Three Square Meals Ch. 74

"We have been sssuppresssing all newsss of the losss of our forcesss in the Regulusss sssyssstem, jussst asss you ordered, your Imperial Majesssty," Grand Prelate Melkadian said, glancing up at the vast draconic behemoth with no small amount of apprehension. "The Imperial Information Bureau hasss kept all talk of the battle from newsss feedsss, and any queriesss about thossse forcesss have been blocked by talk of preparationsss for a major offensssive."

The Emperor had been deeply unimpressed when he'd been informed of the loss of all ships under the command of High Prelates Grakira and Zorlin, and had taken quick steps to limit the potential aftershocks of such a defeat. Melkadian had discussed the battle with his leader at length, reviewing footage acquired by spies to analyse the crippling loss. It seemed that there had been one pivotal factor in that battle that even the Emperor had been unable to predict.

"WHAT OF YOUR DIPLOMATIC ENDEAVOURS WITH THE TERRAN FEDERATION?" the Emperor asked, idly dragging a six-foot claw across the floor, and digging a deep furrow in the granite.

Folding his scaly hand-like claws behind his back, Melkadian was delighted to reply, "I have sssurreptitiousssly requesssted a ceassse-fire from Terran High Command, and I received word yesssterday that they have accepted, Emperor. Although our losssesss in the Regulusss sssystem were devassstating, our ssspiesss report that the Terran forcesss took consssiderable damage too. As you sssussspected, they ssseek to ussse thisss lull in the conflict to repair all their forcesss in preparation for a counter-offensssive from the Dragon March."

The colossal dragon nodded, events subsequent to the battle playing out exactly as he'd predicted they would. His huge reptilian eyes gleamed as he stared at Melkadian, and in a deafening growl that reverberated around the cavernous throne room, he asked, "HAVE THE BRIMORIANS UPHELD THEIR END OF OUR BARGAIN?"

"The firssst ssshipmentsss from the Brimoriansss arrived thisss morning, Emperor," Melkadian replied, feeling a surge of relief at being able to report some good news for a change.

A sly smile formed on the Emperor's enormous scaly face, and as his smile widened, rows of huge teeth bigger than Melkadian's leg came into view. It was a truly terrifying visage, and even though Melkadian had grown accustomed to working for the Emperor over many years, he couldn't help feeling an instinctive surge of fear in the presence of such a mighty apex predator.

"EXCELLENT, MELKADIAN," the Emperor boomed, even his normal speaking voice loud enough to make the Kintark Grand Prelate wince inwardly at the sound. "RECALL EVERY AVAILABLE FLEET, AND BEGIN WORK ON THE REFIT IMMEDIATELY."

Melkadian bowed, and said, "Very good, Your Imperial Majesssty. I ssshall give the ordersss at once." The Grand Prelate paused, and then added, "I have sssome other interesssting newsss for you, Emperor. The traitor hasss arrived on Kinta, and isss here in the Palace, if you wisssh to grant him an audience?"

"SEND FOR HIM, HE WILL BE PIVOTAL IN OUR PLANS," the massive dragon thundered, before stretching in satisfaction. Arching his back, the gigantic red titan loomed high in the audience chamber, before settling down with a susurration of scales. He let out a throaty rumble of contentment in his chest, and continued, "SOON MELKADIAN, WE'LL CRUSH THE TERRAN FLEETS AND SWEEP THROUGH THEIR WORLDS. BILLIONS OF SLAVES RIPE FOR THE TAKING - IT WILL BE GLORIOUS."

Up until that morning, Melkadian would have considered such statements as groundless boasting that were completely detached from reality, but recent events had changed matters considerably. His heart lifted at the prospect of a golden age for the Kintark Empire, and the annexation of the Terran Federation would ensure reptilians, not humanoids, would become the dominant species in the galaxy!

He lowered his gaze subserviently to his revered leader, and said, "Once again, I'm awed and humbled by your ssstaggering intellect and foresssight, Emperor. Truly it isss an honour to ssserve one ssso mighty."

Sensing that his audience with the Emperor was at an end, Melkadian turned and started the long walk down the vast hall that was decorated with war trophies from a dozen subjugated species. The dragon spoke again though, halting him in his tracks.

"THE 'LION OF THE FEDERATION', WHAT NEWS OF HIM?" The Emperor asked, his bellowing voice muted to a cautious rumble.

It was the first time Melkadian had ever heard the Emperor speak in such a way, and he stifled his shock, before turning to answer the question.

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John had a lot on his mind as he strolled out of the drydock on his way towards Edraele's quarters. However, he still smiled pleasantly at the various dark-haired Maliri engineers he passed, who stopped whatever tasks they were doing to stare at him in absolute fascination. Fortunately, most of them weren't doing anything dangerous at the time, although two grav-trucks hauling long coils of power cables would have crashed into each other if he hadn't raised a hand to bring them to a halt with a telekinetic barrier. He wagged a finger at the astonished drivers, who blushed endearingly as they gazed at him.

He'd healed seventy-five Maliri today, giving each of them a healthy head of white hair, as they joined the ever-expanding network of girls under Edraele's care. The last group had been several hours ago, and since then, he'd been helping with some of the heavy-lifting for the refit, while chatting to more of the Maliri. He could have asked Jade for her assistance with recruiting a fourth group, but he had other plans in mind.

He hadn't gone more than a couple of strides along the corridor, when he heard the sound of running footsteps behind him. Turning to see who was pursuing him, he smiled when he saw a very familiar, beautiful blue face framed by long, flowing white hair.

"Hey, everything alright?" he asked Irillith, as she jogged to catch up to him.

She reached his side, and paused before she answered, then let out a sad sigh before she replied, "No, not really. I wanted to speak to you before you make any big decisions, though. Can you spare a moment?"

"For you, always," he said with a smile, and taking her hand, he led her over to the "recruiting room" he'd been using with Jade.

They walked over the springy floor, and John sat down in the big chair, then pressed the button to close the door behind them. He patted his lap for her to sit, and was pleased to see a flicker of a smile light up Irillith's face as she joined him, and sat obediently across his lap.

"I'm sorry I haven't had a chance to check in with you today," he apologised, while wrapping her in his arms. "I know you're really worried about Tashana. Any news on her?"

"It's alright, you've had a lot to deal with since we got here," she said, leaning into him and resting her head against his shoulder. Irillith looked forlorn as she added, "As for Tashana, she still hates me with a passion, and refuses to take my calls."

"I'd offer to talk to her, but she's terrified of me," John said, with a look of regret. Sounding more optimistic, he continued, "Edraele's keeping an eye on her to make sure she's alright, so she'll let us know if there's a problem. I'm hoping that given a bit of time, Tashana will realise I'm not some horrible monster, and that I'm actually trying to help the Maliri."

Irillith nodded, and agreed, "It's probably best not to push her, especially after everything she's been through." She looked thoughtful before she added, "She can't have missed how much happier the engineers are once they've joined us. Hopefully, that might make her see that you're changing things for the better."

"If you need me to help in any way, just let me know. I'll drop whatever I'm doing to be there for you, okay?" he said, lifting her chin so that she was looking at him.

Giving him a grateful smile, she replied, "I know, and I promise I'll ask for your help if I need it."

"Good girl," he replied, being deliberately patronising, and he grinned when he managed to make her chuckle. Giving her a curious look, he continued, "So, what did you want to speak to me about? Or did you just want to talk about Tashana?"

Irillith sat up so that she could look at him more easily, and replied, "I actually wanted to talk to you about my mother, if that's okay?"

"Sure, what's on your mind?" he asked, giving her an encouraging smile.

She looked away for a moment, then replied, "I just wanted to ask you not to judge her too harshly for what she did. From what I've seen of the new Edraele, her heart was probably in the right place, even if the results seemed shocking from a Terran point of view. She was just approaching this problem as any Maliri Matriarch would."

John stroked her back, as he said, "It's alright, I'm not upset with her." He let out a heavy sigh, and added, "Really, it was my fault, for not checking to see if my Progenitor-side had left her any orders. It just came as a shock, that's all."

Irillith nodded, and her violet eyes looked distant as she said in an oddly-detached voice, "It's amazing, the impact you've had on me. Only a few months ago, I would have been overjoyed to hear about her elimination of House Valaden's enemies, and full of admiration for her cunning. Now, I'm appalled by it."

"You've come a very long way since then," he said, making no attempt to mask how proud of her he was.

She blushed a dark blue, and said, "I can't exactly claim much credit for that, but I appreciate the sentiment. Thank you."

Shaking his head, John said earnestly, "All I did was heal some of the emotional trauma you'd suffered. The way you've befriended all the girls, and done so much to help Calara rescue her family, was all down to you." He smiled as he added, "The old Irillith was a bit of a pain in the ass, but the new you? To quote Dana: 'You're awesome!'."

Irillith laughed aloud at that and hugged him affectionately, looking much happier already. "I always feel so much better after talking to you," she said, leaning in to give him a tender kiss.

"Yeah, I love our chats too," he agreed. His voice was gentle as he added, "Don't let the situation with Tashana get you down. Things will work out, it'll just take time, that's all."

"I know, and I'll keep persisting with her," she said, looking firmly resolved in her decision. "I'm not going to let her down again."

"Like I said... awesome," he grinned, and he got to hear her lovely laughter as his reward.

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Tashana paced back and forth, fretting over her plans as she went through them again. She'd managed to identify the perfect vessel to escape, and she had a good idea for her destination. All she needed now was to remove the tracking device, and choose the ideal moment to make her getaway. She froze mid-stride, with the sudden realisation that she needed to find some kind of evidence to back up her warnings about the Progenitor, if anyone was actually going to believe her.

If she could get to her treasure-trove of artefacts on Valaden, they would be enough to convince even the most stubborn of sceptics, but there was no guarantee those items hadn't been destroyed when she was exiled. Even if they were still intact and undisturbed after all those years, they were in her quarters in her mother's palace on Valaden, which was a veritable fortress. Attempting to recover those items would simply be impossible with all the security there.

Her pacing renewed again, and she wracked her brains as she tried to think of anything she could use. Freezing for a second time, she felt a wild surge of hope in her chest, and rushed over to the nearest data terminal, holding her breath with anticipation. Her slender fingers darted over the console, and after pausing for a second to remember her old security ID, she grinned when she found that it hadn't been revoked. Irillith had so underestimated her, that she had never bothered to remove her security clearance, figuring Tashana to be doomed in her exile to the Unclaimed Wastes.

Now that she had logged in, she accessed the only part of their secure network that she'd ever used, her hands shaking with excitement as she tapped in the access codes. It only took a second to bring up the data archive, and she whooped with delight when she saw that everything was still there - decades of her painstaking work, investigating and recording data on every Progenitor and Thrall artefact or facility that she'd managed to uncover.

She knew her work like the back of her scarred hand, and she flipped through the holographic data archives until she found what she was looking for. It was a picture she'd taken from a Maliri thrall facility she'd discovered on Epsilon Aquarii IV, the very system she was in now. The base had been constructed near a fault line, and with tectonic activity over tens of thousands of years, most of the facility had been crushed. She'd managed to unearth what had appeared to be some kind of trophy room, and while the banners and trophies had been looted or destroyed long ago, the beautiful hand-sculpted friezes on the walls had survived the passage of time.

The artist had been an exceptional artisan, depicting Mael'nerak and his white-haired Maliri thralls massacring the Progenitor's enemies. Different coloured, tiny stones tiles showed the blue-skinned, armoured Maliri with long white hair, just as so many other of her finds had done. She gathered her proof, along with plenty more damning evidence, and copied it to one of the portable data sticks inserted into the console. Now, she just need some compelling evidence to show how John Blake was subverting the present-day Maliri.

She snorted as she had a brainwave, and opened up the data archive that Irillith had sent her. She raced through the data, paying scant attention to several petite Terran girls she didn't recognise, nor the Terran thralls that the Progenitor had subsequently enslaved. All she was looking for was that tell-tale flash of blue from her evil whore of a sister. It didn't take too long to find images taken of Irillith looking demure before she was taken, and another of her with her shameless long white hair. Tashana took still images from both, then added them to the files on the data stick. As soon as the transfer was complete, she flipped open the compartment in the console, detached the data stick, and stashed it in her jacket pocket.

Now that was done, she could put the rest of her escape plan into action, and do what was needed to thwart the Progenitor from crushing the life from her people.

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John smiled at the guards outside Edraele's quarters, and they blushed before looking at him with wide eyes, as he walked unopposed between them. Alyssa and Edraele were sitting together as they waited for him in the lounge, the two of them deep in conversation when he strode into the room unannounced. The Maliri Matriarch turned to look at him in surprise, and John realised that without her constant telepathic access to his mind, she had no idea he was about to arrive.

He walked over to them, and said, "I'm sorry to have kept you two waiting. I had a lot on my mind before I made any kind of decision."

"Don't worry about it, we've been having a nice chat," Alyssa said, stepping close to him and giving him a brief kiss.

Edraele looked at him apprehensively, and said, "That's quite alright, John. I understand you needed time to come to terms with recent events."

He frowned at her, and asked playfully, "Is that how you greet your Progenitor?"

She blushed and walked over to join them, giving him a rueful smile before leaning in for a kiss. "Sorry, I'm just a bit distracted at the moment," she apologised, relaxing a little when she saw how at ease he looked.

"I've come to my decision, but we can discuss it tomorrow," he said decisively, wrapping his arms around both of them. "There's something much more important we must address first. Right now, in fact."

Alyssa smiled at him, knowing full well what he had in mind, but Edraele had an intensely curious expression on her face as she asked, "What's that?"

He pulled them in closer, and replied to her, "I don't like the idea of you having orders in your head from my Progenitor-side. I'm going to fill up your tummies, so Alyssa can help fix that immediately." He raised an eyebrow as he looked at them in turn, and added, "As long as neither of you object, that is?"

They both looked at him coyly and shook their heads. Alyssa smirked as she replied, "I could definitely use a nightcap."

Edraele sighed happily, her worries receding, and replied, "I can't think of anything I'd love more."

"Good girls," he replied, stroking their backs encouragingly. He glanced at Alyssa and added in a firm telepathic voice, \*I'm going to shut you out of my mind as well, just to make this more exciting for you. I'll let you back in when you're carrying my cum in your belly.\*

\*I fucking love it when you get all dominant like this,\* she purred, her cerulean eyes sparkling as she bit her lip and nodded her consent.

John blocked her out of his subconscious, then looked at Edraele, and arched an eyebrow as he inquired, "Could you show us to the bedroom, please?"

He could see her breathing quicken, as she turned and led them through the door opposite the study. There was a corridor beyond with several closed doors on either side, and they followed Edraele as she led them to the third one on the left. The door opened as they approached, revealing a tastefully furnished bedroom, complete with a spacious bed. Both women were flushed now, looking excited as they glanced at him.

"You're wearing far too many clothes, why don't you help each other undress?" he prompted them, lounging against the door as he admired the statuesque blondes.

He could see them both hanging on his every word, no longer able to rely on telepathy to anticipate his whims. The lack of control was thrilling for them both, and they quickly closed with one another, hurrying to take off each other's clothes.

John tutted his disapproval, and said, "Do it slowly, there's no rush. I'm only going to fuck you when I'm good and ready."

They both blushed, then smiled flirtatiously at each other as they began to slowly peel away the layers. Alyssa smoothed the shoulder strap of Edraele's dress from her shoulder, revealing a tantalising stretch of flawless blue skin. In return, Edraele touched the clasp at the top of Alyssa top, then teased it down, undoing the sealing strip all the way to her midriff.

Each of them flashed a look at John from time-to-time, confirming his approval, before helping the other out of their garments. Seeing both confident women looking unsure of themselves and looking to him for direction was very arousing, and his cock throbbed with every inquiring glance they gave him.

When they were both nude, he took a moment to admire the lovely contrast between Alyssa's bronzed skin, and Edraele's sky-blue flesh. They posed for him under his admiring gaze, until he beckoned them over, and said, "Excellent. Now you can both undress me."

Remembering his previous instructions, they took their time, kissing his skin whenever it was exposed as they removed his clothing. With both of them working together, it didn't take long for him to be just as naked as they were, despite the slow teasing as they stripped him. When they were done, he pulled them both to him, enjoying feeling their firm breasts squashed against him.

"You're the two most powerful women in the galaxy," he said, looking at each of them in turn. His tone was fierce as he continued, "I love you both, and you belong to me."

"I'm yours, Master," Alyssa whispered, her voice throbbing with adoration as she kissed his cheek.

Edraele whimpered with lust, and she said in a breathy, reverent murmur, "I live to serve you, Master."

"You're both very good girls," he said approvingly, sharing smiles with each of them when they caught his eye. He squeezed their taut bottoms, and added, "Now, I want you to kneel and get my cock nice and wet. I'm going to be fucking you both, and I want to slide straight inside you."

They sank down obediently, planting loving kisses on his torso as they knelt before him. Both of them could see how much his cock was throbbing with need, and didn't waste any time pressing their soft lips to his shaft. Despite not having telepathy to rely on to judge his mood, they were doing a very admirable job of attending to him. He placed a hand on their heads, then guided them up and down his length, keeping them level as their tongues lapped away at him.

It was a thrill to be so domineering with them both, and while he would have stopped this game if either of them had been uncomfortable with it, the aroma of feminine arousal reassured him that was definitely not the case. Alyssa was practically panting with lust as she eagerly got him well-lubricated with saliva, and he could see how hard her nipples had got as she brushed her chest against Edraele's.

Satisfied that they'd prepared him, he held out a hand to each of them, and helped them to their feet. "On the bed on your back, Alyssa. Edraele, mount her please, tummy-to-tummy," he told them, in a voice that brooked no insubordination.

They moved to obey, with the Terran girl lying on her back, spreading her thighs and drawing them up, knees bent to make a welcoming cradle for the Maliri Matriarch. She climbed on top of the teenager, and after a moment's pause to align their breasts, she sank down over her young lover. John heard the wet sounds of deep French-kisses, neither of them able to keep their hands off each other, now that they were lying that intimately together.

Climbing on the bed, he moved behind them, and smiled when Alyssa grasped hold of Edraele's firm cheeks and eased them apart, giving him a magnificent view of her dark blue centres of pleasure. Edraele gasped at the contact, which turned into an excited hiss as Alyssa stretched her cheeks, exposing her to him.

She arched her back, breaking their kiss for a moment, before tossing her flowing hair out of the way and looking at him over her shoulder. "No one's ever taken me there, but it's yours, whenever you want it," she said earnestly.

John's cock lurched at the thrilling prospect, and he had to struggle to restrain himself from mounting her there and then. Instead, he nuzzled his cock against her sopping pussy, and said, "That's a beautiful offer, and it's one I fully intend to take advantage of." He stuffed her full of his cock, in one long, unrelenting motion, and declared, "Not today, though."

Edraele let out a long wail as he drove into her, sheathing himself fully in one womb-penetrating thrust. Alyssa waited no time in assisting, suckling on one dark-blue nipple while pinching the other, her second hand finding and stroking Edraele's clit. Under such tremendous sensory assault, the Maliri Matriarch came explosively, clamping down hard on his cock as her body convulsed in ecstasy.

He fucked her hard, not giving her a moment's respite as he ploughed her through two more orgasms. With no warning, he pulled out of her soaked pussy, eliciting a mournful sob from the reeling azure beauty, before aligning himself with Alyssa. Edraele had made him slick and wet, and he was able to thrust deep into Alyssa's glistening pussy, forcing her internal walls wide apart to accommodate his girth.

"Holy fuck!" she grunted, as he plunged into her.

John drove all the way into her yielding body, only stopping when his quad was resting on her ass, and her tightly-stretched lower lips were kissing the base of his cock. He paused to admire the view, enjoying the feel of Alyssa's trembling body as she held him in a snug grip.

"Stop fucking around and give it to me!" she demanded, her desperate need overriding her submissiveness.

"Kiss!" he commanded, slapping Edraele's firm rump as he began pounding Alyssa.

Edraele responded at once, and began to lovingly kiss the panting blonde, her darting tongue muffling Alyssa's string of profanities. Her searching fingers found Alyssa's pert nipples and tweaked them hard, just as John rammed all the way inside her. Alyssa arched her back as she came, bright blue eyes rolling back with the intensity of her orgasm. He rode her through it, and working as a team, they drew another shrieking climax from the Terran girl, before he pulled out his cock, and drove it back into Edraele.

In the end, the girls just clung to each other, whimpering with pleasure as he took it in turns, power-fucking them both. He held out for an hour, but the heady rush of dominating them physically like this was intoxicating. Shoving all the way into Alyssa, he cried out with exquisite relief as he began to cum, filling her womb with blasts of his rich spunk.

When her abdomen started to round out nicely, lifting Edraele, the Maliri gasped, "I can feel your tummy filling up!"

Before she could say anything else, John pulled out of Alyssa, leaving her a moaning, sodden mess, and shoved into Edraele. He grabbed a fistful of her hair to pull her back to him, and said, "Your turn now, gorgeous!"

She cried out as she felt him shooting his first spurt inside her, quickly followed by many more. Her womb soon reached its normal capacity, then began to stretch, forced to expand to house all his sperm.

"You're going to look so beautiful when you're pregnant," Alyssa purred, rubbing her hands over Edraele's swelling tummy that was resting on her own.

The Maliri was too insensate to respond, but her body knew what she needed, and gripped John lovingly as she tried to milk him of every drop. Finally, he was done, and he pulled out carefully, then flopped onto the bed, too exhausted to even speak. When he regained his senses, Alyssa and Edraele were flanking him, planting soft kisses on his chest.

"You were absolutely magnificent," Alyssa whispered, kissing him on the throat as he panted for breath.

Edraele nodded, and said breathily, "You were so dominant, taking exactly what you wanted from us." She gazed at him lovingly, and added, "I've never experienced anything so incredible."

A proud smile flickered over John's face when he looked down to see the two swooning women, the tender looks they were giving him leaving him in little doubt that he'd done a great job. He pulled them closer, and his smile grew wider as he felt their swollen bellies pressed against him, each carrying a hefty load of cum in their wombs.

"You two aren't done yet," he said with a teasing grin, dropping the mental barrier to allow them back into his mind.

His two Matriarchs shuddered with relief to be let back inside his subconscious, then shared a flirtatious glance as they listened to what he wanted them to do next. They peeled away from him, momentarily making him regret his instructions, but when Edraele lay back on the bed and Alyssa straddled her in a sixty-nine, he smiled with satisfaction. They lapped away at one another, sucking out and swallowing the load he'd split between them, filling the room with the thrilling sounds of their debauchery.

When they had both finished, Alyssa lay back on the bed next to Edraele, and rolled on her side to look at her as she said, "You know what I'm going to try to do now, right?"

Edraele nodded, and said honestly, "I'll cooperate as willingly as I can."

Alyssa snuggled in closer, and they intertwined their limber legs as they pressed up against each other. John moved over to flank Edraele, and he wrapped her in his arms, just as Alyssa cuddled her too.

"Just relax, and open your mind to me," Alyssa whispered, framing the beautiful woman's face in her hands, and leaning in to give the Maliri a gentle kiss. "You're one of John's girls, and it's my job to take care of you."

John could feel Edraele relaxing in his arms, and he kissed her shoulder as he murmured, "That's a good girl, you're doing so well."

Alyssa had no idea if this was going to work or not, without them sharing an empathic bond first, but she tried to follow the same process as before, reaching out with her mind to Edraele. Edraele was a strong psychic in her own right, and her consciousness seemed to shine like a beacon to Alyssa, guiding her closer.

Edraele followed their instructions as best as she could, relaxing herself, and feeling a tingle in her mind, as she did her best to drop all barriers between her and Alyssa. She waited patiently for several moments, and when nothing happened initially, she assumed it hadn't worked. That was until she felt a colossal presence brush against her mind, but this one felt altogether different to John's. Alyssa's mind felt warmer and gentler than John's distinctly alien, albeit benign, consciousness.

She felt herself being swathed in a comforting blanket of emotions, full of love and protectiveness, and her eyes widened at the wonderful sensation. The overwhelming sense of selfless maternal care triggered a very distant memory, of an event that had occurred nearly a century-and-a-half ago. Her own mother had been kind once, before the tumour growing in her brain had twisted her into a sadistic and cruel monster.

Edraele had been a little girl of no more than six, when she'd been playing in one of the parks on Valaden, and had run to her mother to draw her attention to a particularly colourful bird. Tripping on the path, she'd scuffed her knees, and her mother had rushed over to her and pulled her into her arms. Brushing away her tears, she'd told Edraele that everything was going to be okay. Edraele felt like that little girl all over again, being wrapped in her mother's loving embrace, and she felt herself tear up at the overwhelmingly comforting feeling.

\*It's been so lonely for you, being a Matriarch all this time,\* Alyssa's sympathetic voice murmured, as it swept through her mind, experiencing all her fears and doubts. \*No one to share your worries with, and bowed down with the heavy burden of responsibility. I'm here for you now, though, and you'll never be alone again.\*

Edraele let out a quiet sob of relief, and her eyes flared with a blazing inner light, which lit up the room in glorious purple arcs. Likewise Alyssa's eyes were shining like two radiant beacons, pure white light adding to the incandescence from Edraele. Both women seemed unaffected by the intensity of that illumination, and they stared into each other's eyes, quite entranced. The two Matriarchs lost themselves in that connection, enmeshing their minds, and forging an unbreakable bond between them.

John pulled up the duvet to cover them both, then spooned behind Edraele, reaching over her to hold both his Matriarchs in his arms. It had been a long, intense day, and he soon fell asleep, grateful for a chance to rest his mind from worries about ruling the Maliri, his ship being sliced into pieces, and an errant twin sister who refused to listen to reason...

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Tashana walked briskly along the corridor to the docks, trying not to look out of place despite her nerves being on edge. She had calculated that now was her best chance to escape, with Edraele distracted by John's return, and before he'd enslaved too many of the Maliri. It was one in the morning, and although there were still a few people walking around the station on late-night errands, the foot traffic had been drastically reduced. She managed to make it all the way to the docking bays without being accosted by anyone, and crept closer to the bay that had been the focus of attention by so many thralls.

Peeking into the huge drydock, her eyes widened in surprise when she saw the Progenitor's glossy-white cruiser broken into pieces. Tashana allowed herself a grin of relief, now that she knew he wouldn't be able to pursue her. There were still some Maliri working in there, but they were dark-haired women, and she couldn't spot any thralls. When she was fairly sure no one was paying attention, she crossed the doorway, and hurried along the corridor to the adjacent docking bay.

There were two guards by the door, and she ducked out of sight behind a comms terminal before she could be seen. Pulling off her cowl and mask, she grimaced briefly at feeling so exposed, then lurched out into the corridor and staggered towards the guards.

"Help me..." she gasped in her gravelly voice, as she stumbled towards them.

Both guards turned to stare at her at the same time, and she could see the looks of horror and revulsion cross their faces when they saw her ruined features. They exchanged a worried glance, then rushed forward to aid her, the lead one asking, "By the gods! What happened to your face?!"

"It was ruined for one fucking credit," Tashana snarled bitterly, straightening and lashing out with a powerful and crippling strike to the throat of the closest guard.

The guard collapsed as though pole-axed, and the other desperately raised her rifle as Tashana darted forwards. Slapping the weapon away, she shoved the shocked guardswoman backwards, only for the stricken Maliri to lose her footing and crash to the floor. Tashana leapt on her chest as she fell, and wrapped her hands around the guard's throat. She squeezed as the guard thrashed, cutting off the blood supply, and forcing the prone woman to black-out. As soon as the second guard went limp, she rose to her feet, then quickly looked both ways down the corridor to make sure the scuffle hadn't been heard.

No one seemed to have been alerted to the sounds of the fight, so she pressed the button to open the docking bay doors, the crystal portal rising silently before her. Tashana quickly dragged the guards inside the room and out of sight, then retrieved sets of binders from their belts and left them cuffed, gagged, and propped-up against the wall, before returning to pick up their dropped rifles. Pausing for a moment she looked at them with regret, but a couple of injured guards was a small price to pay, if she were to avert the enslavement of her entire species. She slung one over her shoulder, and carried the second in her arms as she jogged towards the elegant vessel parked in the centre of the bay.

Edraele's private shuttle was a sleek two-hundred-metre long ship, equipped with the best of House Valaden's technology, making it amongst the fastest vessels in her fleet. Tashana ran up to the airlock on the port side of the ship, and her heart was pounding in her chest as she approached the sealed crystal door. She waved her hand in front of the genetic identification scanner, and sensors inside the vessel performed a check on her as she stood before it.

Time seemed to slow to a crawl as she waited with bated breath, but after what was actually only a couple of seconds delay, the crystal door rotated upwards, admitting her to the vessel. Her DNA was identical to her sister's, and of course, her mother's favourite was still allowed access to the private shuttle. Allowing herself a grin of triumph, Tashana stepped inside the plush luxury of the vessel, and headed straight for the lift as the door closed behind her.

It was a short journey up to the Bridge, and she stepped out, then headed directly towards the Pilot's seat, propping the rifles against the console. Although she'd never personally flown her mother's shuttle before, its controls were not dissimilar from other Maliri vessels she had flown. It was a simple process to power up the ship's systems and engage the engines, preparing the nimble vessel for take-off.

That just left one last hurdle - Genthalas' flight controllers - but she was willing to bet that no one on the station would dare question Edraele Valaden's private shuttle, let alone try and prevent her leaving. Using retro-thrusters, she reversed the beautiful golden ship out of the docking bay, then rotated around and headed straight for the Nav beacon at the edge of the star system. She brought up the system map, and her angular eyes darted from one military vessel to another, expecting them all to turn and pursue her at any moment.

Tashana was so focused on the Maliri ships, that it came as a surprise when she reached the outer edge of the system. The console sounded a melodic chime, almost making her jump out of her skin, and she sighed with relief when she saw a flashing green light on the Nav computer, alerting her that she was clear of any gravity wells. She swiftly plotted her meticulously-planned course, being careful to avoid any points on the House Valaden border that would be well-defended with picket ships. Activating the FTL drive, the shuttle took less than five seconds to surge into hyper-warp, leaving the Epsilon Aquarii system behind her.

Letting out a disbelieving laugh, she relaxed in the Pilot's Chair, astonished that she'd been able to make her escape. Now there was just one last thing to attend to, and she left the Command Deck as she headed for her mother's private quarters. The layout of the audience rooms hadn't changed in thirteen years, and she strolled through them as she walked purposefully to the bedroom at the rear of the suite. There was a bathroom adjoining the bedroom there, and she flinched when she caught sight of her horrific reflection in the mirrors. Turning away, she damped down a small towel with cold water, before walking back into the main room and sitting on the bed.

Tashana took a deep breath, then channelled all her hate and rage, submerging herself within the roiling column of fire that burned inside her. It flared with excitement, and embraced her as if she were an old lover, her mind filling with delightful images of flames and burning. The fingers on her left hand were enveloped in a fiery nimbus, and she looked at the dancing orange lights with fascination, watching as the flickering flames swirled around her fingertips.

It was thrilling to channel that inner fire once more, but she remembered she had a specific purpose in mind, and extinguished all the flames, except for one burning ifrit swathing her index finger. She brought her burning fingertip to her neck an inch above her collarbone, and cried out in agony as the smell of burning flesh assaulted what was left of her nose. Yanking her hand away the instant she felt a sharp jolt in her neck, she doused the last of the flames, and slumped backwards on the bed. Fumbling for the damp cloth, she pressed it to her neck to chill the searing pain of the burn, although it was trivial compared to the excruciating torments she'd endured over the years.

Now that the insidious tracking device had been fried, she was finally free, and could start rallying her people to oppose the existential threat to the Maliri. The Progenitor already had House Valaden in his clutches, and Loraleth, Aeberos, Naestina, and Ghilwen were about to fall, if they hadn't done so already.

"You haven't conquered the Maliri yet, John Blake..." she muttered, before lurching upright, and stalking from the room.

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John awoke the next morning, to find himself in an unfamiliar bed. It took him a moment to remember where he was, and he smiled as he remembered the fun he'd had with Alyssa and Edraele the previous night. His stomach rumbled loudly, reminding him it was about time he had breakfast, and he leaned up to look at his blonde Matriarchs. At some-time in the night they'd finished their bond, and their eyes were closed as they slumbered peacefully entwined together. The rhythmic rise and fall of their busty chests was quite hypnotising, but they were obviously still tired, so he let them sleep.

He was careful to remove his left arm from under Edraele without jostling her, and winced at the pins and needles in his arm after having a delectable Maliri Matriarch sleeping on it all night. There was a second door in the bedroom that led to an ensuite bathroom, so he walked in and eyed the Maliri shower suspiciously. He started to ask Alyssa if power was back on in the Invictus, but remembered at the last moment that she was still out for the count. It was odd not having her there to act as his communications nexus with the girls, as she normally awoke within seconds of him every morning. He poked his head through the door again just to check she was okay, and his sensitive ears picked up her smooth and regular breathing.

Shrugging to himself, he figured that bonding with Edraele must have taken more out of her than normal, and he closed the bathroom door so he wouldn't disturb them. He walked into the shower and stuck a pair of the filters into his nostrils, then activated the shower in the same way Edraele had done so in her quarters in her private shuttle. Fortunately, the shower controls were the same, and the cubicle quickly filled with the liquid cleaning solution, fully submerging him for several seconds as it did its work. The water drained away moments later, and he removed the nose plugs, before returning them to their place. Although he felt squeaky clean, and couldn't deny its efficiency of design, it just wasn't the same as a good old Terran shower.

He dried off quickly, then crept back into the bedroom to locate the clothes that the girls had stripped off him the night before. He dressed quickly, then considered taking a walk of shame back to the Invictus to get a fresh set of clothing. The girls were still snoozing though, and he didn't want to wander off too far until they'd awoken. He had a moment of indecision, before deciding that the first thing he needed to do, was to go and try to find them some breakfast.

He walked out of the bedroom, and glanced around to get his bearings. Taking a right, he walked down the corridor to the door at the end, fairly certain that it led into the lounge in Edraele's quarters. It only took a quick glance into the room to see that he'd remembered correctly, but he was surprised to find the ornate lounge occupied with the four beautiful young women that Edraele had introduced him to yesterday evening.

"Good morning, girls," he announced cheerfully, as he strode into the room.

John heard their sharp intake of breath as they whirled around to stare at him, wide-eyed in shock. The four young women appeared to have been rendered mute as they sat there gazing in awe, and he walked over to join them with an unthreatening smile on his face. He'd grown quite used to the debilitating effect the Maliri genetic modification had on these women, and for once, he wished they'd just snap out of it, so he could talk to them normally.

Going by past experience, asking questions seemed to temporarily suppress their entranced state, so he inquired politely, "I was wondering if you girls could help me? I'd like to get some breakfast this morning, but I've no idea where anything is. I'd rather not wander too far until Edraele's woken up, and I assume there must be some kind of kitchen nearby. Do any of you know where it is?"

Like that, the spell was broken, and all four girls rose to their feet, eager to help him with his vitally important breakfast mission.

"I know where it is, John!" one of the nubile girls replied exuberantly, looking at him with her big blue eyes. She blushed, and added falteringly, "Is it alright to call you that? Or do you want us to use a more formal title?"

"John is just fine, Nyrelle, wasn't it?" he asked, trying to remember their names from the brief introductions the previous evening. From the look of delight on her face, he was relieved to see that he'd been correct.

"We can show you where it is," a green-eyed beauty offered. She appeared to be the eldest of the four, and approximately Irillith's age if he guessed correctly, making her early-fifties if he was right.

He smiled at her in gratitude, and said, "That would be lovely. Thanks, Leena."

From the glowing smile he received in return, he figured he was two for two, and they walked towards the door he'd just arrived through, beckoning shyly for him to follow. He did exactly that, watching in amusement as they turned around to glance at him from time-to-time, the girls blushing as he met their inquisitive stares.

It was only a short walk to the kitchen, and the lovely teal-eyed girl opened the door for him with a shy smile. He murmured his thanks to Valani, then glanced inside, surveying the facilities with a professional eye. The large kitchen was spotlessly clean, but all the utensils, food, and cooking devices were safely stored away somewhere, leaving him with broad worktops and little else to work with.

They sensed his indecision, and one of the girls giggled, before saying breathlessly, "Would you like us to make breakfast for you?"

"I'd really appreciate that, thanks Kali," he replied, smiling at the last of the group, and meeting her inquisitive indigo-eyed gaze.

She let out a happy sigh, then asked, "What would you like?"

"Surprise me," he replied, with a flirtatious grin.

There were no table and chairs in the kitchen, so he moved out of their way, and leaned against the far wall as he watched the four young women spring into action. They gathered in a huddle to start with, and there were some frantic whispers, as they determined what to make him for breakfast. Once the decision had been made, they touched the wall and surfaces of the worktops, making cupboards and heating panels rise or swing into place. In a matter of seconds the spartan room had been transformed into an extremely well-stocked and functional kitchen, and he watched in fascination as they used unfamiliar Maliri utensils to begin preparing odd-shaped fruits and other items for him.

Nyrelle gave him a furtive glance, then looked at him in surprise, when she saw he was leaning against the wall. She hurried over to him, and sounded flustered as she said, "Sorry, John. Just look for the indentations on the wall, they operate the concealed furnishings."

She reached across him with her delicate fingers outstretched, as she caressed a slight depression in the wall. He caught movement to his right in his peripheral vision, and a table slid out of the wall, complete with padded benches on either side. Nyrelle gazed up at him, standing very close as she pulled back her hand. She bit her lip, then let her fingers graze over his left arm, following the curve of his muscular bicep.

"You're so much bigger than a Maliri male," she whispered breathlessly, her shyness forgotten as her wandering fingers trailed over his broad chest.

John tried not to laugh at her inadvertent double-entendre, and simply enjoyed her delicate touch. Nyrelle was gorgeous, just like her three Matriarch friends, and for that matter, every other Maliri woman he'd met so far. He marvelled that Mael'nerak's genetic tampering had been so rigidly efficient as to create an entire race of astoundingly beautiful, athletic women. Compared to the wildly different body shapes in the Terran Federation, it felt completely surreal to be surrounded by legions of girls that exactly matched the kind of figure he found most appealing.

Nyrelle started panting with lust, and judging by the delicious aromas coming from the kitchen, he realised he'd better do something quickly if he wanted to get his breakfast while it was still hot.

He smiled at her, and to break the spell, said very reluctantly, "We'll get to know each other over breakfast, Nyrelle. But, I'm really thirsty, and I'd love a drink, if that's okay?"

She took a deep breath to steady herself, then returned his smile, and said, "I'm sorry, I should have thought to ask. Natalla berry juice is my favourite, if you'd like to try that?"

"Absolutely," he agreed cheerfully.

It was a visible strain for Nyrelle to remove her hand from his chest, but she managed it, before turning to glide over to the kitchen. He watched her take a tall pitcher of juice from the concealed fridge on the left of the kitchen, and she smiled at him as she poured it into a glass and walked back to hand it to him. The drink was a strange mauve colour, but it smelled nice, and he tilted the big glass back to take an experimental sip. The taste was bizarre, reminding him a little of raspberries, but it left a refreshing tingle in his mouth, like mint.

"What do you think?" she asked him, looking at him expectantly.

He gave her an appreciative nod, and replied, "It's delicious, excellent choice!" He quickly drank the rest, and with the hungry look Nyrelle was giving him, he figured he should probably stay well-hydrated. He smiled at her, and added, "I'll get another, that was amazing."

She placed her hand on his chest, and took the glass with the other, as she purred, "Let me, you take a seat."

After a brief caress, she withdrew her hand, then sauntered away, fluttering her eyelashes at him as she returned to the fridge. He did as she asked, taking a seat on the long bench, and watched the four women in the kitchen. Their long dresses were form-fitting, and he admired their shapely figures as they finished the final touches to his breakfast.

Alyssa would normally make some kind of salacious remark at this point, but both her and Edraele were still ominously silent. John knew they'd greet him the moment they awoke, so he was starting to get worried at their uncharacteristically long lie-in. Just as he was about to get up to go and check on them again, the Maliri girls joined him at the kitchen table. They'd prepared a broad selection of food for him to choose from, with a splendid variety of fruits, some of which he recognised from his visits to Geniya station.

The aroma from the pancake-like dish in front of him was positively mouth-watering, and when Kali presented him with a knife and fork, he wasted no time tucking in. The pancake itself was soft, moist, and delicious, filled with some kind of delicate fruit, and he groaned in appreciation.

"My God, that's fantastic!" he exclaimed, when he'd swallowed down the mouthful. He grinned at Kali, and asked, "Did you prepare that?"

She nodded enthusiastically, and replied, "It's called a 'Luwynn surprise'. I'm so glad you enjoyed it!"

"What's the surprise part? That it makes you think you've died and gone to heaven?" he asked, with a playful grin.

She giggled cutely, and shook her head as she replied, "The cook chooses the contents, and there are dozens of regional variants. That was my own version with Hallen nuts in."

"I'd love to learn how to cook that sometime, if you don't mind sharing your recipes?" he asked her, his voice serious but hopeful.

"No, I don't mind!" she quickly replied, shaking her head and beaming at him.

He gave her a grateful smile, then tried the fruit, making appreciative noises as he sampled the exotic new flavours. He wasn't faking for their benefit, the food really was divine. Leena and Valani looked delighted as they watched him eat, enjoying the fruits they'd prepared.

"Are you sure you girls won't join me? This all tastes amazing, but there's loads here! I think I'll need help if you aren't going to have to roll me out of here when I'm done," he said, making them laugh.

Leena fetched them some forks, and they began to join him in eating breakfast. With conversation temporarily stalled, they began to look more aroused as they took pieces of the luscious fruit, and popped it into their full, sensual mouths. He watched Nyrelle make eye-contact with him, then swallow some fleshy orange fruit, and he shifted in his chair to reposition his growing length. They were sweet girls, and desperate to get his mind out of the gutter, he tried to think of something else to talk about while he finished breakfast.

"You're all from different Maliri Houses, aren't you?" he blurted out, clutching at straws. "Would you mind telling me a little bit about them?"

The girls glanced around at each other as they shook off the effect of his captivating presence, unsure who should speak first. Deferring to the highest-ranked House, their eyes fell on Kali expectantly.

"I'm from House Loraleth, the second-ranked House," she replied, looking self-conscious. "What did you want to know?"

John's ears pricked up at that, and he asked, "Second-ranked? It's House Valaden that's first, right?"

Kali nodded, and replied brightly, "Yes, that's correct! Edraele controls Genthalas Station, which means she's always had a significant advantage in the size of the fleets at her disposal."

He frowned then, and asked, "I'm assuming you don't just announce your fleet assets to each other, so how do you know who ranks where?"

"Each House has extensive spy networks, so Matriarchs have a very good idea of the number of ships at each House's disposal," Nyrelle explained patiently. "However, most Matriarchs make a lavish show of the forces at their command, to publically gain prestige, and hopefully climb the House rankings. It's rare that anyone would attempt to conceal the strength of their forces."

"So, House Loraleth is second, because you've got the second-biggest fleet, Kali?" he reasoned, before popping more of the pancake in his mouth.

Leena shook her head, and before Kali could reply, she interjected, "It's not quite as simple as that. The size of your territory and the number of worlds under your control are also a significant contributor." She hesitated for a moment before adding, "The strength and number of nobles ruling the House are a factor as well. My house, Ghilwen, was ranked six only a few months ago, before it dropped to rank seven after recent events."

"Really, what happened?" John asked, without picking up on the subtle implication of her words.

"Two of my sisters were assassinated," she replied, with a resigned expression on her youthful face.

John reached across the table to take her hand, and squeezed it gently as he said, "I'm so sorry for your loss. That's awful!"

She sighed, and gave him a sad smile as she replied, "Thank you, but we weren't close, not since we were young. Aradrea, my mother, encouraged us to treat each other as rivals, and played us off against one another. I didn't see it at the time, but she was foolish to antagonise Edraele, and my sisters paid the price for her ambition."

He frowned, and said, "Wait, you're from House Ghilwen aren't you? I think Irillith said that a fleet of your ships tried to intercept the Invictus the first time we arrived in Maliri Space."

Leena nodded, and replied, "Yes, that's correct. Edraele ordered the assassinations to punish my mother for her brazen attempt on Irillith's life. It was pure chance that you were caught up in that."

John looked around at each of them, and said in a quiet, sombre voice, "I just want to say how sorry I am for what happened recently to your families. I promise you that I didn't intentionally order the assassinations, but ultimately, what happened was my fault, so please don't blame Edraele for it."

Valani was sitting next to him, and she placed a soothing hand on his arm as she said softly, "We don't blame either of you. Political assassination is simply the Maliri way."

"Or at least it was," Kali added with a smile.

He faltered, and felt a huge sense of guilt as he looked at each of them, before he said in a hushed voice, "I don't know how you can be so forgiving. If I'd lost family members like that, I'd be desperate for revenge."

Kali was sitting to his left, and she put her arm around him, as she murmured, "We've all seen Terran entertainment shows, and seen how Terran families are. Bearing in mind that even the most obnoxious families are exaggerated for comedic purposes, please believe me when I tell you that the Maliri take family feuding to another level of vindictiveness and cruelty. I was the youngest of four sisters, and they tormented me for years. My oldest sister refused to even speak to me for over a decade."

"Faraine, my second-oldest sister, arranged for the eldest to be killed in a hovercar accident," Nyrelle said, making eye-contact with him across the table. "My mother was furious initially, because she feared a potential drop in House Ranking, but when we retained our rank, she praised Faraine for her ingenuity."

Valani stroked his arm, and said, "Edraele explained what you're trying to accomplish, and we're all completely behind you. We've outlawed political assassinations on all the worlds under our control."

John looked around at them all, and genuinely amazed, he said, "You're all quite remarkable girls. I'm amazed you're all so well-grounded, considering what you've been through."

Kali smiled at him, and said, "Edraele said that's why she reached out to us, instead of our mothers. As the youngest sisters, we were essentially ignored as being inconsequential in the lines of succession."

"And ironically enough, now you're helping to reshape Maliri society," he said, suitably impressed.

They blushed at his praise, and smiled at him happily. Their looks turned more intense after that moment of quiet reflection, and he watched Leena lick her lips as she gazed at him.

John glanced around at them, and asked hesitantly, "I know it's rude to ask a woman her age, but would you mind me asking how old each of you are? You all seem younger than most of the engineers I've been working with on the refit."

"I'm fifty-four," Leena replied, without pause.

Nyrelle looked at him lustily, then shook it off to reply, "I'm thirty-three."

"Thirty-four," Valani answered, smiling at him when he made eye-contact with her.

"I'm the youngest at thirty-one," Kali replied, gazing at him with her big indigo eyes. She tilted her head, and asked curiously, "How old are you, John?"

"Take a guess," he said, encouraging them with a playful smile.

Leena appraised him for a moment, then said, "I guess you're at least one-hundred-and-five."

"No, older! You seem very calm and wise, like Edraele," Kali insisted. "I would have said you were... one-hundred-and-forty!"

Valani shook her head, and said sagely, "Terran's aren't as long lived as the Maliri. I'm guessing eight-five!"

He laughed, and said, "Thanks, girls. I'm pleased to tell you you're miles out. I'm forty." When he heard their shocked gasps, he couldn't help but smile.

Leena gaped at him, and said, "I knew Terrans aged more quickly than Maliri, but I'd never have guessed you were younger than me!

Nyrelle hadn't spoken yet during this exchange, and she leaned forward, giving him a wonderful glimpse of her azure cleavage, as she asked him leadingly, "Why are you asking how old we are, John?"

He met her blue-eyed gaze, and didn't conceal his interest as he replied, "I think you know why."

Her chest flushed a dark blue, and she nodded, before glancing downwards. When she looked at him again, she did so through long lashes as she said, "Maliri are considered adults at twenty-five."

"What are you talkin- Oh..." Kali said, her voice trailing off, as she blushed furiously.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to embarrass you," he said, putting an arm around her.

Kali leaned into him, and breathed out as she said dreamily, "I don't mind at all."

Nyrelle's blue eyes flashed with arousal, and she purred, "Can we move somewhere more comfortable?"

John nodded, and the girls moved quickly from the benches, abandoning the remnants of breakfast for the servants to clear. Nyrelle offered him a hand, and led him out through the kitchen door, and across the corridor to an adjacent bedroom. John waited politely for the girls to enter before him, and they stood by the bed, watching his every move as he entered, closing the door behind them.

He approached them, but didn't make any move to initiate physical contact, as he asked, "Do all of you know what I am?"

"A Progenitor," Valani said, looking at him intently.

Leena nodded, and said, "Edraele explained that you're like the opposite of the Mael'nerak. You're seeking to help save us from extinction, rather than to enslave the Maliri like he did."

He raised an eyebrow, then nodded, and said, "Yes, that's basically right." Looking at each of them in turn, he continued, "You're all intelligent, well-informed girls. I'm sure you know what white hair on the Maliri signifies?"

"That they've been with you," Nyrelle said, breathless with anticipation.

"Clever girl," he said approvingly. He reached out towards her slim stomach, and asked, "May I?"

She locked eyes with him, nodding as she gave him permission to touch her. He knew she was agreeing to far more however, with the intense, smouldering expression on her beautiful face.

He brushed her toned belly with his fingertips, and caressed her gently, drawing a low moan from the excited girl. "The white hair means that they've swallowed my cum," he explained, looking into her eyes. "I have psychic abilities, and that act links me to them, letting me heal any scars or injuries."

"Is that what you're going to do with us?" Kali asked him, stepping closer and stroking his arm.

"You're beautiful girls, so of course I want to, but only if you want it, too," he explained, looking around at them. The looks he shared with each girl left him in little doubt that they definitely wanted the same thing. He moved his hand lower on Nyrelle's belly, and she gasped as he stroked her. "The Maliri were never meant to have such a huge gender imbalance in your population. That was due to the Mael'nerak changing your bodies, so you'd provide plenty of women for his wars. It's warped your society though, so I'll be seeking to change that, and undo his tampering."

Valani stared at him in wonder, and whispered, "Edraele said that if we're good girls, you might agree to have a baby with us?"

"We all need to rebuild our Houses," Leena murmured, looking at him with a soft, doe-eyed expression. "I can't imagine being with anyone else."

John mused that Edraele was quite fortunate that she wasn't awake at that particular moment, especially when he looked around at each of them, and saw similar longing expressions on each of their lovely faces. "We'll talk about that later," he said firmly, unwilling to commit to anything until they could all think more clearly.

He pulled Nyrelle to him as she whimpered with desire, and she wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him passionately, moaning into his mouth. While he wanted to make sure they all went into this with their eyes open, he knew nothing he did nor said would dissuade them at this point. The genetic modification was far too strong to be resisted, making him appear to be Adonis made flesh - or at least the Maliri equivalent.

For his own part, the Maliri drove him wild, with their toned bodies and smooth blue skin. When he'd been with Jade in the recruitment room, although the physical sensations were overwhelmingly intense, it was a strangely dispassionate affair, in terms of his interaction with the Maliri. It was so much more exciting being able to hold them and touch their bodies, rather than experiencing it via a proxy, as adorable as Jade was.

The girls had no qualms about being naked in front of each other, and quickly divested themselves of clothes before leading him to the bed. From there, he was lost in a stunning sea of azure flesh, kissing one eager girl while caressing another, as two others lapped at his cock. The girls worked well as a team, sharing him equally, and building him up on a crescendo of pleasure. He finally finished with Nyrelle sucking on his rampant head, while the other three knelt around him, licking his shaft.

He came hard, immediately filling her mouth with a sweet-tasting load. She gulped it down as her eyes glazed over, sucking rhythmically as he fed her. Continuing to share, they each took their turn, gulping down about a pint of his spunk before he pulled out of their clutching throat, and moved on to the next eager girl. They sat back in a daze afterwards, stroking the warm load in their stomach's with a blissful smile on their beautiful faces. When they'd thoroughly emptied his quad, he groaned with satisfaction, his balls feeling numb after the concerted and enthusiastic attention they'd received.

John lay there for a minute or two to recover, before helping the dazed girls to lie down on the bed, where they cuddled up together in pairs. In all the excitement, he hadn't had a chance to discuss any injuries, and he checked them over quickly to see if there was anything obvious that needed healing. While they all bore a few whip marks across their backs, Leena, the eldest, bore the most signs of physical abuse. He stroked her dark hair, causing her to mumble in her sleep, then pulled the covers over them to let them rest.

Dressing quickly, he smiled at the lovely girls, then closed the door and walked back to the room he'd left Edraele and Alyssa in. When he opened the door, he saw they were still sleeping, and began to pace nervously, worrying that they were okay. Tapping his watch communicator in an attempt to contact the Invictus, he saw nothing but a blank signal on the small holo-projection. The comms array obviously still had no power, so he was unable to reach Faye, even if Dana had brought her back online.

"Fuck!" he swore, missing his matriarch's instant telepathic communication now more than ever.

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Sakura felt the soft warm body she was snuggled up with shift position, and her eyelids fluttered open a moment later, to stare back into a set of lovely brown eyes.

"Good morning, beautiful," Calara said to her with a warm smile, brushing her hair away from her face. "Did you sleep okay?"

The Asian girl stretched languidly and let out a contented sigh as she replied, "I haven't slept like that in ages!" Sakura had grown accustomed to hearing her Matriarch's gentle telepathic voice first thing in the morning, and sounding surprised, she added, "I can't hear Alyssa. Normally she's the one waking me up."

The Latina frowned, and replied, "I think she's still asleep at the moment. I haven't heard from her, either."

Sakura sat up, and smiled at the other girls who were starting to stir, before glancing at the ship's chronometer. "It's eleven o'clock!" she gasped in shock, drawing startled looks from the rest of her bedmates.

"Oh, crap, we overslept!" Dana swore, sitting bolt upright. She playfully smacked Rachel's taut bottom, and added, "Come on sleepyhead, we've snoozed through most of the morning!"

The brunette swept her tousled mane from her face, blinking as she shrugged off the drowsiness after her long sleep. "How come Alyssa didn't wake us?" she yawned, before sitting up and stretching.

"We think she's still asleep at the moment," Sakura explained, nimbly vaulting from the bed. She offered Calara a hand, and the Latina smiled at her as she took it, and climbed out of bed much more elegantly. Sakura looked around at her friends, and continued, "I'm going for a shower, anyone want to join me?"

Jade slinked over to join her, followed by Irillith as she got up too. "Sounds like fun," the Nymph said, following the bright-eyed Asian into the shower.

The lovely warm water soon had them all awake again, but they didn't waste time playing, not while they were running so late. After getting refreshingly clean, they left the cubicle to dry themselves in the automatic driers.

"Let's get dressed, then meet back here," Sakura suggested, as she dried herself off. "We should probably figure out what we're doing for the rest of the morning."

Rachel smiled at her, and said, "Everything is fully planned out, we'll just use up a bit of contingency time while we catch up on today's tasks. I'll adjust the schedule accordingly. It wouldn't hurt to reconvene and have a quick recap though, good idea!"

No one objected to the plan, so they scattered to get dressed in their rooms, then returned to quickly make the bed before sitting on top of the covers. The six girls glanced around at each other, not sure how to proceed without John there to lead the discussion.

"Who's in charge?" Sakura asked, looking around at the others quizzically.

Jade smiled at her, and replied unfalteringly, "John is."

Dana gave the Nymph a playful nudge with her elbow, and grinned as she said, "No, she means while John and Alyssa aren't here!" She giggled as she added, "I think our hierarchy is based on how long we've been slurping down John's cum, isn't it?"

Irillith looked amused, and glancing at Calara, she added, "That certainly does fit. They normally leave you in command of the ship when they're away, don't they?"

Calara nodded, then hesitated before she replied, "That's normally in combat situations, though. I think it might be wise to defer to Rachel's expertise while she's overseeing the refit."

Clearing her throat, Rachel smiled at her and said, "I'm happy to lead the discussion." She sat up straighter, and continued, "First things first, we need to get Faye back online again."

Dana looked guilty, and replied, "I was planning to move her server first thing this morning, then hook her up again. I can't believe we overslept so long!"

"What about the new materials you're forging?" Rachel asked, giving her lover a quizzical look. "Weren't you supposed to be overseeing the Maliri this morning?"

"Nah, Alyndra can definitely take care of that, she's quite clever. I modified the Mass Drivers last night, and the test firing worked perfectly. The Maliri were supposed to be running the collider in bursts overnight, and as we didn't get vaporised in our sleep, I'm guessing they didn't fuck it up!" she announced, cheerfully.

Rachel shuddered, and said, "I don't know how you can be so blasé about something like that."

Dana smiled at her, and admitted, "I'm not really, babes. I checked my calculations hundreds of times, to make sure every last precise detail was correct. There's no way I'd put any of you at risk."

Rachel stroked her arm affectionately, then said, "Alright, so you'll bring Faye back online again this morning, then what are you up to this afternoon?"

Dana held up her hand and extended a finger as she ticked off each item on her list, as she replied, "Now John's started recruiting the Maliri, I'll give the first group the plans to construct the two new Trankaran engines we're going to need."

"I'll help oversee that, if you'd like?" Sakura volunteered. "We managed to stockpile all the armour plating with John's help yesterday, so I'm a bit ahead of schedule."

"Great stuff," Dana said, giving her an appreciative smile. "We're also going to need a fuckton more retrothrusters to handle the Invictus' increased mass. If I give you the plans for them too, can I leave you in charge of assembling those?"

"Absolutely!" Sakura agreed, glad to be doing something helpful.

Dana extended a second finger, and said, "The next big job we have to do, is start replacing all the power relays and power couplings with the Maliri equivalents, and setting up the new Core rooms. I know Faye said she'd help oversee that with the maintenance bots, but it'll go a lot faster if we get some engineers started on it right away."

"I'll take the front of the ship," Calara volunteered. "Most of the work there is to feed power into the forward weapon arrays, so it makes sense for me to keep an eye on that."

Irillith smiled at the redhead, and said, "I'll take the rear of the ship, then. I'll be on hand if you have any problems getting Faye online."

Dana gave her a grateful smile, then held up a third finger as she said, "I need to start building the new Progenitor Power Cores. I'll start with the first one, now we've got the new materials I needed, but the other two can wait until we've got the new superstructure in place. When they're all up and running, I'll start on the new Tachyon Drive."

Rachel nodded while checking her portable display, and tapped her finger on her chin as she said, "I was hoping we could begin construction of the Singularity Driver barrels today, or at least build the protective shells around the Core Rooms. Unfortunately, we need Alyssa for both of those."

"She never normally sleeps this long," Calara said, looking increasingly worried. "I know she was going to bond with Edraele last night, but do you think something went wrong?"

"John would have said if they needed help," Jade said reassuringly.

Dana blinked in alarm, and blurted out, "Ah, crap! The comms relay is down, so he can't reach us if he tried."

Rachel slid smoothly off the bed, and said decisively, "I'll go and check on them, make sure everyone's alright. The rest of you know what you're doing, but just let me know if there's any problems when I get back."

"I'll speak with Luna, and ask her to take you to my mother's quarters," Irillith said, as she followed the brunette. "I'm sure Almari and Ilyana can manage the construction of the superstructure until she gets back."

"I'll meet you outside, let me just retrieve a trauma kit," Rachel said, as she hurried to her room.

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Luna smiled with satisfaction as she surveyed the first pieces of the crystal struts, which would form the framework for the Invictus' superstructure. Maliri engineers were using hoists and grav-sleds to manoeuvre the crystal beams into position, carefully aligning them between the two sections of the Invictus, in preparation for their assembly. Only a tiny fraction of the required components had arrived so far, but this was just the first wave of deliveries from the crystal fabrication plants, and it was critically important that they kept up with supply. Much more would be arriving over the next week, as facilities designed to build several large vessels at once were all focused solely on rebuilding the Invictus.

She had no background in engineering, and was merely there to oversee the work of the capable teams of engineers. Her job was to report any problems to Dana, Rachel, or Edraele, depending on the nature of the issue at hand. Speaking of her Matriarch, Edraele normally gave her a friendly greeting when she awoke, and it was unsettling to not have heard anything from her that morning.

"Luna! We could use your help," Irillith called out to her, drawing her attention from the engineers.

Turning to seek out the House Valaden noble, Luna saw her trotting over from the Invictus' airlock, and she smiled in greeting. "How can I assist, Irillith?" she asked, the noblewoman's tense expression putting her on edge.

"Rachel wants to check on Alyssa and Edraele. We haven't heard from either of them this morning, or John for that matter," Irillith explained, sounding worried.

Sharing a similar look of concern, Luna nodded, and turned to the Terran brunette, and said, "If you'd like to follow me, I'll take you straight to her quarters."

"Thank you, Luna," Rachel said, with a grateful smile.

Luna glanced over at Ilyana and Almari, who were organising the engineers at the fore section of the ship, and the confident women seemed to have everything in hand.

"Don't worry, I'll let them know where you've gone," Irillith said, giving her a reassuring smile.

Luna nodded to her appreciatively, then set out at a brisk walk towards the double doors leading from the drydock. Rachel fell into step beside her, the fit young woman having no trouble keeping up with the quick pace she was setting. Noticing the trauma kit clutched in the doctor's hands, Luna looked at her in alarm, and asked, "Do you think they've been hurt? I've not heard of any trouble from the guards on her quarters."

Rachel smiled at her, and said, "I brought it with just in case there was an emergency, but none of us have sensed any problems."

They strode out of the drydock, and Luna immediately spotted some kind of commotion to her left. She paused, looking at the cluster of medical and military staff gathered at the door to the next docking bay, and said, "I better check what's happened. That's the bay we're using for Edraele's private shuttle."

"I understand," Rachel agreed. "I might be able to help."

Walking quickly to join the group, Luna announced brusquely, "I lead the Matriarch's bodyguard. What's happened here?"

One of the officers from the garrison forces was there, a capable woman by the name of Melandris, that Luna had dealt with before. The officer looked deeply anxious, and she pleaded, "Luna! You've got to tell Matriarch Valaden it wasn't my fault! I wasn't even on duty last night!"

Luna raised her hand in a calming gesture, and said, "Just tell me what happened, Edraele is highly unlikely to hold you accountable."

Melandris still looked nervous, but she stammered, "Someone assaulted these guards, then gagged and bound them. They were only discovered when their relief shift arrived ten minutes ago."

Rachel hurried over to kneel by the groaning Maliri, glancing at the two women, and immediately looking alarmed. She turned to look at Luna and the Officer, and said, "This first woman has injuries to her trachea, the second is suffering complications from being strangled. See her bloodshot eyes, and drooping right eyelid? It's indicative of neurological trauma. I'll go and get Jade, can you arrange for them to be taken to Edraele's quarters?"

Melandris was astonished that the Terran girl had been able to diagnose them in less than a second, and she started to say, "How did she-"

"Do as she says," Luna said abruptly, cutting off the officer. "Take them to the Matriarch's private suite."

"But shouldn't we take them to Medical?" Melandris protested.

Luna shook her head, and replied, "No, this is the best course of action. They'll be fully recovered in no time."

Melandris nodded, albeit reluctantly, and began giving orders to the personnel to arrange for the injured guards to be stretchered away via medical anti-grav beds. Luna glanced into the docking bay, curious as to why someone would have attacked the guards, and her eyes widened when she saw that Edraele's private shuttle was no longer parked in the bay.

"It seems you omitted to mention something fairly important, Melandris," Luna said, in a disapproving tone. "What happened to the Matriarch's shuttle?!"

The officer gulped, and replied, "It was taken, Luna. I've checked the holo-footage from last night. It was a golden-masked woman..."

"Tashana!" Rachel gasped, looking alarmed. She started sprinting for the drydock, and called back over her shoulder, "I'll get Jade and Irillith! We need to tell John what's happened!"

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On Deck Three, in Faye's specially prepared server room, Dana carefully conducted a myriad of checks to make sure that the network was stable, before reactivating their ever-helpful AI. After nodding to herself in satisfaction, she pressed the button on the console, reconnecting Faye's server to the primary power grid, then waited patiently for her to come online once again.

An array of lights on the server flickered for a moment, and a purple pulse of light began to fill out into a five-foot-tall feminine shape in the centre of the room. The figure started out as a vaguely androgynous shape, but detail was layered onto the holographic image, until Faye's lovely smiling face was filled out in exquisite detail.

"Welcome back online, Faye," Dana said, greeting the purple sprite with a warm smile.

Faye blinked for a couple of seconds, then looked at her in surprise, and said, "I think my server's chronometer has gone out-of-sync with the Invictus! I'm reading the time as one in the afternoon!"

The redhead gave her a guilty look, and replied, "Sorry about that. I meant to bring you online first thing this morning, but we all overslept! Then when I woke up, I had to disconnect all the data lines we lasered through to avoid shorting out the Invictus' network, and reconnect primary power to Deck Three. All that took about an hour."

Nodding her understanding, Faye suddenly looked startled as she exclaimed, "About a third of our internal Cyber-Realm is offline! I know you warned me to expect it, but it's weird seeing a big chunk lopped off the Invictus' network!"

"That'll be down for at least a couple of weeks. We'll need to build up the new superstructure, then lay down all the new data lines to reconnect to the front section of the ship," Dana confirmed, while studying the power readouts for Faye's server. She glanced over at the purple-hued girl, who was now sitting cross-legged on her hexagonal server, and added, "Everything looks good from here. Are you reading any problems with your server?"

"Everything's in the green, and I'm raring to go!" Faye chirped as she hopped off the server and bounded over. She grinned at her friend, and added, "Now, what can I help you with?"

Dana grinned back at her, and said, "Can you oversee the engineers working on replacing the power couplings and power relays in this section of the ship? It means I don't have to keep an eye on them, and I can get stuck in with building the first power core."

"I'll put all my available avatars on it!" Faye said exuberantly.

"Please could you also let Irillith know you're taking over? She'll swap over to upgrading the network instead, so watch out for service outages in the areas she's working on, okay?" the redhead asked, as she thought over the various steps in the upgrade they needed to complete.

Faye closed her eyes for a second, then replied, "I'm chatting to her now, and introducing myself to the engineering teams with nine other avatars. My secondary avatar is bringing the maintenance bots online, and I'll put the boys to work in the Core Room. They need to upgrade the power converter, the power conduits, and all the power regulators too, if we're going to avoid a burnout when you install the new Power Core."

Dana nodded and agreed, "Good thinking. That's the most complex part of the Power Core upgrade, and we can't afford any mistakes."

"You can trust me. I know just how you like everything, and I'll make sure it's all done to your high standards!" Faye said earnestly, her cute face set in a serious expression.

With a relieved laugh, Dana replied, "You don't know how awesome it is to have you back online, Faye. You were only shut down overnight, but I missed you loads already!"

"I'm just grateful to be part of the team!" Faye replied, giving Dana a sparkling smile.

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John sat on the end of the bed, watching over Edraele and Alyssa with a look of concern on his face. Both women seemed peaceful enough, but they were still fast asleep, and it was now pushing into the afternoon. There was a polite knock on the door, which made him jump, before he relaxed and said, "Please come in!"

The door swung open revealing Rachel, who smiled at him in greeting, and he spotted Jade and Irillith waiting impatiently behind her. He could see the tension in Rachel's grey eyes when she looked his way, her pensive expression intensifying when she spotted Edraele and Alyssa slumbering on the bed. She walked over to them purposefully, while retrieving a medi-scanner from her belt, and wasted no time in checking on his sleeping Matriarchs.

Jade entered the room immediately after her, and walked straight over to him with a broad smile on her beautiful verdant face. He got off the bed to greet her, pulling her in for a hug, but before he could say anything, Irillith rushed over to him, looking distraught.

"What's the matter?!" he asked, embracing the Maliri girl as Jade made way for her.

"Tashana's gone!" she blurted out, only just managing to keep it together. "She assaulted some guards and stole a ship!"

"She did what?!" he exclaimed, looking at her in alarm.

Jade hugged Irillith from behind, and answered for her, "Two guards were injured when she knocked them out, so Rachel suggested bringing them here for you to heal." She glanced at the shaking Maliri girl in his arms, and added, "It seems as though Tashana stole Edraele's private shuttle, and jumped out of the system. Luna got Genthalas Flight Control to give us her exit vector - she was heading back towards the Unclaimed Wastes..."

"For fuck's sake..." John muttered, hugging Irillith tighter. He leaned down to kiss her, then said in a calm, reassuring voice, "We'll take the Raptor and go after Tashana. We can use the tracking device to follow her wherever she goes, and we'll be able to intercept her before she leaves Maliri Space."

"I should have tried harder to reach out to her!" Irillith sobbed, no longer able to hold back her tears. "There must have been something I could have done to make her understand!"

He stroked her back, and said, "You've already been trying your best, honey, it's not your fault. Tashana's just trying to deal with all the anger that's been pent up for thirteen years. I've seen how crazy she gets just laying eyes on you. We can't just expect her to get over that in a couple of days, no matter how much we want her to."

Irillith nodded, and lay her head against his chest, crying softly while John and Jade did their best to console her. Rachel had been leaning over the bed while she completed her scans, and when she came back to join them, she looked greatly relieved. After deftly returning the medi-scanner to her belt, she reached out and stroked Irillith's shoulder to comfort her.

"Please tell me you've got some good news?" John asked plaintively.

Rachel nodded as she replied, "Physically they're both fine, although I'm picking up greatly increased activity in their frontal cortices. I could probably wake them with a stimulant, if you want?"

He shook his head, and replied, "No, let them sleep. Whatever's going on, they obviously need the rest." Glancing over at the serene-looking women on the bed, he asked Rachel, "What's happening to them?"

She frowned for a moment, before replying, "Any theories I suggest would be pure speculation at this point."

"That's okay, give it your best shot. You've never failed to make uncannily accurate predictions before," he said, while hugging Irillith close.

Rachel looked thoughtful as she evaluated the circumstances, and the nature of the two sleeping women. She met his questioning gaze, and said, "I think what's happening is best explained by relational database theory. Do you know what that is?"

He shook his head, and replied, "No idea, but give me the layman's version."

She nodded, and replied, "I've heard Dana and Faye discussing it before, and I think it's a comparable metaphor." Taking a deep breath, she continued, "When Alyssa set up a bond with each of us, it's been a one-to-one relationship, where she connected her consciousness to mine, for example. She represents a central hub, with each of us linking only to her, and our combined strength augmenting you with psychic energy."

"Alright, I follow that. So, how's it different with Edraele?" he asked, looking down at the two women.

"As another Matriarch, her mind is designed to work in the same way. She's set up basic one-to-one connections with every Maliri in her network," Rachel explained patiently. She followed his gaze, and said, "They probably tried to set up a similar one-to-one relationship with each other, but each of them has their own network of girls linked to their mind. I'd posit that their minds are trying to set up a one-to-many relationship with every girl in each other's respective network. Whether they've succeeded or not, I've no idea, but it'll become clear when they wake up."

"Why's that, exactly?" Jade asked, looking at her curiously.

"If it worked, then Edraele will be able to communicate telepathically with each of us, and Alyssa will be able to communicate with all the Maliri. Whether or not we'll be able to reciprocate with Edraele, like we can with Alyssa, again, I've no idea," she said, giving Jade a helpless shrug and a smile.

Irillith sniffed, and lifted her head from John's chest as she turned to look at the brunette. She rubbed the tears from her face, and asked, "So what happens if they set up a many-to-many relationship instead?"

"Then we'll all be able to communicate telepathically with one another, rather than just with our Matriarchs," Rachel answered, intrigued by the idea. "It's a fascinating possibility, but I doubt it's viable. They're both powerful psychics in their own right, with their minds enhanced to deal with that level of intercommunication. Ours are not."

John smiled at her feeling enormously relieved, and said, "Alright, that doesn't seem so bad. Let's leave them in peace, and we can check in with them when they wake up." He sounded optimistic as he added, "I don't suppose you have any idea how long that's going to take, do you?"

She shook her head, and replied, "When Alyssa bonded with each of us, it took about an hour. However, there's six of us in Alyssa's network, and well over one-hundred-and-fifty Maliri in Edraele's. Are they each trying to bond with us? Or just establish an initial connection? There's too many unknowns to be able to make an estimation."

"Alright, that's fair enough, you've been a big help already," he replied, reaching out to brush her cheek affectionately.

Rachel smiled at him, and said, "Everyone at the Invictus knows what they're supposed to be doing with the refit. I'll stay here and keep an eye on Alyssa and Edraele, just to be on the safe side."

He gave her a grateful smile, then glanced down at Irillith, and said, "Let's leave them to sleep it off, okay?"

She nodded, and released him from her tight hug, as they walked out of the room, closing the door quietly behind them. Jade opened the door at the end of the corridor, and they all entered the lounge to find a cluster of unfamiliar Maliri talking quietly together, as well as two sitting on the chairs.

Luna stepped forward, an anxious look in her yellow eyes, and asked, "Is Edraele alright? What happened to her?"

"We think everything's going to be fine," he replied, his tone reassuring. He glanced at the unfamiliar Maliri, and continued, "Speak to me later for the specifics, or you can just wait until Edraele wakes up and ask her yourself, whatever you prefer, Luna."

She caught his questioning glance, and hastily explained, "When Rachel suggested bringing the two guards to visit you for healing, I thought it might be sensible to bring the young Matriarchs' bodyguards along too." She approached until she was standing right in front of him, and looked apprehensive for a moment, before she leaned in and added in a furtive whisper, "Edraele did something to their minds! She subverted their allegiance to their Houses, making them loyal to her instead. These eight assassins are the ones that eliminated the original Matriarchs. I know she was hoping you could 'undo' whatever it was she did to them."

John's eyes widened in surprise, and he glanced at the eight Maliri assassins. Unlike the two armoured guards and another woman in more ornate armour, who were all staring at him enraptured, the assassins were just watching him patiently. There was something off in the way the assassins held themselves; it was only very subtle, but there was definitely something unnatural in their bearing.

He turned back to Luna, and said, "You did well bringing them to me, thank you."

Jade brushed her fingers along his arm, and asked coyly, "How do you want to do this?"

"Are you up for a bit of nursing?" he asked her, looking at the guards with the severe mottled bruising on their throats. "I think that'll be easier for them."

"Of course, Master," she purred, smiling at her perspective kittens, and brushing her firm bust against his arm.

John nodded, then looked at Irillith, and asked, "Can you go and get the tracking device? Call me when you've found Tashana's location, then ask Almari or Ilyana to contact Luna and keep me updated. When Jade and I are done here, we'll head back to the drydock and take the Raptor to chase after her." He looked thoughtful for a moment, then added, "Are you able to give orders to House Valaden's fleets?"

Irillith paused as she considered her standing with the Fleet Officers, then replied, "As long as I'm not asking them to do anything outrageous, then yes, they should listen to me."

"Can you move any available forces to create a blockade and cut Tashana off? I don't want her heading into the Unclaimed Wastes again if I can help it, it's far too dangerous for her there," he explained.

"I'll arrange it immediately," she replied, then stepped close and gave him a brief, but heartfelt kiss. Her angular violet gazed into his, and she continued, "I'm so sorry for all this trouble, but thank you for trying to help her."

"She's your family, it's no problem," he said firmly, giving her a sympathetic smile.

He watched as she crossed the lounge, giving him a wave goodbye, before she disappeared into Edraele's study to contact the Valaden Fleet Commander. Turning to look at the assembled Maliri, he suddenly smiled at Luna, and asked, "I just had a thought: are there actually any more spare bedrooms? The young Matriarchs are sleeping in one, and Alyssa and Edraele are in the other."

Luna returned his smile, and said, "Yes, there's another in these quarters. Let me show you..."

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Irillith hurried back to the drydock, her mind in a whirl as she worried about her sister. She'd had no trouble convincing the Valaden Fleet Commander to relocate a number of fleet assets from patrol routes, and from some of the safer borders with recently-allied Maliri Houses. Those ships were now spreading out to form a sensor web on the edge of Valaden territory, to make sure Tashana wasn't able to slip past and make her way back to the Unclaimed Wastes.

She felt so sorry for her sister, knowing that Tashana must be truly desperate to escape from her and John, if she was considering heading back to that horrible place. Irillith could feel a rising sense of guilt growing within her once again, and she hugged herself as she walked quickly along the corridors. Although John had been wonderful, and was bending over backwards to try and help her wayward twin, she knew he had more than enough to worry about without burdening him with this too. It was just one more thing to feel remorseful about, and she tried to think of ways to make it up to him.

Striding into the frenetic activity within the drydock, it was easy to spot her adoptive sisters amongst the sea of blue-skinned Maliri. She acknowledged Sakura's friendly wave with a smile, and exchanged a brief hug with Calara when the Latina jogged over to greet her, and spoke to her briefly to update her on Alyssa's status.

The huge hangar doors had been removed from the Invictus prior to it being sliced into pieces, so she simply walked straight through the hangar on her way up to the Command Deck. Temporary lighting festooned the corridors in the ship's stern, so she had no problem finding her way. The lower levels were fairly quiet, but she could hear lots of voices and the sounds of construction work as she rose past the mid-levels. Glancing down the corridors, the Titanium deck plates had been raised all along Decks Three to Six, with snaking power and data cables stacked in coils at regular intervals. The engineers were currently pulling out the now-redundant power lines that had linked the fore and aft of the ship, and were preparing to replace them with superior Maliri equivalents.

Faye was overseeing their work on every deck, and her avatars each turned to wave at Irillith as she ascended in the grav-tube. The one on Deck Three gave her a playful wink, then disappeared in a purple flash. When Irillith stepped out onto the Command Deck, the Stations were all dimmed and on minimal power, making the Bridge seem eerily subdued.

Faye was waiting for her just outside the grav-tube, and she gave her a cheerful grin as she said, "Hey, Irillith! Do you need any help with anything?"

Irillith smiled at her, and shook her head as she replied, "I'm fine, thanks, I just need to get the tracking device for Tashana's implant. Is it still in the Briefing Room?"

The purple sprite nodded enthusiastically, and replied, "Yes, it's still there, right on the table!" The AI gave her a quizzical look, and added, "Why do you need that? I thought Tashana was in her guest quarters here on Genthalas? Is she hiding somewhere?"

Shaking her head as she headed down the ramp towards the Briefing Room, Irillith replied, "She's stolen a ship and run away. I need to try and track her down."

Fluttering along beside the Maliri girl on her iridescent wings, Faye frowned and said, "Oh! I hope she'll be okay."

Irillith smiled at the purple girl for her kind sentiments, then hit the button to enter the Briefing Room and darted inside. The tracking device was on the table, just as Faye had described, and she hurried over to it, picking up the sophisticated piece of equipment. After hitting the button to activate the projected holo-map, she waited impatiently for the device to locate her twin, knowing it would display her current location in relation to the nearest star.

After a few seconds' wait, it flashed a red message across the map, which read, "Signal terminated."

Her heart lurched in her chest, her mind instantly leaping to the conclusion that her sister had been killed. Through the rising panic, a sudden thought flashed into her mind, and she gasped, "She destroyed it!" Her brow furrowed for a moment, before she added, "How could she have known?!"

Faye was standing beside her, and her pretty face fell as she whimpered, "I'm so sorry! I had no idea this would happen..."

Irillith managed to suppress her flare of anger, and she asked quietly, "What happened? I need to know everything."

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"So then we think she burned out the tracking implant somehow, and fled in your shuttle," John said to Edraele, who was sitting up in bed, hugging her knees.

Alyssa put a comforting arm around the upset Maliri woman, and leaned into her as she said, "Don't worry, we'll bring her back home again."

"Couldn't we go after her?!" Edraele asked frantically.

He slowly shook his head as he replied, "By the time we realised what had happened, Tashana already had a twelve-hour head start. The Raptor is fast, and we could catch up to her if we knew exactly where she was, but without that data, we'd just be flying around aimlessly. We had her exit vector when she left the system, but she hasn't been picked up by monitoring stations or vessels in that direction."

"It was a ruse," Alyssa said, looking impressed. She glanced at Edraele, and smiled as she added, "She's wily, like her mother and sister."

Edraele gave her a half-hearted smile in return, then returned her attention to John, and said, "There must be something we can do? We can't just abandon the search!"

"We're not giving up on her, don't worry," John replied, trying to soothe the distressed woman. "We've repositioned some of your fleet to cover your border with the Unclaimed Wastes, and Leena has asked House Ghilwen forces to watch out for her too. If it was a double-bluff, and she actually is heading in that direction, the only way she can slip by them is if she takes a massive detour to avoid the sensor nets they have in place. If they pick her up, they're under orders to interdict her ship and capture her."

"What if she's seeking asylum with another Maliri house?" Edraele asked, sounding deeply worried. "The Edraele of old terrorised those Houses, and they might just execute her the moment she identifies herself as my daughter! At the very least they'll no doubt seek to use Tashana as a powerful bargaining chip."

"I sincerely doubt they'd just kill her, all the pressure you've put on their borders will have them frantic with worry. If they do capture Tashana and try to bargain for her life, I'll just have to go on a charm-offensive," John replied, trying to sound reassuring.

\*I appreciate the effort, but I know when you're just trying to stop me from worrying,\* Edraele thought to him, giving him a wan smile.

Alyssa's shared thoughts followed a moment later as she thought to them both, \*He doesn't like to see you get upset. I don't like it either.\*

The two blondes shared a hug, while John blinked at them in surprise, and said aloud, "That's going to take a bit of getting used to. How are you both feeling now, anyway?"

"My head's still ringing," Alyssa admitted, massaging her temple with her right hand. She glanced at Edraele, and added, "I'm sure it would have felt amazing, if she hadn't dragged half her bloody House with her into my head!"

Edraele met his worried gaze, and trying not to wince, she replied, "It's not quite as bad as the migraines I used to get, but not far off. I'd rather not try and bond with another Matriarch, if that's alright with you." She glanced at Alyssa, and sounded astonished as she continued, "The intensity of the bonds you've built with your girls is mind-blowing! I've no idea how you managed to develop the connection between you to become so powerful!"

In a deadly-serious voice, Alyssa replied, "We fuck a lot, and I'm very good with my fingers." She wiggled her nimble digits at Edraele, and gave her a playfully flirtatious smile.

The Maliri laughed at that, then winced and clutched at her head.

John moved across the bed to reach out and gently caress them, as he said, "I'm just glad you're both alright. You had me worried there."

Alyssa leaned into his hand, and let out a sigh of relief as he stroked her. She smiled at him, and said, "I agree with Edraele. No more Matriarchs, please."

He chuckled, and replied, "Alright, I'll try and restrain myself."

Edraele looked at him intently then, doing her best to ignore her pounding headache for one moment, and said, "I realise now, that my actions towards the other House Matriarchs have put you in a terrible position. I ended up forcing on you the last thing you wanted, and I'm truly sorry."

He smiled at her, and said, "We can talk about it later, Edraele. Get some rest and let that headache clear, then we can go over my plans for the Maliri."

Her purple eyes widened as she stared at him and heard his thoughts, then she tumbled into his arms, hugging him fiercely. "That's so wonderful, John! I swear I'll do everything in my power to help you achieve this vision!" she gasped, sounding elated.

He held her tight, and shared a smile with Alyssa, whose cerulean eyes twinkled with... amusement? Or was it admiration? He couldn't quite tell.

\*You do know how to show a girl an interesting time, Mister Blake,\* she said, gazing at him enigmatically.

\*I try my best, Miss Marant,\* he replied, beckoning her over to join his hug with Edraele.

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Alyssa and Edraele recovered quickly from their bonding session, and over the next several days, everyone fell into a familiar routine as they laboured on the Invictus' refit. Scores of Maliri got to sample John's marvellous hair tonic, with greater numbers of white-haired engineers working on the Invictus every day. The crystal lattice that would form the superstructure of the Invictus began to arrive at a faster rate as more of the fabrication plants came online, and what started as a trickle of deliveries, soon became a flood.

With such a vast number of engineers working on construction of the two-hundred-and-fifty metre mid-section of the lengthened assault cruiser, it began to take shape at an astounding pace. By the third day, the fore and aft sections were aligned with the primary load-bearing beams of the crystal framework, and carefully sealed together. Once they'd been secured in place, Alyssa and John strengthened the join with Crystal Alyssium support beams, much to the amazement of their Maliri audience.

Half the Maliri working on this area of the ship began to assemble the Invictus' new crystalline outer hull, which would eventually be sheathed in Crystal Alyssium armour plating. Dana had highlighted all the areas in the plans that were designated for weapon hardpoints, and there were dozens of alcoves set into the hull to make room for retractable turret bays. The smallest alcoves were only four metres long, but there were three huge holes on either side of the topdeck that left yawning gaps in the glittering crystal, each of them nearly fifty metres across.

The second group of engineers were tasked with building the internals of the Invictus' midsection. They worked at a blistering pace to construct the shells for all the new rooms - like the munitions rooms and the new Power Core Chambers - which would be required to support the vastly-expanded arsenal. First on the list, were the cross beams and cradles that would support the Singularity Drivers, and as soon as the superstructure was in place, Almari gave Rachel the all-clear that the massive rails could be lowered into position. The brunette watched from high up on the maintenance gantry, as Alyssa calmly approached the four-hundred-metre long barrels, which had been placed alongside the ship.

The Progenitor couple had worked tirelessly as a team to construct the shortened, four-hundred-metre long rails for Dana's enhanced version of the Terran Singularity Driver. It took two days in all, for them to laboriously shape enough of the Crystal Alyssium into the many quint-shaped rail sections, which were needed to form the complete barrels. Dana had spent hours checking the positioning of each section, as they were arrayed in a long line on purpose-built frames, and ordered slight adjustments until they were in perfect alignment. Alyssa and John had then sealed all those twenty-metre long pieces into two flawless tubes, which would channel the accelerated rounds towards their targets.

Rachel watched in fascination as Alyssa's eyes flared with a incandescent radiance, clearly visible despite being one-hundred metres away from her. The psychic blonde made an imperious gesture towards the first of the Singularity Driver rails, and it lifted smoothly off the ground in its hurry to obey her will. She brought it high up over the topdeck to the sound of enough shocked gasps, that Rachel could hear the breathy chorus from up on the gantry. John was waiting for it up there, and he raised his hand as he helped guide it into position. Dana was at one end of the enormous trench, on the starboard side of the topdeck, with Calara standing facing her at the other. Rachel knew they were giving Alyssa constant telepathic feedback, to ensure that the alignment was exactly to her redheaded lover's specifications.

It was a perfectly executed operation, followed immediately afterwards by the placement of the second barrel for the port Singularity Driver. After days spent preparing for that moment, it felt slightly anticlimactic that it was all over so quickly and efficiently, as dramatic a sight as it had been. Rachel looked across the topdeck at the adoring crowds of Maliri that were now surrounding John, and chuckled to herself. It seemed the majority of their audience agreed with her assessment, and were now seeking a more impressive climax.

\*Very droll,\* Alyssa thought to her, glancing up at the gantry from the deck of the drydock. The inner light illuminating her eyes was now beginning to fade, and she added whimsically, \*Maybe I should look into getting a big strapon? The Maliri seemed to love watching me and John laying some pipe with two huge shafts...\*

Rachel laughed aloud, shaking her head at the Karron girl's charming vernacular.

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John finally managed to peel himself away from the breathless crowd of dark-haired Maliri, and gave them a friendly wave as he turned and jogged across the topdeck. Calara shared a jubilant grin with him as he passed by, and there were a few dozen white-haired engineers that smiled in amusement at their smitten colleagues. They still shot him admiring glances, of course, but now they were psychically linked to him via Edraele, the effects of the genetic modification was no longer quite so debilitating.

\*I'll be there soon, Edraele,\* John thought to the Maliri Matriarch.

\*Take your time, there's no need to rush,\* she replied soothingly. \*I just thought you might appreciate a break from recruiting so many engineers with Jade.\*

He sent her a grateful telepathic smile as he trotted along the maintenance gantry, and headed for the metal stairs that led down to ground level. \*A change would be great, actually. Don't get me wrong; being with Jade feels absolutely incredible, but I'm starting to feel like I'm being milked like a prize bull!\*

\*I know,\* Edraele said indulgently, fully aware of his every thought, no matter how fleeting.

John smiled to himself as he wondered what she had in store for him this time. Edraele had set up another of these different liaisons two days earlier, where he'd met half-a-dozen of her senior Fleet Officers. They had swooned at the sight of him, but he'd had an enjoyable time getting to know them and finding out about their careers in the military, before taking them to bed with him. A smaller group had felt much more intimate, and when he left them to sleep off their lunch, he felt refreshed rather than wrung out.

 Turning his attention to his second Matriarch, he asked Alyssa, \*Fancy coming along too? I know you like to watch...\*

He could sense her indecision, before she finally replied, \*I'd love to, but I better make a start on reinforcing the Power Core Chambers with Crystal Alyssium shells. It'll be easier to do it now, while we've still got big holes in the ship to float all the materials through.\*

Pausing for a moment, half-way down the flight of steps, John said, \*It feels like I'm slacking off, disappearing like this. Are you sure you don't want some help?\*

\*Nope, not at all,\* she replied firmly. \*None of us can help the Maliri like you can, and you know how important it is for the future of their species. You'll just have to try your best to cope with having adoring blue-skinned beauties kneeling for you and sucking down your cum.\*

Continuing down the steps again, he chuckled as he replied, \*Alright, but I'm only doing this for the greater good, remember?\*

\*Your stoicism in the face of such adversity is truly inspiring,\* she replied, laying on the sarcasm nice and thick. \*Now stop complaining, and go get some smoking-hot blue pussy!\*

He smiled at the thought, but if Edraele had lined him up with some fresh Maliri to convert, it would have to be blowjobs only, until they'd adapted to take his size. Still, he could always see if the young Matriarchs would be up for something more intimate in a second session. He'd love to spend more time with Edraele's three assassin bodyguards too, but he'd already been with Luna, Ilyana, and Almari twice before. He needed to speak to Athena about setting up a psychic ward to prevent himself from being pulled into the Astral Plane, before he could risk feeding those girls again. A third time would obviously trigger one of his dreams, just as they had in the past, those horrifying nightmares occurring every time a new girl was connected to him permanently...

\*Wait a minute! What the hell?!\* he blurted out, nearly stumbling down the last few steps from the maintenance gantry in his surprise.

He could feel the shock from both his Matriarchs, and Alyssa exclaimed, \*How the fuck did we miss that?!\*

\*You're right, John!\* Edraele gasped, sounding stunned. \*The rules regarding my connections to the Maliri are quite different to the rules that Alyssa seems to adhere to!\*

John steadied himself, then walked across the drydock towards the double doors, as he asked, \*But why are you able to establish empathic links with the Maliri after I've only been with them once? It takes three times before they're permanently bonded to Alyssa!\*

\*Because of our species? We Maliri were designed to serve you, after all,\* Edraele replied thoughtfully. \*Perhaps it's because we're more psychically responsive?\*

\*Nah, that can't be it,\* Alyssa replied as she thought it over. \*What about Irillith? She was hooked on John's cum after the first mouthful, but she wasn't permanently linked to us until the third time. That was when I saw an image of her in my mind, and I got the empathic connection with her. Also, Jade's latently psychic, but... wait! I had a link with her the first time too!\*

They were all quiet for a moment as they mulled that over, until John exclaimed, \*That's another thing that doesn't make any sense! Apart from Irillith, why are all the Maliri getting allocated to Edraele? How come they aren't shared out evenly between you? It can't be proximity-based, as Alyssa's been physically closer to me for nearly all the recent sessions in the Recruiting Room.\*

\*Irillith joined us before Edraele did, remember?\* Alyssa prompted him. \*Maybe all the Maliri just go to her by default, but Irillith was an exception simply because I was your only Matriarch at the time?\*

\*I'm sorry, I can't explain it,\* Edraele replied sounding as flummoxed as John and Alyssa. \*I'm not consciously making any decisions regarding any of the new Maliri. They just appear in my mind after the link is created.\*

John strode along the corridors to her quarters, and said, \*Alyssa, can you have a chat with Rachel about it? She usually seems to figure these kinds of things out pretty quickly.\*

\*I already am, handsome,\* she replied, following up on his thoughts before he'd even had a chance to vocalise them - telepathically speaking, of course.

He walked the rest of the way to Edraele's quarters in silence, trying to puzzle out some of the strange quirks in something that he'd previously assumed they fully understood. He was so lost in thought, it came as somewhat of a surprise when he arrived by the guarded entrance, particularly when the sound of raised voices coming from inside reached his sensitive ears.

Glancing at the armed guards, he raised a quizzical eyebrow, and nodded towards the door. The two women smiled at him and rolled their eyes, before one of them stepped forward and whispered, "They've been bickering for at least an hour!"

That came as quite a surprise, as the last group of Fleet Officers had been quiet and full of nervous excitement while they waited to meet him. He smiled at the woman, and said, "I've stood guard duty before, I know what a chore it can be. Hang in there, soldier, I'll try and at least make it easier on your ears."

"We'd really appreciate that, thank you!" the second guard said, gazing at him with sincere gratitude in her eyes.

\*Edraele, can you arrange a meeting with your guards, please,\* he requested, as he winked at the lean, aquamarine-eyed guardswoman, and she blushed for him prettily.

\*Of course, John, that won't be a problem,\* she replied, sounding pleased. Her tone shifted then and she added, \*I had some... pressing matters of state to attend to, so I'm afraid I won't be there to greet you in my quarters. Make yourself at home, though, and I'll catch up with you later.\*

Something was slightly off in her voice, and he couldn't quite place what it was. As he was mulling it over, she remained suspiciously quiet, so he decided to speak to her about it that evening, when they planned to meet for dinner. The second guardswoman moved to open the door for him, and he reached out to hold her hand in place when the was door partially open, hearing her gasp at the light contact. He raised a finger to his lips in a shushing gesture, then stepped closer to overhear the heated conversation within the lounge.

"For the thousandth time, I've got nothing to do with it! I'm just as worried as the rest of you!" A woman's voice rang out, sounding deeply frustrated. Her voice dropped a few octaves, and she snapped, "With all the finger-pointing, Elinris, it sounds like you're trying to deflect attention from yourself!"

"Of course that's what you'd say, Laenya, if you were trying to hide your -own- complicity!" another young voice snarled.

"Be silent, you fools! We were summoned by Edraele Valaden! I don't believe for one second that any of you have enough influence to even speak with her, let alone involve her in one of your schemes," a different voice grated, sounding full of contempt for her companions. John could hear her anxiety as she added, "I'm more worried that one of you has inadvertently offended her, and now we're all to pay for your idiocy."

"Don't you dare take that superior tone with me, Dalesse," a fourth voice sneered. John could hear the malice dripping from her voice, as she added vindictively, "We all heard how you were ejected from your high-and-mighty position in the palace. Apparently, you were too incompetent to hold down a job as a glorified filing clerk!"

There were titters of laughter from the others, and John heard the sound of furniture being toppled over.

"How dare you, you fucking slut!" Dalesse shrieked indignantly. Her voice seethed with anger as she spat, "Yes, Ifene, I've heard how you're trying to get a transfer to the border stations! As if any of the men there would be interested in a spiteful little bitch like you, no matter how wantonly you spread your legs for them!"

That insult was met by a furious hiss from Ifene, and her string of profanities made John blink in surprise, as he listened to her creative suggestions as to what objects should be inserted into particular orifices. He realised he was still touching the guard's hand on the door, and she caressed him briefly when he released her fingers.

"I better get in there before things turn ugly!" he murmured to the guards, who giggled as he smiled at them.

Opening the door wider, he strolled inside the room, and was immediately glad he hadn't waited any longer. The sofas had been toppled over, and the young women's faces were contorted in anger as they swore at each other. One of the women had pulled off her belt to uncoil a concealed neural whip, and it crackled ominously as she lashed it in fury. Meanwhile, her adversary had picked up a vase from a table, and seemed fully intent on hurling it at the whip-wielding Maliri.

"Ladies, please!" John shouted loudly, his authoritative baritone voice battering through the shrieking sopranos that echoed around the room.

They all flinched and whirled around to face him, astounded to hear the sound of a male voice deep in Maliri Space. After one look at him, their mouths opened in shocked amazement, and Dalesse dropped the hefty vase to shatter on the floor, while the neural whip fell from Ifene's limp fingers.

John sighed, and thought to Edraele, \*I know I was after a bit of a change, but this wasn't quite what I had in mind...\*

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Sakura walked across the maintenance gantry, returning the friendly smiles from two white-haired engineers from Houses Loraleth and Ghilwen, who had stepped aside to let her pass. She'd spent plenty of time chatting to the scores of House Aeberos Engineers that she was coordinating, and the subject of the Maliri Houses working on the refit had cropped up early on. They had started by pointing out which insignias represented each of the major noble Houses, and had then gone into detail about Maliri politics.

They had described an intricate web of precarious treaties and vicious feuds amongst the Maliri Houses, which reminded Sakura of the deadly games played by the Shoguns in feudal Japan on Terra. While Aeberos and Naestina were as close to allies as was practical in the Regency, Houses Valaden and Loraleth were viewed with fear, while Ghilwen was overlooked as a once-great player that was now on the decline. Sakura's engineers kept to themselves, and barely spoke to women from rival Houses, although they viewed them with constantly watchful suspicion. At least while John wasn't making an appearance, at which point productivity nosedived, until he disappeared from sight again.

The first group of white-haired Aeberos engineers that had actually been with John and Jade in the Recruitment Room, appeared to have a dramatically different outlook to their compatriots regarding Maliri inter-House politics. They greeted any white-haired Maliri like the very best of friends regardless of House affiliation, while being pleasant and courteous to any of the dark-haired girls from other Houses. By contrast, those Maliri viewed Edraele's wards with an air of reverence, and it was astonishing to see the calming effect the recent recruits had on any tensions between Houses.

Sakura had found the interplay between all the Maliri to be quite intriguing, and it had given her something interesting to observe over the last several days. After the intense training on the way to the Unclaimed Wastes and then the thrilling rescue from Underworld, playing babysitter to Maliri engineers wasn't her idea of fun. She put such thoughts aside when she finally approached Rachel, and she crept up behind her as silent as the grave, then suddenly goosed her friend, making the brunette squeal in surprise.

Rachel laughed, and held her hand over her chest as she gasped, "Stop doing that! It's mean, taking advantage of me when I get distracted!"

"Sorry, I couldn't help myself," Sakura replied, opening her arms to give her a conciliatory hug.

"Alright, you're forgiven, but only if you join Dana and me again tonight," Rachel said, smiling flirtatiously at the exquisite Asian girl.

Sakura nodded eagerly, then hesitated before she replied, "Are you sure I'm not getting in the way? Don't you two want some time alone together?"

The brunette laughed, and said, "No, we both love your company, and Dana says she's got a real taste for eating 'Chinese food'."

The raven-haired girl frowned and started to object, "But I'm-"

"Japanese, yes, I know. I can only apologise for my philistine of a lover. I have tried reminding her, but in her defence, she's very distracted by the refit at the moment," Rachel said, with an apologetic smile.

Sakura laughed good-naturedly, and shrugged as she said, "At least I don't have to deal with jokes about eating Sushi instead!"

Rachel chuckled, and said, "Yes, that's very true." She looked at her friend curiously, and added, "So apart from scaring me out of my wits, what brings you to see me? Is your part of the refit proceeding according to plan?"

Sakura nodded towards the stern of the Invictus, then pointed at the two massive new engines they'd added to the assault cruiser's old complement of four. She grinned as she informed Rachel, "We've finished the final checks, and the new pair of Trankaran engines have passed with flying colours. You can cross them off the list now; and we're just installing the last of the additional retro-thrusters."

"You're making good time," the brunette said, looking pleasantly surprised. "You're actually a little ahead of schedule!"

"Getting the first group of blonde engineers from John made a big difference," Sakura said, looking thoughtful. "Those girls have been a real calming influence, and keep the rest of the work crews focused. Inter-House disputes are practically unheard of now, and John's only influenced about a third of the workforce!"

Rachel gazed off into the distance, distracted by some train of thought as she replied, "Yes, it's fascinating to see the impact he has on the Maliri. The genetic modification to their DNA is absolutely remarkable!"

Sakura gave a wistful sigh, then nodded as she replied, "They can't get enough of him."

Stroking her shoulder sympathetically, Rachel said, "It sound like they aren't the only ones. I knew there was some other reason you came to see me. What's wrong?"

The Asian girl met the brunette's probing gaze, and after hesitating for a moment, she replied, "We spent practically every minute together for two weeks while he was training me, and I guess it just feels a bit unsettling now that he's so distracted with the Maliri. I'm just missing him, I suppose."

Rachel pulled the other girl in for a hug, and said, "I know exactly what you mean. I spent my two weeks with him on Oceanus on holiday, so it was a real shock to the system, when we returned to what passes for normality on the Invictus."

"How did you deal with it?" Sakura asked, resting her chin on her friend's shoulder, and enjoying the physical contact.

"By making the most of the time we do have together, and getting distracted by my work. There's always something new to research, which helps keep my mind occupied," Rachel replied, stroking Sakura's back supportively.

"While Dana keeps your body occupied?" Sakura asked, her tone teasing.

Rachel laughed and replied, "Oh yes, definitely! But, there's no shortage of stunning girls to distract yourself with on the Invictus."

She pulled back so that she was staring into Sakura's almond-shaped brown eyes, then leaned in for a tender kiss. Her fingers reached down to squeeze her taut bottom, making the Asian girl let out a lusty moan into her mouth.

When their lips parted, Sakura murmured, "I'll look forward to seeing you two tonight..."

"We'll keep you very distracted," Rachel promised, before leaning in to rub noses with the other girl. She smiled as she added, "We'll get John back to ourselves soon. The refit will be over before you know it, and then we'll be off on our travels once again."

\*Don't worry girls, I'll make sure he gives you plenty of attention while we're here,\* Alyssa said to them both, her telepathic voice caressing both their minds lovingly.

She outlined her plan, and the two girls grinned at each other with delight.

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After one last glance at the four sleeping Maliri, John quietly closed the door as he left the room, although such caution was unnecessary, as they would all be unresponsive for the next several hours. The fractious girls had calmed down dramatically as soon as he'd introduced himself, and after witnessing their fiery tempers and caustic personalities, he wasn't that sure he wanted to get to know them any better.

Still, he'd persevered enough to find out their names, and a little bit about their background, but asking too many questions had broken the spell from the genetic modification - at least enough for them to start fighting again. Not enjoying the normal "getting to know you" banter one bit, he'd decided to stop asking questions, and just get the encounter over with. Despite their malevolent personalities, they were all physically very attractive, and he'd thoroughly enjoyed their attention until he filled their tummies.

However, to say that he had some pointed questions for Edraele, was a dramatic understatement!

\*I'm in my study, John,\* she said to him, her tone contrite.

He walked through the now-deserted lounge, and wasn't surprised to see that Edraele's fastidious staff had already made the room presentable once more. Not bothering to knock, he strolled through the door on the far side of the room, and saw Edraele rising from the chair behind her desk.

Taking a seat on one of the chaise-lounge chairs, he shook his head, and said with some amusement, "I know I told you I didn't mind surprises, but I was hoping the next one would be a bit more pleasant! Did you round up the most obnoxious girls you could find, to teach me a lesson? If so, it worked! After dealing with those little devils, I can't wait to see the next group of friendly and placid engineers!"

"I'm so sorry, John," Edraele replied, as she glided over to sit beside him. She let out a forlorn sigh as she continued, "You've only really had any interactions with support or military personnel, aside from Irillith and myself. Maliri noblewomen are 'temperamental', to put it mildly."

John couldn't help but recall how abrasive Irillith had been before she'd properly joined his crew, and he nodded solemnly, as he said, "It's tragic how much Maliri society warps them."

"It's all the backstabbing and infighting for position and prestige. The engineers are commoners and have no chance of ever raising their status, so they're largely unaffected by Maliri politics," Edraele said, nodding her agreement. A flash of guilt crossed her face as she added, "As long as they avoided the ire of their tyrannical Matriarch, that is."

"Why did you ask me to meet with those four in particular, anyway?" John asked, reaching out to stroke her azure cheek. He smiled as he added, "I'm not upset with you, I understand you probably had a good reason, I just can't figure out what it could be. From talking with them, it didn't sound like those girls held major positions of influence."

She smiled at him, then tentatively requested, "Would you consider it a personal favour? If that's not too presumptuous?"

He shrugged, and replied, "Sure, I don't mind. You've done so much for me, I'd have to be a right dick to turn you down. Would you like me to try and heal some of the emotional trauma that has turned them into-" His voice trailed off at the end, unwilling to finish the sentence.

"Horrible little bitches?" she filled in for him. Edraele gave him a grateful smile as she continued, "Yes, please, that would be wonderful! Will you need additional sessions with them? I know that it took you considerable effort to restore Irillith to the lovely girl she is today."

"No, that shouldn't be necessary," John replied, confident in his abilities. He smiled at her as he continued, "I've had considerable practice at healing damaged young women, now. I should be able to do enough in one session to make a dramatic difference to their personalities."

Edraele gave him a beatific smile, and said, "I really do appreciate this, John, thank you so much. It's important to me that we help those girls."

He nodded agreeably, then focused his will, and started undoing the worst of the mental trauma the Maliri noblewomen had suffered. He'd already checked them for physical injuries, and had begun regenerating the neural whip scars that marked all of their backs. The results of his psychic ministrations would be readily apparent in a little over four hours' time, going by past experiences.

Studying the Maliri Matriarch's exquisitely beautiful features, he could see the tension in her eyes, even if he couldn't feel her worried state over their empathic bond. Knowing the reason behind her distress, he turned to face her, and asked, "Have you heard anything more about Tashana? It's been several days now, but she couldn't have just vanished!"

Letting her carefully-maintained mask slip, Edraele sagged, her expression tortured as she shook her head, and replied, "Nothing, John. She appears to have slipped the net entirely! I just wish I'd done things differently, and maybe I could have persuaded her that you aren't the terrible threat she thinks you are!"

Pulling her into his arms, he hugged her tight, and his voice was consoling as he said, "Tashana was only here a day before she fled. Other than restraining her and forcing her to listen to reason, there wasn't anything you could've done." He sighed, as he added, "After everything she's been through, I couldn't do that to her, even if it might have helped. There's no way I'd ever force the Change on her against her will, and pushing too heavily to make her see sense might have permanently burned any possible bridges in the future."

Edraele let out a ragged sigh, and murmured, "It just seems so cruelly unfair. Tashana can finally have everything she ever wanted, but she's too terrified to see it."

"I haven't given up on her yet," John said, easing back on his grip, and letting Edraele sit back and gaze at him. "I promised Irillith I'd help her find her sister, and I'm promising you the same thing with your daughter. I won't leave Maliri Space until we've resolved this, and helped Tashana. I promise."

Her smile was loving as she said, "The sentiments behind the gesture are lovely, but I can't hold you to that. There could be an emergency in the Terran Federation, and it might be something you can't ignore."

"You're family, Edraele, and your needs come first," he said emphatically. A sardonic smile played across his lips as he added, "Besides, we've saved the Terran Federation a few times already. They're building up quite a tab!"

Although Edraele would never dream of making him choose to uphold that promise if a situation like that ever arose, seeing such loyalty and dedication from him made her heart race in her chest. She shared her feelings of overwhelming love and gratitude to him over their bond, and hugged him fiercely as she was swept up in that rising tide of surging emotions.

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John leaned back against the headboard, carefully guiding Sakura with him, so that she could rest against his chest. Their fingers were intertwined atop her hugely-rounded tummy, and she sighed with contentment as she felt the warm, heavy weight in her womb.

"Does that feel better?" he asked, kindly.

She turned and tilted her head so she could look him in the eye, and replied, "This morning was just what I needed, thank you."

"Yeah, I really missed being with you, too," he agreed, before glancing around at the rest of his girls who were all smiling at him affectionately. "I'm sorry you were all feeling neglected. Alyssa's solution is inspired!"

The blonde tipped an imaginary hat to him, before she grinned and said, "I'm not being completely selfless, I call dibs on the next vigorous ploughing!"

"Ah, crap!" Dana swore. "Are we doing a roster?!"

"I'm next!" Calara blurted out.

"Wait!" Dana protested

"Then me!" Rachel insisted, giggling at the indignant look on her lover's face.

Faye had to bite her lip to stop herself from requesting her own place in the roster, and instead, she smiled at the light-hearted banter from her friends.

Irillith laughed at the redhead's expression, and said, "It's alright, you can go before me, if you like."

Jade nodded, and with a happy smile on her face, she said indulgently, "I've had him to myself for days now, I don't mind waiting either."

Rachel's eyes were a stormy grey as she leaned in and kissed the flustered Chief Engineer on the cheek, before darting a flirtatious glance at John, and said, "It's alright, he can take us together."

Sakura felt John's stiffening interest against her back, and she laughed as she said, "I think he likes that idea!"

"You'll get no argument from me!" John agreed, smiling at the pair of nubile teenagers. He patted Sakura's swollen belly, and added, "Jade, do you want to load up while we just go through the progress on the refit?"

The Nymph's emerald eyes glinted at the prospect, and she crawled across the bed to give Sakura a kiss, before moving between her golden-brown thighs. The sound of eager lapping and sucking filled the room while Jade went to work, accompanied by breathy sighs from Sakura as she writhed on her prehensile tongue.

Turning to the purple AI first, John gave her a warm smile, and said, "How about you start, Faye?"

"Sure!" she agreed, pleased that he'd chosen her to begin. Her cupid-bow lips turned up into a happy grin as she replied, "We're making amazing progress! My boys have also fully upgraded the first Power Core Chamber, so it's prepared for Dana whenever she's ready! The Maliri have also been working really hard to replace all the severed power cables, and now that more of the superstructure is in place, we should be able to start leading cables across to the fore section of the Invictus by tomorrow afternoon!"

He nodded as he replied, "Sounds like you're doing a fantastic job. Have you had any problems with anyone regarding your... unique nature?"

"You mean have any of them freaked out at taking orders from an unchained AI?" she replied, her luminous eyes meeting his. Shaking her head before he could respond, she added thoughtfully, "No, but the Maliri crawling along the maintenance tubes did look a bit unsettled when I started gloating about how wonderful it was to see organics on their knees."

He blinked at her in shock before he realised she was joking, and the purple girl giggled at his startled reaction. Laughing then, he said, "Your jokes are getting better, Faye."

She winked at him playfully, and beamed a sparkling smile at his praise.

Turning to Dana next, he asked, "How about the new Power Cores? Everything going alright there?"

"The first one's built, and I'll install it later today," Dana said, bouncing up and down with nervous excitement. "I can't wait to see how much power that fucker can pump out!"

Calara turned to look at the redhead, and said, "Actually, I was thinking about how we manage power allocation yesterday. It might be sensible to disperse the power load, so we won't be left crippled in the event of losing a core. For instance, we could split the energy weapons and ordnance-based batteries, to make sure we don't lose everything in one go."

"Way ahead of you, gorgeous," Alyssa said, with a grin. "I heard you thinking about it, so I spoke to Dana about it yesterday, and she's had some ideas."

"Wait a second," John interjected. He frowned as he added, "Won't we be blasted to smithereens if we get a core breach, anyway?"

Dana shook her head, then replied, "I've built in multiple redundancies to mitigate a core breach, but it shouldn't be anything we need to worry about. If we do take a bad hit, we've now got a quad-shaped Crystal Alyssium shell around the Power Core Chamber, and Alyssa re-shaped the Core-casing a bunch of times to make it super strong."

"I shaped that bastard eight times," Alyssa said, frowning as she remembered the terrible strain. "It's as tough as I can make it."

"I appreciate it, beautiful," John said gratefully, putting his arm around her, and pulling her in for a brief kiss.

"What ideas did you have regarding the power load?" Calara persisted, her olive-toned face looking anxious. "We don't want to risk losing all our energy weapons against a shielded opponent!"

Dana grinned at her enthusiastically, and replied, "It's alright, I was thinking along similar lines. I'm planning on linking the front core to the Pulse Cannons, the Nova Lances, and all our new guns amidships. The middle one will power the Beam Lasers, Singularity Drivers, and the shields - I figured if we're so fucked that we lose a core, it doesn't matter where the shields get their power. The last one has all the rest, so that's the engines, Tachyon Drive, sensors, life support, basically all the stuff our existing Power Core keeps running, but without all the guns. I figured that would give us plenty of future-proofing capacity, for when we get more Progenitor schematics!"

John frowned in confusion before he asked, "Can't we just link more than one core to each system?"

The redhead winced, and said gently, "Nah, you don't want to do that. If we did lose a reactor, the power surge could trigger a reactor cascade in the other Power Cores. This way, we can keep things nice and safe and separate."

He shrugged, and said defensively, "Hey, it was just a suggestion."

Alyssa nudged him with an elbow, and smiled as she teased him, "Probably best stick to fighting, fucking, and coming up with inspired military manoeuvres. It sounds like engineering isn't your strong suit."

John laughed as he warned her, "You're playing a dangerous game there, honey. I've got legions of Maliri at my command now... They could tickle you for days without a break!"

"Alright, I'll be good," she replied, before giving him an angelic smile and leaning in for a kiss.

When they parted, he looked at the Latina on his left, and asked, "Anything interesting to report, Calara?"

"All the rewiring with Maliri crystal-fibre in the bow of the ship's been progressing well," she replied thoughtfully. "We'll be ready to move on to the mid-section as soon as the floor decking is in place."

Rachel spoke up, drawing all eyes to her as she said, "The plan is to start on the lower decks first, then work upwards. We're going to make use of the turret wells amidships to drop in the Singularity Generator, the Tachyon Drive, and all the belt feeds and anti-grav generators for the new munitions rooms."

"What about the forward grav-tube?" John asked, looking at her speculatively. "Wouldn't it be sensible to put that in early, too?"

"We'll be working on that today, handsome," Alyssa said, before kissing his cheek. "I hope you're ready for lots of psychic shaping."

He frowned as he asked, "Why are we building that out of Crystal Alyssium?"

"We need a second Inertia Negation Device to extend the field, now that we've chopped up and lengthened the Invictus," Dana explained patiently.

Rachel smiled at him, and said, "Once that's in place, I've got another big task for our two resident psychic-shapers."

Alyssa rolled her eyes at him, and said, "I can't believe you wanted that reinforced as well. Haven't we got enough reshaping on our plates already?"

John was firm as he replied, "The Invictus was never designed for the kind of knock-down brawls we've been getting involved with. We've been one lucky shot from disaster in more battles than I can count! I'm not going to put any of you at undue risk, if I can help it."

Calara smiled at her blonde lover as she said, "I agree with John, but there's other big benefits too. The new features to that room will make a tremendous difference in a fight, especially if I need to coordinate another fleet engagement, like we did in the Regulus system."

"Ah, I don't mind, really," Alyssa admitted. She winked at John, and added, "I just like seeing you get all protective."

He smiled at her, then looked down at Sakura and Jade, and seeing that they were nearly done, he asked, "How about you two, anything new to report?"

"Engines are done," Sakura managed between gasps. She struggled to add, "Retro-thrusters by tomorrow!" before tailing off in an orgasmic squeal, as she grabbed at the sheets with a white-knuckled grip.

Jade sat up with a satisfied smile on her face when she'd finished licking the raven-haired beauty to climax, and hefted her titanic, cum-inflated breasts. She shivered with delight as she stroked the engorged spheres, then looked at him with heavy-lidded eyes, and purred, "I've fed over four-hundred Maliri so far, Master." Her mouth turned up into a languid smile as she continued, "And I've loved every second of it..."

He chuckled at that, then looked at Irillith, and asked, "How're the network upgrades coming along?"

The Maliri girl had a far-away look in her eyes, and after a gentle telepathic nudge from Alyssa, she replied, "Oh! Sorry, John. We're proceeding according to plan, and nothing untoward to report."

"I think you need a distraction from Tashana," he said sympathetically, beckoning her over to him. Sakura moved aside to make room for her, and once he had his arms around Irillith, he continued, "How about keeping me company in the Recruiting Room? It's interesting getting to know all the engineers, and you can help switch them out when Jade's finished feeding each pair."

"That would be nice, thank you," she murmured, turning her head to give him an appreciative kiss.

"We'll get her back, don't worry," John said, as he stroked her silky white hair.

Irillith nodded, but couldn't help worrying about what her twin sister was doing, her heart skipping a beat at the thought of her being in danger.

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"Alright, send her in, Renelle," Matriarch Tsarra Perfaren declared, using her most imperious voice, before closing the comm channel to her assistant and sitting up straight in her chair. She glanced nervously to her left, looking up at her Fleet Commander, and added, "We might get some answers at long last, Aadya!"

The older woman nodded grimly, and said, "I'd advise great caution, Matriarch. Bearing in mind her lineage, she shouldn't be trusted."

Before Tsarra could reply, the door to her grand study opened, and three figures entered the room. Two of them were House Perfaren guards in full armour, and they were flanking a woman wearing a black outfit with red leather boots and jacket. As if the woman's outfit wasn't garish enough, she also wore a bizarre golden mask which sported a sardonic, mocking smile embossed on its shiny surface.

"So you're Tashana Valaden?" Tsarra asked, studying the peculiar figure with great curiosity. She did her best to appear haughty as she continued, "Your choice of ensemble is certainly... unique."

Tashana performed a deep respectful bow, and said, "Thank you so much for agreeing to see me, Matriarch. I promise you, after you listen to what I have to tell you, that decision will be one you never regret for the rest of your life!"

"That certainly does sound dramatic," Tsarra noted, her voice calm as she glanced at her Fleet Commander, who nodded as she studied the Valaden noblewoman. Focusing on the unusual figure in front of her again, Tsarra's dark-green eyes narrowed as she added politely, "Before we talk about anything else, perhaps you could take a look at something for me?"

She stabbed a finger down on the console built into her desk, and a holo-projection appeared before them. It showed House Perfaren's territory, with fleets from House Valaden, Loraleth, Aeberos, and Naestina still sitting in the exact same place as they had been for nearly three weeks.

"Maybe you can shed some light on this fascinating situation, Tashana Valaden?" Tsarra snapped, her anger bubbling over after so long spent waiting for a decisive attack to come, which never actually did. Her face was contorted in anger as she snarled, "Your mother is poised to strike my territory with what appears to be an overwhelming alliance of enemies. Why shouldn't I just have my guards shoot you on the spot? Or better yet, dragged out of here and tortured, until you tell us everything you know?!"

"It's a bluff," Tashana said dismissively. "My mother would never risk damaging your fleets."

Hands balled into fists, Tsarra managed to suppress her fury long enough to ask through gritted teeth, "And why, pray tell, is that?!"

"Because she wants to take every ship you have, and give them as a gift to her Progenitor Master," Tashana explained, appearing unruffled by the young Matriarch's outburst.

"W-what?!" Tsarra stammered, gaping in shock at the masked woman, after hearing her bizarre response.

Aadya's eyes widened slightly at this pronouncement, but her features remained impassive as she studied the strange Valaden noblewoman.

"My mother's been enslaved by a Progenitor, as have my sister, and I suspect at least four other Matriarchs," Tashana replied, her voice full of conviction. In the deathly silence that now pervaded the room, her gravelly voice took on a darker edge as she added, "Edraele assassinated the old Matriarchs from Houses Loraleth, Aeberos, Naestina, and Ghilwen, and has replaced them with the youngest daughters of each ruling family. They are her pawns, and have almost certainly been enslaved as well by now."

After a moment of stunned inactivity, Tsarra abruptly rose from her chair, and yelled, "Progenitor?! Matriarchs enslaved?! What in the hell are you babbling about?!"

Tashana sounded eerily calm, as she replied, "The old legends about Mael'nerak were true. He was a Progenitor, just like the one now controlling my mother."

At the mention of the ancient children's nursery rhyme, the Perfaren Matriarch burst into disbelieving laughter, and snorted with relief, "You're completely insane!" Turning to the guards, she added, "Get her out of my sight. Throw her in prison while I decide if I'm going to have her executed, or use her to broker a bargain with her mother."

"No, wait!" Tashana protested, as the two guards grabbed her arms.

Tsarra sat back in her chair, and shook her head as she said to her Fleet Commander, "What's Edraele playing at, here? Is this some kind of elaborate insult that implies I'm so young and inexperienced, I'll believe in a child's fairy tale?"

Before Aadya could reply, Tashana begged, "I'm telling you the truth! You have to believe me!"

Tsarra glanced at her in irritation, and said, "Edraele might think I'm fresh out of the nursery, but I can assure you, I'm no fool. Why should I listen to a word out of your lying, Valaden mouth?"

Tashana shoved one of the guards backwards, and managed to tear her hand free from the woman's grasp, which she swiftly raised to her cowled head. "Because I hate her more than you do!" she snarled, tearing the mask free. "Because my cunt of a sister and vicious bitch of a mother took every -fucking- thing away from me! But I'll be damned before I let them destroy our whole civilisation!"

The House Perfaren Matriarch gaped in horror at the terrible ruin that was all that remained of Tashana's face. "Gods, I think I'm going to be sick..." she mumbled, turning her head away in revulsion.

Aadya had been perturbed by the sight of Tashana's ravaged features, but she watched her dispassionately as she tried to make an evaluation of the woman.

Both guards grappled with Tashana again, while she screamed, "Get the fuck off me!"

As Tsarra made an effort to compose herself, Aadya leaned in and said quietly, "As preposterous as it sounds, I believe she's telling the truth, Matriarch. Or at least, what she's convinced is the truth. You can't fake that level of conviction, or the extent of those injuries, for that matter."

Tsarra took a deep breath, and said to the guards, "Let her go." She purposefully avoided looking directly at Tashana's ravaged features, and added, "Please... put your mask on again."

After a moment's pause to straighten herself, Tashana pulled the cowl over her head once more, settling the mocking golden mask into place. Those wild purple eyes calmed again, and she said, "I have more evidence to back up my claims. I don't expect you to believe this on my word alone."

She produced the data-stick from her pocket, then with hands held up in an unthreatening manner, she approached the House Perfaren Matriarch and handed it over.

Tsarra studied it for a moment, then asked, "What's on here?"

"Proof, that what I'm telling you is the truth," Tashana said decisively. "Just insert the data-stick, and I'll show you."

After throwing her advisor a quick glance, which was met by a nod, Tsarra turned to the console in her desk and inserted the data-stick. She hit a glowing green button next to the device, and a holographic display sprung to life before them, showing them the files stored within.

"May I?" Tashana requested, gesturing towards the holo-display.

"Go ahead," the Matriarch replied, her curiosity piqued.

Tashana faced the display, and her nimble hands flickered through the files until she found what she was looking for. With a tap on the floating image, the picture expanded to show Irillith, as she was before she'd debased herself for the Progenitor. Her hair was short and dark, and she wore a long dress, looking cold and aloof.

"My sister..." Tashana muttered, glancing once at the picture and narrowing her eyes.

"I know all about Irillith," the youthful Matriarch replied, her tone grim. "I'm fully versed on your family, have no fear about tha-"

Her voice trailed off as Tashana flicked over to the second image. It showed Irillith with long, flowing white hair, and a broad sparkling smile on her face as she hugged one of the Terran girls. Tashana grimaced at the sight of her slutty sibling: her sister was laughing at some insipid joke, probably at her own expense, no doubt.

"She's so beautiful..." Tsarra murmured, her dark-green eyes widening, as she stared at the feathery mane that cascaded around Irillith's shoulders.

"That's quite enough," Tashana snapped, slashing down with her hand and dismissing the image.

Tsarra frowned, and protested, "Wait, I hadn't finished looking!"

The Fleet Commander at her side nodded, and said enthusiastically, "I'd always thought that wearing long hair would be scandalous, but she looked incredible!"

Tashana studied them for a moment, and her voice was chilling as she explained, "The Maliri are conditioned to respond that way to Thralls. The effect is far more dramatic with a Progenitor, so I didn't dare show you him."

"Conditioned?" Tsarra said dubiously. She shook her head, and protested, "That's absurd. I was just curious, that's all!"

With a pained sigh, Tashana replied, "You were so fixated, you didn't even notice Irillith was unarmoured around a Terran girl. John Blake and his crew all know of our secret. My mother and sister have made no attempt to conceal their appearance from him, but why would they? He's fucking them both."

Tsarra gaped at her, and muttered, "You can't possibly be serious..."

"Progenitors use Maliri women for breeding and as disposable soldiers, and Edraele and Irillith are far too valuable to be wasted on the battlefield..." Tashana clarified, her implication quite clear. "If I hadn't reached you in time, you'd eventually share the same fate."

"Why aren't you affected by this conditioning? You've seen this 'Progenitor', and his 'Thralls'," Aadya asked pointedly.

Tashana looked thoughtful for a moment, then replied, "I spent over twenty years studying the story of Mael'nerak. After everything I uncovered at dozens of dig sites, I recognised him on sight. Perhaps that foreknowledge protected me from the effects."

She turned, and clicked on another directory, bringing up a sprawl of images from her research archive. The other Maliri in the room watched her in fascination, wondering what she was about to reveal next. After selecting the one she had in mind, she turned to face Tsarra again as the picture was projected before her.

It showed dark-haired Maliri bowing on the floor, as a man stood before them, flanked by a white-haired, blue-skinned woman. There was a series of connected images that illustrated a sequence of events, with a number of the women then selected by the Mael'nerak. Although he had pointed ears like a Maliri, he had the colouration of a Terran, and even the sight of that picture was fiercely compelling to the Maliri audience. Tsarra inhaled sharply, her cheeks flushing a darker blue and her breathing quickening as she responded to the arousing sight.

"See how you react to a simple picture of a Progenitor?" Tashana said, her voice filled with worry. "You'd be rendered helpless if he was here in person."

Tsarra flushed with shame, just as the two guards and Aadya did too, all having reacted in the same way. Tashana quickly changed the image, showing the groups of now-white-haired Maliri heavy with child, the women smiling happily.

"Where did you get these?" Tsarra asked in a hushed voice.

"A Thrall facility on Epsilon Aquarii IV. I took these pictures from one of the rooms Mael'nerak used to breed his slaves," the Maliri archaeologist replied. "The ancient Maliri he used would have been docile and compliant as soon as they laid eyes on him."

She clicked through a few more images, until she found one that showed a group of fully armed and armoured white-haired Maliri, boarding a black-hulled spacecraft. The next few images showed them smiling as they mercilessly slaughtered a wide variety of races, while the Mael'nerak looked on.

"That was taken from the ruins of a military barracks on Valaden itself." Tashana explained, before shutting down the projection when she saw the effect it was having on her onlookers. Her voice was tinged with regret as she added, "I actually found an incredibly sophisticated recording device that contained testimony from Mael'nerak's original Matriarch. She warned of the threat the Progenitors posed, and was the one who ordered our people to hide our faces behind armour."

"Why?" Tsarra asked, thoroughly shaken by everything she'd just been shown.

"Because we've been engineered to be a perfect slave race!" Tashana snarled, her tone bitter and resentful. "By keeping ourselves hidden, she hoped to avoid attention from another Progenitor. It worked for nearly ten-thousand years, but the secret's out now, and John Blake's taking control!"

"Have you still got this recording device?" Aadya asked quietly.

Shaking her head, Tashana replied, "My sister has it. I was trying to warn her about the threat the Progenitors posed, but she framed me, and I was banished to the Unclaimed Wastes."

Tsarra slumped in her chair, sharing a deeply worried look with her Fleet Commander. She turned her green eyes back on Tashana, and said, "Alright, I believe you."

Tashana's shoulders sagged with relief, and she said, "Thank you, Matriarch. You may have just saved us from a terrible fate.

Aadya was tense with worry as she said, "If everything you say is true, and this Progenitor has subverted House Valaden and four Matriarchs from other Houses, what can we possibly do to stop him? House Valaden alone is big enough to defeat us, now that they don't have to keep forces in reserve to protect their borders with those Houses. If Edraele's allies join in the assault as well, we don't stand a chance!"

"That's right," Tashana nodded, her eyes burning with a fierce inner fire. "If you try to face them alone, you're doomed."

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