Three Square Meals Ch. 61

"So, this is what I really look like?" Jade marvelled, turning one way and then the other as she looked at herself in the four mirrors.

John watched her from one side of the walk-in wardrobe, and smiled as he replied, "Still just as beautiful as ever, little catgirl."

She turned to grin at him, her cute nose wrinkling as she did so, and revealing her pointed canines in her sparkling smile. Jade saw his gaze fall on her pointed teeth, and she giggled when she looked in the mirror and bared her fangs. "These won't be practical at all," she said, throwing him a naughty, mischievous smile.

The Nymph still looked like herself, or at least her facial features were still definitely all Jade, but the pointed cat ears, the tail, and the close coat of green fur were all definitely new. She turned to look at him studying her, and she did a little pirouette for him to show off her new physique, lashing her tail playfully before disappearing in a shimmering green haze. When the blur dissipated, she was back to her familiar Nymph-shape again, and she glided over to him and into his arms.

After he'd revived her, and the initial shock had worn off, Jade had been overjoyed to see him safe and well, positively brimming with energy in her enthusiasm. Now that she had shifted back to her normal Nymph form, it turned out to be quite literally true in her case, as the light viridian lines that emphasised her curves were glowing with an ethereal radiance.

"Aren't you going to stay in your natural form?" he asked her in surprise.

She shook her head slightly, looking up at him with her emerald cat-like eyes, and replied in a soft whisper, "You fell in love with me looking like this. This is the 'real' me now." She paused, looking away from him with a thoughtful look on her face, and she smiled to herself as she admitted, "This form actually feels more comfortable and satisfying than copying Alyssa now. I wouldn't change it for the world."

He wrapped the nude girl in his arms, and held her tight as she nuzzled her head against his chest, purring with contentment. "I love you, whatever shape you're in," he told her sincerely.

"So you'd like to go to bed with me looking like a big hairy spider?" she asked him, a teasing gleam in her eyes.

He chuckled and replied, "Let's just say some forms are better suited for different activities than others."

She giggled, and nodded, running her tongue over her Terran-like teeth, and said, "Those pointy teeth would never do. Not for what I like doing with you most." She paused, and looking thoughtful, she mused, "My natural form is quite exotic though. Perhaps my Master would enjoy ravishing his fiancé as a petite catgirl for a change?"

John coughed and avoided her probing gaze but he couldn't deny he found the thought intriguing. With Jade watching for the slightest shift in his expression, she caught the spark of interest, and gave him a knowing look. Her emerald eyes gleamed with excitement, and he could feel her smooth skin warm up beneath his fingers.

He smiled at her as he caressed her sleek body, and said, "As fun as it is flirting with you like this, we'd better get started if you're going to start nursing Calara back to health."

"I can't wait," she sighed looking up at him with several emotions playing across her beautiful face. He could see a burning lust in her eyes, intertwined with a look of love and adoration.

They walked back into the bedroom hand-in-hand, and Jade was gentle as she helped him strip off the training gear he was still wearing from his fight with Yamamoto. Rachel had bandaged the wicked cuts across his arms that he'd received fighting against the deadly ninja, so Jade was especially careful not to brush her hands against those wounds. When he was as naked as she was, she gave him a smouldering look and tugged his hand impatiently, leading him over to the bed. They passed the big comfortable chair, which he'd sometimes use to relax in while watching the girls playing together, and he quickly took a seat, pulling her back to him.

"Here," he said, looking up into her eyes and placing his hands around her waist.

She nodded with excitement, and he lifted her effortlessly into the air, then brought her over his lap. Jade was agile and very limber, so she raised and spread her legs as he carried her over his thighs to straddle him. When he positioned her over his cock, she sank down his shaft in one long smooth motion. The Nymph linked her arms around his neck, then leaned forward, pressing her full breasts and svelte tummy against his torso.

"This is different," she noted, her full lips twitching into a smile.

"More intimate," he agreed, wrapping his arms around her, and holding her protectively against him.

Their faces were only inches away from each other, and as she gazed at him lovingly, he could see the cat-like irises in her emerald eyes grow big and round.

"You saved me," she murmured in a soft whisper, her mood shifting as she stared at him in wonder.

Ever since he'd brought her back to life, she'd been perky and upbeat; but now, in this moment of quiet, she suddenly seemed overawed by what had just happened. She leaned into him and started placing small, tender kisses on his lips, repositioning herself slightly so she could cradle his face in her hands.

"I love you, Jade," he replied. "I'm not going to let anyone take you from me like that."

She whimpered with arousal, her kisses growing more passionate and full of desire. He placed his hands on her firm buttocks as she started to gyrate in his lap, and she began to massage his cock with her incredibly tactile internal muscles. She alternated from rubbing his cock with what felt like the soft hands of a gaggle of eager girls, to what seemed like a dozen questing tongues licking every inch of his shaft. He groaned as she rode him, stroking his length inside her with a variety of different sensual rhythms.

"I'm yours forever," she whispered to him, giving him a smile of tremendous satisfaction as she watched him relish her talents.

He gasped as she picked up the pace, the tongues and soft hands vying with each other to see who could bring him to climax first. "I won't last much longer if you keep that up," he panted, staring at her beautiful face.

"I don't want you to," she purred, lowering her hands from his face and placing them on her slim stomach. Not interrupting that exciting rhythm for a moment, she tilted backwards to give herself plenty of room to expand, and he could clearly see the big bulge in her abdomen where his cock was fully impaled inside her. She sighed rapturously, and said, "Fill me, my love."

"Calara?" he asked her through gritted teeth.

"Will be sharing your cum soon," she reassured him, her hands massaging the head of his cock through her taut skin.

The wanton look of desire she gave him prevented him from holding out any longer, and he grabbed hold of her trim waist as he began shooting his load inside her. Jade cried out in ecstasy as she felt the heavy splashes of spunk filling up her womb, and her thighs began to tremble as she joined him in his climax. Her delicate fingers cupped her growing belly, her hands spreading further apart as her tummy rapidly expanded to carry everything his quad could give her.

Soon their stomachs were touching again, but hers was now bowed-out with several pints of cum filling her up. His quad gave up its last spurt, his balls now fully emptied inside her, and he sagged back into the chair with a disbelieving groan. They shared a happy grin, and he stroked the huge bump she was now carrying, her skin feeling soft and smooth where it had stretched to carry his load.

"Happy birthday," he said with a playful smile.

Jade giggled, and said, "My favourite present, ever!"

He helped her up, and she gave him a gentle kiss when he stood up beside her. "Thank you," she told him, her expression open and full of gratitude.

Giving her a warm smile, he replied, "You're very welcome, but I'm going to be very unhappy with you if you let yourself get killed again."

She sighed with contentment, and said, "I'll be more careful, I promise."

"Good girl," he said to her, pulling her into his arms for another hug. When they eventually parted, he said, "You better get down to Medical, I'll get dressed and join you in a moment."

"Whatever you say," she said with a dreamy smile, and she glided from the bedroom, humming a soft tune to herself.

He watched with a smile on his face as the nubile Nymph padded out of the room, then strolled into the bathroom to get cleaned up. \*Are you there, Edraele?\* he asked the House Valaden Matriarch.

\*I'm here,\* she replied, and he could hear the relief in her voice, although she sounded exhausted.

He turned on the shower, and said, \*I'm so sorry I haven't been able to thank you properly since the rescue. Things have been non-stop crazy since I broke out.\*

\*There's no need to apologise,\* she replied soothingly. \*I'm just so happy that you're all safe and well. I was so worried when you were knocked out.\*

John felt a sharp pang of regret that he wasn't on Valaden right now, and able to give the remarkable woman a heartfelt hug of thanks for saving his life. She was being so selfless and giving with him, and he wished there was some way he could repay her for all she'd done.

\*You already have,\* she told him quietly. \*You literally made me the person I am today, and I can't tell you how rewarding it's been, living this new life you created for me. I'm filled with a drive and sense of purpose I've never experienced before, and It's been lovely growing closer to Luna and the girls. Irillith and I are rebuilding our relationship too, and my world is starting to feel complete for the first time in what seems like forever.\*

\*It's great to hear you're happy,\* he replied, as he washed himself under the warm sprays of water. \*I just wish I could do something more tangible for you to show my appreciation.\*

She laughed, sounding tired but happy, now that her worries about his safety had fallen away. \*Just stay safe, and return to me. Making love for the first time will be reward enough,\* she told him, her voice full of longing.

\*I'll look forward to it,\* he said with a smile. He stopped washing himself under the splashing water for a moment, and his tone was earnest as he added, \*Thank you though, Edraele. You saved my life back there, and I'll never forget what you did for me.\*

She didn't reply, but he could feel the warm wellspring of positive emotions flooding from her as she basked in his praise. It was a lovely feeling, and his mind savoured the glorious sensation of her happiness washing over him. He finished his shower, and dried off quickly before going to get dressed, all the while enjoying the lovely connection he had with Edraele.

By the time he'd returned to the Medical Bay, Calara was now sporting an impressively curved abdomen, which he could see tenting the sheets. Jade was sitting in one of the comfortable visitor's chairs with Dana cradled in her arms, the redhead sucking greedily at the Nymph's slightly swollen breasts. Irillith licked her lips, a satisfied smile on her face, and her full lips spread into a gorgeous grin when she saw him arrive.

"Hello, John," she greeted him warmly, stepping over to him for a hug. Alyssa and Rachel had lazy smiles on their faces, and he guessed they'd received similar tender care from Jade.

He smiled back at the Maliri girl in his arms, and noted, "You look much happier."

She blushed, then smiled at him coyly as she replied, "You know why."

"Mmm, I can guess," he hummed, running his fingers over her slim stomach, and drawing a soft sigh from the exotic blue-skinned girl.

Rachel laughed, the sound both light and cheerful, and it brightened up the Medical Bay as it echoed around the room. "I'm glad I've been able to help you guys with research. You certainly don't need me for my medical expertise, Doctor Jade seems to be taking excellent care of everyone," she joked with a smile.

The Nymph's emerald eyes gleamed as she turned to look at John, and she said breathily, "He's grown so powerful, death isn't even a problem any more."

"I think you're a special case, Jade," John protested raising his hands in the air, urging caution. "Please don't start getting complacent, everyone!"

Rachel pouted, and said, "It's too late for that. Dana wouldn't even let me splint her broken ankle! She said, and I quote: 'Don't waste your time, babes. John will stuff me full of spunk and I'll be good as new'."

Dana had emptied Jade's breasts of their delicious, sweet-tasting contents, and she lifted up her shirt to run her hands over her slightly curved stomach. "It's true though," she said with a languid smile. "Now I'm carrying his cum, it's almost like I can feel him looking after me."

Alyssa put her arm around Rachel, and said to the frustrated brunette, "Don't listen to Dana, she's just cum-drunk. Calara was bleeding to death, and you saved her life. Please don't think for one second, that I'm not eternally grateful for your medical expertise."

John had walked over to join them and he placed his hands on Rachel's hips as he looked down at her, and said, "Alyssa's totally right, and thank you so much for what you did for Calara." He sighed as he added, "As miraculous as this healing is, it's not always exactly practical to just top you up. Besides, if anything happened to me, like this abduction attempt, then I need you to look after the girls."

Rachel was listening to him attentively, and she smiled when he finished speaking, then said, "Of course, I'd rather no one got hurt in the first place, but I'll always be there to help where I can." She blushed but kept eye contact with him, as she added, "I'm being a hypocrite anyway. I was just as eager to be nursed by Jade as the others."

Raising his left hand, he lifted her chin so he could get a better look at the numerous cuts and abrasions that she'd sealed over with a wound closure gel. His right hand slipped under her shirt, and began to gently caress the spot on her lower belly where the swallow tattoo had once been. "Good, I want to take care of you too," he said protectively.

She gasped at his touch, then stared into his eyes while giving him an alluring smile.

"Talking of abduction attempts," Alyssa said, glancing over at the occupied cryostasis pod. "What are we going to do with the deadly elephant in the room?"

John saw that the cryostasis pod was now banded in thick strips of Crystal Alyssium, and he knew even he would struggle to break out of there. "Nice precautions," he noted when he turned back to Alyssa. She just raised an eyebrow, declining to comment. He heaved a sigh, and continued, "Despite the temporary high from Jade's pick-me-up, I know you're all still tired from being tapped for psychic energy. I'm worn out too, and I need some rest. I suggest we interrogate our prisoner after a nap, and we can try to find out what she knows."

"I'll be looking forward to that," Dana said ominously, the smile dropping from her face as she glared at the captive ninja.

John looked at Alyssa and asked, "How long until we reach the Dragon March?"

"Just under twelve hours to go," she replied immediately. "Despite all the shit with the assassination attempt we only lost about two hours from all that."

"Alright, time for bed then, all of you. We'll be able to get a good rest, and still have plenty of time afterwards to assess what just happened," John said, his voice firm and authoritative. He turned to look at the slumbering Latina, and said to Alyssa, "Can you bring Calara with you, please? We'll need to keep her topped up so I can continue healing her."

The girls nodded obediently, and started filing out of the Medical Bay. As he watched Alyssa gliding over to Calara, he held out his hand to stop Rachel, and asked her, "Are you sure it's safe leaving the assassin in cryostasis? She won't be able to break out?"

Rachel stood still, and turned to look back at the cryo-pod. She stared at the bloodied and battered captive for a moment, then replied cautiously, "If she was an ordinary woman, then she'd be totally helpless until we bring her out of cryostasis. I gave her a full body scan when we put her in the pod, and she's had dozens of invasive cybernetic enhancements. Until I analyse all her implants, I can't give you any guarantees, but she's probably safely contained in there."

"Alright, thank you, Doctor," he said to her with a grateful nod.

"Any time, Rear Admiral," she replied with a teasing salute. With an amused chuckle she added, "Believe it or not, I'm actually a Second Lieutenant. Not that I really care much about ranks, but it's amusing how much you outrank me now."

He raised an eyebrow as he said, "And yet, according to Terran Federation regs, you're still able to judge me unfit for command on medical grounds, and have me removed from active duty. Quite the responsibility you have there, Second Lieutenant."

"You better be a good boy then, and do exactly what I want," she replied flirtatiously.

He grinned at her as he asked, "And what might that be, young lady?"

"You'll have to come and visit me in Medical some time to find out," she teased him in reply.

He laughed, and swatted her on the rump, saying, "Off to bed, I'll join you in a minute."

She gave him a playful wave goodbye, and sashayed out of the Medical Bay. When she had gone, he turned to see Alyssa sitting beside Calara's bed, gazing intently at the sleeping girl and gently brushing her fingers through her lover's dark hair. When she realised she had his attention, her piercing blue eyes flicked to his, and a wry smile formed on her face. He strolled over to join her, and she raised an eyebrow, and asked, "So now it's just us, are you going to tell me about 'Radiant Alyssa'?"

"Ah, so you know about her then?" John asked hesitantly.

She frowned, and replied, "While you were spirit-walking, it was really difficult to hear what you were thinking. I did hear you bump into someone you referred to as Radiant Alyssa, and whoever she is, she shocked the hell out of you."

John gently stroked her cheek as he said, "I don't have any real answers for you yet. You're right though, I did run into her when I was Sprit-walking, and she helped me bring Jade back. We were too busy to talk at the time, but she said that if I go back and see her, she'd tell me what I want to know."

"Who or what do you think she is?" Alyssa asked him, her bright blue eyes looking huge as she stared at him, waiting breathlessly for his response.

He hesitated, then finally replied, "I think she's been helping us for months, but that's about all I'm certain of. I really want to find out more about her, but there's a problem." He looked troubled as he continued, "She wasn't the only thing I saw there. There's an echo of Progenitor John on the Astral Plane, and I'm guessing it's probably got something to do with the ethereal prison I banished him to. Trying to peel myself from my body is probably ten times harder than it should be because of it, so I'll need to be fully rested before I try another spirit-walk."

The blonde girl smiled at him, and said, "Don't worry, I can wait a few hours to find out more." She turned to look at Calara, and then added, "I'll take her back to the bedroom with me, but there's someone you should see first before bed, if you're not too tired."

John nodded, and asked, "Faye? Yeah, I was planning on heading up to the Bridge in a moment."

"Good," Alyssa replied. She met his gaze, and said, "She watched Jade get killed and was powerless to prevent it. I think it hurt her a lot more than she's let on."

"Alright, I'll speak to her about it," he agreed, then leaned it to kiss her. Their kiss was gentle and intimate, and when they finally parted, he looked into her eyes and said, "Thank you for coming to rescue me."

She grinned at him and said, "You seemed to be doing a fine job of rescuing yourself."

He glanced over at the cyborg assassin they had taken captive, and her mono-edged matte black sword that lay on a gurney, then said, "Yeah, but I'd have been in trouble when she turned up again."

"In that case, you're welcome!" Alyssa said to him with a laugh, and he gave her a big hug before letting her go.

"I'll meet you in the bedroom," he said, as he turned to leave the room.

"I never get tired of hearing you say that," she purred seductively, then waved him goodbye as he walked out of the Medical Bay.

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Faye was up on the Bridge, sitting on the IntOps Console and staring at the Sector Map, but he could tell by the thousand-yard stare that she was thinking about something else entirely. John stepped out of the grav-tube onto the Command Deck, and when he spotted the purple sprite, he walked across the room to join her. She jumped with surprise when he sat down in the chair behind the IntOps Console, then looked at him guiltily.

"Some Watch Commander I am, when you can sneak up on me like that," she said, looking downhearted.

John smiled at her apologetically and said, "Sorry about that, Faye, I should have said hello. I didn't mean to startle you."

She waved a hand at him, and sounded subdued as she said, "No problem. It's okay."

He leaned towards her, and said, "I came up here to check on you and make sure you were alright, but I can see you're not." Fairly sure he already knew the answer to his next question, he still asked it anyway, "What's bothering you, Faye?"

The four-inch-tall pixie looked like she was going to wave away his concerns, but she changed her mind, and drew a shuddering breath. When she started speaking, her voice was quiet and she sounded deeply upset. "I saw it all happening..." she finally replied. "You fighting against the assassin, and then Jade being killed. I saw it all, and was powerless to stop any of it."

"That wasn't your fault though," he said to her gently. "You couldn't have stopped that assassin."

Her little face shadowed with anger, and she protested, "But I could have stopped it all!"

John's face twisted in confusion as he asked, "How, Faye? I don't understand."

"I activated the ship's anti-personnel defences, and I could have shot that assassin with the Gatling Lasers! But..." she trailed off, stopping herself from continuing with a visible effort.

"But what? You can tell me... what's troubling you?" he asked her sympathetically.

"It was your fault!" she finally snapped. "Because of your paranoia about AI, I was locked out from the ship's defences! I couldn't fire them, so you were captured, and Jade got killed because of it!"

He was startled by her furious outburst, but he forced himself to think rationally about what she had just yelled at him. Settling back in the chair, he frowned, and said, "You're right. I should have started trusting you much sooner, and I'm sorry."

She nodded, but sounded despondent as she said, "I understand why you feel that way, what with Nexus and the Terran's history of rogue AI. It just came as a shock when I couldn't intervene to save you."

"Like I said, I'm sorry, Faye. I promise it'll be different from now on," he replied, but he could see she was still upset by something else. She was looking down and away from him, so he crouched down so he could meet her gaze, and asked perceptively, "There's something else bothering you. What is it?"

She looked at him, and he could see tears filling her eyes as she whispered, "I can't get those images out of my head. I keep seeing it over and over again."

"Seeing what? Jade being stabbed?" John asked her.

She nodded, a tiny fluorescent tear rolling down her digital cheek as she replied, "I've deleted the video file, but it keeps reappearing in my system memory. It's like my central processing core can't let it go."

John looked concerned and said, "If you were Terran, I'd say you were suffering from PTSD. It's something I've had a lot of experience with, and I've lost friends I served with who were haunted by memories from combat."

"How do I make it go away?" she asked him plaintively.

He studied her a while, trying to think of some useful advice to help the troubled girl. "Well, Jade is completely recovered now, so seeing her laughing and smiling as she goes about the ship might make it easier to let that memory go. We've also captured the assassin who stabbed her, so seeing her eventual fate might make things easier too."

"Are you going to kill her?" Faye asked him in a neutral voice.

He paused, thinking it over until he replied, "We'll try and find out more about the man she was working for. We don't want to have to deal with more assassination attempts if we can nip this in the bud."

"That didn't answer my question," she persisted, with a small smile.

"No, it didn't," he agreed. He sighed, before he continued, "I don't like the idea of killing her in cold blood, but she's extremely dangerous. In all likelihood, we might have to. Would you have a problem with that?"

She shook her head, her cute little facing looking fierce as she replied, "No, definitely not."

John nodded while watching her, then after another pause, he leaned over the IntOps console, and clicked on several buttons until a security interface appeared. It rose up above the sprite as a glowing blue holographic panel, listing the various security functions aboard the Invictus. He made some changes to the settings, then said, "I've just given you fire permission on the internal and external Anti-Personnel defences. We've taken the assassin prisoner, but now if you get in the same situation again, you won't be powerless. Maybe knowing that might help you put this behind you?"

Faye looked surprised, but she smiled at him gratefully, and said, "You've been really kind, thank you." She blushed a darker shade of purple, and added, "I'm sorry I yelled at you before."

He laughed, and said, "Don't worry about it, I deserved it." He grinned at her playfully, and joked, "As far as homicidal AIs go, I think you're a lovely girl."

She giggled and beamed a sparkling smile at him as she replied, "Yeah? Well you aren't too bad for a filthy organic."

They both shared a good laugh, and when he rose from his chair, she looked much happier. He smiled at her, and said, "I'm worn out, and I need a good sleep. I'll leave the ship and our prisoner in your capable hands, Watch Commander."

She fluttered up to his face, carried on her shimmering gossamer wings, then leaned in to kiss him tenderly on the cheek. She smiled as she said, "Thanks for coming up here and trying to make me feel better. It really meant a lot."

"Any time," he replied as he waved her goodbye, and then stepped into the grav-tube, disappearing from sight.

Faye turned back to her vigilant watch over the Sector Map, while bringing up a cam-feed image of the Medical Bay. As she stared at the face of the beaten assassin through the clear viewport of the cryostasis pod, she activated the internal defences in the corridor on Deck Seven, bringing the Gatling Lasers online.

She found herself fervently hoping that the assassin would try to escape.

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John found the girls already in bed waiting for him, so he stripped off his clothes and joined them. The quick boost from being fed by Jade was wearing off now, and all of them looked bone weary, having been heavily tapped of psychic energy to bring Jade back. The only exception was Jade herself, who was cuddling Calara protectively from behind.

"I'm not remotely tired," she said with a warm smile. She glanced down at Calara, and placed her green hand on the Latina's swollen tummy, then said earnestly, "I'll keep an eye on this little kitten, and keep her safe."

"Thanks, Jade," John replied, struggling to stifle a yawn. "Wake me up when she's absorbed the last lot."

She nodded, her fingers moving in broad, gentle circles on Calara's coffee-coloured stomach. The girls spread out to give Jade and her patient plenty of room, so the sleeping arrangements were somewhat disrupted. In the end, Dana and Rachel ended up drifting off to sleep in each other's arms on the far side of the Nymph. Alyssa snuggled into John, holding him tightly, and she beckoned over Irillith, who gave her a grateful, if rather sleepy smile as she joined them. The blondes fell asleep almost immediately, and after giving Jade a final glance, John was soon slumbering peacefully too.

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He awoke several hours later to feel the delightful sensation of several girls swirling eager tongues around his cock. He was still tired out, so he just sagged back in bed, and let the girls go to work, figuring Alyssa had arranged some kind of team effort to coax another load from his quad. Seeing no need to hold back, he let those velvety soft tongues tease and caress him to the edge, and he reached down to run his fingers through one of his fellatrix's hair.

It only took a moment to realise there was only one girl blowing him. As he made that realisation, he shivered with pleasure and pulled Jade forward, so that her lips were encircling the base of his shaft. She purred with delight, and being fully encased in that vibrating, massaging throat of hers, his quad seized the opportunity to pump their cargo into a receptive female. He came hard, filling her up with his freshly prepared load, and when he was done, he looked down to smile at her as she appeared from under the covers.

Jade blew him a kiss, then crawled over to rejoin Calara, who was sleeping serenely on the bed. She elongated a couple of her fingers, then gently wormed them between the Latina's lips so that she could top up the horribly wounded brunette. John suddenly heard a muffled gasp from Calara, and she jolted herself awake.

He sat upright at the same time that she did, and while he wore a look of concern, she looked horrified as she gaped at the bandaged stump where her hand should be. Alyssa had felt him stir, and she was by Calara's side like a shot.

"Shh, it's okay," she said to the brunette in a calm, reassuring voice.

"My hand!" Calara said in shock, verging on the edge of panic.

Alyssa swaddled the Latina in soothing thoughts as she said, "Will be as good as new in no time." She wrapped her in a hug, and added, "John's going to make it all better."

He was with the scared girl now, and he brushed his fingers through her long, dark-brown hair as he said with confidence, "Don't worry, I'll have you healed up soon."

Jade leaned in, and pressed her luscious lips against Calara's cheek, giving her an affectionate kiss. As she pulled back she said softly, "I died, and he brought me back to life."

The Latina pulled back from Alyssa's comforting embrace, and looked at Jade in astonishment. Her big brown eyes rapidly flicked between Jade, Alyssa, and John, as she struggled to take in what they were saying to her.

John could see she was really struggling with it all, so he said in a firm voice, "You need your meds, Commander. Settle down with Jade, and I'll debrief you."

His commanding voice of authority had an immediate effect on her, and she smiled at him bravely as she took a big breath to steady her nerves. "I think you better bring me up to speed," she said, after a moment's pause.

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Jade cradled the young woman in her arms, singing to her softly as Calara suckled on the Nymph's engorged breasts, quickly filling her stomach with John's cum. He sat opposite Jade, massaging Calara's expanding tummy as he carefully explained what had happened aboard the Invictus while she'd been unconscious. Alyssa chipped in from time to time, interjecting with her point of view on recent events, and in particular, adding details about her own boarding action. The blonde girl desperately wanted to wrap Calara up in a big hug to reassure the unsettled young woman, but she kept her hands busy by brushing them through the Latina's dark tresses.

Eventually the Nymph was done, and she helped Calara lie back on the bed, resting on her side. John spooned up behind the shaken teenager, wrapping her up in a protective embrace, and letting Calara draw comfort from the strength in those arms. "I can't believe you're going to grow me a new hand," she said, her eyes drifting down fearfully to the bandaged stump.

Alyssa was lying in front of her, and she lifted Calara's chin to avert her gaze from her injury. Her voice was gentle and kind as she said, "Don't think about it then. Just enjoy carrying John's cum inside you, and before you know it, everything will be back to normal."

Calara sighed, and she looked at them each in turn before saying in a small voice, "Thank you for looking after me."

They both cuddled her, keeping her safe in their arms, and she soon fell into a deep sleep as John's cum began to go to work. Or more accurately, it allowed him to channel his willpower through her body, and use the load in her stomach to knit new bone, muscle and sinew on her forearm. Jade was snuggled in behind John, and he felt her chest rising and falling rhythmically as she fell asleep too.

Alyssa looked at John over the sleeping brunette, and thought to him, \*Calara's such a wonderful girl, it's awful seeing this happen to her.\*

\*As you said, I'll make her all better,\* John replied with a kind smile.

She nodded, then pulled back from Calara a little way to give herself some room. Her dextrous hands worked quickly to untie the bandage from around the Latina's wrist, and she took great care while she worked, making sure not to disturb the slumbering girl. John watched her nimble fingers with fascination, and when she peeled back the last of the bandage from around the stump, she looked up at him in surprise.

The torn and ragged flesh on Calara's forearm was now completely rejuvenated, ending in a smooth, rounded stump at the wrist. The healing results were always dramatic, but this transformation in just over four hours was nothing short of miraculous. Alyssa's blue eyes suddenly flashed with inspiration, and she climbed out of bed, before darting into the walk-in wardrobe. John watched her leave, wondering what she was up to. She wasn't gone for very long, and when she returned, she was holding a long white glove in her hands. With a broad grin on her face, she waved it in the air triumphantly.

\*This is perfect!\* she exclaimed, as she climbed back on the bed, then carefully slipped the satiny glove over Calara's wrist, and up her forearm past her elbow. \*Now she won't have to look at her arm while it's healing.\*

He smiled at her, and said, \*Nice idea, beautiful. We can easily remove it in four hours and check the progress.\*

Alyssa nodded enthusiastically, and they lay together for a few minutes, staring into each other's eyes. Drowsiness soon overtook them both, and they dropped off to sleep, while cradling Calara in their arms.

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John felt much better when he woke in much the same way four hours later. Jade's enchanting green eyes sparkled with excitement when she saw he was awake, and when she redoubled her efforts, he soon gave her exactly what she wanted. Once she was satisfied she had every last drop, she sat upright with a lazy, contented smile on her face, and beckoned Calara over to join her.

All the girls were awake now, and once John had stopped seeing stars, he sat up, and watched the tender scene as Jade literally nursed Calara back to health. Rachel had spotted the white opera glove on the brunette's hand, and she bounded over, before leaning in to take a closer look.

"May I?" she asked Calara.

The Latina nodded, holding out her right arm which was encased in the white satin garment. John could see at a glance that something had changed in the last four hours, with only the fingers of the glove looking hollow, and not quite hanging right. Rachel carefully pulled the glove away, and gaped in astonishment at the smooth, unblemished skin on the girl's forearm. When she tugged the glove away completely, she shook her head in wonder.

"You've completely rebuilt the carpals, metacarpals and proximal phalanges!" she gasped, gently turning Calara's olive-skinned hand to get a look at all sides.

Calara looked a bit worried, and released Jade's engorged, dark-green nipple from her lips so she could ask, "What does that mean? Is that bad?"

Alyssa was sitting by Calara's head, and she raised herself up so she could lean over and give the brunette a kiss, while whispering loving words to her telepathically. When they finally parted, Alyssa said, "It means you're nearly there. John just needs to rebuild the end of your fingers, and you'd never be able to tell you were hurt."

Rachel slipped the glove back on her friend's hand, and then looked up at John with newfound respect in her eyes. She looked like she wanted to discuss it further, but she paused, in consideration for Calara who was still unsettled by the whole traumatic incident. They watched the Latina finish emptying both breasts, and she sat up afterwards with Jade's assistance.

Sensing that John wanted to speak to them, Alyssa guided the girls via telepathy, and they fanned out into a semi-circle around the bed. He nodded his thanks to her, then looked up at the hidden camera, and said, "Faye, can you call us on the view-screen please? I want to involve you in all our team chats."

Up on the Bridge, the tiny digital creature's face lit up with a beaming smile. She had observed John and the girls having these impromptu team meetings in their bedroom before, and now he was actively including her, she felt more a part of the group than ever. She activated the screen in the bedroom, and when it came to life a few moments later, Faye's adorable face appeared as a holographic image at the end of the bed. Rachel and Irillith shifted slightly to make room for her, so that she could see and be seen clearly.

John looked around at all the bright, attentive faces that were looking at him expectantly, and he said, "Are you all feeling better now? I'm sorry I had to tap you for so much energy earlier, I'll try not to do that again unless it's an emergency."

There were murmurs of agreement that they all felt fully recovered, and Alyssa smiled at him as she said, "Don't be silly, none of us mind. You brought Jade back to life! How could we be mad at you for that?"

The girls echoed their agreement, and John smiled at them as Alyssa leaned in and gave him a gentle kiss on his cheek. He made eye contact with each of them in turn as he said, "I don't want any of you to start taking unnecessary risks, thinking I can just bring you back to life if something goes badly wrong. Jade has a unique physiology, and her body works very differently from all of yours."

Alyssa stroked his arm, and said, "There's no need to worry, we'll be careful." Turning to look at the rest of the group, she added, "Right girls?"

They all promised him that they would, and he nodded, somewhat mollified. Turning to Rachel, he asked, "What exactly happened to her, anyway? I've seen Jade regenerate a really nasty wound before, so what was stopping her from healing the sword hit?"

Rachel was animated as she replied, "It's funny you should ask, I was fascinated about that too!" She suddenly looked remorseful, and she looked over at Jade, making eye contact as she added, "Please believe me that I was completely heartbroken when you died. I guess I went into autopilot to cope with the grief, so when I removed the sword, I performed a partial autopsy."

Dana grimaced, and said, "Babes, that's pretty cold."

Jade smiled at the brunette, and said, "Please don't worry, I don't mind at all! In fact, if you're able to tell me more about how my body works, then that would be amazing!"

Rachel had been looking shamefaced, but after hearing the Nymph's forgiving, encouraging words, she smiled at her and said, "Thank you for not being upset with me." When Jade waved away her concerns, the brunette brightened up considerably, and continued, "I'm sure this sounds bad, but it was really interesting actually! I knew you didn't have blood, which got me wondering if you had a heart, or some other kind of organ that was critical for sustaining life."

"Did you find anything?" John asked, curiously. "I saw Jade take a nasty buzzsaw wound to her side, and her body seemed to be made up of dark-green flesh."

"I did!" Rachel exclaimed with excitement. She smiled at Jade, and said, "You appear to only have the one vital organ; it's an exquisitely beautiful viridian crystal right where your heart would be. I don't want to make you sound like a robot, but I think it acts like a power source of some kind. The assassin must have been aiming where a tiger would have a heart, and her strike pierced straight through your heart-crystal."

The Nymph blinked in surprise, then said brightly, "I knew I had to have a heart in there. I wouldn't be able love all of you so much without it."

The girls faces softened, and touched by her words, they gathered around the Nymph hugging her and giving her affectionate kisses. John made eye contact with Jade as the girls swarmed around her, and he had to admit he felt a little moved himself at the expression of pure joy on her face as she was surrounded by her adoptive sisters. He let them enjoy their moment, and they eventually parted and formed a circle, kneeling on the bed as they gave him their full attention once more.

"We need to discuss the damage we sustained to the ship during the attack." John said to them all. He looked at Faye, and said, "First things first though, anything to report, Watch Commander?"

She grinned at him and replied, "Nothing so far, it was all pretty clear. Quite a bit of merchant shipping, but no military vessels."

"We'll be approaching the picket lines in a few hours," Calara warned them. "We'll have to watch out for that irritating Carrier Captain if he's still the Commanding Officer for the reserve forces."

"Captain Maddox," Alyssa supplied helpfully.

Calara nodded, her eyes narrowing with annoyance as she said, "He had a real chip on his shoulder about John. He was commanding a Heavy Carrier called the Medusa if I remember right."

"I'll keep an eye open for him, but I'll let you know the moment I see any military ships on the long range sensors!" the perky AI sprite replied.

"Great, thanks, Faye," John said gratefully. He leaned forward a little, and asked, "I assume the Assassin is still in stasis? You didn't mention it, and I'm sure you'd have woken us if there was a problem."

The purple construct shook her head, and replied tersely, "Still sleeping like an evil baby."

John nodded, and said, "Alright, we'll go and investigate her in a little while." He looked at Dana as he continued, "Now, on to the damage we sustained. How serious was it?"

The redhead didn't look as upset as he'd expected and she replied, "Me and Faye already patched up the Drive Room, and replaced all the destroyed power couplings. It needs a bit of a clean up, but aside from that, it's fine." Her face fell as she added, "The Officers' Lounge is a write-off though. There were a couple of explosive devices that went off, and they royally fucked up the place. We'll be eating in the Galley on Deck Four for a while I think."

Alyssa felt quite cheerful over John's empathic bond with her, and when he glanced her way, he expected her to be upset, but she was far from it. She was listening to his train of thoughts of course, and she gave him a big grin. "This just gives us a chance to remodel the place! It was comfortable enough before, in a bland, militarist sort of way. Now we have an excuse to refurbish the entire lounge!"

Rachel brightened considerably, and she said, "I've had a fair bit of experience with opulent luxury. I think we might be able to come up with something pretty special!"

The girls were all quite animated now, and they began to chatter amongst themselves, discussing potential plans for the decor. John watched them with amusement, marvelling at how they always seemed to find the silver lining, no matter how dark the cloud. Alyssa grinned at him, then shushed the girls so he could continue.

Faye took the opportunity to pipe up once the conversation died out and said, "While you were asleep, I got my boys to clean the place up. They removed all the debris, and replaced the damaged fire extinguisher system, that kind of thing. When they were done, the cleaning bots gave it a good scrub."

John nodded his thanks to the holographic representation of Faye, and said, "That can't have been a pleasant job, thanks for sparing us from that."

"It made me feel useful, and I was glad I could help!" she replied, and her joyful expression made him smile.

His smile faded though, as he went on to say, "This episode with the assassin has really exposed some gaps in our security. We've been getting so good at carving our way through external threats, I got a bit complacent about hostile infiltration, and it turns out we were horribly exposed. As we've all now found out, the consequences have been horrendous, and it's only by blind-luck that I didn't lose one or more of you permanently." He clenched his jaw, and said, "I can only apologise to all of you for letting you down like this, but I promise you, no fucker is going to sneak onto our ship when we're through with upgrading security."

The girls looked shocked at his heated self-recrimination, and started to protest. Alyssa placed her hand on his shoulder, and said gently, "You can't blame yourself for this. We're all clever girls, and we should have come up with suggestions on how to improve internal security."

John nodded, but she could tell from his thoughts that he wasn't convinced. He turned to look at Faye, and said, "We've got a big advantage with you aboard. You don't need to rest, and with your digital nature, you can monitor far more than a normal person could. I propose that we find out how the assassin snuck aboard, then come up with countermeasures to prevent that, as well as anything else we can think of. Then we can give Faye the tools she needs to properly protect us in her Watch Commander role."

Dana looked eager to get started and she said, "I'm nearly done with that project I've been working on! As soon as I'm done with that, I'll get right onto security upgrades." She glanced at Irillith, giving her a winsome smile to encourage her to assist.

Instead of responding however, the blue-skinned girl looked at John and said, "Please don't feel that security was your responsibility alone. My people have been perfecting infiltration and assassination techniques for centuries, and I should have been all over the vulnerabilities we had. I think I became so obsessed with our cyber security, I overlooked the physical."

John smiled and said, "I was actively encouraging you along that path, but I appreciate your sentiments, thank you."

The Maliri girl smiled at him, then looked back at Dana. She hesitated for only a second, before she said to her, "I think it might be worth postponing that project for a day or two."

"How come?" Dana asked with a frown.

Irillith took a big breath before replying, then said, "That assassination attack happened so soon after rescuing Terra, we haven't really been able to discuss everything that happened with Nexus. I told you what happened when I confronted him, and everything he told me. I haven't had a chance to tell you that before Nexus kicked me out of his digital network, I launched a score of search routines to trawl through his archives. There were a few things I wanted answers to, but I also ransacked his data archives for everything I could find on Progenitors."

John was amazed at her bold initiative, and he gasped, "That's fantastic news! Did you find anything?!"

Irillith grinned at him, a gorgeous smile lighting up her face as she replied, "I got a lot of hits. I'll need to go through the data I acquired first, but it should make for fascinating viewing." Her jubilant expression faded a little, and she added, "All the recent data I can go through without any problems, but there's data that Nexus acquired when he achieved Unity. I can't read any of that, in fact, I don't even recognise the data formats."

"I might be able to help," Faye offered enthusiastically. "The device that powers me is pretty old, remember?"

Irillith gave her a grateful smile, and said, "If you can take a look, that would be amazing, thank you. I've uploaded the data I stole from Nexus to my IntOps Console under the 'Nexus' repository."

Alyssa frowned and said, "We don't steal things, we requisition them."

John and the girls laughed at that, although Irillith looked a bit confused, having not heard the reference before. Alyssa sighed, and she explained the joke to the Maliri while they waited for Faye to trawl through the files.

The purple sprite was back a few moments later, and her tiny face was downcast as she said, "I'm sorry, I don't recognise the files." She shook her head, looking positively bewildered, and continued, "The data formatting is incredibly complex! I don't even recognise the characterset. Here, take a look!"

She projected the formatting data onto the viewscreen, and a stream of bizarre shaped sigils scrolled across the surface. They all gazed at the oddly shaped characters, and Dana suddenly groaned, and squeezed her eyes shut as she clutched at her head.

"What's wrong?!" John asked her in alarm.

"I -know- this!" she groaned. "Fuck, this is excruciating!"

Rachel put her arm around her, and sounded worried as she asked, "Do you want me to get you some painkillers?"

Dana waved her away, and gasped, "No, it's not painful! It's just really fucking annoying!" She sounded incredibly frustrated as she continued, "I recognise the characters, and the answer's on the tip of my tongue, but I just can't put it into words!"

"Is this an ancient Progenitor language we're looking at?" John marvelled as he stared at the sigils, voicing what everyone was thinking.

When no one reacted, he looked around at the girls, and saw they were all staring at Alyssa, open-mouthed in shock. Her eyes were illuminated by a bright white radiance, and she beckoned over Dana and Irillith towards her.

"Come to me, you two," she requested, her voice reverberating with an eerie echo. It was as though there were two people speaking at the same time, but perhaps half a second apart. Her tone was kind, but her words rang with the confidence of someone expecting to be obeyed.

John watched spellbound as Alyssa reached out towards Dana, lightly placing her palm against the redhead's temple. Dana groaned again, wavering slightly as her brow creased with frustration. The blonde girl turned to look at Irillith next, and smiled at her as she caressed the side of the blue-skinned girl's face. Irillith suddenly gasped, her violet eyes shining brightly with a fierce inner glow. Letting out a low moan, the light pouring from her eyes flickered wildly, then began to project astoundingly complex diagrams in the air. The pictures were technical schematics, and they bathed the room with a soft purple radiance.

Dana's eyes flashed from side to side as she gawped at the schematics, and she blurted out, "Holy Fuck! You guys aren't going to believe this shit!"

The images cycled through several schematics, the incredibly detailed and intricate designs annotated with those same bizarre sigils. Alyssa abruptly withdrew her hands, and Irillith pitched over with a painful groan, while Dana let out an ecstatic sigh of relief. "I'm really sorry, Irillith," Alyssa murmured, stroking the Maliri girl's hair as the dazzling white illumination slowly faded from her cerulean eyes.

There was a stunned silence in the room, as John, Calara, Jade, and Faye gaped at the three girls involved in the totally unexpected display. Alyssa's eyes had returned to normal, but she seemed to be dazed, and was blinking owlishly as she tried to get her bearings.

John shook his head, and then exclaimed, "Where do I even start after that?!" He was dying to ask Alyssa about her glowing eyes, but he could see she was still groggy. He turned to Dana instead, and asked, "So what were those schematics? It seemed like you understood them."

Dana giggled with delight, and she said, "That was such a rush! We'll have to do that again!"

"No way!" Irillith groaned, waving her hand in protest. "My eyes felt like they were going to burst!"

Following John's thoughts, Edraele asked, \*What happened? Is my daughter alright?\*

John scooped Irillith up in his arms, and she buried her head in his shoulder, her eyes squeezed tightly closed. He stroked her back, and asked in a comforting voice, "Are you okay? Do you need Rachel to give you some painkillers?"

"I'll be alright," she murmured, clinging to him tightly.

\*She'll be fine,\* he said to Edraele, soothing her concerns.

While he held Irillith, he looked over her azure shoulder at the redhead, and asked, "What did you see, Dana?"

"Ancient Progenitor tech!" she replied gleefully, bouncing up and down where she sat on the bed. "Those Unity files that Irillith recovered are ancient video archives, and I know how to make a projection device that can play them!"

He looked astounded at her reply, and said, "So we might be able to see video footage of what... the Mael'nerak?!"

Dana chortled with delight, and said, "Yeah, I know... fucking crazy, right?"

Alyssa was still looking a little disorientated, but she reached over to John, and stroked his arm as she said softly, "You might be able to get some answers at long last."

The look he gave her was affectionate, but it shifted to a frown, and he said, "We'll get back to you in a moment, young lady."

"Okay," she replied, giving him a dreamy smile.

Turning to look at Dana, he raised an eyebrow quizzically and said, "How about the rest of the schematics? They were only up for a few seconds. Was that long enough?"

"To memorise them?" she replied, then let out a disbelieving laugh, as she said, "Hell yeah!"

"What did you see?" Jade asked, as intrigued as everyone else.

"Oh not much, just the schematics for a Progenitor tech Power Core and Tachyon Drive!" she exalted. Shaking her head, she giggled as she added, "Those sneaky little fuckers!"

"Who, the Progenitors?" John asked in confusion.

Dana shook her head, and laughed as she replied, "No! The Ashanath! They have this reputation for being gifted scientists in the fields of Power Core technology and FTL travel, but they've been cheating! The Tachyon Drive and Power Core they gave us must have been from their attempts to reverse engineer Progenitor Tech. They fucked up though, and made a bunch of mistakes, because they didn't fully understand the science behind it."

John looked astounded, and he paused for a moment before asking, "How on Terra did the Ashanath get their hands on a Progenitor Power Core and Tachyon Drive?!"

Irillith's pained expression had eased now, but she still clung to John for support, and looked a little pale. She kept her eyes closed as she murmured, "The Ashanath held huge amounts of territory before the Terrans started annexing it. Perhaps they found them?"

He nodded thoughtfully, and replied, "That makes a lot of sense actually. The Greys find some ancient ship parts, and tow them back to Ashana. Then they spend a few centuries researching them, and start figuring out how they work, improving their own FTL drives as they go."

Jade looked excited as she asked Dana, "How fast is the new Progenitor Drive?"

Calara leaned forward and said urgently, "Even more important than that, how much power can the Progenitor Core put out?! Can we use it to fire the Nova Lances?"

Dana grinned at the pair of them and said to Jade, "Insanely fast. Over double our current FTL speed!" Turning to Calara next, she looked equally excited as she replied, "The Power output is vast. A single core will be enough to power everything we're currently running, as well as the Nova Lances."

Both girls looked tremendously excited at the prospect of more ship upgrades, and they grinned back at Dana with delight. Her jubilant grin had dropped into a frustrated frown though, as she examined the schematics she had memorised in greater detail.

John noticed her mood shift, and he asked, "I'm sensing there's a problem?"

The redhead looked glum as she replied, "I can't just crank out all the parts using the Mass Fabricators. We need more elements from the Progenitors' Enhanced Periodic Table, so we'll definitely need Maliri help at Genthalas Shipyard to build this stuff."

He smiled at her as he said, "That's not a problem. When we've wrapped up our business in the Dragon March, and after we rescue Irillith's sister, I'm planning on going back to Maliri Space anyway. We can visit Genthalas then, and upgrade the Invictus."

"This ship is going to be so awesome!" Dana squealed with delight, sharing a wildly enthusiastic grin with Calara and Jade.

John could feel Edraele's excitement over their bond, and she sounded overjoyed when she said, \*I can't wait to see you! How long until you arrive?\*

\*All being well, we should be there within a couple of weeks,\* he replied, looking forward to it as much as she was. \*It'll be great to see you too.\*

John turned to look at Alyssa, and said gently, "Now, let's talk about what just happened with you. Do you have any idea what the white glow from your eyes was about?"

Alyssa frowned, and replied, "What white glow?" She was much more coherent now, but the thought that she'd done something without being aware of it was startling.

Turning to look at the girls, John said, "You all saw what just happened with Alyssa. When I brought Jade back to life, I met the glowing white figure we saw on that video that Rachel took with the Psi-scanner. I think 'Radiant Alyssa' only exists on the Astral plane, so I'm going to go and speak with her now, and find out what's going on."

Irillith looked up, having got most of her colour back now, and she said quietly, "Before we boarded that battlecruiser, Alyssa's eyes did the same thing. She reshaped the armour on the Raptor."

"So we're up to Quad-shaped on the gunship now?" Dana asked curiously.

Alyssa grinned, and said, "Fantastic! That saves me a job!"

Irillith sat up and slowly shook her head, staring at Alyssa as she said, "You didn't stop there..."

The blonde girl frowned, and asked, "Really? How many times did I reshape it then."

The Maliri girl sighed, and said with regret, "I was upset at the time and not really paying that close attention to the count. I'd guess at least seven more reshapings."

"No fucking way!" Alyssa balked. "Ten times! I can't even imagine what a nightmare it'd be trying to shape that many times."

Irillith nodded, and said, "You were planning on ramming that battlecruiser to knock them out of hyper-warp. I guess you wanted the armour tough enough to survive."

John studied the psychic blonde, and asked, "Do you really not remember any of that?"

She slowly shook her head, and replied, "It's all an angry red blur to be honest. Now I'm thinking about it, I'm starting to have a few flashbacks though. Kind of like going out on a real bender, then the next morning suddenly remembering the crazy shit you got up to on the night before."

Dana looked absolutely amazed, until her face lit up with a huge grin, and she said, "You know what having Deca-shaped armour means, don't you?"

"That we need to find out what the term is for shaping eleven times?" Jade asked far too innocently.

The redhead rolled her eyes, and replied, "No... It means that the Raptor is immune to laser damage! I didn't have a sample to test before, but the Crystal Alyssium followed a linear progression, and I predicted it would become one-hundred-percent reflective on the eighth shaping." She paused for a second, recalling her progression chart, then added, "It also has fifteen times the durability of Titanium. That gunship is damn near indestructible!"

"Can you test it? Make sure?" John asked her, as astonished at this bit of news as the rest of them.

Dana nodded eagerly, and started climbing off the bed as she said, "I'll go check it out right now!"

The girls took her departure as their cue to leave, and they began to climb off the bed to go and get ready. John called after them, "We'll meet in the Galley for a quick bite to eat in an hour!"

Calara had started moving to get up as well, and John turned to fix her with a steely gaze, and said sternly, "Where do you think you're going, Commander?"

She froze, and then looked back at him, and replied, "I was just going to go up to the Bri-."

"Nope, bed rest for you, young lady," he said, cutting her off, and pointing back at the bed.

Calara laughed but climbed back under the covers as he had ordered. He leaned over to give her a kiss on the cheek, and his voice was caring as he said, "Just rest, honey. You've had a hell of a shock, so relax, and let me heal you."

She nodded obediently, then snuggled in under the covers to watch them. John turned back to Alyssa, and said, "I guess it's time to find out what 'Radiant Alyssa' has to say for herself."

Alyssa gave him a teasing smile as she slipped under the covers, cuddling up with Calara as she said, "I'm guessing I can't spirit-walk at the same time, so I might as well get comfortable with my girl."

"Sounds like a good plan to me," he agreed.

Taking a big breath, John settled down on the bed sitting across from Alyssa. The blonde and brunette were gazing up at him, and those big alluring eyes kept making his mind wander. He couldn't help but remember the previous occasions that they'd worked as a team looking up at him seductively. He let his eyelids drift close to try keep his mind off their distracting presence, then just focused on his breathing as he relaxed and felt at peace.

After the total chaos earlier that day, he relished the tranquillity as he calmed his mind, and drifted into a zenlike state. He started thinking about spirit-walking again, and as soon as he felt that tugging sensation in his chest, he let himself flow into it. Like last time, he felt the colossal weight on his back, like an anchor dragging him down and preventing him from leaving his body. Knowing exactly why it was so difficult allowed him to prepare accordingly, and it felt a little easier to slowly peel himself from his physical form.

John tipped over, and held out his hands to stop himself from sprawling face first on the bed. He assumed it hadn't worked, but as his eyes flew open, he could see the duvet through his transparent fingers. He realised he had been successful after all.

\*Hello John, I'm so glad you came back,\* a lovely warm voice said to him, drawing his focus to the resplendent creature waiting for him in the Astral Plane.

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"So, the spider at the heart of the web makes her appearance at long last," the haughty young Maliri noblewoman sneered, eyeing the House Valaden Matriarch with contempt.

At least that was the emotion she was attempting to portray. Edraele had become an expert at reading people long ago, and she could tell that Leena Ghilwen was terrified. After arriving at Genthalas Shipyard, Leena had been left waiting for hours, as Edraele had been on her way to see her when John had been attacked by the assassin. The girl had grown increasingly nervous and apprehensive as the hours had slowly ticked by, without any sign of her captor. The House Valaden Matriarch glanced at Almari, who beckoned the two House Ghilwen assassins from the room, leaving Edraele alone with the frightened young woman.

The last remaining member of the House Ghilwen nobility was actually the second of Aradrea Ghilwen's three daughters. Her two sisters had been killed by Luna on the old Edraele's orders, in retaliation for the attempt on Irillith's life by a House Ghilwen attack fleet. At fifty-four, Leena was the eldest of the four noble daughters that Edraele had ordered brought to Genthalas, and she had deliberately saved her until last.

Nyrelle Aeberos, and Valani Naestina were both around Kali Loraleth's age, with all three girls in their early thirties. They hadn't been exposed to so much of the bitter, black-hearted Maliri politics at that age, and as all three were the youngest of several siblings, they had largely been ignored by their Matriarch mothers. Edraele knew she would have to handle the conversation with Leena a little differently.

"Take a seat, Leena," Edraele said, eyeing the younger woman with cold disdain.

Leena tried to be brave, and she said obstinately, "I know you killed my mother! I'm not taking orders from you, Valaden B-...." However, her confidence failed her, and she let her voice fade out, not daring to finish the insult.

Edraele's eyes narrowed, and her voice was chilling as she said, "You will sit now, or I'll break both your legs and make you crawl on the floor."

Shaking with fear, Leena sank back on the long sofa, her face a mask of dread. "W-w-what are you going to do to me?" she stammered, barely able to find her voice.

Drawing herself up to her full height, the House Valaden Matriarch glided across the room with all the regal splendour of someone who had spent decades practicing such an entrance. She stood over the quaking girl, and said, "You must know that as the last remaining member of House Ghilwen, you are all that stands between me, and total subjugation of the worlds under your control?"

Leena's trembling increased, her light-green eyes widening as she realised the truly desperate situation she found herself in. "You're going to kill me..." she managed to gasp, her face blanching.

Edraele didn't answer for a painfully long moment, until she finally said, "You know my reputation. Am I likely to show you even the slightest bit of mercy?"

The young woman was overcome with despair, and she shook her head slowly. She gazed up at Edraele, too scared to answer, and almost too afraid to even blink.

Stepping to the side, Edraele sat elegantly on the other end of the sofa, and she let a warm smile light up her face, as she said, "It's fortunate that my reputation no longer matches reality." With a sad sigh, she continued, "Please accept my humblest apologies for scaring you like that. It was purely an act, and I bear you no ill will. I needed you to understand the gravity of the situation you're currently in, and thus, hopefully you'll seize the gift I'm about to give you with both hands."

"What gift?" Leena asked, not daring to believe that this wasn't some kind of trick from the devilishly cunning woman.

Edraele spread her hands in an open gesture and replied, "Your life."

"You're not going to have me killed?" The House Ghilwen noblewoman asked incredulously.

Shaking her head, Edraele replied, "Definitely not. In fact I wish to protect you, and offer you an alliance. If you choose wisely, you'll become a valued member of the alliance I've just forged with Houses Loraleth, Aeberos, and Naestina."

Leena stared at her in shock, and gasped, "Shaedra Loraleth would never agree to that! She hates you almost as much as my mother!"

Studying her carefully for her reaction, Edraele said, "Shaedra is dead. Her youngest, Kali, is now Matriarch, and has sworn fealty to me. Likewise, Nyrelle Aeberos, and Valani Naestina now rule their Houses, and both have agreed to serve."

Slumping back in her chair, Leena shook her head in total disbelief, and muttered, "Four of the top five Houses... who can stand against that?!"

Edraele smiled at her, and said honestly, "I'm hoping no one will even try. Especially you, Matriarch Leena Ghilwen."

"But why?" Leena asked, truly bewildered. "You could crush House Ghilwen with ease, even if you don't just kill me here and now."

Edraele moved closer, then placed her hand on Leena's, giving her a reassuring smile as she said, "I have no wish to crush any of the Houses, least of all yours. I promise that whatever you decide, you'll be free to leave unharmed." She squeezed the younger girl's hand very gently, and added, "I'm truly sorry for what I did to your mother. You're correct, she is dead, but I was assured it was painless."

"Why are you telling me this?" Leena asked, staring down at Edraele's hand covering her own, and still reeling from the shock.

Leaning in, Edraele said earnestly, "I'm hoping that by being completely honest with you, you'll understand that I had no choice. Please do me the small courtesy of being honest with yourself, and answer me this: Would your mother have ever agreed to form an alliance with me?"

Leena knew the answer immediately, and she replied in a quiet voice, "Never. She absolutely despised you."

Edraele nodded, and looked pained as she said, "Which is why, to my regret, I was forced to end her life."

The young woman could tell that Edraele was telling the truth. She was astounded at how different the House Valaden Matriarch was in person, compared to everything she had been told about the woman. Leena had grown up listening to her mother's furious tirades about Edraele Valaden, and after Leena's two sisters had been assassinated, Aradrea Ghilwen's hatred had intensified to a frightening degree. The reality was though, that Edraele actually seemed... nice. A personality trait like that would normally be considered a terrible weakness in any Maliri woman, let alone a Matriarch, but Leena knew instinctively that Edraele was anything but weak. Far from it, in fact.

Leena stared at the older woman, and now that she had calmed down a little, she truly took in her shocking appearance for the first time. She'd been so scared out of her wits before, that she hadn't been able to appreciate just how stunningly beautiful Edraele actually was. Although she knew that Edraele was well into her middle years, her skin was as clear and fresh as a girl half her age. Then of course, there was the hair. Throwing propriety to the wind, Edraele had grown her hair well past her shoulders, and her silky white mane looked absolutely breathtaking. Leena found herself filled with an urge to reach out and stroke those beautiful tresses...

Edraele could see the subtle shift in Leena's demeanour as the personality modification encoded in her DNA took effect. She smiled at the younger woman, and said, "I've had a vision of the future for the Maliri. Would you like to hear it?"

Nodding distractedly, Leena continued staring at Edraele's hair for a moment, before she turned to look at her, and asked, "Vision? What do you mean?"

Moving closer on the sofa, Edraele spoke now as though to a confidant, one Matriarch to another, "You must be aware of the disastrous consequences that the males withdrawing to the border stations has had on population levels?"

Leena was listening closely now, her mother having raised similar concerns in the past. "Yes, I'm aware it's becoming a problem," she conceded.

"Along with the relentless assassinations, and inter-House warfare, it's become much more than a problem," Edraele said passionately. "The Maliri are in a death spiral towards their own extinction!"

Shocked for a second time that evening, Leena managed to reply, "It can't be as bad as that, surely?"

Edraele looked sombre as she replied, "You only have to view our cities to know it's the truth. Scarcely a quarter of Melfalas, my own capital city on Valaden, is still populated. The numbers continue to decline by the year."

"So what are you going to do?" Leena asked, spellbound by the captivating older woman.

Edraele's violet eyes gleamed with a fiery passion as she replied, "For far too long the Maliri have been at each other's throats! I want to end all the pointless violence: the torture, the killings; we can do away with all of that, and work together as a people instead of against each other!"

"You want to rule the Maliri!" Leena gaped at her, truly astounded by the woman's ambition.

"No, I just want to stop us slaughtering each other," Edraele replied, with a light laugh. She gazed into the younger woman's eyes, and asked, "Would you like to help me in achieving this goal? I wish to establish a ruling council of Matriarchs, and you would have your own place of honour at that table. Together, we can save the Maliri from extinction, and work together to forge a bright future amongst the stars!"

Leena was stunned. This meeting with Edraele had gone nothing like the way she had imagined it would. The House Valaden Matriarch was passionate, inspiring, and speaking to her with a frank honesty that Leena didn't doubt for a second. Although she'd lived through decades believing that Edraele was supposed to be her nemesis, now that she had finally met her in person, she found that she actually liked the woman. Yes, she had terrified her initially, but Leena could see why she'd behaved that way, to snap her out of her own preconceptions about Edraele Valaden.

Taking a big breath, Leena said earnestly, "You have my fealty, Matriarch Edraele Valaden." She added with a shy smile, "And I'd love to work with you. Thank you for giving me this opportunity."

Edraele looked delighted, and she beamed a wide smile at her as she said, "Oh, you wonderful girl! Thank you!"

Leena shook her head in amazement, and said, "I should be the one thanking you. You hold all the cards, and here you are, offering me my life, and a chance like this!"

"I promise you, you won't regret it," the older woman said, brushing her hand against Leena's cheek in an affectionate gesture.

Now that they were this close, the young Maliri's eyes wavered, and those light-green orbs flicked to Edraele's long hair. She stared at her in fascination once again, seemingly unable to avert her gaze. Edraele saw Leena's slender hand lifting up subconsciously, but she made no move to pull away.

"I've never seen anyone quite so beautiful," Leena murmured, totally enthralled, her fingers brushing ever so lightly through the silky white-blonde hair.

Edraele smiled at her, enjoying her gentle touch, and said, "What a lovely thing to say. Thank you, Leena."

Suddenly realising what she was doing, the young woman jerked her hand away, a look of wild panic on her face. "I'm so sorry! I don't know what came over me!" she blurted in alarm.

Gathering the girl's trembling hands in her own, Edraele stroked them softly, and said, "Be at ease, my dear, you haven't done anything wrong."

Shuddering slightly after the shock, Leena gazed at the Valaden Matriarch, and said in awe, "You're nothing like the person I thought you'd be. You're so kind and caring..."

Edraele smiled at her, and said, "I met someone who transformed my life for the better, and you'll be able to meet him soon as well. Would you like me to tell you all about him?"

Leena nodded, then listened in rapt attention as Edraele began her tale.

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John lifted his head to look at the girl who'd spoken to him, and immediately recognised the glowing white figure that he had come to know as Radiant Alyssa. She was sitting cross legged in front of Alyssa herself, who was still lying in bed, cuddled up with Calara. The girl was streaming light from her body, and he narrowed his eyes against the glare as he tried to make out her features.

She saw him squinting, and she smiled as she said, "Please forgive me, I forgot how bright my aura is now. Alyssa's been getting so much stronger."

The brilliant radiance dimmed somewhat, allowing John to look at her clearly for the first time. The girl appeared identical to the real Alyssa, right down to the last detail, but she was shrouded in a soft nimbus of white light. He sat up from where he had toppled over earlier, sitting a few feet apart from the girl, who was studying him with her penetrating gaze.

Her voice was clear and calm as she said, "When we spoke before, I promised I'd answer your questions. You must have many you want to ask me."

Watching her warily, he asked, "Who are you?"

The beautiful girl tilted her head to one side, and replied, "Alyssa, or part of her at least."

He smiled wryly, and asked, "So should I just call you Alyssa then?"

Her full lips quirked up into a half-smile, and she said, "I think it might get a little confusing if I went by Alyssa too." She looked thoughtful for a moment, then added, "Perhaps you should call me, Athena instead"

"Well it's nice to meet you, Athena," he said politely. "You seem to know who I am already."

She nodded, and replied, "I've been watching you for months now. I know you very well indeed."

John hesitated, then decided to be forthright, and he said, "I might as well come right out and ask... what are you exactly?"

"You don't recognise me, do you?" she asked him, her focus on him growing more intense. "Don't I seem familiar to you, at all?"

He was about to shake his head, but something about her presence made him hesitate. She was right... there was something about her, something he felt he knew so very well indeed. Then the feeling was gone, drifting away in the ethereal wind.

"There is something, but I can't place it," he was forced to admit. "Why are you so sure that I should recognise you?"

She smiled at him enigmatically, and replied, "Because you created me."

John stared at Athena in confusion, and exclaimed, "That can't be right! I don't even understand what you are exactly, so there's no way I could have created you!"

She gave him a knowing smile, and said, "You've done lots of fascinating things over the last few months, and you weren't consciously aware of doing most of them. Why should creating me be any different?"

He was about to protest, but when he thought back to all the crazy things that had happened to him recently, he realised he'd sound like a fool. Trying a different tack to give himself a chance to arrange his thoughts coherently, he asked, "Do you know why I created you?"

"To protect Alyssa," she replied simply, turning back to look at the blonde girl who appeared to be frozen, such was the time dilation effect of the Astral Plane.

He followed her gaze, looking at Alyssa for the first time since he had begun Spirit Walking. A shimmering light shrouding her head made him pause, and he approached her, leaning in to take a closer look. She was adorned with a gleaming, beautiful diadem, which sparkled majestically as it caught the light. Despite its seemingly delicate appearance, he could tell the golden crown was forged with great strength.

Athena was right by his side as he stared at Alyssa, and she said, "That's a mind-shield, just like yours."

John reached out his fingers to touch it, and Athena gently intercepted his hand, restraining him from approaching any closer. "Please don't break it," she cautioned him. "Her mind isn't ready to merge with me yet."

Turning to look at the girl in astonishment, he said, "Merge with you? What do you mean?!" He frowned in confusion, and before she could reply, he added, "And Alyssa's spirit-walked before, so how come she didn't see you, if you're here in the Astral Plane?!"

Athena sighed, and said apologetically, "I'm sorry, I'm not handling this conversation very well at all." She took his hand, and turned him away from Alyssa, so he was looking at her directly. She smiled at him as she continued, "It's probably easier if I explain, rather than you stumble around trying to find the right questions to ask."

He laughed, and replied, "Yes, that's probably for the best."

She moved to kneel directly in front of him, and she lifted her hand towards his head. He flinched a moment, then forced himself to relax, and let her touch the side of his face.

"This all started with you," she murmured, brushing her soft fingers across his cheek, and then up to gently stroke his temple. "You were never prepared for the kind of power you have coursing through your blood; your Progenitor nature that's been built into your very DNA."

He slowly shook his head, and admitted, "I feel like I'm fumbling around in the dark most of the time, especially when it comes to psychic powers."

"I know," she agreed. "You're a practical man, grounded in reality. You struggle with accepting things that you can't see and touch, and your mind's been fighting against your birthright every step of the way."

"You mean Progenitor-John?" he asked, glancing back at the eerie shadow that was shrouding his body. The sinister echo of his nefarious alter-ego.

"He's a guide, or was meant to be at least. Built into your genetic code, he was supposed to help prepare you to use your powers and begin your conquests," she explained, as she followed his glance. She smiled as she caressed him, and continued, "But you're essentially a good man, and you rejected that siren call. Instead of enslaving and conquering, you found ways to master your mind, imprisoning Progenitor John behind a mental barrier. You built that up over the years with careful focus and meditation."

John looked stunned, and he blurted out, "But I just learnt martial arts to give me a way of controlling my temper. My grandfather pushed me into it, saying that boys needed a positive outlet for all their energy. I found the meditation helpful, so I kept it up over the years, but I never consciously rejected anything!"

She shrugged, and said, "Sub-consciously then. In any case, your stubborn refusal to accept the nature of your species has driven Progenitor-John mad. He's decided to take control, and he wants to become the dominant personality now."

John shuddered at the thought, recalling just how powerful the evil version of himself had become. A sudden thought came to him then, and he turned back to Athena, and asked, "So how are you linked to all this?"

"As I said before, your mind rejects things it isn't comfortable with," Athena replied, as she slowly turned towards Alyssa. "When you began feeding her your cum, you made her into your Matriarch, as you already know."

Nodding, he said, "Yes, she's been developing her psychic powers at an incredible rate." He glanced at Alyssa, and added fondly, "She's an amazing girl. I couldn't ask for a better Matriarch."

Athena tilted her head to one side, and said quietly, "She's not just your Matriarch. Not any more."

John frowned, and replied, "What do you mean by that?"

"You've heard the girls talk about Progenitor-John, and what he was like," she replied, her tone patient. "Can you imagine him giving power like that to one of the women under his control?"

Slowly shaking his head as he thought about it, John was forced to admit, "Not a chance. Edraele mentioned that Progenitors treat their Thralls as disposable slaves."

"They view their Matriarchs in much the same way, only allowing them limited telepathy to help keep the Thralls under tight control," she said quietly.

"So what's all this got to do with Alyssa?" John asked, getting frustrated.

Athena was quiet for a moment as she studied him, then replied, "Your mind rejected the idea of psychic powers, but I think you realised you still needed them." She glanced at Alyssa, and said, "So you gave them to her instead."

"I did what?!" he balked, his eyes growing wide.

"You turned her into a Progenitor," she continued relentlessly.

John stared at her, open-mouthed in shock, and struck dumb by this revelation.

Athena frowned as she took in his stupefied expression, and asked him, "This can't be a complete surprise can it? Her triple-helix DNA, those incredibly potent psychic abilities... you must have had your suspicions?"

He let out a bewildered laugh, as he admitted, "I had no idea!" A look of concern shadowed his face, as he blurted out, "She's not in any danger is she?"

"Not from the powers you gave her, no," Athena replied. "That's one of the reasons why you created me. I'm here to help take care of her."

"I did?!" he asked, astonished.

She nodded, smiling at Alyssa affectionately, as she said, "She's a kind, loving, and wonderful girl, but her mind wasn't equipped to deal with all this in one go. I've been here to nurture her, helping her develop her powers, and to protect you both."

"It wasn't her I saw in my dreams, was it?" he asked, already knowing the answer.

"No," she replied, watching him as she spoke. "I've had to intervene a number of times over the past few months to help keep you safe. The glowing figure you saw in the healing dreams was me, although the healing ability actually comes from you. I was merely there to help guide you through the process, and channel psychic energy from the girls to help fuel the rejuvenation. I've tried not to be too active, and I've only really assisted while Alyssa's mind was at rest, to avoid accidentally unsettling her."

"There's been other occasions too, haven't there?" he asked her quietly. "Where you've had to get more actively involved."

"Yes," she agreed, her voice sombre. "I had to step in to stop Edraele from breaking open your mind shield, and inadvertently unleashing Progenitor-John. When he was freed anyway a few weeks later, he was far too dangerous for Alyssa to face alone. I guided her through that confrontation, then helped break you out of the abyssal prison he'd cast you into. After the recent assassination attempt, Alyssa was consumed by rage and grief, so I helped her channel that raw emotion. You witnessed the end result."

John shook his head in amazement, but he smiled as he said, "That trick just now with Dana and Irillith wasn't exactly subtle. What was that about?"

She gave him a coy smile, and replied, "You're aware of my presence now, so I took the opportunity to directly assist you, unlocking some of the secrets you've imparted to Dana." She frowned as she added, "Although Irillith wasn't ready for that yet, and I ended up hurting her. I'd appreciate it if you'd pass on my sincere apologies when you return, please."

"Of course," he murmured, as he thought over what she had just told him. He looked at her, his face a picture of confusion as he continued, "Hold on a minute. You said that I gave all my powers to Alyssa, but that can't be right, I've started using them recently! My enhanced strength, Telekinesis, Electrokinesis, those kind of things."

"Your powers haven't gone anywhere," she explained carefully. "You can do what you do, because it's been built into your DNA. Your mind just suppresses the abilities it can't really get to grips with."

"Like the Telepathy?" he asked her, feeling a bit shamefaced.

"There's no reason why you can't use Telepathy yourself, your mind simply refuses to countenance the idea," she said with a smile. She looked over at Alyssa, and shrugged as she added, "You have Alyssa to take care of that for you now though, so there's not quite the same urgency for you to learn."

He nodded absent-mindedly, but his mind was preoccupied, thinking about other things. He fixed her with a steady gaze, and said, "I've got an awful lot to thank you for, haven't I?"

She blushed, and said, "I've only tried to help where I can. No thanks are necessary, I've only been doing what you created me to do."

He reached out to take her hand, and he stroked it gently as he said, "Thank you so much. Not just for saving my life all those times, but for stepping in to protect the girls. I owe you a huge debt."

"You're welcome," she said, waving away his thanks.

Acting spontaneously, he pulled her towards him, his arms wide to embrace her. Athena's eyes widened in surprise, but she let herself be drawn to him, letting out a little gasp as he wrapped his arms around her. She was tense at first, but she eventually relaxed against him, her skin tingling where it brushed his own. They sat like that for a long moment until he eventually released her, and even through the radiance shining from her, he could see that she was flushed.

She averted her eyes for a moment, then looked at him boldly and said, "That felt wonderful, thank you."

"Any time," he told her with a grin.

He began to feel a tugging sensation coming from the astral cord linking his ethereal presence to his physical body, and he tried to resist, but it gradually increased in strength. When he looked at Athena in alarm, she smiled at him wistfully, and said, "You're tiring. Having to devote so much of your mind to maintaining Progenitor-John's prison makes Astral Projection much harder for you."

"That's what I guessed," he replied, getting dragged back, inch-by-inch towards his body. "But I still have more questions for you!"

"And I'll be here to answer them," she replied, waving him goodbye.

With that he lost his fight with the astral cord, and was yanked back into his body, leaving him reeling from the abrupt change in perspective. He blinked rapidly as he tried to steady himself, and as he regained his balance, he found Calara and Alyssa kneeling beside him.

"Are you alright?" Calara asked him, looking worried.

John nodded and blurted out, "Alyssa makes jumping in and out of the Astral Plane look easy, but trust me, it's not!"

"You'll get used to it," the blonde girl replied, rubbing his back sympathetically.

He turned to look at her, his senses back to normal once more, and said in a serious voice, "We need to have a chat."

He began to relay everything that Radiant-Alyssa, or Athena as she was now called, had told him. Alyssa had been silent as he explained who she was, and more importantly, what she was. However, when he told her that she was now a Progenitor too, her reaction had been anything but quiet.

"I'm a what?!" she gasped, looking dumbfounded.

"She said I'd given you copies of my powers, and turned you into a Progenitor," he said again, but slowly this time.

She stared at him for a moment, struggling to react to the startling news, but she eventually managed to find her voice, and asked him, "But why?"

He looked chagrined as he admitted, "Apparently my mind struggles with the idea of psychic powers. I guess that's why I have such a hard time learning something that I haven't seen with my own eyes. Athena thought that subconsciously I knew I'd need some of the more magical type of powers, so I gave them to you instead."

"So Athena's like my version of Progenitor-John?" she asked him, her cerulean eyes threatening to bug out of her head.

He nodded, stroking her arm as he said, "Yes, but she's really nice. I made her to look after you, and help you get used to your new abilities." He paused for a long moment, taking in the shocked look on her beautiful face, and added, "I'm really sorry. I promise I didn't actively choose to do this to you."

She suddenly laughed with delight, and as the lovely sound echoed around the big bedroom, she threw herself into his arms, knocking him back on the bed. "Why are you apologising?" she asked him, with a huge grin on her face. "This is fucking awesome!"

"It is?" he asked, looking up at her, shocked as he was by her exuberant reaction.

She began showering him in kisses, and replied, "Of course it is, you big dummy! It means I'm even closer to you now!"

He grinned back at her, feeling hugely relieved she was taking the news so well. Calara's laughter at the blonde girl's energetic kissing frenzy drew their attention, and Alyssa sat upright abruptly.

"Come here, Thrall," she ordered in a faux-baritone voice, her lips lifting into a playful smile.

"Yes, mistress," Calara replied, trying to stifle her giggles.

She crawled over the bed to join them, and Alyssa gave her a warm hug, as she said, "You have two progenitors in love with you. How do you feel about that?"

"It feels wonderful," Calara replied with a smile, hugging her back.

Alyssa suddenly blinked, and exclaimed, "Wait a minute! If I'm a Progenitor now, am I going to grow a big cock and four balls?"

John laughed and said, "Sorry, honey, I don't think it works like that. You just got the psychic powers."

She pouted as she ran her hand over Calara's spunk stuffed stomach, and said lustily, "That's such a shame. Filling up these beautiful girls with my big load would have been so exciting!"

"You'll just have to live vicariously through me," he said with a smile, stroking the Latina's rounded belly.

Calara giggled, and said, "I'm not sure if I should feel sad, or relieved!"

"Sad, definitely," Alyssa replied with a wicked grin, but her expression shifted slightly, and she started to look thoughtful.

John was watching her face as he caressed Calara, and he said, "I know. You have a lot of questions, right? I can go back and ask her for you, once I've recovered."

The blonde girl nodded, then frowned as she replied, "It's a shame I can't just speak to Athena directly, it would be so much faster." Her frown deepened as she continued, "Hang on a minute, how do we know I can't?"

John was about to reply, but she had already focused her will inwards, and quickly peeled her Spirit form from her body. When she returned what seemed like only a few seconds later, she looked terribly frustrated as she said, "She wasn't there..."

"I did ask her about that, but we got a bit side-tracked, and she didn't have a chance to answer," he was forced to admit. "Athena mentioned something about you not being ready to merge with her yet. If I were a betting man, I'd say that you probably both can't Spirit-walk at the same time."

Alyssa sighed, and said, "No problem, I guess I'll just draw up a list of questions for you."

Glancing at the ship's chronometer, John saw that only fifteen minutes had passed, despite it seeming like he'd been chatting for hours. With the way that time moved much more quickly on the Astral Plane, his entire conversation with Athena had taken less than a half-a-minute.

"We've got a while before lunch," he said to Alyssa. "How about we spend it making this beautiful girl sing for us?"

"My hand..." Calara protested. "I can't do anything like this."

With a sultry look on her face, Alyssa said, "All you need to do is lie there... and let us know how good it feels."

The two Progenitors moved in tandem, pouncing on the giggling brunette.

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Irillith and Dana had been very busy in the Galley. When John and Alyssa arrived, leading a dazed Calara between them, they found that the utilitarian room had been transformed with brightly coloured streamers, and a pristine white tablecloth was draped across the table. Dana was trying to hang a banner, and she beckoned them in eagerly to assist her, while Alyssa sent a quick telepathic summons to Rachel to make sure she got there a little early too.

Jade had gone for a swim, and she had lost track of time, revelling in just being alive. She had raced around the pool as a green mackerel, darting through the water like an arrow. It was only when Alyssa called out to her that she realised she was running late, and she sprang from the pool, then shook herself off before slipping into a short aquamarine dress and heeled boots. Eager to see everyone again, she jogged along the corridor to the grav-tube, then ascended in the blue glow.

When she stepped out onto Deck Four, she was surprised to find it was pitch black in the corridor, ranks of sealed doors lining the route to the Galley. "Guys, are you alright?" she asked, worry tinging her voice.

Her cat-like irises widened, and she could see furtive movement in the darkness up ahead, so she crept forward warily, wondering what had happened to everyone. Suddenly the lights flickered on, and Jade was astonished to see all the crew there, waiting with beaming smiles on their faces. "Happy Birthday!" they called out together, as John strode towards her and gave her a loving hug.

Jade was shocked, and as he led her into the Galley, she gazed wide-eyed at the streamers adorning the wall, and the rapidly painted banner that said, "Happy Birthday, Jade!" in still wet red paint.

"Happy birthday, sexy," Alyssa said as she walked up to the stunned Nymph. She put her arms around her, and hugged her tightly, as she whispered in her ear, "We were going to just pick a date for you, but now we have a real date. The date John brought you back to us."

Dana had set up the portable holo transmitter, and Faye was hovering above the device, watching the party with wide, excited eyes.

Irillith disappeared into the Galley kitchen, and when she reappeared a few moments later, she was carrying a couple of plates full of Maliri delicacies. Jade could already smell the tantalising aromas from the spicy food, and her mouth began to water as she recognised the dishes from the banquet they had enjoyed at Natralis on Geniya Trading Post.

"Fortunately I hadn't served these when the bomb went off," the Maliri girl said. "They were still in the fridge."

Rachel was walking behind her, carefully balancing a couple of large bowls of spaghetti Bolognese, and she smiled at Jade as she set down the food. Calara walked over to give Jade a hug, and the poor Nymph was quite overwhelmed by it all.

"I've never had a birthday party before," she murmured, truly touched by the effort they'd all gone to.

"Sorry this is a bit last-minute," Dana said with a frown. "The last party got blown to bits."

Jade shook her head, and replied, "No, it's wonderful! Thanks all of you."

John and the girls gathered around her, each giving her a big hug, and by the time the beautiful alien girl had hugged everybody, she was struggling not to cry. They led her over to the table, and they sat on the benches next to the Galley tables and shared out the food before getting started. The Nymph groaned with delight when she tasted the first of the deftly woven pastry-style wraps, each containing some lighted spiced meat. She encouraged the others to join in, and soon they were all complimenting Irillith on her cooking.

"How did you learn to cook all these dishes?" Calara asked her after she had finished her wrap. "You prepared about twenty different dishes if I remember rightly, and they all looked and smelled incredible."

Irillith had a wry smile on her face as she replied, "When you're paranoid about being poisoned, you soon learn to cook when you're preparing all your own food."

Alyssa raised a glass of juice and brandished one of the wraps in her hand, as she toasted, "To Irillith's paranoia!"

They laughed as they joined her in the toast, and when they'd finished the Maliri dishes, they tucked into the spaghetti. It was a fun, light hearted meal, just the thing they needed after all the drama earlier in the day. Jade giggled and laughed, loving every minute of the party as she grinned affectionately at all her friends. They finished off the food, then cast furtive glances at one another, as Rachel and Irillith darted off into the Kitchen again. The lights in here weren't voice controlled, so she rushed over to the dimmer switch, and turned the illumination right down.

"What's happening now?" Jade asked, looking around in confusion.

The crew all began to sing:

"Happy Birthday to you,

Happy Birthday to you,

Happy Birthday dear Ja-ade,

Happy Birthday to you!"

As the tuneful rendition of the song echoed around the Galley, Rachel and Irillith emerged from the kitchen carrying a candle-lit cake between them. Jade stared at it in amazement, immediately recognising the green tiger shape of the cake.

"The cake was completely unscathed as well," Calara said, looking greatly relieved. "The icing was still setting, so it was covered and safe in the kitchen."

"it's kinda fortunate you're starting over today," Dana said with a grin. "One candle we can manage, ten thousand would have set off the fire extinguishers."

"Blow out the candle and make a wish," John said to the Nymph, smiling at her encouragingly.

Jade nodded as she stared into his eyes, then leaned forward and blew out the candle with a delicate breath. Everyone clapped and cheered, and she smiled at them all, her expression one of wonder.

"You've all been so thoughtful," she said, her voice throbbing with gratitude. "I can't believe you'd go to so much trouble."

"It wasn't any trouble," Irillith said to her, stroking her arm affectionately. "We all love you."

There were murmurs of agreement, and a big tear welled up in Jade's eyes. She turned to John, looking to bury herself in his shoulder, and he opened his arms to her.

"I love you, Jade," he whispered in her ear, as he held her in a tender embrace. He smiled as he continued, "I'll look forward to celebrating your next ten thousand Birthdays with you."

She shuddered in his arms, crying happy tears and clinging to him for support. The girls were delighted at her reaction to their surprise party, and more than one of them felt their throat thicken with emotion to see Jade so moved by such a simple gesture. Eventually she pulled herself together, and they tried the cake, which was made with Mint chocolate, even going so far as to include her viridian tiger stripes. The cake was delicious, and between the seven of them, they made short work of it.

John glanced towards Alyssa, who nodded, and replied to his telepathic request for information, \*An hour until we reach the picket forces.\*

Standing up from his place beside Jade, he said, "I'm really sorry we can't keep the party going. Getting totally smashed would be fun, but we'll have to take a raincheck on that. We've only got an hour to go before we reach the Dragon March, and there's something I'd like to do before we arrive."

He didn't need to say it, but they all knew exactly what he was talking about. It was time to interrogate the deadly assassin who had snuck aboard, and reaped such terrible destruction amongst them.