Three Square Meals Ch. 93

Lieutenant Commander Ryan Murphy pulled off his flight helmet and relaxed back in the seat of his Claymore fighter. Running through the shutdown routine, he powered off the engines, then deactivated the rest of the impressive new fighter’s systems. He’d just spent the last two hours on another test flight, this time shooting up agile target drones.

Although he was still in love with the highly advanced craft, which was a huge upgrade over his old rapier, the initial awe was wearing off and he’d started spotting quirks and idiosyncrasies of the converted gunship. Adjusting to the extra pair of Gatling Lasers in the loadout of six had been easy, but landing rounds on target with the Gauss Cannon built into the fighter’s fuselage was proving a trickier prospect.

The airlock popped open with a hiss and a deck engineer poked his helmeted head through the portal. “Leprechaun! The Captain wants to speak to you!”

“Hey, Garv,” Murphy replied, climbing out of his seat and heading for the airlock. “Could you take a look at the alignment of the Gauss Cannon’s sights. I’m still not convinced they’re properly calibrated.”

Garvy laughed and rolled his eyes. “I’ve told you before; you have to lead your targets! The projectiles are slower, it’s not like the Gatling Lasers.”

“I know you told me, but I’m sure it’s fucked up,” Murphy protested, before giving him his most endearing smile and clapping the engineer on the shoulder. “Indulge me, would you? There’s a six-pack of Trankaran ale in it for you...”

The Engineer sighed and nodded. “Alright, I’ll take a look.”

“Cheers, fella,” the young pilot said with a grin.

Murphy squeezed past the tech and climbed out onto the wing of his ship. Following his ritualistic habit, he placed two fingers to his lips, kissed them, then pressed the digits against the image of his lucky charm painted on the Claymore’s fuselage.

“Thanks, darlin’,” Murphy murmured under his breath, as the portrait of the beautiful dark-green lioness beamed a glittering smile back at him.

Sliding off the wing of his fighter, he jogged over to the maintenance gantry, then climbed the steps out of the hangar and joined the main concourse. The vast Flight Deck on the Terran Federation flagship, The Retribution of Zeus, was bustling with crews eager to get more practice with the new Claymores. He spotted Whiskey leading four young pilots towards the hangar and the two officers exchanged respectful nods. Murphy suppressed a smirk, not envying the experienced fighter-pilot the job of training up those rookies.

When he finally arrived at the Captain’s office, he saw two more familiar faces standing outside and he smiled at the two young recruits. “Hey, lads! Not in trouble already, are ya now?” he teased the two ensigns.

“No, Sir, Lieutenant Commander!” Ensign Halifax replied, snapping to attention.

Baker gave him a sharp salute, then smiled and shook his head. “Nothing like that, Leprechaun.”

“Catch me after I’ve seen the Captain, and I’ll give you those pointers on the Rapier I was talking about,” Murphy said with a good-natured smile.

The two ensigns exchanged nervous glances, unsure how to respond.

Before they could reply, the door beside them opened and Captain Lewis stepped out. “I thought I heard your Irish brogue, Leprechaun. Can I have a word?”

“Of course, Captain,” Murphy replied, following the older officer into the room and closing the door behind him.

“Take a seat,” Lewis said, gesturing to the chair as he sat behind his desk.

Relaxing into the chair, Murphy studied the Captain for a moment, not liking the way he brushed his finger across his moustache. That usually meant his old instructor was on edge. “What’s up, Gator?” he asked, figuring he might as well get to the point.

“I’m assigning you your own wing, Ryan,” Captain Lewis said, leaning forward and looking at him intently. “You think you’re up to it?”

Murphy blinked at him in surprise. Being offered command of five fighters was the last thing he expected his commanding officer to say. He couldn’t help grinning as he said, “Binary’s gonna be pissed!”

The Captain leaned back in his chair and shook his head. “I’ve already assigned him a wing of his own. You guys are the veterans now, you’ll need to train up the new replacements as your wingmen.”

Suddenly ensigns Baker and Halifax standing outside the Captain’s office began to make a dreadful kind of sense. “But they’re flying Rapiers, Gator!” Murphy protested. “They’ll never be able to keep up with my Claymore!”

Shaking his head, Captain Lewis replied, “I’m not mixing fighter classes in a wing, don’t be ridiculous. Your four wingmen will be assigned Claymores the same as you.”

Murphy hesitated for a moment, then said dubiously, “It’s a very powerful fighter, Captain. I’m not sure giving one to a rookie is a good idea.”

Lewis shrugged. “The entire squadron will be switching to Claymores when we get more from Olympus, so they’ll need to learn to fly them sooner rather than later. I’ve split the first batch of twenty into four wings and you’ll be leading the second.” He saw Murphy’s look of surprise and smiled. “You’ve logged fifty-percent more flight time in the Claymores than any other pilot on the Zeus... Teach them all the tricks, Lieutenant Commander. You’re dismissed.”

Rising from his chair, Murphy saluted the Captain. “Thank you for this opportunity, Gator. I won’t let you down.”

Lewis nodded towards the door. “I don’t know what you said to Baker and Halifax, but they specifically requested they be assigned to your wing.”

Murphy grinned at him. “Is that right?”

Laughing, the Captain shooed him out, “Get out of here before I change my mind!”

Opening the door to the office, Murphy strode outside and found the two ensigns staring at him, wide-eyed with anticipation. The sudden weight of responsibility came crashing down on his shoulders and he froze, realising the lives of these two young men were in his hands. Memories of Angel, Snakebite, and Romeo flooded back, as did the feeling of guilt that he’d let his old wingmen down. If only he’d trained harder before Regulus, improving his piloting skills, practicing his shooting, maybe he could’ve saved them. He’d been trying to atone for that with all the hours he’d logged in the Claymore, hoping to be the best wingman he could be, but now he was going to be the Wing Commander it mattered more than ever...

Fighting down his doubts and fears, he put on an air of bold confidence. “Alright lads, let’s go!”

The two ensigns looked at him in surprise, then scurried to fall into step beside him. “Where are we going, Lieutenant Commander?” Halifax asked hesitantly.

“To the Flight Deck. It’s time you two popped your cherries on Claymores,” Murphy said with a grim smile.

“Oh yeah!” Baker crowed, pumping his fist in the air.

Murphy darted a frown at Ensign Halifax. “But cut that Lieutenant Commander shit out, alright? Every time I hear my rank, I keep expecting to get a bollocking from the Captain. Leprechaun is fine.”

“Yes, Sir!” the young ensign said, before sharing an eager grin with Baker.

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Dinner aboard the Invictus was a great success and after praising Sakura for the delicious Italian food, the contented crew retired to the sofas to watch the stars racing by. Alyssa had redesigned the lounge with exactly this kind of thing in mind, so John and all the girls were able to sit in a comfortable semi-circle, chatting quietly together and sipping drinks.

John emptied his glass of whiskey, then set it down on the coffee table, waving away Calara’s offer to top it up. He put his arms around Sakura and Alyssa, then let out a happy sigh.

“You sound like I feel,” the Asian girl murmured, snuggling closer. “I can’t remember feeling this wonderful before.”

Alyssa smiled at her fondly, then glanced at John. “I think you might have to come up with a new punishment for our Head Chef. I don’t think she was supposed to be having the time of her life!”

“She’s a good girl, leave her be,” John said to the blonde, knowing Alyssa was only teasing. He drew Sakura closer and gave her a tender kiss.

The raven-haired beauty closed her eyes and had a blissful expression on her face by the time he pulled away. “I stand corrected. *This* is the happiest I’ve ever been.”

John squeezed her shoulder then turned to look at Alyssa. \*Thanks for all your work behind the scenes today. I really wanted to thank the girls and they all seemed to have a great time.\*

\*They really did,\* Alyssa replied earnestly, looking around at her smiling friends as they chatted quietly together. \*I might get a bit carried away and seem a bit manipulative sometimes, but it’s only because I know all of you so well. I just want to give you what you all need...\*

John studied her beautiful face for a moment. \*You don’t need to keep beating yourself up over what happened with Niskera. For what it’s worth, I think we did the right thing. I’ve been very impressed by her and I think she’ll be able to make a huge difference for the Trankarans. As for you being manipulative, we’ve discussed all that and it’s water under the bridge as far as I’m concerned.\*

Her expression softened and she tangled her fingers in his hair. \*I’m glad you’re not mad at me. I agree with you too, about Niskera.\* She paused looking undecided for a moment, then admitted, \*You asked earlier if you were missing something between me and Niskera. I was just-\*

\*Telling her she’d be welcome to join us on the Invictus in the future?\* John guessed, giving her a knowing smile. \*Don’t worry, I’m not mad about that, we did discuss the possibility after all. If Niskera isn’t happy settling down with the Trankarans after all the changes she’s been through to save them, there’s no question that we’re obligated to offer her a place here with us.\*

\*But would she make you happy?\* Alyssa asked softly. \*I could feel how impressed you were by her personality, but I know you have a certain... type.\*

John frowned and said, \*It feels wrong to so casually talk about essentially changing Niskera’s species, even if that is what she wants.\*

Alyssa shook her head. \*If Niskera decided to join us properly, I don’t think right or wrong will come into it. The fact is, that if you keep loading her up, she’s bound to start changing.\* Her eyes darted off to the left to look at Jade’s lustrous dark-green skin. \*My gut tells me that if she went through the full Change, she’ll end up looking like a grey-skinned version of our lovely Nymph, but with the permanent lightshow. You told Niskera she was beautiful earlier, but I know you were thinking of her more like an exotic sculpture than a girl you wanted to fuck.\*

\*I wasn’t lying earlier, the glowing lines were beautiful,\* John protested. He hesitated when he saw the knowing look Alyssa gave him, then conceded, \*But you’re right... I know it makes me seem ridiculously shallow, but I still don’t find her all that physically appealing.\*

\*You can’t help what you’re attracted to,\* Alyssa told him, stroking the side of his head. \*But more importantly, do you think you’d be attracted to her if she looked like a grey version of Jade?\*

John stopped to picture Niskera like that for a moment, but struggled to see the stocky, bald Trankaran woman changing appearance that radically. He found it easier to imagine how Jade would look with grey skin instead, her luscious nubile body covered in swirling, glowing lines. He had to admit, the image was quite intriguing...

\*Good to know...\* Alyssa said with a coy smile.

\*Hang on,\* John said with a cautionary look. \*There’s absolutely no guarantee Niskera would change to look like that; it’s pure speculation on our part. Let’s just say that I hope that Niskera finds happiness with the Trankarans, but if she doesn’t, I’m willing to offer her a home with us. Okay?\*

The blonde nodded, knowing not to push this any further. \*Understood. I promise I won’t try and persuade her to join us, subtly or otherwise. I’ll just focus on looking after her either way.\*

\*See, you’re a good girl too,\* John replied, sharing a smile with her.

Alyssa leaned in so her lips were almost brushing his. \*Do I deserve a kiss for being good?\*

\*Definitely,\* he agreed, pulling her closer.

The rest of the evening rolled on and they had started the day early so they decided to call it a night when it turned ten. Drifting out of the Officers’ Lounge in a group, John reached out to clasp Jade’s hand, then pulled the surprised Nymph into the red glow of the grav-tube.

“G’night, ladies, see you in the morning!” he called out to the rest of the girls, who grinned and waved back at him, all well-aware of his plans courtesy of Alyssa.

“We’re not sleeping with the others?” Jade asked him in surprise as they descended in the anti-gravity field.

John shook his head and guided her out onto Deck Three. “I thought it might be nice to spend the night in the Observatory, just you and me.”

She stroked his jawline, a soft smile on her face. “You didn’t need to single me out for special treatment.”

Turning as if to head back to the grav-tube, John said playfully, “Oh, okay. If you don’t fancy it, we can catch up to the others...”

The Nymph pulled him back and hugged him tight. “I never said that!”

“Well I’m all yours for the night, so wherever you want to spend it is entirely up to you,” John replied, stroking her back.

Her eyes lit up with excitement and she led him by the hand down the corridor towards the Lagoon. John laughed at her enthusiasm and followed behind the eager girl. When they entered the big room, Jade pulled her dress over her head, leaving it crumpled in a heap with her abandoned shoes.

She spun away from him, bounding ahead along the path that led over the softly-lit lagoon. “You’re wearing too many clothes!” the Nymph said with a grin, waiting for him at the apex of the bridge.

John quickly stripped off and walked over to join her, admiring Jade’s spectacular viridian body as she posed for him like some kind of wild forest sprite. “We’re going to get wet, aren’t we?” he asked wryly, already having a pretty good idea what the answer might be.

“I already am...” Jade replied, her emerald eyes glinting with arousal.

Turning to face the still dark waters of the lagoon, the strong muscles in her legs tensed and she launched herself off the bridge. Jackknifing in the air, she straightened as she dove into the pool, barely making a splash as she cut through the surface of the lake. The Nymph surfaced a few moments later, her feline eyes reflecting the light as she gazed his way.

John followed Jade’s example, leaping in after her with an impressive dive of his own. He plunged through the water, then breached the surface, to find Jade waiting for him. “Hello, beautiful,” he said, pulling her close.

Jade wrapped her arms around him, then looked into his eyes with a mysterious intensity behind that loving gaze. “There’s something special I’d like to do with you, Master.”

“What’s on your mind?” he asked, watching her curiously.

The Nymph gave him an enigmatic smile. “Your thoughts...” she murmured, stroking her fingers across his temple. “They’re quiet though, like whispers behind a closed door...”

John looked at her in surprise, his eyes widening as he felt a light flutter against his mind.

“You let me in once before, when we first met,” Jade purred, her velvety green skin warming up against him.

“When you shifted form into Alyssa,” John said in sudden understanding. “I must have let you in subconsciously... I didn’t feel a thing that first time.”

 “I had to read your mind to learn how I could best serve my handsome new Master,” she whispered, giving him a gentle kiss. “Perhaps you recognised my nature by instinct.”

He looked at her in confusion. “Don’t Nymphs normally just do that the once? So that they can find out what their master considers to be the perfect woman?”

“Many things have changed since then, with you and with me,” the Nymph murmured, her cat-like pupils widening as she gazed at him with longing. “Would you share your thoughts with me again?”

Doing as she asked, John opened a breach in his mental fortress for the fluttering presence waiting patiently outside. He felt Jade’s mind brushing against his, gentle and tentative at first, then growing bolder as she deepened the contact between them.

A look of wonder spread across her beautiful face and she gasped, “I’d forgotten what it was like... your mind is glorious, Master!”

Jade mewled into his mouth, kissing him with abandon as she hugged him tighter, wrapping her legs around him too. They sank below the surface of the water and her kisses slowed as she started breathing for the pair of them, using a set of gills she formed on her neck. They slowly dropped to the bottom of the lagoon, Jade lying on the sandy floor with John resting on her supine form. He experienced a strange sensation of weightlessness being fully supported underwater like this, the disembodied sensation magnified by the Nymph embracing his mind too.

\*Just relax... let me take care of you,\* she murmured, the pure joy in her telepathic voice tempered by the tenderness in her mental and physical touch.

Putting his full trust in her, John did as Jade asked, losing track of time as he enjoyed the pleasantly soothing embrace. She started asking him about his past; beginning with how he’d grown up with his grandparents, helping them run their restaurant. The Nymph seemed to delight in reading his thoughts and she began to ask about his time in the military, prompting him to talk about his friends and colleagues, the battles he’d fought in, and the reasons why he’d eventually retired. Then she moved on to his years as a trader, the deals he’d struck and all the exotic places he’d visited. Finally, she asked him to talk about each of the girls on his crew, while she purred in euphoric bliss.

John paused for a second and framed a question in his mind. \*Why did you ask me to talk about the girls? You know them all really well.\*

\*I can sense how you feel about each of them and all your fond fleeting thoughts,\* Jade explained, \*This must be what it’s like for Alyssa... I feel like I’m finally getting to know the real you!\*

\*Not yet,\* John replied. \*We haven’t discussed how I feel about my beautiful Nymph...\*

Jade’s breath caught, her eyes filled with anticipation.

He shook his head. \*Not like this. Let’s go to the Observatory and I can show you properly.\* With that he closed the portal in his mind to stop her getting a sneak preview.

Jade was filled with a sense of profound loss and her eyes widened in shock, but she wasn’t able to communicate with him telepathically now to tell him of her anguish. They bobbed up to the surface, then swam to the edge of the water, padding out onto the sand. Jade had a deeply conflicted look on her face, her eagerness to hear more warring with disappointment at being shut from his mind. She looked at him and was about to say something, then faltered.

There were fresh towels on the sun-loungers, so John picked two up, passing one of them to the Nymph. “What is it, honey?” he asked gently.

She held the towel against her bust and looked at him with her big emerald eyes. “Being separated from your mind... I already miss listening to your thoughts.”

John wrapped his towel around himself, then pulled her into his arms. “After tonight, I’ll give you permanent access as if you were one of my Matriarchs, like Alyssa and Edraele. Would you like that?”

Jade swooned in his arms, looking like she could scarcely believe her ears. She nuzzled into him as they walked up the slope and across the bridge towards the Observatory, seemingly wanting to stay as close to him as possible. They practically fell onto the bed together, both of them eager to physically consummate the intimacy of their new psychic connection.

The moment that Jade took him to the hilt inside her luscious body, John let her back into his mind again. They began to move together and he thought about all the little things he adored about the loving Nymph, from her glorious smile to her sweet, gentle nature. Jade sobbed with joy as she basked in his litany of praise for her countless virtues, eyes wide in awe as she clung to him as though never wanting to let him go. She heard his words of course, but now she was able to feel the heartfelt emotions behind them all too, trembling in ecstasy as he stroked inside her.

Jade crested through one rolling climax after another, whimpering with delight as John whispered in her ear and overwhelmed her mind with loving thoughts. When he told her how much he loved seeing her being caring and maternal with the girls, while thinking about how he couldn’t wait to see what an amazing mother she’d be to their children, Jade finally begged him to stop.

“It’s too much,” she finally gasped, lying limp in his arms in a state of blissful and exhausted astonishment. “I can’t cum any more!”

“One more, with me...” John urged her, cradling her head in his hands and moving with a different purpose now.

She bit her lip and nodded, moans of pleasure bursting from her as he ramped up the pace. John teetered on the edge, his quad trembling after being held in check for so long. He plunged up to the hilt inside her and finally surrendered to his release, joining her lusty cries as she climaxed with him. When he was spent, he carefully pulled out, then collapsed beside the insensate Nymph. The pair of them panted for breath, with John eventually spooning up behind Jade as he pulled the covers over them.

Light pulsed out from her curved midriff, the lines following the graceful curves of her lithe figure. John followed those lines with his fingertips, knowing that her body was responding to him, growing stronger with every pulse. Jade was lost in thought for a long time, her long hair spread across his arm that she was using as a pillow, her hand resting atop his as he cradled her swollen belly.

“Are you okay?” John asked, pulling her closer. “You’re very quiet.”

She turned slightly and gave him a wry smile. “I was just thinking how ironic this evening was...”

“Ironic? What do you mean?” he asked, leaning down to plant a tender kiss on her cheek.

“The day after you freed me in every possible way, you’ve made it so I’ll never leave you, not ever,” she said adamantly.

John looked at her in alarm. “What do you mean?! I wasn’t trying to-”

Jade stilled his worried words with a loving kiss, her telepathic thoughts as soothing as a lullaby. \*How could I ever leave you? Knowing you feel the same way about me as I do about you...\*

He relaxed as he understood what she meant, smiling with relief. The Nymph began to purr, a deep sound of contentment rumbling in her chest. He stroked her to sleep, hearing her rhythmic breathing deepen as she started to slip into a blissful slumber. John was getting drowsy himself and was about to join her, when Alyssa’s telepathic voice whispered through his mind.

\*And the lovely Nymph makes three,\* she told him, her gentle voice ringing with approval.

Smiling with satisfaction, he kissed Jade on the shoulder, then surrendered to sleep himself.

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\*Good morning, beautiful...\*

Tashana heard Alyssa’s soft voice breezing through her dozing subconscious, rousing her from sleep. She opened her eyes to see Irillith lying asleep in front of her, long snowy-white hair framing her beautiful face. It was strange to feel so happy to see her twin’s exquisite features again, having spent over a decade desperately trying to erase that face from her memory. It hadn’t just been to hide from the pain of betrayal, but also to avoid the bitter sting of loss, after the mutilation of her own identical features. Tashana brushed a lock of hair away from Irillith’s forehead, feeling a surge of protectiveness as she watched over her slumbering sister.

Alyssa’s enchanting cerulean eyes appeared over Irillith’s blue shoulder and the blonde studied her for a moment. Tashana felt her Matriarch’s caring presence in her mind and she could almost see the gears whirring in the teenager’s head.

\*I woke you up early in case you wanted more time alone today?\* Alyssa asked kindly. \*I know you’re still figuring things out with Irillith.\*

Tashana hesitated as she glanced at her sleeping twin, then nodded, giving the blonde a grateful smile.

\*Go get a shower then, I won’t wake them for another half-hour,\* Alyssa said, her eyes flicking to the bathroom door.

Mouthing the words “Thank you,” to the blonde, Tashana climbed out of bed then padded across the bedroom. She closed the bathroom door behind her so as not to disturb the others, then turned on the shower and sighed as the hot water sluiced over her. Shutting her eyes, she relaxed under the streams, not missing the Maliri version of a shower for one moment. It might have been far more efficient, but it was much less enjoyable.

Feeling smooth arms encircling her from behind, Tashana opened her eyes to see a pair of slender bronzed limbs surrounding her waist, as a pair of full breasts pressed into her back. Unfortunately, that only narrowed down the identity of her shower companion to three possibilities; a blonde, brunette, or redhead.

“You can have time apart from Irillith without being alone,” Alyssa murmured in her ear and taking the opportunity to playfully nip at an earlobe. “Alone is boring...”

Tashana laughed and turned around, sharing a smile with the blonde girl. “Are you coming with me to the firing range?”

Alyssa wrinkled her delicate nose and shook her head. “We can find much more fun things to do while you decide if you love or hate Irillith...”

“I don’t hate her... not exactly,” Tashana immediately replied. “It’s just... complicated.”

“I know, I’m just teasing you,” the blonde replied, stroking her arm. “Things will work out, it’ll just take time.”

Tashana let out a sigh. “I know. Everything that happened to me in the Unclaimed Wastes is already starting to feel like a bad dream. The memories are fading and the sting isn’t so painful... not any more.”

Alyssa’s full lips shifted into an affectionate smile. “I have to hand it to him, he really knows what he’s doing...”

The Maliri girl could only nod her agreement. She paused then, an unspoken question hanging on her lips.

“Go ahead, what’s up?” Alyssa asked, sensing her indecision.

“I just wanted to ask about John... You’ve been with him much longer than I have; does that feeling of awe ever go away?” Tashana quietly replied. “I feel like I’ve been getting to know him better, but then he’ll do something that makes me feel like I’m only just starting to get an inkling of just how powerful he is. It’s thrilling and frightening at the same time... Like when he lifted the shield that was suppressing my memories; I finally got an understanding of just how titanic his mind is. I’ve never felt so insignificant before.”

Alyssa’s expression shifted to one of unguarded honesty, something Tashana had never seen before in the blonde. “I know exactly what you mean,” the teenager said quietly, hugging her closer. “I can’t believe how powerful he is already and he’s not even unlocked his full potential yet. It sometimes feels like watching a god discover that he can just reshape the galaxy at will...”

They held each other as they stood under the water and Tashana felt a sudden surge of affection for the young Terran woman in her arms. It was times like these that she was suddenly reminded just how young Alyssa really was. Tashana was fifty-two and she’d been astonished at how quickly Terrans matured, with her teenage Matriarch normally so confident and composed, but she was still only eighteen-years-old. Stroking Alyssa’s toned back she embraced the blonde who had done so much for her.

Sensing the change in mood, Alyssa pulled back and gave her a warm smile. “You’re a sweetheart,” she said affectionately. “But let me look after you for now, okay?”

Tashana nodded, surprising herself with how easy it was to look to the younger woman for support. “So if we’re not going to the firing range, what are we up to?”

Alyssa’s hands drifted lower and she cupped Tashana’s shapely buttocks then gave them a suggestive squeeze. “I know what I’d really like to do, but I suppose we can’t spend the day in bed. Let’s finish our shower, then go and get changed, and we can do some more psychic training.”

The Maliri girl readily agreed, then soaped herself down with the blonde’s enthusiastic help. They parted ways in the bedroom, with Tashana retiring to her quarters to get a fresh change of clothes. She flicked through her wardrobe, trying to decide on what to wear, before finally choosing lacy underwear, a long dark-red dress and some heeled shoes, having been forewarned by Sakura. Quickly applying some make-up and artfully styling her hair, she glided over to the door and out into the corridor.

The blonde was waiting for her there, wearing a very tight-fitting pencil skirt, stockings, heels, and a blouse that flattered her impressive bust. Alyssa clearly wasn’t expecting Tashana to have gone to as much effort as she had done and she grinned as she linked arms, leading her down the corridor. “Very nice!” she said appreciatively, eyeing Tashana’s bountiful cleavage through the plunging neckline. “I was expecting you to appear in gym gear.”

“We’re fighting with our minds, not our bodies,” Tashana replied. “There’s no reason we can’t look good while doing it.”

Alyssa’s melodic laughter echoed down the corridor. “Alright, who tipped you off?”

“Sakura,” she admitted, sharing a grin with the blonde.

“I should be annoyed at her, but you look good enough to eat...” Alyssa said with a lascivious wink.

It was Tashana’s turn to laugh as they stepped into the grav-tube. “Do you mind if I ask you something personal?” she asked, studying the statuesque blonde.

Shrugging and spreading her hands, Alyssa relied, “I’m an open book, ask away.”

“I couldn’t help wondering... Is all the flirting and compliments just an act you put on to make me and the girls feel more at ease?” Tashana asked, watching her young companion.

Without a moment’s hesitation, Alyssa replied, “No, definitely not; I think you’re a lovely person and a very beautiful woman.”

Tashana reached out to clasp her hand and gently squeezed it. “I’m amazed you turned out so caring and kind, considering the tough start you had growing up.”

Pausing for a second, Alyssa looked thoughtful as she slowly shook her head. “I used to have fun with Sparks, but I was never this outgoing before. I suppose I’ve changed quite a bit since I joined the crew.”

They reached Deck Nine and Tashana couldn’t help trying to imagine what the blonde had been like before she had met John. They walked out into the corridor, with Alyssa gesturing towards the door leading into the Secondary Hangar and hitting the button to open it with a telekinetic swipe. Walking hand-in-hand around the Raptor gunship, Alyssa darted a glance at the Maliri girl who was lost in thought.

“You’re wondering just how much my personality has changed since being with John,” Alyssa noted astutely.

Tashana gave her a brief nod. “I’ve been spending quite a bit of time thinking about the changes he’s made to me, Irillith, and Edraele. I’m obviously hugely grateful for everything he’s done for me, but I couldn’t help feeling curious about the rest of you.”

The blonde shrugged and said blithely, “It’s probably fair to say he made as dramatic a change to my personality as he did to my body. The key difference is confidence; I know I look beautiful now, so I’m no longer plagued by any of the insecurities that held me back before. John’s always been very complimentary with me and I know how good that feels, so I never hesitate to try and make you girls feel good too.”

“What about all the flirting?” Tashana asked, stopping by the door to the Primary hangar. “Does that come from a newfound sense of confidence too?”

Alyssa paused, then stepped closer to the Maliri girl. “Perhaps... perhaps not. I was John’s Matriarch before he made me so powerful and a Matriarch’s role is to help her Progenitor get more girls for his armies. Fortunately, John’s nothing like the other Progenitors we’ve heard about, but I guess my relationship with him is still similar.” She placed a hand on Tashana’s slender stomach and shivered with delight as she caressed her. “Just the thought of you carrying his cum in your tummy turns me on so much...”

Tashana saw the smouldering look of desire in the blonde’s bright blue eyes and knew she was being completely honest with her. “Do you ever resent that kind of dramatic change to your personality?” she asked quietly.

The blonde laughed and pulled her into a hug. “No! Not for one moment!” When she leaned back to gaze at Tashana again, she was earnest as she continued, “My old life was bleak, lonely, and depressing until I met Sparks. She helped look after me, but we were both living on the edge of starvation for years, not much more than slaves to the gang that adopted us. It was a grim life that was bound to end badly, probably sooner rather than later.” She gestured to encompass the ship and everyone in it. “Now I’m with the man I love and a bunch of girls who are closer to me than sisters. Why would I ever resent that? I’ve never been happier than I am now...”

“I can see that,” Tashana murmured, brushing her fingers against Alyssa’s cheek. “Living here with everyone has been wonderful. I feel so close to all of you...”

The blonde leaned into her hand and closed her eyes as the Maliri girl caressed her. “The way we are with each other, the warmth and affection, all the gentle touches and kind words... that all comes from John too. It’s very different from the way Progenitors normally treat their women. I’ve seen psychic images of Mael’nerak’s thralls together and they were cold, humourless, unemotional. It might only seem like a little thing, but it means so much...”

Tashana hugged Alyssa then, wrapping the blonde in her arms and gently stroking her back as they stood together. There was nothing amorous in that embrace, just heartfelt respect and affection. “You’re such a wonderful girl,” she whispered in her ear. “Thank you for satisfying my curiosity.”

Alyssa pulled back and gazed into the Maliri girl’s gentle violet eyes. “You’re close aren’t you... I can feel it. That’s what’s prompted all these questions.”

Tashana looked calm and confident as she said, “I can feel it too; I know I’m ready to bond with you.” She leaned in to give the blonde a tender kiss. “But let’s wait until later.”

The blonde was surprised and intrigued by Tashana’s bold self-assuredness. She pressed closer, her slender stomach grazing against the Maliri girl’s. “Good call. It’ll be much better when we’re full of his cum...”

“Mmm-hmm,” Tashana murmured, before giving Alyssa a teasing smile and turning away. She hit the button to open the door and the two girls glided into the Primary Hangar. “So, what do you have in mind for psychic training?”

Alyssa sauntered past her, brushing her fingers across Tashana’s arm, then walking a few dozen paces further into the centre of the vast room. “How about you show me what you’ve got?” she taunted her blue-skinned companion.

“Are you sure?” Tashana replied with a grin, her eyes starting to glow with an inner ethereal glow. “I don’t want to accidentally hurt you...”

“Big talk from the fire chick,” Alyssa called back with a sly smile. “I’ve kicked your ass before, I doubt this will be any different...”

Tashana arched an eyebrow at the blonde, then looked inward and embraced the inner fire, bringing it forth in flickering flames that danced around her slender fingers. She threw her hands to her sides, gouting a torrent of flames in both directions, which began to solidify into writhing six-foot-tall elementals. The lithe fire sprites moved sinuously in the amber radiance as she added more structure to her flaming minions.

When she glanced back at Alyssa, she noticed the Terran girl had summoned a telekinetic barrier despite her bold talk. Quite wisely Tashana copied her, quickly bringing a glowing pyrokinetic shield into existence with the snap of her fingers. Formed of scores of sharply-defined burning hexagons, the large disc hovered protectively a couple of metres in front of her.

Alyssa mimed a yawn. “Whenever you’re ready, Miss Valaden.”

With a simple thought, the fiery elementals leapt to the attack, sprinting towards Alyssa, their hands engulfed in raging flames. At the same time, Tashana pointed towards the blonde with her right hand and a stream of fire bolts roared across the gap between them. Each bolt slammed into Alyssa’s glowing white shield, bursting with rippling splashes of light as the blazing hail was absorbed.

Alyssa raised both hands, palms upwards, creating two radiant walls of force in front of the fire sprites. The fiery girls squealed in surprise as they slammed into those impenetrable barriers and bounced backwards to land on their bottoms. Giving Tashana a playful wink, Alyssa casually summoned a huge spear of glowing white energy which she hurled back through the stream of fire bolts. “Try this on for size!”

Tashana braced for impact and felt every bit of the colossal force behind that telekinetic lance as it slammed into her shield. She was thrown backwards by the strength of that hit, barely managing to avoid being unceremoniously dumped on the deck like her fire sprites. Frowning with annoyance, the Maliri girl sent a new set of commands at her fiery sisters, who vaulted to their feet and ran to the side, attempting to flank Alyssa. She sent a sheet of flame arcing towards Alyssa, and lobbed a couple of fireballs overhead, her fists pumping as she hurled the fire at her unruffled opponent.

Making a quick flourish with each hand, Alyssa brought her force-walls back, interposing them between herself and the fire sprites. Simultaneously, she focused on Tashana’s direct attacks, her shield widening to protect her from the inferno roaring towards her. She glanced upwards and summoned a telekinetic baseball bat, which whistled through the air to smash the incoming fireballs. The impact made each one explode into billowing flames, detonating harmlessly above her in the high-ceilinged hangar.

“Come on, you can do better than that!” Alyssa goaded the Maliri girl, before making a chopping motion with each hand.

Tashana’s eyes widened in alarm as a glowing sledgehammer appeared only metres away and pounded down on her pyrokinetic barrier. The hexagons forming the shield creaked and spat embers with the thunderous impact, the shield caving inwards alarmingly. At the same time a sword appeared beside her, lunging forward and slashing at her arm.

“Fuck!” Tashana hissed, barely managing to dodge aside in time, and feeling a sharp sting as she whirled away. She glanced down and was shocked to see blood oozing from a jagged slash across her bicep.

Without pausing to think about it, she whipped her right hand across, summoning a second flaming barrier to slap the disembodied sword away before it could attack again. Eyes narrowing in anger, she snapped her fingers at the flame sprites, splitting them in half and sending the four burning female figures running in different directions. Tapping deeper into herself, she raised her left hand at the sledgehammer as it battered her shield a second time. A ferocious conflagration raged from her flame-shrouded hand, incinerating the glowing weapon in an instant. Curling those flames back, she used them to reinforce her tattered fire-shield, making it glow strong and bright again.

The four fire sprites started hurling firebolts at Alyssa now, the Terran girl’s white shield peppered by dozens of impacts. Alyssa shifted to the defensive, concentrating on making more telekinetic barriers to protect herself from the flanking attacks. She spotted Tashana winding up a huge fireball and she grinned as she made a sweeping gesture with her right arm, creating a score of glowing force-darts.

Tashana just managed to unleash the massive fireball in time, before the storm of darts plunged into her shield. She gaped in shock as those force projectiles pierced her barrier, managing to find fault-lines between the hexes and ripping through them. Robbed of their momentum, the darts spun lazily past her protective barrier, but still struck Tashana hard enough to make her wince.

She glared at the blonde and made a savage upwards motion with both hands, raising a column of fire from below, just as the fireball smashed into her shield. Alyssa reacted with split-seconds to spare, pulling her barriers inwards to form a close-fitting hexagonal bubble around her body. She strode out of that terrible inferno, her white shield blackened and pitted by the intensity of the attacks.

“Not bad,” Alyssa said with a smirk, ignoring the fire bolts from the flame sprites as her hands made a series of flourishes in the air. “Let’s give you a few more toys to play with...”

Another sledgehammer appeared just like the last, but this time it was joined by an identical companion. The two huge mallets crashed down, battering Tashana’s shields, while the sword tried to sweep past and find an opening. Tashana gasped as a glowing scythe hacked through the first of her elementals, making it explode in a blast of spitting fire as the form containing the flames was eviscerated.

Stumbling backwards, Tashana could see both her shields cracking under the strain from the mighty blows. The gleaming white sword pirouetted around her second shield and she barely managed to get a third shield up in time to stop it from slashing at her legs. Her eyes widened as she saw Alyssa casually form another hail of darts with her left hand and an energy lance with her right.

The inner fire within her coiled and twisted, almost as if it was begging to be unleashed. There was a vicious edge to that writhing flame, which had been tempered through years of abuse, burning white-hot with rage and hate. Although the call of those flames was incredibly seductive, Tashana faltered, terrified of surrendering herself to so much fury.

\*Channelling all that rage helped unleash your psychic fire, but you had to lose yourself to the flames... You’ve grown far beyond that now,\* Alyssa said soothingly, feeling the conflicting emotions pouring off the Maliri girl. \*Your Malifica mask was just a tool, but you don’t need to hide behind that any more. Now there’s just Tashana, and you’re so much more powerful...\*

Tashana took a deep steadying breath and felt the seething fury that she’d kept bottled up for years slowly drain away. That dancing inner flame burned just as bright, but the ferocious lashing and spitting sparks had stilled, all the energy focused inwards to strengthen the intensity of that blaze.

She calmly straightened herself as she tapped into it, ribbons of fire pouring down her shoulders to gather in the palms of her upheld hands. Ignoring the pounding telekinetic weapons that surrounded her, Tashana stared in fascination at the incandescent fire she held in her hands. It had never burned so bright or been so alluring before, the thrilling sensation sending shivers down her spine. Looking up, she slowly clapped her hands together, then disappeared from sight in the rolling conflagration she unleashed.

Alyssa’s eyes widened in surprise as a massive blast wave roared towards her, the flames incinerating her telekinetic weapons in an instant. She focused all her psychic might into strengthening her shield, bracing herself as the inferno swept over her. The white hexagons blistered and cracked, turning black as they were charred to a crisp, then glowed white again but this time with the ferocious heat. The intensity of that fire was shockingly powerful and she had to devote her full attention to maintaining and renewing her telekinetic barrier against the onslaught.

Finally, the flames tapered out, revealing Tashana standing calm and composed on a small disc of grey titanium decking. Beyond that disc, the floor bubbled and glowed orange with the fiery forces that had been unleashed in the hangar.

“Good training session,” Tashana said with the hint of a smile.

Alyssa laughed and nodded. “How about we keep John out of the Hangar until I can patch it up? I’m not sure he’d be too impressed with turning bits of his ship to cinders...” Shrouding herself in a soft white aura, she lifted off the deck and soared through the air to land beside Tashana. Alyssa stroked her wounded arm and gave her a look of apology. “But first, let’s go see Rachel to get you patched up.”

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John nodded with satisfaction as he slotted the last ring into the case, nestling it into the velvet indentations designed for that purpose. After perfecting the design of the band, it hadn’t taken too much effort to adjust it slightly to allow for the gem setting. Making ten identical rings had then been easy, shaping the glistening crystal Alyssium around each precious stone.

He’d been siphoning little pieces of the white metal from one of the huge blocks in the Cargo Bay, so there wasn’t a mess to clean up after himself this time. Fitting the lid back on the container, he tucked the case under his arm, then strolled out to the Grav-tube to head up to his bedroom. Deck Two was deserted now, with all the girls busy around the ship, so he was able to enter his walk-in-wardrobe unobserved and hide the gemcase in the jacket pocket of his Lion uniform.

With that done, he relaxed the barrier in his mind, letting his blonde Matriarch and the Nymph back into his thoughts again. \*Sorry about that, Jade,\* he apologised. \*I know I said I’d give you permanent access, but I didn’t want to ruin the surprise.\*

\*You’re forgiven, Master!\* she said jubilantly, overjoyed to be listening to his thoughts again.

Her euphoria was uplifting and John couldn’t help smiling as he strolled back down the corridor.

\*That was actually very nice timing,\* Alyssa said a moment later. \*I was just going to gather everyone in the Medical Bay to hear Rachel present her findings on the Kirrix.\*

\*Great! I’ll see you there,\* John said, as he reached the tube.

He was just about to step into the anti-gravity field’s warm red glow, when movement above him made him pause. Calara was descending from the Command Deck, a distant look in her beautiful eyes. John waited until she was level with him, then darted into the tube and wrapped his arms around her.

Calara jumped in fright, then laughed when she saw who it was. “You scared the hell out of me!” she protested, playfully smacking him on the arm.

“Sorry, I couldn’t resist,” John said, stroking her back. “You looked like you were miles away. Everything alright?”

She relaxed against him and slowly nodded. “I’m fine, but my research into tracking the Nymphs has slammed into a brick wall. I was following up a few promising leads, but information on several sources was re-classified as top secret, the timestamp dated fifty years ago. I tried using your Vice Admiral authority to access the data, but it’s been locked at Admiral-grade.”

John frowned in confusion. “Why would High Command have taken an interest in the Nymphs back then? That was before I was even born!”

“Beats me,” Calara said with a helpless shrug.

“I’ll have to have a chat with Charles and see if he can help,” John said, remembering his friend’s recent promotion. “It might be wise to do that in person rather than discuss it over a comm channel though. Especially if that data was locked at such a high level.”

“We could always ask Irillith to hack her way in,” the Latina suggested. “I’ve not spoken to her about it yet because she’s been busy working on Faye’s software.”

John guided her out onto Deck Seven then shook his head. “Let’s wait before we unleash her on top-secret classified files. I’ve no doubt she’d be able to break her way in and find out what we need to know, but there’s always a chance she might accidentally trip some kind of electronic trap that reveals her identity. Things are reasonably friendly between us and the Admiralty at the moment, so I’d rather not risk stirring up any unnecessary trouble if we can help it.”

“That’s sensible,” Calara readily agreed, as she fell into step beside him. “Besides, when you speak to Jehanna, she might have some new leads from that contact number TFNN set up for us.”

“I was planning on speaking to her later,” John said nodding thoughtfully. “I’ll ask her then.”

“Not planning on dropping in to see Jehanna along the way?” she teased him. “What happened to using the cam footage to woo her into bed?”

He laughed and rolled his eyes. “That was just a favour to give her an exclusive and help us out with some good PR. I was never seriously intending it as some kind of seduction gift.” He let out a frustrated sigh. “I would’ve really liked to have seen her, but Terra is too far out of our way. We’re so far out near the Kirrix border, the detour would’ve added another two or three days until we could rendezvous with the Maliri. I want Edraele back on her feet as soon as possible.”

“It won’t be long now,” Calara said, giving him a reassuring smile and squeezing his hand.

Reaching the door to Medical, John opened it then stepped aside for the brunette. She gave him a peck on the cheek, then glided inside. When John followed in after her, he was surprised to see the entire crew were already assembled there, gathered around the two grisly Kirrix trophies.

“Hey everyone,” he said, pleased to see all the girls. “You got here fast!”

Tashana looked a bit shifty, darting a quick glance at Rachel, but Alyssa simply beckoned them over to join the group. “We were all in the vicinity anyway. Most of us were already in Engineering.”

Jade bounded over to greet John with a kiss and he put his arm around her as they stood by the dismembered insectoid heads. Glancing at Rachel, he said, “Over to you then, honey. Did you find out anything interesting?”

She nodded and pressed a couple of buttons on the nearby console, bringing up expanded holographic images of the two huge Kirrix creatures. “The autopsies were quite fascinating and provided supporting evidence to my theories around a Kirrix hivemind.” She pointed to a large fleshy organ in the Hivelord’s skull first. “The Hivelord possesses the same kind of enlarged Amygdala as the drone I examined earlier, which makes it apparent that this creature can tap into the same kind of hivemind as the drone and possibly be controlled by it too.”

“So the Broodmothers run the show then,” Dana muttered, wrinkling her nose in distaste as she looked at the hideously alien creatures.

“Possibly,” Rachel said, a mysterious smile on her face. “I took a look at the Broodmother and I found the same kind of massively enlarged amygdala in their heads, but even larger, with a number of subchambers and extra nodules. I suspect that these extra structures allow the control of lesser-tiered Kirrix.”

Dana smirked at her lover and said, “I feel there’s a huge but coming...”

Rachel smacked her playfully on the bottom and nodded. “Yes, you’re right. The organ in the Broodmother skull has a number of differences from the others, *but* the fundamental structure of the amygdala is still largely the same as the other Kirrix creatures we’ve encountered.”

“You suspect there’s another creature capable of controlling the Broodmothers as well?” Irillith asked, studying the multi-faceted black eyes that stared back at her, malevolent even in death.

“Yes, that’s my current theory,” the brunette agreed. “We know from experience that telepathy has no range limitations, so perhaps there’s some higher-tier set of creatures deep in Kirrix Space which coordinate the actions of the Broodmothers. They may or may not be able to take direct control at such massive ranges, but simple communication is almost a certainty.”

“That’s as interesting as it is disturbing,” John said, patting her on the shoulder. “Anything else?”

“Mainly just observations on the rest of the organs in the cranium,” Rachel said, pointing towards an expanded holographic image showing her dissection of the huge insectoid skulls. “You see how they each have just the one huge brain, rather than duplicates like the Juggernaut? These creatures are almost certainly much more intelligent than the rest of the Kirrix we’ve looked at. We already guessed that they led the Kirrix forces, but this essentially confirms it.”

Their Chief Engineer gulped and looked away, trying to distract herself from the gruesome sight.

Calara frowned as she looked at the ugly creatures. “They were able to take enormous amounts of damage before we took them out. Are they actually capable of feeling pain?”

“They have nerve-ganglia structures similar to a drone,” Rachel said gesturing to a highlighted image on the holograph. “I’d obviously need to do a thorough examination of their thorax and abdomen to confirm this, but I imagine they’re fundamentally the same as a drone. Head shots to quickly kill them, or hits to the central ganglia in the thorax to cripple them.”

Dana nodded and muttered, “Shooting off limbs just seemed to piss them off even more!”

“I wonder if the Juggernauts are a new subset of Kirrix creature, or if they’ve always been around, but just haven’t been encountered by anyone yet?” Jade wondered out loud.

John shook his head. “There’s a high chance they’re something new. I’ve never heard of anything like them before and the Terran Federation reclaimed a number of worlds in the last purge that had previously been taken by the Kirrix.”

“I don’t think the Maliri have met anything like that either,” Irillith said, glancing at Tashana who shook her head. “At least I’ve never read about anything like it.”

“The Kirrix don’t encroach on Maliri territory though,” Tashana said quietly. “Even though the Regency had always shared a border with Kirrix Space as far as I know, I’ve never heard of an incursion.”

Calara grinned at the Maliri twins. “They probably know better than to even try it!”

“It looks like the Kirrix are smarter than Terrans,” Alyssa said wryly, thinking of the cored out Terran freighter in Maliri Space known as ‘the Warning’.

John glanced at Rachel and said, “I know you said you saw no evidence of Progenitor tampering with the drones. Anything in the Hivelord or Broodmother?”

The brunette shook her head. “They definitely seem to be a naturally occurring species. The Kirrix only have double-helix DNA, but seem to have developed organs to unlock psychic abilities, rather than encoded it on a triple helix strand.”

“I wonder how common psychic species actually are,” Alyssa murmured, turning to looks at Rachel. “There’s the Bolon as well obviously.”

“I asked for a genetic sample from all the minor empire diplomats,” the brunette replied. “If any of the rest of them are psychic, it’s not through triple-helix DNA. None of them are Progenitor creations.”

“That’s good to know at least,” John said nodding thoughtfully. He gave her a grateful smile. “Nice work checking all that out, Rachel.”

“It was my pleasure,” she replied, returning his smile.

Sakura glanced down at the grotesque dissected Kirrix heads. “I don’t know if anyone’s still got an appetite after looking at these, but I made lunch for everyone.”

“I’m famished!” Rachel said with a grin.

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John strolled through the Bridge an hour later, having enjoyed a sandwich and a chat with the crew in the Officers’ Lounge. They’d been in fierce combat only two days earlier, but that seemed like a lifetime ago now and he was really enjoying just being able to spend a bit of quiet time with the girls. He waved Faye goodbye as he entered his Ready Room, then walked over to his leather chair and took a seat.

During the early hours of that morning, the Invictus had crossed over from Trankaran Space into Terran Federation territory, so they were back in range of the Terran comm beacons. John scrolled through his list of contacts until he found the right one and swiped across her name. They were still a long way from the Core Worlds, so it took over a minute for the call to be routed through to Terra.

Jehanna Elani’s familiar dusky features appeared in his holo-display a moment later and she looked delighted to see him. “Oh, John! I was worried about you! Are you all okay? Did you manage to deal with that emergency?”

“We’re all good thanks, Jehanna,” he replied, just as pleased to see her. “But I’ve got some good news and bad news.”

The coffee-skinned beauty frowned and said, “It might just be the reporter in me, but I want to hear the bad news first.”

“I’m afraid I’ll have to postpone our meeting for at least a week,” John said, giving her a look of regret. He gave her a wry smile. “You’ll forgive me if I was hoping that came as bad news, not as a relief.”

“Definitely bad news, I was really looking forward to seeing you,” she said, disappointment written over her gorgeous face. “Why the delay?”

John eased back in his chair. “Things got pretty ugly in the Trankaran Republic. They had a bug problem and needed some exterminators.”

“You fought the Kirrix!” Jehanna burst out, looking thrilled. “Did you get any footage of the battle?!”

John laughed and reached over to tap some buttons on his console. “I’m glad you find me being up to my eyeballs in hideous insectoid monsters to be so exciting. Yeah, I’m sending you the footage we put together for you.”

The Indian girl blushed as she faltered, “I’m so sorry! I get like this when I think I’m on to an exclusive...”

“I’m only teasing you, don’t worry,” John said, with a reassuring smile. “The copy I’m sending you is an edited version, so feel free to use anything you like from there. When we finally get to meet up, I’ll show you the unedited footage. You’ll see why we made two versions when you see it.”

The light of understanding shone in her eyes and she slowly nodded. “I must admit... I’m already intrigued to see that version.”

There was a chime from Jehanna’s console alerting her that the file transfer was complete. John laughed when he saw the hungry gleam in her dark-brown eyes and waved her away, “Go ahead, you might as well watch it now.”

Jehanna nibbled at her flushed lower lip, obviously torn between wanting to continue speaking to him and viewing the cam-footage of the battle. “Are you sure you don’t mind?”

“Give me a call back when you’re done and I’ll answer any questions,” he replied, enjoying seeing her face light up in a beaming grin.

“I’ll call you right back, I promise!” Jehanna gushed, waving him goodbye as she closed the call.

He relaxed back in his chair, knowing it would take the excited reporter at least twenty minutes to watch the footage.

\*That was fascinating,\* Jade murmured, her telepathic words meandering through his mind. \*I never realised just how much you watch our mouths when we talk to you.\*

Alyssa laughed and said, \*Now you see why I like listening to his thoughts so much. I’ve no idea why he’s so obsessed with silky-soft pouty lips...\*

\*I’m sorry you had to postpone your meeting with Jehanna. You really were looking forward to feeding her again, weren’t you, Master?\* Jade said, the sympathy clear in her voice. \*If you like, I could come up to see you and shift into her form...\*

John groaned and readjusted his trousers at the thought. \*I thought it was bad with just Alyssa rattling around in my head. I don’t know how I’m going to survive the pair of you teasing me!\*

\*I wasn’t teasing you, the offer was quite sincere,\* the Nymph said earnestly. \*I’d be thrilled to help ease your discomfort.\*

He was sorely tempted, but politely declined in the end, wanting to savour the experience with the real Jehanna. \*I appreciate the offer, but stick with working on the new pistols, you’re nearly done with the second aren’t you?\*

\*Very nearly,\* the Nymph replied, only sounding faintly disappointed.

Knowing there was still a while to go until the beautiful journalist was likely to call him back, John asked Alyssa, \*Need any help with reshaping the body armour?\*

\*Thanks for the offer, but I’m pretty much done; just finishing up your second Paragon suit,\* the blonde replied. \*I repaired nearly all of them yesterday, while you were tinkering around with your secret project.\*

\*Ah, I see,\* John replied, deliberately keeping his mind blank and not giving anything away.

Smiling to himself at the blonde’s attempts to pry more information from him, John rose from his chair and stood by the long window that flanked the room. Gazing out at the stars, he realised he was looking at the distant systems that made up Kirrix Space, and the homeworld of those evil monstrosities must be out there somewhere. More importantly, he knew that somewhere in that direction lay Arcadia, the planet where Jessica Blake had met his father. For all he knew they might still be there...

The girls left John in peace as he stargazed, thoughts of his mysterious parents swirling around in his head. Despite spending so many years trying to track down his mother, he’d never dwelled on what he might say to Jessica Blake if she was still alive, or to his father for that matter – whoever he might be. Now that such a possibility might actually present itself, he found the thought quite daunting.

The chime from the holo-interface came as a welcome distraction and John returned to his seat to answer the call. Jehanna’s face appeared seconds later, her expression one of shock, awe, and excitement.

“Oh my God! This footage is sensational!” she gasped, gazing at him in wide-eyed astonishment.

He smiled and relaxed back in his chair. “Glad you enjoyed the show.”

“I can’t believe you and the lionesses rescued the Trankaran Chancellor! You must have fought off thousands of Kirrix! And that fleet... they had so many ships!”

“Am I forgiven for making you wait for our meeting?” John asked, enjoying seeing the euphoric gleam in her lovely brown eyes.

Jehanna let out a disbelieving laugh and nodded exuberantly. “Absolutely! But I really want to see you soon!” She paused then, making a visible effort to calm herself down. “Is there any kind of spin you want me to put on the story?”

John narrowed his eyes and said, “Did you know that the Trankarans asked for help against the Kirrix and High Command turned them down?”

“No! I hadn’t heard that!” she exclaimed, before the dusky reporter frowned in confusion. “But why? We’ve been friends with them for centuries...” She looked thoughtful for a moment, then continued, “We could crucify them with this. Make it look like the Admiralty were betraying loyal allies in a fit of pique, forcing you to step in to save the day...”

Quickly shaking his head, John replied, “I appreciate the thought, but I’ve already got enough enemies at the moment. After the award ceremony, things seem to be pretty cordial between me and the Admiralty, so I don’t want to rock the boat. Maybe just say something like: the Trankarans requested aid against a Kirrix threat, so I volunteered to help them out.”

She shrugged and nodded. “Sure, however you want to play it.”

Jehanna fidgeted, full of nervous energy and John could tell she was itching to break the story. “I won’t keep you much longer, I promise. I just wanted to ask what the response has been like about any surviving Nymphs?”

Giving him a guilty look, she apologised profusely, “I’m really sorry! I can’t believe I’m being so self-centred.” She paused for a moment to collect her thoughts. “We had a flood of messages after your plea for information and my boss made our interns sift through them all. There were loads of cranks and con artists, as you’d expect when you offer that much money, but a couple of the calls seemed genuine and quite promising. We’ve been having problems getting in touch with a few of the callers, but I’ll draw up a list and send it to you once I’ve got some more info.”

“I appreciate it, thank you,” John said, giving her a grateful smile. “Sorry again for having to postpone the meeting. I’ll get in touch in a week or so and let you know when I’ll be back on Terra.”

Jehanna was so excited at the thought, she forgot all sense of decorum and blew him a kiss. “I can’t wait!”

“See you soon,” John replied, waving her goodbye and ending the call, her joyful face slowly fading from view.

\*Please let me be there when you two finally meet up!\* Alyssa pleaded. \*There’s so much chemistry between you both!\*

John couldn’t help grinning as he remembered how good the two girls had looked together. \*I’m sure something can be arranged...\*

\*I’ve finished the second pistol,\* Jade informed him. \*Would you like to meet us in the Firing Range?\*

\*I’ll be right there,\* John agreed rising from his chair and heading out to the Bridge.

Faye greeted him with her customary wave. “Hey John!”

He had started walking for the grav-tube, but stopped at the top of the ramp to talk to the fluttering sprite. “Hi Faye. I was just wondering, did Dana take a look at the pictures you took of the damaged turretwell? If so, what was the verdict?” Raising an eyebrow he added, “I’d go and ask her myself, but I’m banned from the Engineering Bay at the moment...”

She flushed, knowing the reason for him being barred was her new body in the Workshop. “I’m sorry about that. Dana did examine the pictures; would you like to see her response?”

“Sure, go ahead,” John replied, turning to look at the holo-cam footage as it appeared in the centre of the Bridge.

The redhead was poring intently over pictures showing the interior of the battered turretwell and she suddenly flung her hands up in exasperation. “Oh, for fuck’s sake! Those bastards went and fucked-up the central lifting mechanism! It’s been sheared in half!”

“That doesn’t sound good,” John said, glancing at Faye who was hovering at his side.

Faye shook her head, a sombre expression on her face as she turned off the footage. “There was a lot more swearing, but I believe we’ll require a visit to a drydock to repair it.”

“Okay, good to know. Thanks, honey,” he said, giving her a grateful smile.

She beamed at him, happy to have been helpful. “You’re welcome!”

John waved goodbye, then took the grav-tube down to Deck Seven. Several of the girls were already in the Firing Range, with Alyssa and Jade watching as Dana handed a huge double-barrelled pistol to Tashana. The Maliri girl was wearing a full suit of Paragon armour and she turned to smile at him when he walked through the door.

“That monster’s enormous!” John exclaimed, as he joined them, looking down at the massive pistol she was cradling in her armoured gauntlets. “That’s way too big to be practical, surely?”

Dana grinned at Tashana and made a circle in the air with her finger. “Try doing that twirly shit with it, see how it feels.”

The Maliri girl nodded as she shifted her grip on the pistol, then spun it around on the trigger guard. Tashana looked surprised as she caught it effortlessly and reversed the spin. “It feels more like a light pistol than this... sawn-off shotgun!”

The redhead pointed at the discs built into both sides of the long barrels. “Those are anti-grav generators coupled with tiny gyroscopes, similar to the ones I built into the Valkyrie. They dramatically reduce the effective weight of the pistol, which should make it much more comfortable to use in an extended battle, like on Khalgron.”

“What’s with the two barrels?” John asked, gesturing towards the dual muzzles. “Tashana’s right, it looks more like a shotgun than a pistol!”

“I was just getting to that,” the redhead said, pointing at the barrels. “It’s basically a really powerful laser weapon coupled with a Quantum pistol, which she can use as an integrated grenade launcher. The upper barrel is a cut-down version of the Reaper Cannon, so I’ve started calling them *Reaper pistols*. There’s a tiny Power Core at the back that powers the weapon systems and I’ve installed heatsinks between the dual barrels to cool whichever’s in use.”

Tilting the huge pistol from side to side, Tashana frowned as she said, “I don’t see the normal fire selector switch.”

“That’s because there isn’t one,” Dana replied with a smile. “I figured you’d be using the Quantum rounds for flaming ammo, like you did against those Juggernauts. They’re set for single-fire only, partially to avoid over-heating issues, as both barrels share the same heatsinks.”

Tashana upended the pistol to look at the magazine slot. “Looks like it takes normal 10mm ammo like the Quantum pistols?”

Dana nodded, handing her a magazine. “Yeah, standard-issue caseless rounds. I figured there wasn’t any point doing anything fancy with them. They have a ton of armour penetration with the Quantum tech, then once the bullet punches through, you can make it explode in a massive fireball.”

“Sounds like fun,” Tashana said with a lop-sided smile. “Mind if I try them out?”

“Be my guest,” the redhead replied, stepping away from the firing lane to give her more room.

Tashana picked up the second pistol, so she held one in each hand, hefting the long weapons to get a feel for them. “The anti-grav generators are amazing! These pistols feel much lighter than the ordinary Quantum versions and they’re twice the size!”

John spotted the shimmer of white on the wall at the end of the range. “You re-plated the Firing Range, Sparks?” he asked in surprise.

“Well I designed the changes, but Alyssa did the plating, and Faye’s maintenance bots built in a bunch of capacitors,” the redhead replied. “The Reaper Cannon is so powerful, a missed salvo from that will seriously fuck up the internals of the ship. Now you can just blaze away for hours without causing any damage.”

“Okay, I’m ready,” Tashana called back to her audience, flicking off the safeties.

She tapped the range console to run through a target routine, then shifted to a firing stance, both pistols pointed downrange. A target dummy sprang up twenty metres away and Tashana squeezed both triggers, sending bright streams of blue laser bolts screaming down the range to punch burning holes through the polycarbonate figure. In just a couple of seconds she’d blasted the target to pieces, scattering glowing chunks across the deck from the filleted dummy.

“There’s quite a lot of heat buildup!” she said over her shoulder, switching targets to a second dummy as it popped up. “I can see it shooting up in my HUD!”

The redhead shrugged helplessly. “I had to shrink a metre-long support weapon into something pistol-sized and the shorter barrel meant less heatsinks. I could’ve reduced the stopping power by sixty percent and let you shoot constantly, but you’ve got two pistols, so I figured you could alternate for suppressing fire.”

“No, they’re fantastic just as they are!” Tashana exclaimed, neatly eviscerating the second dummy. “With the Quantum pistols I was really worried about running out of ammo, so I had to hold back against the Kirrix. I would’ve been so much more effective with these!”

A third target dummy popped up, but this was a lot more angular and made from a very familiar gleaming white metal. Tashana eyed it curiously and squeezed off a prolonged burst, the laser bolts shimmering oddly where they struck the armoured surface. Glowing red circles marked the points where the blue laser fire had hit the dummy, but it was otherwise unharmed.

“I figured it was about time the dummies got an upgrade too,” Dana said with a grin. “There’s capacitors built into the floor to dissipate the energy, so they don’t take any damage from lasers. The red hit markers are holo-projections, so you can practice shooting without making Faye and her boys build a crapload of replacement dummies!”

John nodded, impressed by her ingenuity. “What about test-firing Quantum weapons?” he asked, glanced at his Chief Engineer.

“I’ll have to come up with something new there,” Dana admitted, looking downrange at the glossy-white dummy. “Quantum accelerated rounds would really fuck up the armour plating.”

They watched as more targets sprang up, Tashana spraying each with short bursts to keep the barrels from overheating. John was amazed at her accuracy using dual pistols as she struck one after dummy after the other in the centre of mass. Not being ambidextrous himself, he knew he’d struggle to even hit the target using his left hand like that. He studied the Maliri girl as she effortlessly dispatched scores of targets, the dummies coming thick and fast. Tashana looked different this afternoon, filled with an inner confidence that she’d been lacking only days before. He glanced at Alyssa and she gave him a subtle nod.

\*She’s been handling the integration of her old memories really well,\* the blonde replied, the admiration quite apparent in her voice. \*Tashana excelled herself in psychic training today and had a bit of an epiphany. A bit of time surrounded by people that love her has really done that girl wonders...\*

John couldn’t help sighing with relief. After seeing the remarkable change to Tashana’s personality since joining them, he’d been tremendously worried that the barrage of horrific memories would be too much for her to cope with. Losing that bright young woman he’d grown so fond of, would have been heartbreaking.

Tashana put down her pistols, heat shimmering around the weapons as the excess heat was vented. She pulled off her Paragon helmet, freeing her long tresses with the shake of her head, then turned to give Dana and Jade a radiant smile. “Thank you both for going to so much trouble for me. These Reaper pistols are absolutely perfect!”

Dana grinned back at her. “I’m really glad you love them!”

Jade stepped forward to hug the Maliri girl. “It was no trouble at all! I was happy to help.” She turned to look at John and continued, “Do you want me to make more of them for the rest of you?”

He hesitated for a moment, then shook his head. “The Quantum pistols are fine for the rest of us as a sidearm, so keep making more Reaper Cannons for the moment. Although you might want to make a spare pair of Reaper pistols for Tashana, to keep on the weapon racks in the Briefing Room.”

“I’ll get on to them after I’ve finished the next two cannons,” the Nymph agreed.

Tashana turned to John and Alyssa, a look of satisfaction in her eyes. “I’ll be much more lethal with those new guns than I would’ve been with a Reaper Cannon. Thank you for asking Dana and Jade to make them for me.”

“No problem at all,” John said, giving her a warm smile. “I’ve seen what an incredible shot you are with pistols and if you’re happier using them than anything else, that’s absolutely fine. I’m not going to force you to do anything you’re not comfortable with.”

She stepped closer, her violet eyes softening as she reached out to place her hand over his chest. “No, you’ve been really gentle and understanding with me every step of the way.” Looking at each of them in turn, she continued, “I’d like to speak to both of you about something important. Is now a good time?”

John nodded, surprised at the firm tone in her voice. “Of course, honey.”

Tashana leaned closer to give him a fleeting kiss. “Let me remove this armour, then I’ll meet you in our room in... fifteen minutes?”

“We’ll be there,” Alyssa replied, leaning against John.

Tashana waved goodbye to the redhead and Nymph, then turned and walked out of the Firing Range. John watched her leave, then followed the rest of the girls out into the corridor. Dana and Jade both had more work to do, so after a quick kiss goodbye, they headed off towards the Engineering Bay.

“I wonder what Tashana wants to speak to us about?” John mused as he walked the opposite way along the corridor with Alyssa falling into step beside him.

“Don’t start worrying,” the blonde replied affectionately, slipping her arm around John’s waist. “She’s happy and content at the moment, it won’t be anything bad.”

They embraced as they stepped into the blue glow of the grav tube, riding up the floors together. “Is this something you’ve had your hand in?” he asked, giving her a knowing look.

The blonde shook her head. “Actually no. I’m just as intrigued as you are!”

They strolled into the bedroom and Alyssa clasped his hand, then tugged him towards the bathroom. “We’ve got a bit of time to kill. Let’s grab a quick shower in case Tashana’s got something naughty planned.” Turning around, she backed through the door, her blue eyes sparkling. “And if she doesn’t, then I’m sure I can think of something fun for the two of us to get up to...”

Showering with the lithe blonde was always a wonderful experience and John did a thorough job of making sure she was exceptionally clean. He could see Alyssa was excited at the thought of Tashana’s mysterious meeting, enjoying the thrill of the unknown. They dressed in fresh clothes then sat down on the end of the bed, and had only been chatting together for thirty seconds, when Tashana glided into the bedroom.

“You look gorgeous!” John exclaimed, admiring the effort the exotic beauty had gone to.

Tashana had styled up her hair into an elaborate sweep of snowy white tendrils and subtly applied makeup to bring out her violet eyes. The Maliri girl was wearing one of her signature long dresses with slashes at the back and sides, which revealed alluring glimpses of her flawless blue skin.

“You look very handsome too,” she replied, before glancing at Alyssa and smiling. “And you always manage to look effortlessly beautiful.”

John started to rise to his feet to greet her, but Tashana crossed the floor and placed a restraining hand on his chest to keep him seated. She leaned down to give him a tender kiss, then stood before the pair of them. Reaching down, she gently caressed their cheeks, looking from John to Alyssa and back again.

“I just wanted to say thank you,” she began, her angular eyes filled with emotion. “I know I’ve said that so many times over the last few weeks, but I’ve got so much to be grateful for.”

John placed a hand on the graceful curve of her hip and gently stroked her waist with his thumb. “You don’t need to keep saying it. You’ve grown far beyond the wounded little bird we rescued and most of that has come from you...”

Tashana gave him a loving smile as she brushed her fingers through his hair. “We both know that’s not entirely true, but it’s just the kind of thing I love hearing you say.” She turned to look at Alyssa next. “You’ve played just as big a part in healing me as John has. You’re both such amazing people, I keep thanking my lucky stars that fate brought us together.”

Alyssa turned her head to plant a soft kiss on the Maliri girl’s wrist. “I’m not so sure about stars... You’re mostly lucky that John has a thing for twins.”

John rolled his eyes at the blonde but Tashana smiled, knowing that her rescue from the Unclaimed Wastes came from his desire to help Irillith atone for what she’d done to her.

“I know how much you’ve each done for me, but I’m better now... and stronger than I ever was before. Perhaps I can finally start repaying you both,” Tashana said earnestly.

Shaking his head, John replied, “I don’t want you to feel-”

Tashana leaned over to kiss him again, silencing his protest. “I don’t feel obligated, I want to help you because I love you.”

“And I love you too,” John said, his sincerity reflected in his warm smile.

Tashana gazed down into his eyes and said softly, “Before you saved me, I suffered through so many awful things... I’ve experienced the very worst of the darkness that lurks in a man’s soul. The contrast between those terrible memories and the gentle way you’ve cared for me is so profound I can’t even begin to describe it.” Her voice caught for a moment before she continued, “Thank you for making our first time together so special. That memory is so precious and real, it makes my past just feel like a series of vague and distant nightmares now.”

“I’m so sorry for everything you’ve been through,” John said, looking up into her misty eyes.

She smiled at him and shook her head. “I’m at peace with it now, thanks to you and Alyssa. I’m only telling you this because I know how much you worry; about your nature and how you are with all of us. I wanted to tell you that you’re a good man in a galaxy full of horrors; trust me, I know...” Her voice dropped a few octaves and was earnest as she continued, “I’m finally ready to take my place at your side. To give you my heart and my body... and Alyssa my mind...”

John was rendered speechless by her fervent declaration. He glanced at Alyssa, who looked equally touched. When he turned back to Tashana, he could only watch in awe as she slipped the dress off her shoulders and stood before him, letting him feast his eyes on her magnificent azure body.

Tashana gave him a coy smile. “We’ve made love and you’ve fed me lots of your delicious cum, but there’s one way we haven’t been together yet.” She cupped his face with both hands and gazed into his eyes. “But I don’t want you to spend the whole time worrying that I’m okay. Let me take the lead... then you can just relax and enjoy yourself.”

Alyssa’s breath caught and her bright blue eyes sparkled with her arousal. “How can I help?”

Tashana turned to smile at her, tracing her slender fingers over the blonde’s full lips. “I’ll need you to put that beautiful mouth of yours to work. It’s very important that John sees that I’m enjoying myself.”

Parting her lips, Alyssa caught that finger and sucked on it gently, gazing up at the Maliri girl through hooded, lust-filled eyes.

Looking at John under her long lashes, Tashana murmured, “It looks like Alyssa agrees. How about you, John? Would you like to see if I enjoy it just as much as my sister?”

He swallowed, suddenly feeling dry-mouthed, then nodded, unable to take his eyes from her smouldering gaze.

“You better get undressed then,” she said with a playful, confident grin.

John was shocked by the change in Tashana. She was still the sweet girl he’d fallen for, but her bright personality had managed to withstand and master those years of torment, rather than being broken and warped by them. The Maliri girl was like an exquisite blade, that had been tempered by the heat, making her resilient... and all the stronger for it.

“Yeah, she’s amazing,” Alyssa purred in his ear. “But if you’re not going to undress yourself, we’re happy to do it for you!”

He glanced at the impatient teenager and saw that she was already naked. Rising to his feet, he looked down into Tashana’s eyes as she started unbuttoning his shirt.

She blushed under his intense scrutiny and paused with a button half-undone. “Is something wrong?”

John shook his head. “I was just thinking how remarkable you are. I don’t think I’ve ever seen you look so confident... so beautiful.”

A lovely smile formed on her flushed lips and she leaned forward to barely brush his lips with hers. The touch was electrifying, as was the thrilling look of desire she gave him. Her fingers moved quicker as they unbuttoned his shirt and she pressed herself against him as she helped peel it off his shoulders.

“Lie back on the bed,” she commanded, a playful glint in her eyes.

John did as he was asked, climbing onto the huge bed and lying in the middle. He glanced down to watch Alyssa as she knelt on the covers, licking her lips to get them nice and moist. Tashana prowled towards him, transfixing him with her violet gaze. She straddled him, letting her full breasts brush over his chest as she moved higher, dark blue nipples growing erect as they grazed over his skin.

She stopped when her pussy was level with his cock and slowly slid herself along the underside of his shaft. He could feel how wet she was as she glided over his skin, using her body to help get him ready to enter her.

“You feel how much you turn me on?” she purred, gazing into his eyes. “You could slide inside my pussy so easily, but you’ve got an exciting new place to explore today.”

 John reached down with his hands to cup her pert buttocks, massaging them with his strong fingers as Tashana ground against him.

“Mmm-hmm,” she hummed, dropping lower so her face was inches away from his. “Just think, you’ll be taking my tight little ass for the first time... are you looking forward to filling me with your cum?”

He nodded, not quite believing his ears, and couldn’t help groaning at the thought. It was obvious how much she wanted it; he could hear it in her voice and could see it in the wild-eyed look she gave him.

“Then you’re in for a good time,” she whispered, before pulling back with a grin.

Moving with lithe, unhurried movements, she turned around so that she was kneeling over his waist with her back to him. Tashana gave him a smouldering look over her shoulder then glanced down as she held her asscheeks and pried them apart. He could see the dark blue star of her anus as she exposed herself for him, the lube glistening in the light.

John stared at her body in fascination, admiring the spectacular curves and lean muscles. His cock throbbed with need, aching to be buried up to the hilt in her nubile flesh.

As if reading his mind, Tashana murmured reassuringly, “You’ll be inside me soon. Not much longer...”

As she raised herself up, John saw Alyssa’s tanned fingers reach between them to grasp his cock and tilt it so that it was vertical. The blunt head of his cock brushed against Tashana’s soft skin, as the blonde lined him up with her ass. Not wasting any time with teasing, the Maliri girl eased backwards, moving with confidence as she impaled herself on his shaft.

“Holy fuck you’re huge!” Tashana hissed, pausing in her descent with just a few inches inside her.

“Stop if you’re in pain,” John insisted, sitting upwards.

She leaned back and placed a steadying hand on his chest, then threw him another sultry glance over her shoulder. “I didn’t say I was in pain,” she said softly, sinking down his length as she stared into his eyes. “Just that you’ve got a lot of cock... it’s exciting being stretched that much for the first time...”

Bottoming out with a shudder, Tashana leaned against him, her back resting on his chest. John’s cock felt like it was being gripped in a hot, velvety vice, her muscles squeezing him rhythmically as they adjusted to his presence.

Her soft hair fanned out over his shoulder and she turned her head slightly to face him. “Feel as good as you hoped?”

“So much better!” John exclaimed, reaching up to encircle her slender waist with his hands.

“That feels good. Keep holding me like that,” Tashana said with a contented sigh. She gave him a kiss, then continued, “Now, I’m going to use your massive cock and Alyssa’s lovely mouth to get myself off. If it gets too much for you, give me your cum whenever you want. Try and hold on as long as you can though...”

He flexed his cock, drawing a moan from the Maliri girl as she writhed in his lap. “I’ll do my best, but no promises... you’re sexy as hell!”

Tashana grinned at him, then looked down at Alyssa and beckoned her forward. “Can you call Irillith and Jade please? We’ll need them too...”

The blonde knelt between their splayed thighs and nodded. “They’re on their way...” Leaning down, she nuzzled into Tashana’s labia, finding her clit and lapping at it with the tip of her tongue.

“Oh fuck! That feels amazing!” Tashana murmured with a low groan. She trembled with pleasure as Alyssa began to eat her out, then looked into John’s eyes. “Does that feel good for you? Comfortable with me lying on you like this?”

He nodded eagerly, feeling the soft swell of her asscheeks as they pressed against his groin and her undulating hips under his hands as she writhed against him. Tashana bit her lower lip then began to move; just sliding back a couple of inches so she didn’t pull away from Alyssa’s questing mouth, but enough to stroke up and down John’s shaft. The way her muscles rippled around him felt incredible and he couldn’t help moaning as Tashana’s soft cries filled his ears.

A shocked gasp at the doorway announced the arrival of a visitor a few moments later. Irillith quickly stripped off to join them on the bed and John saw the Maliri girl appear at his side, feverish excitement in her eyes.

“Didn’t I tell you how good it feels, little sister!” Irillith gasped, a look of delight on her face.

Tashana turned to her and beckoned her down. “Kiss me!” she demanded, before her voice trailed off into another cry of pleasure.

John felt more movement on the bed and Jade moved into view a moment later. She knelt beside them and wasted no time in engulfing Tashana’s erect nipple in her mouth. It was too much sensation for the over-stimulated girl in their midst and Tashana bucked wildly as she climaxed, clamping down on John’s shaft as she shook through her release. He could see Irillith clinging desperately to Tashana, the sisters moaning into each other’s mouths as they shared a toe-curling twingasm.

\*Ready to really blow their minds?\* Alyssa urged him, her telepathic voice trembling with her excitement. \*I’ll keep getting Tashana off, but I need you to start fucking her too!\*

\*Sounds good to me,\* John readily agreed, shifting his grip to hold Tashana’s waist more securely. He turned and kissed Tashana on the cheek, getting her attention. “Ready for more, beautiful?”

Tashana had a languid smile on her face as she sagged against him, then guided her dazed twin down to her heaving breast. “Definitely...”

Her eyes widened as John started thrusting into her, tightening her frantic hold on Jade and Irillith as they suckled on her nipples. Alyssa picked up the tempo with her tongue on Tashana’s clit, then gently eased a half-sized telekinetic replica of John’s cock into the Maliri girl’s grasping pussy.

“Yes!... Oh fuck...!” Tashana wailed, bucking wildly as John stroked her through another climax.

She mewled ecstatically in his ear, thrashing in his lap as he thrust into her. He could hear her trying to tell him how much she loved him, but it came out as a climactic cry, her ass clenching around him like a fist as he drove deep inside her. They lost Irillith at that point, her eyes rolling up as she slumped backwards onto the bed with a euphoric whimper. Jade quickly took over, brushing her fingers across Tashana’s chest to massage and squeeze one breast while she suckled on the other. The Nymph formed another mouth on the palm of her green hand and maintained the suction on both of Tashana’s nipples.

“You’re such a good girl,” John murmured in Tashana’s ear, before kissing the pointed tip.

She whimpered with delight, then turned to give him a sloppy kiss, her tongue duelling with his. “I need your cum...” she begged him, her hands moving down to her belly and caressing the long bulge his cock was making in her stomach. “I want to feel you shooting inside me!”

John’s hips moved in a blur as he pounded her, Tashana thrashing in his lap as she climaxed again and again. His was teetering on the edge when he felt Alyssa’s soft hands massaging his quad, her velvety tongue lapping at his taut skin. It was all the encouragement he needed to thrust up to the hilt inside the trembling blue beauty, arching his back as he lifted her off the bed. With a huge cry of release, his cum shot up his shaft and deep into her belly, in one massive spurt after the other.

“Yes... make me yours...” Tashana gasped, flopping back against his chest. Her hands cradled her growing stomach as she swelled with spunk, pints of his thick cream rounding out her tummy as she quivered on top of him.

John placed his hands on hers, feeling her abdomen grow as he rode out his orgasm. “You’re mine, Tashana,” he whispered in her ear, holding her close.

She nuzzled into him, planting fluttering kisses on his cheek as she grew huge with his cum. When John’s climax abated, they helped the exhausted girl flop onto the bed, John and Alyssa moving to flank her. They stroked and kissed Tashana as the Nymph moved between her legs, a hungry gleam in those emerald eyes as she started sucking out John’s load from the trembling Maliri girl. Tashana was too worn out for any more orgasms, so she just sighed with contentment as Jade gently emptied her rounded belly. When Jade had got every last drop, she gathered Alyssa and Tashana in her arms so they could feed from her massive cum-swollen breasts.

Tashana paused before latching on and glanced at her comatose twin. “Can you save some for Irillith when she wakes up?”

“Of course, little kitten,” Jade said softly, before guiding the weary girl to her breast. She murmured loving words to both of them as they drank from her, stroking their hair as she cradled them in a tender embrace.

John watched the trio of girls in fascination, enjoying hearing Tashana’s muffled moans as she filled her stomach with his load. She began to perk up with the first mouthful and by the time she and Alyssa were sporting rounded tummies, her violet eyes were bright and alert once more.

Tashana turned to the blonde, the excitement quite clear in her voice as she said, “I can’t wait to bond with you!”

Alyssa nodded, just as eager as she lay down on the bed beside the Maliri girl. She wriggled closer so her curved tummy kissed Tashana’s, drawing a smile from the blue-skinned beauty.

“Now, just relax,” Alyssa murmured soothingly, gazing into those enchanting violet eyes. “We’ll take it nice and easy...”

Tashana smiled at her and shook her head. She flung aside her mental defences, exposing every facet of her subconscious to the startled blonde. \*There’s no need... my mind is yours...\*

Alyssa was flooded with feelings of love and devotion, knowing in an instant that Tashana trusted her with her life. The earnest sincerity of those thoughts was humbling and she smiled fondly at the Maliri girl after recovering from the initial surprise.

\*That was a wonderful gift, thank you. Now let me share with you, but we’ll go slowly this time,\* she said as they fell deeper into the trance.

Mimicking the Maliri girl, she opened up her own mind, but deliberately took her time to avoid overwhelming her newest recruit. Tashana gaped at her in wonder, immersing herself in the blonde’s titanic psychic presence.

\*I had no idea...\* Tashana murmured, sounding awed. \*You’re just like John, but you shine so brightly...\*

\*Just relax... add your beautiful voice to our chorus,\* Alyssa purred, swaddling the astonished Maliri girl in her loving thoughts.

John watched Tashana as the two girls bonded, a look of wonder, then delight appearing on her face as their minds merged. To his surprise, he felt the moment when they psychically embraced, a thrilling surge of power rippling through his body as Alyssa added Tashana’s impressive potential to their group. The other girls had already bonded with his Matriarch before he’d started enhancing their third helix, but with Tashana the difference was palpable.

Jade brushed her fingers along his shoulder, then snuggled in against him when John put his arm around her. “I felt it too,” she said, leaning in to kiss him on the chest. “I love that we can help you get stronger.”

He glanced down at her slightly inflated breasts, then smiled as he said, “Save some of that for yourself. I want to see you glow for me, my lovely little Nymph.”

“Yes, Master!” Jade replied, shivering with excitement as she followed his instructions.

Siphoning off some of his load to her stomach, her tummy began to send out viridian pulses that rippled over her body. Jade purred with delight, knowing that now John was making her stronger too. They relaxed in bed together, Jade keeping a watchful eye on Irillith, who was still snoozing with a blissful smile on her face, while John focused on the enraptured faces of the other two girls.

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“Don’t you dare put me on hold again!” Charles barked at the Orbital-Galactica operator.

The young man in the holo-image looked flustered, sweat rolling off his brow and staining his silver and blue shirt. “I’m very sorry Admiral Harris! I’ve tried to contact the CEO as you requested, but his assistant just informed me that Mr. Vernmeier was dismissed this morning!”

“What about someone on the board? They can’t have all been fired as well?!” Charles demanded incredulously, his moustache quivering with anger. “What the hell’s going on with your outfit? Don’t make me open an Internal Security investigation to review Orbital-Galactica’s operations!”

“I-I-I’ll try and find someone!” the operator stammered, his eyes widening with fright. “Hold please!”

“No wait!” Charles blurted out, but the man’s image had already been replaced by the company logo; a silver spacecraft looping around a blue planet.

Throwing up his hands in frustration, Charles slumped back in the chair and ended the call with a snort of disgust. He’d wasted the entire day trying to track down the senior officers from Orbital-Galactica, Energetica-Corp, and Titan-Solutions but had experienced the exact same problems with all of them. It was now obvious that Henry Voss had culled all the upper management from the companies he’d recently acquired.

That headache was returning with a vengeance, so he stabbed a finger down on the comm button on his desk. “Victor, can you get me some pain-meds please. I can feel another migraine coming on.”

“Yes, Sir,” his young assistant immediately replied, his tone quiet and sympathetic.

Charles closed the call, then gazed out the window at the hundreds of ships flying to and from the station. While Olympus Shipyard was by far the best equipped repair-yard in the entire Terran Federation, the facility was primarily designed with one purpose in mind: to rapidly construct the capital ships that formed the backbone of the Terran Federation fleets. Any new tech from the R&D division typically went through months of prototyping, using Admiralty-approved contractors to improve designs. When a schematic had been refined to provide a sufficient level of quality and reliability, its innovations were finally incorporated into the standardised blueprints used at Olympus for fleet construction.

Henry Voss had acquired every major contractor on that list, paying extortionate sums for companies thought to be too strong for aggressive takeovers of this nature. Charles frowned in frustration; there had to be some reason that Voss seemed to be deliberately crippling innovations in spacecraft components.

With a heavy sigh, he glanced at his comm interface, then scrolled through the list for the name of his contact at Voss Enterprises. He’d attempted to speak to Voss directly that morning, only to be told in no uncertain terms that, “Mr.Voss is indisposed for the rest of the day.” The situation was becoming desperate now though and if politeness and courtesy failed again, it was time to start getting heavy with the threats.

The Admiralty allowed private corporations an enormous amount of leeway, but when push came to shove, they could always be reminded who was actually in charge of the Terran Federation. Any corporation going on the infamous Admiralty Blacklist would face very troubled times indeed. Hostilities usually initiated with a relentless and unending series of audits, covering all transactions for decades in exhausting detail. If that didn’t result in cooperation, progressively more drastic measures were taken, even going so far as garrisoning troops at a company HQ to provide “extra-security” for board members. When enough of the troublesome board started retiring due to sudden and unfortunate ill-health, a corporation never failed to step into line.

Bracing himself for a very unpleasant conversation, Charles was about to swipe his finger across the name of Henry Voss’ personal assistant, when he hesitated and switched to a cluster of files instead. Searching through numerous folders, each tagged with a picture of a stunningly beautiful woman, he stopped at a grey-eyed brunette and opened up her file.

The dossier on Lieutenant Commander Rachel Voss was far more comprehensive than his files on the rest of the lionesses, the one exception being Commander Calara Fernandez. Both of the young women had served in the Terran Federation military, so he’d been able to uncover a wealth of information on each of them. Scanning through Rachel’s file, Charles froze when he read one line, then let out a humourless laugh of disbelief.

Doctor Rachel Voss – emancipated from Henry Voss, 16th October 2776.

Charles knew that John Blake and the lionesses had recently travelled to New Eden, which he also knew was the homeworld of one of the richest men in the Terran Federation. It was shortly after that visit when Henry Voss had blown billions of credits on his acquisition spending spree. Could it really be that appallingly simple? Surely all this trouble couldn’t be over some personal feud between father and daughter?!

As phenomenally wealthy as Henry Voss was, Charles could safely assume that one or more of the Admiralty were in his pocket. It was definitely in the realm of possibility that Voss might have found out exactly who John was and what he’d been working to accomplish at Olympus Shipyard. Charles grimaced, knowing just how small-minded, petty, and vindictive the fabulously rich could be. It wouldn’t surprise him in the slightest if the mega-billionaire had squandered a huge sum of money, just to spite his estranged daughter and her lover...

“Fuck!” Charles swore vehemently, rubbing a hand over his face.

There was a short knock on the door, a double-rap of the knuckles that Victor only used to let Charles know it was urgent. Charles had a bit of a headache, but delivering some pain medication would hardly warrant Victor’s emergency knock.

Sitting up straighter in his chair Charles called out, “Come in!”

Victor darted inside, glancing over his shoulder as he started to shut the door, “Sir, there’s someone here to see you, I-”

“Stop wasting time and let me in!” a man’s stern voice demanded, the door rebounding off a foot wedged in the doorway.

Victor’s expression darkened and he looked like he was about to sternly rebuke the owner of the foot.

“It’s alright, Victor,” Charles said, eyes narrowing as he rose from his chair. “Let Mr. Voss in...”

The young lieutenant stepped aside and gestured for the smartly-dressed older businessman to enter the office. Once Henry had walked purposefully into the room, Victor looked at Charles and asked, “Will that be all, Sir?”

Shaking his head, Charles replied, “I’ll call if I need anything. Thank you, Victor.”

Closing the door after him, the lieutenant left the two grey-haired men staring at each other.

After an uncomfortable moment’s silence, Charles frowned and said, “I’ve been trying to speak to you all day. You’re a difficult man to track down.”

“Yes, I heard,” Henry Voss said with a wry smile.

Gritting his teeth in irritation, Charles gestured towards the sofas. “Why don’t you take a seat, Mr. Voss.”

Henry shook his head. “Actually I’d prefer to stand. I’ve been on a ship for the last twenty-two hours and it feels good to stretch my legs.”

Charles nodded, then leaned against his desk, studying his guest. He’d seen numerous holo-images of the phenomenally successful entrepreneur, but he was surprised to see Henry Voss looked younger and more vital than the recent pictures he’d seen. Henry crossed his arms and raised an eyebrow in return, both men staring at one another, trying to gauge the other’s measure.

“Alright, I might as well cut to the chase,” Charles finally snapped. “Why are you sabotaging my refit?!”

“Sabotaging the refit? That couldn’t be further from the truth.” Henry Voss gave him another maddening smile and slowly shook his head. “I’ve brought a veritable army of technicians with me to assist with the upgrade of your vessels, as well as the initial batches of FTL Drives, Power Cores, and heavy-grade heatsinks.”

Charles gaped at him in shock. “But I thought... you fired all the board members!”

“They were proving obstinate, so I dismissed them all,” Henry declared with a glint of satisfaction in his grey eyes. “I’ve cancelled all civilian contracts with every corporation I now own and have initiated the expansion of facilities in all divisions. I intend to start manufacturing enough state-of-the-art components and weapons to support a massive shipbuilding program at Olympus Shipyard. The various boards objected to me running their companies at a massive loss for the foreseeable future, so I had to take steps.”

“But this must be costing you billions!” Charles gasped, shocked to the core by Voss’s announcement.

“I’ve been reliably informed that the total cost of this venture, forecast over the next three years, will be 212 billion credits,” Henry said, not batting an eyelid at the incredible sums of money involved.

Charles shook his head in wonder. “Why would you do that?!”

“Two reasons,” Henry said, his expression turning bleak. “Firstly, what’s the use of all that money if we’re all dead in a matter of months...”

“So you know then,” Charles said, suddenly understanding what was driving the man.

With a heavy sigh, Henry nodded. “I found out when John and Rachel visited... They turned my world upside down; everything that used to seem so important, now feels hollow and pointless.” He turned and walked over to the window, then stood and gazed out at the sprawling expanse of stars. “Even the stars look different now... dangerous, threatening...”

Charles walked over to join the troubled man, standing beside him and looking out into space. “I always used to find that view inspiring, wondering what kind of remarkable creatures might live in all those systems far beyond Terran Space. Now I finally know what lurks out there, I can only think that ignorance was bliss...” It came as quite a relief to actually have someone other than John to confide in. He glanced at Voss and added quietly, “What was the second reason?”

Henry didn’t say anything for a long moment and when he did, his reply was barely more than a whisper and loaded with regret. “It’s my last chance... to create a Voss Legacy that my daughter will actually be proud of...”

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For the first time in what felt like weeks, Rachel awoke naturally rather than with a gentle telepathic prompting from Alyssa. She loved the blonde like a sister, but to be able to sleep through the usual morning wake-up call was glorious. The second surprise was not having Dana sprawled on top of her. Her gorgeous redheaded girlfriend was a hugger and liked to sleep as closely wrapped around Rachel as possible. Instead, she had a set of broad strong arms around her and she bit her lip with excitement, knowing who they belonged too.

“Happy birthday, beautiful,” John whispered in her ear, sending a shiver of delight up her spine.

Rachel turned around so she was on her back and looked up at his smiling face. “I wasn’t sure if you knew...”

“Sparks reminded me a few days ago,” John replied, a fond look in his eyes. “How’s it feel being nineteen?”

The brunette grinned at him. “Compared to my eighteenth birthday? I think it’s fair to say I feel quite a bit different... Maybe it’s because of that unexpected growth spurt?”

John laughed and placed a hand on her toned tummy. “It’s amazing how much of a difference a healthy diet makes...”

She licked her full lips and glanced downwards. “Speaking of which, are you serving me one of your delicious breakfasts this morning?”

He gave her a playful smile and gestured to himself, sweeping his hand down his body. “Consider me your beck and call boy. I’m at your complete disposal today.”

Rachel grinned with anticipation then pushed John’s shoulder so he rolled over onto his back. The brunette moved with him, straddling his waist and smoothly impaling herself, her supple body yielding for his huge shaft. She shuddered with delight to feel him penetrate her so deeply, then once she was settled, placed her delicate hands on his chest to support herself.

Leaning forward, she began to move, gazing into his eyes as she purred, “I want to ride you like this until you’re close, then I want you to flip me over and pound your cum into my womb. Dana’s been complaining about getting withdrawal symptoms, so I’ll share this one with the girls, then lunch and dinner you’re all mine!”

“Whatever the lady desires,” John replied with a grin. He reached up to cup her large breasts, each more than enough to fill his hand. “And how many times would you like to orgasm this morning?”

“I think two should suffice,” she replied airily.

John frowned and shook his head. “I think we can do much better than that for the birthday girl...”

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“Would you do the icing?” Sakura pleaded, a hopeful expression on her face. “I’ll put on the candles!”

Calara looked dubious and replied, “Surely icing is part of the Head Chef’s duties?”

“This is too important to mess up!” the Asian girl protested. “Please!”

“Oh, alright then,” the Latina said with a smile, rolling her eyes.

Sakura gave her a delighted hug, then darted over to the cupboard to retrieve the tiny decorative candles. She searched through the drawer and pulled out a couple of the small containers. “You’ll need to get a lot more when it’s my birthday.”

Calara frowned at her and said, “We should have more than enough. You’ll be twenty-one won’t you?”

“Ninety-six actually,” the raven-haired girl replied, a hint of a smile teasing her lips. “I was in cryo for the last seventy-five of them...”

“How are you getting on with the cake, sleeping beauty?” Alyssa asked, sweeping into the kitchen. Before Sakura could reply, the blonde bent down to examine the layers of coffee sponge and icing with a critical eye. “Looks perfect!”

“I can’t imagine how shocked my mom would’ve been to see me baking,” the Asian girl said with a grin. “It’s actually been good fun.”

Alyssa slipped her arm around her friend’s waist then gave her a friendly hug. “How about you two?” she asked Irillith and Tashana who were concentrating intently on preparing delicate-looking wraps.

Irillith turned and smiled. “Lunch is just about ready, we’ll leave it in the refrigeration units, then we can pack it up when we’re ready to go.”

“Perfect!” the blonde declared. She sauntered over to Tashana and slipped her arms around the Maliri girl as she enquired playfully, “And how are you today, my lovely newly-bonded Thrall...”

“I’m feeling wonderful thanks, revered Matriarch,” Tashana replied with a smirk, tilting her head back to give the blonde a quick kiss.

“Ugh, that makes me sound like I’m about two hundred years old!” Alyssa protested.

Calara turned around and playfully spanked her girlfriend on the bottom. “Haven’t you heard the expression ‘you shouldn’t play with fire’? That probably goes double with teasing a pyrokinetic!”

Tashana snorted and shook her head. “Count yourself lucky that you haven’t tried slugging it out with her. She doesn’t pull her punches!”

Alyssa gave her a peck on a blue cheek. “Actually, I do. You got about fifty percent strength...”

The Maliri girl turned to gape at her in shock.

The blonde winked back, then turned to look at the others and announced, “Alright, Rachel’s waking up again after her nap. We’ve still got a couple of hours until lunch, so we can finish everything off later. Let’s go everyone!”

They filed out of the kitchen and Calara asked, “Are Sparks and Jade on their way?”

“Yeah, they’re just heading up in the grav-tube.”

The Nymph and the redhead reached the Deck Two corridor just as the rest of the girls left the Officers’ Lounge. Jade’s arrival was met with giggles from the rest of the girls and she gave them a helpless shrug as she toted the massive red present in her arms.

Dana gave the Nymph a reassuring pat on the shoulder. “Hey, it’s what Rachel wanted...”

They strolled towards the bedroom to find John and Rachel in bed together, the brunette looking drowsy but very content after her post-coital snooze.

“Happy birthday!” everyone cheered, before treating her to a rousing rendition of the upbeat birthday song.

“Thanks everyone,” Rachel said, giving her friends a warm smile.

Dana bounded onto the bed and flung her arms around her girlfriend. “Happy birthday, babes!” They shared a kiss, then the redhead asked eagerly, “Do you want your present?”

Rachel laughed at her exuberance and nodded. With an encouraging wave from Dana, Jade returned to the corridor and leaned around the door, where she’d hidden the huge parcel. It was wrapped in bright red wrapping paper, with the words ‘happy birthday!’ interspersed between a menagerie of cute baby animals.

“Is that what I think it is?” Rachel asked, her grey eyes shining with excitement. She sat up rather awkwardly, the heavy load of cum in her womb rounding out her abdomen.

Jade walked around the side of the bed, then carefully placed the huge present on the covers within reach of the birthday girl. Rachel tore open the packaging in a flurry of shredded paper and said playfully, “Just what I always wanted!”

Dana patted the brand-new Reaper Cannon. “I’ve made some tweaks just for you...”

The Nymph picked up the weapon again, then slid a pair of smart-linked glasses onto her face. After glancing at the built-in HUD, Jade let go of the underslung cannon, leaving the support weapon floating motionless in the air. She walked back several paces and the Reaper Cannon followed along silently at her side.

“That’s perfect!” Rachel gasped, looking delighted.

Their Chief Engineer smiled at the brunette’s joyful reaction. “I’ve built in extra anti-grav generators and there’s a standby mode you can activate on the Paragon HUD. Turning that on ties the cannon to your body armour and it’ll follow you around until you deactivate it again.”

Rachel darted a glance at John. “That’ll make it even more practical when I need to stop shooting to heal someone!”

“Very impressive,” John replied, nodding his approval. “It might be worth incorporating that functionality into the standard version. I’m sure it’d be useful for all of you.”

Dana grinned at him and replied, “One step ahead of you! I modified Irillith’s Reaper Cannon this morning while Jade was building this one.”

“I love my present, thank you,” Rachel said, pulling her lover in for a tender kiss. She guided Dana’s hand to her swollen tummy and quirked an eyebrow. “Want to share my birthday breakfast?”

After the girls had eaten their share of the late brunch, they spent the rest of the morning chatting together and relaxing in bed. After taking a shower and dressing in khaki slacks and a white shirt, John left his crew to get ready for their mysterious excursion, with Alyssa the only one who knew the details of their destination. He heard her declare that short floral dresses were the order of the day, and he smiled to himself in anticipation as he headed up to the Bridge. Bounding up the illuminated steps to join Faye on the Command Podium, he greeted her with a broad smile.

“You seem to be in a very good mood today, John,” the purple sprite observed, grinning back at him as he sat in his chair.

“I am,” he agreed feeling relaxed and carefree for once. “It’s been wonderful to just have a few days without having to charge off to the rescue.”

Faye gave him an anxious glance. “Are you sure it’s wise to say something like that? We always seem to run into disaster every time the crew attempts to celebrate anything!”

Leaning forward in his chair, John nodded, his face serious. “Actually, that’s what I wanted to speak to you about, honey. I’ll have the watch communicator, so I’ll be able to contact you if we get in any trouble, but I’d like to take a few extra precautions. Please keep the Invictus in geo-stationary orbit above our location and keep scanning the vicinity in case of approaching lifeforms or vehicles.”

“Of course! I can perform sweeps with the Raptor and Valkyrie too!” Faye suggested, her brow furrowing in concentration. “The planet you intend to visit has quite varied topography, so I should be able to maintain a close vigil, while still remaining unobtrusive to the girls.”

“We’ll keep a good selection of firearms in the Raptor too,” John agreed. “It’s a shame we don’t have any armour-equipping frames in there... that’s something we need to install in the future.”

“I know! I’ll load the boys in the back!” Faye gasped, her luminous eyes widening. “If there’s any trouble, they can do a low-altitude combat drop and you can use their armoured chassis as cover!”

“That’s a great idea,” John agreed. “We definitely need to prepare as if we’re being extracted from a hostile battlefield.”

“Don’t worry, you can count on me to keep you safe!” Faye said, her elfin face looking up at him earnestly.

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It had just turned one in the afternoon when the Invictus dropped out of hyper-warp into the Zeta Telescopii system. The battlecruiser’s hull was bathed in the warm orange glow from the system’s star as Faye ramped up power to the engines, sending them racing towards the planets within. Zeta Telescopii was a spectacular anomaly amongst the hundreds of systems in the Federation, containing over a dozen habitable planets, each one supporting a thriving Terran colony. Eleven of them were quite lovely continental planets, somewhat reminiscent of Terra itself, but the planet known as Myra’s World was the crowning jewel of the system.

The Raptor descended through the atmosphere of the turquoise planet, with all the girls excited about their excursion to one of a handful of gaia-classification worlds within the Federation. Having secured permission to land from flight control, Faye brought them down through fluffy white cloudbanks over the hilly region that was their destination. Breaking through the clouds at last, they got their first glimpse of Myra’s World and could only gasp at the beauty of the lush paradise planet. The Oberon nature reserve was a breathtaking sight, with its verdant meadows and majestic waterfalls, rainbows arcing gracefully over the cascading water.

“I’ve never seen anything so beautiful,” Dana whispered in a voice full of awe. Her sky-blue eyes widened as if to take in every detail as she gazed through the cockpit canopy.

“I have,” John said, gently stroking her back as he put his arms around her and Rachel. They both smiled at him, then leaned against his chest as they watched their approach to the planet’s surface.

Faye brought the Raptor in to land in the centre of a broad meadow, hovering a few inches above the ground so as not to disturb the neat carpet of grass below. John picked up the backpack he’d prepared especially and slung it over one shoulder, then picked up two of the wicker hampers the twins had packed with their lunch.

He shared a pointed look with Faye, then led the girls from the cockpit and down to the lower level of the gunship. Their elfin pilot had already lowered the forward loading ramp and they followed it down, before hopping off onto the springy grass below. The air was fresh and clean, even more so than that on the Invictus itself and they took big lungfuls, broad grins on their faces as they did so.

After waving Faye goodbye and watching the Raptor soar skyward, John walked a few dozen places to find a level spot, then unshouldered his backpack. He’d brought several blankets with him that they laid out together to form a tartan patchwork, which would protect them from the ever-present danger of roaming insects and grass stains. The hampers went in the middle and they unpacked the picnic that the girls had lovingly prepared, as well as the bottles of wine that he stood up in a couple of cooler buckets.

It was a gorgeous day on Myra’s world and the group laughed and joked under the bright sunshine

while nibbling at their tasty lunch. Tashana and Irillith had prepared a wide variety of Maliri rolls, wraps, and pastries, which tasted incredible with the bottles of wine that John had picked out for them. He sat back and watched the girls as they relaxed and had fun together, never looking more beautiful than they did that afternoon.

With lunch finished, he moved the hampers aside, then tapped his glass to draw everyone’s attention his way. The girls quieted, watching him with smiling faces as he looked at Rachel. “I won’t give a long speech, but I just wanted to say thank you for making that fateful decision to join the crew four months ago. The time you’ve spent with us has been wonderful and I can’t even imagine what it’d be like without you here as part of our family.”

“She’s totally awesome!” Dana cheered, hugging her girlfriend.

John smiled and nodded, looking into Rachel’s grey eyes. “That she is.” Raising his glass to her, he continued, “Happy birthday, Rachel. Here’s to the first of many, many more to come.”

The girls all raised their glasses too and chorused, “Happy Birthday!” then drank to toast their friend.

“Thank you so much,” Rachel said, blushing at all the attention. “I’ve had an amazing day so far. I haven’t had this much fun on my birthday since... ever!”

“There’s still lots more to go!” Dana exclaimed before giving her a kiss.

Putting his glass down, John reached for his backpack, then pulled out the black case. He murmured a telepathic apology to Alyssa and Jade, then shut them from his mind to avoid tipping them off. That instantly drew their full focus to him, as he placed the case in his lap, the rest of the girls quickly noticing their intrigued expressions. Soon John had everyone’s undivided attention once again.

He cleared his throat, suddenly feeling nervous, and when he glanced at Rachel he saw she had a stunned look on her face as she read his intentions perfectly. There was a hushed silence as the rest of the girls realised he had something significant planned, the only sound the faint rushing of the water cascading into the deep pools behind them.

John looked around the group. “My life’s been a wild rollercoaster over the last six months, with some very dark lows but also some really incredible highs. The highlights have all been because of you and I wanted to take this opportunity to thank you all for choosing to be with me.” He smiled at them and shook his head in wonder. “I never imagined I’d ever meet anyone as remarkable as each of you... Yet here I am, with eight of the most beautiful, intelligent, and loving women in the galaxy.”

There were soft sighs from the girls as they glowed with pride at his sincere compliments. Glancing around the group, he met their tender gaze, sharing an intimate smile with each of them.

“We have the chance at a long and bright future ahead of us and I feel blessed that I’ll be able to share an eternity with all of you.” He paused for a second to fight down his nerves, then continued, “I’ve spoken to most of you about this individually, but this time it felt right to share this moment with all of you at once.”

He took the case off his lap and placed it on the blanket in front of him, then pressed his thumb to the rune in its centre. The lid clicked and he caught it just before it flipped open. The girls were all staring at him with wide eyes now, holding their breath in anticipation.

“I want to make a commitment to all of you today: that I’ll always be there to love and care for you, for the rest of your lives.” He paused and slowly tilted back the lid of the case. “Will you each do me the honour of being my wife?”

There was a collective gasp as the girls laid eyes on the eight exquisite rings immaculately presented in the black velvet cloth. They glanced at each other, their eyes sparkling in equal excitement and astonishment.

John sensed their hesitation, so he smiled as he said, “How about we start with Alyssa and each of you take your rings in the sequence you joined me? I think you should be able to tell who they each belong to...”

All eyes fell to the blonde and she reached out with a trembling hand for the brilliant sapphire ring that perfectly matched the shade of her enchanting cerulean eyes. She let out a soft cry as she gazed at the intricate craftsmanship of the band, with a noble lion leading a pride of ten sleek lionesses around the circumference.

“It’s so beautiful...” she murmured, happy tears filling her eyes.

The rest of the girls echoed her words as they each took their own ring.

“How did you find an amethyst with a blue spark inside it?!” Irillith marvelled, sitting next to her twin, their heads close together as they compared the two violet stones.

“Mine has a tiny red flare at its centre!” Tashana exclaimed, looking up at him, shocked by the effort he’d gone to.

“I can only claim credit for the bands,” John admitted honestly. “I asked Thandrun to help me find the perfect stones and he asked one of his forgemasters to cut them.”

“There are ten lionesses,” Jade murmured, kneeling beside him to show him her emerald ring. “Who are the last two?”

John reached into his pocket and pulled out two more rings, which he slotted into the empty case. They were both inlaid with amethysts, but one was a deep, regal purple, while the other was lighter and had an inner luminescence to it.

“Edraele and Faye...” Jade whispered in a hushed voice.

“I would’ve loved for them both to be here for this too, but it wasn’t to be,” John said quietly. “My relationship with them is different from the rest of you; still special, but just... different. I care about Faye a great deal, but I want to wait for her to have her body, and we obviously still need to revive Edraele.”

“They’ll love their rings,” Alyssa said, leaning in to him and planting a tender kiss on his cheek. “Just like I do...”

John returned her kiss, then looked around the group with a frown. “I’m getting a bit worried... No one’s actually said ‘yes’ yet!”

He was immediately buried under a deluge of overjoyed women, who showered him in kisses between telling him “Yes!” in the most emphatic way possible. Much to his relief, they were all extremely eager to accept his proposal. Starting with Alyssa, he slid the ring onto her finger, watching her look of joy as she wore it for the first time. One by one, he went around the group, doing the same for each girl to mark their acceptance of his proposal.

Hugging Dana and Alyssa to him afterwards as he lay on the blankets, he smiled at them as he said, “I finally managed to give you the romantic setting and the ring you deserved, I just hope the proposal met your expectations...”

The redhead laughed, looking at him through soft tear-filled eyes. “You daft, romantic bastard... You could’ve given me a battered old bearing as a ring and said ‘fancy getting hitched?’ and it still would’ve been perfect!”

“It was really lovely,” Alyssa agreed, holding her hand in the air and watching as the light caught the blue jewel. She ran her fingers over his chest and then leaned in to kiss him. “You’re completely forgiven for blocking me out of your mind. The ring was so thoughtful. I can’t believe you were able to get such detail on the band; I think I’d struggle to make anything quite so delicate...”

“It’s deca-shaped, so I wouldn’t call the band delicate exactly,” John said with a grin, hugging her closer. “It should be able to take a battering without taking a scratch.”

Alyssa frowned and hugged her hand to herself protectively. “I’ll be taking better care of it than that!”

Sakura couldn’t take her eyes off her chocolate-coloured diamond, tilting it in the bright sunlight to admire the white frosting interlaced through the facets of the gemstone. “Does this mean we have to love, honour, and obey you now?” she asked, a joyful smile on her face.

“Not until the actual wedding,” John replied with a grin, sitting up when Alyssa and Dana moved away to rejoin their lovers.

Sakura quickly took the opportunity to sit astride him. “I plan to start early... so I can get really good at it.”

He stroked her back as they kissed, holding her close as she pressed herself to his chest.

When she finally pulled back, she said softly, “Thank you for speaking to my parents first. Knowing they approved and gave their blessing makes this even more special.” She blushed and held her hand over her heart. “It’s like I can feel them... watching over me.”

John gave her another kiss then darted a glance at Rachel. The brunette had overheard the Asian girl’s words and she spotted the quick flash of regret on John’s face.

Kneeling beside him, she ran her hand over his shoulder. “Don’t feel bad. I know you tried to do the same for me, but you were right to hold off on asking my father; announcing our engagement would’ve ended badly if you’d brought it up during that visit. My relationship with him is very different to the way Calara is with her parents, or Sakura was with hers. You’ve already managed to repair those burned bridges between my father and me, but it might take months for us to gradually rebuild our relationship. I wouldn’t want you to delay this engagement with all of us for that reason.”

He slipped an arm around her waist and pulled her close, Sakura wrapping an arm around her too and kissing the brunette on the cheek. John gazed into Rachel’s grey eyes and said, “The incident at the lake, with the portal... I was trying to do the same for you that I did with Sakura.”

Rachel bit her lip as her grey eyes glistened with tears. “You were going to ask my mother for her blessing, weren’t you?”

John nodded, before letting out a heavy sigh. “I’m sorry it went so wrong... It’s too dangerous at the moment to try and make another attempt. I promise you though, one day we’ll try again.”

“Thank you,” she whispered as she shuddered in their embrace, burying her face in John’s neck.

The rest of the girls stroked her back and arms, offering her support as they joined in the hug. Rachel looked up to thank them and caught the look of guilt on Calara’s face. She quickly pulled away from John and fiercely embraced the Latina. “Don’t ever feel guilty about your family! It’s not your fault what happened to me and mine, but seeing you with your parents gives me hope... That’s how I want to be with my children, making them feel cared for and loved!”

There were murmurs of agreement all round and Calara looked tremendously relieved that she hadn’t upset any of them, the look of guilt vanishing from her face.

Alyssa caressed her lover’s back and said softly, “I also want to see you have the huge family wedding you deserve; it’s what’s right for you and your family. I know that’s why you’ve been reluctant to make any plans with Maria... You know what she expects, but you don’t want to risk upsetting any of us.”

Calara glanced around, the look of guilt back with a vengeance. “It feels so unfair, like I’m showing off or rubbing your faces in my ‘perfect family’. I swear to you, I don’t feel that way at all!”

“It’s okay, we know...” Alyssa said soothingly, brushing her fingers through the Latina’s lustrous brown hair. “Fate had different plans for me growing up, but I’ll still be able to enjoy your big wedding through you...”

Dana hugged Calara tighter. “As long as we all get to be bridesmaids!”

Calara laughed and smiled gratefully at her friends as they nodded their earnest agreement. “You’re all amazing! Of course you can be my bridesmaids; that was the only thing I’d actually decided on!”

Alyssa glanced around at the rest of the girls, asking them all the same telepathic question and getting nods of confirmation from each in turn. She brushed her fingers along the back of John’s neck. “John, there’s something else we should talk about, while we’re on the subject of wives and weddings...”

“That sounds ominous,” he said with a smile, putting his free arm around her. “What’s on your mind?”

“We all think that Calara should be your official wife, at least as far as the Terran Federation is concerned...” the blonde said, her tone firm.

The Latina gasped, her eyes wide with shock. “No! That’s not right, it should be you!”

Alyssa slowly shook her head, her expression calm and serene. “This is like you being the Lion’s second-in-command for PR purposes. What we’re doing isn’t exactly illegal, but John having eight or more wives would still be considered scandalous. Why bring attention to it?”

She glanced around at each of the girls in turn. “Dana just wants to be John’s property, Rachel’s always hidden herself from the public eye, and Sakura’s past would raise too many awkward questions. As non-Terrans, Jade, Irillith, and Tashana definitely wouldn’t be a wise choice; not that they ever desired that attention in the first place.”

“What about you?” John asked quietly, turning from the rest of the girls as Sakura climbed off his lap, so that he could face Alyssa directly. “You know how much I love Calara, but she’s right about this. You were first, you’re my Matriarch, and our relationship is special; there’s no point shying away from that. It should be you...”

The blonde smiled at him and brushed her fingers across his cheek. “Just imagine the awkward questions that would raise with Calara’s family... and what would we gain? Being a figurehead for PR purposes doesn’t mean anything to me. The only opinions I really care about are right here, aside from Faye, a sexy reporter who shows a lot of potential, and a host of blue-skinned babes. This would mean far more to Calara than any of us, so it seems like the obvious choice to me.” She took his hand and placed it on her slender tummy, then reached out to caress Jade’s and Calara’s toned stomachs. “You know what I want more than anything...”

John looked around at the girls and asked, “Do all of you really feel that way?”

Rachel squeezed Calara’s hand then smiled at John. “It makes a lot of sense. I’d hate being in the media spotlight, but I can just imagine the look of pride on Calara’s face when the two of you make an official announcement. Commander Fernandez engaged to Vice Admiral Blake... the TF military will love it! One of their own marrying the Lion of the Federation.”

He turned to look at Calara and saw her blushing furiously, trying to mask the thrill she felt at hearing those words. “It looks like we’re outvoted, Commander,” he said with a warm smile.

Alyssa laughed, and patted the Latina on the shoulder. “Go on, you’re not fooling anyone...”

Calara flung herself into John’s arms, kissing him soundly. “I’d love to! I’ve been so worried about how my dad would react when he found out about the girls, but this solves everything!”

After lots more celebrating, the girls eventually calmed down and they relaxed on the blankets under the glorious sunshine, admiring their new rings. Alyssa insisted that John lay back with his head on her lap, and he sighed with bliss as Calara joined the blonde in brushing their fingers through his hair. The Maliri twins joined him then, snuggling up on either side of him and resting their flowing white manes on his shoulders as he put his arms around them.

“I had no idea there was so much complexity involved in Terran weddings,” Irillith said, tilting her head up to look at him.

“Just wait until Calara and Maria start planning the big day on Oceanus,” John replied with a wry smile.

Tashana nodded and said authoritatively, “According to the Terran shows I’ve seen, there’s usually numerous problems with the venue, the caterers, and the weather, as well as long-lost lovers trying to disrupt the nuptials. Also, if you ever see the bride in her wedding dress before she walks down the aisle in the ceremony, then the marriage is doomed to never take place! The worst problems are due to fights with the ‘in-laws’... They usually reach their peak when the bride fails to turn up at the wedding, or the groom sleeps with a bridesmaid!”

“What happens when the bride and groom sleep with all the bridesmaids, then whisk them away on their honeymoon?” Calara asked, sharing an excited grin with Alyssa.

Tashana laughed and shrugged helplessly. “Perhaps the producers thought that was too outrageous to make a believable storyline?”

Irillith shook her head in disbelief. “It looks like the Maliri managed to avoid a great deal of unnecessary trouble by ignoring marriage altogether!”

John squeezed her shoulder and asked with a teasing smile, “Does that mean you’ve changed your mind? You don’t want to be married to me after all?”

“I never said that!” Irillith blurted out, blushing self-consciously.

He brushed his fingers across her slender neck. “I did think about making you a nice collar instead of a ring... maybe that would have been more appealing?”

“I love my ring!” Irillith protested, but she hesitated then, a glimmer of excitement appearing in her eyes. “But the collar sounds very interesting...”

Tashana laughed and stroked her sister’s arm affectionately, hugging her and John closer. “Maybe matching collars?”

Irillith grinned at her, nodding eagerly.

John looked down at the happy pair. “I know the normal Terran formalities regarding marriage don’t really apply to you two, but I had planned on asking your mother for her blessing.” He smiled for a moment and added, “She did say she’d agree if I asked, but it was just an offhand comment she made when we were discussing speaking to parents.”

Irillith smiled at him and said, “I have a feeling she hasn’t changed her mind since then. Our mother seems to have taken quite a shine to you for some reason...”

John returned her smile, but Tashana suddenly froze, gaping at him in shock.

“What is it, honey?” he asked, concerned to see her dramatic reaction.

“Our father... you wanted to ask him too!” she gasped, a riot of emotions flashing across her face.

Irillith sucked in her breath, looking as stunned as her twin. She knew John well enough by now to realise he’d want to do the same for them as he’d done for Sakura and tried to do for Rachel.

John hugged them closer and slowly nodded. “Yes, you’re right. I discussed it with Alyssa and Edraele, but I didn’t tell you about it because I didn’t want to get your hopes up. I need concentrated psychic imprints left behind by strong emotions, preferably ones focused on you. We thought that the best chance would be from your camping vacations with him, but they were scattered all over Valaden.”

Tashana sat up and shook her head. “No! On Geniya station!”

Irillith sat bolt upright as well, nodding eagerly. “We used to call him there almost every night! He’d tell us bedtime stories to help us go to sleep...”

Frowning in confusion, John glanced up at Alyssa. \*I wonder why Edraele never said anything...\*

Guessing what he was saying to the blonde, Irillith said, “Our father was a comms specialist and hacker. He masked the signal so Edraele never knew about our calls to him.” She faltered then, her face reflecting her grief and deep sense of loss. “I was always in awe of the way he defied my mother... that’s why I chose to follow his career.”

John sat up and gathered the twins in his arms. “I can’t wait to meet him, he sounds like a remarkable man. I know how proud he’ll be of the wonderful women you’ve both become...”

Both sisters trembled in his arms as they leaned into him for comfort, the thought of being able to see their long-dead father again leaving them overcome with emotion. The other girls moved to embrace them too, Rachel and Sakura sharing a knowing glance, having experienced those same mixed feelings of soaring elation and devastating loss.

Tashana eventually leaned back to look at John and wiped the tears from her eyes. “Do you really think we’ll be able to see him again?”

John nodded, feeling much more confident now. “Geniya station would be perfect. I’m sure there’ll be lots of psychic imprints of him than I can tap into.” He cradled her head in his hand, brushing his fingers through her hair. “But the same applies with your father as Rachel’s mother. Until we can resolve this problem with the astral plane monsters, it’s far too dangerous to attempt anything like that again.”

“I was going to look into my research anyway!” Tashana exclaimed, a fervent gleam in her eyes. “If there’s anything Valada knew that could help us, I’ll find it!”

“I’ll help too,” Irillith immediately volunteered. “Faye’s operating software is done, so I can give it my full attention unless she finds any errors.” Her confident tone dismissed the chance of that occurring as an impossibility.

John gave them both a reassuring smile. “The three of us can start tomorrow morning. We’ve still got a couple of days until we reach Maliri Space, so we should be able to make some real headway.”

Tashana looked like she was about to suggest starting that afternoon, but she suddenly glanced at Rachel, then relaxed and nodded her agreement.

“What?” Rachel asked, having seen the fleeting glance.

“We’ve got plans for you this evening,” Alyssa said with a mischievous wink, before leaning in to kiss John on the cheek. “It’s probably time we returned to the ship.”

While the girls packed away the blankets and hampers, John called Faye to let her know they were ready to leave. The Raptor rose up from behind a nearby ridgeline, sweeping over the spectacular waterfalls and bright drapes of colourful flowers that flanked them. Less than thirty seconds after making the call, the gunship was floating inches above the grass with the loading ramp down, waiting for them to board.

Rachel declared that she was feeling peckish after lunch, so she pulled John into the cabin at the back of the Raptor with an eager gleam in her eyes. Seeing her slowly stroking his shaft with his engagement ring on her slender finger proved to be a powerful aphrodisiac and it didn’t take long for him to give the brunette just what she needed.

They lay on the bed together afterwards, John stroking her tanned, curved tummy, while Rachel traced lazy circles over his chest with her hand. She gazed at the misty grey diamond on her ring as it caught the light and let out a happy sigh.

“I hope you didn’t mind me choosing today to give the rings to everyone?” John asked, looking down at the brunette with concern.

Rachel glanced up at him and quickly shook her head. “No, of course not. It made today even more special.” Her gaze softened and she gave him a fond smile. “I’ve been loving all the attention, but seeing all the girls look so happy was the best gift you could’ve given me.”

“I would have asked you about it beforehand, but I didn’t want to ruin the surprise,” he explained.

“Don’t worry, it was the perfect time. I was so distracted by my birthday that I got to enjoy the surprise too!”

“Ah, so there are ways of confounding that amazing mind of yours after all?” John said, before tilting up her chin and kissing her.

“Apparently so...” She giggled, her face lighting up with her radiant smile. “I couldn’t believe how anxious you were when you were about to pop the question to all of us. I’ve seen you fearlessly charge a Kintark dragon and wade into endless waves of Kirrix, but it took eight besotted girls to finally make you nervous!”

“What can I say... You’re all so beautiful, you left me quaking in my boots,” he replied playfully, before easing himself upright. “Come on, we better get going, birthday girl. I’m sure we’ve already landed on the Invictus.”

When they emerged from the cabin, the cockpit ahead of them was deserted and the gunship parked in the centre of the Hangar Bay. Dana was waiting for them in the forward loading area and she greeted them both with a kiss, before putting her arm around her girlfriend. They travelled up in the grav-tube together, with the teenagers waving him goodbye as they stepped out onto Deck Two. John had important business on the Command Deck, but he promised them he’d join them shortly in the Officers’ Lounge.

Faye was gazing intently at the Sector Map when John walked onto the Bridge. Her purple-eyed gaze stayed riveted on the Invictus, watching it race between the stars as they continued their journey towards the Maliri border. For the first time that he could remember, she didn’t immediately turn around to greet him with a friendly wave or a cheery grin and he was shocked to receive the distinct impression that she was deliberately ignoring him.

“Could I see you in my Ready Room please, Faye,” John said quietly as he walked towards the door, feeling a sudden lurch of trepidation in his chest.

She turned to look at him, a strange enigmatic expression on her elfin face that he’d never seen before. Her brow was furrowed with anxiety and her cupid-bow lips were twisted into an odd kind of nervous, trembling half-smile. She wouldn’t make direct eye-contact and just gave him a curt nod.

John opened the door and strode inside his room, walking over to the sofas and taking a seat. He knew how observant Faye was, with access to hundreds of camera feeds all over the ship and he realised she was bound to have spotted the girls’ engagement rings. He cursed himself for not speaking to her beforehand to pre-warn her, but there was nothing he could do about that now. The sprite didn’t appear for thirty seconds, and he’d just started to stand again when she appeared in a purple flash.

Taking a deep breath, he said, “Faye, I’m so sor-”

“I heard everything!” she blurted out, a look of terrible guilt on her face. “I was really worried about your safety, so I kept the Valkyrie hidden in a cloudbank and used its sensor arrays to eavesdrop!”

John hesitated, unsure how to respond for a moment. “I really wanted to have you there too, but-”

She stared at him without blinking, her big eyes grown huge. “Is it really true?”

He looked at her in confusion. “Sorry, Faye, Can you be more specific? We talked about quite a bit this afternoon.”

“That you want to marry me someday...” the sprite whispered, a look of awe on her face.

John let out a deep sigh of relief. “Yes, that’s true, but-”

“Woohoo!” Faye squealed, leaping into the air with a look of ecstatic joy on her cute face. “Oh my goodness! I can’t believe it!” she whooped and did an impromptu cartwheel across the Ready Room.

He couldn’t help smiling at her antics, watching as she skipped back to join him with a deliriously happy grin reaching almost from ear to ear.

“If you’re done celebrating, we need to have a little chat,” he said, patting the sofa next to him.

She nodded eagerly, her wings still fluttering in a blur as she sat beside him. “What do you want to talk about?”

John was quiet for a moment, trying to get his thoughts in order before he spoke. That momentary pause let the purple sprite calm down too, her head cocked to one side as she studied him.

“Firstly, I just want to say that I thought long and hard about having you come with us on the picnic, so I could give you a ring as well,” John said, wishing more than ever that he could reach out and touch her hand to give it a reassuring squeeze.

As if reading his mind, she raised her right hand and wiggled her delicate holographic fingers in the air. “It’s okay, I understand! I can’t actually put it on yet anyway!”

Giving her a kind smile he nodded. “Yes, that’s true, but there’s another reason as well...”

Faye leaned forward, hanging on his every word. “What’s that?”

“Faye, I think you’re the kindest, most selfless girl I’ve ever met, and I’m very, very fond of you... but you and I aren’t quite at that stage yet. With our relationship I mean,” John said, his tone gentle and measured.

“Oh...” the purple sprite said, sounding subdued, and visibly deflating.

“I was wary of you to start with, but you showed me what an idiot I was in not trusting you. Since then, you’ve been amazing and I quickly came to think of you as a friend.” She looked even more forlorn and he quickly blurted out, “But that changed! I’ve started seeing you as more than that now!”

Faye perked up immediately, giving him a happy grin. “I feel the same way!”

“Good, I’m delighted to hear it,” he said with a smile. He looked into her eyes and continued, “If you were a regular girl, I know things would have progressed much faster between us. That’s not meant in any kind of unkind way; I think you’re adorable, and charming, and gorgeous... but you have a holographic body, there’s no point pretending that doesn’t make a difference.”

Reaching towards her, he mimicked brushing the backs of his fingers over her tummy. She glanced down and switched outfits in the blink of an eye, changing from her fluttery dress to a revealing crop-top and short skirt that exposed her slim midriff. Faye bit her lip, then slowly expanded the curve of her holographic abdomen, matching John’s hand as he slowly drew it back.

“I’ve spent hundreds of hours imaging it,” she whispered softly.

“You look beautiful,” he murmured, following that curve with his hand and being careful not to waver into her image.

Faye gave him a shy smile and brought her hand down to caress his, longing to touch him just as much as he wanted to touch her. “I do understand, I promise. You can’t help your organic nature; you need that release of dopamine, adrenalin, and serotonin into your system... they’re all necessary to encourage you to bond with a potential mate. With no physical form, I can’t trigger that with a tantalising touch, a gentle caress...” Her fingers traced higher up his arm, moving with seductive confidence but unable to stir so much as a hair.

“Beautiful, kind, and clever,” John said with a smile.

Faye blushed, then looked at him under long lashes. “As I say, I really do understand. There’s no rush, we can go at whatever speed you feel comfortable with. When I finally have a physical presence, things might accelerate between us... or they might not. At my core, I’ll still always be an artificial lifeform, so you might find being with me to be too... unnatural. I’ve prepared myself for that eventuality, so I don’t want you to feel bad if you end up feeling that way. I only ask that you please tell me if you do, then I can try and make modifications to my behaviour, to see if that helps alleviate any potential problems.”

He gave her a self-conscious smile. “Actually, that was something I was worried about, but I was more concerned about upsetting you if I felt that way.” He chuckled in surprise as he continued, “I thought I was going to be the one comforting you, I wasn’t expecting you to make me feel better!”

She let out a sigh of delight. “All the girls love making you feel happy, but I’m sure you understand why it means even more to me.”

Shaking his head in amazement, he said, “You’re an amazing girl, Faye. Thank you.”

She leaned forward, understanding in her eyes. “As much as I *really* want to throw myself into a relationship with you, if I’m honest, taking it slowly works better for me as well. It gives me a chance to learn and grow, allowing me to adapt as our relationship changes. It’s all very exciting, but all so new...”

“Slow it is then,” John said, nodding his agreement with a smile. “I’ll look forward to our first proper date!”

“Me too!” Faye gushed, darting forward to give him a peck on the cheek. “Thank you... for everything.”

“Likewise, beautiful.” Rising to his feet, John stretched and glanced at the clock, seeing it had turned five. “I better get going, they’ll be starting Rachel’s party soon.”

Faye fluttered to her feet and gave him a broad grin. “Feel free to let your hair down. I’ll take good care of your ship if you want a good drink.”

“Our ship,” he corrected her, returning her grin. “And thanks, I appreciate it!”

Faye Primary swooned as John left to head to the party, only roused from her daze when she heard the elated clamour from her other eleven avatars, all begging her to join them. She quickly checked the long-range scanners on the Bridge, then darted into the cyber-realm for a quick thirty-second catchup with the rest of her processing streams. When she arrived, her avatars were all chattering away at once, huge sparkling grins plastered across their faces.

“Did any of you manage to get a look at the ring he has for us? The ones the girls received are a combination of their eye colours and abilities!”

“I can’t believe he thinks of us like one of his lionesses! He said he wants to marry us one day!”

“The way he looked at us when we ran the belly-expansion subroutine... I captured it on holo-cam from four different angles!”

“Oh! I have to see that again! We need to freeze-frame the best image and set it as our wallpaper!”

“We’re going on a date...” Faye Primary murmured, a blissful lovestruck smile on her face.

The rest of her avatars rushed to gather around her, giving her hugs and telling how wonderfully she’d handled the meeting with John. There was much jubilation that Faye had been able to make him feel happier again, particularly with easing his concerns about a relationship with a synthetic lifeform. Thirty seconds seemed to fly past in the blink of an eye and the multitude of Faye’s reluctantly dispersed, returning to their tasks. With Faye Secondary covering the Bridge, that meant Primary was able to join the party.

When she projected herself into the Officers’ Lounge, the crew were enjoying some pre-dinner drinks while they waited for the chefs to put the finishing touches on their meal. Alyssa was playing barmaid and mixing up fruity alcoholic cocktails for the girls, while John sensibly stuck to a perfectly aged bottle of Mcgregor ’61.

Faye chatted to her friends until it was time for them to sit down for dinner, which consisted of an array of spicy kebabs, hummus and salad. Calara and Sakura brought out the birthday cake when everyone had finished their main course and Rachel was delighted to see it was a coffee cake. Dana shared a grin with Sakura, having forewarned the Head Chef that it was her girlfriend’s favourite. When they’d blown out the candles and had a slice, it was time for more drinks, and Faye turned on some tunes to really get the party started. They danced the rest of the evening away, drinking and laughing together, the birthday girl having a fantastic time.

Faye kept a lot of her attention on John, watching him have fun with the girls. He was self-conscious about joining in with the dancing, but after several drinks and all eight girls persuading him, he finally relented. While not as lithe and limber as the sultry girls dancing around him, he handled himself well, having a good sense of balance and rhythm.

As the evening drew to a close, Dana walked over to join her petite purple friend in watching the dancing. “It won’t be long now, Faye. I can’t wait for you to be able to properly join in with everything.”

Faye nodded and grinned at her. “I know, I’m looking forward to it so much!” She glanced down at the ornate jewellery adorning the redhead’s right ring finger. “Could I take a closer look at your engagement ring?”

Dana lifted her slender hand so that it was close to one of the ceiling-mounted cameras. Turning her wrist, she splayed her fingers wide so the sprite could see every detail on the band and the sky-blue sapphire with the golden halo at its centre. “That okay?”

“Perfect, thank you,” Faye replied, giving her a dreamy smile. “I can’t believe I’m on the band as one of the lionesses...”

“You’re as much a part of the crew as anyone,” Dana said kindly. “You deserve to be there.”

Rachel waved to the redhead as she called out playfully, “Hey, sexy! It’s time for bed!”

Dana winked at Faye as she turned to follow John and the girls out of the lounge. “You deserve to be there, too!”

Faye blushed furiously as she waved the redhead goodbye. That troublesome ‘embarrassment’ sub-procedure seemed to have a mind of its own!

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Everyone was feeling a bit fragile the following morning, particularly Tashana, who hadn’t heeded John’s warning about mixing her drinks. He had planned to spend the day with the twins looking into Tashana’s research, but he knew they wouldn’t make much progress until the afternoon, not with the Maliri girl nursing the hangover from hell. She hid under the covers complaining that the muted lights were far too bright, earning a sympathetic hug from Alyssa, before she and the rest of the girls got out of bed. Fortunately, Irillith was happy to share John’s miracle hangover cure with her sister and less than a minute after Tashana had filled her stomach with his cum, her pounding headache had completely faded away.

“I very nearly swore off drinking ever again,” she said with a look of relief, patting her curved tummy. “Perhaps I don’t have to take quite such drastic steps now.”

John climbed out of bed and offered both girls a hand as they joined him in walking to the shower. “I tried to warn you last night... I did the same thing when I was young. I arrived late at a party and a lot of the drinks had already gone, so I mixed up a drink using all the dregs from a bunch of bottles. I’ve never been so wrecked in all my life!”

Tashana winced, giving him a look of sympathy. “I can’t imagine having a worse hangover than I did this morning.”

“Yeah, I learned my lesson,” John said with a chuckle as he stepped into the shower cubicle.

Closing his eyes, he sighed in bliss as the hot warm washed over him, the twins making sure he got nice and clean. They split up to get dressed, agreeing to meet by the grav-tube when they were ready. Sakura was waiting for John as he strode down the corridor, a bacon roll in one hand and a mug of hot coffee in the other.

“Oh, you’re an angel, honey!” he exclaimed, eagerly accepting both from the raven-haired beauty.

She watched him take his first bite and smiled when he groaned with delight. “I love cooking for you, you’re so easy to please.”

John swallowed the first bite and shook his head. “I’m not exaggerating, this is really good!”

Sakura gave him an affectionate peck on the cheek. “I’ll make you something nice for lunch. Any requests?”

“Why don’t you surprise me?” John replied with a broad grin, before taking a sip of coffee. “Mmm, that’s good too.”

Tashana and Irillith appeared from their quarters within seconds of each other, and Sakura waved them all goodbye before returning to the lounge. John greeted the twins with a smile, then offered them a bite of the roll or a drink of coffee.

“It’s okay, we had a filling breakfast already,” Irillith said patting her tummy. “You better keep your strength up though...”

When Tashana shook her head as well, John eagerly tucked into the rest of his breakfast as they rode up to the Command Deck.

“Where should we go to look into my research?” Tashana asked, hesitating when they stepped out onto the Bridge.

“Our stations?” Irillith suggested waving towards their places on the Bridge.

John strode down the ramp and beckoned them to follow. “Let’s use the Briefing Room. There’ll be less distractions.”

He led them into the long room, then activated the holo-interface built into the desk and divided it into three partitions. Taking a seat in the middle, he put down his coffee mug and half-eaten roll, then patted the seats beside him. The sisters glided over obediently and sat down to flank him, smiling as they did so.

“You’re right, this is much better,” Tashana agreed. “Now I can easily see what you’re both looking at if you find something interesting.”

She connected to her station on the Bridge and began accessing all the files she’d uploaded from her research archive on Valaden.

Irillith tapped a finger against her chin and brought up an administration portal in the holo-panel. “I can set up a VI to start searching through Valada’s notes and recordings for keywords. Is there anything specific you want me to look for?”

John leaned back in his chair, trying to think of phrases that might have been used. “Perhaps try looking for references to the Astral Plane or Spirit Walking, as well as ‘monsters’, ‘eldritch’, ‘ancient’, ‘psychic’... oh and anything about nightmares or dreams too.”

“Sure, that won’t be any problem at all,” she replied, bringing up a ghostly holographic keyboard, her fingers dancing over the keys.

Tashana placed a hand on John’s arm to draw his attention. “Where would you like to start? I think the most relevant data will be from the training facility I uncovered...”

“Shall we work from the beginning, just to be thorough?” he suggested. “You can talk us through your initial findings in the palace on Valaden, then we can continue on through your dig sites and look at everything in the order you discovered it.”

“Are you sure?” Tashana asked, clearly thrilled at being able to discuss her work in such detail. She faltered, then glanced at John then Irillith. “It’ll take quite a bit of time to go through it all...”

“We don’t want to miss any clues,” John said, giving her a reassuring smile. “Besides, I’d be fascinated to hear you talk about something you’re so passionate about.”

“And I can make up for lost time,” Irillith said, looking at her sister affectionately. “Your work always was interesting, I was just being stubborn and petty not paying more attention years ago.”

Tashana beamed at them in delight and swiped across the first folder, bringing up pictures onto their matching displays. “I first thought there might be more to the Mael’nerak story when I discovered this frieze in the old catacombs underneath the palace!

The picture was of an elaborately sculpted piece of masonry depicting a dozen naked Maliri women kneeling before a man on a throne. The male figure was clearly taller and stockier than a Maliri male should have been, with meticulous attention to detail on his face and robed physique.

“I remember you showing me this...” Irillith said quietly, leaning forward and staring at the picture. “He looks very like you, John; that’s why I thought you were Mael’nerak when we met on Geniya station.”

As John stared at the goateed and robed figure on the throne, Tashana continued, “Finding this artefact suddenly made me think that there must be much more to the ancient stories about the Mael’nerak. Why would an adult sculptor create such an elaborate piece about a nursery story and specifically add a sexual undertone to the sculpture with the nude women?”

John raised an eyebrow. “You’d be surprised what Terrans get up to...”

Tashana nodded and said, “I knew that Terran stonemasons sometimes depicted your ancient gods as being bigger than normal mortals, to show their elevated status. Mael’nerak is shown here as about the same size as a well-built Terran, which makes him larger than a Maliri male... but Mael’nerak was never revered like that in our culture. Even if he was, I would still have expected him to be shown as much more like a Maliri in build.”

“That wasn’t quite what I meant, but you make a good point,” John said, nodding his understanding. “Whoever made this piece obviously looked at Mael’nerak in a flattering light; he’s not being portrayed as a villain in his bearing or posture.”

“Exactly!” she said, then gestured to the prone girls worshipping him. “But those girls are also clearly shown to be enthralled by him. So, with my curiosity piqued, I started searching for any other works referencing Mael’nerak.” She brought up a second set of images. “My first dig was near an abandoned settlement called Sylmalume. Let me show you what I found there...”

Eight hours later, after spending the entire day scrutinising the Mael’nerak research, John, Tashana, and Irillith relaxed in bed, the twins snuggling into John as they caressed each other’s curved bellies.

“I can’t believe we didn’t find a thing,” Irillith murmured, clearly disappointed.

Tashana gave her a helpless shrug. “I know my research pretty thoroughly, I didn’t think I’d seen anything on the Astral monsters before.”

John stroked their backs and said, “Don’t get disheartened, we knew it was going to be a lot of work. We’ve still got Valada’s notes and all the findings from that facility to go over. If there is anything, that’s bound to be our best chance of discovering it.”

Irillith brightened as she glanced across John’s chest at her twin. “How about your research notes from your digs in the Trankaran Republic? I couldn’t find that data when I was setting up the VI. Perhaps something in there might be valuable?”

Tashana looked at her in surprise, then her expression softened. “No, there was nothing useful there I’m afraid...”

Her sister frowned in confusion. “But you were there for over a decade! You must have found something.” She paused for a second, looking thoughtful. “What about your time in the Unclaimed Wastes? Maybe there was something there that might help us? Were you researching Mael’nerak’s genocide of the Achonin?”

Tashana let out a heavy sigh and glanced up at John. “I hate there being secrets between us...”

“Secrets, what do you mean?” Irillith asked, looking concerned.

John stroked Irillith’s shoulder soothingly as he gave Tashana a worried look. “Are you sure? You’re strong enough to break the barrier, but... it’s going to be rough.”

“Barrier?” Irillith asked in confusion. “You two aren’t making any sense.”

Tashana gave John a firm nod, then sat up and moved around him so that she lie down next to her twin. Taking Irillith’s hands into her own, she gazed into those anxious violet eyes and said gently, “I’ve kept things from you, big sister. You helped too, giving John permission so that he could shield your mind to help make me better. It worked, but I don’t want there to be any barriers between us now... they’re holding us back.”

“I helped?” Irillith asked, frowning as she glanced up at John, then focusing on her twin again.

“Shh, just relax and everything will be fine,” Tashana murmured, her eyes starting to glow with a soft inner radiance. “Now I’ve bonded with Alyssa, we can bond too, but there’s something in the way... a mental barrier that’s stopping us.”

“I want that so much!” Irillith gasped, her angular eyes flashing with excitement. “How do we get rid of the barrier?”

The glow in Tashana’s eyes flared, then was mirrored in her sister’s a second later. “There... now open your mind to me.”

Irillith looked elated, a gloriously happy smile on her face as she threw herself into the bond with her twin, baring her soul. Tashana did likewise and Irillith gasped in wonder...then let out a anguished cry of horror. Her face twisted in shock as she realised the terrible truth of what had really happened to Tashana.

What she had done to her twin.

“No... no, no, NO!” Irillith sobbed, tears rolling down her cheeks as she stared aghast at her sister. She relived every moment of Tashana’s torment; starting with that excruciating agony of betrayal, when Irillith framed her and engineered her banishment. “How could I do that to you?!”

Irillith trembled with anguish, racked with deep sobs, finally getting a glimpse of the horrendous catalogue of brutality Tashana had endured. Brutal gang rapes, whippings, torture, even her sister’s face being permanently mutilated... and through it all, feelings of terror, shame, and despair. The only thing that had given Tashana the strength to survive through her hideous ordeal had been her blazing hatred for her twin.

“I forgive you... that’s all behind us now,” Tashana murmured, giving her a tender kiss.

“I’m a monster...” Irillith sobbed wretchedly, writhing in anguish as she witnessed all the terrible things that had happened to her twin in the Unclaimed Wastes.

“No! You’re different now, thanks to John. So is Edraele... and so am I,” Tashana insisted, pulling her twin closer. “You can feel everything... but forget the past, focus on what I’m feeling right now.”

Irillith heaved a ragged breath and did as her sister asked, trying to ignore the horrific memories and concentrating on Tashana lying on the bed beside her. She gasped again, then melted into Tashana’s arms, a look of wonder on her face.

“We started as one and we’ll always be a part of each other,” Tashana murmured, gazing into her sister’s stunned eyes. “I love every part of you, Irillith. Join with me again...”

John watched as Irillith calmed, the two girls staring lovingly into each other’s eyes, a soft nimbus of violet light linking them together.

\*Holy shit!\* Alyssa exclaimed, her shocked voice ringing through his thoughts.

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There was deathly silence in the meeting room as the movie on the holo-screen ended, the final shot showing John walking through a teeming throng of Trankarans. The solemn respect and sincere gratitude on their slab-like features was quite apparent to the Terran audience in the room.

Jehanna Elani’s beautiful face appeared on the screen a moment later and she slowly shook her head as she glanced at her fellow anchor. “This is the fifth time I’ve watched it and I’m still moved...”

Bill Armstrong nodded, a genuine look of awe on his face. “I have a newfound respect for the incredible servicemen and women in our armed forces, Jehanna.”

“I’m sure the Trankarans feel the same way,” she replied, with a warm smile. “It makes me feel proud that the Terran Federation was able to help our friends and allies in their time of need.”

“Can someone shut that bitch off!” Admiral Weber snapped, glowering at the screen.

Fleet Admiral Buckingham paused the recording, then looked around at the four Admirals seated at the meeting table. “Comments?” he asked through gritted teeth.

“I had no idea how powerful his ground forces were,” Edwin Caldwell murmured, looking shocked at the scenes he’d just watched. “He only had four lionesses with him when he rescued the Chancellor... It would’ve taken us an entire battalion of troops to face that many Kirrix and we would’ve taken significant losses. I didn’t see a scratch on any of those girls by the end of that battle and they were fighting non-stop for hours!”

“That’s why any attempts to seize the Invictus are doomed to failure,” Lynette Devereux said, throwing a pointed glance at Admiral Weber. “Any strike forces we sent in wouldn’t stand a chance.”

Weber frowned but couldn’t argue with the carnage he’d just witnessed with his own eyes. “You’re right... Now it is far too late, we should’ve struck when I said!” Turning to look at the Fleet Admiral, he continued, “His ship’s been upgraded yet again! It’s even stronger than it was at Regulus... There must’ve been a score of Kirrix capital ships in that fleet and he annihilated every last one of them!”

“Could we even match the Invictus in an open battle?” Buckingham asked Caldwell, a hint of fear in his voice.

Caldwell didn’t hesitate when he shook his head. “With their speed and firepower? They could pick any fleet apart with those Nova Lances and Singularity Drivers and we’d be powerless to stop them. Our only chance would be to lure them into a trap, then fight in a pre-prepared battlefield. Even then I’m not convinced we’d be successful.”

“How the hell did he get his hands on the Singularity Driver schematics?” Buckingham muttered, rubbing his hand across his brow.

Mishra leaned back in her chair and said thoughtfully, “There were reports of him having a pet AI at Regulus and they did capture Lynton’s dreadnought. Perhaps they acquired the weapon plans from the Thor?”

The Fleet Admiral sighed and nodded. “That does seem the most likely option.” He looked at the four Admirals. “Anything else?”

“John Blake is obviously aware of our rejection of the Trankaran’s request for aid,” Jayanti Mishra observed, glancing at Jehanna’s frozen image. “Her line at the end there seemed like an obvious reference to that decision.”

“Oh, really?” Admiral Weber said sarcastically, before rolling his eyes. “She’s his mouthpiece... TFNN has been running constant pro-Lion features for weeks.”

“To be fair, I suppose it could have been a lot worse...” Edwin said quietly.

“How?!” Weber demanded, looking incredulous. “That combat footage makes him look like some kind of action holo-movie star! His popularity is going to go through the roof!”

Devereux shared a glance with Caldwell and nodded. “If John was really trying to cause trouble, he could’ve gone public about us turning our backs on the Trankarans. Just imagine how that would’ve made us look, especially with him riding in to save the day!”

“Exactly,” Caldwell agreed.

Buckingham’s eyes narrowed and he said in a cold voice, “It was clearly a barbed dig at High Command... and I refuse to be lectured to by John Blake. You know as well as I do that we’ve been fighting off the Kirrix all along the border. It’d be madness to strip forces from territory under attack, just to send them on a reckless jaunt into Trankaran Space!”

The Admirals went quiet, darting glances at each other, all well aware of the escalation of Kirrix probing attacks on the outer rim of the Terran Federation.

With a heavy sigh of frustration, Buckingham leaned back in his chair. “All this combat footage really does is confirm something we already suspected: we can’t openly fight John Blake. That leaves us with our contingency plans... so what’s your current progress there? Have you found anything from digging into his background?”

Weber frowned, then said, “I followed up on the survivors from the Unclaimed Wastes; you know the ones, they popped up in a TFNN fluff piece for Blake.”

“The rescued slaves from the Underworld?” Mishra asked, leaning forward with interest. “What did they say?”

Snorting in frustration, Weber growled, “If there’s any dirt there, no-one’s talking. We tried bribery, some intimidation... we got nothing. They wouldn’t say a bad word about him.”

“He rescued them from slavery,” Devereux said quietly. “Did you really expect anything else?”

“Alright, what about you?” Weber challenged her. “If it’s that easy, I’m sure you found all the dirt on your pet Lion!”

Devereux reached into her pocket and put a holo-projector on the table. “I did find something actually...” She pressed a button on the small device and a holographic picture of a scrawny young woman appeared, her short blonde hair lank and greasy.

“Who’s that?” Caldwell asked, studying the woman curiously.

“Alyssa Marant,” Devereux replied with a smile. “My team searched back through the calls logged to John’s old ship, the Fool’s Gold. Six months ago, he made a call to GALSEC and ran a background check against her ID. Ladies and gentlemen, meet John Blake’s first lioness.”

Caldwell frowned and looked closer. “There must be some kind of mistake... that can’t be right.”

Devereux tapped another button and brought up a picture taken at the award ceremony of the statuesque blonde, as she beamed a glorious smile at the crowds. “It’s definitely her. I had my team run comprehensive facial analysis against the two images. Her eyes are the closest match, although her irises are now brighter and clearer. The rest of her features are similar too, but with varying degrees of change.”

Looking on in fascination, Mishra asked, “I suppose it shouldn’t be that surprising; do you remember the radical change to Lynton? I’d love to know how these Progenitors do it...”

“Even a full body-sculpt job can’t make that dramatic a difference,” Edwin noted, nodding with similar interest.

Weber sneered in derision and waved his hand at the two images. “The public will never believe it! Going from that... to that?! Even if they do, big deal... So Alyssa started out as gutter trash from the rim; who gives a shit?” He snorted as he looked at the pictures. “You know the kind of following those lionesses have. If we release this to the public, Blake will have millions of women begging him to change them the same way!”

Devereux was about to snap a sharp retort, but Buckingham raised his hand and interjected. “He’s right, we can’t use this. It would be far too easy to spin the story into something positive for Blake... What else?”

“I’ve been investigating reports into a freighter rescue... the Calypso,” Mishra said after a moment’s hesitation. “The crew were all interviewed afterwards by the relief force that towed their ship to Port Heracles. There were claims that John saved them by ripping a cyborg pirate apart with his bare hands! I’ve seen pictures of the remains of the cyborg... it wasn’t pretty.”

Buckingham looked at her in confusion. “How does that help?”

She shrugged and said tentatively, “I thought maybe the brutality angle...”

Buckingham narrowed his eyes in anger. “It was a pirate for God’s sake! Everyone wants them dead! If we release that, the public will love him even more!” He jabbed a finger at Jehanna’s image on the holo-screen. “She’d be on the news within the hour crowing about the Lion bringing ‘stern justice to the enemies of the good citizens of the Federation’!”

Mishra faltered and said quietly, “I’m trying, but-”

The Fleet Admiral slapped his hand down on the table. “We need real dirt on the man! I refuse to believe there’s nothing in his past we can’t twist to our advantage! If by some goddamn miracle he is a born-again saint, then look into all his associates; maybe we can tarnish him by association!”

The Admirals all nodded their agreement, darting anxious glances at one another.

“Alright, that’s all for today,” Buckingham said curtly, rising to his feet. “You’re dismissed.”

Mishra, Devereux, and Caldwell filed from the office, but Weber hung back. “A quick word, Sir?” he asked politely.

The Fleet Admiral nodded, walking across the office to his desk. “I hope you’ve got some good news for me, Carl.”

A confident smile spread over Weber’s face. “We tapped the TFNN hotline regarding information on the Nymphs. My strike teams tracked down the most reliable informants, rounded them up and interned them so we could find out what they know. We’ve started hunting down the aliens themselves.”

“How many so far?” Buckingham asked, looking delighted.

“Two. I’ve had them sent to a secure facility,” Weber said with a smile of satisfaction. “The extraction was covert, so there won’t be any direct blowback from their previous owners. You’d be surprised who they were though... Such upstanding citizens keeping an alien sex-slave as a pet! They definitely won’t want this going public.”

Buckingham patted the Admiral on the shoulder, “Excellent work, Carl. Let me know who the previous owners were in your report would you?”

“Of course, Sir,” Weber said with a grin.

“Just imagine replicating those Nymphs and turning them into shock troops...” Buckingham murmured, a triumphant gleam in his eyes. He smiled at Weber. “Even if we can’t, it keeps them out of Blake’s hands.”

“He’ll never find them,” Weber agreed, looking confident.

The Fleet Admiral sat in his chair, then glanced up at his fellow officer. “Round up the rest of them, then begin the tests...”

“Yes, Sir,” Weber replied with a sharp salute, before turning and walking from the office.

Buckingham steepled his fingers, a smile creeping onto his face as he imagined John Blake’s confusion at the lack of response to his appeal. Turning and opening up the holo-interface on his desk, he scrolled down through hundreds of notifications until he paused, finding exactly what he was looking for. The post-dated security lockdown he’d placed on all the military records regarding Nymphs had been queried, the source none other than the Invictus itself.

“It’s about time we curtailed your little operation, Mister Blake,” he said to himself, with a nod of satisfaction.

Relaxing back in his chair, he glanced across the office at the still-frozen image of Jehanna Elani on the holo-screen.

“Yes, well past time...”