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Jade grinned in delight at John and the girls, appearing as an exact replica of their beautiful Chief Engineer, right down to the golden coronas around her pupils. Dana leaned closer, open-mouthed with shock as she was faced with her own double staring right back at her.

“Oh wow! Do I really look like that?!” Dana marvelled, darting around on the bed to look at Jade from different angles. “I look fucking gorgeous!”

Rachel laughed and rolled her eyes affectionately at her girlfriend. “Come on... You’ve seen yourself in the mirror before. You must know how beautiful you are.”

“Yeah, but it’s not the same!” Dana protested, shaking her head in amazement as she ran her fingers through Jade’s long silky-soft auburn hair. She darted a look of amazement at John. “Seriously, how come you’re not fucking me 24/7? I’d just wanna bend me over and go to town!”

“Every day’s a constant battle of willpower,” John admitted, managing to maintain a sombre expression with some difficulty. When the girls’ laughter subsided, he reached out to take Jade’s hand. “We’re getting a little sidetracked here. More importantly, what happened, Jade? Are you alright?”

The Nymph nodded, shimmering in a green haze before returning to the familiar form that they all knew and loved. Jade gave him a blissful smile, looking happier than he’d ever seen her before. “All the restrictions that were keeping me under tight control... I wasn’t even aware of them before, but now they’re gone! It feels so liberating!”

“I knew you had a problem handling weapons and that you could only copy Alyssa’s appearance, but I didn’t know about any other limitations... or that I could free you from them,” John said gently. “If I did, I would have removed them months ago.”

Jade straddled his lap, curling her arms around him. “Don’t you see? That’s what made the way you did it so wonderful!” she said in delight. “I could feel it while we made love; how much you cared about me... wanting me to be free to choose my own path. You didn’t break my bonds, you helped me do it myself!”

She kissed him passionately, moaning into his mouth as she tangled her fingers in his hair. John placed his hands on her hips, feeling her skin heating up as she let out excited little gasps.

The Nymph suddenly pulled back and gave him a rueful smile. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to tease you like this; I know we’ll be jumping into the Alpha-Tauri system soon. Once we’ve rescued Niskera, I promise I’ll show you just how much you mean to me!”

John looked at her in surprise for a moment, then shook his head. “Jade, honey... the battle was over hours ago! You slept right through it!”

Jade gaped at him in shock, then a shadow of guilt fell across her face. “I’m so sorry! I didn’t mean to let you down, I-”

Smothering her anguished apology with a kiss, John held her close, stroking the Nymph’s back to sooth her. “It wasn’t your fault,” he said, when he felt her start to relax in his arms. “We managed to survive the battle and I think Alyssa has a new appreciation for just how much you help her. I won’t say we didn’t miss you, because you always make a huge difference, but everyone made it through alive and we managed to save the Trankarans from the Kirrix.”

Looking greatly relieved, Jade glanced back at the girls to check they were all unscathed.

Alyssa stroked the Nymph’s arm. “Everyone’s fine! We’re all just glad you’re okay; you had us really worried! We had no idea what was happening to you...”

Jade turned and embraced the blonde, resting her chin on Alyssa’s shoulder as she hugged her fiercely. The rest of the girls moved forward to hug the Nymph too, stroking her arms or murmuring supportive words.

When Jade pulled back a little, she smiled at the group. “I’ll need to do some practicing to test what I can do. There were rules I couldn’t violate before; like only being able to shapeshift into the form chosen by my master, but they’re all gone now!”

Alyssa gave her a coy smile. “You can really change shape into anyone you like now? Like John’s equally handsome twin?”

The girls chorused a moan of lust at the thought of being double-teamed by two versions of John.

The Nymph looked around at the dreamy expressions the girls were all wearing, then darted an apprehensive glance at John. “I-I probably could do,” she faltered, an unsettled frown on her face. “I know the girls would love it, but it would feel wrong...”

“Don’t worry, I’ve got no interest in seeing you turn into me! Besides, no one’s going to ask you to do anything you’re uncomfortable with,” John said firmly, opening his arms to the unsettled Nymph. “I like you just as you are, but just out of curiosity, why would it feel wrong? Is it something to do with me being your master?”

She shook her head and gave him an embarrassed smile. “No, it’s just that I’m a girl and shapeshifting into a man would feel really weird!” She nuzzled into him and added, “You already removed the compulsion to obey you, but my feelings towards you haven’t changed... I like you being my Master.”

John brushed his fingers along her jawline, tracing the shape of her face in the way he knew she loved. Jade quivered in delight, then caught his fingers and gave them a tender kiss.

Alyssa stroked the Nymph’s back and said, “I’m sure there’s still loads of fun we can have with Jade’s new abilities, if she can shift into any woman she likes.”

Jade gave John a coy smile, “That’s very true. I can change form into any woman you desire...”

Alyssa kissed the Nymph on her shoulder, while gazing into John’s eyes. “I know how much fun we’ve had with Jade being my twin. Just imagine her doing the same with the rest of the girls...”

Irillith laughed and gave Tashana an eager smile. “Have you ever wondered what being a triplet would be like, Shan?”

Tashana felt a strong urge to make a biting remark about not wanting to be betrayed by two sisters, but she stopped herself in time, remembering the new Irillith hadn’t done anything to deserve her ire. Alyssa picked up the conflicting emotions and darted a surreptitious glance at her, watching carefully to see how Tashana would react.

The Maliri girl managed to return her twin’s smile and said, “That could be fun; I’m intrigued to find out.”

Jade leaned closer to John and murmured seductively, “There are lots of other much naughtier possibilities too, Master. Just think; anyone you’ve ever fantasised about, no matter how forbidden the fruit...”

His eyes drifted over to Calara who shook her head in amusement. “I’m just surprised it took you that long to think about my mother!”

The rest of the girls laughed too, all well aware of the chemistry between John and Maria Fernandez. Despite their obvious attraction to one another, they knew that nothing would happen between them in reality.

Alyssa’s eyes sparkled with excitement. \*Jade pretending to be Maria, or Edraele with the twins... it wouldn’t be real, so it’d just be harmless fantasy! Oh, we can have so much fun with this!\*

When Alyssa gave him a saucy wink, John rolled his eyes at the blonde. Turning his attention back to the Nymph, he cupped Jade’s beautiful face in his hands and said gently, “I don’t want you to feel like you have to pretend to be anyone else. I love you for the woman you are, not to just use you to act out some crazy fantasies.”

Jade softly brushed her lips against his, then gazed into his eyes and whispered, “I know... that’s why it’s okay.” Her emerald eyes shimmered in the light as she continued, “The fact that something’s naughty makes it all the more thrilling. I’d love to be able to help you indulge some of your wilder fantasies; you don’t have to feel any guilt over it.”

“Thank you,” he said, appreciating her selflessness.

\*She’s not being selfless, our saucy little Nymph is even more into it than I am,\* Alyssa interjected, as she heard the Nymph’s lustful thoughts. \*She’s already making plans...\*

John glanced at Jade again and she gave him a far-too-innocent smile.

The Nymph’s happy expression wavered for a moment and Jade asked tentatively, “Would someone mind telling me what I missed while I was asleep?”

Her companions glanced at each other, not sure where to start.

“You were out for fourteen hours,” Alyssa said, while stroking Jade’s arm. “You missed quite a bit.”

The Nymph’s hands went straight to her tummy, stroking the toned dark-green skin as her eyes flicked to John. “Fourteen hours... like when a new girl joins you for the first time...” She sighed happily and nodded with satisfaction. “I do feel like a new woman now; someone worthy of being your mate.”

“You always were!” John protested, holding her close.

Jade didn’t bother to disagree, she just purred loudly as she snuggled into him.

“How about the videos Faye put together!” Dana suddenly blurted out, drawing everyone’s attention. She looked at the cute purple sprite and added, “Jade can just watch those, that’ll save us trying to explain everything that happened.”

Faye nodded, then smiled at the Nymph when Jade’s curious emerald eyes flickered her way. “Of course! I’ll be happy to run through everything with you!”

Alyssa sat up straighter and said in an authoritative voice, “We skipped dinner last night, so I’m sure everyone’s hungry and could do with a nice big breakfast... While Jade’s reviewing the battle footage, I think it’s about time Sakura began her role as Head Chef.”

Sakura had perked up at the thought of John filling her stomach with his sweet-tasting cum, but her face fell when she realised what the blonde actually meant. She looked anxious as she hesitantly replied, “Okay, I’ll go make a start.”

Calara shared a smile with Alyssa as she put her arm around the Asian girl. “Don’t worry. We’ll be there to teach you everything we know, remember?”

Sakura immediately relaxed and the trio of girls climbed off the bed, leaving John to look at them all in surprise. His confusion deepened when Jade pulled away from him to join them. “Weren’t we all planning on a team victory celebration in bed this morning?” he asked the departing women.

Alyssa darted a glance at the four girls still on the bed with him, an enigmatic smile on her face. Dana, Rachel, and the Maliri twins all turned to look her way, clearly listening to the blonde’s telepathic instructions.

“I know you very well, handsome,” she reminded him gently. “You love a wild eight-girl-orgy as much as I do, but that’s not what you need this morning, not really.”

He looked back at the four girls who were approaching him on the bed, each of them with a similar look of tenderness in their eyes.

“Alyssa just reminded us that you saved all our lives,” Rachel said quietly, her fingertips lightly brushing over his skin as she ran her fingers up his arm.

John realised that he was surrounded by the girls in the ground team that had accompanied him through the ferocious underground battle with the Kirrix. As he remembered the frantic combat and the magnificent way the girls had all accounted for themselves in that brutal firefight, his expression softened, eyes filled with pride.

“Have fun...” Alyssa said with an affectionate smile, drawing all their attention as she left the bedroom and glided away into the corridor beyond.

Dana shook her head in admiration at the blonde, before turning back to look at the others. “She’s a manipulative minx, but she’s right; I’m glad it’s just us this time...” She knelt between Irillith and Tashana, putting her arm around both their waists and kissing each of them on the shoulder. “I feel closer to all of you than ever before.”

Irillith nodded, reaching out to hold John’s hand and interlacing her fingers with his. “That whole battle was thrilling! Thinking back on it now, I can’t believe how recklessly I threw myself into combat. I’m amazed I survived it!” She paused then turned to give the redhead beside her a tender kiss on the cheek. “Actually, I shouldn’t be surprised, not when you’ve built us such incredible gear.”

“My heart was thumping the entire time...” Rachel admitted, smiling gratefully at John when he put an arm around her. She looked across at Dana and the Maliri girls. “You were all so fearless! I just kept reminding myself I had to be as brave as you; anything less would have let the team down.”

“I’d never have guessed,” Tashana said, closing the circle by putting her arm around the brunette. “You were calm, confident, and professional. It was incredibly reassuring to know that if I got hurt, you’d be there to take care of me.”

“I was so worried about all of you being in so much danger,” John admitted, looking at each of the girls in turn. “But you were absolutely phenomenal! I’ve never been prouder of any of you after the way you handled yourselves yesterday.”

“You were amazing too,” Dana said softly, her cheeks flushing as she gazed at him. “I was terrified when the train toppled over, but you just reacted instantly and saved us all. I went from being scared out of my mind to feeling totally safe as soon as you held me...”

The girls all nodded, glancing around at each other before looking at John with affection and admiration. That quickly developed into something much more exciting and he saw the subtle shift in their eyes as passions were inflamed.

John caught the subtle flicker of emotion on Tashana’s face when she glanced at Irillith and he immediately worried that this was too soon for her. \*Are you sure you’re alright with this?\* he asked, framing the question in his thoughts. Alyssa immediately realised his intent and passed the message on for him via telepathy.

Tashana nodded imperceptibly as she heard the blonde’s voice in her mind, but John wasn’t entirely convinced. He smiled at the rest of the girls and said, “I don’t know how you feel, but I think we should celebrate properly... Why don’t we use the playroom?”

“Fuck yeah!” Dana blurted out, grinning in delight.

Rachel and the twins had never used it before, but they’d all heard the tales.

John smiled at them and said, “Why don’t you girls go and set it up, then meet me in the bathroom? We’ll have a nice soak in the bath first then head over there... Tashana, feel like helping me get everything ready?”

She nodded at once, realising he wanted to speak to her alone. They broke apart from their group hug and went their separate ways, with Dana, Rachel, and Irillith talking animatedly as they left. John led Tashana into the bathroom, then started running the bath and pressed the button to add bubbles. He glanced at Tashana who appeared lost in thought, the Maliri girl only rousing from her reverie when he dimmed the lights to a soft glow.

“Are you sure you’re alright with this?” he asked, slipping his arms around her from behind.

Tashana leaned back against his chest and tilted her head so she could gaze up into his eyes, the confusion and doubt quite clear in those violet orbs. “I don’t know,” she admitted softly. “I look at Irillith and I’m not sure if I want to kiss her or claw her eyes out...”

“She hurt you very badly, but you’ve also grown really close in the last couple of weeks,” John said, hugging her tighter for reassurance. “Trying to adjust to both sets of opposing memories and feelings must be incredibly difficult.”

Tashana forced herself to relax, the rigid tension in her body easing away. “I’ve seen the way I was before, all twisted up with hate and hungry for revenge,” she said in a hushed whisper. “I don’t want to be like that again and Irillith doesn’t deserve that either, not any more.”

John hesitated, unsure what to say for a moment. He leaned down to give her a gentle kiss, then said, “I love you and I love Irillith, so I only want the best for both of you. Just know that no one is going to push you into anything you’re not ready for, particularly not me. It’s barely been a day since I restored your old memories, so take as much time as you need to adjust to everything, okay?”

Her violet eyes gazed into the distance for a moment, before she nodded decisively. “The old Irillith and Edraele are long gone, so harbouring this resentment towards them is pointless. I know the future I want for myself, so putting this off isn’t going to change anything.”

“Are you sure?” John asked, gently stroking her arm.

She turned in his embrace and pressed herself up against him. “I want to see the look of pride in your eyes when Irillith, Edraele, and I are all pregnant by you. If I’m going to get what I really want, I have to leave what happened to me in the past.”

“You’re a remarkable woman, Tashana,” he said, filled with admiration for her sense of drive and purpose. “I’ll do everything I can to give you the happy future you’ve always deserved.”

They kissed each other passionately, losing track of time as their lips moved together.

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Sakura crouched down warily, all her senses honed to a razor-sharp edge as she watched her target with an unblinking hawk-like stare.

Alyssa squatted down beside the Asian girl, sharing in the tense vigil with a grim expression on her beautiful face. The blonde handed over a knife, then nodded towards the bacon and sausages sizzling on the grill. “If they make a wrong move, go for the eyes...”

Calara giggled and patted Sakura on the shoulder. “As long as the heat’s kept low, they’ll be fine! Part of the art of cooking is multi-tasking, so let’s get you started with frying some eggs.”

The Asian girl slowly straightened and shot her an anxious glance. “I don’t know if that’s wise. My dad always said I could burn a pan of water.”

“You’re doing well, don’t worry,” Alyssa said, her voice soothing as she stroked Sakura’s arm. “We’re here to help you avoid any disasters.”

The kitchen lit up with a purple flash and Faye appeared beside the three girls. “Hey!” she greeted them all with a bright smile. “The last of the Trankaran civilians are disembarking, but a few of them wanted to say thank you to the pilot of the ‘big robot’, that saved them from the Kirrix.”

Alyssa darted a glance at Calara and the Latina immediately put her arm around Sakura as she said, “Go ahead, honey. I’ll keep things ticking over until you get back.”

The blonde smiled at Sakura and held out a slender hand for her. “Come on, let’s go say hello.”

“I’ll meet you down there!” Faye announced, then vanished as quickly as she’d appeared.

Walking hand-in-hand, the two girls left the Kitchen and strolled through the Officers’ Lounge, heading for the grav-tubes. Alyssa could feel the various emotions surging through her raven-haired companion and she stroked her thumb across the back of her hand. Sakura glanced at her, giving her a nervous but excited grin as they stepped into the red glow of the anti-gravity field.

The hubbub on the lower deck had subsided now, with the vast majority of the Trankaran civilians having safely disembarked to the huge battlecarrier known as the Kerhom's Anvil. When Alyssa and Sakura walked out of the grav-tube, they saw Faye standing beside three figures by the airlock door at the other end of the corridor. A big Trankaran male with a trauma kit wrapped around his thigh, had his arm around a Trankaran woman, while a small girl stood between them, holding her mother’s hand.

“Go ahead,” Alyssa said softly, giving Sakura an encouraging smile.

The blonde watched as her friend glided down the corridor towards the purple sprite and the Trankaran family. Faye turned towards the Asian girl, gesturing towards her as she spoke to the survivors. The little girl immediately ran towards Sakura, arms held wide for a hug, a joyful smile on her tiny dark-grey face. Sakura dropped to her knees and embraced the little girl, then glanced up at the tearful parents, who patted her shoulder and murmured words of earnest gratitude.

Alyssa could feel a lump in her throat as she watched the Trankarans thank their saviour. She could feel the sense of pride in Sakura and an easing of the weight of guilt she carried on her shoulders for all those years spent as Shinatobe.

“Thanks, Faye,” Alyssa whispered to the purple girl, who had reappeared beside her to watch the touching scene. “She really needed that.”

“They were easy to find,” Faye replied, a soft smile on her elfin face. She glanced up at the blonde. “Thanks for asking me to help, this feels wonderful...”

“You’re welcome,” Alyssa replied, watching as the Trankaran parents knelt beside Sakura and their daughter, wrapping them both in a tender hug.

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John and Tashana shared a look of surprise when Dana, Rachel, and Irillith suddenly embraced them. The couple had been so absorbed with kissing each other, they were oblivious to the girls’ arrival.

“We’re all set!” Dana said with an eager grin.

“We better get nice and clean then, before we get really dirty!” Tashana said with a lusty smile.

They all stripped off in a flurry of clothes and climbed into the bubble bath, the hot water leeching any tension from their bodies in no time. The new bath was huge, designed as it was for the entire crew, which left more than enough room for the girls to sit beside John in pairs. Dana and Rachel shared a flirty smile with the others, before the brunette slid across the redhead’s lap then leaned in to kiss her girlfriend.

John and the Maliri girls watched them for a moment, savouring the look of adoration in the lovers’ eyes as they kissed. Irillith opened her arms for her sister with a coy smile, and after a moment’s hesitation where Tashana darted a glance at John, she shifted in the water, straddling her twin. She leaned in to kiss Irillith, two sets of curving blue lips gently brushing against each other.

\*I love you so much, little sister,\* Irillith murmured telepathically, sliding her arms around her twin’s slippery azure body and caressing her back. \*Even after John made everything better for me, my life was still empty without you in it. Since you’ve returned, I’ve never been so happy, not ever!\*

Tashana’s violet gaze softened as she kissed Irillith, feeling the sincerity in those words. She knew it was all true, because that’s exactly how she felt since joining John on the ship. With a start, Tashana realised that while her sister had ruined her old life, if it wasn’t for Irillith, they would never have met John. Suddenly overwhelmed with gratitude for her twin, both new version and old, Tashana moaned into her mouth, kissing her with mounting passion.

John watched the sudden change in Tashana with relief, her abrupt shift in body language reflecting her different outlook. He was soon surrounded on both sides by kissing girls and feeling less anxious about Tashana, he turned back to look at Dana and Rachel. Their obvious affection for each other was inspiring and he watched their intimate kisses in fascination. Grey and blue eyes suddenly darted his way, the two teenagers easing apart.

“I can see how much you love each other,” he said, smiling at both girls. “It’s wonderful to behold.”

They glided as one over to him, sliding across his body in the water. “We feel the same way about you...” Rachel murmured, gazing into his eyes with similar intensity as she kissed him.

When Dana took over, she brushed her lips against his before pulling back with a sultry smile. “Rachel’s normally right about everything, but not this...” she said, darting an affectionate glance at the brunette. “Being with her is soft, gentle... comforting. We love each other as equals and it’s amazing, but being with you is totally different! You own me, you own all of us; you’re our lion and we’re your lionesses!”

John started to protest that he considered them his equals too, but Rachel silenced him with a fierce kiss.

The brunette pressed her firm breasts against his arm, her grey eyes turning stormy with excitement. “She’s right! I feel safe, protected... cared for when I’m with you. It’s much more primal and very exciting!”

“My head’s normally buzzing with thoughts,” Dana murmured, pressing herself against his cock. “But when you’re inside me, I can’t think of anything else. I just focus on getting fucked by you, wondering when you’re going to breed me...”

Rachel looked startled for a moment, then grinned at her lover. “I thought that was just me!”

“Fuck no...” Dana growled, writhing against John.

Tashana pulled away from Irillith and grinned at the three girls. “You’ve all been with John a lot longer than me. I think I’ll need to get more practice, see for myself...”

Irillith flashed him a smouldering look and nodded. “I know exactly what they mean. You definitely need to experience it too!”

Dana and Rachel moved aside to give the Maliri girls a turn lying on top of John. He put his arms around the twins, then casually slid his hands down their backs, and eased a finger into Irillith’s ass. She hissed, the lust in the look she gave him ratcheting up several notches.

“You think about me making you pregnant when we’re together?” he asked Irillith with a teasing smile.

“Always,” she growled, before giving him a sly smile as she clenched the muscles in her ass, gripping his finger. “Well maybe not always, but when you take me like that, I can’t think of anything at all...”

Tashana glanced at her twin in confusion for a moment, before she gasped in shock when John began to rub his finger against her ass too. She bit her lip and slowly nodded, letting out a low moan when he eased the tip inside her. They lay against his chest, gazing into each other’s violet eyes as he gently massaged them both.

“Let’s move this to the playroom,” John eventually said to the four girls, easing his fingers from the Maliri girls. “I’ve got something big here I want all of you to think about...”

They got out of the huge bath and dried quickly, before padding down the corridor towards the playroom. Irillith hit the button to open the door, revealing the darkened room within that flickered with candlelight. Dana led the way inside, flashing John an eager grin over her shoulder as she picked up two bottles and handed one to Irillith. The girls then glided over to the waterproof sheet that had been carefully prepared on the big mattress on the floor. They paired off with Dana and Irillith pouring oil over their partners, massaging it into Rachel and Tashana’s stunning bodies and making them glisten in the candlelight.

It was the first time John had seen a Maliri girl oiled up like this and Tashana’s azure flesh looked just as mouth-watering as Rachel’s bronzed curves. The girls switched when they were done, getting Dana and Irillith prepared as well, and soon all four women stood proud and elegant before him. Although they looked spectacular, their attempts to remain poised and alluring was slightly undermined by the fact that all four of them were practically panting with lust.

John walked over to join them and slid his hands over their slippery skin, relishing the feel of their pliant, supple bodies as he caressed them. He pulled Tashana and Rachel closer, filling his arms with beautiful girls.

“We’ll need to take this nice and slow,” he said firmly, before kissing Tashana. She moaned into his mouth as Irillith hugged her from behind. When his lips parted from hers, he turned to Rachel next and continued, “I’m packed full at the moment, so I’ll need your help keeping control until I’m ready to fill you all with cum...”

“Can I see?” the brunette asked with an excited sparkle in her eyes, before dropping to her knees.

Dana quickly took her place, standing next to John and kissing him passionately.

“Oh! You weren’t kidding!” Rachel gasped, gently filling her hands with his heavy orbs and feeling their weight. She stood a moment later and gave him a hungry look. “We’re not going to have much room for Sakura’s breakfast after you feed us all that...”

They all lay down then, moving together in an oil-slicked tangle of limbs. John took Rachel first, sliding deep inside her body in one long womb-penetrating thrust. She was so turned on that she took him effortlessly, stretching wider around his broad girth, her snug pussy gloriously wet with her arousal. When his quad was resting against her trembling ass, her pussy wrapped tight around his shaft, John gazed into Rachel’s smoky grey eyes and saw a look of ecstatic awe.

“What’re you thinking about, beautiful?” he murmured as he started to move, grinding against her aroused clit each time he buried himself inside her luscious body.

Answering with panted breaths between deep thrusts, Rachel managed to groan, “How many times... you’re going to get me... pregnant!” With the last utterance, her eyes rolled back as she came, clinging to him as she arched her back and cried out with pleasure.

John savoured the feel of her clamping down on his shaft and her firm breasts squashing into his chest, desperately fighting the urge to fill her with cum. He took Dana, Irillith, and finally Tashana the same way, ending up just as slippery as they were. When the second Maliri sister finally slumped backwards in orgasmic bliss, she gazed up at him with a lovely doe-eyed look on her exquisite face, her lips lifted into a soft lop-sided smile. The other girls had taken to massaging John while he slowly fucked each of them in turn, leaving him in a blissful state of relaxation that actually helped him stave off his own climax.

He eased his huge cock out of Tashana then helped her sit up, the girls gathering around him.

“How do you want to cum?” Dana asked him, reaching out to gently stroke his aching quad.

Tashana smiled at him and asked, “Can I make a suggestion?” When John nodded, she continued, “Irillith and I have been hogging you these last few weeks. Why don’t you finish with Dana and Rachel, then they can feed me and Irillith afterwards?”

That was how John found himself kneeling behind Dana as she lay on Rachel, his balls slapping against the brunette’s pussy as he fucked the redhead. The two lovers were moaning ecstatically into each other’s mouths, climaxing repeatedly as John alternated between them. Irillith and Tashana knelt beside him, taking turns kissing him, while helping to guide his cock into each of the teenagers when he switched girls. John would have done it himself, but he had his index fingers buried inside each of the Maliri girls. When they weren’t helping him alternate between tight pussies, the twins’ eager fingers were working on each other’s clits, gazing into each other’s eyes as they brought each other off.

“Just wait until he’s got his cock in there!” Irillith gasped, her chest heaving with excitement as she stared into her sister’s eyes. “You won’t believe how good it feels!”

Tashana groaned, leaning against John for support. Her violet eyes were hooded with lust as she hissed, “I’ve got a good idea... he fucked you like that for hours and I felt it all!”

They both squealed as they orgasmed again and the feeling of both sisters clenching down on his fingers set John off. He drove all the way inside Dana and roared as he came, pumping long blasts of spunk into her rapidly filling womb. The redhead screamed as she was overwhelmed by her climax, throwing her head back and bucking against him. Her belly started to swell with the hefty load he was pumping into her, but the twins had just enough presence of mind to help John switch girls half way through. He thrust up to the balls inside Rachel, shooting his spunk into her depths and making her tummy curve up against her lover’s.

Both girls were sobbing with ecstasy when he was finally done, but they got no respite as Irillith and Tashana were both hungry for cum. The Terran girls flopped bonelessly on their backs, and uttered feeble groans as the Maliri girls started to suck out John’s spunk, while giving their sensitive clits a good tongue lashing. About half way through their debauched feast, the twins helped reposition Dana and Rachel in a sixty-nine, letting them both get their own high-protein breakfast.

When they were all done, John sprawled on his back in the middle of the bed, relishing the numb ache of his freshly-emptied balls. He let out a disbelieving laugh and muttered, “Holy fuck... That was incredible!”

The four girls flopped down against him, panting for breath in a sweaty, oil-slicked pile. The girls stroked their tummies, enjoying both the full feeling and the warmth of his cum. John could feel an active psychic connection with each of them now and he savoured the intense feelings of protectiveness that stirred within him.

“I’ll have to join ground missions more often if we celebrate like that afterwards!” Irillith said, turning to grin at him.

He laughed and ran his fingers through her hair, which was now slicked back against her head. “If you weren’t so handy on the Bridge, I’d have you with me all the time. I’ll make sure I thank you properly whatever you end up doing.”

The door swished open, drawing their attention, and Alyssa glided inside looking very satisfied with herself. “Did that hit the spot?” she asked them, arching an eyebrow playfully.

John leaned up on his elbows and grinned at her. “Yeah, you know it did.”

The girls all nodded, with similar enthusiastic grins lighting up their glistening faces.

Alyssa squatted down next to Dana and traced her fingers over the redhead’s toned stomach. “If you’re still hungry, we’ll be serving breakfast in ten minutes. Why don’t you all take a quick shower and get cleaned up? Don’t worry about tidying the playroom though, Jade volunteered to clean that up for you.”

At the mention of breakfast, John’s stomach rumbled in anguish, drawing giggles from the girls who were using him as a pillow. They all got up, eager to be supportive of their new Head Chef, and left the room to head for the big shower in the Commander’s Quarters. John was last to leave and he ran into Jade as she glided down the corridor followed by a procession of cleaning bots.

He greeted her with a smile. “Honey, I don’t expect you to-”

Jade rushed into his arms, showering him with kisses and giving him a tight hug that surprised him with her strength. “I saw it all!” she exclaimed, finally releasing her fierce grip and pulling back to stare into his eyes. “I’m so sorry I put you in that much danger! I was terrified for you and my sisters watching that video, it was awful!”

John shook his head and brushed his thumb across her cheek. “It’s alright, Jade. You’ve got nothing to apologise for. It was just unfortunate timing, but we all made it through safe and sound.”

The Nymph glanced over his shoulder, watching the tanned brunette padding down the corridor holding Dana’s hand. “Rachel still got hurt though! Seeing her in agony like that was horrible.”

“But she’s fine now,” John said firmly, looking into Jade’s troubled emerald eyes. “I don’t want you feeling guilty about this, Jade, I mean it. I’ve got enough on my plate trying to help Tashana at the moment. You said it yourself: I helped you break free of your previous limitations. If it’s anyone’s fault it’s mine and that’s the end of it.”

“Whatever you say, Master,” she purred, her anxious expression lifting as she gave him a tender kiss. She leaned forward to whisper in his ear, “I might not have to obey your every whim any more, but I still love it when you’re firm with me and take charge...”

“Good to know,” John replied, sharing a smile with her. He glanced down at the oil-stains he’d left on her dress and frowned. “Sorry about the mess, this stuff gets everywhere.”

She grinned at him, her sparkling white teeth a sharp contrast to the dark lustre of her lips. “I have no reservations about getting dirty, Master...”

He laughed and waved goodbye, before strolling down the corridor towards the bedroom to catch up with his quartet of lovers.

One of the cleaning robots bumped into Jade’s leg and let out an indignant beep.

She glanced down at it and said defensively, “I said I’d help as well! I’m not stalling to get out of cleaning, I promise!”

Mollified, the cleaning bot spun around and rolled back into the devastated bedroom. The Nymph saw the mess and just shrugged off her dress and padded inside nude, ready to help out. Once she was through the doorway, her form shimmered in a green haze, radically changing shape into something more efficient for the clean-up operation. She decided to grow a second set of arms and a huge cat-like lower body to help counter the additional weight of her new limbs.

The robots looked at her in confusion for a moment, not recognising the fantastical creature in their midst. Jade elongated both sets of her arms to gather up the corners of the oil-slicked sheet and neatly stripped the mattress in one go. With the bulk of the hard work done already, the cleaning bots set about their tasks with gusto.

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Sakura nervously nibbled a nail as her guests took their seats around the dining table in the Officers’ Lounge. The entire crew was there and she was feeling the pressure, knowing that they’d all soon be tasting the food she’d prepared for their breakfast that morning.

“This smells delicious!” John exclaimed, looking over the platters of sausages, eggs, bacon, beans, and tomatoes. “Did you really cook all this yourself?”

Sakura gave him a shy smile as she nodded. “Calara and Alyssa spent an hour or so teaching me how to prepare everything, then they helped as my assistants.” She looked surprised as she added, “It was surprisingly easy actually. You just have to remember all the recipes, then coordinate all the timings so it’s all ready at the same time.”

“She was a very attentive student,” Calara said, smiling at the Asian girl.

Alyssa grinned at Sakura. “We wouldn’t want you getting bored... If you’re finding it too easy, we’ll have to teach you something much more complicated for lunch and dinner!”

Sakura looked even more worried now, but she waved a hand at the food on the table. “Please start everyone! I don’t want it to get cold.”

John ladled one of the fried eggs onto his plate and sliced off a corner before taking an experimental bite. There was quiet in the room as everyone waited for his verdict.

He nodded, looking impressed. “Very nice! The yokes have started to thicken but aren’t hard... you’ve cooked them perfectly, well done!”

With an audible sigh of relief, Sakura beamed a bright smile at him, then joined the others in tucking into breakfast. The rest of the food was just as good and everyone was quiet as they munched away happily. It didn’t take long for everyone to finish and they all joined in to help clear the table afterwards.

After carrying a stack of plates into the kitchen, John returned to the dining room and strolled over to Faye, who was still perched on the end of the table. “Faye, could you help me with something?”

“Sure, John!” she replied, vaulting off the table, her wings quivering in anticipation. “What do you need?”

“I’d like to have a chat with the various diplomats. They’re still aboard, right?” he asked, glancing at his watch and noting that it was now six in the morning.

The purple sprite nodded, her luminous eyes gazing off into the distance for a few seconds as she checked the ship’s cameras. “They’re all in the guest quarters on Deck Four. Most of them are sleeping right now, but they asked me to wake them the moment you were available to speak to them.”

John hesitated before he said, “I’m happy to let them sleep and speak to them later...”

“They were very keen to have a meeting with you as soon as possible,” Faye said, her cute elfin face looking thoughtful. She gave him a reassuring smile. “I suspect they’d be more upset at missing a chance to speak with you than they’ll be annoyed at being woken up.”

“Okay, go ahead and wake them please, I’ll meet them in the Briefing Room,” John said, before pausing for a moment thinking about the other tasks he needed to do. “Could you also let Thandrun know that I’ll head over to the Anvil to speak with him in an hour.”

“Will do!” Faye enthusiastically replied. She glanced up at him and smiled. “I had something I wanted to ask you about, if you have a moment?”

John glanced at the sofas and said, “Sure, why don’t we sit down and we can talk it through. I hadn’t forgotten you had something on your mind, I promise.”

“Actually, that was something else, but it would be lovely to talk about that too!” Her smile widened as she fluttered along at his side. Faye’s iridescent wings moved in a blur, letting her keep pace with him as they crossed the lounge. “I wondered if you wanted me to have my boys start stripping the Invictus’ damaged armour plating? It’ll save time when you and Alyssa begin the repairs, but I didn’t want to start removing armour without speaking to you first!”

“Good thinking,” John replied, impressed by her initiative. “We’re quite a way from the Kirrix invasion forces at the moment and we’ll be able to pick up any approaching ships on the sensors long before they arrive. We should be safe with Thandrun’s fleet for the next several hours at least.” He paused to work out how long Niskera had been asleep for, estimating it would be about four more hours until she awoke. “Once I’ve finished these meetings, I’ll make a start on fixing the armour, so I should be ready to go in about two hours. We’ll just focus on repairing the damaged plates for now, we won’t have time to completely reshape the ship’s armour before Niskera wakes up.”

“And you want to depart for the meeting with the Maliri as soon as possible?” Faye speculated, tilting her head to one side as she studied him.

He nodded, wondering how Edraele was doing, and how Luna was coping as interim Matriarch of House Valaden. “Yes, that’s right. We’ll give Niskera as much support as she needs to adjust to the Change, then once I’m sure she’s happy and settled we’ll make a move.”

Alyssa appeared from the kitchen and she glided over to join them, leaning over the back of the sofa to give John a peck on the cheek. “Sorry to interrupt,” she said, smiling at Faye. “I just wanted to let you know that I’m happy to start working on repairing our Paragon armour, unless you want me there for the meeting with the alien races?”

John hesitated, then said, “Would you mind keeping me company? I’d like to have a chat with the Bolon diplomat.”

The blonde nodded, listening to his thoughts and knowing what he had on his mind. “Of course, I’ll be glad to.” She glanced at Faye and added, “Do you want some privacy for your talk with John?”

Faye glanced at John, then looked back at Alyssa and asked hesitantly, “Would you mind?”

“Of course not, don’t be silly,” the blonde said, giving the purple girl a kind and understanding smile. She glanced at the kitchen and added, “The girls have all got plenty to keep them busy this morning, so they’ll be out soon. You might want to head up to the Ready Room to avoid any more interruptions.”

John shrugged and rose to his feet. “I need to head up to the Bridge anyway. Meet you in the Ready Room, Faye?”

“See you there!” she exclaimed, waving goodbye and disappearing in a purple flash.

Alyssa linked arms with him and they left the Officers’ Lounge, then stepped into the blue glow of the grav-tube and rose up to the Command Deck. They parted ways with a kiss, Alyssa walking over to the Briefing Room to wait for the diplomats, while John strolled over to the Ready Room to meet with Faye. She was inside waiting for him when the door opened, bouncing up and down nervously, her wings thrumming in the air.

Deciding to get straight to the point, John sat down on one of the sofas and gave the purple AI an encouraging smile. “Okay, you’ve got my undivided attention, honey. What’s on your mind?”

Faye nibbled at her cupid-bow lips, clearly hesitant about voicing her thoughts. John was about to offer her more reassurance, when she blurted out, “I felt sorry for the Kirrix!”

He blinked at her in surprise, then relaxed in his chair as he studied her. “Okay... Do you think we did the wrong thing destroying their fleet?”

“I honestly don’t know. I started feeling doubts during the battle while I was on the Invictus’ Bridge with Alyssa and Calara. We’d just exterminated the first wave of Kirrix drone fighters and it was a massacre, we wiped them out to a ship...” Faye faltered and looked troubled as she continued, “The girls were delighted to have destroyed all the strike craft, but I couldn’t help feeling pity for the Kirrix. It was such a one-sided slaughter!”

John gave her a wry smile. “It’s ironic that an artificial lifeform has more respect for life than we organics do, especially after I was so paranoid about you turning on us.”

“Was it right to feel that way though?” Faye asked, looking at him in confusion. “The Kirrix are evil, aren’t they? If they’re the bad guys, surely annihilating them is the right thing to do...”

John was quiet for a long moment, unsure how to answer her at first. He eventually said, “If we hadn’t intervened to stop the Kirrix at Khalgron, they would have captured and infested every Trankaran on that planet. The grubs would have eaten their way out of their hosts from the inside, killing every single one of them. That would mean over a hundred-thousand civilians killed in just a couple of weeks, just to hatch more Kirrix young...”

Gazing away into the distance, he murmured, “Are the Kirrix deliberately evil? Or are they just following their natural instincts, using sentient life as hosts for their young, even though it means the deaths of any creature they impregnate?” His eyes narrowed and his voice grew firmer as he continued, “In my opinion, it doesn’t matter whether it’s instinct that drives them or if they’re deliberately sadistic. The Kirrix are like parasites, selfishly killing millions of innocent people in their drive to procreate. If it was up to me, I’d wipe out every last one of the vermin!”

He faltered then and gave Faye a look of regret. “I’m sorry, Faye. I’m proud of you for developing a newfound respect for life, but I’m really not the best person to have this kind of philosophical discussion with.”

Faye shook her head and said insistently, “I’ve always found your opinions to be well-considered and insightful. Why would you think you shouldn’t be discussing this with me?”

John’s expression turned bleak. “Because genocide is the family business. It looks like my father’s either Mael’nerak, who exterminated the Achonin and who knows how many other species, or this Ranagon the Despoiler... and we know for a fact he was responsible for massacring billions of Maliri and Trankarans!”

The purple girl darted over to sit beside him on the sofa, a look of frustration on her lovely elfin face. “Oh drat! I wish I had that body... you look like you really need a hug.” Her face brightened and she gasped, “I know! I could ask Jade to turn into a copy of me! Then it’d be like I could give you a hug through her!”

He smiled at the eager sprite and shook his head. “I appreciate the thought, but let’s save our first hug for when it’s really you, okay?”

Faye blushed and nodded, her luminous eyes growing softer as she gazed at him. “Okay, that would be lovely. But I am sorry for making you feel sad though...”

John frowned and shook his head. “Don’t be, I didn’t mean to turn this into a chat about me.”

“I don’t mind!” Faye quickly protested. “I really don’t, honestly! You’re always there to offer me and the girls a shoulder to cry on. I’m really grateful you trusted me enough to be honest about something that’s bothering you.”

John was about to make a joke about not needing to cry right then, but he slumped despondently in the chair instead. “It really does bother me...” he admitted with a grim frown. “I try to do the right thing, but am I just fighting a losing battle? Will I end up getting banished into my own mind by my Progenitor-half, then becoming as much of a monster as every other Progenitor we’ve heard of? Being a pitiless genocidal tyrant is in my blood... can I really fight against something so ingrained?”

Faye nodded exuberantly. “Of course you can! You’ve encouraged all of the girls to change for the better! It’s something you feel passionately about and you’ve nurtured in all of us!” She reached out to brush her holographic fingers against his cheek, feeling a momentary surge of irritation that she couldn’t comfort him by touch. “You’re a good man, John. Just think of all the lives you’ve improved with your influence.”

“Judge myself by my actions?” John said with a wry smile. “I think that’s what I just advised you to do with the Kirrix.”

“Very wise advice it was too,” Faye told him sagely, before breaking into a grin. “Was it helpful?”

He nodded, the tension easing from his shoulders. “It was actually, thank you.”

“Yay!” the sprite cheered, looking delighted. She placed her hand on top of his and continued, “Before you ask, your advice was useful for me too. I’ve spent the last eight hours helping to look after the Trankaran civilians we rescued. They’re nice people... friendly, helpful, kind, and none of them deserved to be killed by the Kirrix. I agree with you; if it comes down to a choice over which species to save, I’d choose the Trankarans every time.”

“For what it’s worth, I agree completely,” John said, relieved that she had found the discussion helpful.

Faye cocked her head to one side, then gave him a rueful look. “The Bolon diplomat has just arrived in the Briefing Room. It’s been wonderful talking to you, but I better let you go.”

He rose to his feet and gave her a grateful smile. “I enjoyed it too, thanks for the advice.”

“You’re welcome!” she exclaimed, bouncing over to the door beside him.

John crossed the Bridge and entered the Briefing Room, to find Alyssa facing the Bolon in what looked like a staring competition. There was a vaguely humanoid robot standing beside the dark-green gelatinous creature, which John knew the Bolons used as interpreters from his past experiences dealing with the strange telepathic species. The robot was a warm orange in colour, all curved lines with a cushiony texture to the outer casing; he couldn’t imagine anything less threatening, which he realised was entirely the point.

“Hey,” Alyssa said, turning and greeting John with a kiss on the cheek. “I’ve just been having a fascinating conversation with Vluwe, the Bolon ambassador.”

The robot turned to face John and after a pause, it said in a grindingly dull monotone, “We are honoured... to speak with you... at last, Dark One... Our thanks for... granting an audience.”

John gave the Bolon a startled frown. “Dark One?!”

“Our humblest... apologies, we did... not mean to cause... any offense,” the robot stated laboriously, the flat delivery robbing it of its sincerity. “We were... only referring to the... void where your... aura should be.”

“He usually just goes by, ‘John’,” Alyssa said with a smile. “He saves ‘Dark One’ for special occasions.”

The robot turned to look at her and stated, “Our thanks... Radiant One.”

The blonde winked at John and said, “I like my nickname much more!”

The Bolon’s interpreter then turned back to John and began to slowly translate the creature’s telepathic speech, “You saved our... life, John... for that we... are truly grateful. Please accept... our most...-”

“Hold on a second,” John requested, raising a hand. “Firstly, you’re welcome. Secondly, I’m sure Alyssa wouldn’t mind translating for us telepathically, I’m sure that’ll be a lot more efficient.”

\*We would find that much more convenient, thank you!\* Alyssa thought to John, passing on the Bolon’s thoughts.

“Thanks, honey,” John said with a grateful smile. He turned to the Bolon and continued, \*Thanks for arriving so promptly. I’m sorry I kept you waiting.\*

\*Bolons do not sleep as Terrans do, so we were already conscious. You do not have to apologise to us, it is quite understandable that you were weary after the battle,\* Vluwe replied politely.

John paused for a moment and glanced at Alyssa, who shook her head, answering his unspoken question. He turned to look at the dark-green blob and said, \*There’s something I wanted to ask you about, regarding something that a Bolon did to one of the women on my crew.\*

Vluwe shifted colours, turning a dull purple colour. \*We suspect that we already know what you are about to ask, by the way you have framed your statement. Please accept our most sincere apologies for the activities of this deviant entity.\*

Walking over to one of the chairs, John sat down and studied the gelatinous alien. \*A Bolon paid a slaver to rape my friend in the most horrifying way possible. It then used her to... incubate and spawn its young.\*

\*Only the most depraved of Bolon would behave in such an appalling manner,\* Vluwe replied, turning a sickly yellow. \*Such practices are outlawed amongst my kind and deviancy like this is punished by nullification.\*

John wasn’t sure what ‘nullification’ meant, but it certainly sounded like a severe punishment. He studied the informative Bolon, not quite sure how to phrase the next question, before asking quietly, \*If this has happened before, are there many half-Bolon hybrids out there?\*

Vluwe paused for a moment, then replied, \*The Bolon are not individual entities like a Terran, or a Trankaran. Vluwe is the name of the colony you see before you. Our species reproduce by a practice that Terrans would describe as akin to mitosis and there is no need for ‘incubation’ of a neophyte colony. The Bolon which assaulted your friend was tasting her fear, savouring it like a delicacy. That division occurred within her body was merely a way of heightening her terror. We are truly sorry that she was made to suffer in such a horrific way.\*

\*Can we can track down who did this to her?\* John asked, his eyes narrowing. \*It happened about six years ago, in the Unclaimed Wastes.\*

The Bolon ambassador shifted colour to a very dark purple. \*We are deeply sorry, but we suspect that tracking the guilty would be extremely difficult, if not impossible. The Bolon are nomadic and solitary by nature; we do not require the company of others when we share so many voices within an entity. There are many Bolon that roam far from the homeworld for decades at a time... Considering the penalty if such behaviour was discovered, we suspect the guilty party would probably remain far from the jurisdiction of Bolon territory.\*

\*Thanks for answering my questions, I appreciate it,\* John said gratefully, leaning back in his chair.

\*If any Bolon is found guilty of such activity in the future, we will request that an investigation is undertaken to verify if they are the specific entity that violated your crewwoman. If that turns out to be the case, they will be handed over to you for whatever punishment you deem appropriate,\* Vluwe replied, changing colour to a deep maroon. \*Such behaviour is an appalling blight on our reputation with all sentient species and will not be tolerated.\*

Alyssa glanced at John then said to Vluwe, \*I’ve seen her memories of the rape. I’ll provide you all the details I can.\*

There was a polite knock on the door, so John rose from his seat and called out, “Come in!”

The door swished open and the rest of the alien diplomats entered the room, with the yellow-eyed Slarmian leading the way.

John greeted them with a smile and said, “Welcome, all of you. Please make yourselves comfortable; I’d offer you a seat, but I’m afraid we’re not exactly set up with non-humanoid lifeforms in mind.”

The Bolon moved further back, allowing the other eleven diplomats to slither, stomp, and scuttle into the room. John noticed more than one of them stared at the weapon racks full of Quantum rifles and Justice Lasers with interest. The rest were either gazing at him, or focused on the racks of Paragon armour in the equipping frames lining the walls. He gave the group a minute to settle down, all the alien diplomats moving to stand around the table, with none of them capable of sitting in the chairs with their unusual physiologies.

All twelve of the diplomats stood watching him silently and John could only guess that they were feeling intimidated by his presence. He decided to start the meeting by saying, “Please accept my apologies for making you wait for this meeting, then for waking you up like this. I promise I wasn’t trying to seem arrogant, but I believe you all asked to speak to me at the earliest opportunity.”

“Crinx would not wish to speak for his fellow dignitaries, but he does not mind in the slightest,” the Slarmian said, weaving his eel-like head from side to side. “Crinx wishes to offer his most profound thanks for the magnificent way in which John Blake rescued us from certain doom at the hands of the Kirrix...”

The quiet meeting suddenly erupted into a chorus of gratitude from the diverse array of alien creatures. Alyssa found it fascinating to watch their various mannerisms when they were expressing heartfelt thanks for their rescue. The Bolon shifted to a rich blue, while the rest gesticulated in various ways unique to their species. The Skerawk was wearing pale yellow robes now, but the diplomat’s head plumage fanned out in an impressive display, while the Bract chattered and waved its antenna about frenetically.

“You’re all quite welcome,” John said with a warm smile. “I’m just glad we managed to get you all out of there safely.”

The Ornalith raised one of its three stubby arms to get his attention. “What happened to Niskera?” the creature asked bluntly in a very deep voice, its concern quite apparent.

“She was exhausted after all the stress of the siege and needed some sleep,” John replied, looking at the three-eyed, squat creature. “Sorry, I didn’t catch your name?”

“Bhegguc of the Ornalith Dictorum,” the marble-skinned creature replied. It paused for a moment before continuing, its sonorous voice ringing with admiration, “I’m not surprised Niskera was weary. She had to rally the defence of the fortress, help the civilians to escape, and call for our rescue!”

“The Chancellor is a credit to the Trankarans,” the Elmoq stated in a strange, watery voice, its rubbery undulating skin reflecting the light. It turned to look at John and rippled for a moment before adding, “I am Lermohle of the Elmoq.”

John nodded as he glanced at the mollusc-like alien. “I agree, Lermohle. Niskera deserved a good rest after everything she’s done, but I’m sure she’ll be up again in a few hours if you have pressing business with her.“ He cleared his throat and continued, “That brings me to something I wanted to discuss with all of you. Before Chancellor Niskera retired for the night, I offered the Trankaran Republic a place in an alliance with myself, the Maliri, and the Ashanath. I don’t expect you to take my word for it, but Niskera accepted; you’re welcome to discuss it with her when she awakes.”

There was a sudden burst of excited chatter, with many of the exotic diplomats speaking to each other in their native tongues.

“Why would Crinx doubt your word?” the Slarmian asked over the hubbub, it’s big unblinking yellow eyes staring at John intently. “After seeing you in action against the Kirrix, Crinx suspects that the other diplomats here are as desperate to ally themselves with you as the Grand Slarmian Dynasty is!”

“How much will it cost for the Bract Conglomerate to join such a venture?” the black-carapaced insectoid diplomat quickly interrupted. Its antennae quivered as it added, “We would be willing to pay significant sums for your protection from the Kirrix!”

There was consensus again amongst all the diplomats as they all practically begged him to let them join the rapidly expanding alliance.

Shaking his head, John replied, “I’m not expecting you to pay me anything. The main priority for me at the moment is protecting the Trankaran Republic and your empires from the Kirrix threat. If any of you are interested in joining that alliance, I’d like you to muster all the fleet assets you have available to assist the Trankarans. I’m planning on supporting that force with the aid of a Maliri fleet, but I’d expect all of you to pull your weight.”

The hook-billed avian dignitary suddenly looked very jittery, its feathered head bobbing in a rapid motion. Despite its far less impressive appearance compared to the taller and brighter coloured Skerawk, it’s warbling voice was beautiful, reminding John of birdsong. “The flocks of Qiat have only recently taken to the stars and do not have any warships of significance. The Qiat have a rich culture and my home planet is a beautiful world of lush jungles and soaring mountains. We are only three systems away from those taken by the Kirrix invaders... I beg you to save us from extinction!”

The Yelneg diplomat drummed its stubby fingers on the table and said in its high-pitched voice, “The Yelneg Dominion is also near the battle-lines with the Kirrix. I promise I will entreat the War Council to come to the Trankaran’s assistance, but I know there will be fierce opposition to stripping forces away from Yelnaga...”

John managed to suppress a groan of frustration as the rest of the diplomats quickly chimed in, voicing similar concerns. He missed Edraele’s wise advice more than ever, as the ambassadors each came up with various justifications why they wouldn’t be able to contribute to a defensive force.

Alyssa gave him a sympathetic smile when he darted a pained look in her direction. \*Talking with diplomats is not really your thing, is it, handsome?\*

\*I’d rather get into a wrestling match with a Kintark Dragon!\* he grunted, trying not to let his irritation show on his face. \*Can’t they see that their best chance of survival is banding all their forces together?\*

\*I’m sure Niskera will be more than happy to deal with them,\* Alyssa replied, glancing around at the dozen aliens, who had started arguing amongst themselves. \*How much do we need their help anyway?\*

\*Trade with all these species is important, the Bract in particular, but I don’t think any of them have a big enough military to make any real difference, not considering what we’re up against,\* John replied, thinking about the intelligence briefs he’d read about these aliens while still in the Terran Federation.

\*Let’s just wrap this up then,\* Alyssa suggested. \*We can throw them a bone and let them join the alliance, then just forget about them after that. If we focus on protecting the Trankarans from the Kirrix, we’ll end up saving all of the minor empires as well... That’s bound to earn you a shitload of brownie points with them for no extra effort.\*

\*That’s good advice actually, thanks.\*

\*I was just trying to think what Edraele would suggest,\* Alyssa replied, slipping her hand into his and squeezing it.

John gave her a grateful look, then cleared his throat again as he turned to face the ambassadors again, gathering their attention. “Please pass on my offer of an alliance to your respective governments, as well as my request for military forces to assist in the fight against the Kirrix.” He held up a hand to stave off any further excuses. “I understand the problems you face and I’m definitely not trying to make unreasonable demands; just consider it a polite request. I fully intend to protect you from the Kirrix invasion regardless.”

“Crinx is overawed by your most generous offer of protection, John Blake,” the Slarmian diplomat said, bowing his curved body in a gesture of respect. “Know that Crinx will describe your splendid actions and behaviour to the Majestic Potentate in the most glowing terms possible!”

“I appreciate that, thank you,” John said, smiling at the grateful Slarmian. He glanced around the table and continued, “Unless any of you have anything important you’d like to discuss with me, I suggest we conclude the meeting there.”

The diplomats were still stunned that he’d offered to protect them against the Kirrix threat, so John was able to depart without any further questions. Alyssa volunteered to show the diplomats out to the Anvil and answer any questions they might think of, freeing John to make his own way to the Trankaran capital ship to visit Fleet Warden Thandrun.

When John stepped out of the grav-tube on Deck Nine, he’d expected the lowest level of his ship to be peaceful and quiet with the last of the civilians disembarked. It therefore came as a surprise when he heard a bustle of activity coming from the Cargo Bay. He opened the reinforced doors, then did a double-take at the dozens of Trankarans striding through the bay. Even more startling was the huge numbers of ore crates being stacked in neat, ever-growing piles.

The Trankarans were being directed by the maintenance bots, so John knew a certain purple sprite would have some answers. “Faye!” he called out loudly, glancing around the busy Cargo Bay.

She popped into existence beside him a second later, a broad smile on her face. “Surprise!”

“Yeah, it was,” he replied wryly, glancing around at the busy Trankarans. “Care to explain what’s happening?”

Faye pointed to the starboard side of the ship. “We’re still docked with the Anvil and the Trankarans are loading materials from their flagship into the Cargo Bay!” She whirled around and pointed to the port side of the ship and continued, “And we’re also docked with a Trankaran freighter and their crew are loading up the Primary Hangar with lots and lots of metals!”

“Is this Thandrun’s doing?” John asked, watching as one of the Trankarans thumped past, the eight-foot-tall rockman pausing to give him a respectful bow.

“Uh-huh!” the sprite said with a grin. “When I spoke to him earlier and told him what we’d done on Khalgron, he was *really* happy! As soon as the last of the civilians were transferred, he asked if he could start loading the ship up with metals!” She hesitated then and looked a bit worried. “I didn’t think you’d mind... Was it a nice surprise?”

“It really was, Faye, thank you.” He laughed and patted her on the shoulder, his hand swiping through her holographic form. “Oh! Sorry!”

She gave him a dreamy smile, looking delighted that he’d forgotten she was insubstantial. “That’s okay, I don’t mind one bit!”

After one last look around the Cargo Bay, John said, “It looks like you’ve got everything well in hand. I better go and see Thandrun and say thanks.”

“No problem!” Faye replied, giving him a cheery wave goodbye, before bounding over to one of her maintenance bots.

\*She’s getting much more independent,\* Alyssa said to him, as John strode across the loading umbilical that connected his ship to the Kerhom's Anvil.

John glanced over his shoulder at the happy sprite, watching as Faye confidently directed the Trankaran cargo loaders around. \*It’s incredible to see how much she’s developed over the past few months.\*

There was a moment’s pause as he walked into the Anvil’s Cargo Bay, then Alyssa said, \*I’m pleased you opened up to Faye earlier, but why didn’t you tell me you were worrying about your Progenitor background?\*

\*Until I started discussing it with Faye, I didn’t realise it was bothering me so much,\* John replied, stopping to look around the bay. He hesitated then admitted, \*It’s all so depressing, I must admit I’ve been trying not to dwell on it.\*

\*I understand, but talk to me next time, okay?\* she asked, her voice like a soft breeze caressing his mind. \*I don’t like you getting sad over things and I’ll always help however I can.\*

\*I know, beautiful. Thank you,\* John replied, finally spotting a couple of Trankaran soldiers over near the broad runed doors that led out of the bay. He walked across the loading area towards them and they saluted him respectfully. “I’d like to see the Fleet Warden. Is he up on the Bridge?”

“It would be an honour to escort you there, Vice Admiral,” one of the huge armoured soldiers rumbled.

Gesturing for the burly Legionnaire to proceed, John said, “Much appreciated, thank you.” He fell into step beside the Trankaran as they strode through the double doors that led deeper into the enormous battlecarrier.

The Legionnaire was not a talkative fellow and John wasn’t really in the mood to make small talk. They strolled down a number of corridors, their way lit by glowing lines that trailed across the rock-like surface of the ceiling. When they finally reached the elevator, the Trankaran soldier activated the runes by the door to open it. John followed him inside and they ascended up the levels to the Command Deck.

When John walked out onto the long Bridge, he was greeted by a thundering bellow. “John! It’s wonderful to see you again!”

John turned to see Fleet Warden Thandrun jogging across the Bridge to greet him, his heavy footfalls thumping on the deck. “It’s good to see you too, Thandrun,” John replied, suppressing a laugh when Thandrun reigned in his enthusiasm and gently patted him on the shoulder like he was made of glass.

“Come this way my friend, we must talk!” Thandrun boomed, a broad grin on his slab-like features, as he gestured towards the Command Chamber at the other end of the Bridge.

John nodded his gratitude to the Legionnaire that had escorted him up to the Command Deck, then followed the massive Trankaran leader across the Bridge. When the door to the Command Chamber closed behind them, Thandrun gazed down at John and shook his head in amazement.

“I must confess that I harboured grave doubts about a successful outcome for your mission... That you would even attempt to rescue Niskera alone was incredibly brave, but also seemed reckless in the extreme. I didn’t doubt your sincerity after we spoke, but I never believed you would achieve such success...” He shook his head and laughed, a deep rolling sound that sounded like boulders crashing down a mountainside. “Never have I been more glad to be proven so wrong!”

“I’m pretty glad too,” John said with a smile.

Thandrun gestured towards at two chairs, one much larger than the other, and they both sat down in their respective seats. The heavy-set Trankaran wasted no time in leaning forward and saying, “I’m very eager to meet with the Chancellor! Your crewwoman, Faye, informed me that Niskera was unharmed, but suffering from exhaustion... Is she still asleep?”

John nodded and said, “I don’t think Niskera got much rest during the siege of Hol Darim Fortress, so she’s making up for lost time. When she wakes up, I’m sure she’ll want to see you immediately.” He paused for a moment, then deftly changed the subject. “I wanted to thank you for the metals you’ve been loading onto my ship. I spoke to Faye a few minutes ago and she’d been keeping it quiet as a surprise.”

Thandrun grinned at him and said enthusiastically, “You’re most welcome! My analysts studied the schematics you supplied us and when they explained just how powerful the new technology was, I felt honour-bound to do my best to repay you. Many miners and traders sought the protection of this fleet from the Kirrix, so I simply paid them for their cargo.”

“I really appreciate all the effort you’ve gone to,” John said, nodding in gratitude. “All those raw materials will be tremendously helpful.”

“My friend, that was the least I could do!” Thandrun boomed, shaking his head in astonishment. “And that was before I found out what you’d accomplished on Khalgron! I’ve heard wild rumours from all those survivors you rescued, but I find myself struggling to believe it could all be true... Would you tell me exactly what happened?”

John relaxed in the chair and went through the battle, giving the Fleet Warden an unembellished review of his spectacular victory over the Kirrix. Thandrun gaped at him in awe when John casually informed the Trankaran that the insectoid forces had been comprehensively annihilated, their huge invasion fleet wiped out to a ship.

“It seems your claims about the incredible firepower of your vessel were not idle boasts,” Thandrun murmured, his wide amber eyes reflecting his shock. “Your story would seem utterly implausible at face-value, if I had not heard similar stories from numerous reliable sources amongst the survivors you rescued.”

“Unfortunately, we had to leave behind at least a hundred-thousand civilians on Khalgron,” John said quietly. “We only evacuated those that had been wounded or infested by the Kirrix. My doctor has successfully treated those survivors and they should all make a full recovery now.”

“Ah yes, the miraculous Doctor Voss,” Thandrun marvelled, steepling his armoured fingers as he relaxed in his chair. “After your sudden departure yesterday, I received reports from my senior medics detailing her amazing exploits in the Anvil’s Medical Bay. My favourite quote was: ‘Being in the presence of Rachel Voss is like bearing witness to the power of the Great Maker himself!’.” The Fleet Warden chuckled then added, “My Medics are a dour bunch. For them to be so enthralled, I knew she must be something special.”

“That she is,” John agreed with a fond smile.

There was a moment’s quiet in the conversation as the Fleet Warden studied John, his expression growing pensive. Just when John was about to ask him what was troubling him, Thandrun said quietly, “Considering what you have just achieved, your previous reference to a second ship just as powerful as the Invictus now has me very worried. I have spent some time thinking about your parting words to me, when we last spoke: ‘There are other threats out there beside the Kirrix’...” He edged forward on his seat, huge hands clenching the armrests in a tight grip. “I now realise how ominous that statement was. Am I right to be worried?”

John met the Trankaran’s anxious gaze and slowly nodded, seeing the subsequent flicker of fear in the Fleet Warden’s eyes. He could see the gears turning in Thandrun’s head, the astute leader’s mind racing. That hint of fear remained, but his eyes suddenly widened in wonder.

“The medics were right!” he gasped, looking stunned. Thandrun stared at John in open-mouthed awe. “Can it really be true?! Are you the Great Maker returned to us?”

Now it was John’s turn to hesitate. He hadn’t been expecting the Fleet Warden to put everything together so quickly, but he realised in hindsight that he’d dropped numerous hints.

Thandrun took that momentary pause as confirmation and he rumbled in shock, “Great Maker preserve me!” He blinked then, his heavy features crinkling into an anxious frown. “I did not mean to take your name in vain, Great Maker!” The Fleet Warden shifted forward and looked like he was about to kneel.

John quickly intercepted him, placing a restraining hand on Thandrun’s armoured chest and shaking his head. “Relax, Thandrun, I’m not the one your people know as ‘The Great Maker’.” He looked into the Trankaran’s eyes and continued, “But I am a Progenitor, just as Mael’nerak was. That’s the real name of the Progenitor who created the Trankarans thousands of years ago.”

“Then that means this other ship... another ‘Progenitor’?” Thandrun rumbled, frozen stiff.

John’s expression was grim as he replied, “I’m afraid so...”

Thandrun gaped at him in horror. “The War of the Heavens... the conflict has begun again, hasn’t it?!”

Letting out a heavy sigh, John nodded. “I’m sorry, Thandrun. You’re right, it looks like another battle with this second Progenitor is inevitable. I didn’t start this fight, but I’ve been trying to stop him from causing mayhem throughout the major empires. When the fighting starts in earnest, I’m hoping that by standing together, we can defeat him.”

“In the last war, my people were nearly brought to the point of extinction,” Thandrun murmured, his shaky voice filled with dread.

“I’m going to make sure it doesn’t come to that,” John said firmly. “I’ve discussed this with Niskera, and-”

“The Chancellor knows?” the Fleet Warden blurted out, sitting up straighter in his chair. “What did she say?!”

John looked at him for a moment, then replied, “I think it might be best if Niskera discusses all of this with you herself. We spoke at length and she now knows a great deal about the threat we’re all facing. The Chancellor formally accepted my offer of an alliance, uniting the Trankaran Republic with the Maliri Protectorate and the Ashanath Collective.”

Thandrun slumped back in his chair, looking strangely ambivalent. “I know I should be thrilled to have found such powerful allies.... but by rallying to your banner, the Trankaran Republic has made powerful enemies as well, has it not?”

John shook his head. “I have a feeling the other Progenitor would never consider the Trankaran Republic to be an ally. At least now you have a fighting chance, because I do want to help you. I like your people, Thandrun... I think the galaxy is a far better place with the Trankarans in it.”

Looking deeply troubled, Thandrun said quietly, “I don’t see how the Republic will be much support to you in the wider conflict against this other Progenitor. We can barely protect ourselves against the Kirrix!” With a bleak, resigned expression on his face, he added, “I considered your talk of a coup to be an extreme overreaction, but now I see that it might be the only chance we have of saving my people from the coming storm.”

John gave him a reassuring smile. “It might not have to come to that, Thandrun. As I mentioned earlier, I’ve spoken to Niskera about this at length. I think we’ve come up with another solution which should help alleviate the problems with the Senate and let you quickly mobilise the Republic for war.”

The Fleet Warden’s face lit up with hope. “I would welcome any other option to avoid the chaos a coup would bring! What have you planned with the Chancellor?”

Patting him on the arm, John said, “She’ll be up in a few hours. Would you do me a favour and wait to discuss it with her? You’ll understand when you speak with Niskera.”

“Considering everything you’ve done for the Trankaran Republic, it’s the least I can do,” Thandrun said, giving him a grateful smile.

John paused for a moment and thought to Alyssa, \*Be right back!\* Then carefully blocked his blonde Matriarch from his mind. He returned the big Trankaran’s smile and said, “There’s actually something else I could really use your help with, Thandrun...”

“Name it, my friend,” the Fleet Warden said earnestly. “If it is within my power to assist, it will be done.”

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Alyssa frowned when John suddenly blocked her from his mind, hating the thought of not being able to hear his inner voice. He’d studiously avoided thinking about the reason why he was shutting her out, so she had no idea what he was up to.

“Please, Alyssa!” a sibilant voice pleaded, distracting her from her thoughts.

The blonde glanced down at the short reptilian creature and slowly shook her head as she gave it an apologetic smile. “I’m afraid not, Zess, sorry...”

“But I wouldn’t do any harm!” the Dauzakai diplomat protested, glancing at the consoles on the Bridge with longing in her green vertical-slitted eyes. Raising a yellow scaled arm, two data jacks snaked out of a glittering cybernetic interface. “I just wanted to take a quick look!”

The moment that John had left Alyssa with the diplomats, their state of awe at his presence had faded away. Since then, she’d been fielding a deluge of questions on everything from Quantum rifles and Paragon armour, to the capabilities of the Invictus itself.

Faye fluttered over to the persistent dignitary and gave the lizardwoman a beaming smile. “Hi! I’m the ship’s AI. I’d love to show you around inside the Invictus’ digital network, but it wouldn’t be safe for you.” She frowned as she added, “I’m running some very aggressive sentinel programs... I wouldn’t want to accidentally fry your mind if you wandered into a sensitive location!”

The worried look on the Dauzakai’s face left Alyssa in little doubt that Zess had been planning to do a fair bit of wandering. Giving the purple sprite a grateful wink over the lizardwoman’s head, Alyssa gestured towards the grav-tubes. “This way, Zess. I’ll escort you to the Trankaran flagship.”

The small reptilian diplomat slumped in defeat, her tail lashing in frustration as she walked towards the rest of the group who were waiting by the grav-tubes.

“You have a truly remarkable ship,” the furry, broad-shoulder mammalian said, when Alyssa drew closer. “It appears to be Terran in construction, but I had no idea the Terran Federation had access to such potent weapons...”

“I’ve grown quite fond of it,” Alyssa said, with a smile at the Ca’tagri ambassador, side-stepping his question about the Invictus’ guns.

“It’s obviously been heavily modified with Maliri tech, Ralthang!” the Yelneg diplomat squeaked in irritation. “Don’t be so provincial, you’re embarrassing yourself...”

The Ca’tagri narrowed his deep-set eyes in anger at the fungoid creature’s abrasive high-pitched comments, the powerful muscles flexing in his arms. He looked like he was about to pounce on the green-capped Yelneg ambassador and tear it limb from limb.

Oblivious to its peril, the Yelneg turned around to look at Alyssa, it’s six stumpy legs making a thrumming noise as it spun. “The War Council might be encouraged to purchase your technology...” it declared, feigning only passing interest. “Perhaps you would be interested in selling it?”

Alyssa glided over, innocuously placing herself between the two diplomats as she stood by the entrance to the grav-tube. “I’ll definitely speak to John and let him know you’re interested,” she replied politely. She gestured towards the red anti-grav field. “After you, ladies and gentlemen.”

The diplomats realised they were unlikely to make any headway against Alyssa’s courteous but firm deflections and they began moving into the grav-tube. She watched them with a smile of satisfaction, wondering why John found dealing with them so aggravating. Dancing around the diplomats’ desperate efforts to acquire their technology had been fun!

When they had cleared the Command Deck, she stepped into the grav-tube after them. When she reached Deck Nine, the Nethrilla ambassador looked a little pale, its red gas-sack looking decidedly pink. It floated beside the Ornalith diplomat, with its many tendrils wrapped tightly around one of Bhegguc’s three stocky arms.

“Everything okay?” Alyssa asked, when she saw the Nethrilla’s eyes rolling unsteadily.

“I think your grav-tubes are great,” Bhegguc said, its three eyes darting back at the anti-gravity field. The Ornalith jerked the third digit on one of its arms at the floating fungoid creature. “But it upsets his sense of balance.”

“Oh, sorry about that,” the blonde said, looking at the floating creature with concern. “Is there anything I can do, or get for you, to make you feel better?”

“Nah, he’ll be fine in a few minutes,” Bhegguc said, his mouth turning into an odd sideways smile as it glanced back at the Nethrilla. “Come on you! If you’re going to vomit, do it on the Trankaran ship. You’re not going to make a good impression on John Blake if you blow chunks all over his vessel...”

“Thank you, my friend...” the Nethrilla murmured weakly as the Ornalith towed it towards the airlock.

Alyssa accompanied the departing group, feeling a surge of relief when the three-legged Ornalith stomped its way onto the Anvil, with the queasy fungoid following close behind.

The Bolon was the last to leave, pausing next to the outer-airlock door, its robotic translator standing patiently beside it. \*It was an honour to meet you, Radiant One,\* Vluwe said, turning a warm orange colour.

\*Likewise, Vluwe,\* Alyssa replied, having enjoyed speaking to the Bolon diplomat.

\*We will inform you if we discover the entity responsible for the violation of your friend,\* the gelatinous creature said earnestly. Vluwe turned a deep purple as it continued, \*We do not wish to give you false hope though. The likelihood of such an occurrence is very slim.\*

Alyssa gave the Bolon a sad smile. \*She’s trying to put her past behind her, so maybe it’s for the best if we never find it. If she ever does get her hands on it, the results are likely to be... unpleasant.\*

\*Regardless, our offer still stands,\* Vluwe said. \*We will leave any punishment to your discretion.\*

\*Be well, kind one,\* Alyssa said, waving the Bolon goodbye.

She sensed the alien’s surprise as it shimmered through a rainbow of colours. \*And to you, Radiant One.\*

It squelched through the airlock, just as John strode towards the portal from the Trankaran vessel. He smiled at the Bolon in greeting, then grinned at Alyssa looking very pleased with himself.

She arched an eyebrow at him. “You’re still keeping me out of your mind. Should I be worried?”

“Oh, sorry, I forgot!” John replied, dropping his mental barrier and letting her into his thoughts.

“So what’ve you been up to then?” she asked, narrowing her eyes at him suspiciously.

John laughed and gathered her in his arms for hug. “Can’t a man keep any secrets?” he replied with an enigmatic smile, studiously avoiding thinking about the end of his conversation with Thandrun.

“Yes, but it’ll cost you... and I only accept kisses as payment!”

“I better start building up my credit rating then,” John murmured, dipping her in his arms and giving her a soul-searing kiss.

The blonde melted in his arms, feeling wonderfully safe and loved in his strong embrace. Alyssa eagerly returned his kiss, delighted to see him in such a good mood. Her bright blue eyes sparkled with excitement when they straightened again and she gave him a blissfully happy smile.

John returned her smile, then said reluctantly, “I love seeing you like this, but I’m afraid I’ve got some bad news that’s going to ruin your good mood... We need to make a start on the armour repairs.”

“It won’t be such a pain in the ass with you helping out,” Alyssa replied, giving him a final kiss, before taking his hand and walking beside him towards the grav-tube.

“Any problems with the minor empire diplomats?” John asked as they started floating up in the blue glow.

She shook her head, which made her blonde mane rise in the gravity field until it was like a golden halo around her beautiful face. “I had fun, actually! They’re all very impressed by the ship and by you in particular, but I managed to avoid committing to sell them any of our tech.”

John rubbed his chin as he gazed into the distance, lost in thought. “It might actually be worth selling them something innocuous like the air-filtration system. If we conduct all the sales simultaneously, we could make money off all of them before they have a chance to sell it on to each other. The same applies to the major empires too.”

As they stepped out into the corridor on Deck Two, Alyssa gave him a playful smile. “Just imagine how much cash we could have made from selling everyone all the tech we gave away for free!”

He laughed and nodded. “That’s true, but we bought ourselves a lot of goodwill with the tech giveaways. I’ve a feeling we’ll need plenty of that when the shit hits the fan.”

“Thandrun was right to be worried about another Progenitor war,” Alyssa said quietly, remembering all the Gaia classification worlds that had been obliterated in the last one.

“Thank God we’ve not had to deal with anything like that yet,” John agreed, sharing a worried glance with his blonde companion. He paused by the door to Niskera’s quarters. “We better check on our guest, make sure she’s okay.”

Alyssa placed a hand on his as he reached for the button to open the door. “Let’s wait and see the final result of the Change, it’ll only be another couple of hours. Faye can let us know if there’s a problem.” She turned and glanced up at the closest camera, “Isn’t that right, pixie?”

Faye blazed into life in a burst of purple light. “Niskera is still fast asleep at the moment,” she said, smiling at the door. “She seems quite comfortable, but I’ll alert you immediately if there’s any changes.”

“Thanks, Faye,” John said gratefully, the AI blinking out of sight again a second later.

He strolled into their bedroom with Alyssa at his side, the two of them heading for the undamaged Paragon suits in their walk-in-wardrobe.

“I’ll start repairing all our damaged gear later,” Alyssa said, as she kicked off her high-heeled shoes and stepped into the Paragon boots in the armour-equipping frame.

“There’s no great rush,” John said with a shrug as the robotic arms started sealing the armour plates around him. He switched to telepathy as the Paragon helmet was lowered onto his head. \*The most important thing is patching up the Invictus’ armour while we’re waiting for Niskera to wake up. We can repair the Valkyrie and the Paragon suits when we’re in hyper-warp.\*

They slotted Quantum pistols into gunbelts which they fitted around their waists, more to keep in habit rather than from any worry about personal safety.

Activating the internal suit comms, Alyssa said, “We’ll need to leave by the fore airlocks. The rest of the exits are blocked by docked ships.”

John followed her through the bedroom, taking the express elevators down to the Secondary Hangar. They needed to pick up some crystal Alyssium to repair the hull, so they walked around the Raptor as they headed towards the Cargo Bay.

“I know you said the girls were going to be busy after breakfast,” John said, waving a hand at the door and using telekinesis to open it. “What’re they all up to?”

Alyssa grinned at his casual use of telekinesis. “Calara’s in the kitchen, teaching Sakura all her culinary tricks. Rachel’s doing an autopsy on the Kirrix heads we acquired. Dana’s working with Irillith on Faye’s new body, but she also put schematics together for a new pistol design. Jade’s building a couple more Reaper Cannons at the moment, but she’ll move onto the new pistols once she’s finished.”

“And Tashana?” John asked, lifting the lid off a storage crate.

“In the firing range at the moment,” Alyssa said, winking at a Trankaran dock loader who was watching them and making a casual gesture towards a huge block of crystal Alyssium. The Trankaran’s eyes widened in awe as the glistening white metal floated out of the storage crate.

“Really?” John asked in surprise, flipping the lid off a second container. “She’s lethal with those pistols already. I’m surprised she’s doing more shooting practice.”

“You asked her to get certified on rifles, remember?” Alyssa said, nudging him playfully with an elbow. “She’s focusing on improving her aim.”

John gestured to his own block of crystal Alyssium then followed the blonde across the Cargo Bay, leaving a trail of astonished Trankarans in their wake. “That’s probably a sensible precaution.”

“I think it’s just something to keep her hands busy,” the blonde said, darting him a knowing look. “I can’t hear her thoughts yet, but I can definitely sense all her emotions. I’d bet a million credits she’s just trying to adjust to all her old memories coming back.”

“That’s no bad thing; she’ll need time to get her head around all the horrible things that happened to her in the past,” John said as he crossed the corridor into the Secondary Hangar. He darted Alyssa a worried look. “Unless she’s distressed?”

She gave him a reassuring smile. “No, just confused mostly. I get the occasional flash of anger, but that goes away pretty quickly. She’s coping with it all remarkably well.”

John paused when they reached the double doors that led into the Primary Hangar. Instead of opening them, he glanced anxiously at the blonde. “Was it too soon? Everything that happened this morning?”

“What, you mean your super-hot oiled-up orgy?” Alyssa asked, an excited gleam in her cerulean eyes. “Believe me, Tashana loved every second of being stuffed full of your cock!”

He rolled his eyes at her and slapped his hand down on the button to open the door. “You know what I mean; her and Irillith...”

“You heard Tashana yourself,” Alyssa purred as she sauntered into the hangar ahead of him. “She wants you to knock the three of them up almost as bad as you do!”

John couldn’t help flushing at her teasing, but he knew it was pointless to disagree. The impish blonde knew all his secrets, well nearly all of them anyway.

Alyssa looked at him curiously as she stopped and waited for him, but her expression softened a moment later. “If I thought Tashana wasn’t ready for it, I would never have set that up this morning. She needs to get over her anger towards Irillith as fast as possible; the two of them are much stronger together.”

John stood beside her, placing his hand on her armoured hip. He gazed into her eyes and saw the heartfelt conviction there. “I trust you; I know how much I care about them both.”

She gave him a tender smile and nodded. “I don’t know if it’s down to me being your Matriarch, but you’d be surprised how much time I spend checking on everyone and making sure they’re all okay.”

“No, that doesn’t surprise me in the slightest,” John replied affectionately, returning her smile and stroking her slender waist.

“I’m really looking forward to our victory celebrations tonight,” she said, giving him a coy glance under her long lashes.

John raised an eyebrow. “Tonight? Why not this afternoon?”

Alyssa placed a hand over her stomach and made a slight curving motion. She winked at him and did it again, making the curve bigger that time.

He laughed and nodded. “Tonight it is then...”

They strolled across the Primary Hangar hand-in-hand, then parted ways in the corridor beyond, John taking the left airlock, Alyssa going to the right. He carefully manoeuvred the massive block of metal through the doors into the pressurised airlock chamber, opening the outer doors as soon as the inner ones were sealed. With the aid of the anti-grav generators built into his body armour, John climbed out onto the hull, then extracted the metallic cube and brought it out into space with him.

John kicked off the hull, the retro-thruster on his back propelling him up past the glistening white bow of his ship. He passed the ten-metre tall lettering that named his battlecruiser the Invictus, each letter illuminated in blue against the white hull. He was careful to avoid the blocky Trankaran freighter that was docked along the port side as he made his way upwards, until he was looking down across the topdeck of the battlecruiser. The Invictus was a huge ship, measuring 750 metres in length, but it was dwarfed by the vast Trankaran flagship it was nestled up against on its starboard flank.

The Kerhom's Anvil was a colossal battlecarrier, by far the biggest vessel in the Trankaran fleet. While only twice as long as the Invictus at 1500 metres, it was enormously broad and at least four times deeper in the draft. The Trankaran ships had curved hulls without too many defining features, reminding John more of a rocky mesa, than an interstellar spacecraft. The Anvil had the same rust-red armour plating common to Trankaran ship construction and he knew from experience that the armour was several metres thick. That armour plating was pock-marked and pitted by neutron beam fire after the deadly battle with the Kirrix in the Delta Corvus system.

John turned and looked out at the remnants of that battle, the sprawling sea of Kirrix debris stretching for kilometres in every direction. Their sinister ochre hulls were dark now, the broken insectoid ships nothing but cold tombs for the dead crews inside. There were derelict Trankaran vessels amongst that grim field of debris, but the recovery efforts had ended, the surviving Trankaran forces regrouped around their battlecarrier flagship.

Six Trankaran battleships, dozens of cruisers and scores of destroyers had survived that ferocious battle and those vessels were being rapidly repaired by maintenance crews. He could make out the makeshift gantries assembled around the most badly damaged ships, with hundreds of engineers working in spacesuits to replace destroyed weapons and engines, or patch damaged plating.

That reminded him of the primary purpose behind this spacewalk and he glanced across the hull, spotting Alyssa floating above the opposite side of his ship. She had already turned the cube of metal into a roiling white orb, which sparkled in the light from the star at the centre of the Delta Corvus system. She waved at him, then moved closer to the scores of armour plates that had been detached from the Invictus’ hull by Faye’s maintenance bots.

He watched as the first half-dozen plates seemed to melt at an imperious gesture from the psychic blonde, coming together into a slowly rotating sphere of metal. Alyssa added metal from the orb she had already melted, replacing the mass that had been obliterated in the Kirrix attack. Once she was satisfied that she had enough, she split the huge metallic sphere into six pieces, then simultaneously shaped them all into pristine white armour plating to be replaced on the hull. Five of Faye’s boys grasped those armoured plates, then floated down to the battlecruiser’s hull, slotting the armour back into position before securing the bolts that would lock it in place. John glanced down at the five robots waiting patiently for him to start his repairs and he drifted down to the lacerated armour panels to begin patching them too.

It took nearly two hours for John and Alyssa to work their way along the topdeck, then back along the underbelly of the Invictus, repairing the plates as they went. The armour had been quad-shaped before, so John left it quint-shaped, being more concerned with having a full set of armour in place rather than trying to make it as resilient as possible. He started off with shaping two plates at the same time, then found that trivially easy, so quickly started working on more. After an hour of melting and shaping scores of armour plates, he eventually worked his way up to six at a time as well.

Once the work was done, they met up again on the armoured housing above the Bridge and sat down on the shiny white surface to survey their handiwork. The Invictus shone like a gleaming white beacon between the dark-red hulls of the Trankaran vessels, aside from the ugly blackened turretwell on the starboard side of the ship. John had replaced all the armour around the site of the explosion that had destroyed the Heavy Cannon, but was unable to repair the smashed pop-up turret itself.

The Invictus had taken a huge amount of damage in the battle of Khalgron, or more accurately, the armour had withstood an incredible number of hits. John was astonished that they hadn’t taken more significant structural damage, having only lost a handful of retro-thrusters and the Heavy Cannon on the topdeck.

“I tried to rotate the ship and keep the worst damaged armour from taking too many more hits,” Alyssa explained a little defensively. “Calara helped a hell of a lot there. We would’ve taken some brutal punishment if she hadn’t warned me about the worst of it.”

“Don’t worry, I wasn’t being critical,” John replied, the admiration clear in his voice. “I’m just amazed you managed to avoid losing any major components. Let’s just try and avoid ever getting into that kind of position again.”

“You’ll get no arguments from me there!” Alyssa vehemently agreed. She turned to look at him and he could see the worry on her face.

“What’s the matter?” he asked, putting his arm around her shoulders.

“Jade’s a much better pilot than me, with exceptionally fast reflexes, but I was able to avoid half the shit the Kirrix threw at us by hearing Calara’s thoughts,” she explained, apprehension in her eyes. “If we ever do get into something really nasty like that again, I’m not sure Jade will be as effective.”

John gave her a reassuring smile. “Don’t worry, if we ever get into another intense firefight, you can pilot the Invictus and we’ll find something else for Jade to do. If she’s right and all her old restrictions are gone, we could train her up with a rifle and maybe have her accompany a ground team. It worked well with Irillith.”

Alyssa appeared even more despondent when he said this. “Yeah, that’s what I thought you’d say...”

He frowned and looked at her in confusion. “Did you have a better idea?”

She shook her head and sighed. “No, I just like being with you. Then I can keep you out of trouble!”

“If it’s any consolation, I didn’t like being separated from you either,” John said, squeezing her shoulder.

“Thanks a lot for helping out with the repairs,” Alyssa said gratefully, leaning into him.

John smiled at her. “You’re welcome. I’m just sorry you had to do all the repairs on your own for so long.” He glanced at the HUD and checked the time. “We better get moving, Niskera should wake up in about fifteen minutes.”

Alyssa got up and offered him a hand, then they started walking across the hull to return to the airlock. “I can’t wait to see what she looks like!” the blonde exclaimed, managing to put an excited spring in the heavy magnetic steps of their mag-boots.

“Me too,” John agreed, but he couldn’t help wondering if the Trankaran woman was really prepared for the new life she was embarking on.

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Admiral Charles Harris strode through his office, nodding to his assistant when Lieutenant Adams looked up at him.

“Hello again, Sir. I trust the meeting went well?” Victor asked, the blue glow from the holographic panels around his desk casting an eerie light over his face.

“It was... interesting,” Charles said, thinking back on the lengthy High Command Strategy meeting that morning.

It was his first time attending as an Admiral and an actual serving member of High Command. When he was still a Vice Admiral, he’d occasionally been asked to present brief reports at those meetings, typically providing progress updates on the Dreadnought program on behalf of Admiral Cartwright. It felt very different being one of the group of thirty Admirals that oversaw those high-profile activities, knowing that he now had the ability to influence the direction of the entire Terran Federation.

He’d been shocked to hear that a Trankaran request for assistance against the Kirrix had been rebuffed. The general consensus was that it had been wiser to retain fleet assets on the Terran border with Kirrix Space, so that they could strongly repel the recent spate of Kirrix raids. There had been a few dissenters, foremost being Admiral Kester along the Trankaran border, but that was one of the reasons he attended the meeting as a hologram. Charles was seated next to Admiral Eleanor Maybridge who quietly confided that Kester had effectively been banished to the remote posting, for vocally opposing the Fleet Admiral in the past.

Kester caused quite a stir when he mentioned that John Blake had crossed the border into Trankaran Space and the rest of the meeting was dominated by discussions about the Lion of the Federation. Charles tried to keep a low profile to find the lay of the land and it soon became quite clear this subject was quite controversial. There were dramatically opposing views amongst High Command on how to deal with the dramatic surge in popularity of his old friend, from those who considered it a useful boon, to those who considered John a threat.

The big surprise was Lynette Devereux, who seemed to defer to Buckingham’s position that John should be handled with far more caution than had previously been the case. She didn’t rise to the bait when she was taunted for her assistance in John’s dramatic rise in popularity, or for her part in coining his Lion title. It seemed nearly half the Admirals in High Command were as startled by her volte-face as Charles had been, sharing shocked looks with one another. Their surprised reactions gave him a quick insight into which specific Admirals had previously been courted by Devereux, while she’d been scheming for election as Fleet Admiral.

Charles roused himself from his thoughts, realising that Victor was waiting patiently for any orders. He glanced at his assistant and said, “I’ll be in my office reviewing the refit. Please field my calls unless it’s from Vice Admiral Blake or anyone from High Command.”

Victor saw that the Admiral was unsettled and now was not the time for further questions or pleasantries. “Of course, Sir,” the young Lieutenant replied with a sharp nod of the head.

Strolling into his office, Charles paused to study the spectacular view of Olympus Shipyard through the huge windows that flanked the big room. There was a steady stream of traffic to and from the station, but his attention was focused squarely on the eight battleships and twenty cruisers in the drydock section of the shipyard. He cast his eye over the long rows of open docking bays that were allocated to the refit, seeing sparking lights like a vast swarm of fireflies twinkling over the hulls of those ships. He knew those lights were from plasma torches, operated by thousands of engineers working on repairing and upgrading those vessels.

He returned to his desk, a worried frown creasing his brow. Although he had plenty of manpower after Devereux’s allocation of more resources just over a week ago, the main problem now was supplying enough raw materials to maintain the pace of the refit. They’d been able to quickly equip and roll out the first squadron of Claymore-class fighters by building the new components at the shipyard and modifying a score of Rook-class gunships. However, upgrading all those cruisers and battleships was a far more daunting prospect.

Charles brought up his holographic message log and started scanning through for the progress reports. He found the one he was looking for from Rear Admiral Richard Dacres, his frown deepening as he started reading its contents...

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Admiral Harris,

Orbital-Galactica have still not delivered any of the new battleship or cruiser class Tachyon Drives and Energetica-Corp were supposed to be sending the first Power Core three days ago! I haven’t heard anything from our reps with either company since the Voss acquisition. I contacted OG corporate, but they’ve been giving me the runaround...The TF Contract Division on Callisto has been less than helpful.

Work crews have been reallocated to focus on repairs to avoid them sitting idle, but we scheduled deliveries once every four days to meet the end-of-month deadline. Any chance you can expedite the situation to avoid slippage on the completion date?

Respectfully,

RA Richard Dacres

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Charles had allocated the Rear Admiral to provide close supervision of the refit of those ships, as the officer had a vested interest in the rapid rollout of the new tech John had supplied. Dacres’ battleship, the Nereus, was one of those grounded in Olympus, currently undergoing repairs and awaiting the upgrade.

Pinching his nose to try and stave off the headache he felt building, Charles slumped in his chair and cursed Henry Voss for wrecking his meticulous plans.

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John smiled at Alyssa, his hand hovering over the button to Niskera’s quarters. “You ready?” he asked with a playful smile.

She groaned and rolled her eyes at him. “Come on! I’m dying to see what she looks like!”

Having mercy on his blonde companion, John pressed the button and the door slid open. Even though the overhead lights were still out in the bedroom, it was illuminated by a warm orange radiance.

“Wow...” Alyssa murmured, walking slowly through the door and gazing at the Trankaran Chancellor in fascination.

John followed close behind her, similarly riveted to the spectacular sight.

Niskera’s arms and head were covered in graceful flowing lines that pulsed with a soothing amber light. The Trankaran woman’s large body was partially covered by the white bedsheet, but the illumination from those lines was bright enough to shine through, revealing that the swirling patterns covered the rest of her body too.

Alyssa sat beside the sleeping woman on the bed and traced a finger over the throbbing light, following the shape of the curves with her fingertips. “The patterns are beautiful,” she murmured, caressing the Trankaran’s arm. She glanced up at him and smiled. “How do you think she’ll react?”

John glanced at the countdown he’d added to his watch. “We’ll soon see... just a couple of minutes until the fourteen hours is up.”

The young blonde rose to her feet and glided over to the water dispenser. “I’ve a feeling she’ll be wanting a drink,” she said, giving him a knowing look as she started filling a glass. Her expression wavered then as she glanced at him in confusion. “I wonder why all of us were so thirsty when we woke up after the first time? Your cum tastes sweet, it’s definitely not salty...”

Pausing in surprise, John shook his head. “To be honest, I’ve never thought about it before. Perhaps Rachel might have some idea?”

Alyssa returned to the bed carrying a tall glass of chilled water, with her head slightly tilted to one side as if listening to something... or someone. She darted a grin at John and said, “Rachel says she’d like to perform some tests to find out. Maybe when we reach the Maliri fleet, you can find some sultry dark-haired temptresses and start filling up blue tummies...”

He laughed and was about to reply when a deep groan came from the bed. John shared a quick glance with the blonde then sat on the edge of the bed. “How are you feeling, Niskera? It’s me, John...”

“Thirsty...” she rasped in a croaky voice.

Alyssa handed the groggy Trankaran woman the glass. “Here you go. Drink this and you’ll feel tons better!”

Niskera sat up and gulped down the entire glass of water in several swallows, letting out a sigh of relief afterwards. “Thank you, that feels so much better,” she replied in deep melodic tones, the former gravelly edge to her voice gone. Her eyes widened in surprise and her hand went to her throat. “My voice has changed!”

“It sounds lov-” Alyssa started to reply, but the Trankaran let out a shocked gasp.

Holding her arms out in front of her, Niskera stared at the lines of warm light shining across her forearms in utter astonishment. “I’ve actually started glowing...” she whispered, sounding awed.

John shared a confused glance with Alyssa. “I thought you knew what the Glowing Queen looked like?”

Niskera slowly nodded. “I’d heard all the rumours, but I suppose I never really believed them. I assumed she was just extremely beautiful and charismatic, which is why the rebels respond to her in the way they did...”

“Do you want to see yourself?” John asked, placing a comforting hand on her shoulder. “There are full-length mirrors in the bathroom.”

The Trankaran woman hesitated for a moment, appearing self-conscious about getting out of bed naked in front of them.

John gave her an understanding look. “We can give you some privacy if you want?”

Niskera smiled at him, her glowing eyes darting to Alyssa next. “My memory’s a little hazy about last night, but I remember some of it vividly. Feeling shy seems a little silly at this point.”

“That’s the spirit!” Alyssa said with a grin, rising to her feet and offering the big woman a hand. “Come and take a look at yourself. You’ve got nothing to worry about, I promise.”

John helped Niskera up and they led her through to the adjoining bathroom. There was no need to turn on the lights, not with the radiant glow pouring from her body.

Niskera inhaled sharply when she got her first glimpse of her new physique, a look of pure wonder on her face. “I’ve never seen anything so beautiful...” she whispered, mouth falling open in stunned disbelief. She turned, looking at herself over one shoulder then the other, before her hand rose to her face. “My eyes... it’s like the fires from the Great Maker’s forge are burning within me...”

“You do look magnificent,” John agreed, smiling at the expression of pure delight on the Trankaran woman’s face.

She turned to look at him, a fierce gleam in her transcendent eyes. “I don’t know how I can ever repay you for what you’ve done for me... for the Trankaran Republic.” She darted a glance at Alyssa and smiled. “You were absolutely right. If I were to appear like this before the Senate, the Senators will be ‘putty in my hands’.”

Alyssa nodded, then winked at her. “You’ll be fighting off the Senators with a stick.”

Niskera’s brow furrowed and she slowly shook her head. “I do not think so, Alyssa. I suspect the Senators will find my new form very appealing, I don’t believe any of them will threaten me with violence...”

The blonde laughed and rolled her eyes. John couldn’t help smiling at the Trankaran and said, “It’s just another Terran expression. She meant that the Senators will find you very attractive.”

The glowing Trankaran turned to him with a curious look in her eyes. “And how about you, John? Do you find my new appearance attractive too?”

John reached out with his hand to gently brush the backs of his fingers along one of the flowing lines, tracing it down from her shoulder and across one of her huge breasts. “You look beautiful, Niskera,” he replied honestly. “You’re the most exotic woman I’ve ever seen.”

She gave him a coy smile and said in her mellifluous voice, “I suggested last night that we might take things further between us. I find that my interest has not waned in the slightest, far from it in fact.”

A flicker of doubt cross John’s face and Niskera flinched when she saw it, suddenly embarrassed. “My apologies, John! I did not mean to make you uncomf-”

Alyssa slipped her arms around the Trankaran woman from behind and gently shushed her. “It’s not what you think...” She met John’s gaze over Niskera’s shoulder and caressed the Trankaran woman’s chiselled stomach. “We’d both love to have some fun with you, but there might be a problem if he fills you up with any more cum.”

“A problem?” Niskera asked, turning to look quizzically at the blonde over her shoulder.

John offered the Trankaran his hand. “Let’s go back to the bedroom and we can talk about it.”

Niskera let him lead her back to the bed, where she sat on the covers, no longer having any reservations about her nudity.

Alyssa sat on the bed beside her and asked, “Do you remember the pictures of me as I was before I met John? Then how I looked after he fed me his cum for a few weeks?”

Niskera nodded, an expression of sympathy appearing on her face. “Yes, you were much smaller and thinner, and had obviously been starved of decent nutrition.” She paused for a moment, a hint of a smile appearing on her face. “Until John provided you an ample supply...”

The blonde laughed and nodded. “Yeah, exactly!” She gave John an affectionate glance. “He did a great job of filling me up.”

John shared a smile with her, then turned to look at Niskera. “Do you remember the Maliri girls I had with me during the evacuation? Irillith and Tashana?”

Niskera smiled, the light in her eyes shining a little brighter. “How could I forget! They’re both exceptionally brave, beautiful, and formidable women.”

He nodded his agreement. “Well every Maliri woman I’ve met has the same kind of physique as them. Rachel has done a lot of research into their genetics and believes that the various species the Progenitors use for their armies, all share the same kind of body shape.”

Alyssa gestured to her own figure with a sweep of her hand. “When John stuffed me full of cum, I ended up growing taller and stronger, until I looked identical to the Maliri.”

The Trankaran woman’s glowing eyes widened as she immediately understood. “So if I ingest more of your cum...” she murmured, darting a look at John.

“You’ll probably get shorter and slimmer, then eventually end up looking like Alyssa; or to be more exact, the Maliri,” John finished for her, impressed that she’d figured it out so quickly.

“Which might lessen or nullify my ability to influence the Senate,” Niskera continued, her expression sombre as she nodded. “Yes, I can see how that would be a great concern.”

John shook his head and said quickly, “Actually no, that’s not my main worry.” He hesitated for a second, then conceded, “Although you might be right about the Senate.”

“If not that, what does concern you?” Niskera asked in confusion.

He reached out to clasp her hand and stroked it gently. “Your appearance has changed in a profound way and I’m worried how it’s going to impact your long-term future. The effect you’re going to have on your fellow Trankarans is likely to be dramatic and I’m concerned that you won’t be able to have a fulfilling relationship with a Trankaran mate. Not only that; if we’re right and swallowing more of my cum changes you even further, settling down in a happy relationship with a Trankaran male might change from being difficult to impossible.”

Her curious gaze softened and she raised his hand to her lips, kissing it gently. “I’m touched that my happiness means so much to you.” She tilted her head to one side, then added, “But why would my new appearance affect my ability to find a Trankaran mate? After seeing my reflection, I would suspect that the opposite would be true.”

Alyssa moved closer and wrapped the big woman in a hug. “You’ll probably have your pick of men, but you might find it gets annoying having them gazing at you in awe all the time. That’s what John’s worrying about.”

“Oh... I see what you mean; such a relationship might feel very unequal.” Niskera was quiet for a moment, then raised her chin to meet John’s concerned gaze with a stoic expression. “I told you before that I was willing to make any personal sacrifice to save my people from destruction. If my long-term happiness is the price I have to pay, so be it.”

“You’re a remarkable woman, Niskera,” John said, leaning closer to embrace her.

She pulled back slightly to give him a wistful smile. “If only you were two-feet-taller and weighed another three-hundred-pounds. You would have made a magnificent Trankaran.”

Alyssa laughed and shook her head. “I like him just the way he is, thank you.”

John returned the Trankaran woman’s smile, then said ruefully, “I’m really sorry, but we’ll have to leave Trankaran Space fairly soon. I’d like to stay longer, just to make absolutely certain you’re comfortable with the changes you’ve gone through, but I need to return to Maliri territory to heal Edraele. She’s my Maliri Matriarch, as well as Irillith and Tashana’s mother.”

“It’s quite alright, I understand,” Niskera said, patting his hand. “You’ve done so much for me already, I wouldn’t want to delay you any further.”

“I want you to stay in touch with us after we leave,” John insisted. “If you ever get in trouble, let us know and we’ll do our best to get to you as fast as we can. Always feel free to call though, even if you just need a friendly chat. I want to help you in any way I can.”

Alyssa gave her a playful smile. \*Can you hear my voice?\*

Niskera looked at her in shock. “I heard you, but your lips didn’t move!”

\*Do you remember I said I was telepathic? You’re part of the gang now; John’s inner circle if you like. I’ll be able to speak to you and feel your emotions, but it’ll be a while before you’re able to talk back to me,\* Alyssa explained, her gentle thoughts swirling through the Trankaran’s mind.

“How remarkable...” Niskera murmured, gazing at the blonde girl in awe.

John squeezed her hand, drawing her attention. “Do you want to quickly talk through your immediate plans? We might be able to offer some advice.”

“My first order of business will be to inject some much-needed leadership into the Senate,” Niskera said, her eyes narrowing. “I’ll rally our fleets and put the Republic on a war footing to fight the Kirrix invaders.”

“Excellent. The sooner you can rebuild your military the better,” John agreed. “I’ve supplied Thandrun with a number of technical schematics which will make a huge improvement to your fleets. I’d suggest you start a major ship-building program as soon as you rally the Senate behind you.”

“I’ll make sure the Trankaran Republic becomes a strong ally for you in the fight against the other Progenitor,” Niskera said, giving him a supportive smile.

“And I’ll do whatever I can to help you in the upcoming battles,” John said earnestly. “I need to discuss the details with Edraele, but my plan is to redirect a substantial Maliri fleet to assist you. They have powerful warships and will be a huge help against the Kirrix.”

Niskera pulled him into an unexpected hug, wrapping him in her strong arms. “Thank you for giving me hope again. I thought all was lost... then you swept in and changed everything.”

John stroked her back. “As I said to Thandrun: I like the Trankarans, I don’t want to see anything bad happen to your people. I promise I’ll do whatever I can to protect you and the Republic.”

The Trankaran woman gave him a grateful smile. “Speaking of Thandrun, I need to speak with him as soon as possible.”

“Why don’t you get yourself ready and we’ll accompany you to the Anvil,” John said kindly, rising to his feet.

Alyssa stood with him, then turned to give Niskera a coy smile. \*There’s no rush, but have a good think about your long-term future. When all the fighting’s done, if you find you’re not happy and it doesn’t work out for you on Trankara, you’ll always welcome to join us.\* She sensed Niskera’s sudden curiosity, and turned slightly, giving the Trankaran a good look at her body. \*You’d look gorgeous as a glowing Maliri... Me, John, and the girls wouldn’t be able to keep our hands off you!\*

John noticed the strange, thoughtful look that Niskera was giving Alyssa and he glanced at the blonde. “Am I missing something?”

“Just girl talk, nothing to worry about,” she said enigmatically, sharing a smile with the Trankaran woman.

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Thandrun gazed at the holo-screen, then pressed a button to play the message back again, wanting to remember every detail. The data crystal had been delivered to him by a wounded Legionnaire, as the Kirrix’s had destroyed the intervening comms beacons, disrupting direct communication between the planet Khalgron and Thandrun’s fleet.

Sub-Warden Dhormun’s blocky grey features appeared above Thandrun’s desk, the Trankaran soldier beginning his message with a respectful bow. “I sincerely hope that this report safely reaches your hands, Fleet Warden. I wished to report on what I have witnessed during the battle of Khalgron.”

Dhormun paused for a moment, a hint of apprehension in his eyes warring with the look of awe on his face. “The arms and armour that the Lion and his lionesses are equipped with are truly formidable, as are their vessels, which possess astonishing levels of firepower. Not only that, but the things they are personally capable of... It was like witnessing the power of the Great Maker first hand! John Blake alone possesses the strength of fifty Trankarans and is capable of moving faster than the eye can follow. I saw him face extremely powerful Kirrix monstrosities in melee combat and literally rip them apart. I do not believe that any can face him in personal combat.”

“Please do not misunderstand the nature of this message; John Blake has proven himself a loyal friend and steadfast ally. If not for him and the women he commands, there is not a shred of doubt in my mind that all our rock-brethren on Khalgron would have been lost to the Kirrix.”

The Sub-Warden leaned forward and said earnestly, “But I beseech you... Do whatever you can to retain him as an ally. He does not strike me as the kind of man that would abuse our trust in an alliance, but make no mistake, if we should ever make the calamitous mistake of turning on him...” Dhormun’s face turned grim. “I beg you to ensure such a disaster never befalls the Republic.”

Straightening then, Dhormun concluded by saying, “I will train and prepare the civilian militia here. Morale is high after our deliverance from the hands of the Kirrix and should they return, they will face fierce opposition. Good fortune to you, Fleet Warden.”

With that, the message ended and Thandrun steepled his fingers, considering the Sub-Warden’s words. Dhormun’s thoughts largely echoed his own and he found himself thanking the Great Maker that John Blake had proven so benevolent towards the Republic. Such thoughts put him in a curiously reflective mood, as he considered his recent insights into the ancient spiritual beliefs of his people.

There was a chime from the door and the Fleet Warden looked up, pressing a button on his desk to admit his visitor. Forgemaster Gilgrem stomped into the Command Chamber, a black case held in his weighty paw.

“Ah! Good to see you, Forgemaster,” Thandrun greeted him warmly, rising from his desk. “Any luck?”

“I did what I could in the ridiculous timeframe you gave me,” Gilgrem muttered with a dour frown. “I would’ve been able to do a much better job if you’d given me a couple of days instead of a couple of hours.”

Thandrun gave him a respectful bow. “Please accept my humble apologies, Forgemaster.”

Gilgrem snorted and handed over the case. “Go on then, take a look.”

The Fleet Warden eagerly accepted the small black box. He pressed his broad thumb to the rune in its centre and the lid flipped up, a kaleidoscope of light shining across his face. Thandrun carefully examined the objects within for a moment, awed by his fellow Trankaran’s skill. “You’ve excelled yourself, Forgemaster. These are absolutely perfect.”

“Hardly,” Gilgrem harrumphed, but when Thandrun glanced up at the Forgemaster’s face, he could see the hint of pride in his amber eyes.

There was a chime from his desk and Thandrun closed the case, then gave the Forgemaster a sincere look of apology.

“Fine, I’ve got plenty to do anyway,” Gilgrem grumped, turning and stomping out through the door.

The Fleet Warden walked back to his desk and activated the rune to accept the call.

Senator Vamred’s worried face appeared as Thandrun sat in his chair.

“Thandrun, any news of the Chancellor yet?” the Senator of Internal Affairs asked, his expression pensive. “There’s been repeated calls to begin the process to elect a replacement Chancellor. With the momentum gathering behind those motions, soon it won’t matter if Niskera still lives!”

“I believe it will not be long, Senator,” Thandrun replied, feeling a huge amount of sympathy for his colleague. To be stuck on Trankara and forced to deal with the endless bureaucracy of the Senate seemed like a fate worse than death to the Fleet Warden. “I promise that I will send word the moment Niskera returns.”

“The primary candidates are Senator Barumdrolin and Senator Dhunarlum...” Vamred said ominously. “I don’t need to remind you what a disaster it would be if either of those pebble-pushers were elected as Chancellor!”

Thandrun’s expression turned bleak. Both senators were renowned for their ability to drag any meeting into an endless mire of tedium. Any chance of decisive action from the Senate would evaporate as quickly as the Republic’s chances of surviving the Kirrix invasion.

There was a flash on his comm-interface and Thandrun’s frown lifted into a smile when he saw who was contacting him. “I must go, Vamred. With a stroke of good fortune, I might have news from the Chancellor this very moment!”

“Great Maker willing...” Senator Vamred murmured, the worry not leaving his eyes.

The Fleet Warden ended the call to the Senator and pressed his finger against the rune to open the next comm channel.

John Blake appeared as a holographic image above Thandrun’s desk, a friendly smile on his face. “Hello, Thandrun. I just wanted to let you know that Niskera has awoken and is eager to speak with you. We’ll escort her over to the Anvil.”

“That’s excellent news, thank you. I’ll be there to greet you personally,” the stocky Trankaran replied. He lifted the black case from his desk so that it could seen via the holocams. “I have the items you requested. I’ll bring them with me.”

John’s smile broadened into a grin. “I can’t wait to see. Thank you, Thandrun!”

“It was a pleasure, my friend,” the Fleet Warden replied. “I’ll see you shortly.”

They ended the call and Thandrun rose from his chair, tucking the black case under his arm. He walked out of the Command Chamber, then crossed the Bridge, waving away several Sub-Wardens who approached him to deliver reports. Stabbing an armoured thumb on the rune to operate the elevator, he tapped his foot impatiently as he waited for it to arrive.

The call with Senator Vamred had been very alarming. John had mentioned that he and Niskera had come up with a plan to encourage the Senate to take appropriate action against the Kirrix threat, but Thandrun couldn’t begin to imagine what it might be. Even though Niskera was safe and well, the Senate was so hopelessly fragmented, attempting to gather a consensus seemed to him to be an impossible task. He stepped into the elevator when the door opened, then hit the button for the loading bay.

Alone in the lift as it descended, his shoulders slumped and he let out a heavy sigh. The sooner the Chancellor was back, the better. He’d done his best to hold everything together in her absence, but he was a warrior, not a politician and had no time for their ridiculous games. That was one of the things he liked about John Blake. Thandrun sensed a kindred spirit there and greatly appreciated his forthright and honest dealings with the Terran. He faltered for a moment, suddenly remembering that the man was not a Terran and was about as elevated from that species as it was possible to be.

The elevator chimed and Thandrun stepped out into the corridor, following the bustling passageway to the loading area. The Anvil was packed with the huge number of evacuees from Khalgron and while he was delighted to see so many women and children safely on board, until he had a chance to disperse those civilians throughout the fleet, his battlecarrier would be teeming with people. Many of the rock-brethren caught his eye and nodded to him respectfully, but he could hear the rumbling sounds of familiar names echoing down the corridors. As he strode through the crowds, it seemed that the names of the Lion and his lionesses were on everybody’s lips.

He finally saw the man waiting patiently in the loading area, Legionnaires and civilians alike loitering nearby and watching him in fascination. Thandrun strode towards John and couldn’t help feeling a surge of relief when he glanced his way, giving him a warm smile.

“Niskera will be along any minute,” John said, glancing back towards the Invictus’ Cargo Bay. “She was just getting ready with Alyssa.”

“It is fortunate we are not attending an official function,” Thandrun said dryly. “Minutes would quickly turn into hours.”

John looked at him in surprise for a moment then grinned. “Ah, so it’s not just Terran girls then.”

Thandrun saw John’s eyes drop to the black case under his arm, so he retrieved it and handed it over. “Please let me know if they do not match your specifications.” John looked at the case in confusion for a moment, so Thandrun pointed to the rune set into the centre. “Just place your hand on that rune to open it.”

John did as instructed, lifting the lid, a bright prism of light shining across his face. His eyes widened as he looked at the contents, then he looked at Thandrun with sincere gratitude. “They’re exquisite... Exactly what I had in mind, thank you.”

The Fleet Warden bowed to him. “Forgemaster Gilgrem’s finest work. I’m overjoyed that they meet your specifications.”

John grinned at him as they shook hands, then he darted a glance over his shoulder. “Here she comes...”

Thandrun turned to look across the docking umbilical into the Cargo Bay opposite. Several Trankaran loaders were in that huge room and they stared in shock to their right, falling to their knees with looks of wonder on their faces. He frowned, thinking their reaction a bit extreme. Chancellor Niskera was certainly well-liked and very popular amongst the citizens, but-

“By the Great Maker!” he blurted out, eyes widening in stunned disbelief as Niskera stepped into view.

He had never seen anyone so breathtakingly beautiful before! It was like Niskera had been blessed by the Great Maker himself. The swirling lines over her body seemed to pulse in time to his pounding heartbeat and her eyes were lit by a glorious inner light that he wanted to gaze into forever, losing himself in their transcendent glow.

Niskera glided towards him, a beatific smile on her face that lifted his heart with joy. “Not by the Great Maker, he left us long ago,” she said gently, her fluid voice sending shivers up his spine. “By the Great Protector!”

Thandrun crashed to his knees, head bowed in reverence. “I pledge to serve you with my life, Niskera, my Queen. I will do anything you ask, anything!”

Niskera gave him a warm, gracious smile and offered her glowing hand to help him up. “Rise, Thandrun, my loyal friend. We have a great deal of work to do if we are to save our people...”

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Sergeant David Gibbons walked down the open street between the rows of buildings, his eight-foot-tall power armoured suit lengthening his strides with each heavy footfall. Pivoting at the waist, he trained the 20mm autocannon on the big deserted factory up ahead, feeling suspicious despite the lack of heat signatures on his thermal-imaging HUD.

He crossed an intersection, looking both ways down the deserted street, the movement of the rolling tumbleweeds catching his eye before he quickly dismissed them. Darting out, he sprinted across the road, unable to help grinning as he charged across in bounding leaps.

The grin was wiped from his face a second later as the building ahead of him seemed to burst into life with a storm of green plasma bolts. He flinched instinctively, memories of his squadmates being burned alive on Port Megara flashing through his mind, their terrified screams ringing in his ears. Reminding himself he was far from the Dragon March now, he put his head down and charged headlong at the Kintark stronghold, the road behind him burning with the eerie fel-green flames of plasma fire.

Gibbons crashed through the wall, bricks and mortar spraying out in a huge arc as he barrelled into the Kintark soldier hiding behind it. He lashed out with a power-assisted gauntlet, grabbing the Lizardman soldier and hauling it off its feet. The 10mm minigun strapped under his left arm screamed as he unloaded, cutting the Kintark in half with a hail of bullets.

There were more Kintark on this level and they whirled around, tracking him with their vicious plasma weapons. He kept moving, running across the building and weaving between the big supporting pillars as superheated plasma sailed around him. One of the shots hit his leg and his armour status display flashed red, warning him of the damage. He recoiled in fear and stumbled to one side, expecting the searing pain of a plasma burn any second. Not paying attention to where he was going, he crashed through a buttress with the shriek of tortured metal.

Dust and mortar showered down from the ceiling, an ominous creak making him want to freeze in case further movement brought the ceiling down. A grin slowly spread across his face as a plan came to mind and he staggered towards the left wall of the building, whirling around and holding his autocannon at the ready. More plasma bolts came flying towards him, but he used the buttresses as cover as he backed away. Clamping down on the trigger, the autocannon spat out a stream of shells, the heavy bore slugs pounding into one buttress after the next, sending lethal slivers of metal flying outwards with each explosive impact.

The groans from the ceiling became a deafening roar and Dave smashed through the wall into the sidestreet just as he brought the factory ceiling down. He toppled over onto his back, a hail of bricks bouncing off his armoured frame as an ungodly amount of dust reduced visibility to almost nothing.

Deep laughter reached his ears over the comm a second later and he felt the vibrations from the floor in his back, from the heavy footfalls of an approaching power armoured suit.

“That was outstanding, Dave!” Staff Sergeant Brannigan chuckled, looming out of the haze of smoke. Offering a power-armoured gauntlet, he continued, “Are you sure you weren’t yanking my chain? You’ve used power armour before, right?”

“Only my fourth training session,” Gibbons replied, accepting the hand and hauling himself upright. “I see what you mean about this Sentinel armour though. You feel invincible wearing this stuff!”

“Ain’t that the truth,” Brannigan agreed, clapping him on the shoulder with a loud metallic clang. He chuckled again and said, “No one’s cleared the Lizards that fast before, not even Commander Wessex! She’s gonna be pissed you broke her record.”

David looked out over the shattered remains of the building he’d just brought down, dozens of broken robotic bodies lying half-buried amongst the rubble. “Doesn’t it get expensive trashing this much training equipment?”

“We’re the best of the best. No expense spared for the Sentinel Battalion,” Brannigan replied, the pride clear in his voice. He turned around and picked up the mangled remains of a robotic soldier, the rubber Kintark mask it wore torn in half by the collapsing building. “I guess they’ll switch these out for Kirrix pretty soon.”

“Yeah, I’ve heard the bugs are stirring up trouble on the border,” Dave replied. “You reckon we might get deployed out there?”

“Seems more likely,” Brannigan agreed, sounding disappointed as he dropped the metallic corpse. “I was hoping to get some payback on the Lizards.”

“Yeah, me too,” Dave replied, though he was quite certain he never wanted to be looking down the wrong end of a plasma rifle again. He gestured to the broken robots with the muzzle of his autocannon. “How come I didn’t pick them up on thermal?”

“Lizards have got themselves some kind of heat-reactive suit,” Brannigan muttered, taking a long kick at a robotic Kintark head and sending it sailing through the air. “They can heat themselves up to run faster, or cool themselves down and go invisible on thermal.”

Gibbons watched the head bounce off a building over a hundred metres away. “Good to know, thanks.”

“That’s enough training for today,” Brannigan said, turning around and jerking an armoured thumb back to base. “Let’s go get a drink!”

“Sounds good to me,” Dave replied, then joined the Staff Sergeant as they walked back the way they’d arrived.

The pyro-gel still burned in the street, the simulated plasma fires uncannily realistic. Gibbons quickly looked away, trying not to think about the smell of burning flesh, or the tortured cries of dying friends.

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John hit the button to close the Cargo Bay door, then returned Chancellor Niskera’s wave goodbye. She was watching them depart from the Anvil’s loading area, Thandrun hovering protectively at her side. Scores of Trankarans had gathered in the Anvil’s loading bay and were standing quietly, all of them gaping at the new Glowing Queen in awe.

When the door closed, blocking off the view, Alyssa looked at him in delight. “Did you see the way they reacted to her? It was even more dramatic than the Maliri!”

John nodded and offered her a hand as he turned to walk for the grav-tube. “I wonder if Mael’nerak always intended to have some kind of Glowing Queen in place to influence the Trankarans?”

“I’m sure you’re right, Great Protector,” Alyssa said with dutiful reverence.

John glanced her way and saw her eyes flashing with amusement. He raised an eyebrow and asked, “Who came up with that idea, anyway? You or Niskera?”

“It was a joint effort,” the blonde replied blithely. She gave him a mischievous grin. “How’s it feel to be the new spiritual icon of an entire species?”

“I’m not going to hear the end of this, am I?” he asked, rubbing a hand over his face. “I thought it was bad enough with all the King of the Maliri jokes...”

Alyssa paused before they stepped into the grav-tube, stepping closer to him and reaching up to gently caress his cheek. Looking into his eyes with concern, she asked, “Does it really upset you when I make fun of this kind of thing?”

John hesitated then slowly shook his head. “Well no, but-“

“Great!” she exclaimed, tugging him into the blue anti-grav field. “Getting fucked by a King is hot; I can’t imagine how sexy it’s going to be getting boned by a living god!”

He rolled his eyes at her, and gathered the exuberant blonde in his arms. “Fine, have your fun, but I am worried about the impact this’ll have on Trankaran society. They’ve revered Mael’nerak as their ‘Great Maker’ for over nine-thousand-years... the last thing I want to do is cause some kind of theological crisis amongst the Trankarans!”

Alyssa’s smile faded and she admitted, “I actually had doubts too, but Niskera insisted; I just helped her come up with the name. She said that nothing will galvanise the Trankarans faster than a ‘spiritual renaissance’.” Her cerulean eyes had a hint of worry to them as she continued, “Niskera wasn’t fucking around when she said she’d do anything to save her people from extinction. I thought Sakura was driven and focused, but she looks like she’s half-assing it compared to Niskera...”

“Do you think it’s something I need to be concerned about?” John asked, looking at her in alarm.

She shook her head but said carefully, “I think it’d be sensible to keep an eye on her though. I doubt she’ll have much sympathy with anyone not fully on board with the ‘save the Trankarans’ plan.”

“We’ll need to keep close tabs on their fight against the Kirrix too, but the comm beacons are down in Trankaran territory,” John replied, with a worried frown. “Even if the Trankarans can replace them all, we’ll have to route the signal through Terran Federation territory and I really don’t want the Admiralty snooping on that kind of sensitive information.”

“How about via Telepathy?” Alyssa suggested, her expression brightening. “That avoids both problems in one go!”

“Yeah, but who do we send with the Maliri fleet?” John asked, his brow furrowing with concern. “The only women you have a full telepathic connection with are the girls on the Invictus and Edraele...”

Alyssa frowned and nodded her agreement. “Yeah, I don’t want to be separated from any of the girls either, and we need Edraele’s influence in Maliri Space to keep everything running smoothly.”

“Exactly,” John replied, hating the idea of any of the Invictus’ crew being stuck with a Maliri Fleet for several weeks.

“Let me think about it,” Alyssa said, giving him a reassuring smile. “I might be able to come up with a solution.”

John nodded and turned to see how close they were to the Command Deck. He realised they had already arrived and were just floating in the anti-gravity field, while Faye waited patiently by the entrance to the grav-tube.

“I didn’t want to interrupt, it sounded like you were having an important conversation!” the purple sprite said, looking at them cautiously as if to make sure they’d finished.

“Any problems?” John asked, stepping out onto the Bridge with Alyssa.

Faye shook her head, long purple hair swishing over her shoulders. “All the Trankarans have disembarked and we’re loaded up with materials. The Anvil and the freighter have both detached and we’re flying towards the edge of the Delta Corvus system as we speak.”

“I better go plot a course,” Alyssa said, striding up the illuminated steps to the Command Podium.

“Thanks, Faye,” John said, before following his blonde XO. He watched Alyssa’s slender fingers dancing over the console, her route appearing as a glowing green line that linked Trankaran Space and Maliri Space by snaking through Terran Federation territory.

“Just under five days until we arrive at the rendezvous point,” Alyssa said, nodding towards the flight path.

John was quiet for a moment, carefully examining the route they were taking and focusing on the section of space that they’d be flying through on the third day of their journey. He pointed to a large orange star tagged on the map as Zeta Telescopii, which was just a short diversion from their current course.

“Would you mind altering our course a bit so we can stop at that system please,” he requested, looking thoughtful. “There’s a planet I’d like to visit there called Myra’s World.”

Alyssa darted a knowing smile at him and nodded. “That’s a lovely idea...” She made the course corrections then activated the Tachyon Drive, launching the Invictus into hyper-warp. “The course change will only add another hour onto our journey. How long do you plan on staying for?”

“Two, maybe three hours?” John suggested, examining the Gaia classification world on the System Map.

“Then we should rendezvous with the Maliri fleet in five days, at about two in the afternoon,” Alyssa said, relaxing back in her Executive Officer’s chair. She raised an eyebrow and glanced at the black case in his hand. “How long are you planning on keeping that little secret from me?”

“As long as it takes, beautiful,” John replied mysteriously, while avoiding any thoughts about the case’s contents.

She groaned in frustration and muttered, “You’re getting annoyingly good at this.”

He gave her a teasing smile and asked, “Isn’t it about time for lunch?”

Alyssa rose from her chair and nodded, joining him in descending from the Command Podium. “I’m hungry too. I worked up quite an appetite after all that psychic shaping this morning.”

She rubbed her stomach in what would be an innocuous gesture, if it wasn’t for the smouldering look she gave him at the same time. John immediately started thinking of just one thing, just as Alyssa knew he would, and he realised there might be consequences to getting into a teasing match with the mischievous blonde.

“Just another six hours to go...” she purred, gently stroking his taut quad through his pants. “Then we can make sure all that tasty cum ends up right where it belongs...”

John groaned at her delicate caress, realising it was going to be a very trying afternoon. He waved goodbye to a grinning Faye, then entered the grav-tube with Alyssa, heading for Deck Two. The rest of the girls had already gathered in the Officers’ Lounge and they warmly greeted the late arrivals as John and Alyssa joined them at the dining table.

John took his seat at the head of the table, intrigued by the broad selection of sushi that their Head Chef had prepared. “This looks amazing!” he exclaimed, looking at the bright orange and reds of the fish, which contrasted with the stark white of the tightly packed rice.

“I hope you enjoy lunch everyone,” Sakura said, with a nervous smile.

Picking up one of the Sake Nigiri, John took an experimental bite, enjoying the contrast between the salmon and the rice. “These are excellent! Well done, honey.”

“I normally prefer hot food,” Tashana said, as she examined the thinly sliced tuna on the half-eaten roll in her hand. “But these definitely break that rule! This sushi tastes delicious.”

Sakura looked delighted and she turned to look at Calara and mouthed, “Thank you...”

“Mmm,” Dana hummed happily as she swallowed a tasty shrimp roll. She looked down the table at John and asked, “So what do we call you now? Your worshipfulness?”

John rolled his eyes at everyone’s good-natured laughter. “I had a feeling Alyssa wouldn’t be able to keep that quiet.”

“If it’s any consolation, I tried really hard...” she said with a twinkle in her eyes.

“For about two seconds, I imagine,” he replied, smiling at her. Turning back to the rest of the group, he continued, “I’m sure Alyssa filled you in on all the details, so there’s no point me rehashing it. We’re on our way to the Maliri now, but we’ll be making a pit stop along the way.”

“Really, where?” Irillith asked, her curiosity piqued.

He gave her a reassuring look. “Don’t worry, it’ll only take a few hours; I want Edraele back on her feet as much as you do. As to where; well, I’ll leave that as a surprise for now.” John waited until all the excited speculation from the girls had died down, before continuing, “Alyssa gave me a brief summary of what you’ve all been up to. Anybody want to elaborate further?”

Jade put down her glass of fruit juice. “I’m half way through a Reaper Cannon. I should be finished by this evening.”

Dana saw John’s momentary flash of confusion and explained, “When I put one together before the fight with the Kirrix, I stripped a bunch of parts from a Quantum rifle. Jade’s building a new Power Core from scratch, along with all the rest of the components. She’ll also need you or Alyssa to do some psychic shaping for the barrel and the gunframe.”

“I’m happy to help,” Alyssa offered. “I was going to fix our body armour after lunch, but I can do that first.”

“I dropped all the runes on the Paragon suits and the Valkyrie, so you can repair all the busted armour,” Dana said, looking at Alyssa then John.

“Great. I’ll patch up the mech then,” John volunteered, which earned him a grateful kiss from Alyssa. When she returned to her seat, he looked at the redhead again. “I heard you’ve already created the schematics for a new pistol?”

Dana nodded enthusiastically and grinned at Tashana. “It’s pretty fucking cool. I think you’ll love it!”

The Maliri girl’s violet eyes gleamed with excitement. “When can I get my hands on a prototype?”

“I’ll work on it first thing tomorrow morning,” Jade promised. She glanced at Dana and tentatively added, “I think I should be able to get two built by... tomorrow afternoon?”

“Sounds about right,” the redhead agreed. “You’re getting really good at building this stuff now.”

“How about Faye’s body?” John asked, sharing a smile with the sprite.

“Three more days to completely finish her frame,” Dana replied, before raising a cautionary hand. “But I can’t finish properly until we meet up with the Maliri fleet. Luna’s bringing me some stuff I can’t replicate with the Mass Fabricators.”

“I’ll be finished with the software by tomorrow evening,” Irillith explained, before turning to look at Faye. “You might want to spend a few days running a beta test before we meet with Luna. I can help work out any kinks you find.”

Alyssa shook her head. “I don’t know... It might be fun if Faye gets a bit kinky!”

Faye blushed a deep purple and she giggled as the rest of the crew laughed along with her.

Irillith arched an eyebrow. “Considering some of the functionality we’ve got in mind, and our favourite piece of anatomy that they apply to, I think a great deal of caution is in order.”

“Don’t worry, I’m being very thorough with mechanical safety features,” Dana said, giving John a reassuring smile. “Even if there’s a software screw-up, it won’t be possible for Faye to hurt you.” She gave the purple girl a flirtatious smile. “Or any of us for that matter...”

“Hey! I do not write screwed-up software!” Irillith protested indignantly. “She’ll be absolutely perfect, I was just being modest.”

Faye had an earnest expression on her cute elfin face. “I know how amazing your coding is, but I’ll still do lots of testing anyway. I wouldn’t want to risk hurting any of you!”

“Which seems like a decent segue into what I’ve been doing,” Rachel said, before breaking into a wry smile. “The autopsies are proceeding well. I’ll go through my findings with you tomorrow.”

“Oh! That reminds me,” Faye blurted out. “I fitted one of the maintenance bots with a holocam and sent it looking at the damaged turret well for the destroyed Heavy Cannon.”

“Nice, thanks,” Dana said with an appreciative smile. “Send the footage to Engineering after lunch and I’ll check it out.”

Calara glanced down the table at Sakura and smiled at her as she said, “We’ll spend the rest of the afternoon practicing and prepping for dinner.”

“How’re you finding it all so far, Head Chef?” John asked, looking at the Asian girl.

“It’s nowhere near as terrifying as I thought it was going to be,” Sakura admitted. “Calara’s a very patient teacher though, so she’s been making it really fun and easy.”

“I’ve been very impressed with the results so far,” John said, which had her beaming at him in delight.

They finished lunch, with Calara and Sakura shooing everyone away when they offered to help clean up afterwards. John picked up the black case he’d placed on the table, drawing curious looks from one and all.

“Don’t bother asking,” Alyssa muttered indignantly. “I couldn’t get a peep out of him. It’s John’s super-secret project...”

John could see the eager challenge in Dana’s and Calara’s eyes and he raised a cautionary finger. “Out of the three of us, who’s most likely to win a tickling contest?”

Calara suddenly looked wary and Dana pouted as she said, “Fine... I’m too stuffed full of Sushi to be rolling around on the floor right now anyway.”

While John knew he could hold his own against the redhead and the Latina, he didn’t like his odds if the entire crew decided to gang up on him. Erring on the side of caution, he waved them goodbye as he strode briskly out of the room and said over his shoulder, “I’ll see you ladies for dinner, I’ve got work to do!”

Nine pairs of beautiful eyes followed his tactical withdrawal, before they glanced curiously at Alyssa, who gave them a helpless shrug.

John travelled down to Deck Nine and collected a fresh cube of crystal Alyssium, then made his way to the mech’s launching bay. As he strode through the Secondary and Primary hangars, Alyssa made a point of whispering seductive telepathic words in his ear, listing all the naughty things she’d like to do to him... and the girls.

He chuckled as she did her best to tantalise and tease him, while he attempted to focus on the battered Valkyrie. The cleaning bots had scrubbed all the green Kirrix blood from the mech, but most of the armoured plates had sustained some form of damage. In the end, he decided to strip the entire mech in one go, add enough metal to replace the lost mass, then carefully reform a new set of armour plating around the huge war-machine. He put aside the black case and separated out a small orb of crystal Alyssium, then took the larger sphere of metal and got to work on the mech. Removing the plating turned out to be easy, but he’d previously deca-shaped the armour and shaping it all for an eleventh time proved quite a strain.

John was panting with the exertion by the time he was done and starting to gain some insight into why Alyssa hated repairing armour so much. She paused in her litany of debauchery to thank him for his appreciative thoughts, before describing how she’d like to lather up Calara in syrup and ice-cream then lap away at her delicious dessert. John was surprised by the length of Alyssa’s comprehensive list of lewd activities, which lasted all the way through the Valkyrie repairs, keeping him in a perpetual state of horniness. Left with a painful case of blue balls, he was finally forced to concede defeat and shut Alyssa out of his mind completely, much to her amusement.

Glancing up at the overhead cameras, John called out, “Faye, could I speak to you a secon-”

She appeared before he finished the sentence. “Hey, John! What’s up?”

“Can you shut down all the cameras in here please. I’d like to work on something in private,” he requested politely.

Faye’s cute elfin features scrunched up with worry. “Are you sure? I won’t be able to tell if you need my help!”

“I’ll be quite alright, it’s just for a few hours,” he said reassuringly. “If I need your help with anything, I’ll just head out into the corridor and you can see me then.”

“Okay...” Faye agreed with some reluctance. She waved him goodbye with a forlorn frown on her face, then blinked out of sight.

John walked across to the crate where he’d left both the small orb of crystal Alyssium that he’d saved and the black case that Thandrun had given him. Alone at last, he placed his hand on the case’s runed surface and flipped up the lid. Inside, embedded in black velvet cloth, were ten beautiful gemstones. There was a soft light behind each stone that illuminated the spectacular colours within each one and the clever way the gems were cut made them sparkle magnificently in the light.

What really impressed John as he brushed his finger over each in turn, was how close a match they were to the eye colour of each of the girls. Thandrun had assured him that the Forgemasters possessed a vast array of precious gemstones, but even so... He lifted a sapphire from its velvet bed, and angled it in the light. It wasn’t quite as enchanting as Alyssa’s beautiful cerulean eyes, but it came very close.

Returning the gem to the case, he gestured towards the block of crystal Alyssium and beckoned it over. Melting a tiny portion from the sphere, he lengthened the psychically malleable metal, then made it curve back on itself so that it formed a simple circular band. Sitting down on the deck, he focused intently on the slender band, working on the delicate filigree he had in mind. Setting the image in his mind, he manipulated the metal, matching it to the mental image.

After a couple of seconds the ring hardened and John plucked it out of the air. He turned it, examining the glistening white metal with a critical eye and frowned as he found a dozen areas he wanted to improve. Concentrating on the delicate band, he melted it back into a liquid metal loop and tried again. The second attempt was better, but still looked amateurish in his opinion, so he came up with several more improvements and began the process once more.

John had no prior experience as a jeweller, but being able to design, shape, and forge each new ring in only a few seconds, let him build up a tremendous amount of experience in just that afternoon. He didn’t attempt to shape the metal beyond deca-shaping, simply discarding the ring and starting over. After several hours, the deck was littered with white rings and his orb of crystal Alyssium had dwindled to almost nothing, but he was finally happy with the design he’d settled on for the band.

He stood up and stretched, then reached for the gem case with a satisfying sense of accomplishment. John suddenly froze, looking down at the ring he held in consternation. He’d been so obsessed with getting the patterns on the band right, he’d completely forgotten about the setting for the gem itself! Flushing with embarrassment, he glanced at his watch, then let out a sigh of frustration when he realised it was six o’clock and he’d run out of time.

Placing the prototype band in the gemcase, he closed the lid, then gestured to the scores of rings scattered across the floor. They rolled together, melting into streams of liquid metal that pooled together, then formed a small orb of crystal Alyssium. He left it on the crate in the mech bay, knowing it would get used for patching up the Valkyrie sooner or later. With the gem case tucked under his arm, he left the bay, remembering to give the cameras a wave as he entered the corridor.

“Hi John!” Faye exclaimed as she appeared an instant later, a look of relief on her face. “Are you alright?!”

Doing his best to hide his sense of irritation at not being able to finish a single ring, he gave the purple sprite a reassuring smile. “Yeah, just a bit tired, but I’m okay.”

Faye nodded, her expression sombre. “Alyssa requested that I ask you nicely to unblock her from your thoughts when you were finished...”

He chuckled and nodded. “Will do, thanks, Faye.”

“You’re welcome!” The sprite waved goodbye and flashed out of sight.

Unsure if he was really in the mood for more teasing, pent up as he was, John took a few moments to decide whether to let Alyssa back into his mind. He eventually relented as he stepped into the fore grav-tube.

\*I’m sorry I was so mean to you,\* Alyssa immediately apologised. \*Come to the bedroom and I’ll make it up to you, I promise!\*

He could hear the earnest sincerity in her voice and he smiled as he walked out onto Deck Three. \*Okay, but only because you asked nicely.\*

There was a momentary pause as he strode around the bed in the Observatory, then the blonde’s concerned voice rushed through his mind once again. \*You feel really frustrated! I really am sorry if I overdid it with the teasing; it was meant with good intentions.\*

John’s quad was throbbing with a dull ache which was far from pleasant, but that wasn’t really his main source of frustration. \*Don’t worry, beautiful. I’m irritated because of my ‘super-secret project’, not because of anything you did.\*

\*Hurry on up then, we’ll make you feel much better,\* she promised, with no sense of teasing or playfulness this time.

Her simple directness was refreshing and John felt relieved there wouldn’t be any more game-playing tonight. He just wanted to spend some time with the second team of girls and show them his appreciation for the incredible part they played in the battle of Khalgron. Strolling through the Lagoon, he saw a familiar dark-green figure surging through the crystal-clear water.

“Jade!” he called out to her as he stopped mid-way across the Bridge.

She burst out of the water, then greeted him with a beautiful smile. “Hey, John!” She darted a guilty look at the lagoon. “I was just taking a quick dip before dinner...”

John squatted down and returned her smile. “Don’t worry, I wasn’t checking up on you. You’re free to use the pool whenever you like. I just wondered if you’re coming up to the bedroom too?”

The Nymph shook her head, dark green hair slicked back from her face. “No. This is a victory celebration for you and the girls who fought with you... I was asleep through that battle.”

Frowning, John said, “I thought we decided that wasn’t your fault?”

“We did,” she agreed earnestly. “That’s why I don’t feel guilty about having you all to myself when we go to bed tonight!”

He laughed as he stood up straight again. “I’ll look forward to that!”

“As will I... Master...” she replied with a coy glance, before darting under the water again.

John watched her lithe form scything through the water for a few moments, then left the Lagoon for the grav-tube. He couldn’t help letting a grin of anticipation slip onto his face as he strode back down the corridor on Deck Two, heading towards his bedroom. His grin broadened when he strolled into the room, to find Alyssa, Calara, and Sakura waiting patiently for him on the end of the bed, wearing nothing but welcoming smiles.

Alyssa padded over to him and gave him a tender kiss. Her hand slid down over his chest to his trousers, then unzipped them and slipped inside, reaching lower to gently caress his quad.

“You’re painfully full,” she said with genuine sympathy. “I promise I wasn’t teasing you just to be a bitch. Come over here and we’ll empty your balls for you.”

John glanced at Sakura and Calara who had already dropped to their knees beside the bed, and said in confusion, “But this evening wasn’t meant to be about me... I wanted to show you three how much I appreciate each of you...”

The brown-eyed girls both gave him similar looks of affection, then Calara said, “Don’t worry about that for now. Alyssa’s got something really lovely planned, but we need a psychic connection with you first.”

Sakura licked her full lips to make them moist. “And you know what that means...”

Alyssa gave him a reassuring smile. “Fill us up first, then you can show us... I promise, it’ll be even better than fucking each of us senseless.”

Intrigued, John let the blonde seductress lead him over to her kneeling companions. Between the three of them, they quickly removed his clothes, so he was standing naked before them.

Taking a loving hold of his cock, Alyssa slowly stroked his shaft as she joined the other two in kneeling before him. “Sit or stand, it’s your choice. You’ll feel more dominant standing and probably cum harder...”

“Time to get to work,” John growled with a playful grin, grasping Alyssa’s head and guiding her lips to the head of his cock.

Her eyes sparkled as she gazed up at him, opening her mouth wide into an inviting oval. With the skill of an accomplished fellatrix, she enveloped his head with soft lips, then lathered him with her tongue, getting him hot and wet. She moaned with pleasure as he pulled her forward, sinking his cock all the way down her throat. They held still like that for a moment, with her swallowing a couple of times to massage him.

John pulled her back a few inches, then said firmly, “Hold there.”

The blonde let out a low moan, but stayed obediently still as he released his grasp on her head. Calara and Sakura were already leaning closer, mouths wide open, before he could tangle his fingers through their lustrous dark hair. Their lips touched as they enveloped his shaft from both sides and he shivered as he felt three tongues working on him simultaneously.

“I’m close, girls,” he muttered under his breath. “Keep going like that and I’ll give you what you want.”

All three of them hummed lustily around him, sending delicious vibrations along his length. He stared down at them, seeing three sets of beautiful eyes gazing back up at him, their pupils wide with arousal. The four of them were locked in this thrilling tableau, with only Alyssa moving in any appreciable way. She slid back and forth, only an inch at a time, but it was more than enough stimulation for John as she fucked her throat with his cock.

He could feel the massive orgasm building and struggled to hold on, almost afraid of the titanic climax that was gathering inside him. Looking down and seeing the hungry gleam in their eyes, he realised that these three incredibly powerful women were focused solely on giving him pleasure. There was an immediate flicker of confirmation in Alyssa’s eyes, matched by Calara and Sakura a second later.

It was those looks of devoted wantonness that pushed him over the edge and he howled with ecstasy as he finally came. He stared at them with unseeing eyes, bucking against the soft oval of Alyssa’s lips, which were wrapped tightly around the base of his cock. Long spurts of cum shot down her throat and splashed into her slim stomach, filling her up with one heavy blast after another.

She drank her fill then swapped with Calara between spurts, quite unbeknownst to John who was overwhelmed by his mind-blowing release. Then it was Sakura’s turn and by the time he was done, wavering unsteadily on his feet, the hefty contents of his quad had been pumped into the three gasping girls kneeling at his feet. They helped steady him and guided him back to the bed, where he flopped down on his back with a disbelieving laugh.

“Holy crap... That was just...” He laughed again, shaking his head as he panted for breath.

“Shh, just relax and recover,” Alyssa murmured, lying down beside him. “We’ve still got the really good bit to go...”

Sakura and Calara spooned next to him on his left and he put his arms around all three girls as he got his breath back.

John let out a contented sigh, all tension drained from his body. “You wouldn’t believe how good that felt!”

Alyssa smiled at him fondly, then leaned in to press her lips to his cheek. “We had a pretty good idea... Want to see your handiwork before we move onto the next bit?”

He smiled at her and nodded, sitting up as the girls knelt around him. Even though he’d shared his load between three of them, he was surprised to see a nice curve to all their tummies, stomachs packed full of his cum. Brushing his fingers over their rounded bellies, he shared a knowing smile with each of them in turn.

“Not long to go,” Calara whispered, placing her hand on his and stroking his fingers.

Sakura let out a happy sigh, leaning into his caressing hand.

John gave them a guilty look and said, “I love all this, but I can’t help feeling selfish. I really did want this evening to be about you three.”

Alyssa moved around the bed so she was sitting behind him, brushing her firm breasts against his back. “We haven’t started yet,” she said soothingly, then beckoned the other two girls closer. “Just lean back against me,” she purred in John’s ear.

He did as she asked, resting his weight tentatively against her at first, then relaxing when he realised Alyssa was using telekinesis to help gently support him. Sakura and Calara moved closer too, lying against his chest with their beautiful faces only inches from his.

“Now, I’ve told all three of you about those metaphysical portraits in my mind,” Alyssa reminded her three bedmates. “By coincidence, Calara and Sakura are the closest to you out of all the girls... remember I said you three share a portrait now?”

The two brown eyed beauties both nodded, the look in their eyes softening.

“It’s not about playing favourites, or who loves each other the most,” Alyssa continued in her hushed voice. “These two gorgeous girls have just embraced you completely, heart and soul.”

John stroked their backs and kissed Sakura then Calara in turn, getting a shy blush from both beautiful women.

“So I was thinking... maybe there’s another way the three of you can really express how much you mean to each other,” Alyssa whispered, her voice soft and caring. “That perhaps I could share what I feel from each of you, every day...”

Before he could reply, John felt a sudden dual opening in his mind, like two broad portals had been flung wide open. He stared at the two girls in front of him in astonishment as he *felt* their matching shock through that channel. Surprise quickly turned to curiosity and as the three of them relaxed, they began to experience a much broader and richer array of emotions.

John could feel the strength of those feelings intensifying as Calara embraced their connection wholeheartedly. He could feel her profound gratitude to him for saving her brother and father, her respect for him as a leader and strategist, and her surging reverence for him as a hero of the Terran Federation. Sakura matched the Latina in the sheer intensity of the emotions he felt pouring from her. He could sense her earnest gratitude for her rescue, the deep admiration she felt for his keen sense of justice, and her awe at the way he finally helped her get retribution, then say goodbye to her parents.

Overlaying everything, he felt the pure feelings of love they felt towards him, which were wrapped around and intertwined with their every thought. As he gazed at them in wonder, he saw the same look of awe on their faces, as they realised just how much he respected, admired, and loved them in return. Tears of joy welled up in their eyes and they hugged him fiercely, overwhelmed by the magnificence of those feelings.

John held them close then looked back over his shoulder at Alyssa and said in a choked voice, “I need you too, beautiful...”

She gave him a loving kiss, then opened her mind to him as well, flooding his subconscious with her boundless feelings of love and devotion...

When John finally regained his senses, he looked at Alyssa in astonishment. “How do you possibly cope with feeling all that, all the time? It was absolutely wonderful, but still...”

Alyssa reached across him to stroke Calara and Sakura affectionately. “You let me experience each new girl a little at a time, until she adds her full beautiful voice to our chorus.”

Sakura gazed at him wide-eyed as she murmured, “I had no idea you felt like that about me...”

Calara slowly nodded, her brown eyes softened with love. “You feel the same way about me as I feel about you...”

“Now you both know,” John said with a gentle smile, brushing the backs of his fingers against their cheeks. He glanced at Alyssa over his shoulder. “Thank you. You were right, this was better than anything I could have imagined.”

Alyssa snuggled into him from behind, planting a loving kiss on his neck. “The evening’s not over yet! Why don’t we go make dinner for everyone...” Her three companions looked at her in surprise and she winked at them. “I’ll be right back!”

Wriggling out from behind John, Alyssa bounded into the wardrobe and disappeared from sight. He looked at the two girls in his arms, who looked as baffled as he was. When she returned, John laughed and nodded his approval as the blonde handed two of his white shirts to the nude girls, while keeping one for herself. He got out of bed and dressed in casual trousers and a t-shirt, then returned to find the trio ready to join him in the kitchen.

The white cotton shirts were too big for all of them, looking more like short dresses with the sleeves rolled back. He knew the real purpose of Dana’s favourite outfit though and he stroked his hand over one curved tummy after another, smoothing the soft cotton across their skin.

“We’ll have to wait about a year until we really start filling them out,” Alyssa said with a wistful sigh.

Loving the doe-eyed looks on their faces, John hugged the three girls to him. “The wait this afternoon was totally worth it!”

They giggled, then walked with him to the kitchen, Calara and Alyssa hand-in-hand, while Sakura leaned against John, his arm wrapped around her shoulder. Dinner that evening was going to be Italian food, and they each worked with Sakura to start adding all the ingredients that she and Calara had prepared that afternoon into tasty dishes.

With nine mouths to feed, Calara suggested making a lasagne, as well as a spinach and ricotta tortellini. The four of them worked well as a team, with John focusing on teaching Sakura new cooking techniques and delegating the things she’d already learned to their two helpful sous-chefs. He stood behind Sakura, slipping his arms around her waist as she followed his instructions, and watching her place the pasta sheets over the mince and sauce.

When Sakura was done, she leaned back against his chest and let out a happy sigh. “Thank you so much for all this. My mother always wanted to teach me to cook and it feels like I’m honouring her memory by finally learning.”

John stroked her tummy and said, “I know you wanted to learn to cook for your family, but you’re going to have a real fight on your hands. I’m going to love looking after you too much.”

Alyssa leaned against the counter, watching John and Sakura entwined in a tender embrace. She knew how much he loved the happy domesticity of the kitchen and sharing that passion with the Asian girl had brought them both that much closer together.

\*Stop slacking off, matchmaker,\* Calara said, bumping the blonde with her hip, then giving her a loving smile.

Alyssa copied John then, wrapping the brunette in her arms and giving her a passionate kiss.

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Prelate Khardas strode along the broad walkway overlooking the vast assembly yard of Mar’Trinark Shipyard, his booted feet clacking on the metallic decking. The Kintark captain stiffened as he recognised High Prelate Raktian heading his way, the esteemed Kintark war hero accompanied by two hulking Royal Guard. Rasping his serrated teeth respectfully as he passed, Khardas’ eyes widened when the High Prelate returned the mark of respect with the distinctive sound of sharp teeth grating together. Khardas urged himself to remain calm and resist the urge to rush after Raktian like an awestruck hatchling, instead focusing his reptilian eyes on the robed Kintark at the end of the long gantry.

“Grand Prelate, you asssked to sssee me?” Khardas enquired when he reached Melkadian, bowing his head reverently to his former mentor.

Melkadian gestured with a clawed hand to the view from the platform and replied in a hushed voice, “Have you ever ssseen anything ssso magnificent, Khardasss?”

The Kintark captain followed the sweep of his leader’s claws, looking out at the seemingly endless formations of cruisers, carriers, and battleships that comprised the Kinta homeworld fleet. Glittering in the warm orange glow from Kinta’s sun, the rays of light reflected off their distinctive green-and-gold armour, identifying the legion of ships as members of the elite Praetorian Guard.

“Assside from the Emperor himssself, there isss nothing in the Universsse ssso formidable,” Khardas replied, as awed by the sight as his leader.

“You echo my own thoughtsss, Prelate,” Melkadian agreed. He turned and clasped the captain’s broad shoulder and continued, “I have a ssspecial asssignment for you, Khardasss. You have already proven yourssself in your ssservice to the Empire, ssso I know that you will be ideal for the tasssk.”

“Name it, Grand Prelate... It will be done,” Khardas said, holding himself taller, the spines on his back stiffening with pride.

“Your cruissser, the Jernak'tor, will be joining a ssspecial formation of ssships, tasssked with essscorting a potent new weapon in the arsssenal of the Emperor,” Melkadian said, his onyx eyes boring into the cruiser captain’s.

“Thank you for thisss great honour, Grand Prelate!” Prelate Khardas gasped, thrilled to be offered such an opportunity to serve the Emperor.

Melkadian studied him for a long moment, then turned and pointed out into space. “Behold! There isss the inssstrument of the Emperor’sss will...”

Khardas turned to look, his eyes widening as he saw the colossal size of the vessel slowly moving into view as it left the Mar’Trinark drydock. As more of the vast ship appeared, the Prelate’s look of wonder turned into one of horror as he recognised the enormous spacecraft for what it really was.

“By Malganth the Betrayer!” he hissed, turning to gape at Melkadian, an expression of disgusted outrage on his face. “What isss that abomination?!”

“We will turn one of their mossst potent weaponsss againssst them,” the Grand Prelate murmured in his sibilant voice. Obsidian orbs bored into Khardas’ soul and there was a dangerous undercurrent to his tone as he continued, “Sssurely you do not quessstion the wisssdom of the Emperor himssself?”

Lowering his broad stature in a gesture of submission, Prelate Khardas quickly shook his head. “Of courssse not, Grand Prelate, but... can one ssso low, truly be trusssted?”

Melkadian gave him a wicked grin, revealing rows of razor-sharp teeth. “Of that I have no doubt, Prelate. May you fight with the cunning and ssstrength of the Emperor himssself in the coming battlesss.”

“I will ssserve the Empire with pride, Grand Prelate,” Khardas replied, recognising the dismissal for what it was.

He turned and strode away, but couldn’t help darting an apprehensive glance over his shoulder. His eyes riveted to the green and gold armour on that fearsome behemoth, as it joined the unstoppable legions of the Praetorian Guard.