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The freighter shuddered as it neared the planet’s surface, its retro-thrusters running at full burn to slow the ship’s descent towards the starport. There was a grating rumble as the merchantman touched down, the ship skidding a couple of metres across the ferrocrete until the captain shut down the engines and the bulky vessel finally ground to a halt.

Governor Lucyna Novitsky relaxed her white-knuckled grip on the passenger’s seat, wishing that was the last time she’d have to endure another re-entry. “Thanks for droppin’ me off, Cap’n.”

“Sure thing,” he replied, turning to look her way over his shoulder. “I’ll be planetside a while, then I’ll wait for you in orbit. Just gimme a holler when you’re ready to head back.”

She nodded to the trader in gratitude, then grabbed her suitcase and took the stairs down to ground level. Her boots made a ringing sound as she crossed the metal decking, walking towards the airlock that Captain Glasbey had opened in anticipation of her departure. As Lucyna stepped outside the spacecraft, she breathed deep, enjoying the lovely pine-scented atmosphere of Brecken’s World. A man wearing a slightly-crumpled suit was waiting for her at the edge of the landing platform and he began walking briskly in her direction.

“Welcome, Governor Novitsky,” he said respectfully as he approached. “My name’s Barnes, I work for Governor Vaughn. He wanted to meet you personally, but he’s up to his ears in T-Fed bureaucracy at the moment. The supply convoy arrived this morning and we’ve been trying to get the freighters unloaded as fast as possible.”

“That’s okay, I understand,” she replied, following her guide across the landing platform. “Bad timin’, huh? Especially with everythin’ else going on...”

Barnes glared at one of the supply freighters as they walked through the starport. “Fuckin’ High Command... those assholes think they can just buy us off after what happened?” he hissed, keeping his voice low to avoid attracting attention. “That we’ll just forgive and forget them leaving us to get fucked up by the Bugs?”

Luce grimaced at the unpleasant memories his angry venting stirred up. Her capture by the Kirrix seemed almost like a bad dream now, the memories blurry and fading by the day... but she could still recall the awful shame and humiliation she’d endured. Glancing at the man beside her, Luce could see those same emotions mirrored in his eyes too.

“They can never make it right,” she replied quietly. “The Bugs took my whole colony... I know exactly how you feel.”

He swallowed and looked away. “Yeah... I shouldn’t have brought it up... I’m sorry.”

Giving him a reassuring pat on the arm to show she took no offence, Luce followed her guide out of the starport and into the city of Valley Falls. Calling the settlement a city was a bit of a stretch, as it was basically just a large town that had grown around the starport. The streets were full of rustic bars and diners, catering to the off-world merchant traffic that came to Brecken’s World for their primary export.

Luce stopped on the sidewalk beside Barnes as a procession of trucks rumbled past, their massive wheels taller than her and caked in mud. Each of the sturdy haulers were loaded with timber fresh from the surrounding lumberyards, all destined for the supply freighters docked in the starport. Now that those freighter captains had completed their supply run for the Admiralty, they were making sure they turned a tidy profit on their return home to the Core Worlds.

Her own colony, Valia Gate, was also a big exporter, although the primary material it possessed was silver. Most of the planets in the Outer Rim were in a similar position, with colonists settling on those worlds to exploit some form of abundantly available natural resource. All the ores, and timber, and precious metals were funnelled back to the Core Worlds, sent to feed the insatiable demands of those highly populated planets. In return, they shipped back all the equipment and supplies needed to survive the harsh conditions out on the frontier.

Luce stood and watched the huge haulage vehicles as they trundled along the cracked asphalt, wondering how their colonies were going to be viable if that supply chain was broken. The Outer Rim might be a huge source of raw materials, but all the manufacturing and production was carried out on the more established worlds in the Terran Federation. Valia Gate had only been founded fifty years ago, but some of the systems near Terra were settled seven centuries earlier, when mankind first took to the stars.

The Outer Rim turning its back on the Core Worlds suddenly seemed like a very foolish idea indeed. As much as Luce loathed the Admiralty, she knew that a dozen frontier systems breaking away on their own would face a very bleak future, even if they were allowed to leave peacefully.

“Governor Novitsky? Are you alright, ma’am?”

She jumped as Barnes touched her arm, breaking her out of the reverie. Luce realised she’d been lost in her thoughts, staring into the distance along the now deserted road.

“Yeah... I’m fine,” she grunted, nodding to her guide to continue.

They crossed over the street and walked towards the colony administration building, an ugly ferrocrete monstrosity that loomed over the smaller shops and restaurants nearby. A detachment of T-Fed marines marched out of the admin complex, then stood guard as their commander spoke to an older man in a rumpled suit at the top of the entry steps. Luce recognised Governor Vaughn at once but made no attempt to get his attention. She followed Barnes around the building, taking a side-street that led to a disused loading dock, and the rear entrance to the administration centre.

By the time they entered the building, Governor Vaughn was waiting to meet them. “Luce, I thought I spotted you out the front! How was your flight?”

“Alright, I guess. Never did think much a planet hoppin’,” she muttered dourly, her moment of introspection putting her in a foul mood. Luce shook his calloused hand. “Hope this ain’t gonna be a waste of my time, Stefan.”

He laughed, his weather-beaten face lighting up into a broad smile. “Cheer up, Luce. I promise you’re not going to regret coming here... you’ll be witnessing history in the making!”

Luce glanced at her escort, then pulled Governor Vaughn aside to whisper furtively, “Listen... I’ve been thinkin’ about things on my way over. Even if we can leave the T-Fed peacefully, how are we ever gonna survive on our own? Don’t get me wrong, I think it’s amazin’ you got those other systems interested, but there’s what... nine of us total? We’re totally screwed without the Core Worlds’ manufacturing capabilities, let alone the fleets to protect ourselves from the Kirrix!”

“You always were a smart one, Luce... and you’re absolutely right. Nine systems breaking away on their own just isn’t enough to be viable,” Vaughn agreed, his expression sombre. His eyes twinkled with barely suppressed glee as he continued, “That’s why we’re waiting just a couple more days for a whole bunch of others... plus the envoy from Nerus IV!”

“Nerus IV?” Lucyna muttered, frowning in confusion. Her eyes suddenly widened in shock as she made the connection. “Port Heracles?!”

Stefan winked at her and offered the stunned woman his arm. “Let’s go get a drink, Luce... I’ll bring you up to speed.”

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John smiled gratefully at Valani as she took away his empty plate. “That Fenmaer was absolutely delicious, thank you. The sauce complemented the meat perfectly.”

“I’m so glad you enjoyed it,” she gushed, beaming at him in delight. “I usually prepare all my meals by myself, so it was really fun cooking with you.”

He gave her hand an affectionate squeeze, then turned his attention back to Edraele. “That’s great news about the Abandoned. How many were Lilyana’s fleet able to rescue?”

“There were ten transport vessels, each carrying ten-thousand prisoners,” his Maliri Matriarch replied. Her expression darkened as she continued, “Unfortunately, one of the transports vented their lower decks and killed half the prisoners before our embedded hackers were able to seize control.”

“That’s one more thing the Brimorians will have to pay for,” John muttered, looking equally grim. His eyes narrowed as those numbers sank in. “A hundred-thousand Abandoned in a single shipment... I wonder how often the Brimorians have been selling slaves to the Kirrix?”

“I’d imagine the Kirrix would want as many hosts as possible,” Edraele replied, considering the distances between their respective homeworlds and the border between the two empires. “Completing one transfer per month would give both fleets plenty of time to unload their cargos and make the return journey to the border.”

“Over a million people a year... it’s almost too horrific to believe,” John muttered, shocked by the appalling death toll. He rubbed his brow in frustration. “I want to free the Abandoned more than anything... but as Calara keeps reminding me, we’ve got bigger problems to deal with right now.”

“You have severely disrupted the Kirrix slave trade,” Edraele reminded him. “As soon as Lilyana’s forces have transferred the prisoners, they’ll destroy all the Brimorian transports. It will be a while before the Enclave discovers what’s happened to their fleet and it’ll take them some time to assemble another transportation force.”

“I guess we’ve bought ourselves another couple of weeks... I just hope that’s long enough,” he mused aloud, his expression turning pensive. “We’ve still got so many urgent tasks we need to complete before we can actually deal with the Brimorians. We have to find Kythshara, locate Mael’nerak’s hyper-warp gate, capture Larn’kelnar’s thrall fleets, then refit the Invictus... and that’s assuming Dana’s actually able to reverse engineer Progenitor tech.”

“A daunting list,” the Maliri queen agreed, her tone sympathetic. “But you’ve had to operate under strict time constraints on many occasions and still managed to triumph. I have no doubt that between you and your crew, you’ll be able to quickly resolve all those issues, then intervene to stop the Brimorians in short order. I’ll aid you in any way that I can and you also have all the resources in the Maliri Protectorate at your disposal.”

John reached out to hold her hand. “I haven’t forgotten about helping you with the matriarchs. I’ll try to spend as much time with them as I can over the next few weeks.”

“There’s no need to worry yourself on that regard,” Edraele said with a reassuring smile. “The matriarchs are all connected to my network now, so it’s simply a matter of scheduling sessions with them to accelerate them through the Change. I don’t foresee any major difficulties with any of the new recruits, but Emandra Holaris is likely to require a substantial investment of your time.”

“I expect she’s going to have by far the most trouble adapting to the Change... assuming she even agrees to go ahead with it.”

Edraele gave him a knowing smile. “The opportunity to restore her youth will be far too tempting for her to resist. I have no doubt that Emandra will take you up on your offer.”

“It just feels so wrong rewarding her like this,” John said with a frustrated sigh. “She tortured her daughters for decades and ended up killing them all... although I guess that was in self-defence. I know that Emandra will end up punishing herself with a guilty conscience... but that seems woefully inadequate after everything she’s done.”

“Making these kinds of decisions will be your hardest duty as leader of the Maliri,” Edraele said with sympathy. “I suppose we should be very thankful that Emandra is the only confirmed survivor of the original thirteen matriarchs. Imagine if they’d all slain their daughters and you were faced with pardoning that entire coven of tyrants for political expediency.”

John grimaced at the thought. “Yeah... that doesn’t even bear thinking about.”

“I know your feelings on Sarinia and about what she did, but I can’t help feeling relieved at the huge burden she inadvertently lifted from your shoulders.”

He nodded his agreement. “I know... which makes punishing her all the more complicated.”

They sat there in silence as John considered his options for dealing with the wayward House Baelora matriarch. Sarinia’s actions had made his life considerably easier, but he didn’t want to judge her based on his own selfish interests. He now had to consider the Protectorate as a whole and the message he would be sending with any sentence that he chose for her, as she had wilfully broken one of the Queen’s new laws. Then there was the whole thorny issue of judging an alien civilisation by Terran moral values, as well as taking into account his own culpability, for creating the source of strife between the matriarchs and their daughters in the first place.

“I’m sure you’ll find a just solution,” Edraele said, giving him a supportive smile.

“I hope so too,” he murmured, before glancing at the chronometer. “The new matriarchs should be waking up soon. I should probably go and check they’re alright.”

Edraele rose from her chair. “Why don’t you leave that to me? Then you can meet with Sarinia again. I’ll speak to the matriarchs about scheduling some time with you, so they can get to know you more intimately. Would you like to see them individually or in pairs?”

“Why pairs?” John asked, as he got up from his seat.

She raised an eyebrow and gave him a knowing smile.

John blushed as understanding sunk in. “Ah... I’ll leave that to your discretion... or theirs... you know what I mean.”

“I do indeed, my Lord,” Edraele purred, linking arms with him as they left the dining room.

They parted with a kiss, then John backtracked along Genthalas’ golden corridors to the House Baelora guest suite. Acknowledging the two guards with a nod, he activated the door chime and waited until Sarinia bade him enter. When the doors parted, he found the noblewoman waiting for him once again, but this time her awed gaze held an undercurrent of anxiety.

“Hello again, Sarinia,” John greeted her as he crossed the lounge.

“I’m glad you’ve returned, Baen’thelas,” she replied, not taking her eyes off him as she bowed respectfully.

“You were very upset about Tehlariene when I left you earlier this morning. Did you think of any way you could atone for what you did to her... and the other women that died because of your actions?”

She hesitated before replying, her expression conflicted. “I’ve thought about nothing else in your absence, my Lord. I’m not sure what answer I can give you that will assuage your anger.”

“This isn’t just about placating me,” John said, frowning at the contrite matriarch. He studied her perceptively, then had a sudden epiphany. “You’re not upset about murdering your sister or the other noblewomen... all you care about is that I’m angry you did it!”

“I’m deeply sorry that I’ve offended you... but I don’t know what to do or say to fix it!” Sarinia blurted out, wringing her hands together in anguish. “I did care for Tehlariene and would’ve spared her if I could, but you’ve said yourself how much you favour the youngest daughters. If I hadn’t killed her, I would’ve been cast aside and replaced by Tehlariene without a second thought.”

John was about to protest, but the words died on his lips as he knew she was right.

Sarinia dropped to her knees before he could reply. “I’m begging you for mercy, Baen’thelas! Give me a chance to serve you in any way that pleases you! I promise you won’t regret it.”

\*I’m sorry John, I should’ve expected something like this,\* Edraele quietly apologised. \*Thrall genetic conditioning is very potent and Sarinia’s had a significant amount of close exposure to you. I don’t think you’re going to get the kind of contrition you want from her... not when she’s in this state.\*

He dropped into the nearest seat with a heavy sigh, then looked down into the matriarch’s tormented gaze. “Will you let me take a look into your mind, Sarinia? I promise I won’t hurt you.”

“You may do as you wish, my Lord,” she replied earnestly.

John cupped her face in his hand, the light touch to her skin drawing a breathy moan from the Maliri noblewoman. His eyes began to shine with a soft blue glow and he reached out to make contact with Sarinia’s subconscious. Any resistance she might have offered fell away as Sarinia mentally prostrated herself before him, allowing John to wander uninhibited through her mind.

He was very cautious as he delved deeper into Sarinia’s thoughts, knowing that a misstep could be disastrous for her psyche. The Maliri noblewoman’s memories were neatly arranged, indicating that she possessed a highly organised and logical mind. However that wasn’t what drew his attention. The colours of the neural paths leading to those memories were very... disturbing in their texture and palette.

The mental pathways all had an icy white tint to them, as though Sarinia was cold and aloof from her feelings. Underneath that frosty hue were faint traces of darker colours, the ugly mottled reds representing bitterness, resentment, and loathing. John knew instinctively that he wasn’t looking at a healthy mind... significant trauma had badly warped the woman’s subconscious in a fundamental way.

Everywhere he looked was the same; Sarinia’s memories were marked by an almost clinical detachment from her emotions, yet underscored by an echo of tightly-suppressed hatred. As John carefully explored her subconscious, he saw the same colouration everywhere. Sarinia’s memory map looked like a wintery wonderland... except the snowfall couldn’t quite hide the gruesome crimson stains that covered the landscape beneath.

He ventured deeper into Sarinia’s mind, delving back through decades of memories to find the source of the trauma that had warped her thought processes for so long. Decades mounted to a century and still he pressed further, the images flashing over the surface of those memories showing an increasingly younger Sarinia, until she eventually appeared as a coltish girl. On the horizon a kaleidoscope of bright colours sprang to life and John realised he’d reached the pivotal event that had distorted the Maliri noblewoman’s mind.

The pivotal memory stuck out like a blighted mark on her mental map. The pathway leading towards it was stained a furious scarlet, shot through with the pitch black of a trust betrayed. John stopped before it and stared at the picture of Sarinia’s childlike face frozen in a scream of anguish, the image so disturbing that it sent a shiver down his spine.

The last thing he wanted to do was go anywhere near that memory, but John knew that it was the key to understanding the troubled matriarch. Holding out his hand, he tentatively touched the memory and let himself be pulled inside, his senses subsumed by Sarinia’s childhood recollections...

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The glorious sunrise sent dazzling spears of light through the angled filters over her bedroom window, waking Sarinia at dawn. She sat up in bed and smiled as she held up her hand, admiring the beautiful shafts of sunlight playing over her fingertips. It was a lovely morning on Baelora and Sarinia was excited to be up so early, eager to finish the special surprise she had been preparing for her mother.

Gaenna Baelora had been in an awful mood for weeks, the matriarch lashing out with her sharp tongue at everyone in the palace. She had even reduced her daughter to tears, berating the young girl for being stupid and useless. Sarinia wasn’t sure exactly what she’d done wrong to deserve such a harsh rebuke, but she loved her mother and was sincerely sorry that she’d upset her.

Pulling out the easel from its secret hiding place beneath her bed, Sarinia set up the portrait and carefully added the finishing touches. Gaenna Baelora was ensconced on a golden throne in all her matriarchal finery, seated beneath a banner carrying their magnificent House sigil. Her mother had often spoken of having more daughters, and Sarinia longed to have younger sisters to play with, so she had added herself and several smaller siblings to make it a family portrait.

Sarinia’s electronic brush lovingly caressed the digital canvas, as she tried to make her mother look as beautiful as possible, just like she was in real life. Stepping back, she studied her handiwork with a critical eye, checking it met her exacting standards to ensure that it was perfect. She beamed with joy, delighted that the picture made her mother look so regal and powerful. The portrait had taken her weeks to complete, but she was sure that it would bring a smile to Gaenna’s face... and that would make all her hard work worthwhile.

She detached the holo-projector from the easel and left her bedroom, skipping through the palace to the matriarchal suite. Sarinia could scarcely contain her excitement as she approached Gaenna’s bedroom, hoping that if her mother liked the portrait enough, they might be able to spend the whole day together as a reward. She entered the bedchamber and found her mother tangled up in rumpled sheets, Gaenna in a deep slumber and oblivious to the young girl’s presence.

Reaching out with fingers trembling from excitement, Sarinia patted the House Baelora matriarch’s forearm. “Mother... wake up! I have a surprise for you!” she gushed, eager to bring a smile to Gaenna’s face.

Her mother groaned and covered her eyes, squinting against the morning sunlight peeking through the shutters. “Sarinia...? What do you want?” she snapped with irritation.

“I made you a present, mother!” her daughter explained, presenting the holo-projector.

Gaenna glanced at the chronometer and her eyes narrowed in fury. “It’s not even six yet!”

“I’m sorry... I just wanted to show you-”

“You wretched child, I’ve told you not to disturb me in the morning! I was up until four last night trying to save our House from being consumed by that Valaden witch and how do you repay me?” Gaenna sneered, her voice ringing with contempt as she continued, “By jolting me awake for some stupid present?!”

“I just wanted to make you feel better,” Sarinia whimpered in dismay. “You didn’t say anything about not waking you up, so I-”

Her mother sat bolt upright, face contorted with rage. “How dare you try to correct me!”

Sarinia had an excellent memory and she knew Gaenna had never forbidden her from entering her bedroom early in the morning. “But you never said-”

“You insolent little shit... it’s time you learned some respect!” Gaenna snarled, grabbing her daughter by the wrist and knocking the projector out of her hands.

As Sarinia was dragged to the end of the bed, the holo-device struck the ground, shattering the projection crystal. The device activated and the portrait she’d laboured over appeared, but now it was marred by jagged cracks, distorting her mother’s face into an ugly parody of the House Baelora matriarch. Sarinia struggled against Gaenna’s strong grip as she was bound by secure cords from the posts at the end of the bed. She’d been punished with slaps and smacks plenty of times in the past, but Sarinia had never seen her mother so angry before.

“Please, mother!” Sarinia gasped, straining to break free. “I’m sorry!”

Her desperate plea went unanswered and an ominous hum started behind her.

“You will be!” Gaenna snarled malevolently.

There was a sharp crack, then Sarinia’s body was ablaze with agony, her back feeling like it had been stabbed by a thousand burning needles. She screamed in anguish, writhing in desperation to escape her bonds and flee from this hideous torment. There seemed to be no end to the pain, the wound from the neural lash throbbing with a nauseating intensity that made it seem like it would never cease.

Then Gaenna struck again, a new stripe of agony setting her daughter’s nerves on fire. Sarinia sobbed and whimpered, but still the excruciating torture continued. With tears streaming down her cheeks, she twisted around, desperately trying to make eye-contact with her mother as she begged her to stop. When she saw Gaenna’s face, Sarinia froze in horror, the look of sadistic glee more terrible than her mother’s grotesque expression on the shattered portrait.

Suddenly, Sarinia realised with sickening clarity that it didn’t matter that she hadn’t done anything wrong. Her mother was inflicting the worst pain she’d ever felt in her young life for no other reason than Gaenna’s own twisted pleasure. The person Sarinia loved most in the world was actually taking delight in making her suffer!

Her pleas for mercy died on her lips and Sarinia hung limply in her bonds, flinching reflexively as she was struck again and again. The tears dried on her cheeks as she withdrew into herself, the horrible betrayal too much for her fragile subconscious to endure. Sarinia *hated* this cruel monster that was torturing her for fun, and she wished fervently, with all her shattered heart, that she would live long enough to see Gaenna Baelora suffer an agonising death.

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John jerked back from the awful memory, utterly revolted by what he’d just witnessed. He only wished that Gaenna Baelora was still alive, so that he could execute her himself for what she’d done to that sweet innocent girl. It was hard to believe that anyone could be so cruel to a child, let alone their own daughter. Remembering the patchwork of old scars that covered Sarinia’s back, he realised torture sessions like that must have been a frequent occurrence in the noblewoman’s life.

It was no wonder she had turned out this way after suffering that level of abuse. John had been injured numerous times, but he’d never experienced that kind of agony before. He opened his eyes to look down at Sarinia and his heart ached to see how desperate she was to regain his favour.

“I’m so sorry for what you’ve been through,” he said, gently stroking her cheek. “You’re just as much a victim of Maliri society as all the other noblewomen who’ve died recently.”

“So you’ll forgive me? Let me serve at your side?” she asked, her face lighting up with hope.

John hesitated, reluctant to shatter her dreams. “Sarinia, all the torture you endured has left terrible scars... not just on your back, but on your mind too. I can heal you physically, but I don’t think I can fix what happened to you mentally... the damage goes too deep and the trauma distorted your entire subconscious.”

Her expression flickered with alarm. “I don’t understand... I feel fine!”

“That’s the problem... you don’t really feel anything at all,” John said with sympathy. “Your mother hurt you so badly, at such an impressionable age, that you withdrew into yourself so she couldn’t hurt you again. Even if I pardoned you for your crimes, I still wouldn’t be able to trust you in the future. You’re exceptionally intelligent, but you’re also cold and calculating, ruthlessly working for your own self-interests at all times. I can’t risk exposing the mothers of my children to someone who thinks and acts the way you do.”

Sarinia stared at him aghast when she realised how sincere he was. “But you forgave Edraele Valaden! If she can learn to become someone you can trust, then I can too!”

John slowly shook his head. “The original Edraele is gone... her personality utterly erased. The woman you met still has Edraele Valaden’s memories, but I had to completely rebuild her into a kind and loving person who cares deeply about her friends, family, and the Maliri as a whole.”

“Why can’t you do that for me?” Sarinia asked, gazing up at him with pleading eyes.

He blinked and looked at her in surprise. “I don’t think you understand the ramifications...”

She nodded eagerly. “I do! I want to be just like Edraele! I can see how much you care about her... about how important she is to you! If you can’t trust me as I am now, remake me so that you can! I’ll do anything to be with you, Baen’thelas, I swear it!”

He sat back and considered her earnest plea. When the guide had erased Edraele’s original personality, he’d killed her, just as surely as if he’d shot her in the head. John had always considered it to be a monstrous act, the forceful stripping away of who she was a terrible abuse of Edraele’s mind and something he’d vowed never to do.

\*But this wouldn’t be against Sarinia’s will,\* Edraele reminded him gently. \*She wants this, John.\*

\*Yeah... but she’s being influenced by her genetic attraction to me,\* John replied, troubled by the moral quandary. \*I don’t think that really counts as consent.\*

\*I’m not sure you can think about it in those terms,\* Alyssa countered. \*If you asked the entire population of Maliri women if they’d give up their old life to be loved by you and have your children, I’d bet a million credits every single one of them would agree in a heartbeat. It’s built into every female thrall to want to be with the Progenitor who claimed their species... that desire is just a fundamental part of who they are.\*

\*This would also solve the conundrum about punishing her,\* Edraele mused, her enthusiasm for the idea growing. \*You can simply tell the rest of the matriarchs that you erased Sarinia’s mind to punish her for the crimes against them. It might seem harsh at first glance, but the truth is that you’ll be undoing 120 years of mental abuse and giving Sarinia a chance to become the woman she should’ve always been.\*

\*But Sarinia was only nine when Gaenna broke her mind. I’d need to rebuild her into an adult woman...\* John muttered, his brow furrowing with concern.

\*You used Maria and the girls as the template for my personality,\* Edraele reminded him. \*I might be biased, but I think you did a fine job of incorporating their idiosyncrasies into the woman I’ve become. Why not do something similar for Sarinia?\*

As John gave the idea more thought, Alyssa interjected quietly, \*Maybe it’s not too late to save Gaenna Baelora’s youngest daughter...\*

John considered that possibility for a moment, then nodded to himself as he made a decision. He looked down to meet Sarinia’s inquisitive gaze. “There might be a way I can help you.”

“Really?!” she gasped, her golden eyes sparkling with relief.

He nodded in confirmation. “I think so. Would you tell me about some of your memories of your youngest sister?”

“Why do you want to know about Tehlariene?” Sarinia asked, looking startled.

Sitting forward, John brushed his fingers against her temple, stroking her gently. “You were so young when your vile bitch of a mother tortured you and made you withdraw into yourself. I saw what you were like back then... you were really sweet, very thoughtful and kind. I want to give that lovely girl a chance to live again, but unless you want to go back to being nine-years-old, I’ll need to use an adult woman as a template for your new personality.”

Sarinia frowned, her eyes accusing. “You want to turn me into my sister.”

“No, not exactly. You’ll still retain all your memories, as well as your intellect and self-assurance... but I want to merge the best parts of you with the warmest elements of Tehlariene’s personality. Between the two of you, I think we might be able to come up with someone pretty special.”

“You can do that just from me telling you about her?” she asked, looking sceptical.

“Not just using your description of her, no. I’ll use telepathy to study the memories you have of your sister and really build up a detailed picture of what Tehlariene was like. After that, I just need to feed you... then you’ll sleep for fourteen hours. When you wake up, you’ll be ready to start your new life with me.”

Sarinia had been listening attentively and she raised an eyebrow. “Feed me?”

“You’ll need to swallow my cum,” John explained, giving her a self-conscious look of apology. “It’ll act as a psychic catalyst, and allow me to make alterations to your body and mind. That’s just the way my abilities work, I’m afraid.”

“That’s alright, I don’t mind...” she quickly replied, smiling coyly in anticipation. Sarinia paused and looked up at him, a flicker of doubt in her eyes. “Do I have any choice in the matter? What happens if I refuse to let you tamper with my mind?”

“I’m not going to force you to do this. I want you to make the choice of your own free will,” he replied solemnly. “The sentence for your crimes should be execution... for breaking the Queen’s edict against assassinations and murdering your sisters, then inciting the rest of the nobility into slaughtering each other. However, I do concede that I played a large part in the circumstances that led up to those deaths, so I’m willing to commute that sentence. I’d have to strip you of your title as matriarch of House Baelora, but you could live out the rest of your life as an ordinary citizen.”

Sarinia hesitated for a moment, then asked in a hushed voice, “Can you promise me that I’ll still retain some semblance of myself? That you’re not just transforming me into Tehlariene?”

“I promise. The core part of your personality will still be Sarinia Baelora, but we need to replace everything that your mother took from you. Edraele’s situation was slightly different in that her personality had been completely wiped out and I had to rebuild her from nothing.”

“Then I choose a life with you, Baen’thelas,” Sarinia declared, meeting his gaze.

“Thank you for trusting me,” John said, leaning down to give her a chaste kiss. “I won’t let you down.”

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\*John really is full of surprises,\* Edraele marvelled, her voice ringing through Jade’s mind. \*I never expected him to come up with this solution to the Sarinia problem.\*

\*I told you he’d changed,\* Alyssa replied a moment later, also sharing her side of the conversation with the Nymph matriarch. \*Ever since John defeated the guide, his outlook has altered on a whole bunch of things.\*

\*Yes... but embracing telepathy to make dramatic personality changes? I never thought I’d see the day that happened!\* Edraele remarked in astonishment.

\*Master is complete now,\* Jade interjected, feeling a surge of pride for the man who had become the centre of her existence. \*The victory over his guide has purged him of his doubts and insecurities. He finally feels comfortable with who he is and what he’s capable of.\*

Helene shifted in her arms and Jade turned her full attention to the sleeping girl, being careful not to disturb her while she slumbered.

Long eyelashes fluttered open and baby-blue eyes gazed up at her in confusion. “Jade? What happened? Where am I?”

“You burned yourself out, little kitten. I put you to bed in my room, so you could rest and recover,” Jade said tenderly. “We’ve all been so worried about you, Helene. How are you feeling now?”

The Abandoned girl grimaced and tried to sit up.

“Take it easy... let me help you,” Jade murmured, effortlessly assisting the teal-hued mermaid into a seated position.

“Thank you,” Helene said gratefully. She rubbed her head and leaned into the Nymph for support. “I feel... washed out... like flotsam scattered after a fierce storm.”

“You were very naughty and pushed yourself much too hard,” Jade gently admonished her. “You must never put your life at risk like that again... not without at least warning Alyssa. She’s been so upset with herself for not realising your life was in danger.”

“I didn’t mean for that to happen, I just got so absorbed in trying to help the girls by easing their suffering.” Helene shook her head in dismay. “They were all so sad, Jade. It was awful... and getting worse the longer everyone was cut off from John.”

“Master thinks that there was something bad in our old connection... something that causes pain in thralls when their connection to a Progenitor is severed,” Jade explained. “He removed that part before reconnecting to Alyssa, so we should never have to go through that again.”

Helene nodded her understanding and sagged with relief that the hollow ache in her chest had gone. “I’m so glad to have him back.”

Jade kissed her forehead. “Close your eyes and think about John for a moment...”

She did as asked, then a look of wonder appeared on her beautiful face. “Oh! That feels wonderful! Jade, he shared his love with me!”

“With all of us,” the Nymph explained with an indulgent smile.

Helene savoured the warm glow in her heart, the glorious sensation making her giddy with happiness. She threw back the covers to get out of bed. “I can’t wait to thank him!”

“Hold on, little kitten,” Jade said affectionately, reaching for Helene’s hand to prevent her dashing off. “John’s on Genthalas station with Edraele and the Maliri at the moment. The rest of us have landed on Valaden and we’re staying as guests in one of the Queen’s palaces.”

“Oh, I didn’t realise I’d been asleep for so long,” Helene said while blushing.

“John asked me to let him know the moment you woke up,” Jade explained. “He’s going to take a shuttle down to the palace to make sure you’re okay.”

Helene nibbled her lip with indecision for a moment, then shook her head. “Please tell him not to rush down here just to visit me. I know how much John’s been missing Edraele and the Young matriarchs and I don’t want to interrupt their time together. Besides, I feel so much better now anyway.”

Jade frowned. “Are you sure?”

Helene nodded and snuggled up with her friend under the covers. “Just tell John that I love him and I’ll see him soon. What’s he doing on Genthalas station at this moment?”

“He’s been meeting all the new matriarchs and adding them to Edraele’s psychic network,” the Nymph explained. “John gave Sarinia a full tummy a short while ago and now he’s trying to erase 120 years of mental abuse she’s suffered.”

“Another wounded little bird that needs fixing,” Helene murmured with a fond smile.

Jade’s expression softened. “They all need his help... and John’s determined to heal them all. He’s planning to spend tomorrow getting to know the matriarchs a bit better, then we’re all going to get together for a party.”

Helene perked up at that, her eyes shining with excitement. “A party?! Oh, that’ll be so much fun!”

\*We’re all really looking forward to meeting you, Helene,\* Edraele said softly. \*I also want to thank you for taking such wonderful care of my daughters for me. You helped ease Irillith and Tashana’s suffering when they were cut off from John... and for that I’ll always be grateful.\*

She blinked in surprise as the Maliri matriarch’s voice echoed through her mind. “Jade, please can you tell Edraele that she’s welcome and I can’t wait to meet her too.”

“I passed the message on,” the Nymph replied a moment later.

The door slid open and Alyssa darted inside, followed on her heels by Sakura who had carried her to the Invictus at top speed.

“Helene! I was so worried about you!” the blonde exclaimed, rushing to her side.

“I’m so sorry, Alyssa,” Helene apologised as they hugged. “I never meant to let myself get so tired, but all of you were so sad and I just wanted to try to make it better...”

“I know... and I’m incredibly grateful for what you did, but please promise me you won’t put yourself in danger like that again! You could have died!”

Touched by the teenager’s sincere concern, Helene nodded contritely. “I’ll try to be more careful in the future.”

Sakura leaned in to join the hug. “I’m really glad you’re okay, Helene. Thanks for looking after us... we really needed you.”

“You’re welcome,” the aquatic girl replied, smiling back at her. “It felt so good to be useful.”

“You must be starving,” Alyssa said with concern. “Let’s go back to the palace and you can join us for dinner.”

“Just wait until you try the food here!” Sakura enthused. “There’s so many different things to choose from and it all tastes amazing!”

They climbed off the bed and Helene wobbled as she stood, feeling weaker than she’d anticipated. Jade had been watching over her attentively, and caught Helene before she could fall.

She scooped the teal-hued beauty into her arms with a maternal smile. “Rest, little kitten. Let me carry you.”

“Thanks, Jade,” Helene replied gratefully, relaxing in the Nymph’s strong embrace as they left her bedroom.

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John sat on the large bed, looking down at the latest addition to his psychic network. Sarinia was resting under the covers in a deep slumber, curled protectively around her swollen belly. Stripping away her cold and detached personality had been frighteningly easy, the mental pathways ripped out with as little effort as tugging on a piece of string. However replacing that barren metaphysical wasteland was another matter entirely, requiring intense focus and concentration. He delved deep into the unconscious woman’s mind, laboriously rebuilding her personality using his impressions of Tehlariene as a template.

Gaenna Baelora’s youngest daughter had led a tragic life, tortured by her vile mother, and bullied relentlessly by three of her four elder siblings. John was pleasantly surprised to see that Sarinia had never joined in their teasing and had been a long-suffering shoulder to cry on for her youngest sister. The onslaught of cruel pranks and spiteful jokes had chipped away at Tehlariene’s self-confidence, leaving her a jittery emotional wreck, who was often in tears when she fled to Sarinia for protection. It was in the moments after Sarinia had calmed and reassured Tehlariene that John got to see glimpses of the kind-hearted young woman she truly was.

Tehlariene idolised her eldest sister and tried to show her love through small gifts and gestures of affection. She’d taken up painting after discovering Sarinia’s long-abandoned interest in the subject, and with no real responsibilities to take up her time, she’d become an accomplished artist. The wonderful landscapes she’d created of their homeworld had moved even Sarinia’s frozen heart, especially those depicting magnificent sunrises bathing the rolling hills of Baelora in glorious sunlight.

Watching those memories of that talented girl had been heartbreaking. Sarinia had been her only friend, and for Tehlariene to be murdered by the one person she trusted above all others made that betrayal all the more appalling. John fought down his anger towards Sarinia, focusing instead on doing everything he could to faithfully recreate the best aspects of that lovely young woman’s personality, so that she could be brought back to life once again. It was hard work, made all the more gruelling by having to visit so many disturbing memories of Tehlariene in distress.

\*John, I’m sorry to disturb your concentration, but may I speak to you a moment?\* Edraele asked politely.

He sat up straight and rubbed his face to ease the tension. \*It’s no problem. What’s up?\*

\*I wondered if you wanted some company this evening? There are two highborn ladies here who are very eager to make your acquaintance.\*

Glancing at the chronometer, John realised that he’d been working on Sarinia for the previous four hours and it was now just past eight o’clock. He knew that it was no coincidence that his Maliri matriarch was contacting him then, as he’d had just the right amount of recovery time to be able to give someone else a full tummy. That prompted a rumble in his own stomach, reminding him that he hadn’t eaten since dining with Edraele and Valani at lunchtime.

\*That sounds like a great idea. I could really use a break,\* John replied, rising from the bed and carefully ensuring that the House Baelora matriarch was tucked in. Pulling the covers up over her shoulder, he continued, \*Where should we meet?\*

\*They’re waiting for you in my quarters, which I’m leaving at your disposal. I’ll be staying with Luna tonight, unless you should need me for any reason.\*

\*Do I get any clues as to who I’m meeting?\* he asked, leaving Sarinia’s suite and acknowledging the two guards outside with a nod.

\*Of course, I wouldn’t want to leave you unprepared, my Lord. They’re both beautiful Maliri noblewomen, with lovely statuesque figures and flawless azure complexions. I promise you won’t be disappointed.\*

\*Thanks. That really helps narrow it down,\* he said with a wry grin, as he strode along the corridor. \*Let me guess... they’re both 5’9” and have short white hair?\*

\*I do believe you’re correct, my Lord,\* Edraele replied, a playful note to her voice. \*How ever did you know?\*

John chuckled, enjoying bantering with the Maliri Queen as he returned to her quarters. There was a fair amount of foot traffic around the station at that time in the evening, with Maliri personnel changing shifts and venturing out for dinner. They all recognised John the moment they set eyes on him, which meant his journey back through Genthalas was accompanied by an unending succession of starstruck greetings.

He’d grown accustomed to being treated like a celebrity on his visits to Olympus Shipyard, but most of the military personnel there were male, unlike the entirely female population of Genthalas. Being swooned over by countless Maliri women made for a dramatically different atmosphere, and while very flattering, it did make John wonder if he’d ever be able to lead anything resembling a normal life in the Protectorate.

\*Don’t worry, it’ll all work out,\* Alyssa reassured him. \*But let’s face it... with the huge family we’re planning, you were never going to end up living in a four-bedroom house in the suburbs. I think you’ll need a home as big as Saelihn Immanthe just to give us enough room to fit everyone.\*

\*Have you been picking out curtains for the palace?\*

\*Maybe...\* she confessed, with a beaming telepathic smile. \*This place is amazing, John! I can’t wait to show you around.\*

\*I’m looking forward to seeing it,\* he said indulgently. \*How are all of you doing? Is Helene fully recovered now?\*

\*Everyone’s great! I think we all needed to just switch off for a while. Helene joined us for dinner and she’s back to her old self with no harm done. The Nymphs took her reef diving with Jade a few minutes ago and they’re all having a wonderful time.\*

John felt a pang of homesickness for Alyssa and the girls. \*I really miss all of you. It feels so strange not having you around.\*

\*I know it’s hard, but duty comes first,\* she said gently, her voice filled with sympathy. \*Just a couple more days of topping up gorgeous Maliri babes, then you’ll be able to unwind with us on Valaden. We’ll try and take your mind off the arduous task of being adored by doting thralls.\*

\*Why do I get the sneaking suspicion that you aren’t taking my woes seriously?\* John countered, chuckling at her response.

The laughter drew the attention of another group of Maliri, who gasped when they saw him, staring at John in wide-eyed wonder. He inclined his head politely towards them and gave them a warm smile, which unleashed devastation upon the swooning personnel.

\*You heartbreaker,\* Alyssa teased him. \*You’re enjoying this.\*

\*I’m enjoying making a positive difference in their lives,\* John clarified, waving goodbye to the starstruck personnel. \*Maliri society was so self-destructive... it’s been satisfying making changes to improve things for everyone.\*

\*Ah, how could I have ever doubted the purity of your motives,\* she said airily. \*I’ll leave you in peace and let you concentrate on doing good deeds for deserving Maliri maidens.\*

John rolled his eyes at Alyssa’s teasing commentary, but as he approached the Queen’s suite, he couldn’t help wondering who might be waiting for him inside. The significance of Edraele selecting two matriarchs to meet him had not escaped his attention, as she had obviously chosen two matriarchs who she believed would make a good pairing. He pictured each of the ten new recruits in his mind and hoped Edraele had picked two of the more placid younger daughters. Healing Sarinia’s mind was taking a considerable amount of mental effort and he wasn’t feeling up to dealing with a couple of the more belligerent elder daughters.

Entering Edraele’s quarters, John crossed the foyer and took a curious peek into the Sitting Room to see who was waiting for him. He was relieved to see Phelora Romenor sitting on one of the chaise longues, the young noblewoman fidgeting nervously as she was lectured by her companion. To John’s surprise, the second matriarch was Kehlarissa Venkalyn, the most outspoken of the four elder daughters who had survived Sarinia’s massacre.

“You must be mistaken,” the older woman insisted. “*I’m* meeting with Baen’thelas tonight and I have no intention of sharing that precious time with anyone else.”

Wringing her hands together, Phelora replied, “I’m sure Queen Edraele said that Baen’thelas wanted to see me this evening. She asked that I arrive at her quarters for eight.”

“Are you quite certain?” Kehlarissa asked, looking at the younger woman with disdain. “Did you clarify the nature of your meeting with Edraele?”

Phelora deflated and shook her head. “N-no... but she’s the Queen, we’re supposed to do whatever she tells us.”

Kehlarissa studied the nervous girl, a sly smile appearing on her face as she sensed victory. “There’s obviously been some kind of misunderstanding. There are important matters I wish to discuss with Baen’thelas alone, so you being here must be a mistake. Perhaps you should leave and schedule an appointment with him tomorrow?”

Having heard enough, John strode into the room to rescue the distressed Romenor matriarch. “Good evening, ladies. I’m sorry that I kept you waiting.”

“Baen’thelas!” Phelora exclaimed, leaping up from the sofa and beaming at him in delight.

“It’s wonderful to see you, my Lord,” Kehlarissa gushed, performing a graceful bow that gave him an enticing view of her impressive cleavage.

“It’s great to see the two of you as well,” John replied as he walked over to join them. “You both look stunning in those lovely dresses.”

Kehlarissa gave him a seductive smile as she coquettishly modelled the elegant gown. “I wanted to look my best for you, my Lord. You deserve nothing less.”

Phelora blushed at the compliment, then her expression shifted to concern. “Are you alright, Baen’thelas? You look so weary this evening.”

The House Venkalyn matriarch shot her a sharp look of disapproval. “He’s kind enough to spare us some of his valuable time and you insult him? What’s wrong with you?” She turned back to John and added obsequiously, “I think you look as handsome as ever, Baen’thelas.”

Looking mortified, Phelora stammered, “I’m so sorry! Please believe me... I-I meant no offence!”

“Hey, relax. I wasn’t offended,” John said, reaching for her hand and giving it a reassuring squeeze. “You’re quite right, I am feeling tired. I’ve been... punishing... Sarinia this afternoon.”

“Punishing her?” Phelora echoed, her eyes wide.

Kehlarissa was still smarting from finding out that she’d been cynically manipulated by the House Baelora matriarch and she snarled, “I hope you made her suffer, Baen’thelas! Sarinia deserves a thousand strokes from a neural lash after what she did to us!”

“I’d never use one of those hideous devices on any woman in the Protectorate, not under any circumstances,” John stated firmly. He looked at each of the matriarchs in turn. “Did your mothers ever use a neural lash on either of you?”

“Of course,” Kehlarissa replied with a nonchalant shrug.

Phelora shivered and dropped her gaze. “Yes...”

His heart went out to each of them in sympathy. Phelora was the most visibly upset, but Kehlarissa’s blasé reaction disturbed him the most, as she had clearly grown accustomed to suffering horrific torture on a frequent basis. He knew that it would take a considerable amount of effort to heal the mental scars that had left behind.

“Come here, honey,” John said to Phelora, pulling her into his arms.

She went to him gladly, letting out a blissful sigh as John wrapped her up in a comforting hug.

“I’ll never let anyone hurt you like that again,” he said earnestly, holding her close. “You belong to me now and I won’t stand for you suffering in any way.”

“Oh, Baen’thelas...” Phelora gushed, swooning in his embrace.

John watched Kehlarissa over the younger noblewoman’s shoulder, seeing her face shift from envy to longing. He released Phelora and beckoned her companion over. “Would you like a hug too?”

Kehlarissa bit her lip and nodded, then glided demurely into his open arms. She was unused to physical contact and her body was rigid for a moment, then she melted against him with a breathy moan. “You feel wonderful, Baen’thelas...”

“So do you.” He smiled, then gently stroked her back. “How old are you, Kehlarissa?”

“I’m 107 years old,” she murmured into his shoulder.

John traced the patchwork of scars crossing her spine. “How long has this been going on?” he asked quietly.

She tensed for a second, but relaxed at his reassuring touch. “I was 35 when my mother first punished me for being insolent.”

“Seventy years...” John muttered with disgust, as he brushed his fingertips over the evidence of decades of abuse. “I’m so sorry for everything you’ve been through, Kehlarissa. What I said to Phelora applies to you as well; you belong to me now and it’s my job to protect you and keep you safe from harm.”

“Really?” she whispered, suddenly sounding vulnerable and uncertain.

He pulled back so that he could see her face. The haughty expression was gone and Kehlarissa stared at him with a mixture of hope and disbelief reflected in her eyes.

John cupped her cheek and nodded. “Your life is going to be very different from now on. It might take a bit of getting used to, but you’re going to be so much happier... I promise.”

Kehlarissa was rendered speechless, so she just gave him a fierce hug filled with gratitude. They stood like that for a long moment, until John patted her shoulder and she reluctantly released him.

“Did Edraele tell you anything about what I had planned for this evening?” he asked the two spellbound Maliri.

They shook their heads in response, but both women now had a glimmer of anticipation in their eyes.

“Well... we’re going to be spending a lot of time together in the future, so I’d really like a chance to get to know you both better,” he explained with a warm smile.

Phelora looked like she wanted to ask him a question, but just blushed and bit her lip. Kehlarissa had no such reservations.

“This morning, you talked about building a much deeper connection with each of us,” the noblewoman said, eyeing him boldly. “I would eagerly welcome more intimacy with you, Baen’thelas. Will that be part of this evening’s activities?”

John hesitated, as he tried to think of a diplomatic response to her query. “I would like that very much, but I think we should talk together for a while first. We’ve only just met and I wouldn’t want you to feel like I was pushing you into anything you’re not ready for. We can take our time to get more comfortable and-”

“I’m ready!” Kehlarissa blurted out, pressing herself against him. “I’m willing to do *anything* that pleases you...”

Phelora nodded in agreement, sidling closer as well. “I have no reservations either, Baen’thelas.”

Their unabashed eagerness came as a bit of a surprise to John, as the Young Matriarchs hadn’t acted quite so brazenly when he was first introduced to them. John was trying his hardest to treat the two noblewomen with respect and slowly develop their relationship, but it was quite clear that they had very different ideas about how quickly things should progress.

\*There is no risk of you offending them, my Lord,\* Edraele said softly. \*Circumstances have changed since you added the Young Matriarchs to my network. You’ve formally acknowledged your claim on the Maliri and that changed everything.\*

\*Changed how?\* John asked, his brow furrowing. \*What did it do to them exactly?\*

\*It might be more accurate to say that the changes are within you,\* she clarified. \*You’re far more confident in yourself and the position you now hold with the Maliri... and that new bearing has had a dramatic effect on the new matriarchs’ disposition towards you. After the wonderful impression you made on them earlier, they are all hopelessly smitten with you. My advice is simply to enjoy yourself this evening... I can guarantee that Phelora and Kehlarissa will.\*

John considered her advice, then turned his attention to the two noblewomen. John reached out to brush the backs of his fingers across their slim stomachs, making them inhale sharply in response to his touch.

“The main thing I need to do is give you both a full tummy...” he said, gently caressing the two Maliri. “It’ll be like earlier with Jade, but this time just me with each of you.”

Kehlarissa’s mounting arousal was quite evident in the smouldering look she gave him. “I long to taste you again, my Lord.”

“I’d like that too,” Phelora agreed, licking her lips in anticipation.

He glanced at Phelora, then back to the Venkalyn matriarch. “Would you like to share, or take it in turns?”

“I’ll go first!” Kehlarissa blurted out, without a moment’s hesitation.

Phelora had been about to agree to sharing, but the reply died on her lips. Her shoulders slumped and she meekly nodded her acquiescence. “I don’t mind waiting...”

“Alright, Kehlarissa goes first then,” John said, inwardly rolling his eyes when he saw the eldest of the two shoot a triumphant smirk at the younger matriarch. “Perhaps you’d like to watch, Phelora?”

She perked up immediately. “Oh, can I! Are you sure?”

“Of course,” he replied with a welcoming smile. Turning to Kehlarissa, he added, “We don’t mind at all, do we?”

Kehlarissa wiped the scowl from her face and affected a sickly smile. “No, I have no objections, Baen’thelas.”

He led the two Maliri deeper into Edraele’s suite and entered her personal bedchamber. Their eyes lit up at the sight of the bed, the atmosphere in the room taking on a new charge of sexual excitement. When John peeled off his jacket, the matriarchs took that as their cue to disrobe. In the blink of an eye, they had unfastened their gowns and let them fall to the floor, leaving both azure-hued temptresses entirely naked before him. John paused to admire them, taking a moment to appreciate how blessed he was to have become the leader of a species where every woman was a spectacular beauty in her own right.

“You’re both absolutely gorgeous,” he murmured, his voice quiet but sincere.

They both blushed, elated by his compliment and obvious appreciation of their figures.

“I want you both to know how much you mean to me... and how grateful I am for your help with leading the Maliri in the coming war,” John said, stepping closer to the entranced women. He reached out to place his hand on their chests, just above the enticing swell of their cleavage. “Close your eyes... and concentrate on my touch. Can you feel it?”

His question was answered by shocked gasps, which swiftly morphed into euphoric sighs. Both matriarchs looked deeply moved by the warm sensation blooming in their chests, his earnest gratitude something they’d never felt before. John leaned down to brush his lips against Kehlarissa’s and she moaned into his mouth, kissing him back with urgency. When he broke the kiss and turned to give Phelora a turn, the matriarchs began hastily unbuttoning his shirt, desperate to get him out of his clothes.

He was soon as naked as the Maliri, their inquisitive hands gently exploring his powerful muscles.

“You’re so big and strong...” Phelora murmured in awe.

Kehlarissa nodded appreciatively as she stroked his chest, then glanced down at his thickening cock and her eyes went wide. “Baen’thelas... you might be too big for me to handle...”

“Trust me, when the time comes, you’ll be able to take me just fine,” John said, his deep voice calming her fears. “There won’t be any pain or discomfort... I promise.”

John took their hands and led the two women over to the bed. As he sat down, Kehlarissa knelt before him on the padded floor, her soft fingers instinctively wrapping around his shaft. She moaned with desire at the throbbing heat filling her hand and leaned forward to nuzzle his cock reverently. Her tongue darted out to taste him and soon she was lapping at the head before enveloping him in her mouth.

Phelora looked a bit unsure of herself, so John patted the covers behind him. “Why don’t you sit back here and give me a hug, then you can watch over my shoulder.”

She nodded eagerly, kneeling behind John and pressing her full breasts into his back as she embraced him. The young Maliri peeked over his shoulder and gasped when she saw his girthy cock encircled by Kehlarissa’s azure lips.

“She looks gorgeous, doesn’t she?” John murmured, brushing his fingers through the matriarch’s short white hair.

“So beautiful...” Phelora breathed, her voice catching.

Kehlarissa glanced up at John, her stretched lips twitching as she smiled with pride and satisfaction.

“Do you want to try taking me deeper?” John asked, gently massaging her head.

She looked sceptical, but pushed forward regardless, the spongy head of his cock pressing at the back of her throat. Kehlarissa’s eyes widened in astonishment as she easily stretched to accommodate him, his thick length pushing deep inside as she slid smoothly down his shaft.

“Good girl,” John praised her. “That feels amazing...”

His cock throbbed, sending a spurt of pre-cum directly into her hungry stomach. Kehlarissa moaned wantonly and her eyes glazed over, the Maliri matriarch slipping into the suckling trance. She bobbed in his lap, inching deeper until she had taken his entire shaft down her clutching throat.

John groaned at the snug fit and leaned back against Phelora who was watching the proceedings in fascination. With one hand holding Kehlarissa in place, John reached for Phelora, turning her cheek so that she was facing him instead.

“Kiss me,” he requested, cupping her pretty face.

Phelora did as he asked, her emerald eyes sparkling with excitement as her tongue sought his. The dual onslaught of her passionate kisses and Kehlarissa sucking hungrily on his cock quickly pushed him over the edge to release. John climaxed hard, groaning as he pumped his heavy load into Kehlarissa’s tummy, rounding it out with several pints of potent cum. Phelora cradled him in her arms, kissing John lovingly as her fellow matriarch sucked out every drop of spunk from his aching quad.

He collapsed against Phelora when he was spent, panting for breath as he recovered from a spectacular climax. “Wow... that was intense!” he said with a grin. “You’re one hell of a kisser.”

The young Maliri giggled and hugged him exuberantly. “I think Kehlarissa deserves most of the credit for that.”

Phelora glanced at their bedmate as John’s softening cock slipped from Kehlarissa’s lips with a wet squelch. The House Venkalyn matriarch sat up straight, her hands drawn to her hugely rounded stomach. Appearing lost in a daze, she caressed her new curves with a look of blissful rapture lighting up her face.

“Oh my goodness!” Phelora exclaimed, gaping at Kehlarissa’s impressively swollen belly.

Sliding off the bed, John crouched down next to the cum-packed matriarch and carefully scooped her up in his arms. “This is what usually happens when I give a girl a full tummy. This morning, Jade shared it out between fifteen of you.”

He lay Kehlarissa down on the bed, resting her head on the pillow and making sure she was comfortable. Turning to look at Phelora, he asked with concern, “Are you alright? Is it scary to see her like that?”

The Romenor matriarch looked flushed, her eyes wild with excitement. “Scary? No... not at all. I’ve never felt so... aroused before.”

John looked at her with sympathy and guided Phelora backwards so that she was lying on the bed. “Just relax and let me take care of you, sexy girl...”

She made no effort to resist him, her gaze hooded with lust as John moved closer. Phelora watched in confusion as he shifted position to lay down between her splayed thighs, nuzzling at her most intimate places to plant tender kisses on her sex. Her composure was shattered as he lapped away with consummate expertise, making Phelora arch her back as her nubile body was overwhelmed with the first of many intense climaxes. He continued until she finally begged for him to stop, her body quivering with adrenalin after receiving so much pleasure.

“Did that take the edge off?” he asked with a playful grin.

Phelora curled up into a fetal position, whimpering softly as she recovered. She stared at him with dazed eyes and giggled self-consciously as she nodded.

John sprawled out on the bed beside her and turned to stroke her arm. “Phelora? I have a confession to make.”

“What is it, Baen’thelas?” she murmured, reaching for his hand and kissing his fingertips.

“When I gave you two the choice of sharing or taking it in turns, I just knew Kehlarissa was going to demand to go first.”

“She’s very beautiful... and so bold and full of confidence,” Phelora said with a hint of envy. “I understand why you wanted to be with her first.”

John laughed and leaned over for a kiss. “No, that’s not it at all. Kehlarissa’s arrogant and overbearing, and I’d much rather spend time alone with you. She’ll be asleep for four hours now as she absorbs that tummy full of cum, which means I get to enjoy your company for the rest of the evening.”

Phelora blinked in surprise, then gave him a lovely smile. “Really?”

He nodded and planted a kiss on the tip of her nose. “Yep. She fell for it hook, line, and sinker.”

She giggled with delight and gave him a joyful hug. “I’d love to spend the evening with you!”

His stomach rumbled loudly and John gave her a wry smile. “Are you hungry? I haven’t had any dinner yet. I’m eager to learn how to cook any House Romenor speciality dishes that you’d be willing to share with me.”

Looking startled for a moment, she then eagerly nodded her agreement. “I’d be delighted to teach you any recipes I know, Baen’thelas.”

He climbed off the bed and offered her a hand. “Actually, Baen’thelas isn’t my real name, it’s more of a title. My name’s John Blake... and I’d like it if you just called me John when we’re alone together like this.”

“John...” she murmured, listening to how it sounded as she repeated his name to herself. “I’d be honoured to use your real name.”

After pulling the covers over Kehlarissa, John led his companion into the wardrobe. \*Edraele, is it okay if I lend Phelora one of your robes?\*

\*Of course, be my guest,\* the Maliri Queen immediately replied. \*Might I suggest the white silk one on the third rack.\*

\*Thanks, honey.\*

He found the garment and helped Phelora slip it on, the material snugly fitting the contours of her shapely figure until it ended enticingly at mid-thigh.

“You look good enough to eat,” he said with a playful wink. “I’ll have to leave room for dessert.”

She blushed furiously, but her eyes sparkled all the brighter as she watched John pull on a pair of cotton shorts. Leaving Kehlarissa asleep in the bedroom, they headed to the well-stocked kitchen, where Phelora glanced through the contents of the refrigeration unit.

John watched her place fillets from an exotic orange-hued fish on the worktop. “What are we cooking?”

“This is Khyrmin Sunfish,” she replied patting the meaty steaks. “They’re native to Romenor too. I thought I’d show you how to make Khyrmin spiced rolls.”

“My mouth’s watering already,” he said enthusiastically. “What else do we need?”

She pointed out half-a-dozen different vegetables and demonstrated how to skin and dice the ingredients with deft strokes of a blade

“You make it look easy,” John said with admiration.

“This is a favourite of mine, so I’ve made it many times,” Phelora admitted with a shy smile.

“I didn’t get a chance to ask earlier; would you mind telling me how old you are?” he enquired, as he copied the way she had prepared the vegetables.

Looking a little self-conscious, she replied, “I’m forty years-old.”

“That’s the same age as me!” John remarked, bumping hips with her and grinning with delight.

Phelora stared at him in shock. “But you can’t be! You must be much older than that!”

He frowned and looked at her askance. “I’m not sure if I should be insulted or flattered. Was that meant to be a compliment?”

“I wasn’t attempting to flatter you, it’s simply the truth,” she explained. “You’re so confident and decisive and you seem to radiate authority; I’d give anything to be a natural leader like you.”

“You’re new to being a matriarch,” John said, stroking her back for reassurance. “It’ll just take you a little time to get accustomed to issuing orders instead of following them.”

Phelora’s face crumpled, her eyes filling with tears.

“Hey, what’s the matter?” John asked, putting down the knife and wrapping his arms around her in a comforting hug.

“I shouldn’t be here... I feel like such a fraud,” she whimpered, turning to bury her face in his chest. “I’m so sorry, Baen’thelas... you deserve so much better.”

“Why would you say something like that?” he asked with concern.

“My planetary governors laughed at me when I told them I was House Romenor’s new matriarch,” Phelora admitted, looking deeply ashamed. “My Fleet Commander wouldn’t even acknowledge my orders and cut off my call!”

“Learning how to command just takes training and practice,” John said, holding her close. “Queen Edraele is a formidable matriarch and I’m sure she’d be delighted to teach you everything she knows about leading a noble House.”

“She’d be wasting her time... I’m too stupid to learn anything,” Phelora muttered dejectedly.

John realised that she was repeating her mother’s and sisters’ cruel taunts, which had relentlessly worn down her self-esteem over the decades.

“I don’t think you’re stupid at all... far from it,” he said, his voice ringing with sincerity. “I think you’re a sweet and caring girl who lacks confidence because your horrible family bullied you for most of your life.”

She shook her head, her expression one of forlorn resignation. “When my mother and sisters attacked each other, they knew I was worthless and ignored me. It was just pure luck that I even survived. I hid in the first place I could while they were distracted trying to kill each other... I had no idea it was Meriel’s secret armoury! I told Thalia and Meriel that they didn’t deserve to be with you before I shot them... but the truth is that I’m not worthy of you either!”

Overcome with emotion, Phelora broke down and sobbed against his chest.

“Phelora? Can I tell you a secret?” he whispered in her ear.

She turned to look up at him, tears rolling down her cheeks. “A secret?”

John nodded, but the moment was spoiled by his stomach grumbling loudly in protest at being neglected.

Her face fell and she whimpered, “You see? I told you I was useless. You’re hungry and I’m falling to pieces instead of making you dinner...”

“You’re far from useless, honey... you’re just dealing with the aftermath of years of abuse. Show me how to make one of these Khyrmin spiced rolls, and I’ll take care of the rest,” John said with a reassuring smile.

Phelora brushed away her tears and did as he asked, lightly seasoning the fish and adding a mixture of vegetables to a flour wrap. After watching carefully, John activated psychic speed and blasted through another dozen wraps, finishing the food preparation in less than thirty seconds.

“There we go... done,” he said, winking at Phelora who was staring at him in open-mouthed astonishment.

He put their dinner in the oven, following Phelora’s stammered instructions, then turned to face her again.

“How did you do that?! That was incredible!” she gasped in awe.

“I used my psychic abilities. You’ve seen me create fire and ice, but I’m also able to make myself stronger or faster than any normal person could ever hope to be. The women in my eldritch network give me the energy to use abilities like that whenever the need arises,” he explained to the stunned Maliri. “Now, are you ready to hear that secret?”

She bit her lip and nodded, watching him with eyes like saucers.

John picked Phelora up and sat her on the worktop facing him. He unfastened the belt of her robe, then carefully peeled it open, revealing a delightful expanse of cleavage and exposing her bare stomach, but still leaving the rest of her covered. Letting his fingers drift to her waist, he tenderly caressed her soft skin, circling her navel and leaving a trail of goosebumps.

“When I give a girl a full tummy, I’m able to restore her body and heal any wounds. All those scars that you and Kehlarissa have will be gone by tonight.”

Raising his hand, he traced a trail up her body and between her luscious breasts, before reaching out to cup her face. Phelora held her breath as she watched him, completely mesmerised by what he was doing and saying.

John gently stroked her temple and gazed into her eyes. “I can also make changes to your mind... to help you recover from all the psychological abuse you’ve suffered over the years. Unfortunately, making mental changes is much more complicated than simply regenerating your body, so I have to be very careful and take things slowly.”

“Are you going to do that for me?” she asked breathlessly.

John nodded, his expression sombre. “You’ve suffered long enough, but that’s over with now. I meant what I said earlier; it’s my job to protect you and make sure that you’re happy. It’s going to be harder helping Kehlarissa, but I’m confident that you’ll feel much better in no time.”

Phelora listened attentively, fascinated by what she was hearing. “Why will it be harder to help Kehlarissa?”

“Because she’s been abused for so long, it’s badly affected her personality. Kehlarissa’s selfish, conceited, arrogant, and basically not a very nice person. I can help her change... to rediscover the person she was before her mother started all those years of abuse, but it’ll take time. You’re a sweet girl who just lacks confidence... I’m very fond of you already.”

Her eyes welled up as she leaned into his hand. “I’ve never met anyone like you before. You’re just so kind.”

He smiled and gave her a tender kiss. “I’m not entirely selfless. We’re a team now and I’m going to be relying on you to help me run House Romenor as we fight against the Progenitors.”

Doubt filled Phelora’s expression and she frowned with worry. “I-I don’t want to let you down, John. I’m really not smart like the others...”

“I don’t believe that for a moment, but even if it was true, it honestly doesn’t matter,” John said, giving her a reassuring smile.

“But I might make some really bad mistakes... or be so awful at being a matriarch, even Edraele can’t help me get better,” she insisted, looking dejected again.

“Trust me, you’ll be fine. I’m strongly attracted to gifted, intelligent women and-”

Her face fell, mired in self-doubt at her own inadequacies.

“Hey, you didn’t let me finish,” John gently protested, lifting her chin so that she’d look at him again. “When I feed you, I won’t just be healing your scars... I’ll be enhancing your body and mind too. Eventually, you and the rest of the matriarchs will be the strongest and brightest women in the Maliri Protectorate.”

Phelora looked stunned, unable to believe what she was hearing. “Really? You can actually do that?”

“The girls on my crew call it going through ‘The Change’ and they’ve all been enhanced the same way. I want the future mothers of my children to be perfect and that includes you too.”

She stared at him open-mouthed for a moment, then flung her arms around John and squeezed him tight. “I want that so much! I’ll do anything you say, Baen’thelas... anything!”

“You’re a good girl, Phelora,” John said affectionately, kissing the top of her head as he held her. “I do have a favour I want to ask, but that can wait until after dinner. It smells amazing.”

Pulling back, she gave him a shy smile. “I really hope you enjoy it.”

John retrieved the tray of wraps from the oven and let them cool before trying one. “Mmm, delicious!” he exclaimed, his eyes lighting up at the gastronomic delight. “These are incredible!”

“I’m so happy you like them,” she gushed, looking elated.

“Would you like one?” he asked, offering her a delicate wrap. Phelora was about to accept it, but John smiled and raised it to her lips. “Here... let me.”

She blushed and locked eyes with him as he carefully fed her the morsel.

“How was that?” he asked, as she swallowed it down.

“The best thing I’ve ever tasted,” she murmured, licking her lips.

“I know. I definitely want some more...” John said, making no move to pick up another wrap.

Picking up on his hint, Phelora held her breath as she fed him a piece of the exotic fish, unable to tear her eyes from his lips. They shared a smile, savouring the playful intimacy and the delicious meal.

After eating, the couple spent the next few hours relaxing with a bottle of House Holaris’ finest vintage, while swapping stories from their youth. John wanted to know more about her life on Romenor and Phelora was fascinated to hear about his adventures out in the stars.

“We should probably head back to the bedroom and check on Kehlarissa,” John said, glancing at the chronometer and seeing that it was almost midnight. “She’ll be waking up soon.”

Phelora stretched on the sofa and snuggled into him. “I don’t want the evening to end, I’m so comfy here with you.”

“I had a great time as well,” he said, leaning down to kiss her. “I really needed to unwind... so this was very much appreciated.”

She gave him a loving smile, then suddenly sat bolt upright. “I just remembered what we’re doing next!” she exclaimed, before springing up from the seat. With a coy grin on her face, Phelora held out her hand, “Let’s go!”

John laughed and let her lead him into the bedroom where the House Venkalyn matriarch was still fast asleep. Her hair had grown out now and tumbled in long flowing locks over her shoulders to spread out across the pillow.

“Oh, wow!” Phelora gasped, sitting next to the slumbering Maliri and staring at her in awe. “Her hair grew so fast!”

Joining them on the bed, John gently brushed aside Kehlarissa’s snowy-white mane so that it was no longer covering her face. “I mentioned needing a favour earlier, do you remember?”

Phelora nodded enthusiastically. “Of course! I’ll help however I can.”

“I’m worried that Kehlarissa is going to struggle over the next few weeks. Her personality is going to go through some dramatic changes and I’d like to ease the transition for her as much as possible. Edraele will be there to help her, but she’ll also be watching over all the rest of the new matriarchs as well as training the youngest how to be effective leaders. I was wondering if you’d be able to keep an eye on Kehlarissa for me?”

The young Maliri blinked in surprise. “You want me to watch her and report back on her behaviour?”

He smiled and shook his head. “No, I’d like you to be her friend.”

Phelora frowned, her expression turning pensive. “I... I don’t think she likes me very much.”

“I don’t think she likes anyone very much,” John noted dryly. “But I don’t think she has any friends either. Will you try for me? If she’s too obnoxious, don’t let her upset you. Just let me know and I’ll figure something else out.”

She nodded, her eyes drifting to the slumbering woman again. “Alright, I’ll do my best.”

“Thanks, honey. You’ve got a good heart; I hope she can learn something about kindness and compassion from you.”

Phelora blushed, unused to receiving praise. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” John replied, lifting her chin to give her another kiss.

Kehlarissa groaned and stretched languidly on the bed, drawing their full attention to her.

“Hey, sleeping beauty,” John said, greeting her with a warm smile.

“Baen’thelas!” she exclaimed, blinking owlishly as she tried to get her bearings. “Where am I? What happened?”

“Relax, you’re perfectly safe. You’ve been sleeping in Edraele’s bedroom,” John replied, stroking her cheek. “Now, are you feeling okay?”

The tension flowed out of her and Kehlarissa gave John an adoring smile as she gazed up at him. “I feel incredible! It’s like my body is tingling with energy.”

“We’re psychically connected,” John explained, lowering his hand to rest on her curved stomach. “While your tummy is still full, I’m able to heal any injuries and enhance your body.”

Kehlarissa let out a soft moan as he stroked her, then she stared at her rounded belly in shock. It took a moment for her to adjust to the startling sight, then an eager gleam appeared in her angular eyes as she registered what John had just said.

“What do you mean by ‘enhance my body’?”

“Any woman I feed regularly will be enhanced to the peak of mental and physical perfection,” he explained, darting a meaningful glance at Phelora. “You’ll become stronger, quicker, and tougher than you ever were before.”

Noticing the flick of his eyes, Kehlarissa followed his glance to the House Romenor matriarch and couldn’t help scowling. “Oh... you’re still here.”

John frowned at her snide comment. “We both wanted to check on how you were doing. Would you like to see yourself in the mirror?”

She nodded eagerly, her excitement overcoming any irritation at not being alone with him. John helped her from the bed, then led the two matriarchs into the en suite bathroom. There were full-length mirrors in there and Kehlarissa gasped when she saw her reflection.

“My hair!” she exclaimed, her eyes like saucers as she gaped at the lustrous mane tumbling down her back.

“You look very beautiful,” Phelora said softly.

“In House Valaden there used to be negative connotations to letting your hair grow out like this,” John said with a wry smile. “Is it the same in House Venkalyn?”

Kehlarissa nodded, blushing self-consciously at the scandalous reaction her new appearance would trigger on her homeworld.

John stepped behind her and encircled her in his arms. “Now it means something very different. Any Maliri woman that sees your white hair will instinctively know that you belong to me.”

The House Venkalyn matriarch admired herself in the mirror, then cradled the bump in her stomach, eyes softening as she imagined it was John’s baby growing inside her.

“Someday...” John murmured, placing his hand on top of hers.

She sighed wistfully, torn between an uplifting surge of hope and agonising frustration at having to wait. “Baen’thelas, is there any chance I can convince you to expedite our deal?”

“It’s only been twelve hours since we last discussed this,” he replied with a wry smile. “I think that’s a bit too soon for renegotiations.”

“So you concede that you will definitely sire my heirs then?” she countered, her magenta eyes sparkling at the banter. “And renegotiation of the timeline is also a possibility... how intriguing.”

John laughed and rolled his eyes at how pushy she was being. “I’m open to future discussions... let’s just leave it at that.” Before she could object further, he turned to face Phelora. “Are you ready?”

She nodded, barely able to contain her beaming grin. “I can’t wait!”

Kehlarissa grimaced as she lost John’s attention and shot daggers at the younger matriarch. Taking one last admiring glance at her reflection in the mirror, she reluctantly followed them back into the bedroom. Phelora was already waiting for John beside the bed and he gathered her in his arms to give her a passionate kiss.

“You’ll sleep for four hours afterwards,” he said, when they finally parted. “I’ll set an alarm for when you wake up, then I’ll feed you both again.”

“Again?” Kehlarissa echoed, perking up at the prospect.

He reached for her hand and gave it a squeeze. “It might be a while before I can arrange another session with you two, as I still have to meet the rest of the new matriarchs. I want to enhance you both as much as I can while we’re together.”

Both women nodded their understanding, then Phelora sank to her knees while Kehlarissa sat next to him on the bed. This time was very different, the evening he’d spent with the young Romenor matriarch bringing them that much closer. He murmured encouragement and gently stroked her hair as she got familiar with his cock, Phelora taking delight in bringing him pleasure. The first dose of pre-cum sent her into the usual daze and then he turned his attention to Kehlarissa, who’d been unable to tear her eyes away from the kneeling girl’s loving ministrations.

John made no effort to hold back, enjoying the kisses with the adoring Venkalyn matriarch as he loaded up another eager Maliri. He moaned into her mouth as he pumped the contents of his aching quad into Phelora’s expanding tummy, with Kehlarissa cooing softly as she relished seeing him climax for the first time. When his balls had been sucked dry, he carefully withdrew from Phelora’s mouth, then scooped up the dazed woman and placed her on the bed.

Kehlarissa watched in silence, her expression conflicted as he pulled the covers over Phelora’s nude body.

“Are you okay? You’re very quiet,” John asked, peeling back the covers on the other side of the bed in invitation.

“Did I look like her?” she asked, turning to study the comatose matriarch.

“Do you mean when you gave me a blowjob, or afterwards when I filled up your tummy?”

She hesitated a moment. “Both.”

“You looked almost identical,” he replied, lying down beside her. “Roll over so I can spoon you.”

Kehlarissa frowned at him in confusion, so he guided her into the position he wanted and wrapped her up in his arms.

“How does that feel?” he asked, kissing her shoulder.

“Very nice,” she murmured, her voice taut with heartfelt emotion.

“Would you move a bit closer to Phelora please?”

“Alright...” Kehlarissa grudgingly agreed, wriggling nearer. “But why?”

Their rounded tummies were nearly touching, his rich cum warming both their bellies. John slid his arm around the House Venkalyn matriarch, then stroked her curves, the backs of his fingers also brushing across Phelora’s impressively rotund stomach.

“Now I can imagine what it’ll be like when you’re both pregnant,” he whispered in her ear.

Kehlarissa let out a soft moan, her hips rolling as she pressed herself back against him. “I want that so much... Please don’t make me wait twenty years, Baen’thelas... I’m begging you.”

“Alright, I suppose we can renegotiate,” he conceded, kissing her ear. “But I want a favour in return.”

“Tell me what you need...” she murmured, interlacing her fingers with his. “I’ll make sure it is done.”

“Phelora’s a sweet girl, but her confidence has been destroyed by years of bullying by her sisters. I’d like you to act as her mentor and assist Edraele with teaching Phelora how to be an effective matriarch. She’s had no training and the planetary governors are running rings around her.”

Curling her lip in disgust, Kehlarissa sighed with irritation. “Fine, I agree to be her mentor.”

“That’s not all,” John said with a playful smile. “I don’t want you to lose your temper with Phelora, no matter how infuriating she’s being. I want you to be patient, sympathetic, and understanding with her. If she annoys you, bite your tongue rather than say anything spiteful.”

“You can’t be serious?!” the Maliri balked, turning to give him a look of incredulity.

“I’m very serious,” he replied, not backing down from her furious glare. “This will be a good opportunity for you to show me how nurturing you’ll be as a mother for our children.”

Kehlarissa froze, her objection faltering before she could vocalise it. “I’ll do as you ask,” she meekly replied.

“You’re a good girl, Kehlarissa,” John said, giving her a grateful squeeze. “You’ve both suffered enough for two lifetimes and I don’t want to see either of you get hurt again. It’s time to start making your dreams come true.”

The House Venkalyn matriarch was quiet for a long time, lying peacefully in his protective embrace. John thought she’d fallen asleep, until she spoke up softly. “Thank you for giving me a chance to prove myself worthy, Baen’thelas.”

“I believe in you, honey,” he said, kissing her cheek.

She snuggled into him with a happy sigh, then John dimmed the lights and they joined Phelora in a deep slumber.

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It was quiet on the bridge of the Brimorian battleship, as Shoal-Commander Taguch paced back and forth, darting the occasional pensive glance at the Sector Map.

“How much longer until we reach the Comms Beacon?” he snapped at his navigator.

The Wave-squire raised his scaly head, tearing his black eyes away from the console. “We should be able to see it, Shoal-Commander. We’re within range of the deployment coordinates... but there’s nothing there!”

He entered the location into the console and a yellow icon appeared on the floating map, well within the outer limits of their sensor range. Unfortunately, the Comms Beacon was missing, with the sensors not even picking up debris where it had once been located.

Taguch scratched nervously at his forearm fin. “Take us to those coordinates. I want to see for myself.”

Fleet Broimedha continued onwards, working its way deeper into Kintark territory. There was no activity on the long-range sensors, with no sign of the Brimorian invasion force or of a vengeful Kintark fleet that might have destroyed them. Shoal-Commander Taguch felt the tension rising on the bridge, with his crew just as apprehensive as he was. He was sure they’d all heard the disturbing rumours.

Eight Brimorian fleets with millions of personnel aboard had gone silent, without so much as a word reported back to the Enclave for the last couple of days. Taguch’s fleet had been patrolling the border, until he’d been given orders by Shoal-Commander Moichnea at Braoimdh Nautica to investigate the broken lines of communication. Now it seemed like he might finally get some answers as to the fate of the missing Brimorian armada. They raced closer to the comms beacon until the fleet dropped out of hyper-warp in close proximity to the vacant site.

“Launch scouts, I want the area searched for debris,” Taguch growled, then watched his crew leap to carry out his orders.

Wings of nimble strike fighters poured out of the carriers, the small craft sweeping the area for any trace of wreckage.

“They’ve found something!” the navigation officer called out. “Transferring visual feed...”

The image from the shipboard cameras began to play, showing tiny fragments of blue and purple hull plating. It was quite clear that the comms beacon had been totally obliterated, blasted by such terrifying firepower that there wasn’t enough debris left to be detected by sensors.

“I don’t see any scorching from plasma fire,” Taguch muttered, feeling a growing sense of unease.

The Wave-squire shook his head. “The pilot thinks it was destroyed by laser weaponry. Look at this...”

The camera tilted to zoom in on a maintenance panel that had been blasted in half by whatever had shot the comms beacon. The neat Brimorian script covering the hatch was bisected along a curved line, the edge melted from extreme heat... but not blackened by flames.

A shiver ran down Taguch’s spine, making his fins quiver. “Launch a replacement Comms Beacon. As soon as it comes online, begin transmitting blind hails to Shoal-Commander Olbhugh and Shoal Master Kaelotegh.”

The Wave-Squire saluted respectfully. “At once, Shoal-Commander.”

Taguch slumped into his Command Chair and waited impatiently for contact to be made with the invasion armada. It was a perplexing mystery as to who was responsible for destroying the Comms Beacon. The Terrans used laser weapons in their fleets, but the border between the Kintark and the Brimorians was light years from Federation Space. It made no sense that a Terran fleet would fly all the way out here to destroy that beacon, especially as they’d just been at war with the Kintark, so the last thing they’d be doing is helping them.

With the Terrans discounted, that only really left the Ashanath, who used Laser Weaponry exclusively. However, the thought of that pacifistic species attacking anyone unprovoked was too ludicrous to be considered. Dismissing them as well, the Brimorian Shoal-Commander felt even more anxious, having eliminated all his possible suspects.

“Nothing, Shoal-Commander,” the communications officer reported. “If the armada is within range of the Comms Beacon, they’re either maintaining radio silence, or are incapable of responding.”

Scratching nervously at his twitching fin, Taguch stared at the vast expanse of space that made up the Kintark Empire. The answers were out there somewhere, but the last thing he wanted to do was go hunting for whatever was responsible for eight Brimorian fleets going missing.

“Establish a connection with Braoimdh Nautica over a secure channel, I wish to report our findings.”

The Wave-Squire nodded and began making the call.

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Deep Lord Athgiloi rolled his powerful shoulders, the scales rippling like a suit of gleaming mail. Clever use of angled lamps created dramatic lighting in the aquatic arena, making the combatants seem like majestic gods to the mere mortals spectating. Grasping his trident, Athgiloi spun it around his hands, building momentum as he stalked towards the six armoured Brimorians facing him.

“The first to cut me gets his own weight in pearls,” he rumbled, the challenge invigorating his opponents.

They clutched their spears and shields tighter, eagerly surging forward through the water as they sought to claim the lavish prize. As quickly as they moved, the Deep Lord was faster, a flick of his tail sending him surging to the right. The hasty lunge from the closest guard brought spear and trident together with a dull clang, Athgiloi rapidly countering the blow with a mighty thrust. He struck the guard’s shield, smashing it backwards into the Brimorian’s face, the impact leaving the soldier stunned.

Now that the Deep Lord had broken free of the encirclement, half of his opponents were badly out of position. Charging forwards, he plunged into their disordered ranks, his shining trident seeking out gaps in their defences. One guard cried out in pain as the serrated blades sliced into his thigh, sending swirls of blood into the water. Another thrust was too fast for the second guard to block, one of the trident’s prongs impaling his flank and adding more blood to the churning morass.

Athgiloi sucked in gallons through his gills, the delicious scent of his prey’s lifeblood triggering dormant predatory instincts. Baring his teeth in a feral snarl, he fell upon the rest, battering aside their frantic strikes and retaliating with crippling blows. Trails of bubbles masked his frenzied assault, making it even harder for the guards to find their foe. In less than a minute they were all floundering in defeat, casting aside their weapons and clutching at jagged wounds to stem the bleeding.

Savouring his victory, the Deep Lord flexed his bulging muscles for the adoring crowd. He drove the trident into the sandy floor, then swam unhurriedly towards the exit where the arenamaster was waiting.

“Triple their pay,” Athgiloi grunted, as he glided past. “They provided more sport than the last pack.”

“As you command,” the arenamaster replied, bowing with respect for the greatest champion in twenty generations.

The Deep Lord ascended through the ancient stone tunnel, then breached the surface of the water into the preparation chamber, his black eyes seeking out Celphna. The Nymph was waiting for him, her face lighting up with joy as he emerged from the water... but she wasn’t alone. Athgiloi’s gaze snapped to the right, locking onto the armoured Brimorian who fidgeted nervously under his scrutiny.

“You were magnificent, Master!” Celphna gushed, rushing to his side.

Athgiloi leaned down to rub his snout against hers. “Wait for me in my chamber, precious one. I will be along shortly.”

She turned and sashayed towards the exit, giving him a smouldering glance over her shoulder as she departed.

“Shoal-Commander Moichnea... what brings you to the arena?” he asked, focusing on the officer from Braoimdh Nautica as he rubbed down his scales.

Moichnea tore his envious gaze from Celphna and dipped into a subservient bow. “Ah... Deep Lord, I have received an update from Shoal-Commander Taguch. He leads Fleet Broimedha on their mission to re-establish contact with the invasion armada and I thought it best to bring you the report in person.”

“I know who Taguch is,” Athgiloi muttered, gesturing impatiently for the officer to continue. “What news of the armada?”

“He located the defective Comms Beacon; it had been vaporised... by laser fire,” Moichnea replied with trepidation. “Taguch scoured the area but was unable to discover any other evidence that might identify who was responsible for its destruction. He also found no trace of any ships from our invasion force.”

Athgiloi felt like he’d been doused in icy water. “Laser fire?” he snapped, glaring at the Shoal-Commander. “Are you absolutely certain?”

“I have seen the footage myself. There can be no doubt as to the type of weaponry used to destroy the beacon... or the scale of the firepower.”

Filled with a dark sense of foreboding, Athgiloi froze as felt his world start to close in around him.

“Should I order Fleet Broimedha to proceed deeper into Kintark territory?” Moichnea asked, unsettled by the lack of response from the Deep Lord. “The closest planet seized by our troops is only six hours from the border.”

“No,” Athgiloi said sharply. “Order Taguch to withdraw immediately and wait for further orders on our side of the border. He is not to engage enemy forces under any circumstances.”

“But what if-”

“You are dismissed, Shoal-Commander,” the Deep Lord rumbled, cutting off the smaller Brimorian.

Moichnea bowed respectfully and turned to leave the anteroom.

Shocked by the report, Athgiloi sank down onto one of the stone benches that lined the chamber. He knew instinctively, with dreadful clarity, who was responsible for destroying the comms beacon. There was only one species capable of such terrifying destruction and if the Maliri were involved in this, he was under no illusion that he would ever hear from Shoal Master Kaelotegh or the armada ever again.

“Eight fleets...” he whispered in horror, reeling from the appalling news.

If his suspicions were correct, the Enclave had just lost half of its entire military in a single devastating stroke. They had gone from a position of overwhelming strength to being desperately exposed... and were now surrounded by vengeful enemies. Utter disbelief quickly gave way to gut-wrenching despair, and for the first time in decades, Athgiloi trembled with fear.

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\*Good morning, John.\*

Edraele’s gentle voice drifted through his subconscious, slowly rousing John from a very deep and restful sleep. Opening his eyes, he saw her sitting on the edge of the bed, her purple eyes watching him affectionately.

\*Morning, beautiful,\* he replied, taking care as he stretched not to disturb the slumbering matriarchs sprawled across him.

John glanced at the chronometer and saw that it was nearly eight in the morning, which meant that Sarinia would be waking soon.

\*You had a busy night... and a busy morning,\* Edraele noted, her gaze flicking to the curved tummies barely concealed by the bedsheets.

\*I hadn’t originally planned on feeding them so much,\* John explained, glancing down at the Maliri women. \*But Phelora was on the brink of a nervous breakdown and Kehlarissa desperately needed an attitude adjustment. It seemed sensible to give them both some extra attention.\*

\*I’m not criticising by any means,\* Edraele said with a fond smile. \*You’ve already made a profound difference to the pair of them.\*

John carefully extracted himself from the two sleeping girls, managing to escape their embrace without disturbing either one.

\*It’s interesting you should say that,\* he noted dryly as he climbed out of bed. \*What possessed you to pair these two together? Phelora’s tortured by insecurities, while Kehlarissa’s arrogant and entitled.\*

\*Opposites attract?\* the Maliri Queen suggested, a twinkle in her eyes.

She stifled a giggle as John tickled her. \*Come on, what was the real reason?\*

\*Stop, please! I’ll tell you!\* Edraele pleaded, while biting her lip to stop herself from bursting into laughter under his playful assault.

\*Tell me in the shower,\* he replied, holding out a hand for her.

They entered the en suite, with Edraele disrobing to join him under the hot jets of water.

“There were a number of reasons,” she admitted, as she soaped down his back. “House Venkalyn is Rank ten and House Romenor Rank nine, which means that Phelora is the only one of the new matriarchs that technically outranks Kehlarissa. Despite her disdain for Phelora being a youngest daughter, Kehlarissa still respects the hierarchies of the House rankings, enough to consider them approximate equals in status.”

“Which bodes well for a long-term friendship,” John noted, listening attentively. “What else?”

“As you so masterfully pointed out to them both, their strengths do complement the other’s weaknesses. They’ll be able to help each other grow far more effectively than if I’d paired Phelora with another younger daughter, or Kehlarissa with one of the eldest,” Edraele explained, moving on to shampooing his hair. “You’ll be relieved to hear that they were the extremes of both sets of personalities, so dealing with the rest of the matriarchs should be relatively smooth by comparison.”

John paused and glanced at her over a shoulder. “Are we being too manipulative pairing the girls up together like this?”

Edraele considered his question for a moment. “No, I don’t believe so. We’re only encouraging mentoring partnerships, not pushing them into full-blown affairs. I think it would be wonderful if romantic relationships do develop, but just because you find that prospect innately appealing doesn’t mean that anyone is forced into it. There are several members of the Invictus crew that haven’t become deeply attached to one particular girl, so it’s certainly not mandatory.”

He nodded thoughtfully, then turned to wash her. “Did I do alright by them both? Was there anything I could’ve done or said better?”

She twisted in his arms to face him. “John... you gave them the best night of their lives. You managed to resurrect Phelora’s self-esteem and break through Kehlarissa’s walls to really touch her heart. If you’d made love to them as well, I’m not sure Luna would’ve survived the night.”

John chuckled with understanding. “Did I turn you into a love drunk again?”

Edraele blushed and gave him a chaste kiss. “I couldn’t help myself... you wouldn’t believe the difference you made to those girls.”

“I’m glad... they both deserve some happiness after everything they’ve been through,” he said, shutting off the shower.

As they dried off together, Edraele said, “Before you go to visit Sarinia, Emandra Holaris has requested an audience.”

“She’s not wasting any time. I take it she’s made her decision then?”

“She has,” the Maliri Queen replied without elaborating. “Emandra is currently waiting for you in my office. I’ll have someone bring you breakfast in Sarinia’s quarters.”

“Thanks, honey,” he said, giving her a grateful kiss.

Relieved that he wasn’t going to be standing on ceremony today, John dressed in what passed for smart casual attire from the clothing his Maliri matriarch had provided. He tucked the blue shirt into his dark slacks and finished buttoning it up as he entered Edraele’s office. Emandra was there waiting for him, sitting on one of the chaise longues in all her matriarchal finery.

“Good morning, Emandra,” John said, walking across the room to join her. He held out a hand as she was about to rise. “There’s no need to get up on my account.”

“A very good morning to you, Baen’thelas,” she said, a gleam of anticipation in her eyes. “Thank you for granting me an audience. I wish to inform you that I have made my decision.”

John studied her demeanour and saw no hint of trepidation on her face. He was sure that Edraele was right and that Emandra would be eager to restore her youth, but he was surprised that the House Holaris matriarch clearly had no reservations about going through the Change. Either she had convinced herself that he was bluffing when he said that she would punish herself with guilt, or she assumed that the warnings were widely overblown.

Taking his pause as a cue for her to continue, Emandra declared, “I wish to proceed with the rejuvenation process.”

Her hungry gaze swept over him, lingering on his muscular physique like a starving man might view a tenderloin steak grilled to perfection. Rather than find the unsubtle objectification amusing, like he usually did when the Maliri stared at him so lustfully, John found that the matriarch’s gaze filled him with revulsion.

“Alright, thanks for letting me know,” he replied, turning on his heel and heading for the door. “I’ll ask Jade to meet you at midday and she can feed you in your quarters. You should see dramatic results when you wake up four hours later, but it might take several sessions to make you look as young as Kali.”

“Jade?!” Emandra blurted out, her expression a mixture of confusion and disbelief. “But I thought...”

John stopped by the doorway and raised an eyebrow. “You thought that I would feed you personally?”

She gave him a hesitant nod.

“It’s not necessary, I assure you,” he replied. “As long as you receive a stomach full of my cum, your body will start to regenerate automatically.”

“But... I-I wanted it to be with you,” she stammered, deflating with disappointment.

John turned and looked her squarely in the eyes. “Emandra... you tortured and murdered your five daughters. There’s nothing about what you’ve done that I find remotely arousing. Trust me when I tell you that using Jade as a proxy is the only way this can physically happen.”

Emandra was crushed by his blunt rejection, her face darkening a dark indigo as she flushed with shame and humiliation. He watched her for a long moment, torn over whether he’d been too harsh with the House Holaris matriarch. Then John thought about Emandra’s youngest daughter, an innocent girl not unlike Phelora, who suffered decades of horrific abuse at the hands of the vicious woman sitting before him. He turned away and left the office without looking back.

He’d calmed down by the time he reached Sarinia’s quarters, the seething rage at the injustice of rewarding such a cruel monster gradually fading. He paused outside the House Baelora suite, struck by the thought that if it wasn’t for the sleeping matriarch within, he’d be having to feed a dozen more of the old matriarchs, who were all every bit as terrible as Emandra.

\*She did us both a great service,\* Edraele said softly. \*I know what Sarinia did to her own sisters was appalling, but I’ll always be very grateful to her for sparing you the ignominy of compromising your morals for the older matriarchs.\*

\*Yeah... it’s complicated,\* John said with a heavy sigh.

He gave the two guards a strained smile, then entered the suite, and was very pleased to find Kali Loraleth waiting for him.

“John! I made you breakfast!” she gushed, rushing across the reception area to greet him with a kiss.

Wrapping his arms around her, John gave her a grateful hug. “Thanks, Kali. I really appreciate it.”

“Hey, are you alright?” she asked, pulling back to look at him with concern.

He cupped her face and gently stroked her cheek with his thumb. “It’s been wonderful being back on Genthalas with you, Edraele, and the rest of her girls. It’s just that all of you are so lovely, I forgot just how horrible Maliri society can be. I’ve just been dealing with Emandra and the idea of rewarding her with immortality for torturing and murdering her daughters makes me sick to my stomach.”

“What you’ve done for all of us has been amazing,” Kali said softly, her dark-blue eyes boring into his soul. “But you were never going to be able to save every noblewoman in the Regency. You’re shouldering enough burdens without carrying the weight of the dead as well. Let them all rest in peace... and focus on those women you can still help.”

John blinked in surprise and looked at her with newfound respect. “That’s... really good advice, Kali. Thank you.”

“I’m glad it was helpful. My sisters always used to tease me about not knowing what was going on, but everything seems to make a lot more sense nowadays,” she said, delighted that she’d been able to give him some useful advice. Taking his hand, Kali grinned and led him across the lounge. “Let’s get you some breakfast! I can’t wait to see which dishes you like the most!”

As he was towed into the kitchen by the exuberant young woman John studied her thoughtfully.

\*Yes, Kali’s become very perceptive since going through the Change,\* Edraele informed him, confirming his suspicions. \*She saw through Sarinia’s deceptions without much difficulty and was the first to realise that Gaenna Baelora and most of the older matriarchs had been slain.\*

\*She’s a clever girl,\* he said, feeling a surge of pride for the House Loraleth matriarch.

They had an enjoyable breakfast together, with John trying lots of exotic Maliri dishes and giving Kali his verdict on each one. She was an excellent cook and John managed to learn lots of intriguing new recipes from her homeworld.

“That was fantastic, thank you,” John said, giving her a grateful kiss.

“It was a pleasure cooking for you,” she gushed, her eyes sparkling with joy.

John stretched and reluctantly rose from his seat. “I’d love to spend the rest of the morning with you, but I need to check on Sarinia. She should be waking up in about five minutes.”

Kali nibbled her lip nervously, then blurted out, “Could I come with you? I’d like to see her.”

He hesitated before replying, “I don’t think that’s a good idea, Kali. Sarinia was tortured by her mother at a very young age and the trauma badly warped her mind. I had to wipe out a significant portion of her damaged personality and now I’m trying to rebuild her... but it’s a slow process and I don’t know what state she’s going to be in when she wakes up.”

“I promise I won’t be upset, whatever happens,” she pleaded. “Edraele explained what you were doing and I think it’s amazing that you’re remaking Sarinia into the good person she should’ve been. Please let me help, John... please!”

“Alright... but we need to be very gentle with her,” John said, taking Kali’s hand as they left the kitchen. “Sarinia might be frightened by all the changes.”

“I understand,” Kali said, nodding eagerly. “I’ll be quiet, gentle, and supportive.”

They walked along the corridor to Sarinia’s bedroom, the doors spiralling upwards as they approached. When they entered, John couldn’t see Sarinia’s face as it was covered by a curtain of snowy-white hair that cascaded down over her shoulders onto the pillow. The House Baelora matriarch lay peacefully on the bed, her chest rising and falling with a steady cadence.

“How much longer?” Kali whispered, sitting cross-legged beside the sleeping woman.

John glanced at the chronometer on the wall. “Just another couple of minutes, then she’ll have been asleep for exactly fourteen hours. Oh, could you get a tall glass of water for her please?”

“Sure!” Kali agreed, springing off the bed and rushing back to the kitchen.

He sat beside Sarinia and gently brushed aside tendrils of hair to reveal her pretty face. She looked serene as she slept, all the tension and worry smoothed away, bringing out her natural beauty.

Kali hurried into the room, keeping the glass steady. “Here it is.”

At that moment, Sarinia began to stir, shifting on the bed before her expression morphed to distress. Her hands flew to her throat as her eyes snapped open, and she let out a hoarse cough.

She looked up at John, the confusion on her face plain to see. “I’m so thirsty...”

“We’ve got a nice cold glass of water ready for you,” he said, his voice calm and supportive. “Let me help you sit up so you can drink it.”

Sarinia allowed him to manoeuvre her into position and gave Kali a grateful look as she handed her the glass. They waited patiently as she gulped the drink down, her throat bobbing as she quenched her thirst.

“I needed that so much! Thank you,” Sarinia finally gasped, sagging with relief.

“You’re welcome,” Kali replied with a warm smile. She put the empty glass on the side table, then moved around to sit on the bed.

“How’re you feeling?” John asked, gazing into Sarinia’s golden eyes.

“I feel wonderful,” she replied, staring at him in fascination. “Did you know that you’re extremely handsome? Those cheekbones and that nose... you’re gorgeous!”

“Thank you,” he said politely. “Do you know why you were sleeping?”

She frowned and rubbed at her temples with both hands. “It’s all a bit of a blur... I can’t really remember.”

“I’m Kali and this is John,” the Loraleth matriarch interjected. “Do you remember your name?”

“My name’s Sarinia,” she replied confidently, before hesitating and looking uncertain. “I-I think. But that name feels so very far away... like I’m different now. I feel like I haven’t been called Sarinia in a very long time.”

“What were you called recently then?” Kali asked, intrigued by her responses.

Sarinia’s brow furrowed with confusion. “I think people called me Tehlariene... but that doesn’t feel right either.” Looking at them in alarm, she blurted out, “I don’t know my own name!”

“Just relax, everything’s going to be okay,” John murmured, his voice soothing her.

She bit her lip then nodded. “Okay. I feel like I can trust you... that you care about me.”

“That’s right,” he agreed, clasping her hand and giving it a reassuring squeeze. “We’re both here to look after you.”

Kali gave her a comforting pat on the arm. “Don’t worry, you don’t have to be called Sarinia or Tehlariene. If you want, you can be called something completely different.”

“Kali...” John rumbled.

“Names are very important; they let everyone know who you are... and who you definitely aren’t,” she said meaningfully. Turning her attention to Sarinia, she continued, “Is there anything in particular you’d like to be called?”

The House Baelora matriarch thought about it for a moment, her eyes going blank. “I don’t have any ideas.”

“What about combining your old names into something new?” Kali suggested. “We could call you ‘Sarene’.”

Sarinia considered that a moment, then glanced at John for his approval. “Do you like it?”

“It sounds similar to a word that means tranquil in Terran. I think it’s a lovely name for a lovely girl.”

She blushed and gave him a shy smile. “In that case, I’d like to be called Sarene from now on.”

“Okay, Sarene,” John agreed, stroking her hand.

Kali hugged her. “I love your new name!”

Sarene grinned and hugged her back. “Thank you.”

John waited for them to separate, then asked, “Can you remember how old you are, Sarene?”

Her brow furrowed again as she concentrated. “I think I’m 62... but that doesn’t feel quite right either.”

“You are a bit older than that... but I’m going to make you young again,” John said, his deep voice mesmerising her once more. “You’re actually 129, but you’ll soon be back to 30, just like Kali here.”

“Hey, I’m 31!” Kali protested with a mock frown.

“How can you make me younger?” Sarene asked, looking bewildered.

“Space Magic,” John replied, winking at her as Kali giggled.

“You’re teasing me,” Sarene protested, colour blooming in her cheeks.

“Maybe a little,” he admitted. “The real answer is complicated and would take a while to explain. It’ll be easier for me to finish helping you, then you should be able to remember everything by yourself.”

“I’d really appreciate that, thank you,” she said gratefully. “It feels like there’s big blank spots in my memories and it’s horrible forgetting so many things.”

John leaned over to give her a tender kiss. “You’ve been very patient so far, Sarene. It won’t be for much longer.”

“Do you want me to help?” Kali asked, her eyes twinkling.

“Yes please,” he replied, returning her smile.

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“Good morning, ladies,” Alyssa said, her friendly greeting echoed by all the women present.

Calara patted the dining chair next to her. “I picked out your favourites for breakfast.”

“You’re such a sweetheart,” the blonde said affectionately, sitting beside her girlfriend.

“How’s John doing?” Sakura asked, between bites of her toast.

Alyssa gave her a coy smile. “He’s working hard.”

“I bet he is,” Irillith smirked, sharing a knowing look with her sister. “Is mother giving him any respite?”

“He’s pretty much surrounded by sexy blue babes 24/7,” the teenage matriarch clarified.

The girls all laughed, not expecting anything different.

“Well, have a great day everyone,” Jehanna said, rising from her seat. “I’ll see all of you later.”

“You’re leaving already?” Alyssa protested.

The dusky-hued former reporter nodded. “I’ll be in the firing range if you need me. John’s back tomorrow and I want to impress him so much that he’ll be begging to give me psychic powers!”

“Alright, but I want you back here for lunch,” the blonde said sternly. “All work and no play makes Jehanna the centre of a fourteen-girl orgy.”

“Is that a threat or a promise?” Jehanna replied with a grin. “I’ll be back either way!”

They waved her off, then Helene turned to her matriarch. “Do you know where Jade is this morning?”

“She’s taken the Raptor back to Genthalas,” Alyssa explained, slicing open a ripe blue fruit. “John’s sparring with Luna this morning and he needs his gear. Jade’s going to be sticking around up there for a few hours to help feed Emandra, but she should be back around oneish.”

“Okay, thanks,” the mermaid said with a sigh.

“What’s the matter?” Rachel asked, giving the teal-hued beauty a sideways hug.

“We were all going to go reef diving again this morning. It was so much fun last time.”

“Jade says she’s sorry she can’t join us,” Neysa apologised. “Master needed her assistance.”

“Don’t worry, we’ll still be getting wet with you,” Betrixa chimed in with an impish smile.

“I’m sure Dana would love to go with you too... right Sparks?” Rachel teased her girlfriend.

“Hmm... yeah,” the redhead muttered, bobbing her head distractedly.

“There you go, another volunteer for deep diving,” Rachel said with a grin. “Just think of all that lovely water, babes. Millions of litres to get you thoroughly drenched!”

“Wait... what?!” Dana protested, her eyes widening in alarm as she realised what she’d accidentally signed up for. “Err, I can’t... I have to work on my tan!”

As Rachel laughed, Alyssa rolled her eyes. “Alright... what are you working on, naughty girl?”

“It’s not that naughty,” Dana protested. “John told the Ashanath that we’d send them new design schematics for their warships... but I hadn’t quite finished them before we got here. I was just thinking about any last improvements I could make.”

“Could I see what you’ve come up with so far?” Calara requested.

“Sure!” the redhead agreed, darting over to a potted plant and retrieving the holo-viewer she’d stashed behind it. She grinned at Alyssa as she set up the projection system so they could all see. “What are you looking at me like that for?”

“You’re lucky John isn’t here. He’d add some colour to those pert cheeks,” she admonished her friend, while eyeing Dana’s bikini clad bottom.

Dana bit her lip and squeezed her thighs together. “Stop trying to turn me on, you’ll get me all hot and bothered.”

She activated the holo-viewer and a set of blueprints appeared for the newly designed Ashanath cruiser. Dana had taken the original disc shape and elongated it into an ellipse, giving her more room for larger engines and additional gundecks.

“Not bad,” Calara said, nodding her approval. “I like how you added some heavy calibre cannons to round out their weaponry. Their total reliance on lasers would’ve crippled them against thrall ships.”

“Yeah, that’s what I was thinking,” Dana muttered, studying the design. “Can you think of anything else I could add?”

“Actually, I have a suggestion,” Rachel interjected, leaning over the table to point towards the lower decks in the stern. “Is that the Medical Lab?”

“Yep,” the redhead confirmed. She frowned and looked worried. “Why? What’s wrong with it?”

“It’s a long way from both the airlocks and the centre of the ship,” the brunette replied. “I understand that there’s always a compromise between ship security and efficiency, but when seconds can save lives, having the medical facilities as close to the action as possible could be invaluable.”

“You could create some security chokepoints by the access areas,” Sakura suggested, flipping a knife in her hand and using it to point to some prime locations. “I’d focus my defences here... and here.”

“Yeah... this is good stuff,” Dana said, nodding thoughtfully. “Anyone else got anything to add?”

“I’ll review the primary gun batteries and might make a few modifications to the firing arcs,” Calara replied, studying the ship’s weaponry.

Alyssa cast a critical eye over the cruiser’s hull, then shook her head. “That ship might be functional, but the aesthetics leave a lot to be desired. I’d like to make a few tweaks here and there.”

Dana groaned in protest. “It’s a warship... you don’t need to pretty it up!”

“True... as long as you don’t mind it looking like it was designed by the Bract,” Alyssa countered, referring to the ugly beetle-like merchant vessels.

“Ugh... go ahead then,” Dana said with mock resignation, while secretly delighted to have Alyssa’s discerning eye review her design. “The Ashanath should finish assembling their psychic comms array by tomorrow morning, so we’ve got 24 hours to make any final tweaks to the schematics.”

“Got it,” Alyssa murmured, her eyes lingering over the blocky Trankaran engines at the rear of the ship. “This should only take me about ten minutes... then it’s back to the grindstone.”

Calara gave her a sympathetic look. “Working on an all-over tan is exhausting isn’t it?”

Alyssa put her hand to her forehead and let out a theatrical sigh. “Being pampered by a team of beautiful attentive servants makes it all so much harder...”

The girls all laughed, including the Maliri staff, who had grown very fond of their playful guests.

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John knelt on the bed and stroked the Maliri girls’ rounded bellies, prompting a moan of pleasure from Kali and a quiet sigh of contentment from Sarene.

“Thanks for letting me share,” Kali purred, snuggling up with her sleeping bedmate.

“Sarene was a lot more lucid than I was expecting,” John explained, pulling up the covers around the two women. “And I needed to get you ready for tomorrow.”

Kali writhed in the bed, her gaze hooded with lust. “I’m so horny, John... are you sure you can’t stay in bed with me?”

“Duty calls, I’m afraid. I have a sparring session with Luna now and I’ll be meeting more of the new matriarchs this afternoon.”

“This is our last chance to be together before we start a family,” she reminded him, her eyes softening at the thought. “There’s so many positions I want to try with you while we still can.”

He leaned over to kiss the doe-eyed girl. “Can you wait until this evening? Then we can have the whole night together.”

She smiled and nodded. “That would be wonderful!”

“Thanks for volunteering to look after Sarene,” he said, glancing at the House Baelora matriarch.

“I‘m glad to help. I saw glimpses of the girl she’s becoming when I first met Sarinia, and I’d like to get to know her better. After what happened to all the other matriarchs, I don’t think she’ll find it easy to make friends with them, so I’d like to be there for her.”

John brushed his fingers through Kali’s hair. “You’re a lovely girl, Kali. I hope you know how much you mean to me.”

She placed her hand on her chest and smiled beatifically. “I know exactly how you feel.”

They shared a parting kiss, then John dimmed the lights and left the bedroom. As he strolled along the corridor towards his quarters, he mused how uplifting it was spending any time with the Young Matriarchs. They all exemplified the positivity and collaborative spirit that he wanted to instil in the rest of the matriarchal council and the Maliri as a whole.

\*I’m very proud of them, John,\* Edraele said with a catch in her voice. \*They’ve all come so far in such a short time.\*

\*They’re a credit to you and the way you’ve taken care of them,\* he replied, feeling a surge of gratitude towards the modest Maliri Queen. \*I really am grateful to you for everything you’ve done for me, for those girls, and all the Maliri.\*

Edraele was rendered speechless by his earnest praise, but John could feel happiness radiating off the Valaden matriarch. As he approached her quarters, he found Luna waiting patiently for him in the corridor outside. She saw John coming before he spotted her and the assassin pushed away from the wall she’d been leaning on, then padded over to intercept him.

“Hello, John,” she greeted him, her eyes sparkling with anticipation.

“Hey, gorgeous,” he replied, sweeping his gaze over her lithe form as she bounded up to him. “You seem very perky this morning. Edraele told me that she’d worn you out last night.”

Luna blushed a very fetching shade of blue.

She glanced either way down the corridor, then leaned closer, and spoke in a conspiratorial whisper, “She was insatiable! I don’t know what you did to her, but we spent hours making love...”

The assassin went on to describe the things they’d done to each other in vivid detail, and soon it was John’s turn to feel himself get hot under the collar. Luna noticed at once and grinned at his reaction.

“Alright, you got me back,” John admitted with a grin, fanning his face. “Just for the record, I wasn’t blushing because I was embarrassed.”

Luna gave him a coy smile and skipped ahead. “I know...” she called back over her shoulder.

He laughed and quickly caught up to her with long strides. “I’m looking forward to sparring with you. Watching you in action against Sakura was incredible.”

“She’s a very capable fighter,” Luna said with admiration.

“Definitely,” John agreed. “I’ve enjoyed sparring with her, but it’ll be an interesting change not having to fight on the defensive all the time.”

Luna laughed and nodded. “She’s the most aggressive swordswoman I’ve ever faced.”

The Maliri bodyguard led him through the gleaming corridors of Genthalas until they reached a section of the station that he’d never been to before. He saw signs for various leisure activities, the list including a startling amount of popular Terran sports.

“You can surf here?” he remarked to his guide.

“There’s a substantial pool with a wave generator,” Luna explained. “Terran leisure activities have been adopted throughout the Protectorate in systems claimed by every noble House. I think it’s because your entertainment shows made them seem so exciting.”

She hesitated and looked at him in confusion. “I could never see the appeal of ‘golf’ though. It seemed to me that 95% of that game is simply a leisurely walk in the countryside, with a momentary pause to hit a tiny ball with a stick.”

He chuckled and nodded his agreement. “I think that one’s an acquired taste.”

They followed runic signs for a variety of martial activities and entered a leisure complex surrounded by holographic images of Maliri wielding deadly-looking blades.

“This is impressive,” John remarked, glancing through the glass windows at various classes being taught.

They were all packed, with dozens of Maliri training in hand-to-hand combat or sparring with weapons.

“Combat arts have always been extremely popular, long before an interest was taken in Terran sports,” Luna replied. She gave him a knowing look and added quietly, “Is it any wonder considering our origins as a thrall race?”

John nodded thoughtfully. “Do you train here a lot?”

“Not often, no. I use my own personal training room for meditation and working on my fighting technique. It’s much smaller than the Dojo you have on the Invictus though, so I asked Edraele to prepare something more suitable...”

He laughed and rolled his eyes. “Oh no. She’s gone completely overboard, hasn’t she?”

“Edraele loves you,” Luna said with an enigmatic smile. “She’d do anything to ensure your happiness living here with us.”

A set of doors opened before them, with a pair of House Valaden guards bowing respectfully to Luna and John as they passed. They walked into a reception area, where a starry-eyed Maliri woman behind a desk waved them though the next set of doors. John blinked in surprise, feeling a disconcerting sense of déjà vu. The room beyond was an armoury, configured to look exactly like the one on the Invictus.

“Master!” Jade exclaimed, bounding over to hug and kiss him.

“This is a pleasant surprise,” he said, spinning the Nymph around in his arms. “What brings you here?”

“I’ve been setting up equipping frames and outfitting them with your training gear,” she explained, pointing to the familiar equipment installed in the walls.

“You’ve done a brilliant job, thank you!” John exclaimed, delighted with the arrangements. “I was expecting to have to put the armour on manually and that’s always a chore.”

Jade nodded her agreement. “I’ll stay and watch you fight, then I can assist you with Emandra. Are you planning your usual post-sparring ritual?” She glanced meaningfully at Luna, her emerald eyes twinkling.

“Ah... no,” John spluttered with a cough of embarrassment.

“Is something the matter?” Luna asked, looking concerned. “Is there a problem with the armoury?”

“It’s all absolutely perfect. Just ignore Jade, she’s being naughty,” John said, giving the Nymph’s skirt-clad bottom a playful smack. “Come on, let’s get geared up!”

They stepped into the equipping frames, the robotic arms swinging down to secure the armoured plates into position around their bodies. A few seconds later they stepped clear, a rippling series of clicks signifying that they were both sealed into their Paragon suits. John reached for the replica of his runesword, while Luna drew the white sword he’d psychically forged for her a month ago.

She opened the door and John followed her through, expecting to find an empty chamber with lots of space for them to fight in. The room was huge, but it was far from empty. Bright sunlight shone down on a picturesque garden, with tiny fluttering insects darting amongst the bright flowers edging the manicured lawns. In the centre of the tranquil scene was a majestic temple, the ornate pillars holding up the vaunted ceilings etched with beautiful carvings. It was like a Maliri shrine to the martial arts and everything about the place filled him with a wonderful sense of serenity.

“This place is stunning,” John marvelled, admiring the meticulous attention to detail in the building and the gardens. “The holo simulation must’ve taken weeks to build.”

Luna glided up the steps, then turned to face him and leaned against a pillar. “What simulation?”

“This is real?!” John gasped, crouching down and brushing his fingers through the grass. \*Edraele... this is too much! It must have cost you a fortune!\*

\*I spared no expense for you, my love,\* she said softly. \*Whatever you need, I will provide.\*

\*I think I need to raise my game,\* Alyssa remarked with an affectionate telepathic smile. \*Edraele’s showing me up as matriarch.\*

John followed Luna up the steps and into the huge temple, turning to admire the beautiful architecture. As he turned, he noticed that viewing galleries had been built into both the upper and lower levels surrounding the training area, every window filled with captivated Maliri.

“Are the spectators too obtrusive?” Luna asked, her gauntleted hand dancing over a control panel built into one of the pillars. The windows turned opaque, leaving the walls outside the temple a featureless black expanse. “They can still see us at the moment, but I can seal us in if you want complete privacy?”

“That’s okay,” he said, turning to wave at the viewing galleries. “I realise that me being here has triggered a huge amount of interest from the station personnel. The novelty will soon wear off when they see the man that claimed the Maliri get his ass whupped repeatedly by a very beautiful former assassin.”

“Flattery won’t earn you any leniency,” Luna said, although her smile broadened at his compliments.

“I wasn’t expecting any,” he replied, walking across the padded floor towards the centre of the dojo.

He watched Luna carefully, maintaining the space between them as she moved parallel to John into position. Once again, he was struck by the air of nonchalance to the assassin’s stance. Everything, from the way she walked, to her relaxed posture was designed to put her opponent at ease. The single-edged curved blade seemed to just hang there, held in a loose unthreatening grip, as though the very last thing Luna would do was swing it at his head.

Despite her perfectly affected indifference, John was experienced enough as a swordsman to see through her ruse, even if he’d seen her fight before. Luna’s stance might seem relaxed, but her yellow eyes followed his every move. He knew she was studying and evaluating him, looking for weaknesses in his defences that might secure an easy victory.

John inhaled deeply and centred himself, finding it incredibly easy to reach a zen state in this haven of tranquillity. He held his sword in a double-handed grip, shifting smoothly to an aggressive posture as he advanced towards his slender opponent. As soon as he was in range, he opened with a lunge, hoping to surprise her by resorting to such an obvious attack.

Luna stepped aside, her blade swiping sideways in a lazy parry that was just enough to push his blow wide. John was expecting a defensive move like that, so he shifted his feet, then slashed sideways with a scything cut. There was no way Luna could affect an air of indifference avoiding that strike and she skittered backwards, the tip of his sword missing her stomach by inches.

She laughed, acknowledging his skill with an approving nod. Luna knew immediately that the feint and slash hadn’t been designed to land a blow, only to force a hasty dodge to shatter her illusion of indifference.

“You liked that?” he asked, twirling his sword around and shifting into a defensive stance.

“Very nice,” she replied, before suddenly bursting into activity.

She darted to his left, then spun to the right, her elegant, curved blade leaping towards his unguarded shoulder. John whipped his sword around and managed to narrowly deflect the lightning-fast strike with a ringing clang. He immediately riposted, but she dived under the blow, using her momentum to flank him.

He cursed at being outmanoeuvred and leapt into the air to avoid her ankle-height cut, just managing to bring his sword down again to block a second back-handed swipe. He landed awkwardly and wasn’t able to take advantage of her being prone, giving Luna the opportunity to leap to her feet and pursue the attack. John had to frantically parry several slashes before he could regain his proper balance, with Luna backing out of range when he was finally ready to shift to the offensive.

Even though Sakura was naturally faster, Luna seemed to have several moves planned out in advance and was always perfectly positioned to execute them. John tried a cross slash, then a lunge, but there was a clang of blade against blade as she casually parried each blow. The effortless ease with which she protected herself from each swing was maddening and John wondered how many opponents she’d defeated by enraging them into doing something foolish.

John shifted fully onto the offensive, using his longer blade to push Luna backwards. She limited her counterattacks to the occasional riposte, while dodging or parrying everything he could throw at her. He kept himself under tight control, not willing to give her any margin to capitalise on his mistakes, trying a dozen different attacking techniques to see if she would struggle to counter any of them.

He noticed that using an offensive move with any real power behind it had almost no chance of landing, with Luna too good at reading his body language to ever be caught off-guard. Shifting to using annoying little jabs and half-cuts seemed to keep her on the back foot, allowing John to press the attack and force a retreat across the Dojo.

Luna made a slight misstep as she dodged away from a quick stab towards her helmet and John finally saw an opening. He pivoted and put his weight behind a diagonal cross slash that would be a nightmare to parry from that position. Except Luna was no longer there. She surged forward, flowing seamlessly into a lunge of her own, the point of her blade striking the chinguard of his helmet.

“You set me up!” he marvelled, gaping at her in disbelief.

“You were probing for weaknesses, so I gave you one to exploit,” she replied, inclining her head.

“So you don’t have a problem dealing with quick attacks?” he asked, shocked at how easily the Maliri had duped him.

Luna gave him a coy smile.

“Holy crap...” he muttered, looking at her with admiration. “Sakura said you were incredible, but I had no idea you were this good.”

“You’re a fine swordsman yourself, John,” she said with sincerity.

“But not in your league,” he conceded, giving her a respectful bow.

“I have been wielding a blade for twice as long as you’ve been alive,” she reminded him. “I’m relieved that all that time training was not spent in vain.”

“Alright, old lady,” John said with a grin, beckoning her towards him. “Let’s see what else you’ve got.”

Luna brandished her Maliri blade and shifted her posture, this time prowling towards him like a stalking cat. She still looked relaxed, but he could tell her muscles were coiled and ready to strike, and now John felt like he was being hunted. Tightening the grip on his sword, he fought down a thrill of excitement as he squared off against the lethal assassin and prepared to defend himself once again.

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“The first batch of mines and gravity-well generators is complete, Edraele,” Makaela informed her, glancing off-screen at a manufacturing docket. “Where would you like this shipped?”

“Minelayers and cruisers from House Ghilwen are waiting to accept delivery,” the Maliri Queen replied. “Use as many docking bays as necessary to expedite the cargo transfer. Those ships must be ready to depart within the next three hours.”

Makaela looked shocked for a moment, then acknowledged the order with a bow. “I’ll prioritise the transfer over all other dockyard activity.”

“Very good, thank you,” Edraele said gratefully.

The commander of Genthalas Shipyard was so flustered by the tight timeframe that she forgot to end the call before turning and barking orders at her staff. Edraele saved Makaela the embarrassment of realising what she’d done and closed down the call herself.

\*We will begin launching ships to deploy Calara’s defensive measures this afternoon, John,\* Edraele informed him as she rose from her seat. \*As per her instructions, the outer rings will be prepared first.\*

\*That’s great, honey,\* he muttered, sounding very distracted.

Edraele smiled as she left her office. \*Having fun with Luna?\*

\*Goddamn she’s a handful!\* John exclaimed, sounding increasingly alarmed. \*Ah... shit.\*

\*Another defeat, my Lord?\*

\*That’s six in a row. I doubt many spectators will bother coming back after seeing me get crushed this badly.\*

\*Oh, I suspect that they’ll still find a compelling reason to return,\* Edraele said archly, as she walked along the corridor towards her bedroom. \*Are you enjoying yourself though?\*

\*I really am. Luna’s amazing with a blade; I’m looking forward to learning as much as I can from her. Anyway, I need to concentrate now... we’re about to start round seven.\*

\*I shall refrain from disturbing you again,\* she apologised, entering her bedroom. \*Good luck!\*

Phelora and Kehlarissa were still curled up under the covers, having slept away the morning. They’d both digested the heavy load John had fed them and had reverted to their previous slender waistlines.

Edraele sat on the edge of the bed and gave them a gentle telepathic nudge. \*Hello, my darlings. It’s time to wake up now.\*

They both stretched like contented cats, then long eyelashes flickered open and the two matriarchs glanced around trying to get their bearings.

“It’s nearly midday,” Edraele said with a warm smile. “I was happy to let you rest, but I will need my bed back eventually.”

Phelora blushed, looking mortified. “I’m so sorry I overslept!”

Kehlarissa sat up, covering her chest with the sheet as she looked around for her dress. “I’ll leave your bedchamber at once, my Queen.”

“Relax, I was only teasing,” she said softly, reaching out to pat their hands. “I wanted to thank you for being such excellent company for Baen'thelas last night. He thoroughly enjoyed meeting you both.”

“Really?” Phelora gushed, her embarrassment swept away by her excitement.

“He did?” Kehlarissa asked, curling a tendril of hair around her finger.

Edraele nodded in reply. “Did you enjoy your evening with him?”

Phelora giggled, her eyes glittering. “It was the best night of my life! He’s so wonderful!”

“Baen’thelas is... not what I expected,” Kehlarissa murmured, her gaze softening. “I’ve never met anyone quite like him before.”

“He cares about all of us very much and wants to do everything in his power to make us happy,” Edraele agreed. “But he’s also carrying a heavy burden of responsibility leading the entire Maliri Protectorate, so it’s our job as matriarchs to support him in every way we can.”

“I will... I promise,” Kehlarissa said earnestly.

Phelora paled, her expression growing troubled. “I want to help... but... I need to talk to you about something, Queen Edraele...”

“I know,” Edraele said with a sympathetic smile. “I’m in constant telepathic contact with Baen’thelas, so I heard everything you discussed with him last night. It’s very important that I can hear his thoughts, because my primary responsibility is to take care of you.”

They both looked shocked at that revelation, so she gave them a moment for it to sink in.

“Should either of you ever have any questions about governing your Houses, I’d be delighted to offer my expertise from ruling House Valaden for nearly a century. I also intend to start running regular training sessions in a couple of days’ time, as soon as John has finished meeting all of the new matriarchs.”

Phelora was so overwhelmed with relief, she looked like she was about to cry tears of joy.

Kehlarissa cleared her throat awkwardly. “Ah... Queen Edraele?”

“Yes, my dear?” she asked with an encouraging smile.

“I appreciate your time is very valuable and you have many responsibilities that require your attention,” the House Venkalyn matriarch began. She tried not to grimace as she continued, “I’d like to offer to be a... mentor... for Phelora, if she might find that helpful.”

“You’d do that... for me?” Phelora asked, gaping at the other matriarch in astonishment.

Kehlarissa gave her a curt nod. “Yes.”

“I think that’s a very thoughtful suggestion, thank you for volunteering,” Edraele said, beaming at Keishara Venkalyn’s eldest daughter.

“You’re welcome,” Kehlarissa murmured, surprised at how good it felt to receive her praise.

Edraele rose gracefully from the bed, then stooped to retrieve their discarded clothing. “It was lovely to see you both this morning and I’m so glad you enjoyed the evening with Baen’thelas. I’ll leave you to get dressed now and let you return to your quarters. Oh... and I’d like to invite you to a party tomorrow evening at the Palace of Saelihn Immanthe on my homeworld. It’ll be the perfect opportunity for you to meet the other important women in John’s life.”

“A party!” Phelora gushed, looking elated.

Even Kehlarissa looked thrilled. “I gratefully accept, my Queen!”

“There’s no need to be so formal. Please feel free to call me Edraele,” she replied, leaning over to give each of them a warm hug. She lowered her voice to a conspiratorial whisper and added, “After all, we’re kindred spirits now. We’ve all been chosen by Baen’thelas to carry his heirs...”

The two younger matriarchs reacted the same way, with wistful smiles and doe-eyed looks.

“Have a good afternoon, ladies,” Edraele said, kissing each of them on the cheek before turning and leaving her quarters.

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John lashed out with his sword, the blade just missing Luna’s torso as she pirouetted away. He was panting with exertion now, having been sparring with the nimble assassin for several hours. All his attempts to defeat her had ended in dismal failure and they’d stopped counting the losses when he hit twenty in a row. The tip of his blade drooped , then John took a deep breath and rallied himself into a solid defensive stance.

“Perhaps we should end the session there?” Luna suggested, eyeing his flagging weapon. Even her own breath was coming heavier now after tiring from the non-stop combat.

“One last round?” John suggested with a frown. “I’d like to see you on the attack again.”

Luna smiled indulgently and nodded, rolling her shoulders and stalking towards him a final time. She darted from side to side, watching John’s blade wavering uncertainly in the air before her as he got ready to defend himself against a fresh onslaught. Luna slashed towards John’s chest with a feint, while bouncing on her heels to reposition herself for the killing stroke.

That was when John whipped his sword across and slammed it into her blade with a thunderous boom, the impact smacking it from her tired fingers. She gaped at him in surprise as he reversed the swing and tapped the edge of his sword against her armoured forehead.

“I think that’s something like 35 to 1?” he asked with a grin.

“You tricked me! You’re not tired at all!” Luna exclaimed in astonishment.

He’d given up all pretence of being weary, standing tall and straight backed as he nodded in confirmation. “Sorry for the deception, but I wanted to win at least one for my wounded pride.”

She smiled and patted him on the shoulder. “You’re forgiven. That was the best you fought all morning.”

John paused, looking at her in surprise. “But we only exchanged two blows. What about all the swordplay earlier? Some of those duels were intense and went on for at least ten minutes.”

Luna walked over to retrieve her weapon, then eyed him speculatively. “The instructor that taught you to fight... he held himself under rigid control, with perfect adherence to his form and technique?”

“That’s right... how did you know?” he asked, his curiosity piqued.

“The style of fighting you use... everything about it screams that to me,” the swordmistress explained. “Your instructor fought dispassionately, seeking to impose order on the chaos of war... but that’s not you, John. Your fighting style is at odds with who you truly are.”

He stared down at his sword and felt a shiver run down his spine as Luna’s words resonated deep within him.

Turning his attention to the former assassin, he considered Luna’s own fighting style and what it said about her. “You were trained to appear innocuous and carefully watch your target... then wait for the perfect opportunity to strike.”

She inclined her head, spreading her hands. “Girls with a natural aptitude for those skills were chosen at a young age for life as an assassin. I am what I am... and I embrace my nature when I fight with a blade.”

“So who am I?” John asked, looking into her eyes.

“Only you can truly answer that,” she replied softly, walking up to him and placing a hand on his chest. “But the man I know you to be fights with passion and right on his side.”

He removed his helmet and tossed it aside with his sword. Luna did the same, her eyes ablaze with excitement as John pulled her in for a kiss. A series of rippling clicks echoed around the temple as they unlocked their suits, then they tore the plates clear in their eagerness to be with one another.

John paused, glancing up at the hidden viewing galleries then over to the control panel on the pillar. “How do you seal off the windows to give us some privacy?”

Luna bit her lip, then whispered, “Leave it...”

He looked at her in surprise, then smiled at the wanton lust in her seductive gaze. Guiding the gorgeous azure-skinned beauty down to the padded training mats, John proceeded to give their audience a truly impressive display of swordsmanship.

Jade watched from the shadows, her feline eyes sparkling with joy. “I know who you are, Master...”

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Commander Tom Walker paced back and forth in the holding room, anxiously counting the minutes until his visitors arrived. He glanced at the chronometer on the wall for the umpteenth time that hour, then sighed with a relief as it reached twelve o’clock and the door buzzed open.

“Dad!” he exclaimed, as his visitors strode into the room.

Admiral Laurence Walker was wearing full-dress uniform, the insignia on his golden epaulets and peaked hat proudly announcing his rank to all. By contrast, the handsome man accompanying his father was wearing a sharply-tailored suit that Tom was sure must’ve cost more than he earned in a year.

Tom glanced at the stranger in surprise, before turning to his father. “I thought you were bringing Mom and Anna with you?”

His father’s expression tightened with irritation. “We can discuss them later. This is Mr. Kincaid... your lawyer.”

“Caspian Kincaid from Kincaid and Hawke,” the man said, offering Tom his hand and flashing him a million-credit smile.

Tom shook it gratefully. “I’ve heard of your firm, Mr. Kincaid. You’ve got quite the reputation.”

“When people want the very best, they come to us,” the lawyer replied, with no small amount of pride.

“For what I’m paying, you better be,” Laurence Walker grunted.

“You get what you pay for, Admiral,” Kincaid declared, unaffected by his client’s dour disposition. “When innocent men are falsely accused of heinous crimes, they can rest assured that their reputation and freedom are in safe hands with Kincaid and Hawke.”

Tom hesitated and glanced at his father. “I’m facing a court martial. Aren’t I supposed to be defended by a military lawyer?”

Kincaid cleared his throat and interjected, “Would you mind if I answer this, Admiral?”

Laurence Walker nodded for him to proceed.

The lawyer looked Tom in the eyes and asked, “Is it alright if I call you Tom?”

“Sure.”

“The stakes couldn’t be any higher, Tom. Your life is on the line... and this isn’t a fair fight. The military will stop at nothing to find a scapegoat for the Callopean Shoals massacre and they’ve decided to pin this on you. Would you want some rookie military attorney with minimal court experience trying to protect you from everything the Terran Federation can throw at you? Or would you want Kincaid and Hawke with our 100% record of client acquittal?”

Before Tom could respond, Kincaid smoothly continued, “Now, you’re probably thinking: what does this guy know about military law? Well, my associates include former military lawyers who know the TFN playbook back-to-front and are playing on our team now. This isn’t our first court martial, Tom. Don’t worry, you’re in safe hands.”

“That’s great to hear, thank you,” Tom said with relief. “Do you have any idea how long it’ll be before the trial?”

Kincaid flashed him a confident grin. “We have the preliminary hearing tomorrow. They’re moving fast on this to try to railroad you into a quick conviction, which is great news for us, because it means you’ll be walking out of here a free man in just a couple of weeks. My firm has access to the best technical experts in the Terran Federation and we’ll start tearing holes in whatever flimsy evidence they’ve put together. We’ve got this, Tom... you just need to stay calm and let us do our job. Now, any other questions before I start digging into your case?”

“No... I’m just glad to have you on my side, Mr. Kincaid,” he replied earnestly.

“Feel free to call me Caspian,” the lawyer said, offering his hand again. As they shook, he continued, “It was great to meet you, Tom. I’ll see you tomorrow for the preliminary hearing.” He turned and nodded to Laurence Walker. “Thank you, Admiral.”

Father and son watched the charismatic lawyer depart, leaving them alone in the holding room.

“So, where are Mom and Anna?” Tom asked again.

Laurence Walker let out a heavy sigh and removed his peaked hat, so he could run his hand through his thinning hair. “Your mother isn’t handling all this very well, son. I was hoping to just get all the charges dropped, but when it became clear they were proceeding with a trial... she had a nervous breakdown and had to be sedated. You know how your mother is about keeping up appearances... she was devastated at the scandal.”

“The scandal?” Tom muttered in disbelief. “But what about coming to see me?”

“Just give her a couple of days,” his father said, giving him a strained smile. “She’ll be up and around again, then I’ll bring her to visit you.”

“What about Anna?” he asked, brow furrowing with concern. “I’ve tried getting messages to her, but she’s not replying.”

“I don’t know, Thomas,” the Admiral said with exasperation. “Anna wouldn’t leave your bedside when you were in that coma... and now you’re finally awake, she won’t come to see you. I offered to bring her with me today, but she declined. I really don’t understand women.”

Tom slumped in the chair, his heart sinking. He knew exactly why Anna was refusing to visit him.

Laurence Walker awkwardly patted him on the shoulder. “Chin up, son. This will all be over soon.”

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“Thank you for lunch, Luna. That was delicious,” Jade said with a mischievous smile. She cupped her hugely inflated chest and continued, “I’ll go and feed Emandra now, Master.”

“I appreciate you helping out, Jade,” John said gratefully. “Let me know if there are any problems.”

“There won’t be,” she replied, giving them both a cheerful wave goodbye.

He returned the wave and watched her leave, then glanced at the former-assassin who was fidgeting beside him.

“Cat got your tongue?” John teased her. “Or was it the other way around?”

Luna blushed a fetching shade of dark blue, having spent the previous ten minutes writhing in ecstasy as the Nymph lapped all the cum out of her womb. She shot a nervous glance at the viewing galleries surrounding the training room.

“I can’t believe we did that...”

John leaned over to the control panel on the pillar and sealed off the windows. “Having regrets?”

She relaxed now that they were alone together, then paused to consider his question. After mulling it over for a long moment, Luna gave him a coy smile. “No, I don’t regret anything.”

He laughed and pulled her in for a hug. “Me neither. Thanks for an amazing morning, honey. I won’t forget that in a hurry.”

“Shall we schedule another session for tomorrow?” she asked with a lopsided grin.

“Count me in!” he joked. “They should start selling tickets... you were spectacular.”

Luna laughed, having got over her earlier embarrassment.

“All joking aside, I learned a huge amount sparring with you today,” John said earnestly. “I knew you were good... but I never expected you’d make me rethink my whole fighting style. I’d really like to practice with you again, whenever you can spare some time.”

“I’ll make sure I’m available whenever you’d like to train,” she replied, before giving him a knowing look. “I suspect that Edraele has a lot more arranged for you to do than me.”

“Yeah, you’re probably right,” he agreed, stooping to pick up his discarded gear. \*Edraele, when’s my next appointment with the new matriarchs?\*

\*I’ve asked Nakiasha Torcyne and Iynessa Elyon to meet you in my quarters at one o’clock,\* the Maliri Queen replied. \*I thought you might like to spend some time getting to know them while you recover, then you can feed them whenever you feel the urge. If you’d prefer to make alternative arrangements, please let me know and I’ll inform the matriarchs accordingly.\*

\*No, no, that sounds fine,\* John replied, following Luna into the armoury. \*Thanks for organising everything.\*

\*It’s quite literally my pleasure.\*

John stowed away his practice sword and training armour, then gave his instructor a farewell kiss. “Bye, Luna. Thanks again.”

“Goodbye, John,” she murmured, smiling wistfully as he departed.

There was a large crowd of Maliri gathered outside the leisure complex and all conversation ceased when he appeared. Scores of women turned to stare at him and John flushed with embarrassment when he realised they all must have seen the show he’d just put on for them with Luna. He locked eyes with a dark-haired, dark-eyed beauty, and John relaxed when he saw that the look she was giving him in return was far from judgemental.

He grinned and tipped an imaginary hat in their direction. “Good afternoon, ladies.”

They giggled and whispered furtively amongst themselves, before the crowd reluctantly parted to allow him to pass. He could sense his matriarchs’ amusement over their bond, but neither Alyssa, Edraele, or Jade chose to comment.

John left Genthalas’ leisure district and was in a great mood as he made his way back towards the residential suites. Luna possessed breathtaking skill with a sword and the training session had been every bit as challenging and rewarding as he’d expected. It was daunting to think about developing his own style of swordsmanship, but he knew that the assassin was right; it was the best way for him to improve his fighting technique.

Lost in thought, John strolled briskly along the space station’s golden corridors, heading back to Edraele’s suite to freshen up. He crossed a junction and an equally distracted Maliri walked right in front of him, her attention so intently focused on his quarters that she never saw him coming. The two collided into each other, sending the woman sprawling across the corridor.

“Oh crap!” John blurted out in dismay.

Acting by instinct, he activated psychic speed and moved in a blur to catch the woman before she fell, effortlessly scooping her up into his arms.

“Baen’thelas!” she gasped, staring up at him in shock.

“Iynessa?” he exclaimed in surprise, recognising the House Elyon matriarch. “I’m so sorry for knocking you down! I was distracted and wasn’t paying attention to where I was going.”

“No, it was my fault,” she hastily apologised, blushing furiously. “I... was distracted too.”

He glanced down at the elegantly dressed woman he held in his arms and raised an eyebrow. “I should probably put you down, right?”

Her angular eyes flicked to his muscular chest, and Iynessa’s pupils dilated as she gaped at him in awe.

John gave her an indulgent smile. “Perhaps I should carry you into my quarters instead? You just had a nasty shock and might be unsteady on your feet.”

She bit her lip and nodded, too wonderstruck to reply.

Doing as he’d suggested, John approached the two House Valaden guards, who opened the door ahead of him. The two guardswomen saluted, then watched enviously as he carried the swooning matriarch inside the Queen’s royal suite.

“I wasn’t quite ready to see you yet,” John explained as he walked into the quarters. “I really need to get a shower and change out of my training clothes. Would you like to wait for me here in the lounge, or in the bedroom?”

“The bedroom!” she gasped breathlessly.

John carried her through to Edraele’s bedchamber, then carefully laid the Maliri noblewoman down on the grandiose bed. Iynessa watched him with wide eyes, her expression alight with anticipation.

“There you go. You can rest comfortably here,” he said, sitting down beside her. “How are you feeling now?”

“I feel wonderful...” Iynessa whispered, thoroughly captivated by him.

“Good, I’m glad you weren’t hurt,” he said, clasping her hand and give it a comforting squeeze. Glancing at the chronometer on the wall, John was surprised to see that it was only 12.32 pm. “I think you’re a bit early; I wasn’t expecting to see you until one.”

She blushed with embarrassment. “I know. I didn’t want to risk being late, so I intended to wait outside your quarters until our scheduled meeting. I’m so sorry for intruding on your valuable time like this, my Lord.”

“That’s quite alright,” he said with a warm smile. “I wanted to get to know you better this afternoon and this just gives us more time together.”

Iynessa’s pupils flared once again and she nodded breathlessly. “I long to be with you intimately as well, Baen’thelas.”

John hesitated, taking care how he worded his reply so it wouldn’t sound like a rejection. “I think you’re a very beautiful woman, Iynessa... but I don’t want us to rush into our first time together simply because we find each other physically attractive. There’s a huge difference between just having sex with a stranger and making love with a partner you truly care about.”

Some of her confidence wavered and she admitted quietly, “I have no experience of either.”

“Then we should definitely take things slowly so you can savour every moment,” he said, giving her a reassuring smile. Studying the noblewoman’s smooth azure face, John found it impossible to guess her age. “Iynessa, would you mind me asking how old you are?”

“I have no objection to telling you, my Lord. I’m 77 years old.”

He looked at her thoughtfully. “Edraele told me that you were Tylindra’s eldest daughter, but you’re younger than I expected. I got the impression that your mother was considerably older than you.”

Iynessa nodded in confirmation. “She was. Tylindra ruled House Elyon for over a century and had three children before I was born. My eldest two sisters were killed by a House Ghilwen agent, who set off a bomb in the palace in an attempt to assassinate my mother. When they died in that explosion, I became the eldest daughter and next in line for succession.”

“I’m sorry about your sisters,” he said with sympathy.

“I’m not. They were both spiteful to me as far back as I can remember,” she murmured, lost in dark memories. A smug smirk appeared on her face as she added, “The day they died was one of the happiest of my life.”

John frowned in confusion. “Wait a second. You said Tylindra had three children before you; what happened to the third?”

“Nothing happened to Jandar. He moved to Genkiri station and lives there still.”

“Oh, you’ve got an older brother?” John asked, pleasantly surprised. “I’m so used to the nobility being female, I never even thought about you having any male siblings. Do you see him very often?”

Iynessa paused and shook her head. “No, not for a long time. My last visit was about twenty years ago, shortly before my elder sisters were assassinated. Emmaeth and Maylina saw him much more recently though.”

“They were your younger sisters?”

“Yes...” she murmured, a flicker of regret passing over her face.

John watched her for a long moment as the awkward silence stretched on. “You look upset, Iynessa. Do you want to tell me what happened?”

She let out a heavy sigh, then reluctantly nodded. “Emmaeth and Maylina worked together to ambush our mother, then after murdering her, they came after me. I had intended to kill Tylindra myself, so fortunately I was armed when we ran into each other. I was always a better shot than either of my sisters... and it was over quickly.”

“I’m really sorry, Iynessa,” he said, gently stroking her hair.

“I didn’t want to fight them,” Iynessa insisted, looking troubled as she gazed up at him. “I offered to spare their lives if they recognised me as matriarch, but they refused to listen to reason. They were both obsessed with becoming matriarch so they could be with you.”

“The last thing I ever wanted was for the nobility to start killing each other over me,” John said with remorse.

She studied him for a moment, then said quietly, “I don’t think you could have prevented it, Baen’thelas. You had to take control of the Regency to lead us against the Progenitors. As soon as you revealed yourself to the Maliri, a fight to the death between the old matriarchs and their daughters was inevitable. Nothing you did or said would’ve convinced me to stand aside and watch my mother become your immortal concubine. I hated her far too much to ever allow that to happen.”

“You’ve had a hard upbringing, Iynessa,” he said with sympathy. “I’ll do my best to make sure your life with me will be very different from now on.”

She gazed up at him in fascination. “You’re not at all like how I imagined you’d be, Baen’thelas...”

“I hope you’re not disappointed?” he asked with a self-deprecating smile.

“No... far from it.”

“You’ve surprised me too, Iynessa... in a good way,” he said, his tone warm and friendly. “I’m really glad I got a chance to meet you.”

Iynessa blushed, unused to receiving compliments.

John glanced at the chronometer and saw that it was quarter-to-one. “Well, we can’t sit around here admiring each other all day. I better get ready before Nakiasha arrives.”

A flicker of irritation crossed the Maliri matriarch’s features, but she quickly masked it with a smile. “Of course, my Lord.”

He hesitated and gave Iynessa an apologetic frown. “I’m sorry that I can’t spend this afternoon with you alone. Unfortunately, time is of the essence, and meeting the new matriarchs in pairs is the only way I can see all of you before the party tomorrow.”

Her look of understanding shifted to delight. “A party?”

“I’ll let Edraele explain all the details, but it should be fun,” John replied, rising from the bed. He stripped off his t-shirt and Iynessa gaped at his chiselled physique. “Now, to apologise for you having to share my time this afternoon, would you like to join me in the shower?”

He chuckled as Iynessa grinned at him and began stripping off her clothes with indecent haste. She couldn’t take her eyes off him when he removed his own clothing, staring in wonder at his body as John led her into the shower. The Terran-style water jets took her by surprise, then Iynessa moaned with pleasure as John soaped her down. She stayed in the same state of bliss as he dried her off and wrapped her up in a fluffy white robe, gazing at him with dreamy eyes.

“You look irresistibly kissable, Iynessa,” John said playfully. “Would you be very offended if I stole that first kiss now?”

She giggled and shook her head, then held her breath as he took her in his arms. The blue-skinned beauty moaned into his mouth as their lips touched, John dipping her as he deepened the kiss. After a couple of delightful minutes, he straightened up and smiled affectionately at the dazed young woman.

“I hope that was as memorable for you as it was for me.”

Iynessa touched her flushed lips with her fingertips, a look of euphoria on her pretty face. “I’ll never forget my first kiss, Baen’thelas.”

“Baen’thelas is just a title. My real name is John Blake.”

“John...” she murmured, her lips tugging into a wistful smile. “What a lovely name.”

\*I’m sorry to interrupt, John,\* Edraele interjected, a tinge of worry in her voice. \*I’m worried about Nakiasha...\*

\*What’s wrong?\* he asked, while guiding Iynessa back to the bedroom.

\*I’m not entirely sure. She’s been growing increasingly anxious over the last twenty minutes and just fled from her suite in tears. I tried to calm her telepathically, but she’s in too much of a panic.\*

\*Where did she go?\* John asked, grabbing some fresh clothes and hastily tugging them on.

\*One second... I’m just trying to locate her on the security cameras...\*

“Nakiasha’s upset about something,” John explained, when Iynessa looked at him in bewilderment. “I’ll go find her and bring her back here.”

\*I think she’s on her way to you,\* Edraele said in surprise. \*Nakiasha’s heading towards my suite.\*

“I’ll be back in a minute,” he said to the Maliri reclining on the bed.

John glanced at the chronometer on the wall and saw that it was already 1:12 pm, time having flown in Iynessa’s congenial company. Leaving the bedroom, he strode through Edraele’s suite, wondering what could’ve made Nakiasha so distressed.

\*She’s just outside, John,\* Edraele informed him.

He opened the doors and stepped into the corridor, where the two guards were trying to reassure the visibly shaken matriarch. Nakiasha was hyperventilating as she frantically brushed away the tears that rolled down her cheeks. She spotted John as he appeared and looked absolutely mortified, then burst into a fresh flood of tears.

“Hey, what’s wrong?” John asked with concern, gently pulling her into a comforting hug. “You’re not upset about seeing me are you?”

Nakiasha collapsed in his embrace, shaking her head as she mumbled incoherently.

He scooped her up in his arms and gave the two guards a grateful smile. “Thanks for trying to help her.” Glancing down at the distressed matriarch he was carrying, he added wryly, “I seem to be making a habit of this.”

They stifled their laughter, but he could see the amusement dancing in their eyes. John winked at them, then returned to his suite with Nakiasha huddled into his chest. He carried her through to Edraele’s bedroom and gently placed her on the bed, then lay down beside her.

“What happened?” Iynessa asked, sounding genuinely concerned at Nakiasha’s distressed state.

“I’m not sure,” John replied, stroking the weeping young woman’s arm. “I found her like this.”

Nakiasha sniffled and rubbed at her eyes. “I... I wanted to look... n-nice for you,” she sobbed between unsteady breaths. “B-but I couldn’t decide what to w-wear... then I realised I was... s-so late... and I d-didn’t want you to get... m-mad at me for keeping you w-waiting... and then I looked s-so awful... and everything turned into a h-horrible disaster!”

“Oh, honey... I’m not mad at you,” John said, giving her a reassuring hug. “Iynessa and I had a bit of a disaster too, but it all worked out great in the end. Before you arrived, we were just having a nice chat and getting to know each other. I was having such a good time, I ended up running a bit late myself.”

“I’m very grateful to you, Nakiasha,” Iynessa said quietly. “You gave me some time alone with Baen’thelas and we just had our first kiss. It was a very lovely gift... so thank you.”

“You two kissed?” Nakiasha murmured, her curiosity overriding her rapidly fading distress.

Iynessa nodded, her gaze softening as she held out her hand. “Why don’t you come with me and I’ll tell you all about it as I help you freshen up.”

“Is that okay with you, Baen’thelas?” the young woman asked, turning to look for his approval.

“Absolutely,” he agreed, then gave Iynessa a grateful smile as she helped Nakiasha off the bed.

He watched the two matriarchs enter the en suite, then folded his hands behind his head as he reclined on the bed. \*Iynessa’s full of surprises,\* he remarked to the Maliri Queen.

\*I knew she wasn’t like a typical elder daughter, but she’s surprised me too,\* Edraele admitted. \*I’m sorry that Nakiasha got so upset.\*

\*She just got herself a bit worked up,\* John said, closing his eyes and relaxing. \*Under the circumstances I can understand her reaction. I guess I’ve replaced the previous authority figure in her life and Nakiasha’s mother probably tortured her whenever she did anything wrong.\*

\*I think you’re right, but I was apologising for being so distracted that I allowed her to get in such a state.\*

Hearing the sincere contrition in her voice, John raised an eyebrow. \*You can’t hear her thoughts yet, Edraele. I don’t blame you for not being able to accurately read the girls’ state of mind when you’ve only got an empathic connection with them.\*

\*Yes... but I would’ve had considerably more success if I wasn’t distracted by Luna,\* she admitted, sounding embarrassed. \*She’s been very appreciative of my contributions towards your new training facility.\*

\*Ah, I see,\* John said with a knowing smile. \*Well, you’re forgiven. Nakiasha turning up late actually helped break the ice between her and Iynessa.\*

\*I’m relieved to hear it.\*

As John lay on the bed, he found himself drifting off to sleep, still tired after his strenuous exertions with Luna that morning. Before he could fall into a deep slumber, a pair of deliciously soft lips brushed against his, followed by a tentative caress from a velvety tongue. He heard a giggle as his eyes snapped open and John found himself looking up at Iynessa’s smiling face.

“I’m sorry, John,” she murmured, a twinkle in her eyes. “I would’ve let you sleep, but Nakiasha wanted to see us kiss again... ”

“Did she now?” John replied, darting a glance at the giggling matriarch.

Nakiasha was wearing a fluffy white bathrobe like Iynessa, her face freshly scrubbed to wipe away the tears.

“Well you look adorable,” he said, nodding his approval. “I really like your outfit.”

She beamed at him, overjoyed at his reaction. “Thank you! It was Iynessa’s idea.”

“Very nice,” he said to the other matriarch, before focusing on Nakiasha again. “So... you’re curious about kissing?”

She nodded in reply, her eyes like saucers.

“In that case, I suggest we stay in bed this afternoon. We can get to know each other and practice kissing at the same time. What do you girls think?”

His suggestion was met with very enthusiastic approval.

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“If you reposition the four Heavy Cannon turrets from the flanks to the centre of the foredeck, you’ll have a 225 degree coverage in the forward arc,” Calara explained, pointing out her changes. “The gradient of the slope leading to the bow means that those turrets can fire over one another even if they’re shooting at a target directly ahead.”

“Yeah, I guess that makes sense,” Dana murmured, studying the updated schematic. “I just stuck beam turrets in the middle because they’re smaller and can track targets a lot faster. I figured they’d be able to quickly spin around and make the best use of the larger firing arcs.”

“That’s very true, but I doubt the Ashanath will be as energetic with their piloting as Jade. Based on how they fought against the Drakkar, they’ll stay in formation and avoid rapid course corrections. If they fight that way, this configuration will let them keep their biggest guns on their primary target for as long as possible.”

“You’re the expert,” the redhead conceded with a shrug.

Calara glanced at the schematics again and frowned. “The one caveat is that this configuration only makes sense if the Heavy Cannons are the ship’s most powerful guns... but aren’t they obsolete now? We’ve barely used them in the last few battles.”

“Yeah, but I can’t exactly hand out schematics for Tachyon Lances to the Ashanath... not that they could even build them anyway. They’ll just be using heavily enhanced Beam Lasers,” Dana reminded her. She gestured towards the thirty-metre-long barrels adorning the Ashanath cruiser and grinned. “Besides, I cranked up those bad boys. They’re not in the same league as Quantum Flux Cannons, but they should severely fuck someone up!”

“Really? Could I see the modifications you’ve made?” the Latina asked, looking intrigued.

“Sure thing.” Dana tapped a couple of icons on her engineering console and a weapon blueprint appeared as a floating hologram before them.

As Calara scrutinized the weapon schematics, the door to the Engineering Bay slid open and Alyssa sauntered inside. “Afternoon, ladies.”

“Hello,” Calara murmured, sounding distracted.

“Hey,” Dana replied, turning and waving at her friend. “I thought you said you’d only be ten minutes? It’s been hours!”

“You can’t rush perfection, Sparks,” Alyssa said archly, and tossed a memory stick to the redhead. “Check this out, Grand Engineering Overlord.”

Dana smirked as she caught the device, then plugged it into her console. With a few clicks she searched through the files and saw updated schematics for each of the Ashanath ship classes. She highlighted them all and hit another icon to display the redesigned warships.

“Holy shit!” she gasped as the sleek vessels appeared. “They look awesome!”

Alyssa had carefully sculpted the ships into beautiful works of art, the graceful lines and flowing curves a delight to the eye. Dana shook her head in wonder as she rotated the vessels, admiring the corvette, destroyer, cruiser, battleship, and carrier from a variety of different angles.

“Hey, wait a minute...” Dana muttered, frowning as she looked askance at the schematics.

“What’s up?” Alyssa asked, her face a picture of innocence.

The redhead grabbed the blonde’s breasts and squeezed them together, then her eyes widened in disbelief. “You gave my ships a cleavage!” she blurted out indignantly.

“I just altered the engine housings to give them a more streamlined curvature,” the blonde explained, her cerulean eyes twinkling.

Calara looked up from the weapon blueprints and glanced at the cruiser schematics, then burst into laughter.

“This isn’t funny!” Dana protested. “They’re supposed to be warships for fuck’s sake!”

“Yes, but who’s going to be flying them?” Alyssa patiently reminded her friend.

Dana paused for a moment, then a broad grin spread across her face.

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“Sleep well, gorgeous girls,” John whispered, kissing Nakiasha and Iynessa on the cheek.

They sighed happily in their sleep, snuggling into each other’s arms with their rounded tummies pressed together.

The door spiralled open behind him and Edraele glided into the bedroom. “Hello, John. I trust you had a pleasant afternoon?”

He turned and smiled at her. “I think you already know the answer to that.”

“When you suggested an afternoon in bed kissing, I wasn’t expecting Nakiasha and Iynessa to start experimenting with each other.”

John chuckled and nodded in agreement. “Yeah... me neither, but I’m certainly not complaining.”

“No, I imagine not.”

He was quiet for a moment as he watched the two slumbering matriarchs. “They’re lovely girls, Edraele. I really enjoyed getting to know them both.”

“They just needed some love and attention... and now they’re blossoming,” she concurred, turning back to face him. “You’ve worked wonders with the new matriarchs so far, John. I’m very proud of the way you’ve been treating them with such sympathy and compassion.”

“Thanks, honey,” John replied with a self-conscious smile.

“I have Marsendra Helewynn and Lyvia Amarille waiting for you in the lounge,” Edraele said, stepping closer to John and gazing into his eyes. “Unless you find the prospect of perking up two more Maliri maidens too arduous a task?”

He shook his head in amusement, then glanced back at the bed. “It’s getting a little crowded in here.”

“You need some recovery time too,” Edraele murmured, appearing lost in thought. “Why not take Marsendra and Lyvia out for dinner? You must be starving... and you can get to know them over a meal together.”

“That’s a great idea,” he said appreciatively, before stepping away to get dressed. “Can you recommend any good restaurants?”

“Oh yes, several,” she replied, kissing him on the cheek. “Leave all the arrangements with me. I’ll make sure you can have a pleasant, intimate meal together without being fawned over by crowds of adoring women.”

“Thanks, honey.”

Edraele waved goodbye and swept out of the bedroom, leaving John to finish getting changed into one of the elegantly-tailored suits she’d had made for him. He studied his reflection in the mirror and eventually decided that the Maliri style was quite flattering.

\*I’m so glad you approve. High-neck collars have never really gone out of fashion.\*

\*It’s a vaguely similar style to the suit Alyssa made for me,\* he noted, immediately noticing the similarities. \*I wonder if Mael’nerak’s style of dress influenced generations of Maliri males?\*

\*Considering how ravishing you looked when you made your grand entrance to Genthalas, I’m quite certain you’re correct,\* the Maliri queen agreed.

\*You silver-tongued temptress,\* John said with a smile as he slipped on his shoes. Leaving her bedroom, he continued, \*Thanks very much for everything you’ve done to make me feel welcome, Edraele. I really appreciate it.\*

\*Are you starting to feel at home?\* she asked curiously.

\*You and your girls have been wonderful, but there’s been so much change in such a short amount of time, I must admit that it’s been a little overwhelming. I’ve really enjoyed meeting all the new matriarchs, but...\* His voice trailed off as he thought how best to phrase his reply.

\*You’re starting to feel like you’re being milked like a dairy cow?\*

John laughed at the evocative image that conjured up. \*A little bit, yes.\*

\*I can easily postpone the rest of your meetings if you’d like?\* she enquired, her voice filled with concern. \*The last thing I want is for you to feel that meeting the new matriarchs is becoming an odious chore.\*

\*Let’s not overstate things. I am getting enthusiastic blowjobs from beautiful, adoring women,\* he said with a wry smile. \*I just... couldn’t keep doing this for weeks.\*

\*I understand,\* she said with genuine sympathy. \*And thank you for being honest about your feelings. My primary concern will always be to support your needs in any way that I can.\*

\*I know. You’ve been amazing, Edraele... I couldn’t do this without you.\*

There was a surge of happiness and satisfaction over their bond as she revelled in his approval.

John walked into the lounge and found two Maliri noblewomen sitting there waiting for him. He recognised them from the Council of Matriarchs, but even if he hadn’t, it would’ve been easy to identify who was who. Marsendra Helewynn sat straight-backed with an air of superiority about her, while Lyvia Amarille appeared nervous and unsure of herself.

“Good evening,” he said with a friendly smile. “Would you two lovely ladies be interested in accompanying me for dinner?”

Despite their radically different personalities and upbringings, for a brief moment, both women reacted the exact same way. They beamed back at him, their exotic angular eyes shining with happiness as they eagerly accepted his invitation. In a moment of epiphany, John realised that the Progenitors’ genetic tampering with thrall DNA acted as an irresistible unifier, overriding all their differences and manipulating them into identical, pliable servants.

It was a very sobering thought.

\*That’s certainly true,\* Edraele conceded. \*But remember that you’re using their genetic conditioning to heal broken, traumatised individuals and help them become happy, contented people. The context means everything... Baen’thelas.\*

She paused to let him catch the significance of his Maliri nickname. \*I know you’ve been telling the new matriarchs that your real name is John, but I’d argue that’s merely the name you were given when you were born. What could more closely reflect the true measure of a man, than the title he’s earned by his deeds? The righter of wrongs... I couldn’t think of a more appropriate name for you.\*

\*It’s certainly something to always aspire to,\* John said thoughtfully, offering each of the two noblewomen a hand as they rose from their seats. \*Thanks, Edraele.\*

\*You’re welcome. Have a pleasant evening, Baen’thelas,\* she said softly, as John escorted the two matriarchs from her suite.