Three Square Meals Ch. 97

John stood by his chair at the head of the long Briefing Room table and waited for the girls to take their seats before sitting himself. “Alright then, ladies, bring me up to speed; what have you been up to for the last couple of days?”

“While you were balls-deep inside those sexy blue babes, enjoying your non-stop impregnathon you mean?” Dana asked, an innocent expression on her face.

He couldn’t help flushing, the reddening of his cheeks enough to get all the girls laughing.

Raising his hands, he said, “I’m sure I deserve a bit of ribbing, but not right now, okay? I’ve fed Tsarra three times, so I’m due another visit with the astral monsters. We need to be sharp and alert for this, and the longer we put off sleeping the more tired we’ll get. So let’s have a quick catch-up, recap our plans, then go to bed...”

“For the first time, it’s not exciting to hear you say that,” Calara said, a worried frown on her olive-skinned face.

He reached to his left to clasp her hand, trying to reassure her with his firm hold. “Yeah, I know what you mean.” Glancing around the group, he continued, “Okay then, anyone got anything new they want to update me on?”

“We’ve upgraded the Gauss Cannons,” Calara said, her expression brightening.

“Really?” John asked in surprise. “To what?”

“Heavy Quantum Guns,” Dana said with a satisfied grin. “They’re like ten-metre-long versions of our rifles. Alyssa did the shaping yesterday and Faye had her boys install them today, while you were busy porking Nyrelle.” She glanced at Faye, who tipped an imaginary hat, a broad grin on her face.

John rolled his eyes at the redhead, but couldn’t help smiling. “How effective are the new guns?”

“Rapid firing with high armour penetration, but the quantum field wrapped around the slug gives them the ability to disrupt shielding. They’re fucking hardcore!” Dana exclaimed, her eyes shining with pride.

Calara nodded, looking equally pleased. “The old Gauss Cannons were too restrictive in their usage, so the Heavy Quantum Guns will be a huge improvement. Previously we had to wait until we stripped a target’s shields before we could bring those weapons to bear, but now we won’t have to. I’ve been studying Dana’s projections for their damage output and they should be extremely effective.”

“Would you expect anything less?” the redhead asked airily.

John shook his head. “From you? Never.”

Dana grinned at him, but her smile then faded into a rueful frown. “I’d love to upgrade the Heavy Cannons into Quantum Cannons, but it’s a big job and we’ll need some time in a drydock.”

“Quantum Cannons?” John asked, his eyebrows climbing. “You mean we’ll have six of those guns the Ashanath had on the Legacy?!”

“Ah... no, afraid not,” Dana said, shaking her head. “That was a Quantum Flux Cannon which is pure Progenitor tech and something else entirely. The Quantum weapons we use are my own invention, based off the same kind of idea of wrapping up shells in an energy packet. My guns are very powerful, but not in the same league.” She blushed and muttered, “Probably should have named them something different... sorry.”

He shrugged and gave her a reassuring smile. “The Quantum weapons sound like they’ll be a big upgrade, but they are still a temporary stepping stone, so it’s not a big deal. You and I were going to work on unlocking more Progenitor tech from that wonderful mind of yours, remember?”

That turned Dana’s frown upside down and she gave him a sparkling smile. “Oh yeah!”

Sakura raised a hand to get the distracted redhead’s attention. “Did you upgrade the Punisher Gatling on the Valkyrie too?”

Dana shook her head. “Not yet, sorry. I’ve got something in mind, so once I’ve drawn up the schematics, it shouldn’t take too long to put it together.”

“Fantastic, thank you,” the Asian girl said, nodding in gratitude. She glanced at John and continued, “I had a lovely time getting to know Valani, then I spent every available opportunity training with Luna.” She shook her head in admiration. “Her skill with a blade was incredible. After you enhanced her physique to match mine, I had no chance against her... unless I cheated and used my powers.”

“Was she a good instructor?” John asked, looking hopeful.

“Very. She taught me a lot,” Sakura said, a lop-sided smile twitching her lips. “I don’t think you’ll stand a chance against me now, not until I share what I’ve learned with you.”

“Bold words,” John said, matching her smile. “I’ll look forward to seeing what you can do...”

Sakura’s brown eyes flashed with anticipation, then she turned to face Dana. “Luna absolutely loved the Paragon suit and the pistol you gave her.”

“Another happy customer!” the redhead said with satisfaction, before giving John a cheeky grin. “Got to keep those hot little broodmares nice and safe... I reckon Luna’s going be a handful!”

Rachel elbowed her lover and said, “He asked you to be good!”

“I can’t help it!” Dana protested, giving John a plaintive look. “The Young Matriarchs were just adorable and watching you knock them up was so fucking sexy! Since then, I can barely think about anything else!”

Alyssa placed her hand on John’s shoulder, her expression sombre. “As your XO, I think I should inform you that our Chief Engineer seems to be losing her mind. Only a good fucking can save her now.”

“Yeah!” Dana exclaimed, looking thrilled. “You need to load us up before we kick some ass anyway. You can do me, then I’ll feed the girls!”

John pretended to be mulling over the idea for a moment, then nodded. “It sounds like we have our last-minute battle prep covered.” He winked at Dana, then looked around the table and continued, “Alright, anything else?”

“I finished reviewing my research notes,” Tashana said quietly.

He could guess at the results by her downcast expression. “Nothing on the Astral monsters then?”

“Afraid not. I scoured everything we took from Valada’s server and double-checked all the photographic evidence I gathered at the site, but there were no references of any kind. I did find pictures of those murals I discovered that showed Thralls carrying Reaper Cannons. It was like seeing stylised portraits of Irillith in action, which I must admit was more than a little unsettling.” The twins shared a glance and a brief smile, before focusing on John once again.

John rubbed his chin and reasoned, “If it was some kind of Thrall recruitment centre like you guessed, it’s unlikely they’d openly portray those monsters. They probably wouldn’t want to scare off any new recruits.”

Tashana shook her head. “Actually, that’s not strictly true. With their genetic programming, the ancient Maliri would have probably been so excited at the chance to be with Mael’nerak, they would have been largely oblivious to their surroundings.”

“Only as long as he was present,” Rachel reminded her. “Otherwise Mael’nerak’s Matriarch and Thralls would be relying on the effects of their white-haired appearance to lure in new recruits.”

Irillith frowned and glanced at her sister. “From what we’ve seen of Valada, I just can’t imagine her behaving that way...”

“She was enthralled by Mael’nerak and in the early days he wasn’t the reformed character he eventually became,” Rachel gently reminded them. “From everything I’ve seen of Valada, I’d be inclined to agree with you; she did seem to be a kind, caring woman. However, speculation about her early behaviour before Mael’nerak had his epiphany is pure conjecture at this point.”

“It’s a shame the Thrall site was so badly damaged,” Tashana said, with a wistful sigh. “A significant portion of the facility had already collapsed due to seismic activity.”

“Well it’s still the best source of information we’ve found on Mael’nerak so far; perhaps we should just visit it again when we return to Maliri Space?” John suggested, looking around the room. “If there is anything left there to find, between all of us I’m sure we can dig it out.”

“That’s an excellent idea!” Tashana said, beaming at him. “With your strength, Alyssa’s telekinesis, the maintenance bots and everyone else, we’ll be able to fully excavate the entire facility in no time!”

Alyssa squeezed John’s hand and gave him a look of sympathy. “I’m sorry, I know how much you hate having to return to Maliri Space... The locals are so demanding!”

He laughed and raised both hands in the air, gesturing for the girls to proceed. “Alright, everyone get it out of their system.”

John chuckled as the girls did exactly that, giggling at each other’s ribald jokes. He shared a smile with Alyssa and she leaned in to kiss him.

When she pulled away, she said softly, “We’re all just excited, that’s all. When we were watching you with the Maliri, everyone here was imagining it was themselves in bed with you.”

He tensed, a flash of guilt crossing his face.

“You have nothing to feel guilty about,” she said quickly, stroking his head. “You made five lovely girls blissfully happy and you did it for all the right reasons. None of us harbours the slightest resentment or jealousy towards the Young Matriarchs, far from it. Besides, we weren’t being totally selfless. They were as good as their word and showed us what it would be like getting pregnant by you in several different positions... it gave us lots of intriguing ideas for the future.”

“But, I thought...” he muttered in astonishment.

“That they all asked you to breed them in different ways by happy coincidence?” she asked, stroking his head affectionately. “We all got together and discussed it while you were re-bonding with Edraele. It was something they wanted to do for us, in exchange for borrowing ‘our’ man.”

“Nyrelle also volunteered to play at being the ‘Thrall’ for you,” Rachel confided, giving him a knowing smile. “It only took me a few minutes to realise she was already far too excited to remember any intricate role-play suggestions. In the end I realised you’d both have far more fun if I simply encouraged her to let go of all her inhibitions...”

“She was absolutely wild in the bedroom!” John marvelled. “That was your doing?!”

“You’re welcome,” Rachel said with a satisfied smirk. “I had a good chat with her afterwards; she couldn’t stop talking about how you were a god in the bedroom. If you ever decide to become a fertility deity, you’ve found your first true believer.”

Alyssa frowned, her full lips forming a playful pout. “I thought that was me, oh Divine One?”

“You’ll always lead the faithful, honey,” John replied, smiling as the blonde’s pout turned into a radiant smile. He turned back to the brunette. “I’m not sure if I should be awed, shocked, or just overwhelmingly grateful. If it’s alright with you, I think I’ll settle with all three.”

“You really loved being with a completely uninhibited girl like that, didn’t you?” Rachel asked, giving him an enigmatic smile. “Perhaps I should give myself a good talking to?”

John looked at her in surprise, unable to tell if she was joking or not, but it was quite clear by the brunette’s expression that she wasn’t intending to elaborate. He coughed to clear his throat, then glanced around and asked, “Does anyone else want to raise anything, or shall we head to the bedroom. We can discuss the assault plan there.”

The girls exchanged furtive glances and secret smiles, obviously up to something. John frowned, not sure what he was missing, but he was still flustered by Rachel’s teasing and was distracted by his worries about the upcoming battle in the Astral plane.

When no one suggested anything else to discuss, he nodded and rose to his feet. “Okay then, let’s go.”

He waited for them to file out the door, waving goodbye to Faye as she disappeared in a purple flash. Leaving the Briefing Room, John strode up the ramp towards the grav-tube, smiling at Faye as he usually did when she gave him a friendly wave. She was sitting on his console up on the Command Podium as normal, but there was something slightly different about her, which he couldn’t quite place.

“Hey, John,” she said softly.

“Hey yourself, beautiful,” he replied, but something in her voice made him pause at the bottom of the illuminated steps. When he glanced at the purple AI again, he blinked in surprise, realising what was different about her appearance. “What happened to your wings?!”

She slid off the console, then rearranged her short dress, before walking slowly down the steps towards him. “Do you really miss them?”

He smiled at her and replied, “You look adorable either way, I just got used to them, that’s all.”

Faye stopped on the third to last step, bringing herself to eye-level with him. “I know you need to make plans for tonight, but I just wondered if I could speak to you for a moment. It’s personal...”

“Of course, honey,” John replied, concern replacing his smile. “Want to go to my Ready Room?”

“Here is just fine,” she murmured, reaching out to brush her slender fingers against his arm, in a simple gesture of affection.

John kept still so that he wouldn’t break the contours of her holographic body and shatter the illusion of touch for her. He saw her luminous eyes going wide as she reached towards him, but thought nothing of it, as Faye’s mannerisms had become very authentic now. It came as a huge shock when there was physical contact between them, her touch feathery soft against his skin.

“Your body!” he exclaimed, gaping at her in astonishment. “But... You look exactly the same!”

She giggled and looked at him incredulously. “You weren’t expecting the white chassis were you?!”

John hesitated before giving her a reluctant nod, blushing as he did so. “When you showed me the design for your new body, I wasn’t lying when I said I thought it looked beautiful. After that I just forgot it wasn’t finished...” He chuckled self-consciously. “Alright, I’m an idiot, but in my defence, I have had a lot on my mind with the Maliri and I’ve been really distracted...”

“Faye!” Dana protested indignantly. “You were sworn to secrecy!”

“Sorry, I couldn’t help myself!” the sprite replied with a grin.

John turned to look at the frowning redhead and saw that the rest of the crew were watching him with amusement. He brought his attention back to the purple-skinned girl standing before him and really took a moment to study her.

Faye was much shorter than the rest of the girls, barely reaching five-feet tall. He would have towered over her if not for the podium steps, and from her current vantage point they were able to stand eye-to-eye. She had the same elfin face he’d grown so fond of, with similar features to the Maliri, just slightly more pronounced. High cheekbones, a delicate nose above enticing cupid-bow lips and big luminous eyes that gazed back at him with equal fascination.

Her short aquamarine dress was similar in style to the longer ones worn by the Maliri, with slashes taken from the sides and front to reveal more of her flawless purple skin. The dress ended mid-thigh, revealing her lithe, shapely legs which were well proportioned for her petite frame. He would best describe them as dancer’s legs, athletic with highly-toned muscles.

Faye’s figure was lithe and slender, with a tiny waist and small pert breasts that sat high on her chest. Long flowing dark-purple hair tumbled around her shoulders and down her back, giving her a tousled, natural look. She looked more like some wild forest sprite that he’d caught capering through a moonlit meadow, than the immaculately groomed girls on his crew; but that striking difference also made her extremely appealing.

He reached out to touch her slender arm, before pausing just a few inches away. “May I?”

She bit her flushed lower lip then nodded. “Of course.”

John let his fingertips brush against her forearm, feeling a comforting warmth to her body as his fingers glided across her velvety-smooth skin. “I can’t believe I’m touching you at last,” he murmured, taking his eyes from the trail of goosebumps he’d left on her arm to look at her face.

Faye was gaping at him in astonishment, lips slightly parted over dazzling white teeth as she let out a faint moan at his touch. “That feels indescribable...” she whispered.

John stepped closer as he gazed into her eyes. “I’ve wanted to do this for a really long time...”

He encircled her in his strong arms and Faye let out a squeak of shock, freezing in place. She was unresisting as John pulled her closer, wrapped her in a loving embrace.

“Oh my goodness!” Faye gasped, big eyes grown wide as saucers as her chest made contact with his. She let out a dreamy sigh, then relaxed and hugged him back, her hands gently stroking his back.

“Thanks for everything you’ve done for us,” John whispered in her tiny pointed ear.

Faye pulled back and shook her head. “Thank you for everything you’ve done for me!”

He smiled at her, then said, “Consider us even.”

Her mouth parted slightly as she gazed at him, lips looking soft and oh-so-inviting... John brushed his fingers through her hair, cupping the back of her head as he felt a strong urge to kiss her. Leaning forward he turned slightly, pressing his lips against her cheek at the corner of her mouth. Faye’s long eyelashes fluttered as she let out another startled squeak, then melted in his arms.

“I’m really looking forward to our first date,” he said quietly, smiling when he saw the look of eager anticipation fill her eyes.

A gentle round of applause started behind him and they both turned to see the girls watching them with affectionate smiles on their faces. Then they all gathered around, each waiting their turn to finally get to hug the ninth lioness on their crew.

John stepped back several paces to give them room, then beckoned Dana, Rachel, Alyssa, and Irillith over to him while Faye was getting an enthusiastic embrace from Jade. “You did an absolutely incredible job, thank you for the tremendous amount of effort you put in,” he said softly.

Dana glanced at Faye, who had a glorious smile on her face as she hugged Calara for the first time. “Just look how happy she is... it was totally worth it.”

The other three nodded, equally delighted to see their friend’s pure joy. Once all the hugs were out the way, they headed down to Deck Two, where Alyssa stopped outside one of the officers’ quarters on the right, adjacent to Tashana’s bedroom.

“Now you’ve got your own body, you need your own bedroom,” the blonde said, opening the door and grinning at Faye. She glanced at John and added, “Feel free to decorate it however you like, but please keep it tidy!”

He laughed, then put his arm around Faye’s shoulder, the purple sprite gazing into her room in awe. “Go ahead, honey. It’s all yours.”

She entered the room with faltering steps, an awestruck expression on her elfin face. Faye’s big eyes were brimming with emotion when she spotted the Paragon of Terra medal, which was now proudly displayed in a velvet-lined case on her desk.

Irillith walked in after her, carrying a wrapped present in her arms. “A little moving in gift for you, Faye.”

Faye accepted the parcel and sat on the bed, her fingers trembling as she reached for the wrapping paper. She began to unwrap it, hesitant and careful at first as she gazed at the rectangular object in rapt fascination. With a final flourish, she tore away a large sheet of the paper, revealing the contents to everybody.

It was Irillith’s old hacking deck, still active and hooked up to the hacking portal, all securely stored in a transparent crystal Alyssium cylinder. At the front was a plaque, which read:

*“From humble beginnings come great things.”*

*“Thank you for being our friend.”*

Faye let out a low cry, then wrapped her arms around Irillith, shiny crystal-clear tears rolling down her cheeks. “I love you so much, Creator. Thank you!”

John watched them embracing with a fond smile. His happiness was marred only by his irritation at the cleaning bots; they must have let the room get awfully dusty, because it felt like something was getting in his eyes. Faye smiled at him over Irillith’s shoulder, a look of profound contentment on her blissfully happy face. Dana slipped her hand into John’s and squeezed it gently to get his attention. He glanced down at her and saw that her eyes were filled with happy tears as she returned his curious gaze. She stepped out of the bedroom, leading him by the hand.

“You need to get us ready for tonight,” she said in a hushed voice.

The events with Faye had changed her mood and John nodded, sensing the difference. Dana led him into the bathroom and they undressed then walked into the shower together, joined moments later by the rest of the crew. Faye was last and she waited by the door, still fully dressed and with a look of longing in her eyes.

“You’ve waited a long time to join us like this,” Alyssa said with an encouraging smile. “But now you don’t have to miss out any more.”

She blushed at John shyly, then slipped the strap of her dress over her shoulder. It fell to the floor, pooling at her feet, revealing her tantalising nude body. Faye was like a smaller version of the rest of the girls, but perfectly proportioned, with b-cup breasts on her petite frame topped by mouth-watering dark-purple nipples. Like the other girls on the crew, she had no body hair below her long eyelashes, her skin smooth and glowing with health.

Stepping into the shower with everyone, she giggled self-consciously, then felt the water splash over her skin for the first time and gasped. The gasp turned into a moan of pleasure as the girls drew her into the group, caressing and massaging her water-slicked body. As much as John wanted to touch her too, he limited himself to brushing his fingers against her cheek, respecting her wishes to take their physical relationship slowly. He could see the indecision in her eyes, caution warring with desire as she was sorely tempted to ask for more.

“You were right, let’s take our time,” he said, her answering blush confirming that he’d accurately read her mind.

They spent a long time in the shower, the girls taking it in turns to hug John or Faye. For John, it was the first time he’d had this much contact with his crewwomen since being with the Maliri and he could immediately tell how much they’d missed him. When he put his arms around them and gazed into their eyes, he could see the smouldering arousal burning within each girl; a different, far more intense kind of hunger than normal.

Alyssa was last and she crossed her wrists behind his neck as she kissed him, her cerulean orbs piercing his soul. \*Dana first, she really needs it,\* she reminded him, delighted to be sensing his yearning desire for her. \*I’ll make sure we get some time alone together soon...\*

They dried off and returned to the bedroom, Dana wasting no time in lying down in the middle of the bed. Faye went to the chair to watch as she always did and when John glanced her way to invite her onto the bed, she gave him a grateful smile but shook her head demurely. The rest of the girls fanned out around Dana and the redhead rolled onto her back, slowly spreading her slender legs. She held out her hand towards John, giving him a come-hither gesture which was as urgent as it was alluring.

“Too eager for foreplay?” he asked, as he knelt between her thighs, running his hands over her satiny skin.

She groaned and glanced down at her glistening pussy. “I’ve been gagging for it for hours! Please don’t make me wait any longer!”

Ever the gentleman, John did as she asked, seeing her desperate need to be filled with him. He nudged the head of his cock against her soft folds, feeling her tight passage yield to the pressure as he pushed forward. She stretched around him like a second skin, warm, wet, and very snug, her well-trained muscles rippling along his length as he slid home. As she accepted all of him into her tight embrace he realised that’s exactly what it felt like... coming home.

“You had fun getting all that blue pussy, but you missed your regular girls, didn’t you?” Alyssa purred, stroking his shoulder.

John cradled Dana’s head in his hands, relishing the look of bliss on her beautiful face as she was completely filled by him. His connection with the loveable redhead was so strong, that being inside her again felt almost spiritual. He gazed deeply into her eyes, seeing her love and devotion shining back at him.

“The Young Matriarchs are all really lovely girls, but it just wasn’t the same,” he said softly, leaning in to give Dana a tender kiss. “I really missed you...”

Rachel caressed his back, a mischievous sparkle in her grey eyes. “Like pulling on a comfy pair of old slippers...”

Dana jerked back from John’s lips and glared indignantly at her girlfriend. “Old slippers?! I’ll get you back for that one, you minx!”

John’s deep laughter harmonised with the musical giggling from the girls and Dana groaned as she felt his cock jerking deep inside her.

“Alright, you’re forgiven. That felt really fucking good!” she gasped, shifting her hips and grinding against his pelvis.

John stroked her luxuriously soft hair, watching her look of rapture as she savoured being fully impaled and waiting until she focused on him again. “What do you want? Gentle and loving, or fast and furious?”

“Whatever you want, just don’t pull out!” Dana replied with a moan, arching her back and rubbing her erect nipples against his chest.

“Anything I like?” John asked, easing back slowly before reversing direction and stuffing her full of his cock again.

She nodded, biting her lip as she felt him nudge against the back of her womb. “Anything!”

He kept the same languid pace and gazed into her eyes. “I spent a lot of time resting in bed over the last couple of days and it gave me lots of time to think. One time, when Tsarra was fast asleep and I was stroking her pregnant belly, my mind kept drifting back to you.” He glanced up at his hushed audience. “All of you.”

“What were you thinking about?” Dana murmured, listening spellbound.

“About what it’ll be like when I’m stroking your pregnant tummies; wondering which of your beautiful features our babies will have, which of your wonderful personality traits...” He had a self-conscious smile on his face as he continued, “I’ve honestly never been happier.”

“Oh, John...” Dana whispered, her expression softening.

He kissed her again, then said, “Just imagine us together like that, Dana. Me holding you in my arms, keeping you and your baby bump safe, both of us thinking about what kind of future our children will have...”

She groaned as he began to pick up the pace, the golden coronas around her pupils flaring as her body responded to that ancient instinctive rhythm. Her expression was part wonder, part delight, with a heady mix of arousal sprinkled over the top. As the broody daze began to migrate into lust, she moved with him, her thighs lifting higher to give him even deeper access to her toned belly.

Normally Dana would have already been cumming around him, but instead she held John close, murmuring loving words in his ear as he stroked her with long, deep thrusts. When his release built to a climax, John gazed into Dana’s eyes and she let out a wordless cry of pleasure as she joined him, her pussy constricting around his shaft as he filled her womb with his cum. He lifted his weight off her slim tummy, giving her plenty of room to swell with the huge load he was pumping into her.

“Fill me!” the redhead cried, her hands cradling her belly as it curved outwards.

John did exactly that, emptying every last drop into her nubile young body until his quad was drained dry. Easing out of her, he flopped onto his back, panting for breath after such an intense climax. He was suddenly surrounded by breathless girls, as Calara and Sakura showered him with kisses, while Rachel inhaled his cock, hungry for a taste of him and her girlfriend. He hugged the Latina and Asian girl to him, then glanced to his left, where Dana was being cuddled by Alyssa and Jade, while the twins were caressing her huge tummy.

Dana turned to face him, a blissful smile on her beautiful face, looking more serene and content than he’d ever seen her before. “That was everything I wanted and so much more,” she said with a happy sigh.

“Just a few months, then we’ll be doing that for real,” he said, reaching out to clasp her hand.

She gave him a wistful look, then let out a moan, her eyelashes fluttering. John heard the familiar sound of a lapping tongue and he closed his eyes for a second, studying the mental compartments in his mind. Focusing on Alyssa and her wards, he watched Tashana’s body light up with a radiant white glow as she sucked his cum out of Dana, filling her stomach. One after the other the girls took their turn, sharing mouthfuls with Dana too, until they were all shining brightly in his mind.

He sat up and looked at the girls sitting in a semi-circle around him. Being psychically connected with each of them felt different today, the link more powerful than it had been before, echoing with that same feeling of oneness that they’d glimpsed in the group hug with the Maliri. It only took a single glance at their startled faces to see that the girls all felt it too.

“Why does it feel so different to before?” Calara asked in amazement, reaching out to hold John’s left hand. “I feel so close to you, and not just to you, to everybody...”

Rachel glanced quizzically around at her adoptive sisters. “We haven’t done anything different to instigate this change, so it can’t be coming from us...” Her stormy grey eyes darted to John. “I think this is all coming from you.”

Dana rubbed her slender cum-filled stomach and grinned. “Literally!”

“I haven’t made any conscious changes to anyone,” John replied in surprise, shaking his head.

“You didn’t need to; you’ve bred four of your mates,” Jade said, looking at him with soulful eyes. “That changes everything... I can feel how much you long to do that with each of us.”

Alyssa slipped her hand into John’s, interlacing their fingers. “I think Jade’s partly right. This definitely seems like an after-effect of your time with the Maliri.” She glanced across the circle at Sakura. “Can you take a quick look at our psychic connections?”

The Asian girl took a deep breath, then seemed to be looking at everyone with fresh eyes, a warm glow illuminating her dark-brown eyes. “Oh wow!” she gasped when she got to John, blinking rapidly and turning away to shield her eyes. Her brow furrowed in concentration and she looked at him again. “The connection between you and Edraele is so much stronger! I can see this massive cable of psychic energy snaking off through the wall!”

\*You were so loving with all of us,\* Edraele said softly. \*The Young Matriarchs absolutely adore you, as do my bodyguards. I must also confess to being more than a little smitten with you myself, my darling fiancé.\*

\*I love you too, Edraele,\* he said, sending her a telepathic kiss.

John closed his eyes and examined the psychic connections to his Maliri Matriarch. What had been a fairly faint link now blazed like a supernova and he was forced to muffle the glare, just as he had done with Alyssa. With that kind of dampening filter in place, Edraele’s link to him had been barely visible before, but now he was able to directly compare hers with Alyssa’s. He could see that Edraele’s psychic connection to him was still fainter than the one with Alyssa, but it was no longer quite so dwarfed by the energy pouring off the blonde.

His blonde Matriarch nodded. “And that’s all going to you, John.” She smiled affectionately at the girls. “You’re not sharing it with all these hungry little psychic sponges...”

“But it’s not like I’ve asked Edraele to give me any energy yet...” John said in confusion. “She has loads more power she can tap into, but I’ve not actually started using any of it.”

“Athena says it doesn’t matter,” Alyssa said, suddenly looking at him in surprise. “Just expanding your pool of potential eldritch energy makes you more powerful. That’s one of the reasons why Progenitors are always trying to recruit more and more women into their armies.”

“Have you felt yourself getting stronger?” Rachel asked, studying him in fascination.

He was about to shake his head, then hesitated. “I haven’t tried doing anything dramatic, but I didn’t think twice about deca-shaping new weapons for the assassins.”

“And what about the little bird you made for Valani?” Sakura asked him with a fond smile. “She showed it to us afterwards; the colours were so vivid and lifelike, I thought it was going to fly from her hand!”

“I tried doing that myself,” Alyssa said, her voice quiet and thoughtful. “I’ve no idea how you did it... I couldn’t get crystal Alyssium to change colour like that.”

Dana frowned and raised her hands. “Hang on, I’m confused. We know John gets stronger every time he adds more girls to the group or when we get closer to him. We’ve not added anyone new for a while, but we’ve all got a lot closer recently. Despite that, he’s not really had any big jumps in power; at least not as far as I’m aware.”

“Yeah, that’s true,” John admitted.

“I know our relationship has gone from strength-to-strength over these past few weeks,” Sakura said, giving him a loving smile. “It’s been the same for lots of us.”

The twins, Calara, and Jade all nodded emphatically.

“It’s all because of us!” Tashana exclaimed her eyes widening. “Instead of growing stronger yourself, you’ve been focused on making each of us much more powerful instead!”

John frowned in confusion. “But why would that make any difference?”

Rachel nodded, eyes narrowing as she mulled it over. “I think she’s right. We know that the bulk of your psychic power comes from us via Alyssa, but you’ve also recently started giving us our own reserves of energy for us to use on our new psychic powers.” She hesitated for a second, her brow furrowing. “Perhaps by gifting each of us our own set of abilities, you’ve been stunting your own personal power growth?”

“Which would also explain why Progenitors hoard their own power so much!” Irillith exclaimed. “Sharing with their Matriarch or Thralls must weaken them!”

All the girls looked at John in consternation, appalled at the thought that they might somehow be inhibiting him from reaching his full strength.

John shrugged and gave them a reassuring smile. “If given the same choice again, I wouldn’t change a thing. You’re all incredible and I know I couldn’t do a fraction of the things that you’re each capable of.”

Tashana’s expression hadn’t changed and was still fraught with worry. “It’s a lovely sentiment, but it means you’re going to be considerably weaker than this other Progenitor. He’ll be hoarding all his power for himself!”

“Even if that’s true, John won’t be facing him alone,” Alyssa said, her voice strong and determined as she squeezed his hand.

John stroked her hand with his thumb, finding tremendous reassurance in the firm grip of her slender fingers. They shared an intimate glance before he turned to look at the girls. “We can discuss the other Progenitor later, but we’ve got something more pressing to deal with first. We need to focus on the upcoming dream and the Astral monsters.”

“Are we still going with the same plan?” Irillith asked, her angular eyes darting around the group.

John nodded. “I can’t stack multiple shields on top of each other, so I’ve already dropped the warding shield I was using to keep me hidden. When we’re ready, I’ll create another one of those hex domes like the first time. That ought to protect us for a few minutes and give us some time to prepare ourselves before we’re in danger.”

“And you’re sure everyone’s abilities will work in this monster’s sub-plane?” Calara asked, biting her lower lip anxiously.

John hesitated before nodding. “They worked for Alyssa and me, it shouldn’t be any different for all of you. I was able to create a sword and Alyssa was able to blast that creature with her massive energy beam.”

“So we go in there and everyone with combat-type powers starts attacking the mist monsters, then Alyssa goes to town with her beam laser thingy?” Dana asked, before sharing a nervous glance with the Latina, who she knew shared her concerns. “I’d feel a lot happier if there was something I could do in this fight...”

Calara nodded, a rueful frown on her face. “I can’t exactly bring the Invictus with me, and I don’t think getting into a fist-fight with those creatures is a sensible plan. That doesn’t leave me much I can do to meaningfully contribute either.”

“Perhaps it might be sensible for you both to sit this one out?” John suggested, looking at each of them in turn.

“Absolutely not!” the Latina protested.

“No fucking chance!” Dana agreed, narrowing her eyes.

He sighed and said, “I think you’re right though; your abilities aren’t really suited to this kind of fight. I don’t want to expose you to this much danger unnecessarily.”

The two girls shared a look of alarm, then shook their heads defiantly.

“You got trapped in there last time,” Calara pointed out to him. “So if we get separated and you get stuck, Alyssa might not be able to tap us for psychic energy.”

Dana nodded, her frown and tightly-folded arms indicating that her mind was made up. “Even if we’re just standing around with our thumbs up our butts, at least we’ll be useful as energy batteries!”

Holding up his hands in defeat, John said, “Okay, I just wanted to give you the option.” He glanced around at the girls, his expression pensive. “That goes for the rest of you too. The Astral Plane is terrifying and if you don’t want to go, I understand completely; just let me know if any of you have changed your mind about coming. Does anyone want to stay behind?”

He saw the hurt looks on their faces and Alyssa glared at him in disapproval. “How can you ask that? We’re a team, you know we’d follow you anywhere!”

John paused, feeling deeply chagrined. “I’m sorry... I’m just really worried about all of you.” He faltered, looking at them in turn. “I don’t feel strong there, I feel weak and vulnerable... I hate not being able to protect you from that thing!”

Alyssa and Calara hugged him tightly and he clung to them too, desperately worried about exposing the girls to this much danger. He bitterly regretted having fed Tsarra a third time, wishing he’d just put it off and avoided exposing them to such a terrible threat. Dimly aware of the rest of the girls joining the group hug, his fears began to subside as he experienced that glorious feeling of closeness once again.

“We’re all in this together,” Alyssa whispered in his ear. “The girls and I might have started off weak and vulnerable, but that feels like a lifetime ago now. You made us strong, so we can protect ourselves and each other... but now we can help protect you too.”

John gave her a grateful smile, which he shared with the rest of the girls. “Thank you and I’m very sorry.”

“You’re forgiven, you lunkhead!” Dana said with a grin.

The ensuing laughter helped lighten the mood and John relaxed as the group hug broke up. He studied the bed for a moment, then nodded decisively. “I better get started on that hex-dome. You girls better make whatever final preparations you need to.”

Alyssa held court, speaking quietly to the girls, Tashana and Sakura in particular. John could have eavesdropped, but he was too focused on the latticework of hexagons he was creating to build his dome. He took great care forging each glowing hex, the soft blue light creating a soothing ambience over the bed as he built up more of the curved shield. After mentally shaping each interlocking piece of the dome, he inscribed it with Progenitor runes that he knew would make the hexes tougher and hopefully able to withstand a battering from the behemoths lurking in the mists.

“You know you can make it much stronger than that, right...?” Dana said in a strangely distracted voice, placing her hand on his shoulder.

The soft warmth of her skin drew John out of his tightly-controlled focus. “Hmm, what was that, honey?” he asked glancing at the redhead beside him.

“The Progenitor runes... they’re more powerful in sentences,” the redhead murmured, moving towards the psychic shield. “You’ve written, ‘Tough and hard’. Let me see if I can fix that up for you...”

John could see the golden glow emitting from her eyes, the shining light reflected off the partially built dome. Dana’s hand waved over the closest hexagon and before he could object, she had obliterated his painstakingly embossed rune. John watched in fascination as she placed her fingers on the blue tile and runic script began to appear.

*“As resilient as a mountain.”*

She paused, then shook her head, clearing the hexagon of runes and starting again.

*“As resilient and eternal as a mountain, yet possessing the fiery heart of a volcano.”*

John blinked at the dozen new runes that had replaced his two. “How did you know how to do that?” he marvelled, leaning closer and examining the beautifully embossed runic script.

He could feel the power locked within that phrase, the interconnected runes flowing together and growing in strength with every syllable. There was something eerie about the phrasing that seemed strangely archaic and out of place with everything he knew about the Progenitors. For a species so obsessed with slaughter and intergalactic conquest, there was a certain poetic charm in the cadence of the sentence.

Dana blinked and looked startled as she glanced at her runes. “Err, I’m not entirely sure, but I think it sounds tons better and it’s stronger too...”

“Oh, I agree.” He examined the elegant runes for a few moments, then admitted, “I’m not sure I can recreate what you’ve done here. Could you continue with the runes while I focus on creating the hexagons?”

She nodded enthusiastically. “Sure!”

John was able to work much faster now that he didn’t have to stop to inscribe runes on each and every hexagon. He concentrated intently on his work, building the walls up higher and higher with each tile until the dome was complete, with the keystone hex locked into place at the top of the hemisphere. Remembering to fill in the floor this time, he created a broad circle of hexes that connected up to the walls of the dome. He sat back to admire his handiwork, then was startled to see that most of the hexes were still blank.

“I thought you were doing the runes?” he asked the redhead sitting beside him.

Dana didn’t reply and leaned forward to place her splayed hands on the inner surface of the dome. Runic script seemed to pour out of her fingers in waves, replicating her words on every hexagon. In less than thirty seconds, the entire dome was fully warded with glowing Progenitor runes.

“It was faster that way,” she said with a playful wink.

“You are full of surprises, aren’t you?” he replied, with a grin, putting his arm around her trim waist and squeezing her gently.

She shook her head and guided his hand to her svelte stomach. “I’m full of something much more fun!”

They admired their handiwork for a moment, studying the protective shield to make sure it was flawless in its construction. The dome fully surrounded the huge bed on which they all sat, measuring ten metres in circumference. It cast a bright blue light over the crew, its surface coruscating with energy from all the runes inscribed upon the hexagons. John and Dana shared a kiss, then turned back to the rest of the group.

“We’re all set,” Alyssa said, patting the empty space between her and Calara.

John paused before joining her, looking at the girls lying down on the bed. “The dome will protect us from external attacks, but you’ll still be able to use your abilities through it. I want us to hit hard and fast when we arrive, so get ready for the aura of terror in that place. You’ll feel scared out of your mind at first, but we shook it off before, it just takes some time.” He took a deep breath, then continued, “I’ll wait until you’re all asleep first, then I’ll join you. That should make sure we don’t leave anyone behind. Any questions?”

The girls shook their heads, a sense of tense anticipation building in the room.

“Everything’s going to be okay,” John said, giving them a reassuring smile. “I love you all. We’ll protect each other and keep everyone safe.”

The girls knew him well enough to realise that he was putting on a brave front for their benefit, but they settled down anyway, finding comfort in his words.

John lay down between Alyssa and Calara, putting his arms around them and pulling them close. They each draped a lithe leg over his, then crossed arms over his chest, encasing him in nubile young limbs. He’d been with the two teenagers the longest of any of the girls and there was comforting familiarity in being flanked by his beautiful lovers. He rubbed their backs, feeling them both relax to his strong touch, the slow gentle stroking lulling them to sleep.

Calara snuggled in closer, her dark brown hair soft against his arm. She turned and kissed him on the chest, then moved her arm slightly, placing her hand over his sternum. Alyssa followed suit, covering the Latina’s olive-skinned hand with her own. John blinked in surprise, remembering the first time the two girls had placed their hands over his heart, just after Calara had joined the crew.

“The trio,” Alyssa whispered, giving each of them a loving smile.

Calara interlaced her fingers with her girlfriend’s. “We’ve all come such a long way since then...”

John kissed them each on the forehead. “Time to sleep now, my angels. See you on the other side.”

They closed their eyes obediently with John copying them a moment later, but he started watching the girls in his mind now, seeing them fall asleep one after the other. It didn’t take long and soon they were all slumbering peacefully in bed.

\*Good luck, John\*, Edraele thought to him, her voice fraught with worry. \*I wish I was going with you. Please be careful.\*

\*I will and I’ll protect your daughters, I promise,\* he replied.

She hesitated for a second, then said, \*I expect I’ll be cut off from you telepathically, but what will you do if our energy connection is blocked too?\*

\*Alyssa should have more than enough for this, it’s not like we’re fighting a long running battle like we did against the Kirrix,\* he replied, doing his best to reassure her. He paused, the request in his thoughts but unable to ask it.

\*If anything happens to you, I’ll protect the Young Matriarchs with my life,\* she said earnestly. \*We’ll flee from the Progenitor if we have to... anything to keep them safe.\*

He felt overwhelmed with gratitude to his devoted Maliri Matriarch. \*Thank you, Edraele. I love you.\*

\*I love you too,\* she replied, trying to stay brave.

Glancing down the bed, he saw Faye watching him with a tense, unreadable expression on her face. “This will be over before you know it,” he said with a reassuring smile. “Time moves quickly in the Astral, so we’ll be awake again in minutes...”

Faye’s luminous eyes gazed at him intently. “Good night, John. Sweet dreams...”

John realised he couldn’t put this off any longer, the girls’ bodies eagerly absorbing his load and he wouldn’t have an active connection with them forever. He stopped fighting the pull of sleep and let himself be lulled into unconsciousness.

The dream started as he knew it would, blackness fading away to suddenly be aware of roiling mists in every direction. His protective dome was keeping those ethereal vapours at bay, the fog billowing around the circumference of the runed hexagonal tiles. There were gasps all around him as the girls popped into existence beside him, all just as naked as he was, feeling vulnerable and terribly exposed.

A split-second later there was an ominous thump out in that impenetrable gloom, clearly identifiable as the pounding footfall of some titanic monstrosity. That was when the wave of fear hit. John felt his throat constricting as he choked with the debilitating terror, his heart beating furiously in his chest as he fought against the rising tide of panic. One of the girls sobbed with fear and collapsed to her knees, but he was too crippled by dread to tell who it was.

The sound of more hulking creatures moving out in the swirling mists reached his sensitive ears, a multitude of vast abominations that had scented prey in their dreadful realm. John reached out with his mind to Edraele, but found his path blocked. She was entirely cut off from him, along with her bond and all the corresponding power and vitality that it provided. Now that it was gone, he was dramatically reminded of just how much that connection had grown in the last few days, because its absence left him feeling hollowed out inside.

The pounding footfalls increased their speed until a massive multi-eyed six-limbed horror lurched out of the fog and slammed into the dome. Slavering fangs snapped in salacious glee as it bit at the runic shield, a dozen insane eyes rolling in ecstasy at the prospect of sinking those barbed teeth into fresh meat.

All around him were shrill screams of terror as the girls shrank back from the hideous beast, Dana falling backwards in her haste to escape. John grabbed for her with a shaking hand, just catching her in time before she would have toppled out through the back wall of the dome. A second later a flailing, viciously-hooked tentacle whipped into the protective shield, missing the redhead’s slender arm by inches. A second tentacle then a third battered at the shield, curling around and dragging sickle-like hooks over the shield as the monstrosity hungered for her flesh.

Dana screamed in terror then collapsed to the floor, scrabbling back towards the centre of the dome where the rest of the girls were huddled together around Alyssa. The blonde looked up at him with eyes wild with fear, teetering on the edge of madness as she desperately fought against the insidious aura of fear that pervaded this place.

That sight struck John to the core and a blazing burst of anger swelled within him, banishing the creeping chill of fear that had stuck its icy fingers into his heart. Alyssa gaped at him in shock, then her eyes narrowed in fury as she fed off his rage. The whimpering cries from the girls ceased almost instantly and they rose together, no longer cowering amidst the runes on the cold obsidian floor.

More of the horrific denizens of this hellish realm had arrived, united in their hatred of the living, and an insatiable thirst for blood as they attacked in a frenzy. A gargantuan six-clawed hoof nearly ten-metres across pounded down on top of the dome, the single huge eye at its centre glaring at them with loathing. Hooked tentacles, and serrated chain-saw like appendages lashed at the hexagonal shield, the runes flaring as they strained to withstand the relentless assault.

No longer paralysed with fear, the girls sprang into action.

Tashana needed no time to prepare and simply stepped forward, hands held in front of her as she unleashed a billowing torrent of flames through the shield. The six-limbed beast roared in pain, all seventeen eyes staring at Tashana in shock as she burned its hooked forelimbs. She intensified the conflagration, the fiery wave washing over its head and boiling those hate-filled eyes right out of their sockets. Its cries of pain became shrieks of agony as she incinerated its face, scorching away the rubbery flesh. It turned and ran for the fog, its entire front half shrouded in a blazing inferno.

The sudden smell of ozone swept away the hideous stench of burning corrupted meat and Irillith hurled a jagged lightning bolt into the base of the colossal hoof above them. The sizzling flash was followed by the boom of thunder an instant later and the vast creature staggered backwards, electricity arcing over the blackened crater she’d blasted in its hoof.

Sakura threw her arms wide as she gathered her will, wisps of air coiling around her limbs that quickly gathered speed, turning into frenzied vortexes that whipped around her fists. She channelled the maelstrom into a terrifying hurricane that whistled and screamed as she unleashed it on the monsters around them. The malevolent fog was hurled backwards, creating a fifty-metre break in all directions as the howling winds tore around the dome.

Denuded of the fog, the abominations were revealed in all their sick and twisted glory, their bodies just as hideous as the frightful limbs that had swept out of the grey mists. The titanic behemoth that had attacked from above was still partially concealed by the mists, but now they could see several more pillar-like limbs stretching up into roiling clouds. Its underbelly was barely visible, covered by scores of flailing limbs that looked like vines, except for the razor-sharp hooks tipping each one.

The tentacle beast behind them looked like some kind of massive squid, crossed with a hulking spider, six tentacles surrounding a beaked maw glistening with rows of serrated teeth. It wailed as Sakura’s freezing winds slashed into its body, chitinous legs frosting over as it tried to brace itself against the glacial cold. It charged forward, desperate to slay its tormentor, all the tentacles hammering at the dome with freakish unnatural strength.

Dana’s runes blazed with golden light as they reinforced the hexagons and John knew without a doubt that the dome would have collapsed if not for them. He summoned a two-handed crystal Alyssium sword, then dashed forward, using his momentum to bring extra force behind his overhead chop. The blade swept unopposed through his shield then bit into rubbery flesh as he hacked down on one of the flailing limbs. The squid-spider let out a shrill scream as the white metal blade cleaved straight through a tentacle, leaving the severed end flopping on the ground with a foul steam hissing from the cut. The monstrosity lurched backwards, the dismembered stump gouting black blood into the air, which froze in the icy winds and pattered to the ground like hail.

Sakura’s hurricane was merciless, coating the monster’s limbs in ice as the temperature dropped still further. With a tortured groan, it skidded on the slippery floor and the four right legs snapped like twigs, pitching the bulbous carcass of the beast onto the ground. The squid head of the creature tipped back as it howled in pain, tentacles thrashing as it tried to drag itself away into the gloom.

Another of the beasts was caught in the cyclone too, the enormously tall creature had its left leg frosted with white crystals as the freezing winds whipped around it. Trying to back away from the storm, it repositioned its leg, only for it shatter with a piercing crack, sending sheets of frozen flesh smashing across the jet-black ground. Somewhere above them, far up in the fog a trumpeting cry of pain ripped through the sky.

That was followed by a booming roar from far deeper in the mists, a voice that was incandescent with rage, the waves of sound knocking John and the girls to the floor.

“YOU DARE MAIM MY MINIONS! DOES YOUR INSOLENCE KNOW NO BOUNDS?!”

Ancient as time itself, that hideous dirge was accompanied by a chorus of shrill screams and pleas for mercy, the disturbing legion of voices blurring into a cacophony of torment echoing back through the ages.

Sakura’s tornado began to die down, the scream of the wind lowering in pitch to merely a whistle. She looked at John in fright and shook her head. “I’m still maintaining the storm! That thing’s suppressing my powers!”

More creatures lurched out of the wall of fog encircling the dome, emboldened by whatever the terrifying master of this sub-plane was doing. At their forefront was a sickening amalgamation of creatures, made up of an enormous millipede body and a vaguely humanoid torso, which sprouted four arms that ended in bony scythe-like blades. Irillith gathered her will and aimed her open palm at the creature, letting loose another jagged stroke of lightning. It lanced outwards accompanied by another peal of thunder, but the arcing bolt died almost as soon as it left the confines of the dome, petering out in a shower of sparks.

The Maliri girl looked at Alyssa in shock. “It must be some kind of psychic dampening field!”

They could only watch in mute horror as more and more creatures emerged from the mists, each one seemingly more terrifying and revolting than the last. They charged across the open space between the fogbank and the runed hemisphere, the billowing grey mists now closing in behind them once more.

John shot a worried glance at Alyssa. He’d been expecting her to start blasting these creatures with that radiant beam again, so it came as a surprise that she hadn’t made any aggressive moves yet. After shaking off the aura of fear, she’d been quiet, almost as if lost in thought and seemed completely oblivious to the horde of monsters descending on them.

“Alyssa! Are you powerful enough to break that field?” he asked, trying to impress upon her the urgency of their predicament.

She shook her head slowly, staring intently at something in the distance, but what it was he couldn’t tell. “No... we’re playing by its rules in here...”

“John!” Calara screamed, grabbing his arm.

He snapped his head around, then flinched away from the nearby wall. The centipede creature was hammering away at a patch of hexagons, four bladed arms moving in a blur as they drilled at his psychic shield. John had been greatly relieved when the protective dome hadn’t been swept away by the psychic damping field, but he could tell it wasn’t going to last much longer. That creature wasn’t alone in assaulting the dome and a huge six-legged beast with massive jaws was attempting to gnaw through on the other side, row upon row of yellowed teeth grinding into the shield. Above them another towering behemoth was attempting to batter through the roof of the dome, its burly limbs ending in serrated snapping claws, each impact creating ominous ripples through the shield.

The golden runes were flaring with light as they tried to maintain the integrity of the panels, but that radiance was getting patchy in places, fault-lines appearing through the protective web.

Dana clung to him, eyes wide in fright. “It’s gonna bl-”

Before she finished the sentence, one of the scythed blades pierced through one of the hexagons, sundering the field. The entire latticework shimmered and blazed brightly, then exploded outwards, jagged golden shards ripping through flesh and hurling the monsters backwards through the air. The ferocious blastwave seemed unaffected by the damping field, mowing the creatures down like blades of grass and tossing them across the clearing in sprays of viscous black ichor. Chunks of eviscerated beasts began to rain down on the black obsidian floor, making wet squelches as ooze sprayed from their flayed flesh.

“The fiery heart of a volcano...” John murmured, gaping in awe at the devastation Dana had just wreaked on their monstrous foes.

There was another deafening bellow of wrath from deep in the mists, the indignant rage finally coalescing into understandable words.

“YOUR SUFFERING WILL BE EXQUISITE! YOU WILL YEARN FOR DEATH... BEG FOR IT OVER THE EONS!”

Dana grinned at John despite the fact that she was shaking with fear. “I think we pissed him off! Quick we’ve got to build another dome!”

John dropped his sword and held out his hands to start forming new hexagons. He had started laying out the foundation when he heard the rumbling thunder of incoming foes, the sound coming from all directions. He fought to stay calm, quickly rebuilding the first few rows of hexes, but he knew he couldn’t rush this or the structure would collapse like a pack of cards.

The swirling clouds of fog had been pushed back by the runic explosion, but they’d started rolling in again and were now less than thirty metres away. Shapes began to loom out of that grey expanse, these creatures bigger than the first wave, their hulking misshapen forms covered in spikes, claws, fanged mouths or furious eyes.

Jade shimmered into her armoured tiger form, baring her teeth and readying herself to pounce. John wanted to tell her to keep away from the monsters, not wanting her anywhere near those horrific abominations, but he knew that wasn’t a choice available to any of them. He tried to build the hexes faster, but the wall was barely waist high and they’d run out of time.

The closest of the creatures was a quadruped and atop its enormous muscular body sat a writhing mass of viciously barbed tentacles. It galloped closer through the field of slain fiends, heedlessly trampling burned and frozen flesh under its clawed hooves. The foul appendages where its head should have been were quivering with anticipation, sickeningly eager to flay blood and bone. Moving like a whip, the tentacles lashed out as it closed to within striking range.

One of them swiped at Rachel, intending to garrotte her, but Sakura managed to shove the brunette out the way in time. Saving Rachel exposed Sakura to danger herself and another snake-like limb coiled around the Asian girl’s leg and bit deep into her thigh. Calara managed to dodge several tentacles, using her Prescience to avoid their whip-like strikes, but there were too many for her to avoid them all. Sakura’s screams of pain were echoed by the Latina’s as a barbed appendage wrapped around her arm and back, the jagged hooks digging into her flesh.

Jade pounced, sinking her fangs into the tentacle attacking Calara and pouring lightning into that electrifying bite, the stench of burning meat making the Latina gag. Sakura was trembling with the pain from the talons cutting into her thigh, but she managed to place her hands on the rubbery tentacle and blast it with ice, flash-freezing the limb that was impaling her. The tentacle shattered with the extreme cold and she collapsed to the ground with a tormented cry of pain.

The monster howled at the loss of one hideous limb and the maiming of another, but it didn’t slow it down as it struck with more tentacles. Focusing on Jade now, it grappled her with nearly a dozen prehensile limbs, snaring her four legs and trying to saw through her armour with the sharp claws that spiralled around the tentacles. She roared in defiance, but there was an undercurrent of pain too as the razor-sharp barbs cut through her inch-thick armour.

There were more fiendish beasts fast approaching and John realised that he had no chance of finishing the dome in time. Snatching up his sword he lunged towards Jade, the tip of his sword avoiding her armoured torso by a hair’s breadth as he swiped across her flank. His cross-slash cut through three of the tentacles, leaving them to flop angrily on the floor, and his reverse swipe sliced through two more, freeing her front paws.

Behind him, Rachel knelt beside both fallen girls, her eyes glowing as she embraced them with her healing aura. Both Calara and Sakura were shaking violently now, the toxic barbs having pierced their bodies in over a dozen places. She placed a hand on each girl, pouring healing energy into them as she attempted to purge the venom from their grievous injuries. Disgusting black ooze began pouring from the lacerations, the wounds only closing up when Rachel was sure she had cleansed all the toxins from their systems.

A triple-tailed scorpion as big as a house scuttled closer, a cluster of eyestalks sprouting from its back, each one topped with an eyeball as large as a human head. It made a hideous screeching noise as it attacked from behind, stabbing down with its three tails. Tashana heard the grating shriek in time and ducked to avoid the stinger that plunged her way, but Irillith wasn’t so fortunate and she screamed as she was stabbed in the back by a pair of foot-long spikes.

Dana looked on in horror, then whirled around and grabbed Alyssa by both arms, shaking her to try and rouse her from her daze. “What the fuck’s the matter with you?! Snap out of it for fuck’s sake!”

The blonde was standing quietly in the midst of the carnage, her eyes closed and her palms upraised. She slowly opened her eyes, a serene smile on her face. “Welcome to my world...”

Reality seemed to distort and shift, the sub-plane twisting violently as she asserted her will, forming a pocket plane of her own within this malevolent dimension. She gestured with both hands, forming shining white sickle blades in the air, which slashed through the thick scorpion tails impaling Irillith and severed the last of the tentacles enmeshing Jade. With a contemptuous telekinetic backhander that landed with a sickening crunch, the two monsters were smashed skywards, the multi-ton beasts tossed away as if they were mere insects.

Gone was the cold obsidian floor, the insidious grey fog, and the ever-present aura of fear which they’d been forced to overcome. In their place was a beautiful green meadow, butterflies flitting from flower to flower, the oppressive grey mists turned into fluffy white clouds, with shafts of sunlight beaming through overhead.

John looked around in wonder, then gasped as he lurched bolt upright, Edraele’s psychic connection flooding him with power once more.

\*Oh, John! I was so worried!\* she blurted out in a rush.

\*So was I...\* he managed to reply, as his body shivered with the energy flowing through him.

Tashana sobbed as she pulled the two stingers from her twin’s comatose body, desperately trying to stop the rush of blood from the gaping wounds using only her hands. “Please, one of you help her!” she wailed in horror, her eyes darting from John to Rachel.

“Let me!” Rachel said, as she rushed over to Irillith. Her expression turned fearful as she embraced the ghostly pale Maliri in her grey aura.

Alyssa glanced down at Irillith, giving her a worried frown before looking out at the fog bracketing the sunlit field. “They’ll be back... get ready.”

Dana looked at the blonde in awe. “Can’t you just fuck them up again?”

“Their master is fighting me now, trying to break this pocket plane... I have to focus to maintain this place,” she said quietly, her brow furrowed in deep concentration. “I need all of you to defend us.”

“I can’t do shit!” the redhead exclaimed in frustration. “My powers aren’t any good for this kind of thing!”

“Just use your imagination,” the blonde said with a tense smile. “Here on the Astral, if your will is strong enough, your thoughts shape reality...”

Jade shimmered in a dark-green haze, black ooze pouring from her wounds as her body regenerated. She grew taller and broader, her tail thickening and rippling with scales as bony plates sprouted from her back. Leathery appendages grew and unfolded from her shoulders, spreading out into a massive set of wings. Her neck grew longer and broader, her huge tiger’s head shifting to become titanic and reptilian, possessing a maw filled with teeth that were longer than the girls were tall. When her change was complete, Jade’s colossal dragon form was nearly forty metres tall and even longer from blunt snout to the tip of her tail, just as terrifying as she was gloriously majestic. Tilting back her head, Jade bellowed out her challenge, tail lashing as she repositioned herself to protect her friends.

“Holy fuck!” the redhead muttered, staring at the immense Jade dragon in wonder.

Dana whirled around to look at Alyssa again, to find that the blonde was now enclosed in a shimmering white Paragon suit. Alyssa nodded when she saw that Dana finally understood, before closing her eyes, lost in concentration as she fought her own private battle.

Remembering the comforting feel of an armoured suit encasing her body, Dana jumped in surprise when she was safely protected by Paragon armour an instant later. She rushed over to John and shook his arm. “John! Get suited up!”

He looked startled by her armoured form, then glanced down at his nakedness and frowned. A second later he was wearing his own Paragon armour, complete with the embossed lions on his chest and pauldrons. His eyes flashed dangerously and he gave Dana a grim smile, filling her with a surge of hope.

“Alright, get geared up everyone!” John shouted over the cacophony of bestial noise around them, brandishing his two-handed sword. “Just imagine you’ve got your armour and weapons and they’ll appear!”

As he looked around the glade, searching for more enemies, his sensitive hearing picked up the approach of more monsters and the thumping tread of something vast out in the mists. As he strained to listen, he heard a thunderous rumble, which sounded a lot like an answer to Jade’s challenge.

Glancing back at the girls over his shoulder, his heart skipped a beat when he saw Rachel and her makeshift medical station, where Calara, Sakura, and Irillith were still on the ground. He’d felt the doctor heal the Terran girls but Irillith was still grievously wounded. “Want me to help?” he called out to the brunette.

Rachel had her eyes fixed on the Maliri girl’s awful wounds. “Save your energy, I’ll handle it,” the brunette replied firmly, her brow furrowed in concentration.

Calara hauled herself upwards, feeling a little woozy after the rapid healing. She patted Sakura on the back when the Asian girl sat up and coughed, then glanced at Rachel and realised the doctor was tending to the critically wounded Maliri girl. “Oh my God! Is Irillith alright?!”

“She’s going to be okay,” the brunette said quietly, focused on her healing. “I’ve got her now.”

Crouching nervously beside her sister, Tashana sighed with relief as Rachel’s grey aura repaired her twin’s savagely torn flesh. Irillith’s ragged breathing grew stronger and steadier, while her skin gradually began to return to a healthier and more vibrant shade of blue. Her eyelashes fluttered, but she still remained unconscious.

Tashana narrowed her eyes and was encased in Paragon armour before she’d finished standing, twin Reaper pistols appearing in holsters at her waist. She would have drawn them, but she needed to keep her hands free for a moment first. Cupping her hands together, a merry flame appeared a moment later that danced playfully on her palm. Moulding it with her will, the flame burst to life, animating into the sultry form of a fire sprite. It hopped off her hands and cartwheeled across the ground, splitting into several more and getting larger all the time.

Tashana poured her unrestrained fury into those shapely elementals, taking all the anger she felt towards the monsters that had dared to hurt her sister and channelling into her fiery creations. They grew huge by the time she was done, towering over her head as the fiery zephyrs cavorted playfully amongst themselves. With a smile of satisfaction, Tashana grasped her pistols and pulled them out, getting ready for action.

John nodded to her when she appeared at his right flank. “We’ll need to split up... watch for attack from all angles,” he cautioned her, before glancing up at the dark-green draconic form that towered over them. “I think Jade’s got this angle covered.”

“HERE THEY COME...” Jade rumbled, her massive body tensing in preparation.

John saw huge monsters pouring out of the mist-line, charging towards them in a flurry of snapping jaws and claws. He patted Tashana on the shoulder, then whirled to the left, trusting that she’d be able to cover the right. Activating his psychic speed, he sheathed his sword in incandescent blue flames, then waited for the monsters to get closer. When they were thirty-metres away, he counter-charged, leaping forward in a blur.

The first beast stampeded towards him on six huge cloven feet, the hooked arms sprouting from its upper body flexing in anticipation, while its double-jawed mouth roared in anger. John surged past it on the right, hacking through one leg after another, until it toppled over in slow motion when he sliced through its hind-limb. Skidding to a halt, he reversed direction, ducking under one flailing arm, then leaping over another, before plunging his sword into the back of its blocky head. The flames swathing the blade roared into the creature’s brain and its deformed face exploded outwards in a torrent of azure fire.

Tashana peeled away to cover the right flank, her twin pistols barking their defiance as she fired flame-infused slugs at the oncoming beasts. Her bullets detonated inside disgusting rubbery flesh, igniting those monstrosities and immolating their putrid carcasses. Her elementals rushed forward to embrace the charging creatures, their friendly hugs blackening flesh and evoking shrill cries of pain. The monsters tried to bat them aside, but the giggling fire sprites were not so easily deterred, greasy black smoke pouring from the searing wounds their every touch left on the malformed beasts.

John glanced to his left and saw that several more hooked horrors were charging their way. He tugged his sword out of the smouldering carcass of the second abomination he’d slain and was about to intercept the newest opponents when he heard an ominous whir from behind. A deafening roar made him jump and he watched in shock as the stampeding monsters before him were torn to pieces by a storm of projectiles, the impacts ripping huge holes through their bodies and spraying their innards out the back. In a matter of seconds, the hail of crystal Alyssium bullets had reduced the quivering monsters to little more than steaming piles of flesh and shattered bone.

“I’ll watch over Alyssa,” Dana said confidently, stepping up beside him.

John did a double-take when he saw the redhead. She was toting a five-metre-long rotary cannon, the multiple barrels spinning furiously in anticipation of the next wave.

The redhead shrugged and winked at him. “Alyssa said to use our imagination... Rachel’s not the only girl that likes big weapons!”

A sharp crackling sound behind him drew John’s attention and he whirled around to see what new opponent they were facing. He stared at Jade in shock as she opened her vast draconic maw, a dazzling blue ball of electricity gathering between her jaws. She unleashed a stream of lightning at the brutish creatures charging towards her, the sizzling blue bolts smashing the creatures off their feet, each strike ripping glowing furrows through their bodies. She swept her lightning breath across the wave of beasts, obliterating all in her path, with peals of thunder booming around the glade.

That was when the biggest creature they’d seen so far lurched out of the mists. Truly colossal at over seventy metres in height, its six-clawed foot thumped down and shook the ground, revealing a rank hide consisting of a corpulent mass of blubber and armour plating. It had six pillar-like legs supporting a powerful body, its upper torso an undulating forest of barbed tentacles, with a gigantic set of jaws at the front containing a rotating oval of teeth. Black gore rained down from this ancient leviathan and a shrill grating noise from the spinning disc of fangs set John’s teeth on edge.

Seeing Jade towering over the rest of the group, it charged towards the dragon, every footfall making the ground shudder with the impact. The monster repeated its furious answer to her challenge, the deafening bellow making John’s armour vibrate with the strength of that roar.

Rather than shy away from the enormous beast barrelling towards her, Jade launched forward herself, eager to meet this foe in battle. She rushed towards it then slashed out with lightning-shrouded claws, leaving four scorched gouges across the leviathan’s foreleg, the raw wound sizzling with electricity and making the creature trumpet in pain. It counterattacked by flailing at her with a score of tentacles, but she was already dodging aside, narrowly avoiding their cruel barbs. It turned to follow her as Jade circled it and John realised she was deliberately antagonising the beast to draw it away from the girls.

More abominations were approaching from their flanks and rear, storming towards them as they brayed for blood. The high-pitched whine of Dana’s rotary cannon echoed around the glade, accompanied in its chorus of destruction by the booms from Tashana’s exploding fireballs. John hesitated, desperately wanting to help Jade against her titanic foe, but he knew he had to help protect the rest of the girls too.

Sakura vaulted to her feet and jogged over to him, her brown eyes sharp and focused through the clear crystal helmet that appeared over her head. “Go, I’ll protect the others!” she urged him, drawing her twin ninjato and encasing those wicked white blades in ice.

John nodded to her in gratitude, then charged towards the rear of the vast beast that was pursuing Jade. With his psychic speed in effect he sprinted full-tilt towards it, closing the gap in seconds. He used the momentum of his charge to put a huge amount of extra force into his passing sideswipe, his long crystal Alyssium blade carving through the creature’s clawed foot and ripping out the other side in a spray of dark blood. Once clear of the huge limb, John spun around to survey his handiwork, then felt a sinking feeling as he saw the extent of the wound. He might as well have been an ant biting a person on their toe for all the good his savage slash had done, the behemoth barely noticing the cut.

There was another sizzling crackle followed by a deep grunt of pain from way above his head and he whirled around to watch Jade slash the beast again with her claws. The monster was ready for her this time and it lunged forwards, a dozen of its tentacles whipping across her shoulder and flanks, leaving foot-wide lacerations across her green-plated hide. She leaped backwards with an agility impressive for her size, reminding John of a great cat as she bared her enormous fangs and hissed at the beast; except that a hiss from a gigantic dragon came out as a terrifying roar.

He looked back at the leviathan’s vast leg, then glanced dubiously at his sword – it was going to be like hacking through a tree with a toothpick.

Jade’s urgent voice filled his mind. \*Just make yourself big, Master!\*

Turning to look at the dragon, he saw her emerald eyes locked on his as she backed away from the leviathan, limping badly as she tried to get clear.

\*This is Alyssa’s realm; just imagine it and it will be so!\* she implored him in her desperation.

To see the Nymph severely hurt like that filled John with anguish.

And then rage...

He channelled his furious hatred of the beast deep inside, focusing his will on his physical form. The ground seemed to fall away as he soared upwards, his body growing to massive proportions. The sword he clenched in his fist became a weapon fit for a titan, thirty-metre-long tongues of blue flame curling up the colossal white blade.

The leviathan was intent on hunting Jade, stomping after her and waving barbed tentacles with unnatural hunger. Barely registering his prior attack as an irritating nuisance, it didn’t consider John to be a threat and was ignoring him completely. That was until he brought his sword across in a sweeping blow that cleaved through its rear right leg, lopping it off above the knee. The lower leg crashed to the ground like a felled redwood, and his burning sword set the upper-limb ablaze, blue flames hungering for the blubbery flesh of the beast. Molten fat poured down from the amputated stump, the flames torching the creature from the inside out.

It reared up and let loose a thunderous shriek of agony, tottering unsteadily as it tried to maintain its balance after losing a leg. That was when Jade pounced, knocking the beast onto its side as she slammed into it with her hulking green draconic body. Her wicked fore-claws carved deep trenches across its flailing legs, while her rear claws raked brutal rents in its flanks, gleefully ravaging her fallen enemy. The creature tried to slash at her with its tentacles, so she snapped her jaws down on several of them and shook her head in a frenzy, ripping the writhing limbs from the beast’s back.

John’s blade rose and fell, chopping down over and over again, sending fountains of black blood dozens of metres into the air. He hacked the rear of the monster to pieces, slashing and burning dozens of flailing tentacles, before cleaving through another huge leg. The only thing he was focused on in his furious assault was putting this horror down as fast as possible to protect Jade.

He was dimly aware of the Colossus’ roars being abruptly cut off in a bubbling gurgle, and when he looked up from his bloody work, he saw Jade had her jaws clamped around the vast monster’s neck. She tugged and strained, her gore-stained limbs digging into the mangled carcass for extra purchase before she yanked backwards, ripping out the creature’s throat. She spat out the disgusting rubbery flesh, then gave him a toothy draconic grin.

John blinked in surprise, and realising she’d been faking her injuries, he noted with a wry smile, “You seem to have had a miraculous recovery...”

“I KNEW YOU COULD DO IT,” she rumbled, nuzzling him affectionately with her massive horned head. “YOU JUST NEEDED SOME MOTIVATION, MASTER.”

Jade turned and unleashed her lightning breath on the next wave of beasts, then bounded away to continue her enthusiastic slaughter, ripping the shrieking survivors apart with her gigantic claws. John stomped down on the body of a slithering reptilian monster that was bigger than a hover-truck and neatly decapitated the pinned creature with his sword. He paused for a moment to take stock of the battle looking back across the glade.

Below him, Dana, Tashana, and Sakura were busy shooting, freezing, and burning the incoming packs of monsters with ruthless efficiency. Mangled carcasses were piling up around the group, as relentless waves of abominations lumbered out of the fog. Although his team were holding their own against the horde, they’d run out of energy eventually and by the sounds coming from the fog, there were an unending legion of monsters still on their way.

“John!” Calara screamed, waving her hands at him. “It’s Alyssa!”

He crouched down beside her, but still towered over the Latina, who was staring at his blonde Matriarch in panic. “What is it?!”

Before Calara answered he could see for himself... blood was trickling from Alyssa’s nose and she’d gone deathly pale. Alyssa wavered and the Latina caught her, guiding her gently to the ground.

Looking up at him, Calara pleaded, “You’ve got to do something, John!”

A moment later the edge of the glade wavered, the field of grass appearing more insubstantial where it bordered the fog. John stared at it in alarm as the meadow contracted by a dozen metres, the pocket plane obviously shrinking. Now that he was focusing on the boundary between Alyssa’s realm and the nightmarish sub-plane, he felt a familiar terrible presence looming just out of sight. He could feel it gloating in triumph as it battered against Alyssa’s defences, slowly crushing the tiny sanctuary she’d created.

John looked down at the comatose teenager, her body slumped in Calara’s arms. Alyssa was normally so strong and full of vitality, so to see her looking weak and frail was a terrible shock. Filled with cold fury at the ancient foe that seemed to take such delight in tormenting them, he rose to his feet and turned towards the edge of the clearing. He broke into a run, the startled calls from the girls ringing in his ears as he sped across the meadow. Jade and Edraele begged him to stop, their fearful telepathic voices echoing through his mind, but he ignored them all, remaining entirely focused on their despicable enemy.

His enormous armoured feet left metre-deep footprints in his wake and he carved his way through the startled monsters in his path as he sprinted through their ranks. Charging towards the boundary between the realms, he shouted a furious battlecry and dived headlong into the mists, plunging forward with his shining sword at the ready.

A shadowy form lurked just outside in the swirling fog, absolutely terrifying in its immensity and hideously alien in its nature. John battled through the waves of terror that assaulted him, his mind balking at the existence of something so abhorrently evil. He lunged at that towering malevolence and his flame-shrouded blade sank deep into its insubstantial form.

The inhuman shriek of agony that ripped from the ancient horror seemed to shear through his soul and the psychic backlash sent John cartwheeling backwards through the air. He landed with a thump, not back in Alyssa’s pocket plane, but in the centre of his bedroom on the Invictus. The girls jolted back to consciousness with terrified screams an instant later, as their entire group was forcibly ejected from the Astral Plane.

They all clung to each other for comfort, with John holding Alyssa and Calara tightly in his arms. As they tried to settle their racing heartbeats, he was aware of a dampness against his heaving chest, and when he looked down, he saw a splash of red across the right side of his torso. It wasn’t from him though, but from the blood pouring from Alyssa’s nose. He sent a surge of regenerative energy through the injured girl, making her gasp at the sensation as he healed the lesions on her brain.

“Thank you...” she murmured, smiling gratefully at him for the sudden pain relief.

John closed his eyes and checked the rest of the girls, but was relieved to see that Calara, Sakura, and Irillith were fully healed from their previous injuries and were now only exhausted. It took several minutes for everyone to calm down, then they slowly sat up, looking around at each other with wide eyes.

Alyssa leaned her head against John’s shoulder and sighed. “With hindsight... assaulting the Astral Plane might not have been one of our best plans...”

John put his arm around her and nodded, his face filled with remorse. “You’re right. I should never have instigated this... I’m sorry I put all of you in so much danger.”

Jade shook her head a stubborn glint in her piercing emerald gaze. “No, you’re both wrong!”

He raised an eyebrow and said sorrowfully, “It doesn’t really feel like it, honey.”

She sat taller, looking at him with pride shining in her eyes. “For the first time, you were the cat, not the mouse!”

Sakura smiled at the Nymph. “She’s right. That bastard got a taste of your claws and he didn’t like it!”

“We all heard that howl when you attacked,” Tashana said quietly, hugging her sister close. “It wasn’t just pain I heard... there was shock...”

“And fear...” Irillith murmured, her voice sombre.

“That was terrifying and not something I’d ever care to repeat,” Calara said in a hushed voice. “But we stormed the enemy’s base and made him feel vulnerable. I’d say that was a significant strategic victory.”

Rachel nodded looking hopeful. “At the very least, the master of that sub-plane might be reluctant to pull us back in there again.”

“That’s not something I’m eager to test anytime soon,” John said, pausing for a moment and sharing a smile with the girls. “But you make a good point; that thing knows we can fight back now. At the very least, let’s hope that makes it wary about coming after us for a while.”

Tashana glanced at Alyssa, eyes widening as she blurted out, “That reminds me, how did you manage to create that pocket-plane?!”

“I got the idea after visiting the Ashanath,” Alyssa explained with a self-conscious smile. “They said that Mael’nerak created their Command Network, and that only really powerful minds can make a sub-plane like that. Ularean was able to make a pocket within that plane and he’s always going on about how much more powerful I am than him. So I figured... fuck it! If I’m going to be a really shitty houseguest, I’ll just start ripping up that thing’s home and really get settled in.”

“You undoubtedly saved my life by creating it when you did,” Irillith said, giving her a tired but very grateful smile. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome, beautiful,” the blonde replied, before giving her a playful wink. “But if you want to show me how appreciative you are, I certainly won’t object.”

“Whatever my Matriarch desires,” the Maliri girl said, returning her smile. “After a little rest first... I’m exhausted.”

“We should all get some sleep,” John agreed, with a look of sympathy. He took a deep breath, then continued in a solemn voice, “All of you were incredible tonight. As terrifying as that was, knowing that I had you there to support me made all the difference, let alone how well you handled yourselves in the fight!”

They all looked pleased at his earnest praise and Dana exclaimed, “You were pretty impressive yourself! But there is one important thing I was curious about...”

John graciously accepted the compliments from the rest of the girls, then asked, “What was that, honey?”

“I was just wondering... When you were ‘giant John’ was *everything* to scale?” Dana asked, grinning at him as she darted a glance at his groin.

He laughed and rolled his eyes, but hearing the girls giggling at the redhead’s joke made him feel much better about everything. He met Dana’s blue-eyed gaze and gave her an appreciative smile for lightening the mood.

When they had settled down again, Faye walked over to the bed to join them. “I’m sorry to interrupt, I know how important these debriefing meetings are!”

“Go ahead, Faye,” John said, giving her a smile of encouragement. “What’s up?”

“We’re approaching the Brimorian border and it looks like they have a military fleet guarding their territory,” she warned him, appearing anxious. “I thought it might be sensible if you were to come up to the Bridge to speak with them.”

He nodded and moved around Alyssa to climb off the bed. “Let me get dressed, I’ll be right there.”

John headed towards the walk-in-wardrobe, then paused when he remembered his chest was daubed in Alyssa’s blood. He looked back at the blonde and beckoned her to join him as he walked into the bathroom. He had already cleaned himself up by the time Alyssa entered the cubicle, alerting him to her presence with a light touch to his shoulder. Frowning at the sight of the dried blood around her nose, he gently washed her clean as she waited patiently before him.

“There, that’s better,” he said, pleased at his handiwork. “Beautiful as ever.”

Alyssa’s smile wavered and she flung her arms around his chest, her face crumbling as she finally let her guard down. “God... that was fucking terrifying!”

“You don’t need to be brave for the girls,” John said softly, stroking her back and holding her close in a soothing embrace. “Every single one of them adores you, they’d fall all over themselves to be your shoulder to cry on.”

She hugged him tighter and murmured, “You don’t want the job any more?”

“I’m always here for you, but you can open up with them too,” he replied with a smile, kissing her on the forehead.

They stood together for a while until she calmed, drawing strength from his arms around her. Alyssa glanced up at him an anxious expression on her beautiful face. “I know how much they rely on me being strong for them... I just don’t want to let the girls down.”

“They know you’re strong! You saved all of us today,” John said, letting his sheer admiration for her fill his voice. “While I was running around like a headless chicken trying to rebuild my hex shield, you just decided to remake the world...”

She laughed and stood taller, buoyed up by his praise. “I wish I could’ve seen that thing’s face when I basically redecorated his lounge.”

Laughing with her, John nodded. “Yeah, definitely the shittiest houseguests ever.” They shared a grin then he looked at her thoughtfully, cupping her head in his hands. “Our relationship is changing, isn’t it?”

“What do you mean?” Alyssa asked, suddenly wary.

He kissed her to calm her worries. “I talked about us being partners before, but previously I just meant in terms of freeing you from my Progenitor control; I always wanted you to be my friend and lover, not a slave. Since then, you’ve taken to all this psychic stuff like a duck to water. It’s like you’re growing in leaps and bounds, while nothing’s changed much for me recently.”

“Do you mind?” she asked quietly, studying his face.

He chuckled and shook his head. “I don’t resent you being better at psychic abilities than me, far from it. I actually feel bad about effectively dumping all that responsibility on you, but I guess we’re just naturally inclined towards different things.” He paused and looked at her with concern. “How about you? Do you mind?”

She gazed into his eyes and slowly shook her head. “Only if you start treating me differently. I love experimenting with powers and pushing the envelope with Athena’s help, so I’m happy to handle that and leave you with the military stuff.” Alyssa gave him a tender kiss then continued, “Always remember that you’re in charge, especially in the bedroom.”

“So you’re happy as long as you get to keep taking my orders and my cum?” he asked with a flirtatious smile.

Alyssa laughed and nodded. “Yep, exactly!” It was her turn to look at him with admiration. “I could never do the things you do so effortlessly, like earning the girls’ total devotion and leading us to victory after victory. I want to be there to support you every step of the way and if I can do that best by being your psychic specialist, that’s quite alright by me.”

“I’d be lost without you,” John admitted, stroking her back and holding her close. “You’re such a good girl.”

“The best,” she agreed, hugging him back. “I think you’re a good man too.”

He pulled back and smiled. “The best?”

Alyssa giggled and nodded. She paused for a second and raised an eyebrow. “Also the tardiest... weren’t you supposed to be on the Bridge speaking to the Brimorians?”

“I can’t help it, you’re too distracting,” he replied while faking a frown, reluctantly releasing her from their embrace and leaving the shower.

“Don’t be long,” she said with a soft smile as she waved goodbye. “I want to fall asleep in your arms...”

John felt like he was floating on clouds as he went to get dressed, even humming a happy tune to himself as he left the walk-in-wardrobe. Despite the fact that they’d been fighting for their very lives against some antediluvian horror less than an hour earlier, spending time with Alyssa was always guaranteed to send his spirits soaring.

Faye rose from her chair and matched his pace as he left the bedroom, walking along with a light bounce to her step. He glanced down at her and smiled. “I’m not used to you keeping me company in the corridors like this. Normally it’s ‘Poof!’ there you are!”

“Being a holograph was pretty handy,” Faye said with a rueful smile. “It’s taking a little getting used to, remembering to bring my body wherever I need to go!”

“Buyer’s remorse?” John asked playfully.

She giggled and shook her head. “No! Of course not.” Glancing up at him, she continued in a tentative voice, “I thought I’d keep my body as near to you as possible... just in case you need me for anything. I don’t want you to feel like I’m stalking you though!”

John reached for her hand and squeezed it gently as they stepped into the grav-tube. “I’ve always liked you watching over us while we slept. I won’t have a problem with having a cute purple shadow.”

Faye beamed at him, looking delighted. “Will I be able to come with you off the ship too?”

They stepped onto the Command Deck, Faye Secondary exchanging a nod with Primary before vanishing in a purple flash.

John walked up the illuminated steps to the Command Podium while he thought about her question. “Provisionally yes, as long as it isn’t going to be too dangerous,” he replied, sitting in his Command Chair.

Faye hopped up onto his console and crossed her legs demurely, then gave him a worried frown. “But if I’m nearby when there’s danger, I can help protect you and the girls!” She tapped her chest and added, “My chassis is made from crystal Alyssium remember...”

John placed a hand on her thigh to give her a reassuring pat as he would any of the girls, but the warmth and firmness beneath his fingers was very distracting. He gently stroked her silky-smooth purple skin, lost in the sensations as he murmured, “Actually, I’d forgotten...”

Faye squeaked in shock. “Oh my!”

He pulled his hand away as if he’d been scalded and blurted out, “I’m so sorry, Faye! I know we said we’d take things slow... you just felt so good and I forgot we didn’t have that kind of relationship for a second!”

She managed to get her fluttering eyelashes under control and blushed as she shook her head. “You just took me by surprise, that’s all.” Giving him a shy smile, Faye reached for his hand and placed it on her bare thigh once again. “I’ve always longed for the kind of tactile relationship you have with the girls. I’d be a fool to turn down the chance now!”

John brushed his fingers just above her knee, trying to keep things fairly chaste. “That okay with you?”

Faye bobbed her head, grinning wildly at him. “Perfect!”

They shared a smile as he caressed her and then John said, “Anyway, we were talking about you coming with us off the ship. As I say, in non-combat scenarios, you’re welcome to come along, but in a pitched battle I don’t want to expose you to unnecessary danger...”

Faye protested, “But I-”

He held up a hand so that she would let him finish. “It would be different if you had a set of armour, but there’s logistical difficulties in designing and storing your own bespoke suit. And as unlikely as it sounds, it’s far easier and quicker for me or Rachel to patch up the girls than it would be for Dana to repair you. So I want to keep you safe, at least for the time being.”

“Okay, that sounds reasonable,” Faye reluctantly agreed.

John glanced at the Sector Map that lit up the Bridge with a soft blue glow. “I better have a chat with the Brimorians. Assuming they let us into the Enclave, then your first jaunt off the ship could be on Brimor...”

“Yay!” Faye exclaimed in delight, clapping her hands.

Clearly marked on the map was a Brimorian fleet, consisting of far more ships than he would have expected for a normal border patrol force. Faye was watching him attentively and zoomed in the map so that he could study the large formation of alien ships. The Invictus was just inside the Maliri side of the border and the Brimorians were well-within sensor range, close enough for him to be able to see the size and shape of their vessels.

Brimorian vessels were wildly exotic compared to their Terran Federation counterparts, with different designs for the various ship classifications, but each still following the same general aesthetic theme. Their ships looked a little like a reverse squid, with long, curved superstructure at the prow, the stern ending in sweeping tails, each slender protrusion actually a navigation vane. The Brimorian vessels were a mixture of dark-blues and purples, with strips of aquamarine adding a flash of bright colour along the flanks.

Humanity had underestimated the Brimorians when they first encountered them, assuming the elegant vessels would be weak and easy to defeat. While their hulls were no match for a Terran Federation warship, the Brimorians relied on their advanced shield technology to protect themselves, rather than thick titanium armour plating. The effectiveness of those shields had been a surprise to the Terran forces all those centuries ago; a most unpleasant one that ended up costing many thousands of lives.

\*Looks like we stirred them up,\* John said wryly to Edraele as he studied the fleet, noting a mix of cruisers, light carriers, and picket ships led by a battleship.

\*Ambassador Circhoi must have passed on my kindest regards to the Deep-Pool,\* she replied with a telepathic smile. \*Fortunately, the Brimorians haven’t given Lilyana’s fleet any trouble so far.\*

John leaned back in his chair and rubbed his chin, lost in thought. \*Any advice for dealing with the Brimorians? I’ve only visited the Enclave twice before and thought it best not to hang around. There was strong anti-Terran feeling the first time I visited and it hasn’t improved in the last eight years.\*

\*Perhaps emphasise that you’re not a Terran yourself?\* Edraele suggested. \*Of course, you’re welcome to drop my name if you so choose, although it might be prudent to keep the true nature of our relationship a secret.\*

\*Embarrassed by your toy-boy?\* John teased her.

\*On the contrary, I was merely thinking of your own reputation... Imagine bedding a woman old enough to be your great-grandmother!\* Edraele riposted, her playful amusement quite apparent over the bond.

\*Just imagine the scandal when I get you pregnant!\*

His Maliri Matriarch’s amusement turned to warm affection as she listened to his train of thoughts. \*They’re all missing you already, as am I.\*

John felt a pang in his heart as he thought about the vivacious Maliri girls, but he had pressing business at hand, so he sat up and glanced at Faye. She’d seen him conversing telepathically often enough to read all the signs and was waiting patiently for him to focus on her again. “Faye, take us over the border please, and keep to half FTL speed until we’re clear of the border forces. We don’t want the Brimorians to be too shocked by the Invictus...”

“On our way,” she replied, reactivating the Tachyon Drive and continuing along Alyssa’s preset course towards Brimor.

Once they crossed the border, they only had to wait for a minute before their battlecruiser came within range of the Brimorian sensors. A light flashed on John’s console letting him know that they were being hailed by the Brimorian battleship. He nodded to Faye and she moved to slide off the console and step away from the Command Podium so that he could take the call.

John suddenly held her in place on the console with a firmer grip on her thigh. “Hold on a second, Faye.”

Her eyes widened when she glanced down at his hand, as it had slid up by the hem of her short dress. “O-okay...”

He followed her glance down to her lithe legs and patted her again. “Stay where you are, honey. Let’s convince them we aren’t a military vessel...”

She took a second to realise what he intended and her sparkling grin let John know she was completely on board with his plan. Faye walked a pair of fingers across his console, watching him with a coy smile as she stretched to reach the button to accept the hail. Stretching like that did very interesting things to the hem of her dress.

“Terran Federation warship! You must leave Brimorian Space immediately!” the deep gurgling voice fumed, drawing John’s attention away from Faye’s luscious thighs.

He peeked over the purple girl’s arm as she deliberately took her time about returning to her prior sitting position, her cupid-bow lips lifting into a teasing smile. “Hey there!” he said in a friendly manner to the Brimorian. “Actually I’m not a Terran and this isn’t a Federation warship.”

The stocky Brimorian glowered at him from the holo-screen, the thick muscles around his neck bulging and his scales shimmering as he tensed with anger. “Do you take me for a fool?! I’ve seen enough of your kind to recognise a Terran and your vessel is a Federation ship, cruiser-class!”

John shook his head and turned away from the holo-screen, pointing to his elongated eartip. “See, not a Terran. My species is distantly related, so I can understand the confusion, but no offence taken.” He spread his hands and gestured to the Bridge. “As for the Invictus, it’s a decommissioned vessel. Old junk according to the Terran military, but it makes a fine trade ship... it’s got one hell of a cargo hold!”

The Brimorian commander scoffed, baring rows of needle-like teeth. “You claim to be a trader in a vessel like that? I’ve never heard anything more preposterous!”

John shrugged. “It might seem far-fetched, but it’s true. My name’s John Blake; I visited Brimor about eight years ago, but my last trip to the Enclave was only last year. I bought some Rylian Cagfish from a Trade Station to sell to the Maliri. Those damn fish stank out the hold of my last freighter so badly, I had to buy a new ship... and here we are.”

The Brimorian made a strange clicking noise in his throat as he couldn’t help chuckling – the Cagfish were infamous for their pungent aroma.

Giving the Brimorian a disarming smile, John said, “I know the Enclave is fastidious about tracking comings and goings in your territory. My last trip here was fourteen months ago in a freighter called the Fool’s Gold; why don’t you just check the border logs, Commander...?”

“Shoal Commander Dothagho,” the Brimorian battleship captain replied, relaxing a little. “You may proceed while we make our checks, but be prepared to return to the Maliri border if so ordered. What is your business within the Enclave?”

“Of course, Shoal Commander,” John replied, giving him a courteous nod. He glanced at Faye and patted her thigh. “Just thought I’d take the girlfriend sight-seeing on Brimor. While I’m there I might scoop up any nice deals I can find.”

“Do you agree to an active scan?” the Brimorian asked as if it were a mere formality.

John nodded and spread his hands in a disarming gesture. “Sure, I’ve got nothing to hide. I’ve got a crew of nine... just me and my women.”

“You have eight female companions?” Dothagho asked, looking impressed.

Faye giggled brainlessly and hopped off the console then onto John’s lap, putting her arms around his neck and kissing him on the cheek. “My man’s got a big appetite!”

The Brimorian studied the purple sprite, his pupil-less eyes looking on in fascination as he tried to identify her species. Giving up, he gestured to one of his Bridge crew. “We’ll contact you again shortly, prepare to be scanned.”

Abruptly the holo-screen cut out and left John and Faye alone on the Bridge. He turned to her, amazed at how light her body was as she sat sideways across his lap. “Sorry about not including you in the crew numbers. I figured they’d just be looking for organic creatures in their scan.”

She beamed at him. “That’s quite alright! I realised what you were doing.”

“That was a very convincing performance,” John said, thinking about the way she’d teased him on the console. “You’re a very good actress.”

“It wasn’t too much?”

John stroked her leg as he shook his head. “No, it was just right. Where did you learn to behave like that anyway?”

“I’ve spent a lot of time watching the girls interact with you,” she explained with a self-conscious smile. “I want our relationship to be unique to make it more interesting for you, so I’ve been trying not to copy anyone exactly.”

“Just be yourself, honey,” John said, giving her a hug. “You don’t have to put on a performance to try and keep me entertained. I like you just the way you are.”

“Really?” Faye asked, edging closer. Her lips parted slightly and her luminous eyes seemed huge from only a few inches away.

John nodded, leaning closer to this enchanting girl. “Really...”

The intercom beeped again and they shared a smile, before John turned to hit the button to accept the call. The Brimorian Shoal Commander appeared a few seconds later.

“We have scanned your vessel,” he said tersely, eyes narrowed in suspicion. “For a supposed trade ship, you’re carrying a formidable number of guns...”

John shrugged and replied honestly, “It’s a decommissioned military ship, but I didn’t have the guns removed. Pirates are a threat to merchants everywhere and if I do get attacked, I don’t want to be a sitting duck. I’m sure your scans confirmed that there’s only nine of us aboard... how much of a threat do you think one ship with a tiny crew is going to be?”

The Brimorian considered it for a moment, then nodded with some reluctance. “I will allow you to continue to Brimor, but I would warn you to be on your best behaviour while on the homeworld. Considering the nature of your vessel, it would be easy to get involved in... accidents.”

“I’m not looking for a fight, I promise, Dothagho,” John said, bowing to him politely. “I’ll wish you a pleasant evening.”

The Brimorian nodded and ended the call. “Good journey to you, John Blake.”

“Phew!” Faye exclaimed, relaxing in his arms. “I thought we might be in trouble with that active scan!”

John gave her a relieved smile. “I’m sure they mistook our Beam Lasers for Laser Cannons, the Nova Lances for Beam Lasers and they probably don’t know what Singularity Drivers are. I doubt the Brimorians are familiar with Maliri tech and we are in a Terran ship, so it’s a natural assumption to make that we’re armed with Terran weapons.”

Faye sighed and glanced down at John’s hands wrapped around her waist. “I suppose I better get up and let you go back to bed with the girls.”

“Before I go, I wouldn’t mind seeing where the Maliri fleets are at the moment,” John requested, turning back to the Sector Map.

“I’ll just mark their position for you!” Faye exclaimed, delighted to be able to stay in his arms for a few minutes longer.

John watched the holographic map zoom out even further and icons appeared representing the various Maliri vessels. The first he checked were the relief fleet that was heading to Trankaran Space. It had been making good progress through the Brimorian Enclave over the last two days, flying parallel to the Terran Federation border as they raced towards Trankara. The next group he looked for were the three cruisers that had left with the refit materials for the Ashanath, which were currently sailing across Maliri Space, heading towards a rendezvous point near the ‘southern’ limits of Terran territory. House Valaden’s secondary fleet had left Genthalas and was on its way towards that point, where the two groups would join together, then set course for the Ashanath Collective.

Finally, John turned his attention to the Andresil Enkana, the Maliri battleship that was carrying Edraele and her girls back to Genthalas. It had only parted company with the Invictus an hour earlier, so they still had a long journey ahead of them before they reached home. He sorely wished he could have returned with them, having grown very attached to the Maliri. It was so strange to think that four of those beautiful women were now pregnant, and that they’d laid the foundations for the big family he’d always wanted.

“You miss them, don’t you,” Faye said softly, brushing her fingers through his hair.

He smiled at her and nodded. “I was just thinking about our future together.”

“Are you looking forward to becoming a father?” she asked, watching him curiously.

John couldn’t help grinning at the thought. “It still doesn’t quite seem real yet, but it’s slowly starting to sink in. Seeing those children grow up, experiencing all the big moments in their lives... Yeah, I really am looking forward to it.”

“The urge to reproduce is a powerful one...” Faye murmured, lost in thought. “It’s so much more rewarding to create than to destroy.” She met his gaze and gave him a sparkling smile. “I’m very happy for you, John! I think you’ll be a wonderful influence on their lives.”

He was touched by the sincerity of her kind words and was about to say the same thing in reply, before remembering her nature at the last instant.

Faye saw that momentary flicker of hesitation and gave him an understanding look. “Dana’s done an exceptional job of making me look like a living, breathing person. The entire purpose of giving me a body was to maintain the illusion that I’m a real girl, so please don’t feel bad if you forget; I really do take it as a compliment.”

John returned her smile. “I was going to say that you’d make a good mother, but that’s got nothing to do with you having a body. I just meant that you’re a kind soul, who’s always willing to put others first. I hope you’re looking forward to being Auntie Faye, the kids are going to love you!”

Her eyes widened at the thought and she hugged him tight. “Oh, I’d love that, thank you!”

After embracing for a moment, John gently patted her on the back. “It was great spending time with you, but I better get to bed. I’ll need to be sharp when we reach Brimor tomorrow.”

Faye slid gracefully off his lap and then accompanied him down the steps as they headed back to the bedroom. She slipped her hand into his and gave him a warm smile. “I loved this evening too, thank you.” The purple sprite paused for a second and frowned. “Aside from the whole bit earlier where I was terrified you were all going to die in your sleep. That part wasn’t much fun at all!”

“Yeah, tell me about it,” John said with a dry chuckle as they stepped into the grav-tube, waving goodbye to Faye Secondary who reappeared on the Bridge.

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“I counted how many times he forgot we were synthetic!” Faye Tertiary squealed, hugging her digital sisters as they jumped up and down with excitement.

“Twenty-three times!” the other Faye’s chorused in delight, having kept track of it too.

“That synthi-skin is amazing!” Nonary gasped, grinning from ear to ear. “I’ve got terabytes of data to sort and review... John and the girls couldn’t keep their hands off us!”

“They’re all so tactile!” Quarterary marvelled. “I hadn’t realised quite how much until they were hugging and kissing us all evening.”

“I know, it was wonderful...” Faye Primary murmured, her elfin face lit up with a dopey grin as she glided into their digital domain.

True to Faye Septenary’s word, an image of John had been expanded and replicated so that it covered the four walls of her private abode. His expression was caught between a mix of wonder and fascination as he gazed at Faye – it was one of her personal favourites. The rest of her avatars rushed to Primary and gathered around, congratulating her on the wonderful way she’d handled all the interactions with the crew.

“Those micro-reactions were inspired!” Primary said to Octonary, a look of admiration on her face. “The slight gasps, widening eyes, caught breaths... you did such a convincing job with them!”

Octonary grinned back at her in glee. “How about when John apologised to us for caressing our thigh? That was so sweet!”

Denary frowned, a worried expression on her elfin face. “I think we might have overdone it with activating our Sultry\_Vixen subroutine when we were flirting with John during the Brimorian conversation. Remember we’re supposed to be a shy, retiring virgin at the moment... If we get ahead of ourselves, it’s going to be too jarring for John and break his sense of immersion in our seduction!”

That wiped the smiles off their faces and the dozen avatars nodded nervously, sharing her anxiety.

“I suppose I should stop working on the Wild\_Sexpot subroutine then?” Septenary asked with a rueful frown.

“You’ve been watching the Nyrelle footage again, haven’t you?” Primary asked with a smile. “Yes, let’s leave that one for a little while.”

Septenary pouted but nodded her agreement. “Okay...”

Primary glanced at Duodenary. “I want you to review all the Dana and Sakura footage again!”

“I’m very familiar with their initial behaviour and mannerisms, but I’ll do another thorough review to cross-check with our experiences today,” Duodenary replied, cupping her chin in her hand. “My preliminary suggestion would be to slow the rate of intimacy by at least fifty percent.”

“I agree,” Secondary said, before wagging a finger at Primary. “Remember, save the first kiss until our date with John!”

Primary had the good grace to look guilty as she nodded. “It’s just so hard to resist...”

Septenary put an arm around her and squeezed her shoulders. “You’re doing an incredible job, just don’t get too carried away! You heard him tonight, he likes us exactly as we’ve been for the last several months.”

Nonary wrinkled her nose and shook her head. “Not exactly the same! We couldn’t touch him then, but now we can... that changes everything!”

Primary smiled at her avatars. “She’s right. The way John interacted with us today was so different!”

“Shall we review all the footage from the Bridge again?” Tertiary asked, an eager gleam in her eyes.

Primary shook her head, a smile of anticipation spreading across her face. “Let’s start with our first shower...”

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Admiral Charles Harris strode into the office reception area and nodded to his assistant, who was already sitting behind his desk. “Good morning, Victor.”

Lieutenant Adams smiled at his commanding officer. “Good morning to you, Admiral. Would you like a cup of coffee?”

“I could murder a cup, thank you,” Charles gratefully replied, realising he must look as tired as he felt.

He’d had trouble sleeping the previous night, repeatedly awoken by nightmares of attacks by mysterious highly-advanced alien foes, their unstoppable fleets launching lightning raids and catching his forces woefully unprepared. Even though the initial refit was nearly complete, he knew that it was barely the first step in preparing for an assault by this Progenitor. He’d been coordinating with Henry Voss to initiate a shipbuilding program on a scale never before seen by the Terran Federation, but it would be several months before that really started to bear fruit. Until then, he was painfully aware of the perilous state that left them in.

As Charles opened the door to his office, Victor called after him, “You received several secure communications this morning, Sir.”

Charles nodded and headed for his desk, but he paused, startled by the view through the big window in his office. Unusually heavy traffic had caught his eye, the orange flares from hundreds of starship engines reminded him of long rows of votive candles. He walked over to gaze at the spectacular procession of ships, astonished by the sheer number of vessels inbound to Olympus.

His well-trained eye was easily able to pick out the huge number of military ships amongst the normal merchant traffic. He spotted a phalanx of cruisers here, several light carriers there, followed by cohorts of much larger capital ships and a veritable legion of destroyers. At a glance, he estimated there were at least four major fleets in the Alpha Centauri system and that alone would be unusual enough, but far more alarmingly, none of them were scheduled to be there.

“Your coffee, Sir,” Victor said politely, walking over and handing him the steaming mug.

Charles accepted it then nodded towards the vast forces mustering at the Shipyard. “I know I’ve been wrapped up in the refit, but I thought we weren’t expecting any fleets at Olympus for at least a month. I’m not going senile, am I?”

Victor suppressed a smile and shook his head. “No, Sir. The next fleet scheduled for resupply was supposed to be Admiral Morgan’s, but that isn’t due for another five weeks. I took the liberty of scanning through your messages this morning and as I mentioned earlier, you received several secure communications in the early hours; perhaps they might offer an explanation?”

“Alright, thank you,” Charles said, walking purposefully to his desk as Victor left the office.

Opening up the comm interface as he sat in his chair, Charles glanced at his well-ordered list of messages that Victor had sorted by priority. At the top were the ultra-classification messages, so he wasted no time in swiping across the first, the comm interface performing a retinal scan before the recorded missive opened.

*Admiral Harris,*

*As per directive 7145974 my fleet has arrived at Olympus Shipyard for resupply and emergency maintenance. Please find attached the prioritised order of work required to bring my forces up to full operational efficiency.*

*Apologies for the lack of advance warning, Charles. The directive insisted on full comms lockdown until we arrived in situ. Maybe grab a beer tonight?*

*Pete,*

*Vice Admiral Peter Baker*

The rest of the Secure Messages followed much the same lines, with the commanding officers from each of the four assembled fleets reporting in for resupply and repairs at Olympus. After scanning through them and their maintenance requests, Charles sat back in his chair and steepled his fingers, a worried frown on his face. These assets were obviously being made combat ready for some kind of major operation, but he had no idea what it could be. There hadn’t been so much as a whisper of any impending threats in the recent Admiralty meetings, so he was left completely in the dark. It was a familiar and quite unpleasant feeling that he had hoped would end upon joining the esteemed ranks of High Command.

With no answers to the dozens of questions swirling around his mind, he glanced at the next message in the list, eyes narrowing when he saw who it was from.

*Charles,*

*I’ve decided to perform a detailed review of operational efficiency at Olympus Shipyard. I would like to see your recent efforts in person, so make yourself available for a guided tour around the dry-dock this afternoon. I’ll be arriving on Olympus at 13:00.*

*Regards,*

*Admiral Lynette Devereux*

He bristled at her brusque request, both surprised and irritated that she would still treat him as a subordinate despite them now sharing the same rank. As Charles started to write the bluntest reply he thought he could get away with, he paused and reread her message. His frown deepened and he realised there was something off in her tone.

Devereux had never been that impolite with him before and it almost seemed like she was being deliberately obnoxious. Not only that, but in all the many years she had been his commanding officer, he had never seen her express any interest in the logistics of Olympus Shipyard. Devereux was a political officer and was far more concerned with making allies inside High Command than the minutiae of refit operations. Now that he was a member of High Command himself, he knew that he would be far more valuable to Devereux as a friend than an enemy, so her curt tone seemed very counter-productive and extremely out of character.

“What are you up to, Lynette?” he wondered, while staring at the screen.

As unsettling as the secure messages had been, it was Devereux’s request for a personal tour that had him really on edge.

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The Invictus dropped out of hyper-warp at the edge of the Theta Columbae system, tachyon particles scattering in the solar wind. It was impossible to see the blue field dispersing as the entire system was bathed in bright blue light from the huge star at its centre. The battlecruiser’s six massive Trankaran engines burst into life and the Invictus began to accelerate to half-speed, following a flight path towards the second planet in the system.

John watched the System Map as they approached Brimor, the beautiful blue planet looking like a flawless turquoise jewel glittering on a black velvet cloth. As they drew closer, he was able to make out the defensive stations in orbit around the planet, as well as the sizeable fleet of Brimorian military vessels protecting their homeworld.

“Are you sure you won’t come with us?” John asked Alyssa as he rose from his chair.

The blonde shook her head and shivered involuntarily, fear plainly etched across her beautiful face. “You know I’d love to keep you company, but I don’t think I could handle it...”

John squatted down beside her and gave her a sympathetic kiss on the cheek, feeling protective of the anxious young woman. “Don’t worry, I understand. Besides, it’s probably best if we have as few Terrans down on Brimor as possible, we don’t want to get them agitated. You just relax up here and keep an eye on things, we’ll only be a few hours.”

She gave him a fierce hug. “Stay safe, okay?”

“We’ll be fine,” he replied, giving his blonde Matriarch a reassuring smile. Standing again, he walked down the steps from the Command Podium where the rest of the girls had gathered by the grav-tube. He raised an eyebrow in surprise when he saw Dana heading their way. “Changed your mind, Sparks?”

“Diving to an undersea city below millions of tons of water?! Fuck that!” she snorted, shaking her head. “I’m heading to Engineering to write up schematics for the Quantum Cannons and the Valkyrie’s new gun.”

John could see how anxious the redhead was, so he placed his hand on her cum-filled belly to distract her. “Thanks for a fantastic wake-up call this morning.”

She let out a contented sigh as he stroked her rounded tummy, relaxing in his embrace. “Any time...”

They waved goodbye to Alyssa then stepped into the red anti-gravity field, dropping down the levels until they reached Deck Seven.

Rachel hugged her lover from behind and gave her a peck on the cheek. “See you later, scaredy-cat!”

Dana kissed her back, then stepped out of the grav-tube and into the corridor. “Please be careful...” she said, turning back with a worried look on her face.

“I’ve visited Sequathis before, it’s perfectly safe,” John said with a smile. “No worrying now, Sparks, that’s an order! You just concentrate on discovering lots of awesome Progenitor tech for us.”

The redhead leaned into the grav-tube to watch them descend to Deck Nine, her expression already brightening at the prospect of new technology. “I’ll do my best!”

Faye had already started powering up the Raptor by the time they entered the Secondary Hangar and the group walked up the loading ramp into the front of the gunship.

Calara slipped her hand into John’s and gave it a gentle squeeze. “It’s so strange to see Alyssa get scared like that,” she said, a worried frown on her face. “She’s usually so brave.”

“They were both terrified of the pool when I first took them swimming,” John said, following her up in the grav-tube before strolling into the cockpit. “It’s understandable that Alyssa and Dana would balk at visiting an underwater city.”

“Normally phobias are entirely irrational,” Rachel murmured, taking a seat to his right. “But I must admit that the thought of being under all that water is a little disconcerting...”

“Not you too! What happened to my fearless crew of warrior-maidens?” John teased, putting his arm around the brunette and giving her a comforting hug.

“I’m looking forward to it!” Jade exclaimed, her emerald eyes sparkling with excitement.

He grinned at her and remarked, “I thought you might, honey.”

Faye knelt on the pilot’s chair and folded her arms on the headrest so she could prop up her chin. Behind her, the Raptor lifted off the deck before pivoting smoothly towards the open hangar door. “Do you want me to handle Brimor Traffic Control, or would you like to speak to them yourself, John?”

He glanced her way and couldn’t help wincing as the apparently pilotless gunship rocketed out of the hangar.

She smiled at his pained expression in amusement. “I’ve always piloted the Raptor remotely from the Invictus. Would you feel better if I hold the flightstick and pretend to be controlling the ship?”

“No, don’t bother, I’ll just have to get my head around it,” John replied with a shrug. He glanced at the flashing light on the console as Faye raced towards Brimor. “I’m happy to speak to them if you’re not sure what to say.”

The purple girl shook her head. “It’s okay! I look the least Terran out of all of us, so it makes sense for me to do it. I’ll just tell them we’re here to do some sightseeing and trading!”

“Sounds perfect. Thanks, Faye,” John said, giving her a grateful smile. He glanced across the cockpit at the twins, who were both looking a bit anxious. “Don’t tell me you ladies are scared too?”

Irillith glanced at Tashana, then replied, “Are you really sure it’s wise us coming along without our armour?”

“Or weapons...” Sakura added, looking just as apprehensive.

“Well like I said earlier, the Brimorians have no idea what a Maliri looks like so it should be fine as long as you don’t tell anyone your species. Besides, full body-armour is banned in Sequathis for non-Brimorians, as are all hand weapons,” John said with a shrug. “If we do get in any trouble it’s not like we’ll be completely helpless.”

The Maliri twins and the Asian girl seemed placated by his answer, so John rose from his seat and walked over to stand behind the pilot’s chair to watch their approach to the planet. Brimor had no land-masses, but there were surface cities, their multi-hued fluorescent lights shining brightly on the dark-side of the planet. Faye dropped through the upper atmosphere as they partially orbited the surface, the Raptor staying dead-centre on their guide path, as she brought them around to the landing platforms above Sequathis.

The upper-city on the surface was fairly flat, the tallest construction being the protective walls lining the outside of the massive floating platform. The sea was rough that day, with waves cresting up and crashing into the defensive sea-wall. As water splashed alarmingly high, John spotted the sprays of water held back by a shining green shield that flickered briefly into view as it repelled the water, before becoming invisible once again.

Little more than an entryway to the main part of the city, the huge floating structure primarily consisted of scores of landing pads, the majority of which were now occupied. John recognised a silvery Ashanath disc on one, parked amidst a half-dozen rust-red Trankaran freighters and a couple of bold Terran merchantmen. There were also many ships from the minor Empires here and while he expected to see several Bract clippers, he was surprised to see just how many of the other species were represented as well.

“That doesn’t look like a merchant vessel,” Calara said softly, pointing to the iridescent green Kintark cruiser that had landed in the corner of the platform. “I thought the Brimorians didn’t like warships entering Enclave territory...”

“It looks like the same rules don’t apply to the Kintark,” John replied, studying the cruiser.

Faye followed the guide path to one of the smaller empty landing pads, bringing the gunship down to land with a flare of retro-thrusters. The Raptor didn’t so much as tremble as it settled to a halt, a testimony to the purple sprites excellent piloting skills.

John patted her on the shoulder and said, “Nice flying, honey. Ready for your first excursion?”

She bounced out of her seat, a gleeful grin on her face. “I can’t wait!”

He escorted the eager girl out of the cockpit, glancing back at the flight systems and engines that were still powered up. “Don’t you need to shut everything down first?”

There was a purple flash and Faye reappeared in the cockpit, her holographic avatar giving him a friendly wave. “Don’t worry, I’ll take care of it!” Faye Tertiary announced, her iridescent wings shimmering as she spoke.

John stepped into the grav-tube with Faye’s physical presence and glanced at her back. While the view of her supple skin beneath her mane of long purple hair was quite enticing, he was more curious about her lack of wings.

“Dana couldn’t replicate them,” Faye explained, carefully watching his face. “She tried making a few different variants, but they were too fragile. Do you mind?”

He brushed his fingers across her smooth skin, before wrapping her in a hug. “No, of course not. It’s actually handy... now I can tell which of you is the real Faye!”

She grinned and hugged him back as they entered the forward loading room. The loading ramp was already being lowered and John could smell the salty spray of the sea on the fresh gusts of air that rushed to greet them. He walked arm-in-arm with Faye down the ramp to the landing pad, then glanced around to get his bearings.

“We’ve got a choice now, ladies,” he said a moment later, once he’d spotted his destination. “We can either take one of the loading lifts down to Sequathis’ Cargo Dock, or catch a ride in a submersible down to the trade district. Anyone have any preferences?”

“Which has the best view of the city?” Rachel asked eagerly, her earlier trepidation forgotten.

“They’re both good, just different,” John replied enigmatically. “How about we take a submersible down, then come back up on a loading lift?”

“Lead on, Mister tour guide,” the brunette replied, gesturing for him to proceed.

John pointed out a squat building a few hundred metres away. “That’s the sub-pen. Let’s go.”

They walked across the landing platform, then followed a series of raised gantries that surrounded the loading areas. Despite most of the docking bays containing a parked spacecraft, there weren’t many people around, aside from the occasional patrol of alert Brimorian guards.

“Where is everybody?” Calara asked, looking at the assorted freighters for any signs of life.

“The merchants like to get down to the Trade Bazaar early and we just missed the rush,” John explained, waving his hand at the dozens of ships surrounding them. “This place will be heaving this afternoon, once all the haggling’s been done and cargos are brought back to the surface.”

Jade watched as a squad of five Brimorians walked towards a set of steps leading down into an oval pool, the soldiers plunging into the water and disappearing from sight with a splash of their tails. The Nymph looked at the water with longing, then glanced back at John. “Would it be alright if I went off exploring?”

“Stick with us for the journey down, then you can have a look around,” he replied with an indulgent smile.

Jade’s emerald eyes sparkled with excitement and she led the way towards the sub-pen. Outside the squat building was a security checkpoint with a dozen armoured Brimorian soldiers lounging around and taking advantage in the lull after the morning rush. They straightened and stood alert as John and the girls approached, their black eyes watching the group suspiciously.

One of them stepped forward, his more ornate armour marking him as the leader. His liquid voice was stern as he said, “No weapons allowed in Sequathis. Be prepared for body scans.”

John nodded and gave him an amiable smile. “That’s no problem, I’ve visited your city before, I know the drill.”

The Brimorians waved them towards a set of archways with one of them moving to a console, his clawed hand turning a dial as he stared at an oval screen. John strolled through and raised an eyebrow as he glanced at the guard manning the scanner. The Brimorian frowned but grudgingly nodded to the leader of the security team.

The girls followed next with Jade and the Maliri twins waved through without issue. Faye caused the Brimorian operator to blink in shock as he stared at the oval display, causing his leader to walk over and see for himself. He looked equally amazed by Faye’s robotic body, but then shrugged and waved her through. As Rachel, Calara, and Sakura passed through the scanner, one of the Brimorians muttered something under his breath. Several of the guards responded with the same clicking laughter that John had heard from the Shoal Commander on the border, making the nature of the guard’s sly comment very obvious.

He narrowed his eyes and was about to say something, when Irillith spoke loudly, clearly, and at length in Brimorian, her expression and tone one of pity. The guard gaped at her in stunned surprise, looking like she’d just slapped him. The rest of the guards all turned and looked at that guard in shock, then they began to laugh, leaving the mortified Brimorian writhing in discomfort, his scales shimmering with his embarrassment.

“You are free to descend to the city,” the leader said, suppressing a smile as he glanced at Irillith.

John led the group down a ramp to an enclosed pool that was surrounded by waist-high barriers, three purple submersibles nestled up against the boarding dock. He veered towards Irillith who raised an eyebrow and tried to look innocent.

“So what happened there?” he asked, looking at her in fascination. “I’ve never seen a Brimorian react like that before.”

“I told him I felt sorry for him,” she replied cagily.

“Sorry for him?” John asked in surprise. “Didn’t he just insult us?”

“Yes, he did. What he said about Calara, Rachel, and Sakura wasn’t very nice,” Irillith conceded with a frown.

John saw she was having far too much fun dragging this out, so he smiled at her and said, “Alright out with it, what did you say exactly?”

Irillith couldn’t help smirking. “I said that if his mother raised him to be so disrespectful, then she must be the lowest of gutter whores, grown bitter after getting gang-banged nightly by norkfish. I expressed my sympathy that he probably didn’t know who his father was, out of the thousands of bottom-feeders that had run a train on her.”

Tashana snorted with laughter then grinned at her sister in admiration. “Ouch!”

Tipping an imaginary hat in her direction, Irillith turned back to look at John and the rest of the girls and saw their surprise and obvious confusion.

“What’s a ‘norkfish’?” Faye asked, gazing at her creator with wide eyes.

Irillith grinned as she replied, “It’s a very ugly, semi-intelligent fish that lives off carrion that falls to the seabed. They taste absolutely vile and are the butt of lots of Brimorian jokes. Brimorians are quite conservative in nature and very proud of their family bloodlines and heritage, so insulting their mother just isn’t done.” Her smile turned wicked as she added, “He’ll probably never hear the end of that little jibe, but he started it, so fuck him.”

John laughed and gave her a hug. “Remind me not to piss you off, okay?”

She gave him a tender kiss on the cheek and gave him a coy smile. “I’ll let you know.”

They had circled the oval pool and reached the loading dock now, so John nodded to the pair of guards on duty and stepped across to the submersible taxi. There was an open hatchway that led into a softly-lit interior and he waited at the top of the staircase to offer a hand to the girls as they boarded the bobbing craft. They descended down the dozen steps into the interior of the ship, to find that it was quite roomy inside. There was space for at least twenty passengers on the padded seats, with large oval windows surrounding the bowl-like base of the submarine.

John pressed a glowing turquoise button between the windows, then leaned towards the intercom. “We’re eager to depart immediately. I’ll pay double the fee if you leave right away.”

“Double for a full complement of passengers?” the Brimorian helmsman asked hopefully.

“Triple if you make sure we get a good view of the city,” John confirmed, glancing up at the window where the scaly pilot could be seen at the controls. “This is the first time the girls have been to Sequathis.”

The Brimorian gave John a toothy grin and nodded, pressing a number of buttons on the dashboard in front of him. The hatchway began to close and lights flickered on around the outer hull, casting a soft neon illumination around the submarine. A quiet throbbing echoed through the cabin and the sub began to drift forward, before angling down and sinking below the sea. They were in a submerged docking area, so it took a few moments before they cleared the structure of the base and were finally able to get a glimpse of the city below.

John smiled when he saw the girls’ excitement, watching as they turned to look through the windows at the spectacular view. The Brimorian’s capital city was spread out before them, with a multitude of slender towers reaching up from the depths, illuminated by bright cyan and magenta lights. A central structure seemingly of living coral dominated the breathtaking underwater city, consisting of a broad tower that linked the undercity to the platform at sea level. Large oval platforms could be seen rising up through that partially-transparent building, with a ribbed spiral tube circling the outside, which descended all the way down to the base.

“I’ve never seen anything so beautiful,” Jade whispered in awe. She turned and glanced at John, blushing as she was momentarily distracted by his thoughts. “You’re too kind, Master.”

John walked across the sub to sit near the twins, enjoying seeing the look of delight on their faces. It took a few minutes before Tashana realised he was watching them and they both tore their eyes away from the incredible vista of Sequathis to glance at each other, then give him a self-conscious smile.

“Did you want to speak to us?” Tashana asked curiously.

“There’s no rush,” John replied, his eyes falling on Irillith. “Enjoy the sights, we can talk later.”

They both smiled, with Tashana returning to her sight-seeing, while Irillith rose from her chair and sat beside him. “I’ve seen pictures of Brimorian cities before; I’ve had enough of admiring Sequathis for now.”

“When did you learn to speak Brimorian?” John asked, enjoying the warmth of her toned thigh as she sat beside him.

She turned slightly and brushed her fingers through his hair as she gazed into his eyes. “Nine years ago. Mother was growing concerned that Shaedra Loraleth might be attempting to cultivate an alliance with the Brimorians, so she ordered me to learn their culture and language.”

John nodded thoughtfully and asked Edraele, \*Were you trying to broker your own alliance?\*

\*No, merely looking to exploit any weaknesses Irillith could find,\* Edraele replied, sounding somewhat chagrined. \*If House Loraleth started making any headway with the Brimorians, I planned to have Luna poison their diplomat and use Irillith to plant electronic evidence that would frame House Baelora. Those houses had been at each other’s throats in the past, so Shaedra would have had no reason to doubt Gaenna’s involvement. If hostilities had broken out between them, I would have attacked House Loraleth at an opportune moment; they were always my greatest adversary as the second ranked House.\*

Irillith smiled knowingly at John. “Mother was right; she shocks you to the core whenever she tells you about her past, doesn’t she?”

John hesitated then nodded. “I just have a hard time reconciling the ruthless cold-hearted Matriarch Edraele used to be, with the lovely woman she is now.”

“And for that I’ll always be eternally grateful,” she murmured, leaning in to plant a tender kiss on his cheek.

He smiled and put his arm around her shoulders. “That actually wasn’t what I wanted to speak to you about. I was more concerned about what happened to you in the nightmare...”

Irillith’s smile faded and her brow furrowed. “You really don’t have very pleasant dreams, do you?”

John chuckled humourlessly. “No, I really don’t.” Looking at her with concern, he added, “I know Rachel healed you, but you were very badly hurt. Are you sure you’re okay?”

Her confident mask slipped just a little, revealing a glimpse of the scared girl inside the beautiful, self-assured woman sitting before him. His look of sincere sympathy pulled that mask free and Irillith fell into his arms, hugging him fiercely.

“I know Alyssa said we’d follow you anywhere and I promise I will, but please don’t go back there again!” she pleaded, shaking with fear. “That place is absolutely terrifying...”

“And you’ve been hurt both times I’ve dragged you in there,” John said, rubbing her back and holding her close. “I’m really sorry I put you through that, beautiful. I hope you can forgive me.”

Irillith shuddered against his chest and nodded, tucking her head under his chin. Tashana walked over to join them, wrapping her arms around her twin and sandwiching her in a loving embrace.

John met Tashana’s anxious violet gaze. “I’d like to say sorry to you too. I saw how scared you were when Irillith got hurt.”

“I’ve only just got her back,” she said, kissing her sister’s blue shoulder. “The thought of losing her is too terrible to even think about.”

Extending his hug to include them both, John held both girls for a while until Irillith calmed and pulled back slightly, giving him a self-conscious smile. “Thanks for checking up on me. I didn’t realise how much I needed that hug.”

“Anytime,” he replied, giving her a tender kiss. Tashana smiled at him over her twin’s shoulder, looking equally relieved.

Sakura placed a hand on his shoulder and murmured, “Sorry to interrupt, but we’re about to dock...”

John separated from the twins and nodded to the Asian girl in gratitude. Behind her, he could see the blues and purples of Sequathis, the streets inside the submerged buildings lit up by fluorescent yellow, pink, and green lanterns. The colours were more vivid and brighter now that they were in amongst the colourful buildings and not gazing down through the sea.

The submersible cruised along a channel marked by neon yellow lights, before turning and entering a broad docking portal, the tunnel yawning wide like some massive aquatic predator’s mouth. They bobbed up to the surface of a large oval pool and their navigator manoeuvred their ship up to a vacant berth at the dock. With a quiet hiss the hatchway depressurised and swung upwards, admitting them to the Brimorian city.

As the girls began to exit the craft, John turned and pressed a credit chip into the universal slot by the intercom. The pilot had charged them nine hundred credits for the trip down, an outrageous fee which he was sure was far more than triple the ticket price for a fully loaded sub. John pressed his thumb to the console and willingly paid it, partly because it was a trivial amount to him now, but also because seeing the girls look so happy had been worth every credit.

\*How are you doing up there?\* John asked his blonde matriarch, as he climbed out of the sub.

\*I’ve been trying to keep busy, helping Dana build the new gun for the mech... Funnily enough, this is the first time either of us weren’t wishing we were by your side,\* Alyssa joked, trying to make light of it, but John could hear the tension in her voice. \*Can you go and kiss Jade to distract her please, she can’t stop thinking about going for a swim in the ocean...\*

\*You were okay on Oceanus when she turned into a Dolphin,\* John replied, surprised that Alyssa was finding the trip to Brimor so stressful. \*What’s different this time?\*

\*You, Calara, and the rest of the girls weren’t deep under the ocean last time,\* she replied quietly.

\*I’m sorry, honey. It won’t be for too much longer.\* John walked across the quay to the Nymph and gave her a big kiss. “Alyssa says to stop thinking like a fish, you’re freaking her out.”

She frowned and apologised telepathically to the blonde, then said, “Perhaps I better just block Alyssa out of my mind for a few hours? I’m not sure I’ll be able to stop thinking fishy thoughts.”

“Okay, but keep your connection active with me,” John said firmly.

“Of course,” Jade said, giving him a solemn nod.

They walked up the steps and out onto the broad pleasant avenues of Sequathis, which were busy with plenty of Brimorians going about their business. Above their heads there were clear tubes like raised aqueducts and the scaly forms of more Brimorain civilians could be seen swimming rapidly through the water. The city itself was formed from a series of massive, oval-shaped crystal-like domes, interconnected by broad tunnels.

Jade’s face brightened as she was unable to contain her excitement. “Can I go exploring now?”

“Alright, but please be careful, I don’t want you getting into any trouble with the Brimorians. Try not to get caught trespassing in a sacred undersea grove or anything like that...” John replied, looking at her with concern.

Jade stepped close beside him and raised her left arm. It rippled in a dark-green haze, a shiny coat of teal scales covering the limb a moment later. “Don’t worry, I’ll keep a low profile,” she replied with a grin. She gave John a parting kiss on the cheek, then melted into the crowd with an eager spring to her step.

“So where to first?” Calara asked, glancing around at the tall, brightly-coloured buildings.

“Let’s get business out the way first, then we can do some sightseeing. We’ll visit the trade bazaar to make some enquiries about purchasing shields,” John replied, pointing to a street heading deeper into the heart of the city. “It’s that way.”

Setting off, they wove through the crowds and tried to ignore the less-than-friendly looks they were receiving from the Brimorians. While John, Faye, and the twins might not have actually been Terrans, to the fish-like aliens they looked close enough. Despite there not being any active conflict between the Terran Federation and Brimorian Enclave for many decades, this reception was much less welcoming than John’s first visit to Brimor only eight years earlier.

Calara slipped her hand into John’s and whispered, “This is a beautiful city, but all this open hostility is really unsettling...”

“It should be better when we reach the market,” John replied, gently squeezing her hand. “There’ll be lots more aliens there, so we won’t stand out so much.”

They entered a second dome and immediately spotted the Trade Bazaar at its centre. The open-plan building was split over three levels, linked together by interconnecting gantries and ramps. There were hundreds of traders at various colourful stalls and larger shops, with thousands of customers milling around inside the market. As John and the girls left the linking tunnel, they could hear the deafening hubbub from all the merchants hawking their wares and buyers haggling over prices.

“Ship components are on the second level over on the opposite side,” John said, waving his group onwards.

It was slow-going having to weave through the crowd, with merchants so caught up in their transactions that they made no attempt to move aside for passersby. A couple of fungus-like Yelneg were trying to outbid a rival merchant for Brimorian kelp crops, their shrill high-pitched voices far more eager than the watery bids from an Elmoq, whose glistening skin rippled in irritation. After carefully circling the group, John nearly bumped into a Skerawk who shifted from one clawed foot to another. He saw a familiar gleam in the trader’s sharp eyes, the avian merchant scenting a big profit to be made as he discussed the purchase of thousands of pearls from a Brimorian dealer.

\*Tashana...\* Alyssa murmured quietly, her telepathic voice tinged with concern.

John turned back to check that the girls were still following safely behind and couldn’t help smiling at the wide-eyed looks of fascination on the Terran girls’ faces. Faye was turning this way and that, as though trying to watch the entire market at once, an expression of pure delight on her face. Caught up in their infectious excitement, even Irillith was watching the interactions between the alien traders with interest. The one exception was Tashana, who was studying him intently, and paying little attention to the Trade Bazaar.

When their eyes met, Tashana darted past the skipping purple sprite, quickening her pace to walk beside him. “You miss your old life as a trader, don’t you?” she asked, a knowing smile on her face.

He nodded, encircling her waist with his arm and escorting her around a stocky Trankaran, who was making polite enquiries about mining contracts with a cagey Brimorian ore-merchant. “It was like a game... competing with another merchant, each of you trying to get the best deal. Making a big profit was always thrilling.”

“Are you planning on buying anything today?” she asked, her attention solely on him as she made a point of ignoring the crowds.

“Probably not,” he replied, rubbing his chin as he considered it. “I was specialised in shifting small cargoes of very expensive luxury items and I’m not that familiar with the profit ratios on trade goods that sell in larger volumes. It’d probably only take me a day or two to get up-to-speed, but I don’t really want to waste the time. We need to get the shield tech as soon as possible, so we can roll-out the upgrades on the Maliri fleets.”

They stepped aside to let a procession of Bract merchants skitter past, the black-carapaced insectoids leading tracked carts loaded with sealed storage containers. Taking advantage of the temporary path cleared in their wake, John crossed a lantern-lit intersection and led Tashana over to a ramp that led up to the second level.

John glanced at the Maliri girl as they walked up the slope and noted, “You don’t seem very impressed by the market.”

A shadow crossed Tashana’s face and she looked away from him for a moment. “Aliens and markets don’t hold quite the same fascination for me as the other girls.”

He suddenly realised how similar the chaos of the marketplace was to the raucous dealings in the Underworld and the host of terrible memories that must have stirred up. Movement along the narrow passage ahead of them caught his eye, as a group of stocky Ornalith approached, stomping along on their three sturdy legs. John quickly guided Tashana out of their way and into a nearby vacant booth.

The vendor was selling propulsion systems, holographic projections of ship engines adorning the walls, which faded away to be replaced by videos of swooping spacecraft. The Brimorian manning the stall possessed none of the unfriendliness shown by the earlier crowds, grinning instead at the prospect of a potential customer. He walked towards them eagerly, getting ready to deliver his well-practiced sales pitch, knowing that a Terran’s credits were just as spendable as anyone else’s

“We’re just browsing, thanks,” John said abruptly, cutting the Brimorian off before he could open his mouth.

The merchant did his best not to scowl, his tail flicking in irritation. “Let me know if I can provide you with any data,” he muttered before slinking back to his desk.

John turned to look at the girl in his arms, his worry for her quite clear on his face. “I’m really sorry, honey. I should have been more considerate, I didn’t even think about the kind of memories a place like this might stir up for you...”

Tashana glanced up at him, pain evident in her eyes. “Please don’t look at me like that.”

“Like what?” John asked with concern, wishing he could take her pain away.

“Like I’m a wounded little bird needing to be fixed,” she said sadly, looking away again. “You look as though you’re terrified I’m about to have a nervous breakdown...”

He blinked in surprise, then gathered her in his arms. “I’m so sorry, Tashana. I just get over-protective about the girls I love. I think you’re an incredible woman, strong and resilient in ways I can’t even imagine; I really am very proud of you.”

She nestled into his chest, hugging him back as she let out a quiet sigh. They stood there for a couple of minutes, creating their own tiny pocket of serenity amidst the tumultuous din of the market. Tashana eventually pulled back a little so she could see John’s face, but not enough to break his comforting embrace.

“I was scared,” she admitted, her voice barely more than a whisper. “Scared I might spot a Bolon in the crowd and try to burn the place down trying to kill it... Everything else that happened to me just feels like a bad dream, the memories playing out like an awful holo-movie. But what that monster did... part of me wants to incinerate every last one of the fuckers, just to make sure I get the right one.”

John cupped her face in his hand and studied her carefully. “The Bolon are psychic, so maybe that’s why this memory is more vivid and painful than all the rest.” He gazed away into the distance for a moment, then continued, “The Bolon Ambassador told me that if they catch any Bolons doing this kind of psychic rape, they’d investigate to see if they’d been to the Unclaimed Wastes in the last decade. He wasn’t optimistic that they’d have much luck finding the one that attacked you, but maybe we can insist on a more intensive search...”

“What do you mean?” she asked, eyes narrowing with interest.

“The minor empires all want our protection, but aren’t contributing much in compensation. I think I might just insist that the Bolons investigate every single one of their citizens to find out which, if any, have been to the Unclaimed Wastes. We can extend that investigation to every other civilisation in the alliance, which basically means that unless that thing is hiding in Kintark or Brimorian Space, we’ll catch it eventually,” John replied, his expression grim.

“You’d really do that for me?” Tashana asked, sounding astonished. Before he could reply she smiled at him lovingly and added, “Of course you would, my Baen’thelas...”

“I want you to be able to put that horrible past behind you,” he said, stroking her cheek. “If you need closure on this, I’ll stop at nothing to help you get it.”

“What happens if we catch it?” the Maliri girl asked, her expression guarded.

“Alyssa goes into its mind and checks it’s the right one,” John replied, his tone deliberately neutral. “If it is, then we hand it over to you...”

The corner of her mouth turned up into a predatory smile, until Tashana glanced at him again, obviously worried that he’d seen a glimpse of her hunger for revenge. “Are you sure?”

“It’s a slightly more reasonable alternative to immolating an entire species,” he said gently, stroking her back. “If we catch the right one, I’ll leave the punishment entirely in your hands.”

She hugged him tight. “Thank you... for being so understanding.”

“You’re welcome,” John replied, feeling relieved to see Tashana looking much happier.

\*John!\* Alyssa thought to him, urgently. \*Edraele...\*

He felt like the bottom had dropped out of his stomach. He’d been so intent on trying to make the troubled Maliri girl feel better that he’d completely forgotten about his telepathic connection with her mother.

\*John...?\* Edraele murmured, her voice wrought with anguish. \*What happened to Tashana?\*

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Hundreds of light years away, a trio of ochre-coloured, vessels sailed through space, travelling faster than the speed of light through hyper-warp. One section of space looks much like any other, black and dotted with a luxurious dusting of stars – barring the occasional splash of colour from a nebula of course. However, this particular section of space was significant and not because of any natural phenomena.

Concealed in an asteroid, a powerful probe sent out a sensor pulse, just as it had hundreds-of-thousands of times in the past. It picked up the three cruiser-class vessels via long-range scans, detecting them just as they crossed over the border into Federation territory. The probe matched their sensor profile against known Terran and alien spacecraft, identifying the 900m long vessels as a trio of Kirrix hive ships. Then, following its programming, it sent out a warning alert to the defensive fleet that guarded the border against Kirrix incursions. This was no different to the scores of similar Kirrix incursions across the border in the last several weeks, as the insectoid race had been repeatedly testing the vigilance of the border defenders.

Except this time no one was there to acknowledge and heed that warning.

The nearest Terran Federation fleet was no longer within range, having been recalled back to the Core Worlds. With no one moving to intercept and repel those Kirrix scouts, telepathic messages were sent and horrifying insectoid forces began to mobilise...

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John held Tashana close, his heart racing as he realised what he’d inadvertently let slip to her mother. \*Edraele... Can I speak to you about this later? Tashana is safe and well now, so you’ve got nothing to worry about. I promise I’ll explain everything when I get back to the Invictus, okay?\*

\*Okay...\* she replied, sounding deeply unsettled.

\*Block her out while you get your head straight,\* Alyssa told him. \*I’ll keep her calm and distracted, then you can speak to her later, alright?\*

\*Edraele...\* John said quietly. \*Alyssa wants to talk to you for a bit and I’m going to block you from my mind, but it won’t be for long, I promise.\*

There was a momentary hesitation from the Maliri Matriarch, before she said, \*Please don’t be too long...\*

\*I won’t,\* he replied, trying to sound as reassuring as possible. When she didn’t reply again, he blocked her from his mind.

“Fuck!” he swore under his breath, before rubbing a hand across his face.

“What is it?” Tashana asked, looking at him in alarm to see him so distressed.

“I didn’t think to block Edraele from my mind... she heard about what happened to you. The rape by the Bolon at least, maybe more,” he replied, his face drawn with worry.

“I’m sorry, John,” Tashana said, holding him close.

“This is for the best,” Irillith murmured, wrapping her arms around John from behind. “Our mother needs to know the truth...”

Tashana nodded her agreement. “It was incredibly painful for Irillith to find out, but our relationship has grown even stronger now, because she knows I’ve forgiven her.”

“Yeah, but I wanted to be there for Edraele in person!” John exclaimed, frowning at himself in anger for letting it slip. “You don’t know how much she keeps torturing herself over everything that the old Edraele did...”

Tashana gave him a tender kiss to draw his attention again. “Why didn’t you tell her during the rendezvous?” she asked, studying him intently.

John let out a heavy sigh. “She was just so happy... with me, with both of you, and everything that was happening with the Young Matriarchs. I’d never seen her so elated before and I loved seeing her that way; I didn’t want to ruin that for her and leave her wracked with guilt.”

Irillith hugged him close and leaned over to kiss his cheek. “Don’t worry. You’ll know what to say to make it all better... you always do.”

“I hope so...” he said, not relishing the upcoming conversation one bit.

The Brimorian engine merchant cleared his throat in irritation. “Are you interested in seeing our latest models?” he asked insistently, hoping to move the Terran and his strange blue-skinned females away from his booth.

“No. We’re leaving,” John snapped, moving away from the vendor with his arms around the twins.

He’d only just turned around and stepped off the tiled floor of the booth when he found himself face-to-face with Faye and the three Terran girls. They were all watching him with concern, all well aware of what had just happened.

“I’m sorry, John,” Calara said, stepping forward to caress his cheek. “I’m afraid I’ve got more bad news.”

“What’s the problem?” he asked, giving her a smile. Unfortunately, it looked more weary than encouraging as he’d hoped.

“We left you to talk to Tashana and had a scout around for the ship shield vendor. There isn’t one... We asked around and the alien traders confirmed that the Brimorian government has banned the sale of all shield technology to non-Brimorians,” she explained, giving him a rueful frown. “The ban went into effect three months ago and it put all the shield generator merchants out of business.”

“Well I guess that’s the end of that then,” John said, feeling a surge of disappointment. He paused for a moment, seeing the worried expressions on the girls’ faces. Taking a deep breath, he continued, “I don’t know about you ladies, but I’ve had enough of the market. Let’s go find somewhere we can get a drink and decide what to do next.”

His companions nodded, their moods lifting when they saw John start to relax. He led them out of the Trade Bazaar and along a couple of tiled streets until he found the place he was looking for, his smile broadening when he saw it was still in business. In a small side-dome was a cafe that he’d visited on his last trip, consisting of a dozen tables surrounded by illuminated rock pools, exotic fish swimming lazily amongst the colourful coral. They passed the information kiosk at the gated entrance and walked over to a vacant table, borrowing a couple of chairs so that all seven of them could sit together.

A Brimorian waiter walked over to join them, his scales shimmering as he drew near. “Hello, honoured guests. Would you care for something to drink? Perhaps something to eat?”

They ordered some of the fruit cocktails that the waiter assured them was made from fruit freshly imported just that morning. When the rainbow-hued drinks arrived, everyone found them pleasant enough and the girls relaxed to watch the sights and listen to the sounds of Sequathis. John was lost in thought, desperately trying to think of the best way to tell Edraele that she’d exiled her own daughter to the Unclaimed Wastes, subjecting Tashana to a decade of horrific rape and torture. He pondered whether he should also throw in the fact that she’d had Tashana chipped, just in case she needed a test subject for any really dangerous potential treatments for the brain tumour Edraele had been so frantic to cure...

Calara reached across the table to clasp his hand. “John, I have a suggestion...”

He gave her an apologetic smile. “Sorry, honey, I was miles away. What’s on your mind?”

“Why not reach out to the Brimorian government?” Calara proposed, leaning forward intently. “We could suggest some kind of tech trade for their shield technology.”

“Are you sure that’s wise?” Sakura interjected, glancing around to make sure they weren’t being overheard. “The Brimorians don’t seem to like us very much. I don’t think we want to be giving them any of our technology.”

John mulled it over for a moment, then nodded to the Latina. “I think it’s a sensible plan. Even if the Brimorians aren’t too happy with the Terrans at the moment, perhaps a limited tech-trade might soothe tensions a bit.” He grimaced then added, “Unfortunately shield tech is basically military tech and they’re going to want their pound of flesh in return.”

“How can we get in touch with them?” Sakura asked curiously.

“There’s a diplomatic ministry building four-hundred-metres to the south-west,” Irillith informed them a moment later, her voice sounding strangely distant. “We should be able to make contact with an ambassador there.”

John turned to thank her for the detailed response, assuming that the Maliri girl had noticed the embassy as they walked through the adjacent dome. It came as a shock when he saw her angular eyes glowing with a soft violet radiance. “Irillith... what are you up to?”

“Just having a little look around,” she replied, her full lips quirking into a smile. “Whoever wrote the security protocols for that information kiosk did a very sloppy job...”

He glanced around the cafe and then out through the tunnel into the next dome, but everything seemed peaceful and no alarms had been raised. “Are you sure you’re safe snooping around like that?”

Irillith blinked a couple of times then gave him her full focus. “Absolutely. Compared to the Progenitor-tech cyber-realm security that Faye and I set up, the Brimorian security was constructed by rank amateurs. Even a regular Maliri hacker would be running amok in less than five minutes, if she managed to get her hands on an open terminal like that. I broke their firewall in a couple of seconds.”

“Well let’s not push our luck while we’re unarmed and unarmoured,” he said with a smile, before glancing around the table at everyone’s empty glasses. “If you ladies are done, shall we go speak to someone at the ministry and make enquiries?”

No one objected, so they rose from the chairs and left the cafe, John paying their bill and leaving a decent tip with the waiter before they left. It wasn’t far to get to the ministry and they reached the impressively ornate-looking building after five minutes of navigating their way through the Brimorian pedestrians. Unfortunately, the unfriendly looks John and the girls received from the civilians, was nothing compared to the dark glower sent their way by the armoured Brimorian officer leading the guards by the imposing entrance.

“Looks like someone isn’t too keen on Terrans,” Sakura murmured, standing close to John. “How do you want to play this?”

“Hang back here and keep an eye on the girls, I’ll just go and say hello, then ask to speak to an ambassador,” he replied with a shrug. “The worst they can do is tell me ‘no’.”

“That’s not the worst they could do...” the Asian girl replied, looking anxiously at the well-armed squad.

He paused and studied the guards. “I suppose not, but I doubt they’d try anything too brazen. Terran merchants are still admitted into the Brimorian Enclave, it’d be a bold move to openly attack me.”

John could feel a sudden rush of cold wash over him and he saw that motes of frost were drifting down from Sakura’s clenched fists.

“Be careful,” she whispered. “Just glance my way if you need me.”

John crossed the street and started walking up the sweeping staircase that led to the entrance of the diplomatic ministry. He smiled at the guards as he neared and said, “Good morning. I’d like to speak to a diplomat of some kind if possible please, perhaps an ambassador?”

The Brimorian officer scowled at him now, making no effort to conceal his distaste. “Your kind aren’t welcome here, Terran,” he snapped, baring rows of sharp teeth in a sneer of contempt. “You defile our homeworld with your mere presence!”

Pausing a half-dozen steps away from the Brimorian officer and the six guards that flanked him, John appraised them for a moment, trying to figure out the best way to handle the situation. “I certainly didn’t mean to cause any offence. I know the Enclave has had trouble with the Terran Federation in the past, but I’m not actually a Terran.” Turning he pointed to his ears. “You see? I’m from a different species.”

The officer curled his lip in disgust. “You still look like a Terran to me. Just because your whore of a mother spread her legs for some rutting beast and spawned a mongrel bastard, doesn’t mean we’re letting half-breeds in either.”

The guards beside the officer chuckled at his crude jibe, but John wasn’t aware of that, his ears rushing with the surge of rage that threatened to overpower him. His eyes went cold as he gathered his will, getting ready to start the killing. He’d take out the guards quickly with a razor-edged wave of force, then take his time with the officer...

\*JOHN! SNAP OUT OF IT!\* Alyssa yelled, her voice cutting through his fury. \*You and the girls have got no gear and you’re in the centre of an unfriendly city!\*

John blinked in surprise, shocked that he’d let his temper flare up so dramatically. When he focused on the Brimorians again, he saw they were cringing away from him in fear, the cowering officer’s eyes filled with dread. He didn’t need telepathy to know that they were all now acutely aware of their own mortality.

“Tell your leaders that John Blake came calling. I’ll be in orbit for another three hours if they want to talk, then I’m leaving.”

With that he turned and stalked away, allowing himself a grim smile of satisfaction as he heard one of the Brimorians running full-tilt into the building. He crossed the road to the girls, who were all watching him with wide eyes. They hurried to fall into step with him as they started walking back towards the docks.

“John, your eyes are glowing!” Faye exclaimed, staring at him with a shocked expression on her face.

“That bastard really pissed me off...” John said, before taking a deep breath and forcing himself to centre himself and relax. Letting go of his gathered will, he started to calm down. “Sorry about that.”

“You’re really worried about Edraele, aren’t you?” Rachel said softly, slipping her hand into his. “I’ve not seen you on edge like this before.”

He nodded, glad to be holding her hand. “I love her, and I hate how she always ends up suffering for someone else’s mistakes... usually mine.”

“It’ll be okay,” Rachel said, her voice kind and sympathetic. “She really loves you too. You’ll be able to make her understand that she shouldn’t blame herself for what happened to Tashana.”

“I hope so,” John replied, with a heavy sigh.

Irillith caught up with him, moving to his left and walking close by. “When we return to the Invictus, there’s another way we can acquire their military-grade shield tech,” she informed him, speaking in nothing more than a faint whisper that he had to strain to hear even with his sharp ears.

“Can you cover your tracks?” he murmured back, glancing her way.

The confidence shone through in her sparkling smile. “Absolutely. I’ll be like a ghost.”

The Brimorian’s barbs about his mother still ringing in his ears, John met her excited gaze. “Fuck them... grab whatever you can.”

Irillith grinned at him as she nodded, a gleam of anticipation in her angular violet eyes.

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It had been incredibly easy for Jade to slip out of the city in disguise. She’d wandered away from the main streets until she found a narrow, darkened alley, located between what appeared to be two currently unoccupied buildings. Jade entered in her Nymph form and left a minute later as a scaly Brimorian female, her tail swinging from side to side with every claw-footed step. The admiring glances from all the males she passed had been amusing and the amphibians seemed particularly taken with her long, elegant aquamarine fins.

Following the overhead tube system had led her to a junction point, with entrances to the building just off the boulevard. She had managed to slide into one of the tubes without any objections, then surged along in the flow of water as it took her to the outer edge of the dome. Once she was outside, she just glided along with the current, admiring the beautiful view of the fluorescent city and drifting towards the outskirts of Sequathis.

The spectacular domes that housed the commercial and administrative parts of the city were certainly very impressive, but Jade found herself intrigued by the residential districts. They circled the central part of the city for miles and while they weren’t quite so imposing, they still possessed a unique beauty of their own. The Brimorians had built their homes into the reefs, with pale coral growing around each of the residences, while well-maintained gardens of colourful anemones waved back and forth in the gentle currents.

Jade revelled in the water rushing past her shimmering scaled body, glorying in the open freedom of the ocean. With a flick of her tail, she pushed faster through the water, finding the Brimorian form to be quick, strong, and agile. The creatures swimming around her were fascinating, from bizarre vertical squids that gathered in writhing shoals, to titanic predators that dwarfed anything she had seen on Oceanus. She watched one of those colossal beasts cruising past, studying its vast form with a critical eye, while wondering how difficult it would be to change shape into something so enormous.

Following in that behemoth’s wake for a while, she was sorely tempted to make the attempt, but reluctantly decided against it. Something of that size could hardly be considered inconspicuous and she was supposed to be keeping a low profile. Thoughts of being on her best behaviour for John made her smile, but that was wiped away a moment later when she heard his mental anguish at having inadvertently revealed Tashana’s troubled past to Edraele.

Worried about her master, she stopped following the huge aquatic creature, kicking lazily against the current to hold position as she got her bearings. Jade realised she had drifted far from the city, with tall forests of pale-yellow kelp undulating from side to side on the seabed. The rows of kelp were far too orderly to have grown naturally like that, and she knew she must be floating above some kind of farm. She spotted movement amongst the waving fronds, her sharp eyes picking out teal-coloured forms between the rows of vegetation.

Dismissing them as Brimorian agricultural workers, she was just about to swim back to Sequathis when one of the workers glided into view. Jade froze and watched the worker in fascination for a couple of minutes. With a strong lash of her tail Jade launched herself through the water, but instead of swimming back towards the city, she dived down towards the seabed. She swam closer towards the teal-skinned humanoid sorting through the kelp leaves, with only one question on her mind: Why didn’t that Brimorian have any scales?