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“Now?” Lyvia asked, her eyes like saucers as she gazed up at John.

He glanced down at Marsendra Helewynn, the once-haughty matriarch now sucking lovingly on his cock as he came down her throat. Her belly had started to swell, the creamy load rapidly filling up her stomach and creating a noticeable bulge. Lyvia’s hand was caressing that rounded bump, feeling her new friend’s expanding tummy as she hungrily devoured everything John could offer.

“Yeah... now!” John gasped, easing back from the noblewoman’s flushed lips.

With her hand around the base of his shaft, Lyvia quickly guided his pulsating cock into her mouth, just in time to receive a thick spurt of sweet-tasting cum. She moaned wantonly as she swallowed it down, her eyes glazing over as she took over from the nude Maliri kneeling beside her.

“That’s it... that’s a good girl,” John groaned, cupping her head as she smoothly descended down his shaft.

The House Amarille matriarch was deep in the suckling trance now, her lips nursing at the base of his shaft as she proceeded to milk him dry. She hummed in rapture as he praised her, creating pleasant vibrations in her constricting throat. Thirty seconds passed and then John was finally spent, his quad having delivered a sizeable dessert to each of the azure beauties on their knees before him. As he wilted, John collapsed back on the bed and panted for breath, recovering from a fantastic end to what had turned out to be a very enjoyable evening.

It hadn’t taken Marsendra long to relax over dinner, a glass of wine and John’s disarming conversation quickly putting her at ease. Likewise, Lyvia had got over her nervousness when she received nothing but compliments and sympathy from him; a startling contrast to the scorn and contempt she’d grown accustomed to over her harrowing life as a matriarch’s youngest daughter. After a couple of hours spent basking in the warmth of John’s company, both women had ended up laughing at his jokes together like the best of friends.

The mattress shifted and John felt someone sit down on the bed. “Hello, Edraele.”

She leaned over, her smiling face appearing above him. “Hello, my love.”

Opening his arms, he pulled her down for a tender kiss.

“I thought you might like some company,” the Maliri Queen explained, as she snuggled up against him. “I was thinking about what you said earlier and realised that it probably doesn’t help being the only one still conscious after you’ve climaxed. I’ve been leaving you alone with the new matriarchs to make feeding them feel more intimate, but perhaps it would be better if I stayed with you instead?”

“This is perfect,” he said appreciatively, stroking her back and enjoying the afterglow.

“Ah... silly me,” Edraele murmured, caressing his chest. “You’ve grown accustomed to being cuddled by two women every night. Should I bring Luna with me next time?”

There was a playful edge to her voice, but John seriously considered the offer. “Yeah... please do. I’d really like that.”

“Whatever you desire, my Lord,” she agreed, surprised but delighted with the new arrangements.

“I’d love to sleep with the two of you tonight, but I already promised Kali,” he explained, rolling over to look into her purple eyes.

“We have eternity together, John,” Edraele said softly, brushing her lips against his. “These girls need your undivided attention now, but we’ll have countless nights to look forward to in the future.”

“Yeah, you’re right,” he acknowledged with a chuckle. “Sometimes I forget about the whole immortality business. It’s hard to adjust to the idea of living forever.”

She nodded thoughtfully. “I suppose being Maliri gives me a slightly different perspective. Terrans lead such tragically short lives and you were raised with the spectre of your own mortality always looming over you.”

“I do still wonder how it’s all going to work, being in a relationship with so many of you in the long term,” John said, his brow furrowing. “We’re talking about me starting a family with nearly forty women. Even if I delay getting the new matriarchs pregnant, how do we handle something as simple as us sleeping together? I know Alyssa had a system that kept everyone happy on the Invictus, but we’re adding another twenty girls to the rotation...”

Edraele smiled at him affectionately. “You’re sweet to worry about things like this, but Alyssa and I will take care of those arrangements for you. The simple answer is that you can sleep with whoever you like, and when you don’t have a particular preference, we’ll rotate in someone who is longing for your company. I believe Alyssa told you something similar before.”

“But forty girls...” John protested, shaking his head. “How’s that ever going to work?”

She was quiet for a moment and gently stroked his cheek. “The matriarchs are all eager to get pregnant by you, but they don’t have any expectations to sleep with you on a regular basis.”

“They don’t?” he remarked in surprise.

“You already know about the Maliri outlook towards relationships and parenthood. All the matriarchs would be delighted to spend time in your company and would relish a night in your arms, but they don’t expect it to be a frequent occurrence. That’s why I think pairing these girls up is such a wonderful solution.”

John was about to respond when Edraele silenced him with a kiss. She sat up and gestured for him to do the same, then looked pointedly at Lyvia and Marsendra. The two Maliri were still kneeling on the padded floor, blissful smiles on their faces as they rested a hand on their curved tummies. Their other hands were clasped together with their fingers interlaced.

“I could sense the friendship growing between them... as well as the attraction,” Edraele said, sliding off the bed to join them on the floor. She elicited matching sighs from the noblewomen as she stroked their rounded stomachs, then glanced back at John over her shoulder. “They’re both eager for you to father their children, but that’s as far as their expectations go. I’m quite certain that Lyvia and Marsendra will find long-term happiness together, occasionally welcoming you into their bed whenever you desire.”

He frowned as he looked down at the dazed pair. “That seems like a really lopsided relationship.”

“I can assure you that they won’t feel that way,” she said, rising to join him on the bed again. “I adore my life with Luna and I know she loves me just as passionately. She gives me all the emotional support I could ever need and I try to do the same for her. At the same time, we both care deeply about you and long for the day we can all start a family together.”

“I feel the same way about both of you,” John insisted. “I don’t want to just be the father of your children.”

“I know,” she said affectionately, giving him a reassuring kiss. Glancing at the kneeling matriarchs, she continued, “But their expectations end there. They’ll eagerly welcome as much attention as you choose to lavish on them, however they know that your time is precious and you have many obligations. We all understand that, John.”

“That’s very selfless,” John said, touched by her sincerity.

“But not as selfless as you. You’ve taken on sole responsibility for the protection and prosperity of our entire species,” Edraele said, gazing reverently into his eyes. “Our role as your matriarchs is to support you and ease your burdens... not add to them.”

He blinked in surprise, startled by her outlook.

Edraele laughed at his expression and hugged him. “Is it really so shocking that we’d feel that way? Remember that there are twenty Maliri females for every male. From our perspective, a forty-to-one ratio would barely raise an eyebrow. By a Progenitor’s standards, you’re leading a monk-like existence.”

“So it all comes down to perspective,” John mused, before his thoughts turned to the other two matriarchs. \*What do you girls think about all this?\*

\*My sisters adore spending time with you, but they’ll happily defer to your mates, Master,\* Jade replied an instant later. \*We receive a tremendous sense of gratification whenever you experience pleasure with us, but it’s almost as satisfying feeling your enjoyment with everyone else. A fortnightly Nymph orgy would be enough to keep us all purring for weeks.\*

\*Yeah... that’s not going to work for Callie, or Sparks, or Helene, or any of us really. My girls are going to need plenty of TLC on a regular basis,\* Alyssa declared, her voice full of affection for her friends. \*You might have got rid of jealousy, but we all start climbing the walls when we’re apart from you for a couple of days. Everyone’s super excited for the party tomorrow.\*

\*I’m missing all of you too. Edraele’s been doing an amazing job of making me feel at home,\* he said, giving the Maliri queen a grateful kiss. \*But it’ll be great to get everyone together.\*

Alyssa, Edraele, and Jade all murmured their agreement, feeling a warm sense of closeness and solidarity.

“Alright, let’s get these girls tucked in, then I’ll head off to bed myself,” John said, gesturing towards the comatose matriarchs.

He carefully enclosed Lyvia and Marsendra in telekinetic bands that cradled and supported them as John lifted the pair onto the bed. Edraele helped him reposition the sleeping Maliri so they were comfortable, then pulled the covers up to let them rest.

“I hope you’re proud of what you accomplished today, John,” Edraele whispered as she turned out the lights. “You helped all those girls tremendously.”

With the lights extinguished, he noticed a soft purple glow radiating from his matriarch’s eyes. “It looks like I really did make a difference,” he said, meeting her adoring gaze. “Are you love drunk again?”

“Tipsy would be more accurate,” she replied with a coy smile. “You’re still making a profound impact on my wards, but I’m growing more accustomed to the side-effects.”

He cupped her cheek and studied her thoughtfully. “I should work on enhancing your psychic powers as well. It seems like a waste not to help you make the most of your natural abilities... assuming you agree, that is.”

“I have no objections. The more powerful I am, the better prepared I’ll be to protect myself and the Young matriarchs from enemies,” Edraele agreed.

They slipped out of the bedroom and closed the door behind them.

“Are you off to see Luna now?” John asked as they walked down the hall.

“She’s waiting to escort me to her quarters,” Edraele replied, opening the door into the lounge.

The assassin was leaning against a wall, her attention on the door. As soon as it opened she pushed away and glided towards them.

“Good evening, John,” she said, acknowledging him with a warm smile as she approached the pair.

“I see where your true loyalties lie,” Edraele teased her. “What happened to my loving greeting?”

Luna blushed and stepped closer to greet the Maliri Queen with a furtive kiss. “Hello, my love.”

“You weren’t so shy in front of company this morning...” Edraele noted playfully, grinning as Luna flushed a dark indigo. She glanced at John and added, “Would you like to see what games the mice were playing while the cat was away?”

He chuckled and nodded. “Sure.”

Edraele drew Luna into her arms, their luscious bodies pressing together and creating a mouth-watering expanse of cleavage. With radiant, lust-filled eyes, Edraele leaned closer to her lover, full blue lips seeking the assassin’s cupid-bow pout. Luna moaned as they kissed, her strong hands brushing through Edraele’s hair as they writhed in an intimate embrace.

“Goddamn...” John muttered, turning as hard as steel at the erotic display.

Pressing her forehead against Luna’s, Edraele turned to glance at him out of the corner of her eye. “Consider us a prize for you to enjoy after taming all those unruly matriarchs.”

Luna gave him a coy smile and planted gentle kisses on Edraele’s lips.

He put his arms around the sultry women and gave them a fond squeeze. “You two make a gorgeous couple. I can’t wait to claim my prize.”

They rewarded John with his share of loving kisses before he waved goodbye and left them to enjoy their evening together. The corridors of Genthalas were quieter at this hour and John was able to walk to the House Baelora suite without encountering more than a handful of station personnel. He nodded to the guards as he strode into the suite, then after finding no sign of Sarene or Kali in the lounge, he headed to the bedroom.

John found the pair sitting cross-legged on the bed, with Kali running a brush through her friend’s mane of snowy-white hair. They were both wearing silk robes that clung to their shapely figures, making the pair looked delightfully decadent in the crumpled sheets.

“Have you two really not left bed all day?”

“Nope! We’ve been having a wonderful time,” Kali replied, her eyes dancing with joy. “What do you think of Sarene’s new look? Isn’t she stunning?”

He crossed the bedroom to join them and sat on the edge of the bed. “You do look very beautiful,” he agreed as he smiled at the House Baelora matriarch.

“Thank you,” she said quietly with a shy smile.

“How are you feeling this evening?” John asked, brushing his fingers through the silky white curtain shrouding her face and stroked her temple. “Still lots of holes in your memories, or are things a bit clearer now?”

Sarena met his concerned gaze and he could see the glittering spark of intelligence in her golden eyes. “My memory has started coming back. I can remember what happened... what I did... and how you tried to help me.”

“Tried to?” John asked with a worried frown.

“Succeeded in helping me,” she carefully corrected herself, her brow furrowing. Sarene looked troubled as she continued, “I orchestrated the murder of dozens of people... or at least Sarinia did. I also died... but you brought Tehlariene back to life again.”

“You didn’t murder anyone... and you didn’t die either,” John said firmly. “You’re a new person now, starting a fresh life as Sarene.”

She slowly nodded, a thoughtful expression on her pretty face. “That feels... right.”

“And I’m your best friend!” Kali gushed, giving her a hug from behind.

Sarene laughed, the tension easing from her with a bright smile. “You certainly are.” She leaned closer to John and whispered theatrically, “Don’t tell Kali that she’s my only friend; I don’t want her to feel like her status as ‘best friend’ isn’t a well-deserved honour.”

“She’s not your only friend,” John said, lowering his hand to clasp hers. “I’m here for you too.”

“In that case I’m faced with a perplexing conundrum,” Sarene said, her smile broadening. “Does Kali retain her title, or is there a new contender for the dubious prize of being my best friend?”

“Don’t be silly,” Kali said, resting her chin on Sarene’s shoulder. “It’s lovely being your best friend... and besides, John doesn’t count.”

“I don’t?” he asked, enjoying their playful banter.

“Nope!” the young noblewoman declared, shaking her head. Kali’s hand slipped inside Sarene’s robe and gently caressed her stomach. “You’re going to be the father of her children, just like you are with me. That’s a special title in its own right... it’d be greedy wanting to be her best friend too.”

Sarene froze, searching his expression with a pensive look in her eyes.

“What’s the matter?” Kali asked, frowning as she looked at each of them in turn. “Of course you’re going to have John’s babies... all of us will eventually.”

“We haven’t discussed that, Kali,” John said, clearing his throat with a cough.

“I’m being punished,” Sarene said softly, her voice leaden with regret. “It wouldn’t be appropriate.”

“You’re not being punished... at least I don’t see it that way,” John said, shaking his head. He lifted her chin so they could make eye contact again. “Your were traumatised as a child and I’m trying to heal all the scars from that abuse.”

“You may not feel like this is a punishment, but the rest of the matriarchs will respect you more if you’re seen to be dealing with me harshly. Any obvious acts of kindness from you will undermine that message.”

Kali shook her head and interjected, “I think that’s a terrible way of handling it, especially if we’re trying to give Sarene a fresh start. Just tell the other matriarchs that you wiped Sarinia’s mind and she’s effectively dead now; that will more than satisfy anyone’s thirst for revenge. Then tell them that you decided to rebuild her as a new person called Sarene, because you still need someone to run House Baelora.”

John listened to her suggestion and nodded thoughtfully.

“Besides... Edraele told me that you’re not even mad at Sarinia anymore,” Kali continued, hugging Sarene again. “She said that you’ve been having a lovely time getting to know the new matriarchs and that you were really grateful not to be dealing with all the mean old ones like Emandra Holaris. You still don’t approve of what Sarinia did, but she has made your life much, much easier.”

“I might have to have words with my exceedingly talkative Queen,” John said, raising an eyebrow.

“Please don’t be mad at her,” Kali begged. “I pestered Edraele all day to find out everything she could tell me about Sarene and how you felt about her now.”

“I’m sorry, Baen’thelas,” Sarene said with a disapproving frown. “I never asked her to do that. I wasn’t even aware Kali was speaking to Edraele.”

“You had no way of knowing that they were chatting via telepathy,” John explained, giving her hand a reassuring squeeze. Turning his attention to Kali again, he continued, “So why are you getting so involved? Are you just looking out for your new best friend?”

Kali shook her head and gave him a coy smile. “No, it’s for a much more important reason. I want us to be just like Tsarra and Leena, or Nyrelle and Valani. I’d like to share my pregnancy with Sarene and watch our tummies grow at the same time.”

“Kali!” Sarene exclaimed, looking shocked.

Scampering around the bed, Kali faced the House Baelora matriarch. “I know it’s not just me! You feel a special connection between us as well, don’t you? I felt it that very first day we met.”

Sarene blushed and darted a pensive glance at John. “I promise I didn’t put Kali up to this either.”

“That’s okay,” he said quietly. “Is Kali right? Do you feel attracted to her?”

She turned to look at the exuberant young Maliri and her eyes softened. “Yes, I do feel a special connection between us. When we spoke for the first time in the arboretum, I thought you were the kindest person I’d ever met. You were so warm, and tactile, and effervescent... even as damaged as I was back then, I realised how wonderful you were.”

Kali leaned closer and rewarded Sarene with a gentle kiss for her honesty. It didn’t take long for the kiss to deepen and soon they were moaning softly as they embraced.

John watched the two in surprise, giving them a long moment together before patting Kali on the shoulder. “That’s enough for now, honey. Sarene’s still adjusting to her new personality and I don’t want her to feel overwhelmed.”

“Oh, I’m sorry!” Kali apologised, jerking backwards. “Are you alright?”

Sarene blushed and nodded, her eyes shining with happiness. “I wasn’t expecting that... but it felt amazing!”

The two women giggled, then shared a fond hug.

Shaking his head in amusement, John rose from the bed. “I’m guessing you two haven’t had any dinner. Would you like me to make you something?”

Kali gave him a seductive look. “I was hoping that you’d feed me again tonight.”

“Both of us...” Sarene agreed, her eyes glinting with anticipation.

John beckoned them over and they prowled across the bed, then knelt on the covers in front of him, expectant expressions on their beautiful faces. He reached out to stroke their bare stomachs, eliciting sighs of pleasure from both Maliri.

“I fed you just this morning, Kali,” John said quietly, his hand dipping down to caress her lower belly. “You’re already at the peak of fertility and ready to bred tomorrow night.”

She moaned and wavered unsteadily, leaning against his arm to stop herself swooning.

Turning his focus to Sarene, he circled her navel with his fingertips. “I think we should give you another full tummy, just to make sure that your new personality is flawless. If the two of you are serious about starting a relationship together, then I want to make sure you’re able to cope with all the heady emotions that go with it.”

“I agree, Baen’thelas,” Sarene said softly. “I don’t want to take any risk that I might harm Kali, emotionally or physically.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll make sure that she’s in safe hands,” he said with a reassuring smile. “Now, I need a bit of recovery time as I’ve only just fed Lyvia and Marsendra. Why don’t we all go to the kitchen and I’ll make you both some dinner. Then we can come back to bed and relax. I’ll make love to Kali, then I’ll feed you, Sarinia; how does that sound for a plan?”

They both beamed at him as they nodded, then John offered them both a hand and led them from the bedroom.

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Nymaleth reclined on a chaise longue in her command suite, reviewing a technical report from the fleet’s senior engineer. The recently fitted components in her warships had vastly exceeded expectations, with the performance of each device shattering all previous records. While in drydock at Genthalas, her ships had been refitted with new sensors, shields, thrusters, engines, heatsinks, a new hyper-warp drive, and even the power cores themselves had been upgraded. Just one of those new devices would have made a tremendous difference to each ship’s combat capabilities, but combined together, her fleet had become exponentially more deadly.

The comms interface chimed, interrupting her thoughts. Nymaleth swept aside the holographic report and accepted the call, the beautiful face of her flagship’s captain appearing a moment later. Darana’s hair was now as white as a gleaming star, the pale colour a striking contrast to her azure skin.

“I’m sorry to disturb you, Fleet Commander,” Darana said respectfully.

“That’s quite alright, I wasn’t asleep,” she replied with a warm smile, waving away the apology. “Is there a problem?”

“We’re approaching Waephyra and have detected a sizeable fleet stationed in the home system.”

“Thank you for informing me, I’ll be there at once,” Nymaleth replied, rising from her seat and ending the call.

She glided out of her command suite onto the Bridge and felt the eyes of the crew follow her every step as she approached the Command Chair.

“Have we been hailed?” she asked the Encaren Valar's captain.

Darana shook her head and grinned. “They haven’t spotted us yet.” She gestured towards the holographic map that dominated the centre of the huge room. “We’re still far outside their sensor range.”

As Nymaleth took her seat, she brushed her fingers against Darana’s. To an outside observer it might have seemed like an accidental contact, but they wouldn’t have noticed the captain furtively returning the gentle caress before removing her own hand from the armrest.

“Hail them please, Eletha,” Nymaleth said, making eye contact with the battleship’s communications officer.

“Yes, Fleet Commander!” the young woman gushed, eager to obey her captivating leader.

The interstellar signal bounced through the network of comms beacon and was rerouted to the House Waephyra fleet. It didn’t take long for them to respond and the House Ghilwen insignia faded away from the holo-screen, the winged chalice replaced by a dark-haired officer’s pensive features.

“This is Fleet Commander Idenvae,” she declared, darting a nervous glance off-screen. “May I ask why you have encroached on House Waephyra territory?”

“My name’s Nymaleth, Fleet Commander for House Ghilwen,” she replied, giving her peer a reassuring smile. “I’ve been sent here by Queen Edraele to verify that Vestele Waephyra is safe and well. Your matriarch was expected at Genthalas several days ago, but she failed to return and has not been responding to Queen Edraele’s communications.”

Idenvae tried to keep her expression blank, but Nymaleth noticed the momentary flash of worry in her eyes.

“Your concern is appreciated but unnecessary,” Idenvae replied, adopting an authoritative tone. “Vestele is merely indisposed at present with important House business. You may return to Genthalas now, Fleet Commander.”

“I’m afraid I can’t do that,” Nymaleth replied, firmly shaking her head. “I am under orders to investigate Vestele’s wellbeing and Edraele will not be satisfied unless I speak to her personally.”

“Well it seems we are at an impasse then,” the House Waephyra Fleet Commander said with obvious annoyance. “For I am under direct orders from Vestele Waephyra not to allow anyone entry into our territory. Therefore, I cannot grant you permission to remain in House Waephyra space and must ask you to leave immediately.”

Nymaleth leaned forward on her seat and said ominously, “I wasn’t asking for permission, Idenvae. We shall be arriving in-system in nine minutes and I fully intend to launch an expedition to Waephyra to establish contact with your matriarch.”

“This is outrageous!” Idenvae snapped, dropping all pretence at civility. “You dare invade my House’s territory and threaten to launch a planetary invasion?! I’m giving you a final warning: Any ships that encroach in our home system will be considered hostile and fired upon!”

“That would be most unwise,” Nymaleth said, looking at the Maliri officer with grim resolve. “You were at Lambda Aquarii... you know the upgrades Baen’thelas gave to the Houses allied with him; my fleet has been refitted with all of those new devices and more. Don’t throw away your ships on a meaningless act of defiance... you have no chance of defeating me.”

“You heard my warning!” Idenvae snarled defiantly, her eyes ablaze with fury. “We’ll destroy anyone that enters the system!”

With that declaration made, the House Waephyra Fleet Commander abruptly ended the call.

There was an uncomfortable silence on the Bridge, then Darana asked quietly, “How should we proceed, Fleet Commander?”

Nymaleth drummed her fingers on the armrest of her command chair as she mulled over the situation. House Waephyra was only ranked seventeen out of the nineteen noble Houses and possessed fewer fleet assets than House Ghilwen at rank six. Unfortunately, half of Leena Ghilwen’s forces were still being refitted at Genthalas, while Idenvae had every ship House Waephyra possessed at her disposal. The Waephyran Fleet Commander could also call upon planetary-based strike craft squadrons, as well as any static defences constructed in the system.

While there was no denying that Nymaleth’s forces had an impressive tech advantage, the outcome of the battle was far from guaranteed, not with so many enemies arrayed against her. Even if she was able to defeat Idenvae, it was highly likely that her fleet would lose a significant number of ships in the process. She remembered well Edraele’s warning to preserve her forces at all costs, an edict that ran contrary to fighting Idenvae to establish contact with the missing matriarch.

“Proceed towards Waephyra,” she ordered the helmswoman. Turning towards Captain Darana, she quietly added, “Send an urgent message to Queen Edraele requesting her guidance. I will await her response in my Command suite.”

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\*John, I need you!\*

The urgent telepathic call jolted him awake, jarring his subconscious from a pleasant night spent in Athena’s delightful company. He found himself in bed with another lovely girl, his arms wrapped protectively around Kali Loraleth.

\*Edraele?\* he replied, rubbing at his bleary eyes. \*Is everything okay?\*

\*I need your assistance to avert a battle! The House Ghilwen fleet I sent to investigate Vestele’s disappearance is being refused access to the Waephyra homeworld. Nymaleth believes that the opposing fleet commander is afraid and will back down if we call her bluff. While I trust Nymaleth’s judgement, I do not wish to take any chances, not with so many lives at stake.\*

\*I agree, you did the right thing waking me,\* John said, carefully disentangling himself from Kali.

He realised that Sarene was no longer sleeping beside him and glancing around the room, he found her sitting cross-legged in an armchair at the side of the bed. She had what appeared to be an easel set up in front of her and held a delicate stylus in her slender hand.

“Baen’thelas!” she said in a hushed whisper, her golden eyes wide with surprise. “Is something wrong?”

“Duty calls,” he replied, keeping his voice low so as not to disturb Kali. “Edraele needs my help.”

“Can I assist in any way?” she asked, half rising from her seat.

“I don’t think so, but thanks for offering,” he replied, hastily pulling on some trousers. \*Edraele should I wear the outfit Alyssa made for me?\*

The crystal door spiralled open and the Maliri Queen glided into the bedchamber. “There’s no time, John,” she said, eyeing him speculatively. “Follow me!”

He hurried after her, the Maliri matriarch leading him through the lounge and into her private study. She activated the comms interface built into the ornate desk and gestured for John to sit as holographic panels sprang into life before him.

“Can’t we just order Nymaleth to hold position while we decide the best course of action?” John asked with a frown. “As long as she stays clear of the Waephyra system, there won’t be a battle.”

Edraele shook her head as she initiated the holo call. “She suspects that some misfortune has befallen Vestele and the Waephyra Fleet Commander is trying to conceal it for nefarious reasons. If Nymaleth is correct, and I believe she is, the longer we delay, the more time we allow the perpetrators to cover their tracks and escape.”

The crossed swords of House Valaden appeared before him and John caught his reflection in the shimmering holo-screen. “Edraele, I can’t talk to them like this!” he protested, looking at his dishevelled appearance. “I look a right state!”

She cast an appreciative glance at his bare chest, then ruffled his bed-hair. “I couldn’t disagree more. You look positively scrumptious.”

John paused for a moment then rolled his eyes. “Alright, I get what you’re doing. I’m sure I should feel offended at being objectified though.”

Edraele leaned down to whisper in his ear, “You can punish me later if you like, my Lord?”

He chuckled at her brazen invitation, then focused on the holo-screen as the image shifted.

The House Ghilwen Fleet Commander answered the call, then gasped when she saw his appearance. “John!”

“Hello, Nymaleth,” he said, greeting her with a warm smile. “It’s good to see you again.”

She blushed furiously, turning bashful and tongue-tied. “Y-you too!”

“Edraele tells me that you suspect Vestele’s Fleet Commander has gone rogue?”

Nymaleth managed to pull herself together and nodded. “Idenvae is definitely hiding something. She seems to be violently opposed to any attempt to make contact with her matriarch.”

John glanced at Edraele and said, “Any idea what could’ve happened?”

“I’m afraid not,” the Maliri Queen replied with a rueful frown. “I know that Vestele is still alive, but I don’t know why she’s not communicating with us. If Idenvae was seeking to supplant her, then surely she would’ve assassinated her former matriarch?”

“I guess we’ll find out soon enough,” he said, before turning back to Nymaleth. “Can you contact Idenvae’s ship again? I’d prefer to resolve this diplomatically before you jump into the system and everyone starts shooting. How much longer until you arrive in Waephyra?”

“We’ll reach the outer edge of their gravity well in two minutes,” Nymaleth replied, before glancing off-screen. “Eletha, re-initiate comms with the Vacaryn Saria and connect Baen’thelas to the call.”

“At once, Fleet Commander,” came the prompt reply, then the communications officer hailed the Maliri battleship.

They didn’t have to wait long and the House Ghilwen Fleet Commander appeared on the holo-screen, an angry scowl on her face. Idenvae’s composure shattered in an instant when she saw John and the Maliri gaped at his bare chest in awe.

“Do you know who I am, Idenvae?” John asked, locking eyes with the stunned officer.

“Y-yes, Lord Baen’thelas,” she managed to stammer.

“Vestele Waephyra pledged fealty to me, which means that you and all of your forces are under my command. Nymaleth is following my orders to investigate Vestele’s disappearance... so would you care to explain why you’re committing treason and threatening her fleet?”

Idenvae quailed at his stern tone and obvious disapproval. She shrank back in her command chair, mortified that she’d offended him.

“I beg your forgiveness, Lord Baen’thelas!” she pleaded, wringing her hands together in contrition. “I wasn’t going to fire on Nymaleth, I was just trying to scare her away!”

He leaned forward and stared at her intently. “Why? What are you trying to hide?”

“This isn’t my fault! I haven’t done anything!” she protested. “This was all Ryallae’s idea!”

“And who is Ryallae?” he asked, raising an eyebrow.

“She’s the planetary governor on Waephyra!” Idenvae blurted out, desperately throwing her co-conspirator to the wolves in an attempt to save herself. “There was a fight... Vestele and her daughters went berserk and starting slaughtering each other. Ryallae said we just had to wait... then we’d be free of Vestele’s tyranny once and for all.”

“Wait? Wait for what?”

“One of Vestelle’s daughters shot her in the back,” the Fleet Commander explained in a rush. “The physicians have tried to save her, but she’s been mortally wounded.”

John leaned back in his seat and frowned at the new developments. “Did any of the daughters survive?”

“No, my Lord,” she replied obsequiously. “All six of them were slain in the fighting.”

He glanced behind the Fleet Commander at the shocked crew gathered on the battleship’s Bridge. “Which one of you is the captain of the Vacaryn Saria?”

“I am, my Lord,” one of the Maliri replied, staring at him wide-eyed.

“Did you know about any of this? Tell me the truth, because I’ll be able to find out if you’re lying.”

“I knew nothing, my Lord!” she exclaimed, quickly shaking her head. “Ryallae contacted us several days ago and demanded to speak to Idenvae in private. I had no idea that our matriarch had been injured until now.”

“Good. I want you to arrest Idenvae while we verify her story,” John commanded.

The captain’s eyes hardened and she whipped a laser pistol out of its holster, then pointed it at her former commander. “Seize her!”

A pair of armoured Maliri trained their weapons on the Fleet Commander and cautiously approached.

“But I didn’t raise a hand against Vestele!” Idenvae protested, darting a worried glance at the two guards.

“No, but you had a duty to report what happened to both me and Queen Edraele,” John said with a disapproving frown. “You knew what you were doing was wrong, otherwise you wouldn’t have been so secretive. It wasn’t your place to wait until Vestele died of her wounds, then attempt to seize power for yourself.”

Idenvae’s shoulders slumped and she offered no resistance as she was led from the Command Deck.

“What’s your name, Captain?” John asked the ranking officer on the Bridge.

“It’s Aemira, my Lord.”

“Aemira, I’m temporarily promoting you to Fleet Commander. I want you to assemble all of House Waephyra’s forces and set course for Genthalas.”

Aemira performed a sweeping bow. “We shall depart at once, Baen’thelas!”

“Excellent. I’ll look forward to thanking you personally when you arrive. Have a safe journey, Aemira.”

She beamed at him in delight, then started barking orders at her crew, who all rushed to obey. Nymaleth had been closely following the conversation and she ended the call to the House Waephyra flagship. The House Ghilwen Fleet Commander reappeared on the holo-screen a few seconds later, an oddly-conflicted expression on her face.

“It looks like you sympathise with her, Nymaleth,” John said, studying the woman curiously. “Do you agree with what Idenvae did?”

The Maliri’s eyes widened in alarm and John could see that she was about to deny it furiously. He quickly held up his hands in a placating gesture.

“I’d prefer it if you were completely honest with me. I promise that I won’t be offended either way.”

She relaxed and let our her breath. “I do feel some sympathy for Idenvae,” she cautiously admitted. “If my old matriarch had been injured in such a manner, the temptation to let Aradrea Ghilwen die of her wounds would be very hard to resist.”

“And what about Leena?” he asked, raising an eyebrow.

“She’s nothing like her mother!” Nymaleth declared vehemently. “I’d give my life to protect Leena from harm. If she were mortally injured, I would stop at nothing to get her the medical assistance she required.”

“Leena’s very lucky to have you as her Fleet Commander, Nymaleth,” he said with a warm smile. “Can I leave you to handle the rogue governor? I want you to arrest Ryallae, then locate and medevac Vestele Waephyra. Let us know if she doesn’t survive the journey back to Genthalas, otherwise I’ll see you in a couple of days’ time.”

“We’ll act with the greatest of haste, my Lord,” Nymaleth said, inclining her head respectfully.

“Thank you for keeping Edraele informed of the escalating situation,” he said with gratitude. “You did well today.”

John glanced at his Maliri matriarch. \*I’d like to spend some more time with Nymaleth. We need to work on creating a bond between you and all the Fleet Commanders. Two-way telepathy will be invaluable.\*

\*That would give our forces a decisive edge against Progenitor fleets,\* she said in wholehearted agreement.

Nymaleth blushed furiously, and her eyes gleamed with arousal. “You won’t be disappointed, my Lord...”

John suspected that whatever message Edraele had telepathically relayed to Nymaleth wasn’t quite the same comment she’d just made to him. He closed the call, then pulled the Maliri Queen into his lap.

“I’m not sure I want to know what you just said to Nymaleth... so what are your thoughts on the Vestele situation? Did I handle that okay, or was I too heavy handed?”

Edraele kissed him on the cheek, then snuggled into his embrace. “I thought you dealt with it perfectly.”

“Thank you... but did Ryallae and Idenvae actually break any laws?” he asked with a pensive frown.

“It’s somewhat of a grey area,” Edraele admitted. “Prior to you claiming the Maliri, if all the members of a Noble House were wiped out, then I suppose a planetary governor or a fleet commander could assume the mantle of matriarch. However, they would need all the notable figures within that House to acknowledge their authority, which would be a very difficult proposal indeed. An even bigger problem is that the House ranking would be decimated, making their territory easy pickings for rival matriarchs. It’s extremely unlikely that a House would survive intact if the ruling family were slain.”

“They must really hate Vestele if they were happy to just sit back and watch her die,” John said quietly.

“The old matriarchs were all cruel tyrants,” Edraele reminded him. “In all honesty, I’d be just as eager to escape from Vestele’s clutches if I were in Idenvae or Ryallae’s position. That’s not to say they should be excused for how they acted... but it is understandable.”

He let out a heavy sigh. “I’m not really sure what to do with either of them. I’m leaning towards removing them from positions of authority, but not punishing them beyond that. Does that seem fair to you?”

“Idenvae was definitely aware that her House was part of a new alliance with you. I’d be astonished if Vestele hadn’t informed them both that you were in command of her fleets in times of war, which would make you their de facto leader if she was incapacitated for any reason. You were quite right to reprimand Idenvae for not informing you, and the fact that they were being so secretive only confirms that they knew what they were doing was wrong.”

“We also need to figure out what we’re going to do if Vestele dies in transit before I can heal her,” John said, rubbing the bridge of his nose. “Even if she survives, I’m faced with the same issues I had over rewarding Emandra Holaris with immortality. Vestele’s people obviously hate her guts, so would I be doing the right thing inflicting her on them all over again?”

Edraele smiled and kissed him tenderly. “I’m sure you’ll make the right choice.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence, but I was hoping for something more tangible,” John said with an exasperated sigh.

She pulled back and made eye contact with him. “I can tell you what I would do in your situation, but I don’t believe it would be helpful.”

He frowned and looked at her in confusion. “I’m not sure why you’d think that... explain it to me in a minute. First though, what would you do in my position?”

“Assuming Vestele lives?” she asked. When he nodded in confirmation, Edraele continued, “I would handle her exactly as you did Emandra. Make Vestele the same enticing offer and warn her of the inevitable side-effects of the Change. She’d ignore my warnings of course, because she’s vain and arrogant, and will be desperate to restore her youth. Then I’d simply wait and let my irresistible influence break the cruel monster she’s become. After she’d endured weeks of agonising soul-searching, I’d help a kinder, better Vestele rise from the smouldering ashes of her old personality, then welcome her to the fold with open arms.”

John winced as she bluntly outlined the elder matriarch’s most likely future. “And if she dies?”

“Then I’d be faced with two choices: either select the most competent candidate to replace her, or simply dissolve House Waephyra. They’re only ranked seventeen, so their territory could easily be divided up between their neighbours. Of those two options, I’d choose a worthwhile candidate to replace her as matriarch; some nubile, doe-eyed beauty, that you’d thoroughly enjoy impregnating.”

“Of course you would,” he said, rolling his eyes and laughing. John considered her replies for a moment, then continued, “That was useful advice. So why did you think it wouldn’t be helpful?”

Edraele caressed his cheek affectionately. “Because I’m not ruling the Maliri... you are. This is a new role for you, one that’s far outside your comfort zone. I would warn you if I believed you were making a catastrophic error in judgement, but making these decisions for yourself will give you more confidence leading our empire.”

“Yeah... you’re right,” he conceded with a rueful frown. “I always feel under huge pressure to make the right decision because there’s so much at stake when you’re ruling an entire civilisation. I suppose the more practice I get, the easier it’ll become.”

“Don’t worry yourself unduly, you’ve been doing an marvellous job so far.”

“Thank you. That’s a relief to hear,” he said gratefully.

Edraele slid off his lap and offered John a hand. “Now, I better not keep you up any longer, you have a busy day tomorrow.” She raised an eyebrow and said with a saucy smile, “Unless you’ve decided to punish me for my earlier transgressions?”

He rose to his feet and gave her bottom an appreciative squeeze. “That’s a very tempting offer, but I should get back to bed. I still need to feed four more matriarchs before the party, don’t I?”

She nodded in confirmation. “Luna and I are looking forward to accompanying you after each pair.”

“Yeah, me too,” he agreed, stifling a yawn when he glanced at the chronometer and realised it was 4:36 am. “Goodnight, honey.”

Edraele kissed him goodbye and John headed back to his bedroom.

Sarene was still seated in her chair and she greeted him with a smile. “Welcome back. Was the disaster averted?”

“We found out what happened to Vestele Waephyra,” John explained, fighting back another yawn. “She nearly died fighting her family. Vestele’s in critical condition and none of her daughters survived the battle.”

The young woman’s face fell and it was easy to see that she was blaming herself.

“Hey... I wasn’t trying to make you feel bad,” John said, squatting down beside her. “This wasn’t your fault.”

Sarene frowned and shook her head. “I planned this. I knew the matriarchs and their daughters would fight to the death to be with you.”

“No. Sarinia planned this,” John said firmly. “You’re Sarene now, remember?”

She nodded, but didn’t look convinced.

“You’re just going through a period of adjustment,” he said, gently clasping her hand. ”You still have all of Sarinia’s old memories, but you’re not that same person anymore. Sarinia suffered horrific abuse when she was a child and it twisted her into a deeply troubled woman.”

“I know that I’m supposed to be Sarene now... but who is she?” the unsettled noblewoman asked, gazing at him for guidance.

“A very bright, sweet-natured girl, who cares deeply about her friends and family,” John said emphatically. “You’re still Sarinia at your core, with all the natural gifts and talents she possessed. But instead of withdrawing into yourself as a child, you emulated Tehlariene as you grew up, learning to share your heart with everyone you love. Now you’ll lead House Baelora as a benevolent matriarch, seeking to better the lives of all the Maliri under your rule.”

“Love my friends and family, and honour my duty as a matriarch,” she murmured, looking calmer and more confident. “Thank you, Baen’thelas... that was very helpful.”

“Your personality has gone through a huge metamorphosis, Sarene,” he said with sympathy. “It’ll take a little time for you to adapt, but I’m here to help you.”

“Thank you... for everything you’ve done for me,” Sarene whispered, her eyes welling up. “I can remember how lonely Sarinia was... how empty her life was for so long. I feel different already... and it feels wonderful.”

He leaned in and gave her a hug. “You’re welcome.”

John held her for a long moment, then pulled back and shared a smile with the earnest Maliri noblewoman. Now that he was right next to her, he caught a glimpse of the digital canvas on her easel and turned to see what she’d been working on.

“Wow... this is really impressive,” he marvelled, studying the portrait in fascination. “You’ve really captured her likeness.”

Sarene had painted a picture of him holding Kali in his arms, the Loraleth matriarch sleeping peacefully with a beautiful smile on her face.

“She’s deeply in love,” Sarene murmured, her gaze softening as she studied her muse. “Safe and content in your loving embrace.”

“You’re very talented,” John said, admiring her work. He remembered that Sarinia’s sister had avoided portraits and focused on sweeping natural scenes instead. “Tehlariene preferred landscapes didn’t she?”

She slowly nodded and gazed down at her slender fingers. “You were right earlier, about me being Sarinia at my core. She favoured portraits because she was interested in people... and they fascinate me too.”

John couldn’t stop himself yawning this time and gave Sarene an apologetic smile. “I’d love to stay up chatting with you, but I can barely keep my eyes open. Come on, let’s go to bed.” When she nodded in agreement, he asked, “What were you doing up so late anyway?”

“I woke up feeling full of energy and couldn’t get back to sleep,” she replied, taking his hand and sliding into bed with him. “I saw the two of you together and felt inspired, so I went to Tehlariene’s quarters and borrowed her easel and canvass.”

“You left here in a robe?” John asked, raising an eyebrow.

She giggled and nodded. “I got plenty of curious looks, especially with my new hair and a big tummy.”

“Yeah, I bet,” John said with a chuckle.

He ran his hand over her stomach, which had flattened out now, her body eagerly absorbing his load. They were still linked though, and he could sense her presence in his mind, the active connection between them strong. When he looked into her golden eyes, John could see a new flare of arousal as she responded to his caresses.

“Maybe I should feed you again... just to make sure you’re okay.”

“We shouldn’t take any chances...” Sarene agreed, licking her lips in anticipation.

John lay back and let the enthusiastic Maliri tend to his burgeoning erection. She knelt between his legs and admired him for a long moment, as if trying to commit every inch of his body to memory. Then she treated him to a delicious blowjob, taking her time to lick and stroke his length, building him up higher until he finally exploded down her throat. John ran his fingers through her long silky hair, stroking her affectionately as she sucked out every last drop of cum.

Sitting upright afterwards, Sarene cradled her rounded belly with an enigmatic look on her face. She glanced at John and smiled when she realised he was watching her.

“Baen’thelas... will you hold me? Like you did with Kali.”

He nodded and beckoned her to join him. “Of course, honey.”

As Sarene lay with her back to him, John stroked her new curves, drawing soft sighs of contentment from the blissful Maliri.

She turned slightly and looked up at him, her brow furrowed with concern. “I honestly had no idea that Kali was going to ask you to get me pregnant at the same time as her.”

“I know,” he said with a reassuring smile.

Sarene’s frown deepened. “I don’t want you to think that I manipulated her to get what I want. That’s the way I used to behave, but I wouldn’t do that to her, or to you... I promise.”

“It’s okay, I know you wouldn’t, not anymore,” John said again. “I rebuilt your mind, Sarene. Nobody knows you better than I do.”

She relaxed, the tension easing from her beautiful face. “I just wanted to make sure.”

“Is that what you want?” he asked, kissing her bare shoulder. “To have my children?”

The Maliri noblewoman blushed, looking more vulnerable than he’d ever seen her before. She looked into his eyes and nodded, her yearning desire plain for him to see.

“Good,” John said, holding her closer. “I’d be disappointed if I put all that effort into making you my perfect woman and you left me for another guy.”

She looked at him wide-eyed with astonishment. “Really?!”

“Mmm hmm... very disappointed,” he teased her.

Sarene laughed quietly, trying not to wake Kali. “No, not that, the other thing.”

“Oh, you mean me making you my perfect woman?” John asked, pulling the covers over them. “Sure. Admittedly you did a lot of the hard work for me. You were already very bright and talented... I just helped you rediscover that lovely kind-hearted girl you used to be.”

Her eyes welled up with tears and she melted into his arms. “You’re so wonderful, Baen’thelas,” she murmured, looking up at him in adoration. “I’d do anything for you.”

John leaned down to give her a tender kiss. “The first thing I want you to do is start calling me John, just like the rest of my girls.”

“Okay... John,” she said with a shy smile. “Anything else?”

“For now, I think we should get some sleep. We’ve got a whole lifetime together to look forward to... as long as you don’t mind sharing.”

She snuggled into him. “I think sharing you with Kali could be a lot of fun.”

“I think so too,” he agreed, stroking her until she fell into a deep contented sleep.

\*Goodnight, my Lord,\* Edraele purred, sounding slightly giddy.

\*Sleep well you three,\* John murmured, then smiled as Alyssa and Jade drowsily echoed the Maliri Queen.

His eyelids grew heavy and he quickly joined his three matriarchs in a restful slumber.

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“Hey! Wake up!”

Benedito Almada groaned in protest as the bedroom shutters were flung open, the dazzling sunshine indecently bright at this hour of the morning. He’d enjoyed a splendid evening in the company of two delectable young nymphets, but instead of waking in their tender embrace, some loud-mouthed braggard was barking orders at him.

“Get the hell out!” Almada snorted indignantly, covering his eyes with a flabby arm. “Don’t you know who I am? Dijkman will have your hide for this!”

“Mister Dijkman sent me here,” the stocky intruder explained, throwing some clothes at him. “Get dressed. He doesn’t like to be kept waiting.”

Almada grumbled sourly as he pulled on his shirt and trousers, imagining all the horrible things he’d like to do to this upstart for ruining his morning. After fumbling around for his shoes, he covered his corpulent frame with his crumpled suit jacket.

“Alright, let’s go,” the henchman said, jerking a thumb at the door.

They left the gaudily opulent room and weaved their way through a warren of corridors in the huge hotel. To someone from the Core Worlds, the Infernal Delights seemed cheap and sleazy, but Almada didn’t visit the Outer Rim to appreciate its hotels. Life was cheap on the fringes of the Terran Federation and all sorts of unsavoury desires could be indulged if you greased the right palms.

Almada followed Dijkman’s lackey to an elevator door that was guarded by two men armed with submachine guns. They entered the black steel conveyance and his guide tapped one of the lower buttons on the control panel, closing the doors behind them. The elevator began its rapid descent, the sudden drop making Almada’s stomach lurch.

Rocky walls gave way to open air, giving them a spectacular view of the underground cavern below. There were fields of glowing magma in every direction, illuminating the subterranean facility with a fiery orange glow. The elevator shaft dropped straight down to an administration complex in the centre of this infernal hellscape, the black heart of Dijkman’s notorious enterprise.

Chotis III had once been a lucrative mining colony, until eco-terrorists activated seismic charges in a dormant volcano. The subsequent eruption caused widespread devastation, killing thousands of miners and causing a public outcry at the horrific loss of life. The mining corporation quietly paid off the miners’ families, then had the eco-terrorists hunted down and butchered.

That was seventy years ago now, but the mining companies had never returned, the cost of excavating the solidified magma proving too expensive to make further drilling worthwhile. In their absence, men like Jarl Dijkman had moved in, quickly establishing Chotis III as one of the premiere tourist attractions for those wanting to indulge in pleasures of the flesh. Benedito Almada had been a long-standing customer for over two decades.

The elevator reached the bottom level and the two men headed deeper into Dijkman’s inner sanctum. Almada gazed longingly through glass-panelled walls at intriguing acts of debauchery, wishing he could quickly get this meeting over with and join one of the orgies. There seemed to be no limits to the depravities that could be experienced in this place, and he should know, having explored some very dark lusts himself.

They reached some double doors inlaid with cavorting satyrs and naked maidens, then his guide led Almada into Jarl Dijkman’s private office. Dijkman was seated behind a desk, his focus on the holoscreens in front of him. He looked up when they arrived, then broke into a broad smile.

“Ah, Benedito! I trust you had a pleasant night, yes?”

Alamda shot a furious glance at the burly henchman. “I was having a very good time, until he showed up and scared away the girls.”

“Ah... please accept my apologies for that. Don’t blame Hans... he’s a good boy and was just following orders.”

Harrumphing with irritation, Almada turned his attention to Dijkman. “So why did you get me up at this ungodly hour, Jarl?”

Giving him a rueful shrug, Dijkman replied, “You know the rules: everyone settles their debts at the end of every month. We charged your account but the payment was rejected, so let’s just settle up and you can get back to Lottie and Greta, yes?”

“It was rejected?” Almada muttered with an angry scowl. “Let me take a look.”

“Be my guest,” Dijkman replied, rotating the holo panel with an accommodating smile.

Almada had been siphoning off money from his primary bank accounts for years to fund his illicit lifestyle. He withdrew the funds as credsticks, then opened new accounts with different banks under a variety of pseudonyms. The account Dijkman was attempting to charge held enough money for him to stay at the Infernal Delights for the next three years, so Almada was certain there must have been an error with the transfer system itself.

He went through the authentication process, then shrugged confidently. “I’m logging in okay. How much is my current tab? I can make a direct transfer to your account.”

“You’ve been a busy boy,” Dijkman noted with amusement, scanning through the bill. “Over two-dozen girls, each staying for multiple days with lots of premium services requested. I see you even asked for some of our more... exotic... packages.”

“Worth every credit,” Almada snickered, remembering the delicious look of pain and revulsion in the girls’ eyes. “I needed a bit of cheering up.”

“That comes to a grand total of 154,000 credits,” the proprietor noted, idly examining his manicured fingernails.

“No problem,” the former Admiral said nonchalantly, checking his balance.

Account Balance: 0 credits.

Almada stared uncertainly at the screen, figuring that there must be some kind of mistake. He went back to the main menu, then requested his account balance again. The number remained unchanged. With trembling fingers, he swiped back to check the transaction history, panicking that ISD had tracked down his secret account. What he found there was so much worse.

Balance transfer: -6,214,936 credits.

“The Lion Foundation thanks you for your kind donation. Your generosity will help fund orphanages throughout the Terran Federation, giving hope and a fresh start to thousands of young children.”

He gaped at the message in horror, wondering how the hell John Blake had tracked down his secret bank account. With shaking hands he logged into the next account and the next, finding the same message over and over again. Growing increasingly frantic, Almada checked them all... and was met with the same message in every one. He’d been stripped of every credit he owned, leaving him a penniless pauper... who owed a lot of money to some very bad people.

“Ready to begin the transfer, yes?” Dijkman asked, studying Almada’s ghostly pale complexion. “Or is there some kind of a problem?”

Almada gulped, his eyes bulging as he turned to the brothel’s owner. “Ahh... there’s no problem. I just need to r-return to my hotel and check my l-login details for another account.”

Dijkman frowned and waved a finger at the sweating man. “Now, now, Benedito... you wouldn’t be lying to me would you?”

“Of course not, Jarl!” Almada stammered, staggering back a step and bumping into the chair behind him. “I’ve got the money... I swear!”

“Are you sure?” the other man asked, his eyes narrowing. “Because you don’t look so good all of a sudden. Why don’t you take a seat? I wouldn’t want you passing out on me and hurting yourself.”

“I-I’m okay...” Almada blurted out, feeling his heart hammering in his chest. “I’ll be right back... just let me get those account details.”

“Hans, why don’t you help Benedito into a chair?” Dijkman suggested with concern. “He really does look most unwell.”

“Of course, Mister Dijkman,” Hans growled and slammed his meaty fist into Almada’s rotund stomach. “Sit your ass down, fat man!”

Almada gasped in agony as the breath burst out from his lungs and he collapsed in the plush seat.

“There, that’s better isn’t it, Benedito?” Dijkman enquired with a pleasant smile. He swiped his hand over the second holo-screen and rotated it to face his guest. “It must be so stressful for you with this huge bounty hanging over your head. You should relax and enjoy our hospitality.”

The holo-screen showed Almada’s face and a description, warning that he was wanted for acts of treason and terrorism. The bounty stood at ten million credits.

“Rest assured that we hold the privacy of our clients sacrosanct,” Dijkman declared, looking at him with sympathy. “For you, the Infernal Delights is a safe haven... a place of sanctuary to evade the long arm of Terran Federation justice. As long as you can settle your debts with us every month.”

Almada gasped for breath, trying not to puke his guts out. “I’ve got the money!”

Hans smacked him around the back of the head. “No lying, fat man!”

“They’ve frozen your assets, yes?” Dijkman asked with sympathy. “Your secret accounts are locked... you can’t transfer any funds?”

“It’s not my fault!” Almada sobbed, his eyes filling with tears. “It was the Lion! He stole millions of credits from me!”

“A dire predicament,” the propriety agreed, nodding sadly. “Don’t vex yourself, Benedito. I have no intention of handing you over to the Terran Federation for the bounty; the last thing I want is them looking into my business. You can stay here as my special guest until your fortunes change.”

“I can?” Almada asked, looking up at him with profound gratitude.

“Of course,” Dijkman agreed, his smile turning predatory. “Although there is the little matter of your outstanding debt. Don’t worry though, we can work out an alternate form of payment, yes?”

“Yes, of course!” Almada gasped, his heart surging with hope. “I can help you run your organisation! I led entire divisions in the Admiralty.”

“No, no, I have no need of a bureaucrat,” Dijkman said with an ominous laugh. “But there are a great many here on the Outer Rim who hate the Admiralty and I think they would pay handsomely to spend some time alone with you, yes? What do you think, Hans? How much would our clientele pay to dominate an Admiral?”

“For an Admiral with a huge squishy ass?” Hans grunted with a sly grin. “A lot!”

“Get him fitted with a cockcage,” Djikman said, waving his hand dismissively. “Have Leonardo make him a gimpsuit that looks like an Admiral’s uniform, then put him to work in the dungeon.”

Almada gaped at the owner of the brothel in horror. “We’ve been friends for 20 years, Jarl! Please, I’m begging you!”

“No hard feelings, Benedito, but you must pay your debts. You owe me 154,000 credits,” Djikman said with an apologetic shrug. “Oh... and I think we should add ten million to the balance, because we are hiding you from the mighty Lion of the Federation.”

Lurching to his feet, Almada tried to make a run for it, but Hans smacked him to the floor with a jaw-jarring slap.

Djikman squatted down by the whimpering pile of blubber and said quietly, “I must warn you that the girls you liked to abuse are in charge of lubing up my special guests... but I don’t think they like you so much, yes?”

Almada sobbed and begged for mercy as Hans dragged him from the room.

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John roused from sleep to the lovely sound of Kali and Sarene whispering together in Maliri. They were speaking too quietly for him to understand what they were saying, but the soft tones and undulating cadence were like a sweet serenade to his ears. He kept his eyes closed and pretended to still be asleep as he listened to their breathy voices.

Kali paused and shifted position beside him. “Are you awake, John?”

He slowly opened his eyes to see her gazing down at him. “Yeah, I was just listening to you chatting.”

“We didn’t mean to disturb you,” Sarene said with a frown. “We really tried to be quiet.”

“It was a wonderful way to wake up. I love the sound of your voices, even when I can’t hear exactly what you’re saying,” he said, wrapping his arms around both girls and hugging them close.

Kali gave him an adoring smile. “You say the sweetest things... doesn’t he, Sarene?”

His other bedmate nodded, her golden-eyed gaze softening. “Enough to melt the coldest of hearts.”

John brushed his fingers through their long white hair. “I wish I could spend another day in bed with you two gorgeous girls, but I’ve got a busy morning ahead. Will you join me in the shower? Then I can enjoy your company for a bit longer before I have to go.”

They nodded eagerly and soon all three were soaping each other down, clouds of steam billowing around their bodies.

“I thought about what you said yesterday, Kali,” John said, stroking her toned stomach. “I really like the idea of you sharing your pregnancy with Sarene-”

He was interrupted by excited squeals as the two Maliri hugged each other exuberantly.

John laughed and gave them each a playful smack on the bottom. “Hey, I hadn’t finished what I was saying.”

“Sorry, John,” Kali said, turning to face him with a grin.

Sarene beamed at him with joy. “Please continue.”

“I don’t think you should rush into such a huge life-changing decision quite yet,” he said earnestly, looking at the House Baelora matriarch. “I’d like you to spend a bit of time getting used to being the new you, without all the emotional complications of being an expectant mother. Explore your relationship with Kali, have some fun with her, and just enjoy life for a couple of weeks. After that, we’ll see if you’re still eager to have a baby. Does that sound reasonable?”

She shared a smile with Kali then nodded enthusiastically. “That sounds amazing! Thank you so much!”

“You’re welcome.”

There wasn’t much conversation during the rest of the shower, just plenty of grateful hugs and kisses. John eventually left the two girls to their celebrations and headed to the walk-in-wardrobe after drying himself off.

\*Good morning, ladies. Looking forward to the party tonight?\* he asked his three matriarchs, who enthusiastically confirmed that they were. \*Yeah, me too. So, who am I seeing first this morning, Edraele?\*

\*Beldrea Kayden and Kelenis Lesandoral,\* she replied, sounding strangely distracted. \*They’re the only two middle daughters that survived the massacre. House Kayden is rank 15 and House Lesandoral is the lowest ranked at 19.\*

John pulled on a pair of trousers as he tried to remember the names of the remaining noble Houses, whose matriarchs he hadn’t seen yet. \*That just leaves Eshenestria, Waephyra, and Quisayne, right?\*

\*Yes. They’re rank 16, 17, and 18,\* Edraele muttered, her voice increasingly pensive. \*Assuming Vestele doesn’t die on the way back to Genthalas...\*

Slipping on a shirt, John paused as he did up the buttons. \*Are you alright, Edraele? You sound... worried.\*

\*John, you need to get to the lounge!\* she suddenly cried out in alarm.

\*Why? What’s happening?\* he asked, bewildered by her frantic shout.

\*Beldrea and Kelenis are furious with each other! I think they’re fighting!\* Edraele exclaimed, sounding appalled at her wards’ behaviour.

Exploding into action, John darted out of the bedroom, then rushed into the corridor outside. He sprinted towards the lounge and burst through the doors, to find the two matriarchs grappling in a ferocious catfight. A glass decanter was smashed on the floor next to them, one of the chaise longues had been tipped over in the vicious melee, and their dresses were ripped and torn.

“You worthless bitch!” Bedrea screeched, clawing at the other Maliri’s face.

“Fuck you, Kayden whore!” Kelenis snarled, fending her off with one hand and savagely yanking Bedrea’s hair.

The doors John had flung open slammed into the wall like a cannon blast. The matriarchs both froze, their heads snapping around to stare at him in shock. He made a chopping gesture towards them and several sets of telekinetic hands forcibly separated the two bedraggled combatants. John strode over to the pair, noting that Kelenis had a bloody lip and Bedrea had bleeding scratches on her cheek.

“What the hell do you two think you’re doing?!” he thundered at the panting matriarchs.

“She started it!” Kelenis exclaimed, eyes blazing with hatred as she pointed at Beldrea.

“It was all her fault, Baen’thelas!” Beldrea cried indignantly, stabbing a finger at the other matriarch. “Her House is pitiful! She isn’t even worthy of being here!”

“You’re only rank 15, you pretentious slut!” Kelenis shrieked, tugging at the glowing hands holding her back.

“Stop it! Both of you!” he barked. “You’re acting like a couple of spoilt children!”

There was a moment of stunned silence as their adrenalin wore off and the two matriarchs calmed down. Then, realisation at what they’d done sunk in and the two noblewoman looked at him in horror.

“Didn’t you listen to a word I said the other day?!” John demanded, glaring at each of them in turn. “There are dozens of hostile Progenitor empires out there, all of them eager to kill every last one of us! None of these petty rivalries mean anything anymore! Our only chance of surviving this war is if we work together... and you two are squabbling over House Rankings?!” he exclaimed in disbelief. “You’re both a disgrace to your Houses!”

The matriarchs cringed at his stern rebuke, their shoulders slumping in shame. With a curt gesture, John dismissed the telekinetic hands and released the pair, plopping them down unceremoniously in dishevelled heaps on the floor.

“Get up and get out. I’m not going to waste my time with women unworthy of the title of matriarch,” he snapped, pointing at the exit from Edraele’s suite. “Don’t come back until you’ve learned how to behave like adults.”

Both Maliri burst into tears and fled from the room, distraught at being banished from his presence.

John let out his breath in a haggard sigh, then righted the toppled sofa. He had just sat down when Edraele raced into the room, her eyes wild with alarm.

“Oh, John... I’m so sorry!” she exclaimed as she hurried over to join him. “I could sense how angry they were getting, but the situation escalated so quickly! They were both middle daughters, so I knew they’d be a handful, but I never expected them to start brawling in my suite!”

“Yeah, me neither,” he said with a wry smile. Reaching for the fretting Queen, he pulled her down onto his lap. “Don’t worry about it, Edraele, the first six matriarchs you paired up were all excellent matches. I wasn’t too harsh with those two was I?”

“No, I don’t think so. They both needed a good talking to after getting into a hair-pulling contest like that. I’ll go and speak to them in a few minutes, once they’ve calmed down a bit,” she replied, relaxing in his arms. Glancing up at John, she continued, “You shouldn’t have any trouble with the last two matriarchs; Faranise and Garinia are both sensible, level-headed women. Would you like me to send for them instead?”

He paused, then shook his head. “No, not right now... there’s a couple of things I want to discuss with you first. As I was yelling at those two, it struck me just how dire our situation is at the moment. I think we’ve done the right thing so far, strengthening your connection to the new matriarchs and unifying the Maliri. However, there are some other important tasks that we should address right now.”

“Name them and I’ll see that they’re begun at once,’’ Edraele replied, listening to him attentively.

“After dealing with House Waephyra last night, I was thinking that we should summon all the remaining fleets to Genthalas,” John said, looking away into the distance. “We sent the lower ranked fleets back to their own territories to wait their turn at being refitted, but it was mainly to avoid any trouble between rival fleets. I don’t think that’s much of a concern now, not with all the new matriarchs replacing their mothers. It makes more sense to have their fleets here, so they’re ready to crew thrall ships as soon as we start capturing them.”

“A sensible precaution. We’ll begin recalling the fleets immediately,” she said, nodding in agreement. “What else did you wish to discuss?”

“I’m worried about the Maliri males being stuck out on the borders in the trade stations. If a Progenitor does invade and starts destroying those space stations, even if we beat him, the Maliri will be doomed to extinction.”

“You could always step in and save us,” Edraele said, barely suppressing an eager smile.

“Yes, I’m sure you’d love that,” John said with a chuckle. “I think I’d struggle to keep up with demand though, even if Jade was helping out.”

She laughed and nodded, before her expression turned serious once more. “You make an excellent point. We do need to entice the males back to the homeworlds as quickly as possible.”

“How are the men organised on the trade stations?” John asked, looking at her with interest. “Do they have a single leader, like a patriarch? Or is there some other kind of leadership structure?”

“I’m not entirely sure,” Edraele ruefully admitted. “It wasn’t of much particular interest until recently. On the few occasions I did try to discover more, my female spies failed spectacularly. I attempted to bribe the males for the information, but they were all tight-lipped on the subject.”

“Ceraden’s the only Maliri male I know well,” John said, considering their options. “I’ll contact him and see if he can shed some light on the subject.”

“Would you like me to initiate the call for you from my study?” Edraele offered, rising from his lap.

“That would be great, thanks,” he replied, following her into the adjacent room.

“Were there any other urgent matters you wished to discuss with me?” the Maliri Queen asked as she opened up the comms interface.

“I think that’s it,” he said, settling into her chair. “Oh, how long until the psychic comms array will be up and running?”

“Construction should be completed by midday. Dana has sent me the updated schematics and I’m planning to send them personally as soon as the Ashanath have confirmed that their own array is finished.”

“Let me know when you’re ready. I’d like to be there.”

Edraele could sense his concern for her safety and she leaned down to give him a loving kiss. “I’ll never say no to an offer of your company, my Lord.”

She waved goodbye and left to speak to her two errant wards.

John didn’t have to wait long before Ceraden answered the call, the Maliri merchant appeared on the holo-screen, seated behind his desk at Geniya trading post.

“It’s Lady Luck’s most favoured son!” Ceraden exclaimed. “How are you doing, old friend?”

“I’m great thanks. I hope you and your family are all in good health?” John replied, returning his smile. “Is Myriana excited about the baby?”

“She’s absolutely radiant,” the Maliri gushed, his blue eyes sparkling. “So are Filaurel, Thessalia, and Syndra. Farryn and Ioelena have been a little queasy in the mornings, but I’m told such things are perfectly normal.”

“They’re all expecting too?” John asked, delighted for his friend. “Congratulations!”

Ceraden’s grin broadened. “I never imagined I’d become a father again, but those bewitching temptresses have been most persuasive. They’re all elated... and truth be told, I’ve never been happier.”

“I’m really pleased for all of you. I know how much all the Maliri engineers longed to have children.”

“Ah yes, they mentioned having lengthy conversations with you on Genthalas,” Ceraden remarked, his eyebrow rising. “As did my daughters, as it happens...”

John couldn’t help coughing awkwardly as he remembered what had followed those discussions. “Umm... yeah.”

Pausing for a moment, Ceraden studied John in fascination. “I must have been blind... how did I not see it before?” he murmured faintly, his expression shifting through a riot of emotions.

“See what?” John asked, feeling self-conscious.

Ceradon broke into a grin and opened his hands expansively. “I was merely admiring the resplendent aura of fortune that Lady Luck shines upon your handsome features! I hear from my chattering Naethala-doves that you have good news of your own to share? They mentioned that a certain quartet of enchanting young ladies, whose mouth-watering cuisine we sampled on Genthalas, might be joining my darling girls in experiencing the joys of motherhood?”

“That’s right... I’m going to be a father too,” he confirmed with a proud smile.

“Please accept my warmest congratulations,” Ceraden declared, shaking his head in admiration. “You aim high indeed, John. I can still scarcely believe that you’re going to have children with four of the... premiere chefs... in the Maliri Regency.”

John hesitated, unsure how forthcoming he should be over a comms channel.

“Considering their... culinary expertise... I would’ve been a fool to turn them down,” John replied, meeting the Maliri trader’s inquisitive gaze.

Ceraden looked at him with concern. “I hope it wasn’t just their... skills in the kitchen... that tempted you into such a union? My five daughters were born to Maliri noblewomen and I must warn you that having children with ill-suited partners is a disaster waiting to happen.”

“No, they’re not like that at all,” John replied, quick to defend the Young Matriarchs. “Instead of being obsessed with the power and prestige of their careers, like some of the ‘older chefs’ I’ve met, they’re all really lovely girls. I have no doubt that they’ll all be wonderful mothers to our children.”

“I’m greatly relieved to hear it,” Ceraden said, the tension easing from his furrowed brow. “We should meet up in person and you can tell me all about how the five of you first met. I’m sure it must make for a fascinating story.”

“Actually, that’s part of the reason why I called you,” John explained. “I haven’t been to Geniya in months and it would be great to get together for a drink. There are a few important questions I’d like to ask you about the trade stations that can’t wait though.”

Ceraden looked somewhat surprised, but gestured for John to continue. “Ask away, by all means.”

“Who actually runs the trade stations?” John enquired, leaning forward with interest. “I know they’re outside the matriarchs’ jurisdiction.”

Steepling his fingers together, Ceraden replied, “That’s correct, the matriarchs have limited influence here. Are you aware of the various guilds and consortiums that have been established on Geniya and the other trading stations?”

John shook his head. “No, I haven’t heard anything about them.”

“When the Maliri males first emigrated from the homeworlds, they renounced their House affiliations to maintain a peaceful existence,” Ceraden patiently explained. “It’s a tradition that we’ve adhered to in the centuries that followed. When young men arrive at Geniya, they choose a trade or profession, and are inducted into the relevant organisation. Leading representatives of those consortiums meet to decide the rules and regulations we follow on the trade stations.”

“Interesting...” John said, rubbing his chin. “So you’re in a trade guild then?”

“I am indeed. And held in high regard, as you might expect for a man of my mercantile prowess,” Ceraden replied, with an elaborate flourish.

“Have you told them anything about me, or the recent events on the homeworlds?” John asked, curious to find out the male viewpoint on the stations.

Ceraden guffawed, his laughter having a slightly hysterical edge to it. “I can just imagine how that conversation would go: ‘Good evening, gentlemen. I should probably warn you that the Mael’nerak has leapt out of a storybook and is back in charge of the Maliri. We’re about to go to war with the rest of his kind and he’s busy punishing all the naughty girls before we get started. Except he doesn’t punish them, he makes them sweet and kind instead’.”

Shaking his head with amusement, he continued, “They would think I’d taken leave of my senses! I have no desire to spend the foreseeable future locked in a room with padded walls.”

John let out a sigh of frustration. “So asking all the men to move back to the homeworlds probably isn’t going to go down well?”

The flamboyant trader gave him a rueful frown. “It would go as well as you might expect, given their utter disdain for the matriarchs. I recall warning you that the homeworlds were a nest of treacherous vipers... and I’m considered overly trusting by many of my erstwhile brethren.”

After pondering that for a long moment, John asked, “If I visit Geniya Station, would you be able to introduce me to the leaders of the consortiums?”

“I would certainly be willing to make the introductions, but I couldn’t begin to guess how you would be received. Maliri males and females have been living completely separate lives for many centuries now and the thought of returning to the homeworlds would be unthinkable to most men I know. Why would they agree to give up their safety and autonomy for a life as a second-class citizen?”

“I see what you mean,” John conceded. “I’d need to find a way of convincing them that they were no longer in danger here and that their lives would actually be improved by returning to the homeworlds.”

“Exactly. You’re faced with a formidable task,” Ceraden agreed with a rueful frown. “I’ve heard all sorts of rumours here about escalating conflicts between the matriarchs and even shocked rumblings about Edraele naming herself Queen. I’ve done nothing to confirm or deny any of those rumours, but as long as the matriarchs are in power, events on the homeworlds will be viewed with great suspicion.”

“Okay, well thanks a lot for the advice,” John said gratefully. “I’ll have to think about finding a way I can put all their worries at ease.”

Ceraden looked at John speculatively. “Why would you even desire such a thing anyway?”

“For two reasons really. The first is that the Maliri birth rate is at abysmal levels and we need to get men and women mixing together socially to fix that. The second is that the trade stations could be in danger if we are facing a Progenitor invasion. If they were to be destroyed, losing all the men would be catastrophic to Maliri chances of avoiding extinction as a species.”

“The trade stations are in danger?!” Ceraden blurted out in shock.

“It’s a distinct possibility,” John replied, his expression grim. “I’m willing to do almost anything I can to protect them, but there’s no guarantees during war. We’re facing immensely powerful enemies who are cruel and ruthless towards their opponents. If a Progenitor does discover the existence of the trade stations and they’re within striking distance, I’d say that it’s highly likely they’ll come under devastating attack.”

Badly shaken, Ceraden slumped in his seat. “Edraele warned me about the likelihood of war... but it all seemed so utterly implausible, especially when she overwhelmed me with everything else as well.”

“I’m sorry, old friend,” John said quietly. “If I could avoid this, I would, but it’s just a matter of time before the Progenitors find us and start launching attacks. Our only chance of survival is to bury all the old enmities and pull together as a united people.”

Ceraden gave him a strained smile. “I’ll do what I can to aid you... I just don’t know how we can change peoples’ attitudes as you suggest. The Maliri are not like Terrans, John... appeals to nationalistic pride are likely to fall on deaf ears.”

“Thanks for the support. I’ll get back to you as soon as I think of any new ideas.”

“Farewell, my friend... and good luck,” Ceraden said, giving him a forlorn wave goodbye.

John leaned back in the comfortable high-backed chair and mulled over everything he’d learned in the conversation. \*Ladies, do you have any suggestions?\*

\*I’ll need a little time to think of some possible solutions,\* Edraele murmured. \*At the moment I’m consoling a distraught Beldrea Kayden.\*

\*I’m going to discuss it with the girls,\* Alyssa eagerly replied. \*Don’t worry, John. We’ll help you come up with a way of bringing the men around.\*

There was a brief pause as Jade waited for her fellow matriarchs to finish speaking, then she said confidently, \*You need only address them, Master. I’ve seen you rouse many a crowd with stirring speeches... I do not believe the Maliri males will be any exception. Far from it in fact.\*

John drummed his fingers on the armrest of the chair. \*That was my gut instinct as well, but Ceraden seemed sceptical that it would work. It’s a shame we don’t know how Maliri males respond to Progenitor genetic conditioning, or if they’re even affected at all.\*

\*You needed no such assistance to lift the hearts of all the Terrans during the award ceremonies,\* she reminded him. \*Even I wished to fight for the glory of the Terran Federation after listening to you motivate the troops.\*

He smiled fondly at his earnest Nymph’s infallible belief in her master. \*I think you might be a little biased, Jade... but I really appreciate the vote of confidence. Let’s all get together tomorrow morning and see if we can hammer out a concrete plan.\*

The trio murmured their agreement, all of them now pre-occupied with thinking about how to bring the divided Maliri people together.

\*Oh, John, I’ve spoken to Faranise Eshenestria and Garinia Quisayne to let them know that you might be available to see them soon. Would you like me to send for them now?\*

\*Where are they at the moment?\* John asked, rising from his chair.

Edraele took a few moments to respond as she checked with Genthalas security. \*Garinia is visiting Faranise in the House Eshenestria suite.\*

\*I could do with a change of scenery,\* he said decisively, striding from Edraele’s study. \*I’ll go and meet them there.\*

\*As you wish, John. I’ll arrange a guide.\*

When he left Edraele’s quarters, one of the guards cleared her throat to get his attention. “Queen Edraele requested that we accompany you to the House Eshenestria quarters.”

“I feel safer already,” he replied with a playful smile.

Both Maliri laughed and fell into step beside him. John caught them darting furtive glances his way as they walked along Genthalas’ golden halls, but he decided not to strike up a conversation unless prompted. Instead, he made a game of trying to catch their eye when they flicked a curious look in his direction, making them blush every time.

Before he knew it, they had arrived at their destination. He thanked the two beaming guards, then tapped the rune beside the door to let Faranise know that he’d arrived. The crystal door spiralled upwards an instant later and John walked into the spacious apartment.

“Lord Baen’thelas, welcome to my new home,” the Eshenestria matriarch gushed, gliding over to greet him.

Garinia Quisayne was more reserved, as he expected from an elder daughter. Even so, she couldn’t prevent a joyful smile from spreading across her face as she rose from the sofa.

“It was a pleasant surprise being able to meet you so much early than we expected,” Garinia said, bowing to him respectfully.

“It’s a pleasant surprise for me that you two aren’t trying to claw each other’s eyes out,” John said, taking Faranise’s hand and giving it a kiss. “I didn’t fancy breaking up another brawl this morning.”

Faranise stared at him wide-eyed as his lips brushed the back of her hand. “Really? Beldrea and Kelenis were fighting?”

“How disgraceful,” Garinia muttered, shaking her head in shocked disapproval.

“That’s exactly what I said,” John agreed, walking back to the sofa hand-in-hand with Faranise. “I was disappointed in them more than anything though.”

“You did say that you wanted us to be close friends and loyal allies,” Faranise said, before smiling at the other matriarch. “That’s why I invited Garinia here, so that we could get to know one another better.”

“That was a great idea,” John said, suitably impressed.

Garinia noted how much he approved and quickly nodded her agreement.

Gesturing towards an ornate bottle on the table, Faranise asked, “Would you care for a drink, Baen’thelas? This beverage is made from Liakas berries, native to my homeworld.”

“I’d love to try some, thank you,” he said gratefully.

Using the same deferential tone, Faranise turned to her other guest. “Would you care for a refill, Garinia?”

The elder daughter held herself taller and inclined her head in reply. “Yes... thank you.”

“This is delicious,” John said with an appreciative smile.

Faranise beamed at him in delight. “Now whenever you taste them, hopefully you’ll think of me.”

“I know I will,” he agreed, clinking his glass with hers.

John watched the way the two matriarchs interacted with him and each other, trying to get a feel for their distinctive personalities.

“Well, I’m at your disposal this morning, ladies. Rather than me dictate how we should spend that time, do either of you have any preferences?” he asked, sipping from his fluted glass.

They both flushed and John could only imagine what thoughts first crossed their minds. Garinia then looked perplexed as she tried to come up with an imaginative suggestion other than just leaping into bed together.

Faranise had no such difficulty and looked him straight in the eye. “If it’s not too presumptuous, I’d like to know more about you, Baen’thelas. Would you mind answering some personal questions?”

“Sure, I have no objections. What would you like to know?” he asked intrigued by the sparkle of intelligence in her sapphire gaze.

“Everything about you! What your life was like being raised as a Terran, what brought you to the Maliri and if you’ve had any difficulty adapting to our customs, and I’m curious what your aspirations are for the future?” she quickly responded. “And of course, I’d love to know what traits you admire in a woman...”

Garinia looked startled by her companion’s sudden boldness and blurted out, “Yes, I’d like to know that too!”

“Alright, let me start with my background first,” John suggested, sitting down on the sofa and gesturing for the two Maliri to join him. “Get comfortable and I’ll tell you everything you want to know.”

\*Faranise is a smart one, isn’t she?\* John remarked to Edraele.

\*She is indeed, John,\* the Maliri Queen replied, delighted that he was as enamoured with the lovely young noblewoman as she hoped he’d be.

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Kehlarissa stood before the full length mirror, admiring the gorgeous curtain of white hair that cascaded over her shoulders and fell down her back. Decades of cultural pressure told her that she should be ashamed of her scandalous appearance, but that couldn’t be further from the way she actually felt at that moment. Her new hair marked Kehlarissa as one of Baen’thelas’ elite; the women at the very pinnacle of Maliri noble society who had been selected to bear his children.

The House Venkalyn matriarch knew that she would become stronger, quicker, and tougher than all the millions of lesser Maliri females she rightfully ruled over. Kehlarissa felt a thrill run through her body as she remembered Baen’thelas’ promise... that he would enhance her to the peak of mental and physical perfection. Shrugging her robe off her shoulders, she stood nude before the mirror. Turning from side-to-side, she admired her stunning reflection, marvelling at how beautiful she looked already.

With her back to the mirror, she tilted her head and brushed her long mane out of the way, then studied herself over a shoulder. The patchwork of ugly scars that had disfigured her back for seventy years was gone. In its place was deliciously smooth and soft blue skin, as flawless and perfect as Kehlarissa knew she was destined to be. Her heart welled up with gratitude to the man who had freely bestowed such miraculous gifts, the unfamiliar sensation making her giddy with happiness.

Her joy was shattered as a chime from the door reverberated through her quarters. Kehlarissa wasn’t expecting any visitors and the one person she would’ve loved to see was busy meeting the rest of the matriarchs before the party. Scowling with irritation, she picked up her robe and slipped it on again, then marched over to the wall-mounted intercom.

“Yes, who is it?” she demanded, hoping that her dismissive tone would drive away this unwanted visitor.

“It’s me! I mean, it’s Phelora,” the Romenor matriarch stammered, sounding upset. “I’m really sorry to bother you, but I was hoping I could ask you for some advice?”

Gritting her teeth in irritation, Kehlarissa managed to choke back a cutting remark as she remembered her promise to Baen’thelas. “Alright... come in.”

Stalking from her bedroom, she stopped outside the lounge door and took a moment to compose herself. Keeping her temper until tight control, she strode into the reception area to find Phelora fidgeting anxiously.

Deciding to forego any small talk, Kehlarissa asked sharply, “You need advice? What’s the problem?”

Phelora looked at her with such desperation, the older noblewoman wasn’t sure if she should feel pity or contempt. She settled on both.

“I know Edraele said that she’d start training me how to be a good matriarch, but I’ve been getting all these messages from my planetary governors, all demanding urgent assistance with so many problems! My House is falling into ruin and I don’t know how to answer any of their questions!” Her face crumpled as she admitted, “I tried to warn Baen’thelas that I’d make a terrible matriarch... I feel so ashamed at letting him down. Can you help me, Kehlarissa? Please?”

Kehlarissa had to actually bite her tongue to stop herself berating the other matriarch for being so pathetic. There was a long moment of uncomfortable silence until she finally grunted, “Yes. Follow me.”

“Oh, thank you so much!” Phelora gasped, overwhelmed with gratitude.

Leading her uninvited guest through to the study, Kehlarissa activated a console built into the desk. Six holographic screens sprung to life before them and she began opening applications, covering the floating panels with a dazzling array of graphs and spreadsheets.

“I’ve been using this software to run House Venkalyn for decades,” Kehlarissa explained, her irritation fading away as she proudly showed off her work for the first time. “My mother focused on matriarchal politics and her scheming, leaving me to administer the systems under our control.”

“Oh, wow...” Phelora murmured, gazing at the impressive display in awe.

Kehlarissa smiled with satisfaction, delighted at how she had stunned her companion with her brilliance. Unfortunately, Phelora promptly burst into tears, ruining the older matriarch’s moment of ego-stroking glory.

“What’s wrong?” she asked, bewildered by the young Maliri’s reaction.

“I don’t even know what any of this means!” Phelora sobbed, waving a hand at the holo-screens. “It’s going to take me months to even find all this information, let alone understand how to make sense of it all!”

Kehlarissa clenched her jaw shut to stop herself from making any of a dozen snide comments. She closed her eyes and slipped a hand inside her robe to stroke her bare stomach, picturing her belly swelling with John’s child.

\*Just remember what’s at stake. It’s all going to be worth it,\* she sternly reminded herself. \*You just have to endure her insipid whining for a few days, then she’ll be Edraele’s problem.\*

She drew a deep breath, then slowly reopened her eyes. Kehlarissa’s hands danced over the runic interface as she dismissed her work, then created blank templates for House Romenor.

Turning to Phelora, she said quietly, “There’s no need to get upset. I can help you locate and input all the data we need for the system productivity overview. It should just take us a few hours to set up.”

“Really?” the younger matriarch asked, looking at her through tear-streaked eyes.

Kehlarissa nodded confidently. “We need to access the Planetary Administration data repositories for your House to find all the information we’re looking for. Do you know the access codes for those archives?”

Phelora bit her lip and shook her head.

Her mentor hesitated, then asked, “Do you even know how to access House Romenor’s data repositories?”

The request was met with another forlorn head shake.

Kehlarissa sighed with weary resignation. She knew this morning was going to test her patience to its very limits.

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The camera zoomed in on the reporter’s handsome face, his neatly coiffed hair seemingly immune to the breeze blowing through the outskirts of Unity City.

“This is Bill Armstrong from Terran Federation Network News, bringing you a special report from the Military Court of Justice,” he said, turning to gesture behind him towards the stately courthouse.

The monolithic building had survived the Kintark bombardment of the Terran capital with minimal damage, although its granite walls had been scorched black by plasma fire. Repairs had already been completed and it stood like a dark grey sentinel overlooking the city, an icon for harsh military justice against those who would betray the institution they had sworn to protect.

“Today we saw the preliminary hearing for the trial against Commander Thomas Walker. He’s being charged with treason and conspiracy to commit murder, for the part he is alleged to have played in the Callopean Shoals massacre. Temperatures were high in the court room this morning as angry crowds reacted to the reading of the charges.”

The report switched to recorded footage, with Tom Walker dressed in his military uniform, seated next to his sharp-suited lawyer. Standing in front of the jury of senior military officers, the prosecutor read out the list of charges.

“Commander Thomas Walker, you have been formally charged with treason against the Terran Federation and 347,189 counts of conspiracy to commit murder. How do you plead to these charges?”

The lawyer nodded to Tom, who cleared his throat and declared, “Not guilty.”

“You rat bastard!” a man from the viewing gallery yelled, breaking the tense silence. “You helped those fucking fishboys murder my sister!”

The public gallery erupted in a cacophony of angry shouts and curses as other relatives of the victims hurled abuse at Commander Walker.

“Order in the court!” the judge demanded, slamming down his gavel. “Baliffs, clear the viewing gallery!”

Heavily armed soldiers wearing the dark brown colours of the judiciary forcibly removed the crowds, some of whom had to be dragged out of the courtroom kicking and screaming.

The camera switched back to Bill Armstrong, whose expression was a picture of grim disapproval.

“Join us for daily coverage of the trial, as we determine the innocence... or guilt... of the man some people are now calling ‘The Rat of the Federation’. This is Bill Armstrong, signing off for TFNN.”

Bill paused the recording, then turned around to grin at his Chief Editor. “What do you reckon, Avery? Is that solid gold or what?!”

Avery Gibson gave a noncommittal grunt. “Who were you frowning at during that final segment? The protesting crowds, the judge for kicking them out, Tom Walker, or the Admiralty for charging him with treason?”

The reporter faltered, turning back to look at his stern expression frozen on-screen. “The crowds for disrupting the trial?” he asked, suddenly sounding unsure of himself.

“So what happens if Walker is found guilty? Then it looks like you disapprove of grieving relatives giving an evil monster a piece of their mind.”

Bill visibly deflated. “Do you want me to reshoot it?”

“How likely is it that Walker is innocent?” Avery asked, dearly missing his star reporter. He knew that he wouldn’t have had to spoon feed Jehanna Elani like this.

“They’ve got reams of evidence against him!” Bill replied, perking up again. “There’s correspondence with the Brimorians, secret bank accounts, black box recordings from the battle, testimonials from experts all proving he’s guilty... I’ve got a reliable contact in the prosecutor’s office; apparently it’s an open and shut case!”

“Alright, run with it,” Avery said, dismissing him with a weary wave.

“You got it, Chief!” Bill gushed, turning and running for programme scheduling.

“I’ve got your coffee, Mr. Gibson, Sir!” an intern gasped, carefully presenting him with a steaming mug.

“Thanks,” Avery muttered, taking the mug and shutting his office door with a melancholy sigh.

The intern stared at him in shock, never having been thanked by the foul-tempered Chief Editor before.

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“How may I serve you today, matriarch?” the planetary governor for Aerona asked, her tone practically a sneer of contempt.

“I’ve just been reading your latest report,” Phelora mumbled, coughing nervously before looking up again.

“Yes, matriarch?” the bureaucrat replied, her mocking smirk filling the holo-screen. “Did you need me to explain something for you?”

“It says here that you’re having trouble with malfunctioning mining robots and you’re requesting extra funds to fix them? That you’ve mined 27 million tons of iron so far, but you’re now 5 million tons behind your target?”

“That’s right, matriarch.” The planetary governor said condescendingly, a sly smile appearing on her face. “I’m sure the extra credits I’ve requested will help us repair them in time to meet the quota.”

Ignoring her request for more money, Phelora glanced at the previous productivity report that had been sent to Meriel Romenor.

“I’ve also been reviewing last month’s report,” she declared, her voice turning hard and cold. “Apparently, you told my mother that you’d mined 30 million tons to date. So what happened to the missing 3 million tons? Did the mining robots bury it under the ground again?”

The governor’s eyes widened in shock as her ruse was discovered. “Ah no, matriarch... I think you misunderstood-“

“I understand all too well, Gaelira,” Phelora interjected ominously. “Now, do you wish to correct this erroneous report, or should I have you dragged outside and shot for corruption? I’m sure it would be a useful lesson to my other governors.”

Gaelira blanched, turning a very sickly pale blue. “I-I’ll correct the report, matriarch,” she stammered in terror.

“There better not be another mistake next time, Governor,” Phelora warned her, before abruptly ending the call.

Unable to hold it in any longer, Kehlarissa burst out laughing.

Phelora spun her chair around and cheered. “I did it!”

“That was brilliant,” Kehlarissa declared, feeling a surge of pride for her protégé. “‘Did the robots bury the ore again?’... where did you get the idea for that line?”

“It just came to me!” Phelora marvelled, grinning with joy. “I’ve never been any good at sharp comebacks, but this time I knew exactly what to say. Thanks so much, Kehlarissa, I couldn’t have done it without you!”

Phelora sprang from her seat and wrapped her arms around the other noblewoman, giving Kehlarissa an exuberant hug. Caught completely by surprise, she froze for a moment, then relaxed and returned the embrace. As they held each other, the Venkalyn matriarch couldn’t help noticing how warm and soft Phelora was, the physical contact reminding her of their time in bed together with Baen’thelas. Unlike the exhilarating thrill she got from being held in John’s arms, this embrace was strangely comforting, a feeling that she didn’t want to let go.

They stood together for a long time, until Phelora slowly pulled back and looked at her curiously. “That was lovely. Thank you.”

The Venkalyn matriarch blushed self-consciously and turned away. “You should return to your quarters. I’ve got some work I need to do before we leave for the party tonight.”

“Alright, I won’t disturb you any longer,” Phelora agreed. She walked towards the door, then turned to study her friend. “Thank you helping me today. I think you’re amazing.”

Kehlarissa was torn how to reply, but by the time she turned back, Phelora was gone.

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John fell back on the bed and panted for breath, recovering after a powerful climax, courtesy of the two Maliri kneeling before him. Faranise and Garinia now had stomachs full of cum, both dazed from bring mentally connected to him for a second time. He wasn’t alone on the bed for long, as Edraele and Luna slipped around the comatose matriarchs to cuddle up next to him.

“You really enjoyed giving Faranise a full tummy, didn’t you?” Edraele purred, gently cupping his aching quad.

“She’s lovely,” John agreed, reaching for the Maliri Queen and pulling her into a grateful hug.

Luna snuggled in closer, trying to get as much of her nude body in contact with him as possible. “It’s so exciting seeing these matriarchs submit to you. I’m so envious of them.”

“You are?” he asked, slipping an arm around her shoulders.

The assassin planted a tender kiss on his chest. “Mmmhmm. If they can make you fall for them hard enough, they’ve got a good chance of convincing you to start a family.”

John chuckled and glanced at Edraele. “So that’s your game plan is it?”

“I’m just fulfilling my role as your matriarch, my Lord,” she replied softly. “My job is to take care of my wards and make sure they’re happy... and what could make them happier?”

“I’ve fallen for you two pretty hard,” John said, giving them each a loving kiss. “Maybe I should do my best to make both of you happy too?”

Luna and Edraele darted a shocked glance at each other, then turned to face him and both said at once, “Really?!”

“I want to... so much,” he admitted, stroking their backs. “You’re both incredible women and seeing you together... you’re so in love. I can’t wait to watch you tenderly kissing each other, with my babies kicking in your wombs, reminding you who you belong to.”

Grinding against him, Luna let out a lusty moan, her eyelashes fluttering as she brought herself off with that thought overwhelming her mind.

“Don’t, my Lord... it’s too tempting,” Edraele groaned in protest, parting her legs to straddle his thigh. She whimpered through a mind-melting climax as she rubbed her throbbing clit against him.

He smiled with satisfaction to see them both looking up at him with glazed eyes. “Why not? We’d just have to keep the two of you far away from any fighting. Luna could still train me in swordsmanship before she starts to show and we can replace her as your bodyguard with a hundred of your best troops.”

Luna’s face lit up with hope, but Edraele bit her lip and reluctantly shook her head. “We can’t, John. You need my daughters fighting at your side, and just think how much you want to get the three of us pregnant at the same time.”

John was about to argue, but he couldn’t deny her reasoning. “I’m sorry, girls... I didn’t meant to tease you. I shouldn’t have suggested it.”

Far from being upset, Luna propped herself up on one elbow and gazed down at him in wonder. “Were you serious? Would you have done it, if not for needing Tashana and Irillith for combat?”

“You’re gorgeous, Luna... and extremely bright, talented, and loving. I was telling Faranise and Garinia the things I find most appealing in a woman and you tick every box... so yeah, I was serious.”

She let out a happy little sigh of contentment, then snuggled up against him again.

“Are you alright, Edraele?” he asked with concern.

“It’s lovely to be so wanted,” she purred, gently stroking his chest. “And now I get to share the afterglow with you too. Trust me, I have zero complaints.”

“It is getting harder to resist,” he admitted, savouring the feel of their statuesque bodies pressed against him. “So many of the new matriarchs are incredibly attractive girls and I know what they want from me more than anything. The problem is that I want that too, and the thought of getting the entire Council of Matriarchs pregnant is such a turn on.”

“Even Emandra Holaris?” Edraele asked with a knowing smile.

He groaned in protest. “Alright, that’s a good point. She always seems to just fade into the background whenever I fantasise about it.”

“Give her enough time and she’ll be as kind-hearted as Kali,” Edraele said, relaxing in his arms. “I’m quite certain that you’ll get to enjoy your fantasy eventually.”

John gave them both a squeeze and said, “I’m so glad I asked you to join me; this was so much nicer than lying her alone.”

Sitting up, he gestured towards the dazed matriarchs and levitated them onto the bed, where Luna and Edraele waited to tuck them in.

Luna noticed that his eyes were drawn to Faranise as she slept. “You really do like her, don’t you?”

He nodded, and stroked the youthful matriarch’s bare arm. “She realised that her mother and sisters would be even more abusive if they felt threatened by how smart she was, so Faranise hid her intellect and played dumb. She endured decades of cruel taunts from her family, yet she was far smarter and more gifted than any of them. She’s a remarkable woman.”

Edraele clasped his hand and gave it a squeeze. “Let’s go transmit the schematics to the Ashanath, then you can come back to see her again. I’m sure she’d love it if you were here when she woke up.”

John frowned with resignation. “I should probably see Beldrea and Kelenis before the party. They’re the only new matriarchs I haven’t fed a second time, so they’ll be left with short hair.”

“Let them wait,” Edraele said with a mischievous smile. “I think it might do them some good.”

He thought it over, then chuckled and nodded his agreement. The trio dressed and left the two matriarchs asleep in Faranise’s bed.

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Considering the vast size of the psychic communications device, with its delicate amplification veins that stretched for over a hundred metres, the size of the control system was tiny. A padded seat was set in a partially-reclined position, with telepathic sensors surrounding the headrest. Holographic screens displayed the digital information being conveyed, with each panel positioned at a comfortable viewing angle.

John eyed the device with a healthy degree of suspicion. “Maybe I should test this out first instead of you?”

Edraele laughed and pointed to the flashing note in the corner of the holo-screen. It read: “Don’t let John get overprotective and take your place. We don’t know how powerful he is now and he could blow out the entire psychic array!”

\*I helped Sparks successfully test a prototype yesterday,\* Alyssa explained, her soothing voice echoing through John’s mind. \*She increased the sensitivity for Edraele, which will make it much easier for her to control.\*

\*You really think I’d fry it?\* John asked curiously.

\*Well you can block me out of your mind, so I think we can safely assume you’re stronger than I am,\* the blonde replied. \*We’ve already uploaded all the new schematics, so Edraele only has to focus on them and picture them in her mind. The psychic comms array will recreate that psychic projection, then bounce it across the upper Astral to the Ashanath’s receiving device.\*

\*A bit like skimming stones across the surface of a lake?\* John asked, trying to think of a useful metaphor.

\*Yes, exactly!\*

Edraele acknowledged the telepathic instructions with a nod, having been informed at the same time. Before she could begin, one of the holo-screens shimmered and Senior Councillor Ularean appeared, his image psychically projected across hundreds of light years in an instant.

“How wonderful to make contact with you, EdraeleValaden!” Ularean gushed, overjoyed to speak to the Maliri Queen using telepathy.

“It’s great being able to speak to you too, Ularean,” she replied, shocked by the warmth in his tone. “Your voice sounds so different from the Ashanath I’ve spoken to before.”

“Ah... Councillor Rathus informs me that the psychic transmitters and receivers in this device are far more sophisticated than the ones in our voice modulators. The voice you are hearing now, is how all Ashanath sound to one another when communicating telepathically.”

\*The system replicates both sides of the telepathic conversation on the holo-screens, so that non-psychics can follow any discussion,\* Alyssa helpfully explained.

“I have John here with me, Ularean,” Edraele told the Ashanath leader, darting a smile at him.

“JohnBlake!” Ularean exclaimed, sounding delighted. “I was not aware you would be there to witness this historic test.”

John was about to tell Edraele what he wanted to say in reply to the Ashanath leader when a faint silvery flicker caught his eye. He could see the wispy eldritch cord snaking away from Edraele to the psychic device, being drawn directly into the receiver. Acting by instinct, he reached out with his mind and made the lightest of telepathic contact to that ephemeral connection. He was instantly able to sense Edraele and Ularean, their minds like beautiful shining stars, glimmering with their own inner radiance.

“I can sense you, John!” Edraele gasped, turning to look at him. Her purple eyes widened in astonishment.

Ularean gaped at him too, his mouth falling open in shock. “Oh my goodness!”

\*Are you alright, Ularean?\* John asked telepathically. \*Tell me if this is hurting you in any way and I’ll stop immediately.\*

John’s face appeared on the holo-screen, positioned as if he was standing beside the equally startled Maliri Queen.

\*I am unharmed,\* the Senior Councillor murmured, a look of wonder on his face. \*But your mind... the scale of it is like nothing I have ever seen before. You remind me of the radiant one... but so much more.\*

\*I’m very new at this,\* John said, frowning with concentration. \*Dana warned me not to overload the receivers so I’m trying to hold back as much as I can.\*

\*This is... not your full strength?\* Ularean stammered, blinking rapidly.

\*The machine isn’t reading me directly,\* he explained, glancing at the astral cord. \*I noticed the psychic connection between you and Edraele, then I tried to make the lightest contact I could, so I wouldn’t accidentally fry the receivers.\*

\*How fascinating...\* Ularean murmured, listening with great interest. \*So you were able to visualise our telepathic conduit?\*

\*Is that a problem?\* John asked with concern.

\*Far from it, if the talent is used with caution,\* the Ashanath replied, his small mouth turning up into a smile. \*There are a few members of the Collective who have that capability, but those that do take great care not to intrude on private conversations lest they cause offence.\*

\*So this is considered rude? I’m sorry about that, Ularean... I’ll end my connection.\*

\*No, JohnBlake... you misunderstand,\* Ularean replied, holding up a spindly hand. \*My conversation with Edraele was not intended for her mind alone, so you caused no offence by merging with us. I merely mentioned it to give you an insight into telepathic etiquette... or at least how it is perceived on Ashana.\*

\*Okay, I’ll bear that in mind next time we visit,\* John said with a friendly smile. \*Anyway, I hope you and the rest of the councillors are doing well, Ularean?\*

\*We are all in excellent health, thank you for the enquiry,\* Ularean said politely. \*Although Councillor Rathus and Councillor Talari are growing increasingly impatient as they wait for the design schematics from DanaBlake.\*

John got the impression that the two Ashanath councillors must have been badgering their leader to hurry up and Ularean’s reply was intended to embarrass them rather than expedite the conversation. By the look of amusement on the Senior Councillor’s face, he guessed it had worked as intended.

\*I won’t keep you waiting any longer. I must admit, I’m curious to see what Dana’s come up with myself,\* John said, before turning to Edraele. \*I’ll disconnect now. I don’t want to accidentally disrupt your transmission of the schematics to Ularean.\*

The Maliri was studying him in fascination, and he realised that she hadn’t said a word since he hijacked their telepathic conversation.

\*Goodbye Ularean, it was nice speaking to you,\* John said, before ending his contact with the psychic conduit.

“The pleasure was mine, JohnBlake,” the Ashanath replied on the holo-screen.

“Are you alright, honey?” John asked, walking over to clasp Edraele’s hand.

She rubbed at her eyes and nodded. “I can’t believe how much your Astral presence has changed since you confronted your guide.”

“Tell me about it afterwards,” he said, giving her hand a gentle squeeze.

“Of course,” she agreed, before concentrating on the holo-screen. “I’m transmitting the schematics now, Ularean.”

John turned to look at the new ships’ designs and was amazed by their breathtaking profile. Alyssa had managed to find a perfect balance with the aesthetics, making it obvious that the beautifully styled ships were deadly and not to be underestimated, without making them appear overtly sinister.

Ularean looked overjoyed as he gazed at the new blueprints, admiring each ship’s graceful lines. As he began to rotate the cruiser class vessel to study it from different angles, his big eyes widened to huge black pools.

“O-o-oh my goodness!” he stammered in an awed whisper.

His image turned fuzzy and indistinct, then abruptly the Ashanath leader disconnected from the psychic comms device.

“What happened to Ularean?” John asked, turning to look at Edraele in surprise.

“I’m not sure,” she replied, shrugging helplessly. “He seemed delighted... and then I suddenly lost contact with him.”

The minutes stretched on, with all of Edraele’s attempts to re-establish psychic communications in vain. She rose from her chair and tried to contact the Ashanath High council via standard interstellar communications, but there was no response there either.

“Something must have gone badly wrong,” John said with concern, as he stared at the blank comms interface. “There wasn’t a psychic backlash or anything like that was there?”

“No, John... nothing of the kind,” Edraele replied, looking equally perplexed. “I didn’t sense any distress from Ularean before he disconnected, far from it in fact.”

“Yeah, that was my impression as well,” he agreed, rubbing his chin. “I guess all we can do is wait and try to get in contact with them again later.”

They were just about to leave the psychic projection chamber when a light flashed on the holo-screen and a melodic chime announced an incoming call. Edraele hurried over to retake her seat and wasted no time accepting the Ashanath leader’s psychic connection.

Ularean appeared on the screen, tears rolling down his tiny grey cheeks. “JohnBlake... I-I am lost for words.”

John reached out to rejoin the psychic connection. \*Are you crying? What the hell happened, Ularean?!\*

The Grey leader took a moment to compose himself. \*Please accept my humblest apologies. I was so overcome that I was unable to maintain the telepathic conduit; I had never seen anything quite so beautiful before. Councillor Rathus has had to lie down to recover.\*

Astonished by their reaction, John shared a bewildered glance with Edraele. \*Well, I’ll tell Dana and Alyssa that you really liked the new ships. They’ll be thrilled that you approve.\*

\*Oh please do!\* he gushed, bobbing his head. \*For many years we have struggled to encourage our people to volunteer for military service. I am quite certain that your wonderful companions have solved such recruitment problems in an instant. We shall have statues commissioned in the shipyards in their honour!\*

\*I’m sure they’ll really appreciate that... thanks very much,\* John replied, still just as bemused by the ecstatic reception the schematics had received. \*We’ve included new weapon technology in those warships as well, so don’t hesitate to contact Dana if your engineers have any queries.\*

\*Once again, we are overwhelmed by your generosity, JohnBlake. The day you first made yourself known to the Collective was a pivotal moment in Ashanath history. We wish you the greatest of fortune in your travels.\*

As soon as John and Edraele had said goodbye, the Ashanath leader ended the call.

“Well that was strange,” John said, turning to the Maliri Queen. “I thought he’d be pleased, but not quite that much!”

She slipped her hand into his. “Perhaps you dazzled him with your psychic presence? You’re *very* impressive, John.”

“Oh yeah, I meant to ask about that,” he asked, turning to place his hands on her hips. “What was that like?”

Edraele was quiet for a moment, then cupped his cheek in her hand. “You’re so kind and unassuming, I sometimes forget just how incredibly powerful you are. Seeing you like that, in your pure astral form, it reminded me that I’m in the presence of...”

Her voice trailed away and she gazed at him in wonder.

“Of what, Edraele?” John asked, waiting for her to finish her sentence. She blushed and looked down, until he gently lifted her chin to make eye contact again. “Please tell me, honey.”

“You’re going to think that I’m being ridiculous, but I have no other way of describing what I saw. I felt as if I were in the presence of a god... A being so powerful as to be beyond my mortal comprehension.”

He broke into a smile. “Come on... you’re kidding me, right?”

“No, John... I’m being absolutely sincere. You witnessed Ularean’s reaction to your presence and he saw but a pale shadow of your magnificence. He would have reacted *very* differently if you met him in person on the Ashanath Command subplane.”

“I guess I’ve grown a fair bit recently,” John conceded, lost in thought. “We have been through a lot since I met you and the Young Matriarchs on the Maliri border.”

“You have indeed,” she said with sympathy, giving him a tender kiss. “It’s a privilege to... be your friend, John.”

“I feel the same way about you, Edraele,” he said, giving her a grateful smile in return. “Thanks for everything you’ve done for me and the girls.”

“You’re most welcome,” she replied, embracing him.

\*You were going to say that it’s a privilege to serve him, weren’t you?\* Alyssa asked quietly as John and Edraele left the psychic projection chamber.

\*I couldn’t help myself,\* Edraele murmured in reply. \*I don’t think he has any idea how staggeringly powerful he’s become...\*

\*Master’s becoming the cat!\* Jade declared, sounding thrilled. \*The vengeance of the Kyth’faren reborn!\*

\*Yes, but no matter what happens, Kyth’vindathys is always going to need his friends,\* Alyssa gently reminded them. \*Let’s get together for our own Council of Matriarchs tomorrow, ladies.\*

\*Agreed.\*

\*Agreed.\*

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The Raptor gunship swept through the ranks of Maliri vessels, its sparkling white armour making it stand out amongst the fleets of golden-hulled warships. Dipping into a steep dive, the small ship levelled out with thrusters on full burn, then glided smoothly into one of Genthalas’ massive docking bays.

Luna was waiting patiently in the vast hangar and she watched as the Terran vessel approached, until it landed five metres in front of her without making so much as a tremor. The loading ramp descended and a beautiful green-skinned girl bounded out, a bright smile lighting up her face.

“Hello, Jade,” she said, genuine affection in her richly timbred voice.

“Luna!” the Nymph gushed, wrapping her up in jubilant hug.

The assassin eagerly returned the embrace, but she was startled at how phenomenally strong the Nymph’s friendly grip was.

“We didn’t get a chance to chat yesterday,” Jade said, clasping the assassin’s hand and swinging their arms affectionately as they left the hangar.

Luna blushed, remembering what they had done together instead.

Jade saw the indigo bloom in her cheeks and laughed. “I’m not complaining, that was much more fun! I just wanted to thank you for everything you’re doing to help John.”

“He’s a highly skilled swordsman, but I believe he can attain even greater heights given enough time and effort,” Luna said thoughtfully. “His sword style doesn’t truly suit him and until he embraces his own nature, he’ll never be able to achieve true mastery of the blade.”

The Nymph nodded enthusiastically. “I know! I keep telling him to trust his instincts and be the cat that’s waiting to be unleashed!”

Luna gave her friend an indulgent smile. “You think John has a Terran feline lurking inside him?”

Jade giggled at that image. “You mean a domestic cat?”

“Yes.”

“No,” the Nymph replied, releasing the assassin’s hand and slipping off her dress.

“Jade? What are you doing?” Luna asked, watching bemused as the green girl stripped naked.

“I was thinking more like this!” Jade replied, her body shimmering in a green haze.

She grew massive in size, her verdant form expanding to take up half the width of the corridor. When she solidified, she became a hulking jade tiger, her powerful muscles rippling in shoulders that towered over Luna’s head. The assassin staggered back a step, gaping at the terrifying beast in disbelief, her eyes drawn to huge fangs that were almost as long as her arm. Only decades of intensive training prevented Luna from turning and fleeing in fear from the ferocious creature.

Jade shifted stance so she looked ready to pounce down the corridor, then opened her maw and roared a challenge. The deafening bellow shook Luna to the core, physically and emotionally, testing her resolve once again. Before the assassin could react, the Nymph shimmered again, her shape becoming indistinct as she rapidly shrank in size. In a matter of seconds she had returned to the cheerful green-hued beauty who grinned as she slipped on her dress.

“Master definitely has that lurking within him!” Jade enthused, holding out her hand again.

Luna stared at her in astonishment, then tentatively held her hand again. “Can all Nymphs do that?”

Jade shook her head. “My sisters can shift into tigers, but not that big. Every time John feeds us, we grow stronger, and he’s been enhancing me for months.”

They carried on walking, passing a few nervous Maliri who had heard Jade’s roar echoing down the corridor.

The Nymph glanced at Luna and asked, “I was thinking that the matriarchs might like to see my sisters shape-shifting at the party. Do you think they’d find that entertaining?”

Luna patted her hand and replied, “It was a struggle for me not to run away in terror when you changed into that huge creature. I think they’d be scared out of their wits.”

“Alright, no scary tigers,” she agreed, her emerald eyes twinkling.

The continued onwards and Luna glanced at her again. “Jade... what’s it like fighting at John’s side?”

Jade thought about it for a moment, then solemnly replied, “It’s the most exciting thing I’ve ever done and the most frightening.”

“You’ve fought some very powerful enemies,” the assassin said, looking at the Nymph with admiration. “Facing a Progenitor would test the courage of the bravest person.”

“Oh, I wasn’t scared of Larn’kelnar,” Jade replied dismissively, shaking her head. “I was afraid for my Master and his mates; to lose any of them would be the most terrible thing this one could imagine.”

It was startling to see her rapid change in emotion, the cheerful Nymph now looking distraught at the possibility of any harm coming to John and the girls.

“Don’t worry, I’ll train with him as often as I can,” Luna quickly said, squeezing her hand. “Between us, we’ll make sure he’s unbeatable.”

Jade perked up immediately and beamed at the Maliri swordmistress in gratitude. “Thank you, Luna. I can see why John’s so eager to see your tummy swell with his baby.”

The assassin blushed again, and Jade gave her an affectionate sideways hug as they walked. They arrived at the Eshenestria suite a few minutes later and Luna made a gesture towards the golden door, which opened obediently for her a moment later.

“He’s in the bedroom,” Luna said, pointing towards a door down an adjacent corridor.

“Thank you!” Jade said gratefully, giving her a quick kiss before departing.

She bounded along the corridor to the bedroom and knocked politely. “Master, may I enter?”

“Come in, Jade,” he called out, his voice muffled by the door.

She padded inside and grinned at John, who was lying in bed between two very contented-looking Maliri. “Master! It’s so good to see you.”

“You too, honey,” he replied, greeting her with a warm smile. “Are you here to ferry me down to the palace?”

“Yep, I’m your personnel chauffeur,” she replied, before her feline eyes flicked to the two matriarchs. “Ohh... Faranise and Garinia, you look gorgeous!”

They blushed and smiled back at the Nymph.

Jade glided over to the bed and sat beside them. “Such sexy little kittens,” she purred, reaching out towards their swollen bellies and pausing an inch away. “May I?”

When they nodded their permission, Jade bit her lip and stroked their soft blue skin, triggering euphoric moans from the two Maliri.

“They look so lovely like this, Master,” Jade murmured, captivated by the matriarchs. “I think you should get them both pregnant as quickly as possible. They’ll give you many beautiful daughters and handsome sons.”

“Jade...” John said, rolling his eyes as he climbed out of bed.

“What?” she asked, giving him a mischievous grin. Turning back to the doe-eyed Maliri, she cooed, “Do you like that idea, little kittens?”

They enthusiastically confirmed that they did, looking at John wistfully as he dressed.

“Thanks for a wonderful morning and a very satisfying afternoon, ladies,” he said, leaning over to kiss them each in turn. “I’ll see you both tonight at the party.”

Faranise darted a furtive glance at Jade, who gave her an encouraging nod. “Baen’thelas... is there any chance...?”

After a stern look at his Nymph, John sat down beside the two matriarchs. “I think you’re both incredible women, with all the qualities I’m looking for in potential mothers. The simple answer is yes, I would love to be the father of your children-”

He didn’t get to finish his sentence as they both squealed with delight and showered him with kisses. It took a while for them to calm down, as they were both so overjoyed that he’d agreed.

John took their hands in his and continued, “I’m going to have to ask you to wait a while before we start a family. I’ve made this commitment to a lot of women and I don’t want to have so many children at once that I can’t be a good father to them all. I want to be able to spend lots of time with each of you as parents, watching our babies grow into happy, successful people.”

Garinia looked at him in adoration. “I understand, Baen’thelas... that sounds wonderful.”

Faranise brought his hand to her lips and kissed it softly. “I’ll wait however long you require, John. The thought of raising our children together is very appealing.”

“For me too,” he agreed, giving them a warm smile before rising from the bed. “Now I better not keep the rest of my girls waiting; you two vixens have already stolen me away from Beldrea and Kelenis.”

They laughed and waved goodbye before curling up together to discuss the thrilling prospect of starting a family with him.

John accompanied his Nymph matriarch out of the bedroom, the door sliding shut behind them. “You shouldn’t tease them like that, Jade,” he admonished the verdant girl.

“I wouldn’t dream of it, Master,” she replied, giving him an unrepentant grin. “I’ve been listening to your thoughts and I know how much you like them. Now they can both relax, content in the knowledge that you’ve selected them to be your mates. They both understand how much being a parent means to you and are happy to wait until you’re ready.”

He paused and conceded her point with a smile. “Alright, I see what you mean. It was lovely to see them so happy.”

“I know,” she agreed, her emerald eyes shining with delight.

They entered the Lounge and found Luna leaning against a wall waiting for them.

“Hey, Luna. I’m sorry I haven’t had the time to train with you today,” John said, hugging the former assassin when she fell into step beside him.

“I’m pleased that we had the opportunity to spar yesterday,” she said with a shrug, as they left the suite. “Edraele has been planning your return to Genthalas for a long time; you were always going to be busy feeding matriarchs, no matter who laid claimed to the title.”

“Yeah, that’s true,” he conceded. “Hopefully things will calm down a bit now and we can settle into a regular training routine.”

“I’d like that,” she said, nodding in agreement. “Whenever you find yourself with some free time to spar, just let me know and I’ll make sure I’m available.”

“Thanks for being so flexible,” he said, greatly appreciating how accommodating Luna was being.

“You’re a busy man. How else are we going to find the time to make you invincible with your runeblade?” she asked, darting a smile at the Nymph.

“Would you mind me bringing Sakura to our training sessions? I’m sure she’d have a lot to contribute and could learn a great deal from you as well.”

“She’s very welcome to join us. Any of your girls that are interested in martial skills have an open invitation.”

“They’ll be thrilled,” he said, putting an arm around her shoulders. “I have to say, you’re far more agreeable than my last instructor.”

“That’s because I’m your devoted thrall and have to do whatever you say, my Lord,” she intoned.

John looked at her in alarm, until Luna winked at him and grinned.

“That reminds me, I must find out if you’re ticklish...” John said ominously, wiggling his fingers at the assassin.

The sound of Luna’s giggling accompanied them down the corridor, followed by more laughter as the trio traded banter together. When they reached the Raptor gunship, John was sorry to say farewell to his Maliri bodyguard.

“I’ll see you tonight!” he called out, returning her wave goodbye as he followed Jade into the Raptor.

The Nymph slid into the Pilot’s chair and darted a smile at John when he joined her in the cockpit. “Luna’s come a long way from that withdrawn, battle-scarred girl you met all those months ago.”

“I don’t think I can claim the credit for that. She’s developed an incredible bond with Edraele.”

“I can see your influence on her too,” Jade said with a fond smile, as she powered up the engines.

The Raptor lifted off the golden deck and smoothly rotated, the nose turning and lifting as the Nymph steered them out of the gleaming shipyard. John stood by the cockpit canopy and stared at Genthalas’ crystal domes and lofty spires until the gunship banked around to face Valaden. The rich blues and lush greens of Edraele’s homeworld filled his view, the rapid change in colours reminding John that the girls were all waiting for him on the surface below.

He felt his heart start to beat faster, an exciting feeling of anticipation building. Spending time with Edraele and the Maliri had been a wonderful experience, but for the last six months he’d spent every waking hour with Alyssa and her girls, forging closer bonds than he ever imagined possible. This was the longest time he’d been away from them and to say that he missed them all would be a colossal understatement.

“We all missed you too, Master,” Jade said softly.

He turned to smile at her. “You’ve been up to Genthalas twice, Jade.”

“I know and I loved it! I missed you the rest of the time though.”

John walked over to stand behind her and massaged her shoulders, rubbing his thumbs along the viridian lines curving across her muscles. “You’re such a good little Nymph. So loyal and devoted.”

She groaned with pleasure, her eyelashes fluttering. “You see? How can I survive a moment without my perfect Master.”

He laughed and leaned down to kiss her on the cheek. “I better let you concentrate. We don’t want to end up as a smoking crater in Valaden’s surface.”

Jade nuzzled into him. “I’d protect you, Master.”

John looked at her in surprise, then looked out the window with a thoughtful expression on his face. “Yes, you could... and I’d be able to save us too, in several different ways.”

The southern continent loomed larger, filling more of the view from the canopy until John got his first glimpse of Saelihn Immanthe. The palace was unmistakable amongst the verdant grounds, its golden towers gleaming like a dazzling beacon in the bright evening sunshine. It was a beautiful building and the sheer size of the magnificent structure was impressive to say the least.

\*The palace is amazing, Edraele,\* John marvelled, drinking in the exquisite architecture.

\*I hope you feel comfortable there,\* she said softly. \*Saelihn Immanthe is yours, if you deem it worthy to be your new home.\*

Struck speechless by the generosity of such a extravagant gift, John watched their approach in quiet reflection at his incredible good fortune.

\*You’ve made your own luck, John,\* Edraele reminded him. \*Nobody forced you to help so many people... including me.\*

Jade levelled out their steep descent, retro-thrusters blazing to slow the Raptor as it began its final approach. John spotted the Invictus in its subterranean hangar, but rather than landing next to the battlecruiser, his Nymph pilot touched down on the gravel drive right outside the pillared entryway.

“Door to door service when you fly with me, Master,” she said with a grin, shutting down the engines and rising from her seat. “Come on, everyone’s waiting!”

He followed after her with an extra spring in his step, feeling like a kid at Christmas rushing downstairs to open his presents. Alyssa’s ribald laughter echoed though his mind and he couldn’t help grinning.

\*I meant that in a wholesome way,\* John protested. \*It wasn’t a euphemism for getting all of you naked!\*

She didn’t reply, but he could sense her amusement over their bond. The landing ramp was already descending as John joined Jade in the forward loading area, and as it dropped down, he could see a banner stretched out under the broad entrance. It was surrounded by balloons and streamers, the message warmly declaring, “Welcome to your new home!”

He was touched to see all the effort the girls had made to make him feel welcome. John swallowed around the lump in his throat, feeling a surge of affection for his thoughtful friends. His loving thoughts were then scattered to the winds only a second later.

“Oh good lord...” he breathed, gazing wide-eyed at his welcome committee.

The girls had decided to wear matching uniforms, if bikinis and high heels could be considered such. The amount of nubile flesh on display was awe-inspiring, but what really took his breath away was the incredible variety of voluminous hair colours and luscious skin tones. He’d spent the last few days surrounded by sky-blue girls with snowy-white hair, which appealed to him on an instinctive level. However, this pageant of feminine perfection was like being welcomed into heaven by a chorus of angels.

Laughing with glee at his stunned reaction, the girls broke their elegant poses and rushed to greet him. John was immediately surrounded by elated Nymphs, giggling Terran teenagers, beaming Maliri twins, and a euphoric Abandoned girl. Over a dozen excited voices declared how fervently they’d missed him, with everyone taking it in turns to hug him as if their life depended on it.

“I missed all of you too,” John replied, enthusiastically returning each embrace.

When it came to Alyssa’s turn she grinned at him as she modelled her tiny red bikini. “Changed your mind about opening your presents?”

His fingers trembled as he brushed them against her bronzed stomach, the skin practically glowing with a beautiful healthy tan.

“I’ve got some tan lines too... in very naughty places,” the blonde confided, before throwing herself into his arms. “Oh my god... I missed you so much, handsome!”

He twirled her around, then gave her a deep kiss, accompanied by delighted cheers from their friends.

“I don’t think the matriarchs would mind if we just forgot the party and had a huge orgy?” John suggested hopefully.

Alyssa jerked back in alarm and shook her head. “No way! We’re not skipping the party!”

Glancing around, he could see that the rest of the girls were clearly tempted by his suggestion, but they all shook their heads too.

“Turning down an orgy? This is unheard of!” he joked with a grin. “Alright, I’ll follow your lead. You’ve obviously got everything planned out for tonight.”

Alyssa’s cerulean eyes softened and she gave him a tender kiss. “Do you need some relief? Seeing all of us like this must be making your quad work overtime.”

“That’s a very tempting offer,” John said quietly, trailing his fingers up Rachel’s tanned arm before caressing Calara’s olive-hued shoulder. He brushed the fingers from his other hand through Dana’s auburn hair, then Sakura’s silky raven locks. “The problem is that I want every single one of you and not just for some quick relief.”

“You missed all your variety, Master?” Leylira asked with an indulgent smile, before glancing down at her tiger striped markings. “I did wonder why I was black and orange...”

John laughed at her joke, then pulled the Maliri twins into his arms. “I just can’t get enough of all the girls I’m hopelessly in love with. The new matriarchs were charming women, but there’s a huge difference between instinctive genetic infatuation, and what we’ve built together.”

\*Just give me time, my Lord,\* Edraele promised, a sultry edge to her voice. \*I promise you won’t be disappointed.\*

“I’ve got an idea...” Alyssa suggested playfully. “Why don’t we fill you in on everything we’ve been up to? After that, we’ll take care of you in a way that I know you’d enjoy.”

“Sounds good to me,” he agreed with a grin. “Okay, who wants to go first?”

“Well, I’ve just been swimming and sunbathing,” Rachel declared, posing to show off her tan.

“You look gorgeous,” John said, admiring her bronzed skin. “And well rested too; I can see how much more relaxed you are.”

“It’s what happens when I’m waited on hand and foot,” the brunette said with a light-hearted laugh. “I almost felt guilty about being pampered like a princess.”

“This place is amazing,” Sakura agreed. “The food, the hospitality, the palace itself... it’s better than any five-star hotel I’ve ever stayed in. I used to go on holidays with my parents for two weeks and I didn’t feel as chilled out as I do after just a couple of days.”

“You were right, I did need some time off from research,” Dana conceded, sidling up to him and giving John a grateful kiss. “It was hard to just switch off from everything to start, but it’s made a huge difference. I was getting frustrated trying to crack the black metal before, but now I’m raring to go!”

“Thanks for listening,” he said, hugging her in return. “I saw the Ashanath ship designs; you did a really nice job on them. I hope they didn’t take up too much of your vacation time?”

“Not much at all,” she said earnestly. “I’d done a bunch of work on them already and I finished them off while I was sunbathing. Callie made some great practical improvements to the weapon layouts... and Alyssa gave the ships a makeover.”

Calara tipped an imaginary hat in his direction and grinned.

John caught Dana’s reproachful tone regarding Alyssa’s contribution and raised an eyebrow. “You didn’t like the way they looked? I thought they were awesome! You should’ve seen the reception your new ship designs got from the Ashanath councillors. Ularean was so overwhelmed, he couldn’t even hold on to the telepathic connection. When he pulled himself together enough to rejoin Edraele, he was literally crying with joy.”

Calara burst into laughter and clapped her girlfriend on the back. “You know the Greys alright!”

Alyssa winked at the redhead. “See, Sparks... I knew someone would appreciate my work.”

Dana looked at John askance. “You really didn’t mind how they looked?”

“I thought Alyssa did an incredible job,” he replied honestly. “Those ships were beautiful... but you could tell they were deadly without them looking like some spiky-hulled monstrosity that the Drakkar would fly.”

Giving him another funny look, Dana held up one finger. “Just wait right here a second, I’m going to grab the holo-viewer.”

As she marched back into the palace, Jehanna strode away with her. “I’m going to get changed out of this bikini!” she called over her shoulder. “I want to give you a shooting demonstration without looking like something out of ‘Girls n’ Guns’!”

“I don’t mind!” John yelled after her.

Jehanna grinned and blew him a kiss, but kept going.

“She wants you to take her seriously,” Alyssa said with a fond smile. “Jehanna’s been working incredibly hard. I think she’s clocked in at least 40 hours on the range over the past three days.”

“I checked the ammo reserves at lunchtime. She’s gone through 45,000 rounds of 10mm caseless,” Sakura noted, shaking her head in admiration.

“Didn’t Jehanna spend any time with you?” John asked with a frown of concern.

“Whenever she wasn’t on the range she kept us company,” Tashana quickly interjected.

“She doesn’t like sunbathing, so we were forced to find other ways to keep her entertained,” Irillith added with a lascivious smile.

“We might as well head inside instead of just standing here in the doorway,” Alyssa said, beckoning him through the entrance. “Just wait until you get a load of this place!”

John reached for Helene’s hand and gave her a warm smile as they walked through the beautiful building. “Keep me company? We need to talk in a minute.”

She clasped his hand and returned his smile. “Of course.”

The girls led John into the grand hall and he couldn’t help but be impressed by the opulent luxury on display.

“Not bad, eh?” Alyssa noted, her eyes shining as she linked arms with him. “What do you think? Could you see this place as our home for the future?”

“It really is amazing,” he agreed, glancing into adjoining rooms and along broad corridors, then up at the magnificent crystal chandeliers overhead. “The palace actually feels welcoming rather than like a stuffy old museum.”

“Yeah, I got the same feeling too,” she happily agreed.

“No bad vibes at all?” John asked, raising an eyebrow. “Tashana said that Valada ruled the Maliri from here, but that was after she had her heart broken by Mael’nerak.”

The blonde shook her head. “Nope, nothing like that at all.”

“I take it you haven’t had any luck in finding anything Valada might have left behind?” he asked the Maliri archaeologist.

Tashana sighed with frustration. “I’ve spent hours scouring the palace for clues, but it’s been a fruitless search so far.”

“I can scan the building using my X-Ray vision later,” he offered, glancing around at the huge rooms.

“Oh that would be brilliant!” the Maliri enthused, immediately brightening. “Why wait though? Can’t you check now?”

“I don’t want to steal Jehanna’s thunder. If I did find something, that’s all anyone would be interested in,” John explained. “And I think Alyssa would kill me if I turned her party venue into an archaeological dig site. Besides, we could do with a floor-plan of the palace first; it would make it much easier to spot any hidden rooms.”

“That won’t take me long,” Irillith said confidently. “I can have one ready for you in the morning.”

“That would be perfect, thanks.”

Alyssa led them through to the back of Saelihn Immanthe and into a spacious, crystal-canopied Sitting Room, furnished with plenty of comfortable-looking sofas.

“This would be a great spot for star gazing,” he said appreciatively, glancing up at the golden afternoon sun.

“We were in here last night,” Calara said, giving him a wistful smile. “There was no light pollution and the view of the stars was amazing.”

“It was very romantic, but that just made all of us really miss you,” Alyssa agreed as she pulled him towards the back doors. “Now... what do you think of the pool?”

John stared in astonishment at the picturesque water gardens that were laid out at the rear of the palace grounds. Amidst all the ornate fountains and carefully tended tropical flowers, gleaming golden bridges arced over a host of curving waterways. It reminded him of the Lagoon, but on a far grander scale.

“It’s so much fun swimming around here!” Leylira enthused, bounding over to his side. “There’s lots of little channels you can chase each other around!”

“And plenty of hidden nooks that would be ideal for intimate liaisons, Master...” Betrixa purred, her sapphire eyes sparkling with a seductive glimmer.

“There are channels that let you swim right out into the lake,” Neysa informed him, drawing his attention to the shimmering body of water beyond the palace grounds. “The coral reefs are breathtakingly beautiful.”

“And there’s so many exotic fish to talk to!” Marika added, bouncing up and down with excitement. “We’ve been out there for hours getting to know our new neighbours!”

“This is incredible. I can’t wait to join you for a swim,” John said, gazing longingly at the crystal-clear water.

“All of these water features are new,” Irillith explained, encompassing the aquatic landscaping with a wave. “There were just lawns and terraced gardens here before.”

“Mother’s sparing no expense to make us feel at home,” Tashana added, slipping an arm around her sister.

“Wait until you see the pool at night, Master! There are lots of pretty lights under the water,” Betrixa exclaimed, beckoning him over so that she could point them out. “When they’re all turned on, it looks magical!”

John walked over to join her and was able to make out the spotlights that edged the pool. “Oh, yeah... I see.”

She giggled and gave him a hearty shove, sending him toppling over. “Time for a dip!”

Except John knew what the mischievous Nymph was up to and levitated smoothly above the water without breaking the surface. “Fool me once...” he said with a grin, before gesturing at the cheetah-spotted catgirl.

Telekinetic hands neatly scooped her up and the startled feline squealed in surprise as she was launched into the pool with a huge splash. The girls broke into laughter, then waved at Betrixa when she re-emerged and spouted water into the air.

“Hey, that’s cheating!” she protested with a pout. “Come in with me!”

The rest of the Nymphs kicked off their high heels and dived in after their sister. Bikinis were quickly discarded by the giggling catgirls and they joined Betrixa in beckoning him to join them.

“Let me watch Jehanna’s shooting demonstration first, then I promise I’ll spend the rest of the afternoon with you,” he said, landing gracefully on the flagstone patio.

Mollified by his compromise, the Nymphs turned their attention to splashing each other, laughing and joking together as they cavorted around the pool.

“Jehanna’s going to meet us at the Firing Range,” Alyssa informed him, before glancing meaningfully at Helene. “Take as much time as you need.”

“Let’s go inside where it’s a bit quieter,” he suggested to the Abandoned girl, who wasted no time in clasping his hand again.

John walked into the relatively tranquil conservatory and took a seat, confirming that the sofas were as comfortable as they looked. He pulled Helene down so that she was sitting sideways across his lap, then wrapped his arms around her and gave her a big hug.

“I’m so glad you’re alright,” he said as she nuzzled into him. “I was so worried when you collapsed.”

“I’m sorry, John... I never meant for that to happen,” Helene said earnestly. “I was just concentrating so hard on trying to ease the girls’ suffering that I lost myself in their emotions. I wasn’t even aware that I’d grown so weak... and then everything went dark.”

“You have to be really careful pushing yourself so hard like that,” John said, looking into her baby-blue eyes. “Stretching your limits can make you stronger, but it’s also very dangerous.”

“I understand,” she said quietly, her returning gaze unsettled. “When I woke up, I found out that I’d slept for most of the day, but I still felt exhausted... it was like being weary down to my bones.”

John was listening attentively and nodded as she confirmed his suspicions. “I think when you push yourself that hard, you start tapping into your own life force. It gives you a surge of extra psychic power, but you’re literally killing yourself to fuel it. That’s what the Progenitors do to their thralls when they drain them to death for energy.”

Helene shuddered with revulsion, her skin prickling with goosebumps. “That’s so horrible. I don’t know how they could do that to another living creature.”

“Yeah, me neither... but we are going to stop them.” Glancing down at the teal-hued girl, he continued, “I’m guessing Alyssa already read you the riot act about putting yourself in danger?”

She bit her lip and blushed. “She did... and I’m so sorry I made everyone worry about me.”

“We all love you, Helene, and we don’t want you to get hurt... or worse. I’m not going to tell you off for pushing yourself that hard, because I know why you did it. Alyssa and the girls were in agony when I cut them off from the connection and I’m incredibly grateful to you for easing their pain.”

Helene looked greatly relieved and gave him a warm smile. “Thank you, John. I promise that I’ll be more careful in the future.”

“You know your limits now and what the consequences might be if you over-exert yourself. If you do need to push yourself that hard again, lean heavily on Alyssa for help... she’s there to support and protect you.”

“I will...” she agreed, before looking at John curiously. “I was worried that you’d be upset with me for putting myself in danger, but you’re not, are you?”

“I know you weren’t being deliberately reckless and just trying to help the girls; I would’ve done exactly the same thing if I’d been in your position. You also learned an important lesson about pushing yourself to the absolute limit and I’m sure you will have grown stronger in the process.” He gazed out through the sweeping crystal windows at the girls laughing together around the pool. “We’re going to be facing more deadly threats than we ever have before and I’m going to need all of you to be as strong as possible. The more powerful you become, the better chance you’ll have of being able to protect yourselves and each other against the Progenitors.”

“Alyssa was right... you have changed,” Helene murmured, studying his face.

He gave her a self-conscious smile. “I suppose this is the first time we’ve had a proper chance to talk since I absorbed my guide. I hope I haven’t changed for the worse?”

“No... not at all,” she said quietly, looking at him in fascination. “You seem calmer and more confident than before. It’s like you’re swimming on a new course and the currents are with you.”

“The guide had been there all my life, so I didn’t realise what a huge drag he was until I finally got rid of him,” John replied, as he carefully considered her words. “I think my mind being fractured like that made it so much harder for me to deal with all the traumatic experiences in my past. Being abandoned by my mother, the guilt I felt over joining the military instead of running the restaurant with my grandparents, then losing all my friends at Galen Prime and blaming myself for the orbital bombardment... it all got too much and I just couldn’t handle any more. I’d still be living as a recluse if I hadn’t met Alyssa.”

“She’s a very special girl,” Helene said softly. “I’ve never met anyone who cares so deeply about their friends and family. Being loved by her is one of the most precious gifts you’ve given me.”

“Yeah, she is pretty wonderful,” John agreed, smiling as he sensed his matriarch’s embarrassment at their effusive praise. He kissed Helene on the cheek and continued, “You were correct before, about Alyssa acting differently with me. She was just trying to be supportive and give me what she thought I needed.”

“Was she right?” Helene asked, listening avidly.

He went quiet and looked out the window again, his gaze focusing on the statuesque blonde. Alyssa was listening to her friends as they chattered away to her, but she turned to face him, her real attention riveted on John.

“Yeah... she was,” he admitted to himself as much as to her. “I was already dealing with so much when we first met, I wasn’t emotionally equipped to be able to handle any more. Alyssa shouldered a lot of moral burdens for me until I’d grown strong enough to cope with them myself.”

They shared a smile together, then he turned to look at Helene. “Thank you for helping me understand the sacrifices Alyssa was making to support me. You were the only one of us that realised what she was doing and I think that’s because you care as deeply about people too. I feel very fortunate that you chose to join us, Helene.”

She beamed at John, her face lighting up with joy. “Up until now, I never felt like I truly deserved to be part of your family. For the first time, it feels like I’ve earned my place with you and the girls.”

“You always deserved to be here, but I understand what you mean. You were there for us when we needed you most,” he agreed, giving her a big hug.

They held each other in that embrace for a long moment, until John noticed Jehanna had entered the conservatory and was discreetly trying to slip past without disturbing them.

He rubbed Helene’s back and slowly released her. “I’m really glad we got a chance to talk.”

She pulled away from him and nodded. “Me too. I missed you so much while you were away.” Helene gave him a tender kiss, then glanced over at her fellow Lioness. “He’s all yours now, Jehanna.”

The former reporter froze and gave her an apologetic frown. “Sorry! I didn’t mean to interrupt.”

“That’s okay, we’d finished talking,” the aquatic girl explained, waving away the apology.

John helped Helene up, then rose from the sofa. “You’re not joining us, honey?”

Helene shook her head as she accompanied him outside. “I’m going to stay with the Nymphs and wait for you in the pool. Jehanna wants to show you and the other Lionesses what she can do... but to me it would just be a lot of bright lights and loud noise.”

John was pleased to see calm acceptance in her eyes now, rather than Helene wistfully imagining what it would be like to fight alongside her new family. It was obvious to him that Helene no longer felt like she needed to prove she was worthy of being with them.

Turning to her friend, Helene smiled. “Good luck!”

She bounded across the patio and dove into the water, where she was enthusiastically greeted by the Nymphs.

Alyssa and the rest of the girls walked over to join John, with everyone looking expectantly at Jehanna.

“Lead on, honey,” John said, clasping her hand.

Jehanna guided them back to the Invictus via the underground passageway, fending off any questions about her shooting demonstration with deliberately vague answers. When they entered the battlecruiser’s airlock, she surprised John by opening the door into the Secondary Hangar rather than heading over to the grav-tubes.

“Can I ask all of you to get geared up,” she requested, striding towards the concealed entrance for the express grav-tubes. “You won’t need any weapons, just Paragon suits.”

“Sure,” he agreed, darting a curious glance at Alyssa as they crossed the hangar.

“Don’t ask me, I’ve no idea what she’s up to,” the blonde admitted with a helpless shrug. She darted a flirtatious smile at their newest recruit. “If I knew she was going to be sneaky and keep secrets, I would’ve spent the last three days bonding her brains out. Don’t worry, I’ll make that my highest priority now.”

Jehanna blushed and cleared her throat. “Please join me in the Primary Hangar when you’re ready.”

Politely raising her hand, Jade asked, “What about me? Do I need to wear armour too?”

“You’re bulletproof aren’t you?” Jehanna asked, studying the Nymph’s lustrous green skin.

“Master’s been making me significantly tougher recently. I should be impervious to Gauss Cannon shells now,” Jade replied matter-of-factly. “Will that be resilient enough?”

The reporter laughed and nodded. “That should be fine.”

John and the girls ascended to the Armoury where they quickly donned their Paragon suits as instructed. When they returned, they found Jade waiting for them by the entrance to the Primary Hangar and as John approached, she tapped on the button to open the reinforced doors. Rather than opening up into the vast room beyond, the parting doors revealed a small assembly area, with the newest Lioness standing between two sealed exits.

“Welcome to the live fire trial everyone,” Jehanna declared, now clad in her own Paragon suit.

She hefted one of their Tachyon rifles on her hip, handling the double-barrelled bullpup weapon with casual confidence.

John eyed the deadly gun with concern. “Jehanna, we haven’t reinforced the hangar to withstand hits from that rifle.”

“I also haven’t trained you how to use a Tachyon rifle yet,” Sakura interjected, her brow furrowing. “They’re lethal weapons and should be handled with great care.”

“Relax,” Dana said with a chuckle. “That’s not one of mine.”

Jehanna glanced at the gun and nodded. “I asked Daphne for some help and the Collective modified an XR-75 to look like a Tachyon Rifle. They’ve also made some alterations to the Primary Hangar to make this a more authentic shooting demonstration.”

The tension eased at once and John gave her an encouraging smile. “Alright, you’ve got my curiosity piqued. What’ve you got planned for us this afternoon?”

She grinned back and gestured towards the door on her left. “Head through there, then up the ramp to the viewing gallery. You should have a great view.”

“That’s all the clues we get?” Calara asked, equally intrigued.

“I’m afraid so. Just give me two minutes to get into position,” the dusky-hued girl replied with an eager grin.

“Alright, let’s see what you do,” John said, patting Jehanna on the shoulder. “Good luck.”

She waved goodbye, then watched her guests go through the door before turning and leaving the assembly area herself. There was a ramp beyond the door and John strode up the incline to a long gantry raised twenty-metres above the deck plates. Daphne was waiting for them there and she greeted John with a smile.

“It is wonderful to see you again, father. Your presence aboard the Invictus was dearly missed.”

“Thanks, Daphne, I missed you too,” John said, giving his adoptive daughter a warm hug. “Thanks a lot for helping Jehanna.”

“The Collective was very glad to be given a useful task to accomplish. We have grown accustomed to the usual frantic pace of repairs and construction set by the Grand Engineering Overlord, so many of us found being idle a most disconcerting experience,” the synthetic girl admitted with an uneasy look on her pretty face. “If this is equivalent to the Terran state of ‘being bored’ then I now understand why organic life-forms do their utmost to avoid it.”

“Don’t worry, we’ll be up to our asses in new projects soon, Daph!” Dana exclaimed, giving the cyborg a reassuring hug. “Your boys are going to be desperate for a vacation after all the work I’ve got planned for them.”

“The maintenance robots will be most reassured to hear it,” Daphne replied, looking very relieved herself.

Sakura leaned against the gantry railing and gazed out across the hangar. “Are we supposed to switch to mag-view or infra-red? Jehanna said we’d have a good view from up here, but I can’t see a thing.”

“I’ll ask,” Alyssa volunteered, moving to stand beside Sakura.

A second later, there was a chime from their helmet HUDs and Jehanna’s face appeared in the corner. “Hello everyone! We’ll be starting in ten seconds... get ready!”

The pitch-black hangar seemed to come alive, with an ominous crimson glow illuminating the undercarriage of the Progenitor shuttle. The airlock split open, the serrated edges like sinister black fangs in a beast’s ferocious maw, the jaws yawning wide for a savage bite. Shadowy figures marched out and even in the gloom, the observers instinctively recognised the distinctive hourglass shape of thralls in black armour. They were carrying Reaper Cannons and the squads quickly spread out as they dispersed from the shuttle.

John and the girls were spellbound by the scene, watching the female troops preparing for battle. Suddenly, one of the squads tilted their weapons and opened fire, a stream of purple bolts tearing across the hangar to rip through a golden bunker on the far side of the battlefield. The loud shots made the observers jump, the unnerving sound an exact replica of the weapon fire they’d heard aboard Larn’kelnar’s dreadnought when the Raptor was shot to pieces.

The shots were immediately returned by streams of blue laser bolts from other defensive positions, the fire slicing into the Thrall forces and lighting up their personal shields. The protective barriers kept the Progenitor’s troops from harm, with each bright flash illuminating eerily beautiful red-hued faces, each thrall’s scarlet features twisted with hatred.

“Those are Maliri lasers!” Irillith exclaimed, leaning forward against the railing as she eagerly watched the battle.

Based on the sheer volume of incoming azure fire, the Thralls were heavily outnumbered, but they still managed to quickly gained the advantage. They blew apart the chains of bunkers with concentrated fire, leaving one after the other ablaze in a storm of purple bolts. The Maliri began to falter as more of the defenders were killed, while the Thralls had yet to lose any of their heavily-shielded soldiers.

“It’s turning into a massacre!” Tashana cried out in dismay. Her gauntlets twisted the railing in frustration, as if to stop herself from leaping into the battle to turn the tide.

A dull boom of retro-thrusters roared around the hangar and spotlights snapped onto the rear of a gleaming white gunship hovering above the battlefield. The landing ramp was already lowered and a solitary figure leaped from the Raptor, her own rifle raised and at the ready. A piercing squeal ripped through the hangar, the distinctive sound of a Tachyon rifle being fired on full auto unmistakeable to everyone there.

Jehanna hammered the closest thrall with sapphire tachyon bolts, overloading her shields before thrusters brought the Lioness safely down to the deck. That was followed by a sharp bark from the underslung Punisher muzzle and a trio of hyper-accelerated slugs smashed into the thrall’s torso, blasting gaping holes straight through the woman’s chest. Taking good advantage of the element of surprise, Jehanna gunned down two more thralls in the same fashion before the squad even realised they were under attack.

John could only watch in shocked fascination as his newest recruit tore through the enemy troops. The thralls seemed overconfident in the indestructibility of their shields, not bothering to take cover as they returned fire. Jehanna had no such compulsion about avoiding incoming enemy shots, and used cover to rapidly outmanoeuvre her opponents.

She darted around the obstacles littering the smoky battlefield and cut a couple more thralls to pieces before sprinting away into the darkness to attack from another position. The enemy squad would unload on the area where the shots had come from, savaging the cover with a terrifying storm of Reaper bolts, but by that time, their tormentor was already long gone. Jehanna was able to use this trick to keep the thralls off-balance long enough to kill ten of them, before they finally adapted to her assault.

“That squad is now switching to mag-view in an attempt to track her,” Daphne quietly explained to the spectators. “We allowed a one-minute window before they recovered from Jehanna’s ambush and started to grasp the tactics she’s using against them.”

The second enemy squad joined the fight, only to be flanked by Jehanna and hit with a storm of tachyon bolts, knocking out shield after shield. The Thralls returned fire, but instead of fleeing for fresh cover, she charged towards them, zig-zagging between the obstacles. Her shields absorbed the hits as Jehanna closed on the squad and then she was right in amongst them, where the long-barrelled Reaper Cannons were too unwieldy to track her through their ranks. She kept moving, gunning down soldier after soldier in a savage point-blank firefight.

As Jehanna blasted gaping holes through increasingly desperate thralls, John glanced at his HUD to study her face. Her expression was one of intense concentration, her mouth set in a grim line as she brutally slaughtered the enemy soldiers. John reminded himself that this was only a training exercise and that the former reporter was well aware of that fact, but part of him couldn’t help wondering how Jehanna would react if this battle was real. Would she be this effective against living Thrall troops?

Considering what they were up against, he needed Jehanna to be unwavering in her resolve against Progenitor forces, but seeing her orchestrating this massacre without batting an eyelid was still disconcerting. He couldn’t help thinking about how shocked the young reporter had been when watching the uncut combat footage of the Lionesses in action. Would that girl be horrified to see what she’d become?

\*This is what she wanted,\* Alyssa gently reminded him. \*You explained all the consequences of the Change and Jehanna knew exactly what becoming a Lioness entailed. She understood all that and chose to fight at our side against the Progenitors... you have nothing to feel guilty about.\*

\*I know that... and I don’t feel guilty, not anymore. I outlined her choices and she gave her consent,\* John replied, watching as the white-armoured girl finished off the rest of the squad. \*It just feels important to recognise the sacrifices she’s made... that all of you have made... to prepare for the Progenitor war.\*

\*Sacrificing some of our humanity you mean?\* his matriarch asked, turning to look at him.

He nodded, meeting her questioning gaze.

Alyssa shrugged and gave him a lop-sided smile. \*I prefer to think of it as a bit of fine-tuning.\*

She turned and watched Jehanna gun down the last survivors of the first squad. \*Jehanna’s not acting out of cruelty or malice... she’s doing what needs to be done to defeat our enemies. The Progenitors surround themselves with legions of thralls; that means we’re going to have to kill thousands of female soldiers if we’re going to cut the head off each and every snake.\*

\*I’m not disagreeing with you... I just wish there was a way we could avoid it,\* John said, a bleak look in his eyes.

“The live-fire trial is complete,” Daphne announced, interrupting their telepathic conversation.

John focused his attention back on the centre of the battlefield, where Jehanna was standing triumphant amidst dozens of dead thralls. He started a round of applause, as the girls whooped and cheered her simulated victory. She broke into a grin and loped towards them, then activated the jets on her Paragon suit to soar up to the observation gallery.

“That was a hell of a show!” John said, clapping her on the shoulder as she landed beside him.

“I thought it might be a bit more entertaining than watching me shoot off a few rounds in the Firing Range,” she replied with a grin.

Dana was peering at the modified XR-75 rifle with renewed interest. “Nice... you used holo-projectors to simulate the tachyon pulses and hyper-accelerated rounds.”

Jehanna laughed and nodded. “The Collective have been amazing! I couldn’t have done any of this without them.”

“It was an interesting project. We were more than happy to assist,” Daphne said graciously. “We studied Larn’kelnar’s thralls using weapon camera footage from the Raptor, then utilised holographic models to recreate the females and their equipment. The Collective’s participation in the training exercise was concealed by holo-projectors that also rendered the fortifications surrounding the battlefield.”

The overhead lighting activated, banishing the gloom from the huge hangar. Like a magician revealing the hidden secrets that lay behind the curtain, the audience could now see the tricks used to simulate the battle. Jehanna’s starting point in the Raptor was a simple mock-up of the rear of the gunship, suspended from the ceiling by sturdy cables. The thralls were merely training dummies that now lay scattered on the floor beside the team of maintenance bots and cleaning robots that had held them.

“You guys were awesome!” Dana called out, waving to the automatons.

The big maintenance bots returned her wave, their faces fixed in unsettling grins. The automated maids curtsied and their expressive faces also beamed in delight, reflecting the Collectives’ genuine happiness at participating in Jehanna’s shooting demonstration.

“I was firing regular rounds with this XR-75, the holo-simulation just made them look like they were being shot from a Punisher barrel,” Jehanna explained, tapping her weapon. “You can check the impact marks from all the 10mm caseless I fired at the target dummies to verify my accuracy.”

“There’s no need, I saw how comfortable you were handling that rifle,” Sakura said in admiration. “I think you might be a better shot than I am now.”

“That was an impressive bit of shooting,” John agreed. “How did you come up with those hit-and-run tactics?”

“We spent quite a bit of time discussing how the thralls would respond in combat,” Jehanna replied, darting a grateful glance at Daphne. “Based on all the footage of your conversations about thralls, we guessed that their forces must demolish most regular troops they encounter, so there’s no need for them to use sophisticated tactics. When they’re facing another thrall army, then Xar’aziuth would want maximum casualties, which again led me to think they just throw their forces at each other with no regard for any strategy.”

He nodded thoughtfully. “I can’t fault your reasoning. We’d come to similar conclusions.”

“What about the red-skinned thralls?” Rachel asked, looking intrigued. “What made you choose that colour?”

“There are a number of factors that led me to conclude one of the next Thrall species you fight will have red skin,” Daphne smoothly replied. “First, there was the Ashanath monoliths which depicted thralls with that skin tone. Those pictograms might have been describing Mael’nerak’s enemy recruiting his own forces, or some of those stones could have been taken from another Progenitor’s recruiting world that pre-dated Rahn’hagon’s invasion. The latter would indicate that red-skinned thralls are within relatively close proximity.”

“Interesting... I hadn’t considered it from that perspective,” Tashana mused, listening in fascination. “What else?”

“We know that Rahn’hagon once claimed a red-skinned race that he named the Randarai Empire. When he sacrificed the last of his thralls to preserve his life after the crash on Arcadia, it is reasonable to assume that he relinquished his claim upon their species. The next logical supposition would be that another Progenitor has claimed them in the 10,000 years Rahn’hagon has been in exile. Finally, there is a possibility that John’s father was sent to investigate the Shroud based on his proximity to this quadrant of the galaxy.”

“You’ve really been paying attention,” John said quietly, surprised at just how much the unassuming synthetic girl had been analysing their situation. “But Rahn told me, that at the time he was sent to wipe out Mael’nerak, he was the most powerful Progenitor in existence.”

Daphne politely inclined her head. “Or so he was led to believe.”

“Very good...” Rachel murmured, nodding to Daphne with respect. She turned to John and elaborated, “She’s right; your father might have believed that, but it doesn’t mean that it was true. I find it very hard to believe that the Progenitors maintain regular diplomatic contact with all their rivals in the galaxy, so how would Rahn know how he ranks against them? Because Xar’aziuth told him he was the strongest? Rahn’hagon was Xar’aziuth’s pawn and what better way to encourage loyalty and inspire your minions than to tell them that they’re your most favoured servant. Perhaps your father was sent simply because he was the closest?”

Alyssa slowly shook her head. “We’ve seen clips of Mael’nerak during the War of Heavens. He said: ‘they’ve sent their strongest’, when he was talking about Rahn’hagon’s invasion. Why would he think that if it wasn’t really the case?”

“Because that’s what my father told him?” John suggested, his expression grim. “I’m inclined to agree with Rachel. I highly doubt that all the Progenitors in existence are gathering together for a friendly chat to compare who’s strongest; they’re far more likely to try to rip each other’s heads off. But contacting an enemy to taunt him about his imminent destruction? Yeah, that I can see.”

Dana couldn’t help smirking. “So you reckon your dad called up Mael’nerak, bragged about being a total badass, then told him he had a tiny dick and that he couldn’t fight for shit... and Mael fell for it?”

Daphne frowned, her expression perplexed. “Why would Rahn’hagon make disparaging remarks about the size of Mael’nerak’s penis? I was under the impression that Progenitors share very similar anatomical proportions, in the same way that thralls are almost indistinguishable from each other physically. Did I make an erroneous assumption?”

“With guys it’s always about who has the biggest dick,” Jehanna said, playfully rolling her eyes.

“The ladies usually take quite an interest too,” Alyssa said, darting a coy smile at John. “Isn’t that right, handsome?”

John put his hands over Daphne’s ears. “Hey... stop trying to corrupt my innocent little girl!”

She turned and smiled at him as the girls broke into laughter.

“All joking aside, that was an interesting discussion,” John said, nodding gratefully to those that had contributed. “It doesn’t really matter who we end up fighting next, but they will be coming for us... and if not, we’ll be hunting them. We need to get used to thinking about fighting Thrall armies and Jehanna’s shooting demonstration was a useful reminder of what we’ll be facing very soon.”

He held a hand out towards Jehanna and clasped her gauntlet. “Now, it looks like I’ve got a promise to fulfil. I take it you’re still interested in having psychic abilities?”

She bit her lip and nodded, Jehanna’s beautiful brown eyes sparkling with anticipation.

“Alright then,” he said, giving her a warm smile. “Let’s go make you into a fully fledged Lioness. I think you’re going to like what I’ve got in mind for you...”

The couple left the gantry hand in hand, closely followed by the rest of the girls, who were just as eager to find out what John had in store for their newest recruit.