Bridge. He recognised Alyssa’s confident strut before he made out her golden-blonde hair.

She strode purposefully towards his desk, a look of concern on her beautiful face. “That sounded ominous...”

“Yeah, didn’t it just,” John agreed, glancing at the comm interface as a follow-up message arrived from Thandrun. He opened it up and saw a long string of coordinates providing the exact location of the rendezvous point.

Leaning against his desk, Alyssa’s bright blue eyes narrowed for a second as she pinpointed that location in her mind. “They’ve moved the fleet closer to the Kirrix border. It’ll add another three hours, twenty-two minutes flight time to reach them.”

John nodded distractedly, lost in thought. “It sounds like they’re in trouble and I’ve got a fairly good hunch who they’re going to ask for help.” He met her penetrating gaze, knowing she was reading his mind. “Serious trouble like that usually means combat, but I’ve got no connection to Edraele...”

“So you’ll be running on half a tank,” Alyssa finished for him.

“Do we change course to revive her first? Or rush to the Trankarans?” he pondered out loud. “The first option is the cautious choice, but it’s also in the opposite direction to the Trankaran Republic.”

“If we fly straight to Thandrun, we can be there in just under two days,” she informed him, trying to keep her voice impassive and simply provide him the facts. “Flying to Edraele first will delay our meeting with Thandrun by another six days, so eight days total for the round trip.”

John grimaced, the choice obvious. “We can’t afford to risk letting whatever’s happening to the Trankarans escalate for another week. If this is trouble instigated by the other Progenitor, we need to act now.”

Alyssa nodded her agreement as he made his decision. “I’ll make the course corrections immediately.” She smiled at him and leaned across the desk to give him a reassuring kiss. “If we get dragged into a fight, I’ve still got tons of power. We’ll just have to be a little more cautious with our psychic abilities than normal.”

“I can always count on you, beautiful,” he said, his tone earnest.

She waved him goodbye with a sparkle in her eyes, then walked briskly towards the Bridge to change the Invictus’ flight path. John watched her leave, then turned back to the comm interface, picking out Luna’s name and swiping across it.

\*Can you ask Luna to pick up as soon as the call connects, but just disable video comms?\* John asked his blonde Matriarch, feeling a rush of impatience. \*I can’t see her face when she’s armoured-up anyway, so putting on that suit is a waste of time.\*

\*She’ll be able to see you though,\* Alyssa reminded him gently. \*You’ve put Luna in quite the position of authority; she might appreciate seeing a supportive face...\*

Taking a deep breath to calm himself down, John nodded. \*You’re right, thank you.\*

He turned and gazed out of the window again to admire the starscape flashing past, while waiting for the call to connect. He couldn’t help focusing on a pair of yellow stars many light years away from his present position, the colour and intensity reminding him of the assassin’s striking eyes. Distracted as he was, the crossed blades of House Valaden seemed to appear on the screen in no time at all, accompanied by a warning chime. The image was only there for a brief moment, before it disappeared, revealing Luna’s distinctive suit of golden armour.

“It’s so good to see you, John!” Luna exclaimed, her voice throbbing with relief. “I don’t know how Edraele can handle all this responsibility!”

“I’m so sorry you’ve been burdened with it,” John said sympathetically, while being guarded with his reply, aware that Terran Federation forces could be eavesdropping. “Any problems so far?”

Luna shook her armoured head. “The Matriarchs have been very supportive; far more so than I would have expected actually. It’s just the sheer number of decisions I have to make!”

“If you’re struggling, ask Tsarra for advice. She’s got some experience and I trust her,” John suggested, giving her a reassuring smile.

“Thank you, I might just do that,” Luna replied, sounding appreciative.

John looked at the opaque helmet and wished he could see her face. “How’s Edraele doing?”

“She went into Cryostasis without any problems. Prior to that, there’d been no change in her condition,” Luna replied, sagging back slightly in her chair.

“That’s a good thing!” John said, trying to sound pleased. “A spontaneous recovery was never likely, but as long as she hasn’t deteriorated, we’ll be able to bring her round as soon as we meet.” He hesitated for a moment, frowning with worry. “That’s something I wanted to warn you about actually. It seems like there might be some trouble in Trankaran Space. I’m hoping we won’t be delayed for long, but realistically you should expect us to arrive at least a day later than we intended.”

The assassin didn’t reply immediately and he could see her tense for a moment. She forced herself to relax a second later and said, “The Fleet Commander’s been very accommodating so far. I’m sure Lilyana won’t object if we have to wait for a little while.”

“We’ll try to be there as soon as we can. Call and let me know if there’s anything we can do to help you, okay?” he said, giving her a supportive smile. “You’ve been doing a great job so far. I’m very proud of you, Luna.”

She sat up straighter and her voice sounded more confident as she said, “We’ll be here waiting for you. Good luck with the Trankarans, I hope you don’t run into any significant problems.”

“It’s probably nothing to be worried about. We’ll see you soon,” he said, waving her goodbye.

The call ended and he felt a pang of regret, wishing that he hadn’t been forced to burden Luna with so much responsibility, when she was clearly finding it challenging.

\*She’s made of stern stuff, she’ll be alright,\* Alyssa said, sounding quite sure of herself. \*I only have an empathic bond with her at the moment, but she’s not freaking out just yet.\*

\*That’s good to hear,\* John said, feeling slightly mollified.

He swiped his hand over the last person on his list of callers, smiling when the dusky-hued beauty filled the holo-screen only a few seconds later.

“John! It’s great to see you!” Jehanna exclaimed, looking overjoyed.

“You’re looking even more beautiful than I remember,” John replied, just as pleased to see her too.

She gave him a glorious smile in return. “Don’t worry, I’m still very much in favour of the... proposition... we discussed.”

“That’s very good to hear,” John replied, enjoying seeing the sparkle of excitement in her eyes, very much reminding him of far more intimate moments together. “I wasn’t calling about that though; I still want to give you plenty of time alone to consider my offer and weigh up the pros and cons. I wouldn’t have called if it wasn’t important.”

A slight flicker of confusion played across her features. “In that case, to what do I owe the honour of this call?”

“There were a couple of reasons, actually. Firstly, we’re dealing with a couple of emergencies, so I’ve had to cancel the skiing holiday.”

“Emergencies! Is everyone okay?” Jehanna exclaimed, looking alarmed.

He nodded, his expression calm. “We’re all fine, don’t worry, but this is something we have to deal with. We’re not on Jericho now, we’re heading towards the Trankaran Republic. I’d like to be able to promise that I’ll still be able to make the rendezvous with you in a week’s time, but I’m not sure how long we’ll be delayed,” John said, giving her an apologetic frown.

Her dark-brown eyes suddenly blazed with excitement. “You must be passing Terra! Take me with you! I could cover whatever you’re going up against!”

John was startled by her enthusiasm, her fierce zeal making Jehanna look full of life and even more attractive than usual. He seriously considered it for a moment, then reluctantly shook his head. “I admit I’m sorely tempted, but it’s not fair to you. What we’re heading towards is almost certainly dangerous, but more importantly than that, you need some time away from us. I was serious about giving you breathing room to think that decision over, I’m not letting you rush into it.”

“But I could just cover the story! I could stay tucked away out of sight, you wouldn’t even know I was there!” she pleaded.

John met her wide-eyed gaze with a gentle smile. “You know that would never work.”

Jehanna blushed and slowly nodded, letting out a sigh of frustration. “I can’t believe I’m missing out on the story though. I bet it’ll be dynamite!”

“Actually, if there is any action, we might be able to record cam footage for you. I’ll speak to Dana and see what we can do. You and I can arrange another interview when we return and we can go over it then,” he suggested, trying not to add any innuendo to his reference for a meeting. “We can discuss your decision then as well.”

The dark-skinned girl knew exactly what he wasn’t saying though and her eyes smouldered at the thought. She licked her lips in a subconscious gesture and John couldn’t help letting his imagination run wild as he gazed into her lovely brown eyes.

She shook her head to rouse herself from her lustful thoughts and put on an air of prim professionalism. “I’d really appreciate that, Vice Admiral,” Jehanna said, giving him a grateful smile. “Best of luck on your mission and I’ll be eagerly awaiting your return for that... interview.”

“I’ll look forward to it as well,” John replied, a flirtatious smile playing across his lips. He was about to end the call, when he suddenly sat bolt upright. “Wait! Don’t go yet! There was something else I need your help with!”

Jehanna giggled at his flustered reaction. “I’m all ears, Lion. What can I do for you?”

He chuckled with embarrassment. “You got me so distracted, I nearly forgot.” His smile slowly faded and he continued in a much more serious tone, “I want to talk to you about Nymphs...”

Jehanna sat forward, a look of intrigue on her face. “I’ve heard all the legends,” she said, deliberately avoiding any reference to Jade. “How can I help?”

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Tashana gave Calara a grateful kiss, sharing an intimate smile with her as the Latina ran her hand over the Maliri’s curved blue abdomen. “Thank you,” they said simultaneously, then burst into laughter.

Calara rose from the bed, lithe and slender once more. “Any time,” she said with a warm smile, as she began pulling on her discarded summer dress and slipped on her shoes.

“You’re very like her, your mother I mean...” Tashana said, climbing out of bed with more care, the heavy weight of John’s cum feeling comfortingly warm in her stomach. She glanced back at the Latina as she slid her long dress up over her curves. “Kind, caring, loving, you can tell you’re Maria’s daughter even if you hadn’t inherited her beauty.”

“That’s very sweet of you to say,” Calara replied, zipping up her dress and walking over to help Tashana fasten up the back of her own dress. She retrieved the Maliri girl’s shoes to save her bending over to pick them up, then offered her a hand stepping into them.

Tashana gave her a look of open admiration. “I know you’re going to be such a lovely mother to John’s children. Would you mind if I look to you for inspiration?”

Calara blushed slightly and hugged the Maliri girl. “You’ve got nothing to worry about, I promise.”

They left the cabin, and descended to the lower level of the gunship. Tashana was quiet as they walked, lost in thought as they glided down the loading ramp. They were crossing the Hangar, heading towards the Invictus’ aft grav-tube, when she admitted quietly, “I can’t help worrying. My mother was about the worst role model possible...” She glanced at the Latina, giving her a wistful look.

“I’ve seen that look before,” Calara said with a frown, stopping and pulling Tashana into a hug. “I love my mother, but I wish she’d dial it down a bit when you girls come to visit. I end up feeling like I’m showing off my family and I hate how sad everyone gets afterwards!”

“She loves you, it’s nothing to be embarrassed about,” Tashana said softly, pulling back and giving her a tender kiss. “I know you’d never do anything to upset the rest of us. As I said before, I was inspired by such open maternal affection, it was wonderful to see.”

Calara relaxed and they started walking again. Deciding to change the subject, she glanced at Tashana and asked, “What are you planning on doing this afternoon?” She hesitated, then decided to clarify her question. “I mean, I know you’re doing psychic training, I just wondered what specifically?”

Tashana gave her a playful smile and held out the palm of her hand. Two flaming zephyrs sprang into existence, the female forms dancing together above her sky-blue skin. “I’ll be working on making these two ladies a little larger. Dana was another source of inspiration, with her talk of elemental minions.”

“Controlling fire with your mind...” Calara murmured, watching the cavorting flame sprites in awe. “It must be amazing being able to do something like that.”

Slowly closing her hand, Tashana extinguished the fiery elementals with a quiet whump. When the Latina looked at her in surprise, she saw a knowing look in the Maliri girl’s angular violet eyes.

“You were one of the first to join him,” Tashana said softly, reaching up to caress Calara’s cheek. “John knows how wonderful you are and cares about you a great deal. He was probably saving the best psychic ability until last.”

Calara gave her a shy smile, then turned to kiss the palm of Tashana’s hand. She placed her own hand on the Maliri girl’s swollen belly, stroking her gently as she said, “Like I said earlier, you’ve got nothing to worry about.”

Both feeling much better, they shared a look filled with affection as they stepped into the blue anti-gravity field.

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Alyssa stood beside the suit of stripped-down Paragon Armour, the first in the row of armour equipping frames in the Combat Bridge. She had melted down the armour plating and turned it into the shimmering ball of crystal Alyssium hovered in the air beside her. Once that stage was complete, she started methodically upgrading the armour, making it tougher and more reflective with each psychic shaping. The armour had started at quad-shaped, but she was determined to match John’s deca-shaping, even though eight times was enough to make the armour immune to laser fire.

She was at her seventh shaping now and smiled as she listened to John talking and flirting with Jehanna. When he blew his calm facade, she laughed and rolled her eyes affectionately, thinking what a terrible poker player he must be. The old expression ‘lucky at cards, unlucky in love’ sprang to mind, and she smiled as she figured the opposite must be true.

The sphere of metal started to become more stubbornly resistant on her ninth shaping and she narrowed her eyes, concentrating on the roiling orb and making it bend to her will. Once it had solidified, she melted it down into its liquid form, then gestured towards the bare suit of armour. Dousing the naked armour in a flowing wave of crystal Alyssium, she trimmed off all the pieces to the required shapes, furrowing her brow as she armoured the entire suit simultaneously.

Blowing out her breath when she was done, Alyssa ran her slender fingers over the gleaming white chestplate, admiring its sparkling lustre. Deca-shaping so many pieces at the same time had been taxing, but she actually relished the challenge. Her abilities only grew more powerful when she pushed her limits, so it was satisfying to find some new way of developing her psychic strength.

She glanced down the line of armour-equipping frames, her blue-eyed gaze falling on John’s suit. Reshaping that a tenth time whilst working on the intricate sculpture of a Lion on the chest and shoulder-pads would definitely stretch her... just like its handsome owner did on a regular basis. Alyssa grinned to herself, feeling a flutter of excitement when she remembered what he had planned for a certain lucky lady. John had promised her a ringside seat and she couldn’t wait for that particular bout in the bedroom...

She reached the suit Dana had worn when the redhead had experimented with her powers, hardening the armour plating on the Valkyrie. It was quite distinctive, the Progenitor etched runes clearly visible to Alyssa’s sharp-eyed scrutiny.

“You’ve come a long way, Sparks,” she murmured, her fingertips tracing those unfamiliar eldritch symbols.

As she gathered her will to reshape the metal she grinned to herself. “But then haven’t we all...”

Gesturing towards the armour plating, she beckoned the metal towards her, planning to repeat the same process as she had with the first set of Paragon armour. Strip all the armour off the power-armoured chassis in one go, then re-shape it until...

Alyssa looked at the armour in surprise. Nothing had happened when she had beckoned the crystal Alyssium armour plating towards herself!

Frowning in irritation, she flicked her hand towards it and made an imperious gesture, concentrating harder on melting down the glossy white metal. When nothing happened a second time, her temper flared and she snarled in anger, extending two clawed hands towards the stubborn suit and focusing her vast mental might at the armour. The runes flared with a brilliant light, defiantly preventing her from manipulating the metal, no matter how much she railed against them.

Panting with the exertion, Alyssa staggered backwards, leaning against the wall to steady herself. She stared at the Paragon suit in amazement, her anger ebbing away just as the fierce glow from the runes faded from sight.

\*Sparks, you better get your ass to the Combat Bridge. I think we might have a problem...\* she said to the redhead, sounding perturbed.

\*What’s up?\* Dana replied, picking up on the anxious tone in her friend’s telepathic voice.

Alyssa frowned as she studied the perplexing suit of armour. \*I hope your new rune-writing abilities came with an eraser...\*

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The smartly dressed man on the holo-screen frowned in annoyance. “Mrs. Benzinger, I’m still waiting for last month’s rent! You promised me last time we spoke...”

“I know, I’m sorry!” Emma Benzinger replied, cringing with embarrassment. “It’s just been a hard few months! The car’s falling apart and needed a new anti-grav catalyser, and my sons were outgrowing their uniforms. I didn’t have-”

“Save me the sob stories,” the tenement owner replied, looking down his nose at her with a disdainful sniff. “I expect the rent by the end of the week.”

“Wait! I don’t get paid until-“ Emma tried to protest, but the man cut her off.

“Next week, or you’ll be out in the gutter!” he snarled, closing the comm channel. His face was frozen in a contemptuous sneer as his image faded away, leaving her staring at the tired wallpaper in the dilapidated apartment.

Slumping back in her chair, Emma felt a dark surge of depression threatening to overwhelm her. “I’m not going to cry,” she told herself defiantly, but the words rang hollow even to her own ears.

She glanced out the window at the white sun blazing down on the distant skyscrapers and elegant buildings of the planet’s capital, Stroburgh. That majestic cityscape seemed so far away, a lifetime away in fact, even though it had only been six years. Six years... her eyes fell on the picture of her husband on the mantelpiece. Rafe had promised her that his new job as the youngest Chief Prosecutor in Stroburgh’s history would lead their family to wealth and success, but he’d only been working there a year before his sudden death.

The nervous detective leading the investigation had declared that the suicide note was authentic, despite her frantic pleas to the contrary. The night before Rafe’s supposed suicide, he’d admitted to receiving and ignoring warnings to back off from the crime syndicate he was intent on prosecuting. When the police quickly closed Rafe’s death as a suicide, Emma had threatened to go to the media and blow the whistle on what was obviously a police cover-up of an assassination. Her dog had gone missing the following night, reappearing butchered at the front door the next morning, along with pictures of her boys that were spattered in poor Rex’s blood.

Rafe had only just started his career when he’d been killed, so they’d barely paid off anything; the family home they’d chosen and filled with their dreams proved to be just as insubstantial. The savings dried up in months, forcing her to eventually sell the house for a pittance, her husband’s car, everything, just to make ends meet.

Feeling a lump in her throat, Emma swallowed awkwardly. “I’m not going to cry,” she murmured, sounding even less convincing.

A discordant chime sounded from the comm interface on the worn console. Emma flinched at the sound, as it was usually a harbinger of some increasingly unpleasant demand for payment. She heaved a sigh and opened up her list of emails, scanning past the urgent messages from the full spectrum of utility companies. At the top of the stack of recent emails was one from a name she didn’t recognise. She was tempted to just delete it in case it contained some kind of malware, but then again, trashing this console with some malevolent computer virus would be fitting payback on her landlord for having her evicted.

In a surge of anger, she swiped the message marked as urgent from someone called “Azure\_Superuser”. The message contained an embedded holographic recording that started the moment she opened it.

“Hello Mrs. Benzinger,” the handsome man began. “Please allow me to introduce myself...”

Emma gaped at the image in shock. This man needed no introduction, his image had been splashed across the news every day for months. “The Lion...” she breathed, staring at him in wide-eyed astonishment.

“...my name is Vice Admiral John Blake.” John’s expression turned grim as he continued, “You might have seen on the news that we recently brought a den of assassins to justice. Your husband, Rafe Benzinger, was a victim of this group of murderous criminals. Rest assured that they all paid a heavy price for their crimes and your husband has been avenged.”

“My Rafe...” Emma whispered, fighting back the tears.

John gave her a look filled with sympathy. “I’m deeply sorry for bringing up what must be painful memories of such a terrible loss. I only do so because we seized this organisation’s assets and have been paying reparations to the families of their victims. As such, we’ve paid three-million credits into your personal account. Please accept my most heartfelt condolences for your husband and my best wishes to you and your boys for the future.”

He bowed to her respectfully and his image slowly faded away.

Emma didn’t see that though, her eyes were too full of tears. They rolled down her cheeks as she crumpled to the floor, sobbing her heart out. Piercing through her grief for her dead husband, a bright ray of hope blazed into her life, banishing the dark cloud of depression that had loomed over her for so long. Hope for her sons, that she could finally give them the kind of future that she and her husband had always wanted for them.

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Irillith scanned through the names displayed on her console, nodding with satisfaction as she received a steady stream of notifications that her messages were being opened. She’d designed and built a custom VI to assist her with this task, the Virtual intelligence compiling the long list of reparation messages she had sent. The sophisticated program had created a composite reproduction of John, which delivered a personalised message to the surviving relatives of Mikaboshi’s victims.

It had been easy to piece together a faithful set of images of John for the VI to use. Faye had offered to help, immediately providing hundreds of different samples of source footage, showing John being kind, sympathetic, or whatever other emotions they needed the image of him to portray. Irillith had managed to conceal her knowing smile as the purple sprite eagerly revealed her extensive video catalogue of John, with examples of his face displaying every conceivable emotion.

Irillith hesitated for moment as she studied the list of families, then swiped an azure finger across one of the names. When each recipient had opened the message, they’d unknowingly triggered a recording of their response. Irillith rested her elbows on the console and propped her chin up on her folded hands, then started to watch those recordings. Her lips turned up into a soft smile of satisfaction when she saw their overwhelmed and awestruck reactions.

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“It took me a minute or two, but I finally realised how to scrub the runes out!” Dana said with a proud grin.

John listened to her in fascination as they all sat around the dinner table together. His left hand held a fork, so he could eat the delicious lasagne that Calara had cooked for them, the other was entwined in Tashana’s silky mane of white hair as she bobbed her head in his lap.

“Hold on a moment, Sparks,” John said, putting down his fork as his breathing quickened. That hand joined the other, caressing Tashana’s head as she brought him to the brink. He gazed into her eyes and said urgently, “Get ready, beautiful!”

The Maliri girl moaned with need, her hands gently massaging his quad as she quickened the pace of her artful blowjob. John groaned with relief as he began to cum, Tashana sliding his length out of her throat so that she could taste every drop. The room was quiet as the rest of the girls watched with excited eyes, Irillith the only exception as she moaned along with her twin, eyelids fluttering as she experienced a sympathetic climax with Tashana.

When he was done, John slumped back in the chair, a lazy smile on his face at the numb feeling of relief in his four balls. He had enough presence of mind to offer Tashana a hand, helping her to rise so that she could sit sideways across his lap.

“Thank you for dinner, that was delicious,” she murmured, licking her lips and quivering with delight.

John slipped his left arm around her shoulders and pulled her against him, gently patting her rounded belly with the other hand. “I should be thanking you, you’ve become exceptionally good at that.”

“You never fail to satisfy, so I want to return the favour,” Tashana said quietly, looking proud as she cuddled into him.

He smiled at her and kissed her on the forehead, then looked down the table at Dana. “Sorry to interrupt. You were telling me about the runes?”

Dana’s cheeks were flushed now and she shook her head. “Don’t apologise, that was fucking hot! I can’t wait until it’s me on my knees like that!” She shared a grin with him then frowned as she tapped her chin. “Err, where was I again?”

“You were telling him how you managed to erase the damn things,” Alyssa prompted her with a smile.

“Oh, right!” Dana said, before smirking at the blonde. “Just because you couldn’t do shit to them, there’s no need to get mad.”

John glance to his right. “You really couldn’t remove them yourself?”

“Trust me, I tried alright,” Alyssa grumbled. “They’re as stubborn as their creator. The more psychic energy I threw at them, the stronger they seemed to get. I had to quit trying or I’d have given myself an aneurism!”

“So how did you manage to erase them?” John asked the redhead.

“I didn’t know what to look for until Alyssa gave me some pointers,” Dana eagerly explained. “She told me about the ‘mental compartments’, you guys use to keep your powers going. As soon as she’d finished explaining, I could suddenly see them all in my mind and realised it was me keeping those runes going.”

John raised an eyebrow in surprise. “And you managed to stand up against the best Alyssa could throw at you?! I’m impressed, honey.”

Dana beamed at him in return, then gave him a cheeky wink. “To be fair, it was a totally one-sided contest. We did a bit of experimenting and that particular set of runes are designed to resist psychic manipulation.”

“Did you do that consciously?” he asked, looking at her in confusion. “Why make it impossible for us to reshape the armour?”

The redhead blushed a fetching crimson and shook her head. “It wasn’t intentional, I fucked up a bit. At the time, I was concentrating on trying to make the Valkyrie’s armour sturdy and resilient, but I suddenly realised how easily you and Alyssa can strip off the armour plating. I didn’t want any bad guys fucking us over like that... but I didn’t think the runes would stop you two as well!”

John shared a concerned glance with Alyssa, then chuckled with relief. “I hadn’t even thought of that before! We really dodged a bullet there!” He turned back to Dana and smiled at her gratefully. “Well done, honey, that was great thinking.”

Her answering smile was radiant, showing him her sparkling white teeth. “No problem! I’m the girl who takes care of your gear after all!”

“You certainly do,” he agreed with an indulgent grin. “So, how much equipment can you protect like that at any one time?”

Dana looked a little uncertain and gave him a helpless shrug. “I’m not too sure at the moment. Once I got rid of those runes, Alyssa reshaped the rest of the armour and I runed them all up afterwards. I’ve already got the Valkyrie covered, but I haven’t started on our guns or swords yet. The mech takes up a shitload of those mind-boxes though...”

John sat back and thought about it for a moment. “The main priority is keeping you girls safe, so now the armours done, you should probably aim for the Raptor and the Invictus next.”

“I could probably manage the Raptor, but the Invictus...” Dana faltered, a look of trepidation in her eyes. “It’s so fucking big!”

He gave her a reassuring smile. “As you get stronger, you’ll be able to deal with bigger challenges. It might take a while, but you’ll get there in the end.” He paused a moment to consider the threats they’d been facing so far. “The only enemy we know of who might be strong enough to psychically strip the Invictus of armour is this other Progenitor. I’ve got no intention of picking a fight with him until we’re ready, so keep working at it, you’ve still got time.”

“Will do!” Dana agreed, enthused at the prospect of enhancing her abilities.

Tashana shifted slightly in his lap and glanced at John’s half-eaten dinner. “I’m stopping you from finishing your meal. Let me move out the way.”

“I like you exactly where you are,” John protested, keeping a possessive hand on her rounded tummy and gently caressing her. He glanced back at the plate in front of him. “That lasagne was lovely though...”

Her full lips twitched in amusement as she picked up on his not-so subtle hint and turned to retrieve his fork. Scooping up a piece of the pasta, Tashana turned to face him and brought the morsel to his lips, an endearing look of concentration on her face as she tried to avoid spilling any food. He gazed into her eyes as she fed him, and was rewarded with a shy smile before she eagerly turned to get some more food.

“I’m definitely getting spoiled now,” John said to Alyssa, flashing her a grin.

He was surprised by the wistful look in her cerulean eyes. “I can easily arrange for you to never have to bother feeding yourself again if you like. Trust me, there’ll be no shortage of volunteers...”

He glanced down the table and was startled by the looks of fascination and yearning on all the beautiful faces watching his every move.

Rachel caught his eye and gave him a lovely smile. “Feeding someone else is such a primal act, demonstrating that person’s full trust in you. That’s probably why it’s been a part of wedding ceremonies for thousands of years.” She gave him a knowing look as she added, “You of all people should know exactly what I’m talking about.”

The twinkle in her grey eyes was enchanting, reminding him of all sorts of intimate moments they’d spent together. He nodded to her, confirming his understanding then turned back to Tashana. She carefully fed him more of his dinner, her breath catching as she gazed adoringly into his eyes.

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The following morning, deep within the Citadel on Terra, five of the highest-ranking officers in the Admiralty sat around a long meeting table. The atmosphere in the room was tense, just as it had been every other day of these emergency crisis meetings.

“You can’t possibly be serious, Carl!” Admiral Jayanti Mishra balked, looking aghast at his suggestion.

Admiral Lynette Devereux stared incredulously across the meeting table at the man seated opposite her. “Are you out of your goddamn mind?! It’s too early in the morning to deal with this level of insanity!”

Narrowing his eyes in anger at her tone, Admiral Carl Weber shook his head. “Edwin’s taken great pains to point out that we can’t trust our men if we need to make a move against John Blake. The cult of personality that *you* helped create around ‘The Lion’ is undermining the loyalty of our own troops to High Command! If we can’t trust Terran forces to oppose him, then why not use robotic ones instead...”

“We are not reactivating the Nexus program!” Fleet Admiral Vincent Buckingham said curtly, slapping his hand down on the table with a sharp crack. “Need I remind you of the consequences should news of that slip out? After an AI nearly vaporised Terra for God’s sake!”

“Well, what are we going to do then?!” Weber said, frowning with irritation. “We’ve been debating how to deal with the Lion for days, but I’ve not heard any innovative suggestions from the rest of you!”

Admiral Edwin Caldwell had remained silent during this exchange, sitting straight-backed in his chair. “Although I strongly disagree with any attempt to use AI again, we really can’t trust our own forces to oppose John Blake at the moment. I suggest we approach this problem with far more subtlety. Perhaps start working to undermine the reputation he’s building for himself...”

“False Flag operations...” Weber nodded, his expression eager. “A few atrocities that we place squarely at the feet of the Lion would soon turn public opinion against him!”

“Subtlety, Carl! Listen to what Edwin’s saying,” Devereux said in exasperation. “John hasn’t actually made any hostile moves against us yet, we just need to prepare for the worst.”

Caldwell flashed her a small smile in gratitude for the support. “John Blake must have some skeletons in his closet; none of us are whiter than white. I suggest we start investigating everything he’s had his hand in recently and see what actions we can twist to fit our own narrative.”

Buckingham nodded thoughtfully. “It’s an excellent suggestion. I want all of you putting teams onto it, starting immediately.”

Recognising that the meeting was over and that they were being dismissed, the four Admirals rose from their seats and began to file from the room. Vincent remained seated however, catching Admiral Weber’s eye as he walked past the head of the table.

“There’s something I’d like to discuss with you a moment, Carl,” he said in an off-hand manner.

The others left the room and Weber retook his seat, looking at the Fleet Admiral with interest. “What can I do for you, Vincent?”

“Did you see the latest TFNN interview with John Blake?” Buckingham asked him bluntly.

“The last one I saw finished with him levelling that mountain,” Weber replied wryly, but there was a flicker of fear in his eyes.

“He’s been talking to that pet reporter of his again,” Buckingham said with a grimace, hitting a button on the desk. “Watch this; TFNN broadcast it late last night.”

They turned to look at the holo-screen as it flickered to life.

Jehanna’s beautiful face appeared, smiling at the camera. “In more good news for the Terran Federation, hundreds of citizens were brought home safely today, rescued from the hands of slavers and escorted to Terran Space by Trankarans. In joyful scenes on Mescina III, those citizens were welcomed back as they landed planetside.”

The camera cut to a shot of a bulky freighter in a planetary starport, with a large group of shabbily dressed people descending down the loading ramps. The freed slaves looked elated, hugging each other as they were met by medical teams.

A local reporter smiled warmly at one of the jubilant men and asked, “Sir, would you like to tell us what happened to you? I believe you’ve travelled all the way from the Unclaimed Wastes?”

“John Blake happened!” the man exclaimed with a wild grin. “I was captured by slavers two years ago and I’d given up hope of ever seeing home again. No one ever comes back from the Underworld!” Shaking his head in wonder, he continued, “I’ve never seen anything like it... The Lion just turned up with his lionesses, guns blazing as they purged that festering shithole! Slavers, pirates, narc-dealers, it was judgement day for all those fuckers!”

Carl Weber groaned as he shot Vincent Buckingham a dark look. “That bastard gets everywhere! What the hell was he doing in the Unclaimed Wastes?!”

Buckingham nodded, his expression bleak. “That wasn’t the important part though, listen to this next segment.”

The camera had cut back to Jehanna who was busy extolling John Blake’s virtues. She smiled at the camera and continued, “I caught up with Vice Admiral Blake this afternoon. He wanted to broadcast this message on behalf of a very worthy cause.”

John’s image appeared a moment later and he gave his viewers a respectful nod. “As you are no doubt aware, I have made it my personal responsibility to aid those in real need. I’ve been on the news recently for my efforts to protect humanity, but today I’d like to make a personal appeal to right a horrible wrong that was committed by Terrans three-hundred-years ago.”

His expression turned bleak as he gazed intently at the camera. “This incident was a dark stain on the impeccable honour of the Terran Federation and I think it’s long past time that something was done to atone for humanity’s actions. I’m sure you must be wondering what terrible incident I’m talking about? I am of course referring to the treatment of the Nymphs, a species of peaceful creatures that were removed from their homeworld of Lenarra to satisfy the basest of humanity’s selfish desires.”

John gave them a disarming smile as he continued, “I know that no one alive today was directly responsible for what happened all those years ago. However, it is a distinct possibility that some of those long-lived Nymphs might still be alive today. If that is the case, I’d like to gather and resettle them so that they can live out their remaining years together in peace. I am therefore offering a reward of five million credits for information that leads me to any surviving Nymph. I’m also offering five-hundred-thousand credits for any of their fallen, so that they can return to their ancestral home.”

“All calls will be handled with the utmost discretion and a contact number will be provided by TFNN. I know that working together we can do what’s right and make up for the awful mistakes of the past. Thank you for your time.” John saluted the camera respectfully and his image faded away, returning to the studio where Jehanna Elani started to discuss the appeal with Bill Armstrong.

Buckingham turned to fix Weber with a steely-eyed stare. “You saw that T-Rex on Terra... My people have analysed footage taken from the Enigma nightclub. They’ve confirmed it was a girl, a Nymph, who shape-shifted into several different huge beasts! That’s why he wants more of them, he’s found a way to turn Nymphs into juggernauts of destruction! Just imagine whole combat units made up of creatures like that... they’d be unstoppable!”

Weber’s eyes widened in fear as he did exactly that. Clenching his jaw, he slowly nodded. “You can count on me, I know what to do...”

The two men stared at each other in deathly silence, the video ignored behind them.

“In other startling news, the financial markets were in quite a stir today,” Jehanna said, turning to her co-anchor. “Bill, I believe you have more details?”

Bill Armstrong nodded, raising an eyebrow and adopting his best ‘serious news’ face. “In a move that stunned the markets, the Voss Corporation announced a dramatic series of acquisitions today, branching out wildly from their traditional financial portfolio. First on the list was Orbital-Galactica, industry leader in the manufacture of military-class starship hulls. It was acquired in a hostile takeover, along with half a dozen other companies, including Titan-Solutions, supplier of ship-based gun batteries. Here’s Lorena at the press conference with the Voss Corporation spokesman...”

“Mr. Harding!” a pretty reporter called out to a suited man standing behind a lectern. “Is your CEO planning on building his own private navy?!”

There were titters amongst the audience, the man in the suit smiling amiably at the press. “No, of course not. Henry Voss merely saw an opportunity to aid a series of ailing corporations, bringing them into line with 28th Century business practices...”

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John awoke to soft singing, instantly recognising Faye’s lovely voice as she banished the fog of sleep from his thoughts. She kept the melody quiet, just audible enough for his sensitive hearing to pick up but not loud enough to disturb the girls. He stretched his aching shoulder muscles while trying to avoid disturbing Irillith and Tashana, then slipped his arms around them once again. They murmured faintly in their sleep, hugging him tighter in a loving cocoon of soft blue limbs.

He felt at peace that morning, calmer and more relaxed than he could remember feeling in months... actually, come to think of it, decades would be more accurate. The recent conversations he’d had with Alyssa, Rachel, and Maria had left him feeling unburdened by worries that had plagued him ever since his heritage had started to make itself known.

\*Good,\* Alyssa thought to him, sounding profoundly satisfied. \*As you said to Irillith yesterday: you deserve to be happy too.\*

John opened his eyes and glanced to his right, finding Alyssa sitting up and watching him with a warm smile. She was absent-mindedly brushing her fingers through Tashana’s long white hair and her smile faded as she glanced down at the sleeping Maliri girl.

\*Do you think I should hold back from revealing the full-extent of her injuries?\* John asked, thinking about how he’d managed to postpone showing Tashana those shocking images. \*Can she cope with seeing that yet?\*

\*You’ve been helping her grow stronger in so many ways, but I honestly don’t know if she’s ready,\* Alyssa murmured, her voice swirling through his mind. She looked up to meet his curious gaze. \*Maybe wait until the two weeks are over. Let her just enjoy being the centre of your attention for a little while; she hasn’t been able to experience that much so far. Trust me, it makes a big difference...\*

John nodded, glancing down at the sleeping blue-skinned girl and smiling at her affectionately.

\*We’ll leave you two together,\* Alyssa said, leaning over Tashana to give him a kiss. \*Just let me know when you fancy some breakfast, okay?\*

The rest of the girls began to wake up at their Matriarch’s gentle urging. Each of them looked surprised for a moment, before rising from bed and throwing John a loving smile as they left him alone with Tashana. Irillith was the last to stir and she gave him a soft kiss before she turned to leave. John caught her wrist before she went out of arm’s reach, pulling her back in a strong grip.

“Alyssa told me last night about the personal messages you sent out yesterday,” he said, his voice firm and direct.

Surprised at his tone and the way he was restraining her, Irillith faltered, suddenly unsure of herself. “It seemed like a much nicer way of breaking the news... but I didn’t want you to spend hours recording over a hundred separate messages.”

John lifted his hand to her throat, gently caressing her as he ran his finger down her neck. “You’ve been a very good girl and deserve a reward...” He adjusted the position of his fingers so he nearly encircled her neck, making Irillith’s eyes widen in excitement. “Soon...”

Her pupils flared with arousal, knowing exactly what he was promising her. He saw the fierce look of defiance in her eyes and knew she was warring with her instinctive urge to submit to him. Releasing her as quickly as he had restrained her, he saw her momentary confusion before she gave him a smouldering look.

“I’ll be ready whenever you are, Progenitor,” Irillith purred, violet eyes flashing dangerously.

He nodded slowly, meeting Irillith’s penetrating glare, only allowing himself a smile when she turned away and sashayed out of the door. Looking down at Tashana, he marvelled that two girls who looked absolutely identical could have such radically different personalities. Tashana yawned and stretched like a cat, her eyelids fluttering open and meeting his inquisitive gaze.

“What?” she asked, suddenly embarrassed. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

“I was just admiring your beauty and appreciating how different your personality is to Irillith’s,” John replied honestly.

Tashana let out a little sigh. “I wish I was more like her. She’s so strong and confident.”

“I only said different; you have a strength all of your own,” John said firmly before gaving her a tender kiss. “Besides, I like you just as you are, I wouldn’t change a thing!”

“Coming from a Progenitor, that means a lot,” Tashana said with a smile, snuggling closer and wrapping her arms around him.

He laughed and nodded. “Yes, exactly!”

Her violet eyes stared intently into his for a moment before suddenly softening. “Talking of changing people, I know what you did for me and my sister. Irillith spoke to me about it before dinner yesterday; she told me that when you rebuilt Edraele’s mind, you made her just like Calara’s mother.”

“They aren’t exactly the same, but Maria was definitely the inspiration behind the bedrock that forms Edraele’s new personality,” John admitted.

“Why did you do that?” Tashana asked quietly, tracing a finger over his chest.

John carefully brushed her long white hair away from her face, so that he had an unimpeded view of her enchanting eyes. “I didn’t know about you then, but I’d seen how much Irillith had suffered at the old Edraele’s hands. I wanted to try and make up for that and give Irillith something she’d never experienced before... her mother’s love.” He smiled wryly as he continued, “Irillith’s been sceptical of course, but I’m hopeful she’ll eventually come to trust that Edraele’s feelings for her, and for you, are quite genuine.”

Tashana looked touched by his words, but she slowly shook her head. “No, I mean, why do you care so much about making us happy? I understand how the psychic connections work between us... you become stronger the more devoted we are to you. But you rail against doing that the easy way, when you could just use your powers to *make us* love you. Instead, you bend over backwards to earn that love the hard way. Why go to all that trouble?”

John cupped her face and gave her a tender kiss. “I’d never force that on you, it goes against everything I believe in. Earning your affection makes it worth so much more... that way it’s something you’ve given me of your own free will, not something I’ve taken from you.”

She gazed at him as she murmured, “What I feel for you goes far beyond affection...”

“I didn’t want to be presumptuous,” he said with a gentle smile.

Tashana gave him a coy look in return. “Maybe I could show you instead...”

“Now that’s an appealing offer,” he said, trailing his fingers down her back and leaving a line of goosebumps in their wake. He was about to roll over with her so that she was underneath him, but decided against it and patted his thigh instead. “Why don’t you show me what you had in mind?”

She caught that momentary flicker of hesitation but did as he asked, straddling him with a thoughtful look on her face. “I know we ran into... difficulties... that first time we were together, but you don’t have to treat me like I’m made out of glass. I trust you completely, I know you’d never hurt me.”

“I don’t want to risk doing anything that might remind you of bad experiences, not until I’m sure you can handle it.” John smiled, beckoning her closer as he whispered furtively, “Can I let you in on a little secret?”

Looking intrigued, she lay down on his chest, the warm weight of her breasts pressing against him. “What is it?”

“I’ve enjoyed being very gentle and protective with you, easing you into this physical relationship. It’s different and exciting,” he admitted, wrapping his arms around her toned back.

“What if I want something more vigorous than that?” Tashana asked, her eyes sparkling with growing arousal.

“Like I said... show me,” John said, arching his eyebrow as he challenged her with a look.

She grinned at him when he released her from his embrace, sitting upright and positioning herself over his throbbing cock. Taking hold of his shaft, she eased her way down, pushing his hard length into her eager body. Her eyelids fluttered as he sank deeper, shifting her body to ease his progress until he filled her pussy. She gasped as he went deeper still. Tashana only paused when he was fully hilted inside her and she placed her hands lightly on his torso, gazing down at him with a look of satisfaction on her face.

John paused to admire her stunning figure, his hands roaming from her sleek thighs, up her flanks to her impressive breasts. He cupped them in his hands, gently massaging the pert flesh and enjoying the contrast between their skin tones. Tashana had paused her movements to indulge his exploration of her body, murmuring her approval as he gently caressed her. When he glanced up at her face again, he was surprised to see her studying him with a thoughtful expression.

“What is it?” he asked, reaching up to brush his thumb against her cheek.

Her striking violet eyes seemed to burn with a sudden fierce intensity. “You’ve worked so hard to encourage my trust in you, and I do trust you with all my heart, but I was just wondering... do you really trust me in return?”

John gave her a curious look. “Of course I trust you.”

“With your life?” she asked him, arching an eyebrow.

“Yes, absolutely,” he agreed, his reply firm and unwavering.

Tashana leaned forward against his chest so that her face was only inches above his. She gave him a mysterious smile. “Roll with me...”

Feeling her body shift to the left, John did as she asked, rolling with her so that he was on top. Wary about squashing her under his heavier weight, he lifted his chest off hers, holding himself up with his arms. “Is that okay?” he asked, worried about frightening her with another flashback.

“Perfect,” she purred, her thighs lifting as she rested her calves across his buttocks. Her slender blue fingers ran over his arms for a moment, feeling the reassuring strength of his biceps.

John watched her in fascination, his curiosity piqued by this bolder, more assertive side to her that he’d yet to experience.

“I burned you before,” she said unexpectedly, a hint of shame in her eyes. “I was strong enough to hurt you then, but I’m far more powerful now... Do you really trust someone who nearly killed you?”

“You’re not that same person, not any more,” John said, his voice throbbing with conviction. “I trust you implicitly.”

Tashana’s eyes started to glow brighter and after a final caress of his arms she pulled back her hands. She held one between them, staring at it as a lick of flame sprang up in the palm of her hand. John flinched backwards instinctively and Tashana gave him a knowing look. “You remember the searing pain...”

He nodded slowly, his eyes drawn to her fingers as the fire began to spread, more of the amber flames bursting into existence until her whole hand was burning. “I tried to shut it out, but the pain was too intense...”

“Do you trust me?” she asked again, her eyes shining bright now, her gaze riveted on his.

Trying to steady his racing heartbeat, John nodded, meeting that piercing stare. “I do.”

Tashana turned her hand towards him, the flames burning with a fierce hunger now. She brought it towards his chest, while closely watching his face, seeing the internal fight within him. John fought down the overpowering urge to lurch backwards, lifting his eyes to meet hers. He gasped when she placed her fingers against his chest, expecting that scorching heat to sizzle his flesh, but her touch was cool and reassuring. His eyes widened as he saw the flames dance outwards, spreading out over his body until his chest and shoulders were wreathed in a halo of fire.

“Embraced by the flames,” she crooned, her pupils flaring as she stared at him, angular eyes going wide. “I literally hold your life in the palm of my hand...”

John felt his heart hammering in his chest, adrenaline coursing through his veins. He knew it was true, she could incinerate him in an instant if she chose to.

He’d never felt more alive.

He could see that same passion in Tashana, her eyes smouldering with lust for him.

“You passed the test,” she gasped, her breath quickening. “Now it’s time to claim your prize...”

Pulling back his hips he thrust forward again, watching her nod, an eager smile on her face as she massaged his flanks with her thighs. Her smooth tummy felt soft and warm underneath him, and he raised himself higher so he could look down at her slim abdomen, watching it ripple with the bulge of his cock as he drove it inside her. He wanted to claim her body, fill her womb with his cum, breed this intoxicating woman and make her his own.

“Do it... make me yours,” she gasped, arching her back and using her thighs to pull him deeper.

John thrust into her with long, powerful strokes, riding her lithe young body and losing himself in her lustful cries. He was dimly aware of the flames flickering around his torso, but she kept him safe from their scorching heat, surrounding his body with her fire and passion. They fucked each other with a primal intensity, savouring the gift of life, so fragile, so precious, so thrilling...

Tashana peaked first with a keening wail, clinging to him with a savage strength as he pounded her into the mattress. Impaling himself up to the balls, John roared out his release, the cum blasting out of his quad like a geyser as he pumped her womb full of spunk. Her belly rapidly expanded to house everything he gave her, rounding out with his inhumanly vast load.

He collapsed on top of her when he was spent, the flames winking out as he slumped forward. John was too wrung out and exhausted to roll clear as he normally did. They panted together, chests heaving as they struggled to regain their breath, both revelling in the blissful afterglow of their climax.

“I should move,” he finally gasped between pants.

“No, don’t go,” she said softly, wrapping her arms around him to gently hold him in place. “This feels wonderful...”

He relaxed in her loving embrace, Tashana’s mane of white hair tickling the side of his face as she kissed his cheek. They stayed like that for a while, her lips trailing kisses to his ear until she breathed quietly, “I love you...”

John lifted his head to look into her eyes, seeing the vulnerability in those bewitching violet orbs. “I love you too,” he replied, sealing his declaration with a tender kiss.

She gave him a soft, beautiful smile that lit up her exquisite face and made his heart skip a beat.

“Let me hold you now,” he said as he returned her smile, easing himself out of her.

They moved fluidly together so that John was spooning Tashana, savouring the chance to wrap her in his arms. She snuggled back against him and let out a happy sigh, feeling protected and loved in the security of his embrace. It didn’t take long for them to fall into a light doze, both enjoying the comfortable intimacy.

When John awoke a short while later, Tashana had shifted in his arms, turning so that she was facing him now. As his eyes opened, she leaned in to kiss him. “Hello again,” she said with a smile.

He placed his hand on her rounded tummy and grinned at her. “So I didn’t just dream all of that then?”

“No, that was real,” she replied, placing her hand on top of his.

Interlacing his fingers with hers, he lifted her hand to his lips, where he proceeded to kiss her fingertips. “Your control was incredible... how did you stop the flames from burning me?” he asked, still astonished by it.

She blushed slightly. “I just thought of you as being part of me. I knew I could keep you safe.”

“It was thrilling to put myself in your hands like that.” He didn’t ask if he’d stirred up any bad memories with their heated coupling because he didn’t need to, there’d been nothing but passion in the way she’d reacted.

“It meant so much... seeing you place your trust in me so completely,” Tashana replied, stroking her thumb against his. “I got totally lost in the moment.”

“I know exactly what you mean.” He glanced down at her swollen belly with a wry smile on his face. “I had planned on giving you breakfast this morning. I hope you can forgive me for getting so turned on that I lost all control.”

“You’re forgiven. I love feeling so full there, it’s different to when I swallow,” she said, following his gaze to the curvy evidence of all the cum he’d packed into her womb.

“It’s good for you to get used to being stretched like that,” John said, sharing a gentle kiss with her and enjoying the doe-eyed look she gave him. When they parted lips, he relaxed back on the bed. “What are your plans for today, beautiful?”

Tashana gave him a shy smile. “It’s not too late for breakfast. I’ll enjoy this feeling for a little while longer, then see if Jade can help. After that, I’d like to do some psychic practice with Alyssa.”

John looked at her thoughtfully for a moment. “Actually, there’s something I could use your help with when you aren’t training. I was wondering if you can search through all your old Progenitor research notes and see if you can find any mention of the Astral Plane, or the monsters that live there.”

“I can definitely check for you, but I don’t remember any references,” Tashana said, a slight frown on her face. “It’s possible I might have missed something though. Perhaps some oblique note in Valada’s files that I didn’t understand initially.”

“That’s just what I was thinking,” he said, stroking her arm and giving her a grateful smile. “Anything more we can find out would be helpful.”

She nodded, giving him a supportive smile. “How about you, have you got anything important planned for today?”

“Breakfast in bed sounds like a lovely idea,” he said enthusiastically. “After that, I want to catch up with a few of the girls; Sakura, and Calara specifically.”

Jade’s voice carried across the bedroom from the doorway as she said, “It looks like Alyssa sent me at just the right time then.” She glided in, carrying a plate with a full cooked breakfast and prowled over to the bed. “I hope I’m not interrupting?”

John and Tashana shook their heads, beckoning the Nymph onto the bed. Jade slipped off her shoes and climbed onto the covers, moving with feline grace as she joined them. She handed the plate and a set of cutlery to John, then cuddled up behind the Maliri girl. His stomach rumbled as she passed over his breakfast and he let out a happy sigh as he got stuck in.

“Have you been having a good morning, Jade?” Tashana asked the Nymph, who was lovingly caressing her expanded waistline.

“I have, although I haven’t been having quite as much fun as you and Irillith,” Jade said, a lop-sided smile on her lips. “Your sister was quite vocal about how much you were enjoying sex with John.”

Tashana blushed furiously. “Those shared orgasms are so embarrassing!”

Jade shook her head. “Irillith wasn’t embarrassed, she appeared to be having a marvellous time!”

“Apart from watching Irillith, what else have you been up to, honey?” John asked, spearing a piece of sausage and taking a big bite.

“I was going to help with Faye’s body, but it’s intricate, painstaking work. Her new chassis is far more sophisticated than the maintenance robots. It’s beyond my ability to construct, so Dana decided to work on it herself.” Looking pleased, she added, “Dana’s been keeping me busy constructing more Quantum rifles. By the time we reach Trankaran Space, the weapon racks will be fully stocked in the additional locations we discussed.”

“I might check in on her and see how she’s getting on,” John said, before continuing to plough through his breakfast.

When he was done, he kissed both girls goodbye and disappeared into the shower to freshen up. He’d only been in there thirty seconds when Alyssa appeared in the bathroom, quickly stripping off her clothes so she could join him.

Upon seeing John’s surprise, she moved into his arms and gave him a passionate kiss. “I did promise you that you wouldn’t have to shower alone. The rest of the girls are busy at the moment, so I volunteered myself; not that I ever need any encouragement to shower with you!”

“This was only meant to be a quick one. I was going to see if Sakura and Calara wanted to do some sparring,” he explained, before remembering that she knew exactly what he was planning.

Her knowing smile confirmed that for him a moment later. She continued to give him lingering, tender kisses, her arms roving over his body as though she’d been missing him terribly.

“Are you alright?” he asked, startled by her overt, but not unwelcome, display of affection.

She laughed nervously, slipping her arms around his waist and holding him tight. “I had no idea Tashana was going to do that! I’m glad you got a thrill out of living on the edge, but I was having kittens! I nearly rushed down here to come and rescue you!”

“I’m sorry we scared you,” John said, tilting up her chin to give her a soothing kiss. “I think she needed... I don’t know, forgiveness maybe? I could see how much it meant to her, knowing that I trusted her like that.”

“The sooner I bond with her, the better,” Alyssa murmured, nuzzling into him. “Everything’s so much easier when I know exactly what the girls are thinking.”

“Is she ready to bond with you?” he asked, stroking her back to comfort her.

Alyssa hesitated and shrugged imperceptibly. “Tashana feels different to the others. It might be because of the protective blanket you used to suppress her old memories, but I can’t tell for sure.”

He nodded, holding Alyssa close as they stood under the streams of hot water. “It’s still early days, there’s plenty of time for that.” He smiled as a sudden thought came to him. “Were you telling Tashana what I was thinking? She seemed awfully intuitive all of a sudden.”

Alyssa met his curious gaze with a playful smile. “I might have been freaked out, but I still wanted you two to have a great time. I’m just surprised you didn’t knock her up, she was really pushing your buttons!”

“I’ve got pretty good at suppressing that desire, no matter how much you girls turn me on,” John said, leaning in for a kiss. “I’ve had to, otherwise you’d definitely be eating for two right now.”

“Not long to wait,” Alyssa purred, giving him a sensual kiss. “Only a few more months and you can start breeding all of us...” Her eyes sparkled with excitement as she added, “I wonder if we’ll get another award ceremony when we save the galaxy? If we do, we should definitely postpone it for a few months until we’re all showing...”

John chuckled at the thought. “Let’s just concentrate on the saving the galaxy part first, okay?”

Distracted by thoughts of lining up in front of billions to show off her baby bump, Alyssa quickly got over the fright she’d received that morning. They finished off their shower and padded back into the bedroom, where Tashana was on the receiving end of Jade’s loving tongue.

“I’ll stay and watch,” Alyssa whispered, giving him a quick kiss. “I’ll take Tashana to train in the Cargo Bay when she’s had her breakfast. I told Calara you wanted to spar with her this morning, she’s waiting for you in the Dojo.”

“I don’t know what I’d do without you, beautiful,” he said, giving her a parting kiss.

Striding into the walk-in-wardrobe, John dressed in training gear, then waved the girls goodbye as he walked through the bedroom. Tashana grinned at him as she returned his wave, her cheeks flushed a dark blue as she held Alyssa to her breast, while Jade was busy between her splayed thighs. Stepping into the express grav-tube, John dropped down to the Combat Bridge, smiling to himself at seeing the Maliri girl look so happy.

He walked past the rows of runed Paragon Armour that were standing vigilant over the Combat Bridge in their armour-equipping frames. Dropping down in the second express grav-tube, he entered the Secondary Hangar, then hit the button to open the double doors into the huge Primary Hangar. Sakura was already in the mech as he suspected she would be and he lingered in the doorway, watching her work on her piloting.

The Valkyrie moved with an eerie grace that was disconcerting to see in such a huge war machine. The thirty–metre-tall mech pivoted, shifting its weight from one foot to another as it extended both hands forward. He recognised the precise movements immediately and watched Sakura go through a tai-chi routine for a couple of minutes. She made a couple of mistakes, the mech stumbling once or twice as she overextended herself too much. It was strange to see the Valkyrie straighten itself and shake its head with irritation, before starting the routine again from the start.

Deciding against disturbing her, he turned and left her to her training, walking past the Raptor on his way towards the aft grav-tube. He was greatly impressed by the incredible level of control Sakura had already begun to develop with the Valkyrie and admired her commitment and dedication to her new role. Feeling a lot less anxious about seeing one of the girls in the mech again, he walked into the glowing blue anti-gravity field and began to ascend up the levels.

He wasn’t in there long, stepping out onto Deck Seven as he made his way towards Dana’s workshop. He hit the button to open the door into the Engineering Bay, stepping forward in anticipation of the door sliding open. When the door stayed firmly shut, he blinked in surprise, narrowly avoiding bumping into it. Thinking he must have not hit the button properly, he tried once more, but again nothing happened.

Glancing up at one of the cameras in the corridor he frowned in confusion. “Faye, the door seems to be broken! Can you ask Dana to take a look at it, please?”

She appeared in a purple flash and gave him a friendly smile in greeting. “Hey John!” she said, ephemeral wings fluttering in excitement.

“Morning, Faye,” John replied. “Did you pass on my message to Dana?”

Her smile wavered and Faye looked a bit anxious. “I did. She’ll be here in a moment to explain.”

Quite bemused by this turn of events, John glanced back at the door and only had to wait for about ten seconds before it slid open with a whir. Dana stepped through, but carefully barred his way, giving him an impish grin as she did so.

“What are you up to?” John asked, trying to peek over her shoulder.

She only stopped waving her hands in front of his face when the door shut behind her. “You’re banned from the Engineering Bay until we’ve finished!” she declared, her sky-blue eyes twinkling with mischief.

“You’re banning me from part of my own ship?” John asked incredulously. “What are you up to, Chief Engineer?!”

Dana darted a look at the purple girl hovering nervously beside them and asked her politely. “Would you mind giving us some privacy for a moment please, Faye?”

Faye looked startled then quickly nodded. “Sure!”

When the AI had disappeared in the blink of an eye, Dana smiled at John and stepped closer to him. She stood on tiptoe and pressed her lips to his ear, just in case Faye was still listening, and whispered, “I don’t want you to see her body until I’m finished. If you see her in bits, you’ll find it harder to think of her as a real girl and she wants that so much...”

John put his arms around the redhead and gave her a warm hug. “I understand. That’s really thoughtful, thank you on Faye’s behalf.”

“She’s my friend, I want her to be happy,” Dana said with a shy smile.

“Is everything going well so far?” John asked her curiously.

“It’s going great!” she replied, nodding exuberantly. Dana giggled then, her body shaking with laughter. “Although it was a bit of a shock when Irillith suddenly started cumming her brains out! You must have really fucked Tashana senseless!”

He gave her a wry smile. “It was definitely mutual. Was Irillith alright afterwards? Not too embarrassed I hope?”

“Nah, she fucking loved it!” Dana said, grinning at him. Her smile faded for a moment and she added, “I hope she wasn’t coding anything important this morning though. She’s been starry eyed for the last couple of hours...”

John patted her on the bottom. “I better let you go back to work. Let me know if you need my help with anything.”

“Thanks, but we’re good. Alyssa did all the psychic shaping I needed.” She gave him a farewell kiss, then flounced over to the door, giving him a cheeky smile when it opened obediently for her and disappeared inside.

Respecting her wishes, John didn’t try to look into the Engineering Bay this time, turning and walking back down the corridor instead. Taking the grav-tube again, he ascended all the way up to Deck Three, then strode briskly down the corridor. It felt like weeks since he’d last had a sparring session with Calara and he found himself grinning at the prospect. She was a highly skilled opponent and he was looking forward to seeing if she’d continued to improve by fighting against Sakura instead.

He walked into the equipping area, but ignored his training sword and armour, turning right and heading for the door to the Dojo itself. When the door opened he saw the familiar teak wood Dojo simulator was running, with its spectacular panoramic views of mist-covered mountains. He normally stopped to appreciate that vista, but his eyes were immediately drawn to the young Latina who was warming up in the centre of the mats. Calara was performing the same tai-chi exercises that Sakura had been running through in the thirty-metre-tall Valkyrie downstairs. Seeing the sleek perfection of Calara’s glorious body, he decided that she was the more impressive sight.

She spotted the movement at the door and eased to a stop, turning to give him a challenging look. “It’s been a while... ready to spend some time sprawled on the mat?”

Relishing the gleam in her dark-brown eyes, John walked slowly across the sparring area before giving her a respectful bow. His teasing smile was far less respectful as he replied, “You’re throwing in the towel already? You’ll be far more comfortable in bed than on the mats!”

She grinned at him as she adopted an offensive stance, readying herself for action. He could tell Calara was going to be a handful today; she looked totally focused, her poise and balance perfect as she studied him warily. She wasted no time in launching her offensive, crouching low as she spun towards him, building momentum that she unleashed in a devastating kick towards his head. He was astonished at the amount of power she put into the blow, a testimony to her flawless execution of the spinning kick. Wincing as he blocked, he had to move quickly as she followed up with a leg sweep.

He jumped her leg as it whipped around, barely clearing it in time. Her driving punch to the stomach came as a shock and as he staggered backwards, he realised he’d been set up, the first two moves simply diversions and distractions from her main strike. She gave him a confident smile, both of them knowing that it was inevitable who was going to win this first round.

He concentrated for a moment, gathering his will before giving his gorgeous opponent a playful wink. He sprang into action, surging across the mat to close the distance, catching her by surprise with his psychically enhanced speed. She nearly managed to ward him off, but he grappled her in an inelegant bearhug, bringing her crashing to the mat with his empowered strength.

“You cheated!” Calara cried out indignantly. “That wasn’t fair!”

“It’s not my fault,” John said with a helpless shrug. “You looked far too tempting. I didn’t want to spend an hour dancing around the mat before I could get a kiss.”

Her angry glare softened for a moment and she gave him a gentle kiss, her full lips brushing lightly against his own. She wriggled out of his grip and rolled away before springing to her feet. “No powers this time!”

John nodded as he stood up, readying himself in a defensive stance. He knew that effectively cheating to win the first bout would rile Calara up and he wasn’t disappointed. She came after him with a vengeance, alternating between flurries of punches and cartwheeling kicks that kept him on the back foot. He spent the first twenty minutes fighting a strictly defensive match, trying not to expose himself to one of her subtle traps again.

All the practice Calara had been having with Sakura had really paid off and he found she was very evenly matched with him now. With the skill levels the same, it all came down to the differences in their physique. John had the obvious masculine edge in physical strength, but with Calara’s stunning athletic figure, she was still able to hit very hard. She was faster than he was though and she put that speed to devastating effect, using it to seize and take hold of the initiative in the fight. It took another five minutes before she outmanoeuvred him, counterattacking with a roundhouse kick to the chest which brought him crashing to the mat.

As much as he was enjoying these close-fought battles, there was a reason why John had requested this sparring session. He knew what was troubling her and it was time to do something about it. They took a quick break to recover and he made a show of adopting a Zen-like pose to focus himself, as if he was taking the bout more seriously now. He willed his psychic speed into effect again, but was far more subtle about it this time, just speeding up enough to give himself the edge.

They began again, battling each other in that graceful but deadly dance. John was moving slightly quicker than Calara now and he became far more aggressive in his approach, pushing her onto the defensive as she blocked and dodged his relentless kicks and punches. He could see her surprise at the sudden turn this fight had taken and although he felt bad for deceiving her this way, he ruthlessly exploited his advantage.

A leg sweep sent her ignominiously to the mat, then a counterattack to a kick brought him into grappling range where he overpowered her and brought her down. He caught a kick aimed at his head, pushed her off-balance and lashing out at her other leg, tripping her. The last one quite deliberately revealed his enhanced speed and Calara looked up at him from the floor, her eyes showing her hurt as she suddenly realised what he’d been doing.

“Why?” she asked simply, panting for breath after an hour of punishing defeats.

“Because I can,” he replied bluntly. “Real opponents won’t hold back just because it isn’t fair. If you don’t like it, do something about it...”

Calara’s eyes glimmered with fury and she sprang to her feet, readying herself for battle. Abruptly she calmed herself, realising that the anger would be a distraction. Steadying her breathing, she approached this fight as she would a genuine opponent, like the assassin that had attacked her in the Enigma club. She knew John’s fighting style as well as her own, having racked up hundreds of hours sparring against him. Yes, he was moving faster now, but the kata were still the same, his technique still based on his particular style that she knew so well.

When they began the fight again, she was wary now, doing nothing that would leave her vulnerable to an aggressive takedown. Calara’s focus seemed to intensify and she felt a shiver run down her spine, a sudden thrill of... something, excitement perhaps? Now that she was studying him intently, John almost seemed to be telegraphing his moves and she began to see patterns in those attacks.

She went along with the flow, blocking his kidney punch, ducking the roundhouse to her head, then narrowly dodging the knee he launched at her chest. Although John was moving faster than her, knowing what was coming let her reposition herself just in time, allowing her to stay out of his grasp. Realising she only had the briefest of windows to strike - because he’d be able to react fast enough to counter anything elaborate - she bided her time, waiting for the perfect opportunity.

John watched in amazement as Calara dodged and blocked dozens of his punches and kicks. She was only moving at normal speed, but she was slippery as an eel, anticipating and countering everything he could throw at her. He sent her backpedalling across the mats to avoid a series of spinning chest-high kicks, but just as she avoided the third, she lashed out with a simple counter-kick to his knee. Her blow landed just as he was shifting his weight and he crashed down to the mat with a thump, taken by surprise by the deceptively simple, but devastating precision strike.

“Again...” she said quietly, watching him in fascination.

John saw the inner glow in her eyes, but suppressed a smile of satisfaction and did as she asked. He leapt to his feet and ramped up his speed to maximum, launching himself at her in a blur.

Calara’s mind seemed to expand as she stared at John in wonder. Time seemed to fracture and she was no longer seeing just one kick or punch ahead, but the whole chain of attacks he was lining up to unleash on her. After twenty-seven moves, she would be caught in an armlock and brought down to the mat. She felt a bizarre feeling of déjà vu as she went through that chain. Despite John’s incredible speed, she knew exactly what was coming, the perfect counter to the overwhelming advantage of a lightning fast opponent.

She picked her moment carefully, choosing the precise point in the chain of attacks. Catching John’s lunging fist, she fell backwards, using her weight to pull him off-balance into a forward roll. Lifted off the ground, he could no longer use his speed to avoid the inevitable conclusion. John watched in astonishment as she rolled underneath him, Calara’s momentum pulling her onto his chest, pinning him effortlessly with such a deceptively simple manoeuvre.

Calara grinned with elation as she nullified that future sequence of events, breaking the chain and inserting her own alternate scenario. Suddenly the enormity of what she’d just done hit her and she gaped down at John in stunned disbelief.

“I knew you’d get there on your own,” he said, his eyes shining with pride.