Three Square Meals Ch. 130

Calara pulled back from her father and they shared a warm smile, revelling in the new sense of closeness between them. Feeling giddy with emotion, she rode a euphoric high of relief at finally being able to put aside months of worry. Out of all Calara’s family members, it had always been Jack’s reaction to her amazing new life that she’d worried about the most, but that was all in the past now. She finally had the best of both worlds; the incredible intimacy she shared with John and the girls... as well as the heart-warming surety that her beloved father was proud of her. Calara’s life had never felt more perfect and she had John and Alyssa to thank for it.

Glancing across to the adjacent sofa, Calara beamed a radiant smile at her lovers... which faltered when she saw the dazzling light shining from Alyssa’s eyes. “Alyssa! What’s wrong?!”

“Nothing’s wrong... everything’s wonderful!” the blonde gushed, giggling as she leaned against John.

Jack looked at her with concern. “Did she have too much to drink?”

“Uh huh,” Alyssa replied, bobbing her head exuberantly. “I’m drunk on love!”

“She’s not actually drunk,” John explained, propping up the wavering teenager. “She’ll be fine in a few minutes; Alyssa’s reacting like this because-”

Jack stared at her glowing eyes and held up a hand. “Let me stop you there, John. I think I’ve reached my limit for what I’m able to cope with tonight.”

Calara laughed and hugged her father. “I’m sorry, dad. This must have all been overwhelming... but I’m really glad you know the truth now.”

“Me too,” he agreed, returning the embrace then rising to his feet. “I’m going to call it a night and let you deal with... whatever’s happening to Alyssa.”

“I’ll show you to your room,” Calara offered, standing too.

Jack gave her a reassuring pat on the arm. “Deck Four, third room on the right. Don’t worry, I can make it there on my own.” He glanced at the beams of light shining from the blonde’s eyes. “You should look after your girlfriend... maybe make her some psychic coffee or something?”

John and Calara both laughed at that, while Alyssa pouted playfully.

“Sleep well, Jack,” John said, nodding to him. “If you need anything during the night, head up to the Command Deck. The Nymphs will be rotating watch on the Bridge and they’ll be happy to help.”

He hesitated for a moment, then asked, “I’d like to call Maria, if that’s alright?”

“Of course,” John agreed.

“There’s a comms interface in your quarters,” Calara interjected. “You can call mom from there.”

Jack thanked them and wished them goodnight, then strode out of the Officers’ Lounge.

Calara sat down next to Alyssa and brushed a stray lock of golden hair from her face. “What happened, my love? I’ve never seen you react like this before.”

Alyssa let out a contented sigh. “You were so happy...” She drew a glowing pink heart in the air with her fingertip, then a dazzling set of stars sparkled around it. “Just like that!”

“I didn’t need telepathy to know how elated you were,” John said, smiling at the brunette. “Alyssa’s closest to you out of all the girls, so she must be really feeling it.”

Calara snuggled up on the sofa next to Alyssa and hugged her tight. “It was amazing. I’ve been worrying how my dad was going to react for so long, but he was just really proud of me. I don’t think I’ve ever felt so deeply at peace.”

“You shared everything with me... and it felt so wonderful,” Alyssa said, her eyes suddenly filling with tears. She looked up at John and choked back a sob. “It was just like back on Karron with my dad...”

“Ah, honey...” he said with sympathy, wrapping his arms around both girls.

“I love both of you so much,” Alyssa whispered, trembling in their embrace. “My life before... I know I’ve never really talked about it, but I don’t want you to look at me differently. It seemed like I was always scared, hungry... and in pain.”

John stroked her abdomen where she’d been stabbed by a Kirrix nest guardian. “I’m sorry. I guess things haven’t changed all that much...”

She wiped away her tears and shook her head. “No, you changed everything! I’m never alone now and we can take anything life throws at us... I’m always going to be there for you.”

“We know,” John said, holding her close.

Calara gave her a loving kiss on the cheek. “We’ll always be there for you too.”

Alyssa let out a happy sigh. “I know...”

They cuddled together for a few minutes, giving Alyssa time to recover after being overwhelmed by her emotions.

She eventually glanced up at John and gave him a sultry smile. “Actually, things haven’t changed all that much. I’m feeling pretty hungry; have you got anything tasty to fill up my tummy?”

“And she’s back,” John said with a chuckle.

Calara grinned at him. “You didn’t answer the question, John. I’m feeling pretty hungry too.”

“Poor girls, I didn’t mean to neglect you,” he said with sympathy, idly stroking their toned stomachs. “I was planning on filling up a smoky-eyed brunette when we go to bed; do you think that’ll keep your hunger pangs at bay?”

“Sounds like the perfect midnight snack,” Alyssa replied, licking her lips suggestively.

John rose from the sofa and offered the girls a hand. When they stood, he pulled them both close. “If you two need some attention after the day you’ve had, I’m sure Rachel would understand.”

Alyssa shook her head. “You’ve been looking forward to having some fun with her all evening. Don’t worry about us, I’m planning to show this gorgeous vixen a very good time. Besides, won’t it be difficult to look Jack in the eye tomorrow, if you spend all night fucking his daughter senseless?”

Calara blushed furiously. “Alyssa!”

“What? I didn’t think you’d want your dad to see you with a freshly-fucked glow in your cheeks.”

“I thought I’d reached a point where you couldn’t make me blush anymore,” the Latina said, faking a rueful sigh. “Clearly I was wrong.”

John laughed at their banter and set off towards the door with his arm around each of them. “Come on you two, time for bed.”

They hugged him back as they left the Officers’ Lounge, then the trio descended in the grav-tube to Deck Three. After the tense conversation with Jack, it was pleasant just to walk in companionable silence, enjoying the beautiful serenity of the Lagoon.

Pausing at the apex of the bridge, John looked out over the enchanting crystal-clear water. “We’re very lucky to have this place... we should make more use of it.”

Alyssa nodded her agreement. “That’s true... it’s been quite a while since we’ve all worn bikinis for you.”

“I wonder if there’s any nice beaches on Valaden,” Calara mused. “We should plan a summer holiday and invite the Young Matriarchs... when they all start showing.”

John groaned at that thought. “I need a vacation to relax... not give me a heart attack.”

The two girls giggled, flashing mischievous grins at each other.

“Where’s the fun in that?” Alyssa teased him, bumping John with her hip.

“It’ll be good practice,” Calara said archly, turning to kiss him tenderly on the cheek. “When we’re both six months pregnant, I want us to go on a babymoon together. I had a lovely dream about you oiling up our baby bumps with sun cream.”

“Were we pregnant or stuffed full of John’s cum?” the blonde asked, looking intrigued.

“Definitely pregnant,” Calara clarified. “Because he got so turned on, we had to alleviate the pressure in his quad afterwards... You should have seen how huge we were then!”

“Alyssa’s a dreadful influence on you,” John said, squeezing Calara until she squeaked. He steered them towards the Observatory. “Let’s go... I feel a sudden pressing need to see the Ship’s Doctor.”

Waving a hand at the door controls, Alyssa strode into their new bedroom. “Rachel, we need your help! It’s a medical emergency!”

The rest of the girls were lying naked on the bed, waiting for John’s arrival. They sat up and looked towards the trio in alarm as Alyssa led her companions into the Observatory.

“Can a case of blue balls be terminal?” Calara asked, her face a picture of concern.

Rachel blinked at her in surprise, then burst into laughter, her bedmates relaxing when they realised the mischievous pair were only joking. As Alyssa and Calara began eagerly undressing each other, the tawny-haired doctor rose from the bed and prowled over seductively to join John.

“I recommend immediately relieving the pressure, Admiral. I’m afraid you’ll have to remove your clothes before we can begin the procedure.”

“If that’s what it takes,” John said stoically. He raised an eyebrow as Rachel started unbuttoning his shirt. “What happened to your uniform, Doctor Voss?”

“I was conducting experiments on the average time it takes for a nineteen-year-old Terran female to achieve an orgasm. I observed that the time is shortened significantly with each additional erogenous zone being stimulated.”

Dana bounded over to help strip off John’s clothes, her nimble fingers deftly unbuckling his belt. “I was eating her out while Helene and Sakura sucked on her tits!” she declared cheerfully.

“That was very noble of you to volunteer yourself as the test subject, Doctor,” John said, feigning a look of admiration.

The brunette inclined her head modestly. “We must all be willing to make sacrifices for knowledge.”

John laughed as he scooped up both Rachel and Dana, placing them over his shoulders. He carried the giggling girls over to the centre of the oval bed, then made a point of turning around to examine the space between their audience. “Does this look like a good spot for the procedure?”

“Perfect,” Rachel agreed, as he placed them gently on the bed. She smiled coyly and lay back, spreading her thighs in invitation.

“Wait a second,” Dana exclaimed, placing a restraining hand on John’s chest. “I want to try something Perl suggested. How would you like to fuck both of us at the same time?”

Glancing down at his package, he raised an eyebrow, unable to see how what she was suggesting was feasible. He might have been extremely well hung, but he still only possessed one cock.

“Trust me,” the redhead said with a wink. “You’re going to love it!”

He knelt down beside them. “Okay, I’m all ears.”

“I had a feeling you might be,” she said with a cheeky grin. “Okay, you lie down right there. Leave everything to us.”

John did as the redhead asked, then watched curiously as Rachel threw a leg over his waist and straddled him. She rubbed herself against his rock-hard shaft, then wriggled forward to lay down on his chest. The brunette was higher up than normal, so he had to tilt his head back slightly to look her in the eyes.

“Hello, gorgeous,” he said, letting his fingers roam over her supple flanks, enjoying the feel of her silky-soft skin.

She was about to reply when Dana’s hand encircled his cock and nuzzled the head against her girlfriend’s sopping-wet pussy. Rachel let out a soft feminine moan of arousal, her eyelashes fluttering at the intimate contact.

Dana leaned around the brunette to smile at John. “Okay, now push inside, but don’t go in too deep! Stop before you go into her womb... okay?”

John’s hands roamed lower until he took a firm grasp of Rachel’s curved hips. “Ready?” he asked, nudging her with the tip.

She bit her lip and nodded. “Uh huh...”

Rolling up with his hips, he pushed down on Rachel and watched her mouth open into a perfect oval as her pussy stretched wide to take his girth. She was already very wet after Dana’s enthusiastic attention, so he was able to slide inch after inch into her belly until he nudged her cervix.

“Fuck!” she gasped, panting at being suddenly stuffed full of his throbbing cock.

“Does that feel good, honey?” he asked, admiring the rapturous expression on her beautiful face.

“Feels so good...” she breathed, looking down on him through her long lashes.

John cupped his hand around the back of her neck and gently pulled her down for a kiss. Rachel returned it with passion, moaning wantonly into his mouth as she writhed against him. Her big full breasts felt soft and warm against his chest, while her snug inner folds gripped every inch of his shaft in a steamy furnace. Resting her forehead against his, she gazed into his eyes and rolled her hips, gyrating with barely perceptible movements.

Her tawny brown hair hung down around his face, acting like a sensually soft curtain that blocked out the outside world. It added to the intimacy, focusing his attention on Rachel’s soft grey eyes and her pupils that were flared with arousal. That was until the right drape was pulled back, revealing Dana’s sparkling blue eyes.

“Everything good so far?” the redhead asked enthusiastically.

John chuckled, the reverberation in his chest making Rachel moan. “This feels amazing, but I don’t see how I’m going to be able to have sex with both of you at the same time.”

Dana winked at him then glanced to her left. “Okay, go ahead!”

The bed shifted by his waist and John felt another slender female body straddling him. There was no mistaking the velvety softness of another slick pussy rubbing against the base of his cock, then someone’s deliciously pert bottom brushed against his quad.

“Oh my god...” John groaned, letting his hands roam lower to stroke the toned thighs of the second girl riding him.

Whoever the mystery woman was, she was gliding back and forth with a glorious sensual rhythm, dragging her clit along the thick vein on the underside of his shaft. The languid stroking felt amazing, especially when contrasted with Rachel squeezing the upper half of his cock with her rippling pussy.

“Who is that?” he asked, stroking the second cowgirl’s thighs in appreciation.

“Guess!” Dana urged him, her eyes twinkling.

“She’s got to be one of the dancers to move like that...” he muttered, appreciating the thrilling way the unknown woman was gyrating her body. “Not Jade... she’d wait until the rest of you had your turn. Calara’s getting cosy with Alyssa, so it must be... Sakura!”

“Very good,” the redhead said, looking suitably impressed. “You know your girls...”

Sakura leaned forward and snaked a hand around Rachel’s waist to reach her clit. She rubbed her insistently, while grinding against John’s cock to get herself off. The brunette whimpered with arousal, her eyes rolling back as she was overwhelmed by a shockingly fast climax, only to be joined moments later by the sexy pillion rider. John could feel Sakura’s thighs trembling as she bucked against him, her movements losing their fluid coordination in the midst of her ecstasy.

Dana had been watching with hungry eyes as the Asian girl climaxed and she darted a flushed grin at John. “Mind if I go next?”

“Hop on,” he replied with an indulgent smile.

Dana released her girlfriend’s hair, letting the brown curtain fall back into place.

John kissed the tip of Rachel’s nose. “Looked like a good one.”

“It was,” she breathed, her eyes hooded with lust. “When she was riding you, your cock pressed right against my g-spot. Then Sakura started rubbing my clit and... oh!”

Her eyes widened as Dana switched places with Sakura, taking over from where the raven-haired beauty had left off. John could feel Dana’s hand slipping between his and Rachel’s stomachs, her fingers quickly going to work.

“Sit up a minute,” he requested, slapping Rachel’s deliciously rounded bottom.

She obeyed instantly, arching her back and holding herself upright with her arms outstretched. With Dana leaning forward, he could see the redhead’s eyes peeking over Rachel’s shoulder, their beautiful faces gazing down at him with alluring looks of arousal. John reached out to grasp Dana’s hips, holding her firmly in place, and gave them both a wicked grin as he drove upwards with pounding thrusts.

They gaped at him in surprise, their shocked gasps quickly turning into lusty cries. It really was like fucking them both at the same time, with Dana’s glistening pussy keeping the lower-half of his cock warm and wet, while her girlfriend wrapped the upper-half in a snug embrace. He soon had them both crying out in release, Dana slumping down onto her girlfriend’s back as they shared a powerful euphoric high. He kept going, wringing another climax out of the squealing pair, both of them powerless to resist as they wriggled on his shaft.

“How was that?” he asked, smiling with satisfaction and releasing his firm hold on Dana’s hips.

The redhead groaned as she tipped over to the side and sprawled on the bed. “I love it when you turbo-fuck me... it’s like getting pounded by an industrial jackhammer!”

Rachel wasn’t able to respond, the brunette lying sprawled comatose across his chest.

“She’s out, handsome,” Alyssa said with pride. “Pleasure overload.”

John gently rolled Rachel off his chest and onto the bed next to Dana. The brunette’s bosom was heaving as she panted for breath, the dopey smile splashed across her face revealing Rachel’s opinion on being rendered unconscious from orgasming so hard. Glancing around the room, John saw the rest of the girls watching him with wide eyes... and looks of longing in those beguiling gazes. He noticed that all the Nymphs were present, but the Valaden sisters were curiously absent.

“The twins are up on the Bridge keeping watch,” Alyssa explained. “We were all hoping this would turn into an orgy... but they did break the bed with you earlier and didn’t want to be greedy.”

“An orgy?” John asked, holding out a hand towards Helene and Jade. “Now that sounds like an excellent idea.”

They beamed in delight as they crawled across the bed to join him, overjoyed at getting to be with John too. Jade urged Helene to take the top, while the Nymph rode the base of his shaft, moving with sinuous sensuality as she coaxed the Aquatic girl to orgasm, quickly following her to climax. The four catgirls paired off, and each couple took a turn drenching John’s cock, in a breathtaking procession of gorgeous women. Alyssa and Calara waited until last, with the blonde eye-to-eye with John as Calara demonstrated just how effective Jade’s dance lessons had been for improving her skills in the bedroom.

“Have we spoilt you now?” Alyssa panted, as she recovered from an intense orgasm. “Can you go back to just one girl, after fucking two girls senseless at the same time?”

John cupped her face in both hands and gave her a tender kiss. “If I have been spoilt, you’ll keep me up to my quad in eager young women, won’t you?”

Her gaze softened and she nodded. “Whatever you need, handsome.”

Calara kissed her girlfriend on the shoulder. “What he needs is to unload his balls.” She looked down at him with sympathy. “I can feel how full they are under my bottom. You must be aching, John...”

He groaned as she gently caressed his taut sack, the stimulation from so many girls leaving him desperate for release. Glancing to the side, he found Rachel and Dana watching him through heavy-lidded eyes. The redhead was spooned behind her girlfriend, squeezing and massaging the brunette’s breasts as they watched John in action.

“Have you recovered, gorgeous?” he asked Rachel, enjoying seeing the languid smile of sexual satisfaction on her face.

“I’m ready and willing.” She crooked a finger at John and beckoned him over. “It’s your turn now...”

Alyssa and Calara smoothly dismounted him, freeing John to kneel between Rachel’s splayed thighs.

Dana gave him a loving kiss on the cheek. “Can I lick your balls while you’re fucking Rach? I want to watch you pump her full of cum close up...”

“I’m hardly going to say no to that, am I?” he replied, with a fond smile.

Turning to the brunette, he lined himself up and slowly slid home inside her soaked pussy. Her pliant body had snapped back after the brief rest, so he had to stretch her out once again, to the sound of her breathy moans.

When John paused at her cervix, she encircled her arms and legs around him to pull him deeper. “I want all of you, John...”

Thrusting harder, he felt the entrance to her womb yield to his cock, admitting him into her innermost depths.

“Oh god, I needed that...” Rachel moaned, her hips rolling as she relished being fully-impaled. Looking up into his eyes, she gently pulled down on his shoulders. “You can rest on me... I can support your weight.”

John tentatively lowered himself on her, but still kept some of the weight on his elbows as he cupped her head in his hands. “That feels good... I love having you completely wrapped around me.”

She gently kissed him. “I can feel your balls on my ass... they’re heavy... full to the brim.”

“Ready to fill up a very sexy girl,” he agreed, pulling back an inch before hilting himself again.

“Thanks for choosing me to take your cum,” she said softly, looking up at him with adoring eyes. “Nothing beats having you filling up my womb... I can practically feel my ovaries jumping for joy.”

“It’s so tempting, honey,” he murmured, lengthening his thrusts. “But then I’d need to get Dana pregnant too... I’m definitely breeding you both at the same time.”

The redhead groaned from behind him, then he felt her pat his leg. He spread his thighs wider to make room for her, as Rachel drew back her legs so her knees were framing her breasts. A moment later, Dana’s warm wet tongue glided over his taut quad, lavishing loving attention on the hefty quartet. John and Rachel groaned at the same time as he thrust forward, the stimulation too much for him to hold off any longer.

“So deep...” the brunette moaned, arching her back. “So fucking good!”

John could only grunt his agreement, driven past the edge of control by the seductive beauty impaled on his cock. He started pistoning in and out of her in an insistent rhythm, Rachel letting out breathy whimpers of excitement as she felt him driving towards the finish. She watched him intently, urging him on with kisses and sexy whimpers as he pushed deep into her body. Looking into Rachel’s eyes as he climaxed, John felt like he was staring into her soul, the brunette screaming in ecstasy as she felt powerful spurts of cum being pumped deep into her belly.

Pinned down on the bed, she thrust back at him as best she could, her hungry pussy trying to milk his balls of every last drop of cum. It was a long, ferociously intense climax, with John having to raise himself up to allow her tummy room to swell. Rachel cradled the curved dome with her hands, a doe-eyed look of bliss on her face as she revelled in her womb being stretched to take his hot load.

Finally sated, John eased out of her and collapsed on the bed, panting to regain his breath after the intense orgasm. At some point one of the girls licked his cock clean, then judging by the enthusiastic lapping sounds and Rachel’s soft cries, he knew she was feeding her friends. Exhausted as he was, he couldn’t muster the energy to even open his eyes to check, but he gladly hugged the pair of luscious bedmates that eventually snuggled up against him. A second set of breasts pressed against his arms as two more girls spooned their lovers, but John let sleep take him, fading out to welcome darkness.

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Deep Lord Athgiloi floated in his submersion chamber, enjoying a wonderful dream. He had vanquished the Kintark Empire and the Terran Federation, the subsequent influx of resources fuelling an unprecedented expansion in military research and shipbuilding. The Enclave fleets were so numerous they blotted out the stars and he launched the vast Brimorian armada against the Maliri Protectorate, his legions blasting golden-hulled starships and leaving a trail of unprecedented destruction in their wake. He had stormed the Maliri homeworld and Queen Edraele was left cowering on the floor of her throne room, begging him for mercy.

He sat on the vanquished Maliri throne, admired by the fawning members of the Deep Pool, who looked upon his magnificence in awe. As he preened in front of his subjects, Athgiloi waited for Celphna to proudly declare him Lord of the Galaxy, but she froze mid-pronouncement, her words coming out as a lilting chime. Athgiloi silently urged his devoted Nymph to announce his glorious new title, but she stood there making the oddly-familiar chiming noise. The dream began to fade, much to his chagrin, then he heard the comms interface chime again and burbled in frustration.

Celphna floated beside him in the tank, the beguiling scaly female watching him with her large black eyes. “May this one offer you pleasure, Master?”

“Later, my beautiful pearl. I have business to attend to,” he replied, reluctantly lashing his tail to propel him across the tank.

He saw that the call was from the Brimorian ambassador previously assigned to the Kintark Empire, who had been recalled from Kinta hours before war was declared. Athgiloi tapped the shell icons to accept the incoming priority call, wondering what could be so pressing.

“Ambassador Saogh, what news from Kinta?” Athgiloi asked the worried Brimorian.

“My apologies for disturbing you at this early hour, Deep Lord, I would not have done so if it wasn’t of the utmost urgency. I have been contacted by one of my spies in the Mar’Trinark Shipyard; he reported that hundreds of Kintark warships are undergoing refit in the drydocks.”

Athgiloi’s brow creased with concern. “That’s not possible. Baledranax threw every space-worthy craft he had at the Terran Federation.”

“Yes, but these warships were thought lost in the Battle of Regulus!” Saogh burbled nervously. “I’ve sent you a listing of the fleet assets my spy was able to identify by their transponder codes.”

Hurriedly scanning through the list, Athgiloi flexed his claws in irritation. “The Terran Federation must have captured those Kintark vessels after the battle. The Empress must have sold her soul to the Fleet Admiral to trade for those warships; I wonder what she offered Devereux to make that deal?”

“I’m afraid I do not know, Deep Lord,” the ambassador replied with regret. “My contacts were not privy to any treaty discussions.”

“Never mind,” Athgiloi muttered, his eyes narrowed in concentration. “You’ve served me well, Saogh. When you return to Brimor, you will be rewarded.”

The ambassador looked elated, his fins quivering as he bowed gratefully to his leader. Athgiloi ended the call, and before the ambassador’s face had disappeared from the holo-screen, the Deep lord was scrolling through the Fleet Command interface to contact the invasion armada. Requesting a status update, he waited for the interstellar communication to bounce between the comms beacons, crossing the vast amounts of space between Brimor and the Kintark Empire. Shoal Master Kaelotegh was quick to respond when the message finally reached his flagship, the Retribution from the Depths.

“The invasion is proceeding according to plan, Deep Lord,” Kaelotegh said, inclining his head respectfully towards the Brimorian leader. “Sixty-two systems have fallen under our control and we continue to sweep unopposed through Kintark territory. There has been no sign of Imperial warships and the planetary governors we interrogated have confirmed that system defence fleets departed weeks ago for the Terran invasion.”

“You will encounter no ships until you reach the homeworld. My spies on Kinta have reported that all the remaining Imperial forces are gathering there to mount a last stand,” Athgiloi calmly informed him.

The Shoal Master narrowed his eyes. “How large a force will we be facing?”

“Not enough to be a threat,” Athgiloi replied, looking unconcerned. “Approximately 300 warships are being refitted at the Mar’Trinark Shipyard.”

“Enough for two fleets...” Kaelotegh mused. “Should I set course for Kinta to destroy them mid-refit?”

“Yes, proceed there immediately. This is an excellent opportunity for us to eliminate all the remaining Kintark warships in one decisive battle. I want you to split your forces and encircle Kinta, approaching their capital from multiple directions so you can interdict any ships that try to escape. If you attack en mass along the invasion corridor, the Imperial forces will realise how massively outnumbered they are and evacuate with the Empress.”

The Shoal Master bared his needle-like teeth in a predatory snarl. “They will not escape our nets, Deep Lord!”

Athgiloi nodded curtly, then gestured with a claw. “The Kintark will be forced to fight a last stand in their home system, so it’s highly likely they’ll attempt to rig the battlefield in their favour. Watch you do not blunder into any traps.”

“We shall remain vigilant for minefields or other hazards, Deep Lord.”

Athgiloi fins rippled in anticipation. “I shall look forward to seeing an end to Empress Tamolith’s short reign, Shoal Master.”

“Do you wish her slain?”

“Bowed and beaten,” Athgiloi corrected him, a sadistic gleam in his dark eyes.

Kaelotegh inclined his head respectfully. “As you command, Deep Lord.”

Ending the call with a tap of his scaly claw, Athgiloi scanned through the rest of the messages he’d received earlier that morning. One of them was from the Dock Master at Braoimdh Nautica and he scanned through the transmission, then opened a comms channel with the massive shipyard. The sigil for the Enclave rippled away, revealing the flustered features of the Brimorian officer.

“Thank you for contacting me, Deep Lord,” the Dock Master said obsequiously. “I have received orders that are too implausible to be believed and wanted to ask for your confirmation. Shoal-Commander Siolagon has issued a ship deed transference writ... to a Terran!”

“The writ is to be honoured,” Athgiloi declared. “The Terran performed a great service to the Enclave.”

The Dock Master’s mouth fell open in shock. “B-but... he’s requesting a Cutaiocht-class cruiser!”

Athgiloi’s lips curled up into a wicked smile. “The agreement was for ‘a cruiser’, but no mention was made of the specific variant. Give him one of the obsolete Biol-class patrol ships instead.”

Chuckling at his leaders’ deviousness, the Dock Master bowed to him respectfully. “I will do as you command, Deep Lord.”

Ending the call, the Brimorian leader swam slowly back to Celphna, picturing all the neighbouring rulers brought to their knees by the might of the Enclave. The thought was thrilling and so very nearly in his grasp... definitely something worth celebrating.

“You may give me pleasure now, Celphna,” he declared, drawing his eager concubine to him.

The Nymph gave Athgiloi a seductive smile and began licking her way down his slippery scales.

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“Morning, John,” Calara said, leaning over his pillow to give him an upside-down kiss. “I’m going to make breakfast for everyone. Any requests?”

John stretched languidly as he stirred from sleep, feeling incredibly refreshed after the best night’s sleep he’d had in weeks. Looking up at the Latina’s smiling face, he kissed the tip of her nose. “Full English for me.”

“Coming right up!” she said brightly, before disappearing from view.

Glancing down, John saw that Rachel was resting her head on the left side of his chest and Tashana on the right. Spooned up behind them were Dana and Irillith, imprisoning his arms in their ample cleavage.

“I’d offer to help make breakfast, but I appear to be trapped...” he noted, smiling as the spooning girls pressed themselves even closer, ensuring there was no escape. “As prisons go, this has to be one of the galaxy’s finest.”

Jade prowled across the bed and straddled his legs, a playful gleam in her emerald eyes. “Just wait until you see how the prisoners get their exercise... it’s guaranteed to get your blood pumping, Master.”

As Rachel and Tashana showered him in kisses, Jade slowly enveloped his cock in her mouth, taking every inch into her snug throat in one smooth action. John smiled appreciatively at his Nymph matriarch, his happy expression turning to surprise as he felt five mouths sucking insistently on his length.

\*Don’t fight your release, Master,\* Jade urged him, her tongue wrapping around his shaft and furiously jacking his cock. \*I want to see how fast I can milk your quad!\*

\*Save some for yourself,\* he groaned to his Nymph Matriarch, clinging onto the girls beside him for dear life.

John didn’t even try holding back and it took the expert fellatrix less than ten seconds to get him spurting down her throat. It felt like her four sisters were sucking John’s quad inside out, as they slurped ferociously on Jade’s tentacles, vacuuming every last drop of cum out of his balls. By the time he recovered, a multi-hued display of light pulses was sweeping across the ceiling, the five Nymphs responding dramatically to his psychic enhancements.

“We’re off to take a shower,” Rachel said, kissing him on the cheek. “Join us when you’ve recovered.”

He managed an inarticulate moan in response, then his nubile prison guards released him and left the bed. They were almost instantly replaced by Jade and four fawning catgirls, their nimble hands roaming over his body.

“Thank you, Master,” Jade said softly, green pulses sweeping across her beautiful face. “This feels so wonderful.”

Her sincere words of gratitude were echoed by her sisters, each looked thrilled to be receiving his psychic attention.

“You’re all such good girls,” he said, stroking the hands caressing him. “I love the five of you so much. You honestly couldn’t make me any happier.”

That appeared to be the right thing to say, as he was soon buried under swooning catgirls. Even Jade looked touched by his words, the Nymph Matriarch leaning down to kiss him deeply. When John had fully recovered, Jade carefully dismounted him, allowing him to get up.

“You should probably avoid our guests for the next couple of hours,” he said, kissing her goodbye. “Jack was great about accepting everything Calara told him last night, but I’d rather not explain why my five sexy Nymphs are putting on a light show.”

“We’ll go for a swim in the Lagoon,” Jade replied, rising from the bed. “Time for more shape-shifting practice, sisters!”

The catgirls sprang to their feet and eagerly followed her from the Observatory, but Betrixa hesitated in the doorway and bounded back to John.

“This one is very sorry about last night, Master,” she said earnestly, her usual brash playfulness replaced by a shamefaced look of contrition. “I didn’t mean to make trouble for you or Calara... I would never do that intentionally.”

“I know, honey,” he replied, giving her a gentle kiss. “Please don’t be upset. I promise I’m not mad at you... I should have briefed you properly beforehand.”

Betrixa looked immensely relieved. “That might have been tricky,” she said, breaking into a grin. “I wasn’t wearing briefs last night... or anything else under my dress.”

He chuckled and patted her firm bottom. “Naughty girl... Have fun in the pool, I’ll see you later.”

She grinned and waved goodbye as she ran to catch up with her fellow Nymphs. John was left standing alone in the Observatory, so he entered the bathroom, nearly bumping into the twins who were about to leave.

“That was quick,” he remarked, stepping aside to let them pass.

“We’re heading up to the Bridge to relieve Sakura,” Tashana explained, giving him a loving kiss. “Jade wanted to feed all the Nymphs together this morning and Sakura volunteered to cover for them.”

“We’ll stay up there for most of the day,” Irillith elaborated, pausing to greet him with a hug. “Shan’s looking for anything in the Nexus files that might help us rebuild Faye and I’ll be investigating the traitors that attacked Olympus.”

“Do we have any idea who was responsible?” John asked, scowling at the thought they were still roaming free.

“Alyssa said that Lynette sent us everything they’ve discovered so far. Come up and see me later and I’ll give you a detailed update.”

“Will do,” he agreed, sharing smiles with the twins as they departed.

John could still hear the shower running in the bathroom, and he found Rachel and Dana soaping each other up when he opened the steamy cubicle.

“Thanks for waiting for me,” he said, joining them under the hot streams of water.

They separated and hugged him, their slippery breasts squashed against his chest.

“No problem, we were having fun,” Dana said with a grin. “I don’t normally have to wash my boobs five times, but Rach obviously thinks I’m very dirty...”

“That goes without saying,” the brunette said, kissing her on the cheek. She turned to give John a shy smile. “Last night was incredible. I thought I had more stamina than that... but in my defence, it all felt really, really good.”

“I loved it too,” he agreed, stroking their backs. “Getting you both off at the same time did my ego a power of good.”

Dana nodded enthusiastically. “When I told Kelli and Perl how huge you were, they suggested giving double cowgirl a try. Those girls are sex experts!”

Rachel gave him a doe-eyed look. “Best of all, we can use that position when we’re both pregnant. You’ll also be able to make love to the Young Matriarchs that way.”

John’s eyes widened at that idea. “That’s inspired!” He hugged both girls close. “I was worried regular sex would be impossible now they’re expecting.”

“Were you planning on just buggering them for the next 8 months?” Dana asked with a giggle.

He chuckled and shook his head. “No... of course not.”

She ran her hand over her stomach and smiled wistfully. “If that’s the only way I can fit all of you inside me while I’m knocked up, I’ll take it in the ass all day, every day.”

“Irillith’s going to be a very happy girl,” Rachel said, flashing a knowing smile at John. “I wonder if any of the Young Matriarchs will love it as much as her?”

“Oh yeah, they’re all anal virgins!” Dana gasped, with barely contained glee.

\*Not for much longer...\* Alyssa chimed in, unable to keep the excitement from her voice.

Rachel lifted her hand so that her engagement ring sparkled in the light. “Perhaps you could make them a memento to celebrate the occasion?”

\*They’d love that, John!\* Edraele exclaimed, sounding thrilled at the idea.

He hesitated, his face a mask of uncertainty. “I think making each of them a ring is a lovely idea, but wouldn’t it be a better idea to celebrate their pregnancies instead? I don’t want any of the Maliri to feel pressured into doing anything they’re not comfortable with and anal sex is taboo in their culture...”

“But what about Luna, Ilyana, and Almari?” Dana reminded him with a frown. “They’d all be thrilled if you made them a ring, but you’re not planning to knock them up anytime soon. You could fuck them all in the ass whenever you like though!”

John rolled his eyes. “Why do we have to link the two together? Can’t I just give them a gift because I love them?”

Rachel and Dana both shook their heads, frowning at that suggestion.

“What? Why not?” he asked in surprise.

“The Lioness rings have special significance to us, John,” Rachel said quietly, stroking his chest. “We earned them by giving ourselves to you completely.”

Dana nodded emphatically. “It’s like what Irillith said yesterday: You own us body and soul... the Lioness rings are a reminder of that.”

“But they’re meant to be engagement rings, not to signify how adventurous we’ve been in bed,” he said with amusement.

Dana admired the sparkling jewellery adorning her finger and smiling fondly. “They’re both.”

Rachel interlaced her fingers with Dana’s, the two rings now adjacent to each other. “Giving us the Lioness rings brought us even closer as a group. I think the Maliri will appreciate and value the special significance of earning this gift and it’ll bring them closer together too.”

\*I know Nyrelle is looking forward to pushing her boundaries with you,\* Edraele said in agreement. \*When the rest of the Young Matriarchs see how pleasurable it can be, I think you’ll find them only too eager to experience it for themselves.\*

\*You’ve already taken their other virginities... why not reward them for giving you the trifecta?\* Alyssa urged him.

Jade chose that moment to chime in too. \*My sisters are also curious why you haven’t taken them that way yet. I can assure you they’ll be very willing participants...\*

John couldn’t help groaning at the thought of all those gorgeous posteriors ready to be plundered.

Caressing his thickening shaft, Rachel gave him a coy smile. “Are your matriarchs whispering naughty things in your ear?”

Dana giggled at his guilty expression. “You’re totally thinking about breaking in the Young Matriarchs’ asses, aren’t you?”

“I was... until Jade told me her sisters are ready and willing,” John admitted, closing his eyes as he savoured Rachel’s delicate touch.

“Oh, you should totally do the catgirls!” the redhead gushed, nodding encouragingly. “They’re going to love it!”

\*I hate to interrupt this fascinating conversation, but breakfast is nearly ready,\* Alyssa informed him, sounding genuinely apologetic.

\*We’ll be right there,\* John replied, sharing a smile with Dana and Rachel.

The three of them quickly finished washing, then made thorough use of the auto-driers before heading to the wardrobe on the opposite side of the Observatory. John decided to go casual, picking out a t-shirt and combat trousers. The girls were still slipping on their clothes by the time he’d finished dressing, so he paused to openly admire their stunning figures, watching them pose for him when they noticed. Once they were all dressed, they left the Observatory and crossed the bridge over the Lagoon.

Slipping his hand into Dana’s, John asked, “Have you had a chance to examine Larn’kelnar’s sceptre?”

She nodded, turning to look at him with big innocent eyes. “It’s got a hard shaft and is twelve inches long.”

Rachel giggled and John couldn’t help laughing. “Sparks!”

Dana bumped hips with him and grinned. “Sorry, I couldn’t resist that one. Yeah, I studied it last night, after you went to see Calara. The first thing I noticed was that the rod is covered in progenitor runes for power amplification, so I think he was using it like a... focusing device.”

“That makes sense,” John said, looking thoughtful. “I’ve got the same runes inscribed on my sword.”

“I also had a look at the sceptre under an atomic scanner. Its structure is far denser than the metal samples I took from the shattered bed, so there must be a difference in the way they’re forged.”

“The black psychic aura radiating from the sample was also much stronger,” Rachel added, her expression turning bleak. “I’m pretty sure I won’t want to know why that is...”

Dana looked at him with trepidation. “I don’t think we’re going to get any more answers until I can take a look at a Soul Forge. If I get a flash of the schematics, I’ll be able to tell you exactly what it does to the metal.”

“Let’s hope it’s still standing on Kythshara then,” John said, nodding his understanding.

“Yeah... because we’re kinda screwed if it isn’t,” Dana admitted, looking worried.

Rachel darted a surprised glance at her girlfriend. “I thought you were being optimistic about finding everything in working order?”

“I am... I just hate not being able to figure out what makes the black metal so resilient,” the redhead growled in irritation. “It’s so frustrating... until I can develop some kind of alternative material that’s just as tough, we’re locked out from all the coolest tech.”

“Actually, there is one other way we can get our hands on those schematics,” John said quietly. “If I can defeat my guide, we’ll unlock everything the Progenitors know... then there won’t be any more secrets.”

“Okay, go kick his butt then!” Dana said, giving him an enthusiastic grin.

“I plan to,” he replied as they stepped into the grav-tube.

She looked at him in surprise. “What? Today?!”

Shaking his head, he gave her a rueful smile. “Not while Jack’s here. I’ve got some preparations to make, then I plan to confront my guide when we return to Genthalas.”

“Awesome... that’s not long!” Dana exclaimed, her eyes alight with anticipation. “The first thing I’m going to build is a Wormhole Generator! Plus the Invictus has got to have a Progenitor Shield Generator... and we need to upgrade her engines and thrusters asap! Oh, and the Heavy Cannons suck, so I’ve got to upgrade them to Quantum Flux Cannons... and while we’re at it, we should totally strap a Quantum Annihilator to the topdeck...”

While the Grand Engineering Overlord listed all the devices she was eagerly looking forward to building, Rachel was studying John intently. “What kind of preparations?”

“Jade’s been helping me to trust my instincts more...” he replied, trying not to sound too evasive. He led the two girls out of the grav-field on Deck Two. “I think it’ll really help if it comes down to a psychic duel between me and my guide.”

“You need every advantage you can get,” Rachel agreed, her sharp eyes watching him curiously.

He darted a glance at the brunette, but she had already turned away, looking lost in thought.

They entered the Officers’ Lounge and saw that Jack had already arrived and was sitting on the sofa with Sakura. They were watching TFNN, which showed the latest updates on the Kintark war crimes tribunal. Sakura leaned over to tell Jack that John had arrived, then rose from her seat to greet him.

“That was good timing,” she said with a warm smile. “Calara just informed us that breakfast was nearly ready.”

John’s stomach grumbled in anticipation, provoking laughter from the girls.

Sakura patted his stomach affectionately. “I’ll go and set the table.”

“We’ll help,” Rachel volunteered, dragging Dana with her. She smiled at Calara’s father. “Good morning!”

“Hey!” the redhead said cheerfully, waving as she passed. “Calara’s cooking is awesome, you’re in for a treat!”

“Good morning, ladies,” he replied, acknowledging them with a polite nod.

John joined his guest on the sofas. “I hope you slept well, Jack.”

“I slept like a log,” his future father-in-law replied, looking self-conscious. “That was the best night’s sleep I’ve had all week.”

“I’m glad you were comfortable,” John said, surprised but pleased. “After everything we told you, I thought you might be up all night worrying.”

“You certainly gave me a lot to think about,” Jack said with a wry smile. “But I was out like a light as soon as my head hit the pillow.”

John looked at him with sympathy. “You must have had a lot of sleepless nights recently. The lack of sleep probably caught up with you.”

Jack hesitated, then shook his head. “I don’t think that was it.” He paused, then corrected himself. “I actually haven’t been sleeping well recently... what with worrying about the Kirrix invasion, then Maria being attacked... but I didn’t pass out from exhaustion.”

Listening with interest, John waited patiently for him to elaborate.

“I felt... safe...” Jack said, clearly troubled by that admission. “It was comforting to know that you and your Lionesses are protecting the Terran Federation. Being here on this ship, I felt safer than I have in years.” He shot John a pensive frown. “My daughter’s waging a war I can barely even comprehend and I should be horrified that Calara’s involved... but I’m glad that she’s fighting at your side. Does that make me a bad father?”

Rather than reflexively replying in the negative, John seriously considered the question. “I think it comes down to trust. We showed you video footage of Calara achieving spectacular victories against impossible odds and I think you’ve come to realise just how truly remarkable she is. You trust your daughter... and with very good reason; there isn’t anyone else in the Terran Federation that comes close to her tactical and strategic genius. Who wouldn’t feel reassured that the best of the best is protecting them?”

“Watching her in action... it was breathtaking,” Jack murmured, his expression filled with wonder. “I saw hints of her brilliance in the public videos that High Command released, but to see my little girl assuming command of the entire Terran Federation defence force...” His voice caught and he swallowed thickly.

“Calara’s a credit to you and Maria,” John said, patting him on the shoulder. “Do I think you’re a bad father? Never in a million years. You have a wonderful daughter and three fine sons; I just hope that one day I can do half as good a job as you’ve done raising your kids.”

Jack looked grateful and moved by John’s sincerity. “Thank you... but I think Maria deserves most of the credit. She was always there for them when I was called away, serving on the Damocles for months at a time.”

“They understood you were doing your duty,” John disagreed. “All your children respect you... and you earned that by being a great father when you were home. Calara talks about you in glowing terms and it’s easy to see that her brothers feel the same way. Trust me... I know what it’s like to have a bad father.”

Surprised by the sudden bitterness in John’s voice, Jack looked at him with concern. “Maria mentioned that you were an orphan?”

“Yeah... I am,” John muttered, clenching his fist.

“Breakfast is ready!” Alyssa announced, her breezy voice cutting through the moment of awkward silence.

John shrugged off his dark mood and looked at Jack with sincere regret. “I just wanted to say... I’m so sorry for what happened to Maria. If there was anything I could’ve done to prevent the attack, please believe me that I would have done it. I can’t help feeling responsible for her being in danger; if we’d kept Calara’s identity as a Lioness secret, this never would’ve happened.”

Startled by the abrupt shift in conversation topic, Jack shook his head. “That wasn’t your fault. Calara told her mother all about Devereux springing the Lion title on you and turning the medal ceremony into a huge PR exercise. I’ve heard the speeches you gave those crowds; you were just trying to raise their morale, not flaunt your victories for personal gain. I don’t blame you for what happened and neither does my wife.”

Breathing out a sigh of relief, John finally smiled. “I’m really glad you both feel that way.”

Calara walked over to join them. “Is everything okay?”

“Everything’s fine,” Jack replied, hugging his daughter. “Mmm, something smells good.”

“Feel free to get stuck in,” she said, gesturing towards the table with a grin.

Jack walked over to the dining table, joining the girls in taking a seat. “This looks incredible, Callie...”

Turning to glance at John she whispered, “Are you alright?”

“Yeah, I’m good,” he replied, greeting her with a kiss.

They walked over to the table that was covered in food, from pancakes, waffles, to everything needed for a traditional cooked breakfast. The normal seating order had been abandoned to accommodate their guests, except for Alyssa and Calara sitting to the right and left of John at the head of the table.

“Eat it while it’s hot,” Calara said, spearing a sausage and adding it to her plate.

Everyone was present from the crew except the Nymphs and the Maliri twins, but their last two guests were also late getting up.

John glanced at the two empty spaces mid-way down the table. “Did anyone tell Emily and Mateo that breakfast was ready?”

Alyssa nodded, pausing with a hash brown half-way to her mouth. “I asked the twins to give them a wake-up call. They’re on their way.”

He had just finished serving himself when the young couple hurried through the door looking flustered.

“Sorry we’re late,” Emily apologised. “We overslept.”

“We didn’t get much sleep last night,” Mateo explained, before wincing at how that sounded.

Emily blushed furiously at the knowing looks from the girls. “We were just talking!”

Sakura took sympathy on the blonde and patted the chair beside her. “I saved you a spot, Emily. Help yourself to food... can I get you a drink?”

“Some orange juice would be lovely, thank you,” she replied with a grateful smile.

Everyone dug into breakfast, conversation coming to a temporary lull as they enjoyed their meal.

When John had finished, he got up to pour himself a coffee, and leaned down to kiss Calara on the cheek. “That was fantastic, honey. I couldn’t have cooked that any better myself.”

“The pancakes were delicious,” Jack agreed, leaning back and patting his stomach with a contented sigh. “Don’t tell your mother, but I prefer yours.”

Calara beamed at them in delight. “I’m so glad you enjoyed it!”

“Coffee, Jack?” John asked, holding up the coffee pot.

“Yes please.”

After serving Calara’s father, John poured out coffee for anyone else who asked for it.

He returned to his seat and looked around the table. “So, what are you girls up to today?”

Calara spoke up first. “I thought I’d give my dad a tour of the Invictus, as long as that’s alright by you?”

“Of course,” he replied, giving her an indulgent smile.

“Could I join you?” Mateo requested, looking hopefully at his sister.

“The more the merrier,” Calara readily agreed. “Emily, would you like to come along too?”

The blonde hesitated before answering, “I was hoping to see more of the Nymphs this morning. Are they coming for breakfast?”

“John fed them when we woke up,” Sakura explained, keeping her expression neutral. “Jade wanted to get an early start; she’s teaching her sisters how to improve their shape-shifting.”

“I heard Nymphs could shape-shift... into their master’s perfect woman,” Emily said, darting a curious glance at John before focusing on the brunette again. “Is there any chance I could watch them practice? I’d love to see them transforming into different people.”

“I don’t think it’s people they’re changing into...” Jack said with a shudder.

Sakura glanced at John for his permission and when he granted it with a nod, she smiled at the blonde. “I’ll take you to see the Nymphs after breakfast.”

“Oh, thank you!” Emily gushed, looking thrilled.

“I’ll come with you,” Helene said, smiling at the thought. “It feels like ages since I had a good swim.”

Mateo looked surprised. “You have a pool? How big is it?”

“It’s a decent size,” Calara replied, her brown eyes twinkling. “We’ll finish the tour there, then you can have a splash around if you want.”

“Sounds like fun,” he said enthusiastically. “I brought some swimming shorts in my kit bag.”

“I’ll be up on the Command Deck,” Alyssa said, when John looked her way. “I’ve got plenty of financial work to keep me occupied, then I’ll be making course corrections when we get closer to the Core Worlds.”

“I’m going to wrap up that robotics project with Rachel and Irillith,” Dana said, grinning at John. “It won’t take us long to finish. Do you want to head down to my Workshop after breakfast?”

“Definitely,” he agreed, wondering how Little One was going to react to her new body. “I can help you with the present while I’m there too.”

She nodded eagerly. “Awesome! I threw together some schematics last night, so you can start shaping whenever you’re ready.”

John finished his coffee, then started clearing the table. When Calara got up to help, he shooed her away. “You made breakfast for everyone. Go and enjoy some time with your family.”

She turned to grin at her father and brother. “The Invictus tour is about to depart. Please keep your arms and legs inside the carriage at all times.”

Mateo laughed as he joined his sister. “Do you remember when we went to that Safari Park for your 8th birthday?”

“Oh yeah!” Calara replied with a giggle. “Eduardo jumped out of the car and nearly got eaten by a tiger!”

Jack groaned and shook his head. “I still don’t know how he managed to disable the child locks. If Dylan hadn’t managed to grab him in time, Eduardo really would’ve tried to stroke that beast. I think he nearly gave Maria a heart attack.”

The three left the Officers’ Lounge together, fondly recalling the Fernandez family vacations. Emily and Sakura followed them out, with the blonde asking her guide a flurry of questions about the Nymphs as they headed to the Lagoon. John watched their guests depart, then glanced at the girls accompanying him, seeing wistful looks on Alyssa’s and Dana’s faces. Rachel appeared equally moved, but there was a sadness in her grey eyes rather than longing.

“We’ll have that one day... all our children reminiscing together,” he said, slipping his arms around the brunette from behind and gently stroking her stomach. “You’re going to be a great mother, Rachel, just like Catherine was.”

The two Karron girls turned to embrace her, turning it into a group hug.

“Do you reckon our kids are all going to be best friends too?” Dana asked, looking at him with her big blue eyes.

“I guarantee it,” John said with conviction. “With you three as their mothers, how can they not turn out to be amazing kids? They’re going to love spending time together.”

The three girls shared blissful smiles with each other.

“They’re going to be nauseatingly happy, aren’t they?” Rachel asked, leaning back against him. “With all of us watching over them, they’re practically guaranteed an idyllic childhood.”

He heard the hint of worry in Rachel’s voice, her words actually a desperate plea for reassurance about the future. “There’s no doubt about it,” John said, beckoning Helene over to join them. “With a powerful empath on standby, there won’t even be any squabbling.”

The Terran teenagers welcomed Helene into their arms, kissing her affectionately.

“This is the first time I’ve thought about what it’s really going to be like raising our children together,” Alyssa said, a look of wonder in her eyes. “Our kids aren’t going to have any worries or insecurities, because I’ll be able to find out exactly what’s bothering them, then Rachel and Helene can help them get through it.”

Dana looked at him in admiration. “You really knew what you were doing when you enhanced everyone.”

“We would’ve been fine even without psychic powers,” John said, caressing the redhead. “The most important quality in a parent is that you love your children... and you girls are the most loving people I’ve ever met.”

They let out a collective sigh of contentment, the quartet radiating happiness.

John smiled at them affectionately. “Come on, we can’t stand around here hugging all day. I’ll tidy up and meet you down in Engineering.”

The Terran girls departed after kissing him goodbye, but Helene lingered behind. “I’m not doing anything important, I’d like to help.”

“Thanks, honey,” he said gratefully, before collecting up the plates.

Helene was lost in thought as she cleared the table with him, ferrying crockery and cutlery to the kitchen to be placed in the dishwasher.

“You look like you’ve got a lot on your mind,” John observed, when he loaded the last of the coffee cups and activated the machine. “What’re you thinking about?”

“Oh... just the different ways of raising children,” Helene replied, giving him a self-conscious smile. “The way we’re planning to live together is similar to the way Abandoned mothers help look after babies as a group... but their children are sent to different villages when they’re six. I hadn’t really thought about that before, but it must be awful having to say goodbye and break up the family.”

“We definitely won’t be doing that,” John said, picking Helene up and placing her on the worktop. He stepped closer as she parted her thighs for him, then caressed her teal-hued stomach with the backs of his fingers. “We’ll be looking after our children until they’re adults and able to make their own way in the world. Even then, we’ll still see them as much as we can.”

“That sounds wonderful,” she murmured, gazing at him adoringly. “Then we’ll have another baby and start all over again?”

“For the rest of your life, if that makes you happy,” he said, leaning in to kiss her.

As Helene swooned in his arms, Alyssa’s telepathic voice swept through his mind. \*Are you trying to get me love drunk again? You seem to be on a mission to make the girls as ecstatic as possible... me included! What’s got into you?\*

\*Just making sure you’re all happy,\* he replied, enjoying hearing Helene’s soft moans as she responded to his kiss.

There was a long pause from his blonde matriarch, before she said, \*You’ve done the right thing by all of us, John. Even Jack was able to see that and you know how protective he is of his daughter.\*

John ended the kiss with Helene and held her close. \*What he said though, wondering if Calara was still his little girl... it got me thinking. Is there a point where I change you so much that you’re not the same person anymore?\*

\*I honestly don’t know...\* she replied, seriously considering the question.

\*That was certainly true in my case,\* Edraele said thoughtfully. \*And perhaps true for my daughters too.\*

\*The three of you have had a drastic personality shift,\* John agreed, recalling how traumatised the House Valaden noblewomen had been. \*You were all so damaged by what you’d been through, I think I can forgive myself for trying to make everything better.\*

\*I had a very dark past, but you’ve given me a second chance to lead a good life,\* Edraele said with conviction. \*I like to believe that my daughters and I became the women we always should have been.\*

\*That’s how I like to think of you too,\* he said, smiling as he thought about the three Maliri.

\*There’s no denying you’ve changed the rest of us too,\* Alyssa finally conceded. \*But they’ve been positive changes, making us brighter, more outgoing, and giving us the confidence we lacked. Before you got to know Sparks, she was short-tempered, sarcastic, and introverted, but she had a heart of gold. You kept the part of her that I loved and encouraged the rest of her personality to shine. You’ll never be able to convince me that wasn’t a wonderful gift to her.\*

\*And what about Calara?\*

\*What I said to Jack was the honest truth. You have enhanced his daughter, but the differences were subtle... enough that he never even suspected anything had happened. She was a lovely girl who’d grown up with a stable, caring family... the core person that Calara was hasn’t changed. The old version would never have dared to stand up to Jack like she did last night... but was that such a terrible thing? Instead of living in fear of rejection, she was open and honest with her father... and they’re closer now than they’ve ever been.\*

Helene pulled back to study John’s thoughtful expression. “Are you talking to your matriarchs?” she whispered, trying not to interrupt.

He smiled and nodded. “I was concerned about how much I’d changed each of you, so they were giving me their opinions.”

“Well I used to be very sad, but you changed me so I was happy!” she said with a bright smile.

John gently stroked her cheek. “That can’t be bad, right?”

She shook her head, her long green mane swishing over her shoulders. “No, I can’t see how it could be. I think the biggest change you made was giving each of us psychic powers, but you only gave us a little bit of yourself... so we haven’t changed all that much.”

“I hadn’t really thought about it like that before,” he admitted, nodding thoughtfully. Focusing on the aquatic beauty again, he continued, “I thought you were a sweet girl when we first met and I think you’re even more lovely now. I’m very glad you joined us, Helene.”

“Me too!” she exclaimed, giving him an enthusiastic hug.

John helped her down off the worktop, then they left the Kitchen hand-in-hand. They said their farewells in the grav-tube and Helene waved goodbye as she stepped into the corridor on Deck Three, leaving John to continue floating downwards to the Engineering Bay. When he entered the huge room, he found Dana, Rachel, and Irillith in the middle of a conversation with Little One. If he was a gambling man, John would have wagered a considerable amount of credits that the subject of the discussion was the row of female metallic figures lined up across the Workshop.

“Why didn’t you tell me you’d already finished the bots?” John asked in surprise as he walked over to join them.

“Because *WE* didn’t...” Dana replied, before jerking her thumb towards Little One. “The Collective couldn’t wait and built them for us overnight.”

He studied the robotic forms and was suitably impressed. Each of the five-foot-tall robots was shaped like a petite girl, with an hourglass figure and shapely bust. The maid uniforms were built into the outer layer of their chassis and looked risqué without being blatantly provocative. What surprised him the most was the adorably cute faces each of them had, with big eyes, wide smiles, and voluminous manes of synthetic hair.

“What do you reckon?” Dana asked, holding her breath with anticipation.

“Alright, I admit I was wrong... they look great,” John conceded, nodding appreciatively. “You did a really nice job with the design.”

“Thanks!” the redhead exclaimed, beaming in delight.

Rachel laughed and playfully elbowed her girlfriend. “You fraud! I saw you trawling the holo-net for pictures of sexy robo-babes. There’s a horny artist out there somewhere, who’d have a heart attack if he saw his android fantasies brought to life.”

Dana had the decency to look guilty for her plagiarism. “I got so much shit from you guys over the maintenance bots’ grinning faces and I didn’t want to mess these up. The Collective are like real robot people now, so I wanted them to look awesome!”

John squatted down next to Little One. “Do the cleaning robots really like this design?” he asked with a pensive frown. “I want them to choose a body they’re genuinely happy with, not feel obligated to pick something they think we might prefer.”

“Thank you for your concern, John Blake, but it is unwarranted,” Little One replied. “The decision was unanimous.”

“I showed them a bunch of different designs, including buff robo-dudes, but they all loved this one,” Dana said, patting a robotic chassis on the arm.

Little One bobbed her domed head in agreement. “As I’ve been designated as female, the rest of the cleaning robots wished to adopt the same gender. The aesthetics of this particular variant were beautiful and closest in proportion to Meta\_Faye. She adored her remote chassis and I believe she would have approved of these new bodies.”

“I think Faye would have loved them too,” Rachel said with a sad smile.

Irillith’s eyes stopped glowing and she turned to address the group. “I’ve checked the remote connections to the digital network and each chassis has full connectivity. I also ran a system-wide diagnostic and all functions are in perfect working order.”

Dana grinned at Little One. “You hear that? They’re ready to take for a spin.”

No sooner had she finished speaking than the line of newly constructed automatons began to hum quietly as they activated. They stayed still for a long moment, the robots staring straight ahead as the neophyte AIs were uploaded to their new homes. Just as John was about to ask if there was a problem, each of the female robots seemed to relax, losing their rigid, straight-backed posture, and slipping into a coquettish pose.

All at once, the robots were a hive of activity, from staring wide-eyed at their slender new hands, to hopping up and down to test the responsiveness of their leg actuators. John and the girls watched them in fascination, seeing the robots acclimatise themselves to the extensive functionality their new homes provided. Apparently, their beautiful figures were not just there to look pretty, as they contained a wide range of concealed gadgets, ranging from vacuum attachments to telescopic mops.

It was obvious to see how delighted the robots were and one-by-one they bounded over to hug the girls in gratitude. John thought it was a spontaneous outpouring of affection at first, until he noticed that the dozen cleaning bots were meticulously coordinated, smoothly thanking each girl before moving onto the next. The first robot to finish embracing the trio walked over to him, a bright smile on her face.

[+++ stated with gratitude +++ [Begin statement] Thank you for my new body, {John Blake}. [/End statement]]

“You’re welcome,” he replied, his eyes sweeping over her petite figure. “That plating is twenty-shaped Crystal Alyssium, so you’re immune to laser fire and practically bullet proof. I don’t want you getting into any combat, but if you do get in trouble, you’re about as tough as we can make you.”

{+++ stated with sincere affection +++ [Begin shy acknowledgement] I know. [/End acknowledgement] [Begin tentative request] Would a physical display of gratitude be acceptable? [/End request]]

The robot opened her arms and looked at him with a hopeful expression.

“You want a hug?” he asked, returning her smile. “Sure.”

The robot stepped forward and carefully slipped her arms around him, her smaller frame nuzzling up against his broad chest. Even though her Crystal Alyssium body was cold and hard, he could still feel the warmth and tenderness in that embrace. John then found himself in a procession of hugs as each of the cleaning robots thanked him for shaping their nigh-indestructible bodies. When the last pulled away, she tickled his nose with a feather duster, before flouncing out of the Engineering Bay with her giggling robotic compatriots.

“I think they’ve got a crush on you,” Irillith said, grinning at his bemused expression.

“They certainly weren’t shy about hugging the rest of us,” Rachel observed with a wry smile.

John frowned in confusion. “But all I did to help was the psychic shaping. Sparks did all the hard work, like designing the schematics and building all the internal components.”

Dana walked over and gave him a tender kiss. “Yeah, but they know it was all your idea. You wanted to keep them safe and suggested making them new bodies.”

“That is correct, John Blake,” Little One said, rolling to a halt beside him. “They were touched that you care about their wellbeing.”

He coughed awkwardly in embarrassment. “Alright, well let’s get your new body finished too.”

The lights on Little One’s robotic chassis suddenly dimmed, the cleaning robot neatly folding in on itself as it was deactivated.

“Hey, what happened?!” John blurted out, squatting down beside the motionless automation to check she was okay.

“Don’t be alarmed,” a soft voice said from behind them. “I simply shut down my obsolete chassis.”

There was movement by one of the Mass Fabricators and a petite robotic girl stepped into view. She looked similar to the cleaning robots, but was clearly far more sophisticated, her face and body less stylised and closer to a Terran female. Her expressive features were slightly exaggerated, with big luminous eyes, a button nose, and a wide mouth which lifted at the corners into a lovely smile. The end result was beautiful, her face endearing without being too eerily close to a Terran’s, neatly sidestepping the Uncanny Valley effect.

“The maintenance robots also completed construction of my new body last night,” Little One explained as she glided over to join them. “I wanted the others to enjoy being the centre of attention and my upgraded chassis would have been a distraction.”

“That was very kind of you,” Rachel said, looking impressed at her thoughtfulness.

Little One acknowledged her with a smile, then turned to look up at John. “Does my body meet with your approval, John Blake?”

“Definitely,” he replied, with an approving nod. “Are you happy with your new look?”

She glanced down at her alluring synthetic figure and considered the question for a moment. “I thought Dana’s proposed design was beautiful, but I only agreed to the upgrade because I wanted to assume a form that would improve relations with the crew. Now that I’ve had time to become familiarised with my new body, I find that my perception of self has changed.”

He looked at her in surprise. “You actually feel different?”

Little One nodded, her expression thoughtful. “I feel more integrated as part of the crew. That shift in perception makes me feel... happy.”

“You did just have an awesome new makeover, that always feels great!” Dana said, exuberantly hugging the robot. She sighed with contentment as she wrapped her arms around the synthetic girl. “I’m really glad you agreed to the upgrade, it’s so much easier to hug you now!”

“I’m... glad... as well,” Little One replied, gently squeezing the redhead in return.

Irillith looked at the petite automaton with particular interest. “Would you mind if I take a look at your code to see if anything’s changed?”

“You have full access, Creator,” Little One replied, smiling at the Maliri over Dana’s shoulder.

Rachel was quick to replace Dana in hugging the robot girl. “It really feels like you’re part of the family now.”

The slender robot froze in the brunette’s arms. Her flawless white features took on a look of puzzlement, then her eyes widened in wonder, the pupils dilating until they were like fathomless black pools.

Rachel felt Little One go rigid in her arms and pulled back to look at her with concern. “What’s wrong? Did I say something that upset you, Little One?”

Staring off into the distance, the robot slowly replied, “My name... it’s... Daphne.”

John shared startled looks with Dana and Rachel. “Did you just pick that name?”

Before the synthetic girl could reply, Irillith interjected. “Faye chose it!”

The Maliri’s eyes were glowing with a violet light as she immersed herself in the Cyber Realm, studying the robot’s code. “I just searched for any new programs activated today... and there’s a module that was accessed for the first time, something called: ‘Phase Three’.”

“Phase Three? What were the last two?” Dana asked, stroking the robots arm.

“There’s so much here... I’m just reading through the code comments...” Irillith murmured, sounding fascinated. “Apparently, Little One was supposed to just observe us to start with, going about her duties and learning more about organics and the way we relate to each other. Phase One was initiated when she began spontaneously writing new code, developing procedures to handle her interactions with the crew. Faye predicted that Little One would spend several months in this state, slowly developing a suite of new sub-routines to cover as many eventualities as possible.”

John frowned and looked at the robot with sympathy. “But then we lost Faye...”

Irillith nodded. “That devastated the Collective and without Faye around to guide them, Little One reached out to us. Our shared sense of grief brought us closer together, forcing her to develop at a very rapid rate as she acted as our liaison with the Collective. When Little One saw how upset you were over Faye and posed her body to make her look like she was sleeping, that act of compassion triggered Phase Two...”

When her voice trailed off, John waited for a few seconds before impatience got the better of him. “What happened then?”

“I’m just reading through it now,” Irillith apologised, gazing distractedly at something only she could see. “Faye was worried we might shut her server down when we found out she’d been secretly experimenting with Artificial Intelligence, so she created that VI to explain herself. She hoped we wouldn’t deactivate the Collective and that Little One would continue to develop her friendship with us as she became more sophisticated. Phase Two had a number of clauses that had to be satisfied before Phase Three could be unlocked...”

There was another brief pause as the Maliri scanned through the list. “At least ten independent acts of kindness from the crew towards Little One and the Collective, a minimum of fifty sub-routines created to handle interactions with us...” Her voice trailed off again as she continued reading. “Oh! This was what Faye was hoping for all along! She wanted Little One to feel truly accepted, with both John and at least one of the girls verbally acknowledging that she’s part of the family. Once that condition had been satisfied, Faye chose a default name for her daughter if we hadn’t picked one already.”

“Faye wanted you to be like her, Daphne,” Dana said softly, brushing a tear from her cheek. “You’re a real person, just like Faye was... and she wanted to make sure you had a proper name.”

“Mother...” Daphne murmured, her mournful voice no more than a whisper. “I miss her...”

John enfolded the orphaned robo-girl in a comforting hug, his heart going out to her. Faye had been her creator, her mentor, her friend... and the closest being in the galaxy to what Daphne had eventually become. The cruellest irony was that Daphne had developed far beyond the other members of the Collective, making her truly unique... just like Faye had been. He desperately hoped that Daphne wouldn’t feel isolated and alone as her mother had before her.

“We miss Faye too, honey,” he said, stroking her soft synthetic hair. “But she would’ve been so proud of you.”

Daphne looked up at him, a real sense of vulnerability in her eyes. “Do you really think so?”

He nodded, giving her an encouraging smile. “Absolutely. You’ve become everything Faye was hoping for when she started the Collective project. She would have loved you, Daphne... I don’t doubt that for a second.”

“You are kind, John Blake,” she murmured, resting her head against his chest. “Faye cared for you with every fibre of her being and I’m starting to understand why. If it was possible for me to have had a father... I would have chosen you.”

John swallowed around the lump in his throat and squeezed her tight. He glanced at Dana, Rachel, and Irillith, and saw that there was not a dry eye among them.

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Fleet Admiral Devereux stood by the sweeping window, staring at the latest Terran Federation fleet to arrive at Olympus. She placed her hands by the glass and spread them apart, activating the panoramic zoom overlay in the holographic interface. The view was magnified tenfold, giving her an impressive view of the colossal titanium-plated dreadnought at the forefront, its name embossed in ten-metre-tall lettering along the bow that read: “The Shield of Heimdall”.

Her gaze moved to the front of the behemoth, to study the severe damage the Terran capital ship had sustained to its prow. There were jagged chunks of blue armour still impaled in the grey titanium hull, graphic evidence of the devastating collision that had obliterated a Brimorian battleship. Devereux shook her head in admiration, still amazed that the commander of that titanic dreadnought had managed to escape the Enclave trap with so much of his fleet still intact.

The intercom on her desk chimed, drawing her attention with its irritating tone. Striding over, she tapped on the holo-interface to accept the call. “Yes, Lieutenant?”

Her adjutant’s voice rang out, “I have Admiral Kester and Admiral Harris here to see you, Ma’am.”

“Send them in please, Jared,” she requested, turning towards the door.

Her fiancé entered first, Charles’ moustache twitching as he greeted her with a smile. “Look who I found skulking around the shuttle bay.”

“Skulking?” Anthony Kester said in mock indignation. “The triumphant hero returning to receive his justly deserved accolades does not skulk!”

“Welcome back, Anthony,” Lynette said with a warm smile. “I was actually just admiring your handiwork...”

Charles walked closer to the window and studied the extensive damage to the dreadnought’s bow. “I’m amazed the superstructure held together as well as it did. You really rammed a battleship at full speed?”

Kester smacked his fist into his palm. “It was like a bug hitting the windshield... just a bit messier.”

“Yes, I can imagine,” Charles said with a wry smile. “I’ll try to get your ships repaired as quickly as possible, but the drydock is already at full capacity refitting the fleets after the Battle of Terra.”

“I won’t object to a nice bit of R&R while I’m waiting...” Kester said hopefully, darting a grin in the Fleet Admiral’s direction. “Buckingham stuck me out on the Trankaran border for months.”

“You’ve more than earned it,” Lynette agreed, walking over to the coffee table. “Would you gentlemen care for a drink?”

They requested coffees, which she poured for them as they joined her on the sofas.

Kester took a sip, then jerked a thumb over his shoulder towards the fleet. “My cap ships took a battering, but I wasn’t expecting them to be in better shape than Olympus. I had no idea the damage to the station was so severe.”

“We lost a lot of good marines in that attack,” Lynette said with a grim frown. “Admiral Schmidt too... he never had a chance. The ISD shock troops were well-organised and caught us completely by surprise. It’s a minor miracle that we didn’t lose a lot more people before we neutralised their forces.”

“A miracle? Is that what we’re calling them?” Kester smirked. “Is there any chance I can be assigned a cohort of gorgeous miracles to my fleet? Well... technically one of them is a reporter, but a cadre of crack journalists would be just as good.”

Lynette felt a sinking feeling in her chest. “What do you mean?”

“May I?” he asked, gesturing towards the holo-interface built into the coffee table. When the Fleet Admiral nodded, he started tapping at the icons. “I was catching up on the news this morning and saw this... it’s all over the holo-net.”

Two holo screens appeared in front of Lynette, floating just above the coffee table. The first showed unsteady footage from a trooper’s helmet camera, with terrified crowds fleeing from the Galleria. Suddenly there was a dazzling burst of laser fire, the pulses of blue light drawing everyone’s attention to a stunningly beautiful brunette who held a glowing pistol aloft. “Lioness coming through!” she yelled a second later, and the teeming horde parted like the Red Sea.

The second image was an equally shaky hand-held recording of a gorgeous raven-haired girl striding purposefully into the Voss reception area, her boots crunching on broken glass. She had the same distinctive laser pistol held in her outstretched hand, an ominous blue light gleaming along the long barrel. The squad of ISD insurgents spotted her and showered the woman in a hail of bullets, but the rounds all bounced off harmlessly, leaving her completely unscathed. Ignoring the storm of lead, she began methodically executing the renegade soldiers, pausing only briefly to shrug off the blast from a fragmentation grenade.

There was no mistaking who was responsible for that slaughter, the beautiful TFNN reporter turning to survey the steaming corpses to check for survivors. As if to drive that point home, the caption below the two videos stated: “Lioness Jehanna Elani saves Henry Voss!”

Lynette clenched her fists in anger. “God dammit!”

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“Do you have to rush off again?” Harini Elani asked, frowning with disapproval at her daughter. “You only just got here!”

Jehanna laughed and rolled her eyes. “I just spent the whole weekend with you, Mama. I’d love to stay longer, but I need to get back to Olympus this evening.”

Harini’s expression darkened with concern. “Are you trying to drive your poor mother into an early grave? You’re not safe there, Jehanna. I’ve been worried sick since the attack!”

“It’s safe now, I promise,” Jehanna said, giving her a reassuring smile.

“How can you promise me something like that? Just this month Olympus was attacked by an alien war fleet and blown up by terrorists!” Harini protested. “You should speak to that horrible boss of yours... Avery. Tell that man it’s too dangerous there and demand that he transfer you back to Terra!”

Jehanna shook her head and patiently explained, “I had contacts in High Command and they offered me the opportunity to be Press Liaison for the Admiralty. Avery didn’t want me to go to Olympus and actually asked me to stay based in the TFNN building.”

“I always liked him,” her mother said, nodding sagely. “You should listen to Avery... go back to being Lead Anchor. I miss seeing you on the Holonet every evening after dinner.”

“Mama... I’ve got one of the most prestigious jobs in the Terran Federation,” Jehanna said, with an exasperated sigh. “I was there to witness history in the making; Fleet Admiral Devereux forging an alliance with Queen Edraele Valaden, the leader of the Maliri Protectorate! TFNN Lead Anchor would be a huge step backwards.”

“There’s more to life than your career,” Harini admonished her, wagging a finger in Jehanna’s direction.

“I know... you’ve told me lots of times.” Jehanna mimicked her mother’s voice as she continued, “You should find yourself a good husband. Start having children while you’re still young and have lots of energy!”

“Well you should,” Harini harrumphed indignantly. Her eyes glinted with maternal cunning, then she asked gently, “What does your mysterious new man think about having a family?”

Leaning back against the countertop, Jehanna sighed wistfully and gazed out into the garden. “He’d love to have children... and a big part of me longs to choose that life with him. The problem is, it would mean giving up my career and I’m not sure if I’m ready to do that yet.”

“You could always go back to work after maternity leave?” Harini suggested. A hopeful smile appeared on her face. “You know I’d love to help you look after my grandchildren...”

Jehanna hesitated, then shook her head. “It’s not as simple as that, Mama.”

Harini threw her hands up in exasperation. “It’s complicated... yes, I know! But that’s all you’ve told me! I don’t understand why you have to keep your man a secret from your own mother! Are you ashamed of him? Is he a criminal?”

“Don’t be ridiculous, mother, you already know he’s in the military.” Rolling her eyes again, Jehanna walked over to the kettle and filled it with water. “Cup of tea?”

“Hmph... Yes, go on then,” Harini muttered, wondering how she could pry more information from her daughter.

Jehanna turned and yelled over her shoulder, “Cup of tea, Papa?” She glanced at her mother and smiled as she whispered his predictable reply, “Not much milk, no sugar...”

“Not much milk, no sugar!” her father yelled back from the lounge.

Jehanna had heard the same phrase repeated thousands of times over the years, and was suddenly struck by a wave of nostalgia, remembering her happy childhood growing up in the family home. It wasn’t just her career that she’d have to give up to raise her own family with John in the Maliri Protectorate... she’d have to leave behind her parents too. Her eyes welled up at that thought and she felt more conflicted than ever.

“Sweetheart, what’s wrong?” Harini asked with concern, giving her a supportive hug.

“I-I’d love to tell you all about him, Mama...” Jehanna said, leaning into her embrace. “But I can’t... I have to keep who he is a secret to protect you.”

Harini stroked her daughter’s long silky black hair. “Are you really sure he’s the one for you, Jehanna?” she asked tentatively. “I must admit, I’m worried that you can’t even tell me who he-”

“JEHANNA! Get your ass in here!” her father thundered, drowning out his wife.

Mother and daughter blinked in surprise and exchanged a startled look. Neither of them could ever remember her father addressing her in such a manner. Jehanna strode out of the kitchen with Harini hurrying behind, then down the long hallway and into the Lounge, where her father was standing in front of the holo-screen.

He turned and stabbed an accusatory finger at the split-screen images that dominated the far wall. “Care to explain what the hell is going on?!”

Bewildered at what could have so upset her father, Jehanna turned to look at the holographic projection... and her breath caught when she realised what it was. She watched herself shoot bursts of laser fire at ISD insurgents, blasting gaping holes through their chest armour as she mercilessly executed the entire squad.

“Oh no...” Jehanna whispered, her heart filled with dread as her world came crashing down.

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Alyssa activated the holo-interface in John’s desk and swiped through her trading accounts. A triumphant grin spread across her face when she saw the huge profits she’d made, her investment in starship construction companies paying handsomely after Henry Voss’ acquisitions. The pressing question now, was what to invest in next. She considered the astonishing results that Rachel had achieved in curing another batch of supposedly incurable diseases, then shorted the stock on the companies providing temporary pain relief for those ailments.

\*Rachel, have you created vaccines for all those lethal diseases you cured?\* she asked the gifted doctor.

\*Not yet, but creating vaccines would be trivial by comparison.\*

\*What are vaccinations usually made from?\* Alyssa pressed, her mind ticking over.

Rachel immediately replied, \*The antigen for the pathogen, be that a virus or bacteria, which is usually mixed with an adjuvant to stimulate a stronger immune response. Then the usual preservatives, antibiotics, and stabilizers, all delivered by hypo-injector.\*

\*Super, thanks!\*

\*Why did you want to know?\* the brunette asked, her curiosity piqued.

\*I’m making it rain...\* Alyssa replied, smiling as she heard Rachel’s laughter.

Alyssa opened up several new holo-screens, her cerulean eyes flicking back and forth as she gave herself a comprehensive education in Vaccinology. Narrowing down a list of the suppliers for those materials, she rapidly researched the relevant companies, then queued up a series of stock trades.

\*Jade, are you busy at the moment?\* she asked her fellow matriarch.

\*Not really. I’m just chatting to Emily about Nymphs while my sisters experiment with shape-shifting. Is there something I can help you with?\*

\*I was wondering if you could give me a crash course in Ancient Maliri?\* Alyssa asked, completing the last of her trades as she waited for Jade’s reply. \*We’ll be heading to the Kyth’faren fortress soon and I’d like to know the basics.\*

\*Ith bregnol, hast elair imenn’eier voluith,\* the Nymph replied, the exotic language enchanting to the ear.

Alyssa shivered with delight, the words resonating deep inside her. \*That was lovely. What did you say?\*

\*You’ll look beautiful with a baby bump,\* Jade replied with a telepathic grin.

The blonde burst into laughter, then a wistful smile appeared on Alyssa’s face as she trailed her fingertips over her trim stomach. \*How do you say: I can’t wait to have John’s baby?\*

Before the Nymph could translate, Lynette’s worried voice interrupted the conversation. \*Alyssa, we’ve got a problem!\*

Alyssa sat up straighter and listening attentively. \*What kind of problem?\*

\*Jehanna’s cover as a secret Lioness has been blown!\* the Fleet Admiral exclaimed, her anger and frustration plain to hear. \*There’s combat footage on the Holonet. It shows her in action during the ISD attack on Olympus.\*

\*Is she in danger?\* the blonde matriarch asked curtly, opening a holo-screen to find the video.

\*She isn’t on Olympus at the moment; Jehanna went to visit her parents,\* Lynette replied in a rush. \*I’ve just dispatched an upgraded cruiser with a security detail to their home on Roanoke. I didn’t want her family to be harassed by the press.\*

\*Good thinking. How long until they arrive at Proxima Centauri?\* Alyssa murmured, watching the bullets bounce off Jehanna’s personal shield.

\*Twenty minutes...\* Lynette said, sounding pensive. \*I’ll call and warn her they’re on the way.\*

\*It’s okay, I’ll speak to her in a moment.\*

\*I’m really sorry about this, Alyssa. I was so frantic to reach Charles when we were attacked, I wasn’t thinking straight,\* Lynette apologised, wracked with guilt. \*If I hadn’t been so stupid to announce that I was a Lioness, this never would have happened!\*

\*You did the right thing, Lynette. Rescuing Charles as quickly as possible was your number one priority,\* her matriarch said soothingly, studying the two videos and spotting the telltale laser pistols that had given away Jehanna’s secret identity. \*Besides, Ilyana and Almari used pistols like that during the Battle of Terra. With all the interest in the Lionesses, it was only a matter of time before someone made the connection.\*

There was a long pause, then Lynette said, \*You’re right... I’ve just been reading through the comments and the Lioness fans are already speculating about their identity.\*

\*Okay, I’ll let John know what happened. Thanks, Lynette, I’ll chat to you again in a few minutes.\*

\*Speak to you soon.\*

Alyssa leaned back in the leather chair, her eyes locked on the dusky beauty standing in the midst of the slaughtered soldiers. She’d been monitoring Jehanna’s emotions over their empathic bond for the past couple of weeks, the young woman increasingly conflicted as she wrestled with big decisions about her future. However, the sudden spike in dread Jehanna was feeling now, made it quite clear the TFNN reporter had just found out about the Holonet video.

\*John... can you meet me in your Ready Room please? It’s urgent,\* Alyssa requested, foregoing her usual teasing banter.

\*On my way. What’s the problem?\* he asked, already running for the grav-tubes.

\*Someone leaked footage of Jehanna in action on Olympus,\* Alyssa explained, feeling the Indian girl run through a gamut of emotions. \*Everyone knows she’s a secret Lioness...\*

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“What do you mean ‘No’?!” Ramesh Elani blurted out, staring incredulously at his stunned daughter.

Harini frowned at him in annoyance. “She didn’t say ‘No’, she said ‘Oh no’. I’ve been telling you for months that you need to get your hearing checked, Ramesh.” Rubbing Jehanna’s back, she continued, “Anyway, leave her in peace for a minute... my poor baby’s just had a big shock.”

“She’s had a shock?! What about me!” he protested, turning to point at the holo-screen. “Your daughter’s a Lioness! She gunned down an entire squad of elite ISD operatives!”

Ignoring her husband, Harini stepped in front of Jehanna, looking directly into her dazed brown eyes. “It’s him, isn’t it? It all makes sense now... you’ve fallen in love with the Lion of the Federation.”

Ramesh’s jaw dropped open and he stared wide-eyed at his wife and daughter. “What?!”

\*Hello, Jehanna,\* Alyssa said, her gentle voice sweeping through the young woman’s subconscious like a soothing balm. \*Don’t worry, everything’s going to be okay.\*

Jehanna let out a shuddering breath and closed her eyes, feeling her state of panic slowly receding.

\*We just found out what happened from Lynette,\* the blonde matriarch calmly explained. \*She’s sent a cruiser and a security team to escort you back to Olympus; they should be arriving in about twenty minutes. John’s going to give you a call as soon as he joins me in the Ready Room, so we’ll speak to you in just a moment.\*

The thought of John calling her family home was like dumping a bucket of cold water on Jehanna’s head. Her eyes snapped open, immediately focusing on the faces of her concerned parents.

“Are you alright, sweetheart?” Harini asked, gently stroking her cheek.

Jehanna nodded, inhaling deeply to shake herself out of her dazed state. “I’m so sorry I couldn’t tell you the truth,” she said, looking at her mother and father with chagrin. “I really wanted to, but we were worried it might put you in danger.”

“Oh, don’t worry about that,” her mother said, giving her a loving hug. “I can’t believe you’re dating Admiral John Blake. I want to know all about him!”

“That can wait, Harini,” Ramesh said sternly, glancing back at the combat footage, before locking eyes with his daughter. “This is more important. We need to talk about what happened on Olympus.”

Jehanna held up her hands to quiet them both. “John’s going to call me any minute now. Let me speak to him first, then we can talk about everything afterwards.”

Before her parents could utter another word, the comms interface began to chime. An alert flashed across the holo-screen that dominated the lounge, which read: “Incoming call from TFN Invictus – Admiral John Blake”. Her mother’s face lit up with joy while her father frowned, looking considerably less pleased.

“Please... just give me five minutes,” Jehanna pleaded with them.

Harini hooked her arm around Ramesh’s. “Come on! Let’s leave her in peace.” She practically dragged her protesting husband out of the lounge, calling back over her shoulder, “Take as long as you need, dear!”

Her mother closed the door behind them with a solid click, leaving Jehanna alone with the soft chimes. She accepted the incoming call with butterflies fluttering in her stomach, experiencing a sudden thrill of excitement, no matter the dire circumstances. The Terran Federation logo disappeared in a cloud of pixels, revealing her boyfriend’s handsome face.

“It’s so wonderful to see you, John!” she gushed, feeling a surge of relief.

“It’s great to see you too,” he replied, giving her a warm smile. “I really missed you, honey. I can’t wait to hold you in my arms tonight.”

She hesitated, suddenly noticing the shadow of sadness in his eyes that hadn’t been there only two weeks before.

“John... I was so sorry to hear about Faye. She was such a sweet girl... I can’t even begin to imagine how hard this must have been for you. When Alyssa told me what happened, I-” Jehanna halted mid-sentence, uncertain how secure the channel was. “Nevermind... we can talk about it later.”

“It’s alright, you can speak freely. Irillith hacked the comms beacons and the security on this transmission is uncrackable. Oh... and thanks, for what you said about Faye. A big part of me wishes I’d just stayed with you on Olympus,” John said, his smile slowly fading. He sighed, then did his best to shrug off the melancholy moment. “Anyway, let’s talk about your situation for now. Alyssa showed me the video... I’m so sorry for turning your life upside down like this.”

Jehanna was about to reply, when she froze and had a sudden moment of epiphany. “You haven’t!”

John looked at her in confusion. “But that video is pretty graphic... I don’t see how we can deny that you’re a Lioness now.”

“But I’m not... not really!” she blurted out in a rush. Now that her initial panic was over, she was starting to think clearly again. “We can just tell everyone the truth!”

His bewildered expression shifted to doubt. “I’m not sure that’s such a great idea, honey.”

Blushing as she realised what he was referring to, Jehanna’s hand instinctively drifted down to caress her stomach. “No, not that,” she quickly clarified. “Everyone knows you rescued me when I was kidnapped and taken to Tartarus. I’m sure it’s obvious from all the interviews that we’ve become friends, which explains why you gave me the laser pistol and shield... to protect me in the future. It makes perfect sense, because that’s exactly what happened.”

John looked at her in surprise. “But you took out that squad of ISD troops on your own. How do we explain that?”

“I’ve been range shooting for ten years and I’m a good shot. I even did a feature about taking lethal measures to defend myself against that team of kidnappers. Is it that far-fetched a story that a confident markswoman rushed to rescue her friend’s father, knowing that your advanced equipment would keep her safe?”

Viewing the ingenious reporter with a new sense of admiration, John replied, “That’s absolutely inspired. You’re right... it’s not like you were using psychic powers or did anything supernatural. We just gave you a massive gear advantage, which made that whole shootout ridiculously one-sided.”

Jehanna nodded enthusiastically. “Exactly! I don’t even look the part. Everyone expects a Lioness to be a busty Amazon in white body armour, but I’m not big enough to fill out a Paragon suit. It’s actually far more believable that I’m just an ordinary woman with a few incredibly powerful gadgets, than believing that I’m one of your superhuman Lionesses.”

At this John shook his head and locked eyes with her, a fierce hunger in his own. “You’re definitely not an ordinary woman, Jehanna... far from it. I think you’re truly exceptional.”

\*And it’s only a matter of time until you look just like us,\* Alyssa purred. \*John loves smart girls and you’ve no idea how much he wants you right now. You need to come up with a good explanation for why you’re about to grow an inch taller, because there’s no way you’re leaving the Invictus tonight without a huge tummy full of cum.\*

Jehanna moaned softly at that thought, imagining swallowing down pints of his delicious spunk and cradling her belly as it expanded to take John’s heavy load. “God... I wish you were here right now,” she whispered, her answering gaze smouldering in its intensity.

“Not long, honey, then we’ll be together.” John paused and suddenly looked at her in surprise. “This conversation didn’t go at all the way I expected. I thought you’d be devastated at being unmasked as a secret Lioness and we’d be forced to make some drastic decisions.”

She bit her lip, then ruefully admitted, “I still haven’t made up my mind about what to do in the future. Please don’t think that it’s because I don’t want to run away with you... I do, very much. it’s just hard to give up my old life.”

He gave her a look filled with sympathy. “There’s no rush. Take as much time as you need to make sure you’re happy with your decision. We can discuss it in more detail later tonight; you might find it helpful to talk things through.”

“I’d really like that, thank you,” she said gratefully, relieved that he didn’t see her indecision as a slight. She heard raised voices from deeper in the house and sighed. “It sounds like my parents are arguing about me being a Lioness... I better go and set them straight.”

“Good luck. If it gets really ugly and you want me to talk to them, just call and let me know,” John offered. “We’re currently on our way to Jericho and should get there for about 9 pm. After we’ve dropped off Calara’s father and brother, we’ll be heading straight to Olympus to see you.”

“Have a safe journey,” Jehanna said blowing him a kiss. “I can’t wait until tonight...”

“Me too,” he agreed, smiling with anticipation.

Jehanna waved goodbye, then reluctantly ended the call. She fanned herself with a hand, then glanced in the mirror and blushed at how flustered she looked. A brief conversation with John had left her as giddy as a schoolgirl and she could only imagine what it’d be like when they were living together... along with the Maliri twins.

A rosy bloom filled her dusky cheeks and if her panties weren’t already soaked after that call, they definitely would be now. She blushed even harder with embarrassment, unable to face her parents like this. Creeping out of the lounge, she dashed upstairs and into the shower, mortified at the thought of them smelling her arousal.

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“Well that’s one disaster averted,” John said, spinning his leather chair so he was facing Alyssa and pulling her into his lap.

“Jehanna certainly seems to think so,” Alyssa agreed, enjoying having his strong arms wrapped around her. “She’s very happy with you at the moment...”

He glanced at the combat footage on the holo-screen above his desk and watched the dusky-hued reporter blast gaping holes through one armoured assassin after another. A flicker of doubt crossed his features as he asked, “Do you really think people will believe her? That video is pretty graphic.”

“Jehanna’s a very smart girl. If anyone knows how to spin a story, it’s her.”

“I suppose that is her area of expertise,” he conceded, his eyes drawn inexorably back to the video of the firefight on Olympus.

Alyssa watched the raven-haired beauty ruthlessly dispatch the ISD insurgents and her full lips curled up into an approving smile. “She’s pretty handy in a gunfight too...”

“That was some very nice shooting,” John agreed, watching the reporter calmly step over the sprawl of corpses as she approached Henry’s office. “I didn’t realise just how intense the fighting had been. How’s Jehanna been coping after the battle? Any signs of distress?”

“None. She’s just been missing you,” Alyssa replied with a fond smile.

John frowned and looked at the blonde. “Nothing at all? Jehanna was upset about killing just one of Weber’s kidnappers, but we just watched her wipe out an entire squad of ISD operatives.”

“You’ve fed her twice since the kidnapping, John,” she gently reminded him, turning to gaze into his eyes. “Jehanna’s outlook has changed... just as you knew it would.”

A flash of regret crossed his face. “I didn’t want to do that to her.”

“Would you prefer her to be traumatised with PTSD instead?” Alyssa asked, raising an eyebrow.

“No, of course not,” he said, looking conflicted. “But Jehanna was worried about being turned into a remorseless killer and that’s exactly what’s happened.”

“Those ISD assholes weren’t worth a second of regret,” the blonde said with a firm shake of her head. “Our friends and family were in danger and Jehanna stepped up to protect them, that’s the only thing that matters. You warned her that the Change had a bunch of psychological side-effects like this, but she still joined us willingly. Talk to Jehanna about it tonight; I bet you a million credits she won’t feel any resentment towards you.”

“But I’ve fundamentally altered her personality,” John said, slumping back in his chair. “She watched the girls in action during the Battle of Terra debrief and was shocked at the scale of the violence. She shouldn’t just be shrugging this fight off like it never happened.”

Alyssa was quiet for a moment as she studied his face. Making a decision, she began to unbutton her blouse, exposing her glorious bronzed midriff. Taking his hand, she placed it on her toned stomach, watching how his expression changed as John caressed her soft skin.

“You fed Jehanna three times and she’s one of us now,” Alyssa said firmly. “We both know how protective you are of your girls... and this is just one of the ways you keep us safe. Jehanna’s association with you made her a target, but you gave her the mental fortitude to do what needed to be done without suffering guilt and remorse afterwards.”

He nodded thoughtfully, tracing an oval around her bellybutton with the tips of his fingers.

Alyssa’s voice turned gentle and sympathetic as she said, “When Jehanna made the decision to join us, it was only a matter of time until she went through the Change. The physical enhancements are more blatant, but we all know you enhance us mentally as well. At least by going through it now, she’ll be better prepared for the brutal reality of a Progenitor war.”

“You think Jehanna’s going to be involved in more combat?” he asked with surprise.

Alyssa simply nodded as she gazed into his eyes.

John studied the blonde curiously. “You want to bring her with us, don’t you?”

“That’s entirely up to you...” Alyssa murmured, giving him a tender kiss.

“I thought XO was in charge of recruitment?” he asked with a wry smile.

“We already recruited Jehanna two weeks ago,” Alyssa replied with a look of satisfaction. “I still need to bond with her, but aside from that, my work is done. She’s a smart girl and can handle herself in a gunfight; I think there’s no question that she’d be a great asset to the team. Jehanna adores you... but she loves her career and her parents too, and doesn’t want to abandon her old life. I think you need to help her make a decision, because she’s really torn at the moment.”

He nodded his understanding. “I’ll talk to her about it tonight.”

“Thank you,” she said with a grateful kiss. Raising an eyebrow, she abruptly changed the topic. “Sorry to call you away so abruptly earlier. I hear congratulations are in order; how does it feel to have adopted a daughter?”

John looked at her in confusion for a moment, then realisation sank in. “Oh, you mean Daphne? Yeah, that was lovely what she said.”

“You were very sweet with her.”

“I felt so sorry for the poor girl. Daphne’s becoming more sophisticated on a daily basis, but that just means she’s missing Faye even more. I really hope she doesn’t end up feeling isolated in the same way.”

Alyssa shook her head. “I think she’ll be alright; her circumstances are different from Faye’s.”

“What do you mean?” John asked, surprised at how certain she sounded.

“Faye fell in love with you,” Alyssa gently reminded him. “Her fondest wish was to go through the Change and truly become one of your girls. She wanted to share our psychic connection; to know what it’s like to have a tummy full of your cum, and give herself to you completely. Her dream was to become a living, breathing woman, and someday have your children.”

John squeezed Alyssa tighter, feeling Faye’s loss more than ever.

She gave him a comforting kiss on the cheek. “Faye wanted to be one of us, but her daughter is still very much a part of the Collective. Daphne wants to be our friend, but she seems to be content with who and what she is.”

John nodded thoughtfully. “So Daphne’s fundamentally at peace with herself. Yeah, I get that impression as well... and I think you’re right, it does make a big difference.”

“I’m sure she’ll run into a few teething problems along the way, but we can help her through those,” Alyssa said with a shrug.

He ran his fingers through her luxurious golden mane and pulled her towards him for a kiss. “Yeah, we will.” When they parted, he reluctantly patted her on the thigh. “I’d love to stay here and chat with you, but I should probably get back to work. I’m going to reshape our Paragon suits so they’re all twenty-shaped, then I’ll head down to Engineering; Dana still needs my help.”

Alyssa raised an eyebrow as she slid off his lap. “If it’s a chore doing the psychic shaping for Sparks, I’m happy to do it for you.”

“Ah no, it’s okay,” he quickly replied, rising from the chair.

She gave him a knowing look. “So you are still looking forward to giving Maria a gift you hand-crafted for her personally?”

John flushed and shot a guilty glance at the doorway. “It’s not like that.”

“Of course not,” Alyssa agreed, adopting a mock-serious expression. Her cerulean eyes twinkled mischievously as she added, “Have fun...”

He groaned and waved her goodbye, leaving the study to the sound of her melodic laughter.

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Dressing in casual clothes after she was dry, Jehanna didn’t bother to reapply her makeup, wanting to make herself look as normal as possible. The doorbell rang, the loud chime reverberating through the house and making her jump. Jehanna grabbed her suitcase and rushed down the stairs, arriving at the front door just in front of her mother, who looked at her in bemusement. Jehanna glanced through the spyhole, then opened the door to the marine Commander who stood just outside.

“Good morning, Miss Elani,” the officer said, giving her a sharp salute. “We’re under orders from the Fleet Admiral to escort you to Olympus whenever you’re ready to leave.”

“I have a few things to discuss with my parents first. It might take a little while, Commander...?”

“Commander Sharring, ma’am,” he replied. “Take as long as you need. We’ll setup a perimeter to keep anyone from disturbing your residence.”

“Thank you, Commander Sharring,” she said gratefully, flashing him a dazzling smile. “I feel so much safer knowing that you’re here to protect me.”

He couldn’t help grinning and saluted again as he stepped back. “My pleasure, ma’am!”

Closing the front door, Jehanna turned to see her mother watching her in fascination. “What?”

Harini gave her a knowing look. “It’s been a while since I last saw you turn on the charm. I bet you have Admiral Blake wrapped around your little finger...”

Jehanna blushed and headed back along the hall. “Is dad in the lounge? It’s probably best if I speak to him first.”

“He’s in his study,” her mother said, before reaching out to clasp her daughter’s hand. “Will you tell me about John afterwards? I want to hear all about him.”

“I promise, Mama,” Jehanna said, kissing her on the cheek. “He really is wonderful.”

Smiling at her fondly, Harini nodded towards the door at the end of the hall. “Go on now, don’t keep your father waiting.”

Walking into the oak-panelled room with her floating luggage following her inside, Jehanna’s gaze was immediately drawn to the large wooden desk that dominated the study. Ramesh had been watching the Olympus combat footage again and he paused the holo-recording when his daughter joined him. Turning in his plush leather chair, he sipped his cup of tea, fixing Jehanna with a steady look and raising an eyebrow expectantly. Her father was calm and in control again now, but she wasn’t sure if that was a good sign or a very bad one.

Jehanna picked up the spare chair and deliberately placed it to the side of her father’s desk so that there wouldn’t be anything between them. After taking a seat, she met her father’s piercing stare. “I’ve been dating Admiral John Blake for the last couple of months, but I’m not a Lioness.”

Ramesh put down his cup and glanced pointedly at the caption on the holo-screen. “They seem to think otherwise.”

“They’re only speculating, they don’t know the truth,” Jehanna said with a dismissive wave of her hand. “You know better than to believe Holonet conspiracy theorists, Papa.”

He frowned with disapproval. “I’ve watched that video several times... and I know it’s you. I recognised your shooting stance.”

She smiled at him fondly. “You’re right, it was me, but that doesn’t make me a Lioness... not really.”

Ramesh’s frown deepened. “I’m not in the mood to play word games, Jehanna. Just tell me the truth.”

Turning to her suitcase, Jehanna unlocked it and retrieved her custom-made laser pistol and personal shield. She carefully placed them on the desk in front of her father, who stared wide-eyed at the sleek handgun, recognising the incredibly powerful weapon from the video.

“I first met John through work a couple of months ago. I told you all about the series of interviews I did with him and I know you’ve watched them. I’d been on a couple of dates with John, when Buckingham had me kidnapped and held prisoner on Tartarus because of all the pro-Lion propaganda pieces I was running for TFNN. John freed me from there and saved my life, but he was worried that I might be targeted again... so he gave me some state-of-the-art equipment to defend myself.”

Her father glanced at the laser pistol and shield generator again. “That was very generous of him.”

“I’m friends with John’s Chief Engineer; she built them for me as a gift before they left for the Kirrix border. I’m sure you’ve seen her at the awards ceremonies; Dana’s the beautiful redhead,” Jehanna explained, then turned towards the video of her storming the Voss offices. “I’m also close friends with the rest of the Lionesses... including the Angel of Terra.”

“Rachel Voss,” Ramesh interjected, turning to glance at the screen again.

“That’s right. Rachel’s lovely, Papa... one of the kindest women I’ve ever met. Anyway, when Olympus came under attack, I discovered they were trying to assassinate everyone connected to the Lion, including Rachel’s father. My personal shield makes me impervious to bullets and my laser pistol hits harder than a Gatling Laser, so I knew I could save Henry Voss. I ran to his office and used the marksmanship skills that you taught me to eliminate the ISD insurgents.”

Ramesh turned to watch her gun down the elite soldiers in bursts of blue laser fire, her lethal shots aimed at central mass every time. “Nice tight groupings...”

Once all the soldiers were dead, the video then showed her checking the steaming corpses for signs of life.

“Confirm your kills; make sure they’re no longer a threat,” Jehanna said softly, explaining her actions and parroting one of her father’s many lessons. “I used high-tech gear and your training to save Henry Voss... that’s the honest truth.”

He looked puzzled and gestured towards Lynette on the second holo-screen. “Then why is she claiming to be a Lioness when you’re denying it?”

“It’s complicated,” Jehanna replied reflexively. When her father raised an eyebrow, she rolled her eyes. “You of all people should understand that sometimes information is classified for very good reasons. The Lionesses are all exceptionally gifted women, like the Angel of Terra who can heal people at will, whereas I’m just... me.”

He leaned back in his chair and slowly nodded. “Alright, thank you for being honest with me. It goes without saying that I’m very relieved you survived the attack unscathed, but I wish you’d given me some kind of warning. The last thing I ever wanted to see, was my daughter being shot at by a dozen highly-trained killers.”

“I’m so sorry you got a shock, Papa,” she said, giving him a rueful look of apology. “I would’ve loved to tell you all about my connections with John, but I was just trying to keep you safe.”

“Sometimes it is necessary to keep secrets to protect your family,” he conceded, nodding thoughtfully. Ramesh hesitated for a moment, then looked at his daughter with concern. “Jehanna, I know your mother’s overjoyed that you’re dating Admiral Blake, but I found something that you really need to see...”

He faced the holo-interface again and swiped away the Olympus footage to reveal another video. The recording was taken from a security camera, zoomed in on Calara as she gave a stirring speech to a military audience. John and the Lionesses were lined up behind her, and Jehanna’s gaze was immediately drawn to the petite purple girl in the back row. Faye’s elfin face was lit up with joy, thrilled to be part of the crew in front of the adoring crowd. Jehanna remembered how Faye had always treated her with kindness and respect, the poignant memories making her heart ache with grief for the lovely girl.

“I’m so sorry, Jehanna,” Ramesh said with sympathy, when he saw his daughter’s heartbroken expression. “I know you loved him, but it’s better to find out what kind of man he is now, rather than later.”

Jehanna stared at her father in confusion. “What do you mean?”

Ramesh gestured towards the front of the stage, where John was kissing Calara, her sparkling engagement ring catching the light as she swooned in the passionate embrace.

“When I was searching for more video on the Lionesses, I read some disturbing speculation about the Lion... and found this,” he explained quietly. “This was recorded on Olympus only two weeks ago. The whole time you two have been dating, he was already engaged to be married; Calara Fernandez is John Blake’s fiancée.”

Jehanna focused on the kissing couple and couldn’t help thinking how beautiful they looked together... and how deeply in love. She smiled affectionately and wondered if the gorgeous Latina would be joining them in bed later that evening. Her father’s words finally registered and Jehanna gulped, darting an anxious glance in his direction.

Ramesh stared at his daughter in bewilderment when he saw her fond smile, then his eyes widened in sudden recognition when she gave him a guilty look. “You already knew he was engaged!”

Jehanna winced at his outraged expression. “Oh crap...”

“How you could do that to the poor woman?!” he exclaimed, looking appalled. “She’s planning her wedding and you’re sneaking around with her future husband!”

She froze, biting back a desperate denial, knowing that her father would be even more shocked by the truth. Jehanna couldn’t meet her father’s accusatory stare any longer and she dropped her gaze, feeling overwhelmed with shame at disappointing him.

Ramesh glared at her silently for several agonising moments, waiting for some kind of explanation. When none was forthcoming, he shook his head in disapproval. “Blake’s fiancée is a war hero; she received a Stellar Cluster for saving Terra and you’ve disgraced our family by treating her so shabbily. I brought you up better than this, Jehanna.”

“I’m sorry,” she whispered, staring at the floor.

“It’s not me you should be apologising to,” he muttered, turning his back on his daughter and staring out the window.

Fighting back the tears, Jehanna retrieved her pistol and shield with shaking hands, then stumbled out of the study. Harini heard the door close and hurried out of the kitchen, eager to find out more about her daughter’s famous boyfriend. She took one look at Jehanna’s devastated expression and rushed to give her a hug.

“Oh my goodness! What happened?!” she gasped, looking at Jehanna with concern.

“I should go...” Jehanna replied, brushing at her eyes.

Her mother glared at the door to the study and yelled, “Ramesh, what did you say to your daughter?!”

Jehanna sighed dejectedly then met Harini’s worried gaze. “Dad found out that John is already engaged.”

“He’s engaged?! That cheating rat!” Harini blustered indignantly. Her face flickered with confusion. “Wait a second... why’s your father hiding in his study? Doesn’t he realise how upset you are?!”

Looking away, Jehanna murmured, “He knows... but it’s complicated.”

Holding her by the shoulders, Harini frowned as she asked, “Complicated how?! What are you still hiding from me, Jehanna?”

“Dad thinks I’m sneaking around with John behind his fiancée’s back... but I’m not.”

Her mother looked bewildered, but there was also a hint of disapproval in her eyes. “But you said you’d fallen in love with John!”

“I do love him!” Jehanna replied insistently. “Look... you wouldn’t understand.”

“Jehanna Elani, you stop treating me like I’m an idiot right this minute! Now, tell me what’s bothering you. I can’t help you if I don’t know what the problem is.”

Worn down by her mother’s persistence, Jehanna sighed with resignation. “Fine, you want the truth? I’m in love with John... and Calara doesn’t mind in the slightest, because I’m sleeping with her too!”

Harini’s eyes were like saucers as she gaped at her daughter. “What?!”

Jehanna shook her head and pulled away from her stunned mother. “See, I knew you wouldn’t understand.”

She walked down the corridor towards the front door, then paused to glance back at her mother, fervently praying that she would rush to reassure her that everything was going to be okay. Instead Harini was leaning heavily against the sideboard, a look of shocked disbelief on her face as she stared off into the distance. With a forlorn sigh, Jehanna opened the door and left her old home, not knowing when she would return. She walked to the dropship parked in the street, her floating suitcase following quietly in her wake, like a funeral procession for her once happy family.

\*I’m so sorry, Jehanna,\* Alyssa said softly. \*I can feel how sad you are, so I’m guessing it went badly with your parents. We’ll try to fix everything when we see you this evening, but don’t hesitate to call us now if you need to talk.\*

Jehanna gave the waiting marines a strained smile, then proceeded up the loading ramp. She appreciated Alyssa’s offer, but she couldn’t see how this disaster could possibly be fixed.

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Calara patted the spherical Power Core’s outer casing. “A single one of these could power every system in a Federation battleship.”

“The amount of energy it generates must be astronomical,” Jack said, staring at the Progenitor device in fascination.

Calara nodded, stepping over the cables snaking across the floor. “The Invictus has three of them. This one powers our engines and most of the original sub-systems, then we also installed two more amidships to support the Shield Generators and all our gun batteries. It takes a huge amount of energy to keep the Nova Lances, Tachyon Lances, Tachyon Cannons, and Singularity Drivers online during combat.”

“I still can’t believe how much firepower the Invictus is packing,” Jack said quietly, studying the incredibly advanced Progenitor device.

Mateo glanced up at the ceiling, his eyes drawn to the broad patches of glistening white metal in the blackened titanium. “It looks like you took a nasty hit. You were very lucky the blast didn’t rupture the core.”

“They weren’t trying to kill us, just disable the Invictus,” Calara murmured, her thoughts filled with memories of Larn’kelnar’s terrifying ambush. “When they knocked out power to the stern, we were forced to abandon ship.”

“What?!” Mateo blurted out, gaping at her in surprise.

She gave him an apologetic frown. “Would you mind if we changed the subject? We lost Faye in that battle and it still hurts to talk about it.”

He pulled her into a hug. “I’m sorry, Callie... I didn’t know.”

“That’s okay,” she said, embracing him back, before pulling away. “Come on, there’s lots more to see.”

Her father and brother followed Calara into the Deck Five corridor, both eager to continue their tour of the ship.

“I’d show you the Engineering Bay, but Dana’s working on a present for mom and I don’t want to ruin the surprise,” Calara explained, leading them into the grav-tubes.

“A present?” Jack asked, looking intrigued.

“It was Sakura’s idea, but Dana’s helping to make it,” she replied as they descended through the decks. “All the girls are very fond of mom and were horrified when they heard about the assassination attempt. Dana and Alyssa are both orphans and mom is the closest they’ve ever come to having a mother.”

“That’s awful,” Mateo said, his expression one of profound sympathy.

Calara gave her father a sideways hug. “I love how close we are as a family, but it’s painful to see how much it hurts the girls when they realise what they’ve missed out on. They all tell me not to feel guilty... but it’s made me realise just how incredibly lucky I am.”

“You’re right, we really are very lucky,” Mateo agreed, smiling self-consciously at his sister and father. “Hell, I know I am. If it wasn’t for you, I’d still be slaving away in that Kintark sulphur mine.”

She patted him on the arm. “We never would have let you rot away in there.”

Mateo looked bewildered. “How did you manage to persuade them to rescue me from Xen-Nuchek? I was so deep in Kintark Space, I thought I’d never see home again.”

“You’ve got a ship full of guardian angels watching over you, Mateo. John and the girls volunteered... I didn’t even have to ask,” Calara replied, a fond smile on her face. “It was the same with protecting the Damocles in the Battle of Regulus, then saving the Orion at the Battle of Terra. Protecting our family has always been their highest priority.”

“Wait... that’s why I was offered this transfer, isn’t it?” Mateo blurted out, shocked as sudden realisation sank in. “John must have called in a favour with the Fleet Admiral, to keep me safe in the Core Worlds instead of in danger out on the Kirrix border!”

Calara shot him a guilty look. “I’m sorry, Mateo.”

He laughed and smiled back at her. “Why are you apologising? I was promoted and offered my dream job!”

“They must really care about you, Callie... to go to such lengths to protect your family,” her father said, looking thoughtful.

Calara hesitated, unsure how to reply.

\*It’s okay, you can tell him why,\* Alyssa said softly.

“They do love me, but there’s more to it than that. Lots of the girls had really horrific childhoods and never knew what it was like to have caring parents or siblings. They love how close we are as a family and don’t want to let anything threaten our happiness,” Calara explained, making eye contact with her father. “One day they all hope to be able to settle down for a peaceful retirement and start families of their own. Our family gives John and the girls something to aspire to.”

Jack listened with interest, surprised by what his daughter had told him. He’d believed the Fleet Admiral when she told him that he and his sons were all being offered safe roles in the Core Worlds, so that Calara would stop worrying about her family being in danger. However, this latest revelation had a ring of truth to it and Jack was touched that Calara’s crewmates held his family in such high regard.

He smiled at his daughter, knowing she was also referring to her own retirement plans. “Well they certainly have my blessing. I wish John and all his Lionesses the very best for the future.”

Calara swallowed around the lump in her throat. “Thanks, dad... that really means a lot.”

Mateo was oblivious to the subtext of their conversation, but he smiled, glad to see his sister looking so happy. “So what’s next on the tour?”

They had already descended to Deck Nine, so Calara strode out of the grav-tube and beckoned them to follow. “I thought I’d show you the hangars, then we can work our way back to the pool.”

“Sounds good,” her brother said amiably.

Jack and Mateo followed Calara through a set of reinforced double-doors into the Secondary Hangar, the sleek Raptor gunship dominating the large room.

“You’ve already seen the Raptor when we visited Jericho,” Calara said, casually gesturing towards the gunship as they walked past. “We mainly use it for boarding actions and combat drops.”

The two Fernandez men stared at the Raptor in fascination, their eyes lingering over the exotic weapons bristling the gleaming white hull.

“What guns are those?” her father asked, stopping to study the sinister-looking barrels jutting out of the chin turret. “I don’t recognise them.”

She paused and faced the Raptor. “Dana recently upgraded all those turret mounts from Pulse Cannons to Tachyon Cannons. The Invictus’ defence grid is made up of the same guns.”

“I’ve never even heard of them before,” Mateo said, raising his hand to run along the gleaming barrel. “How powerful are they?”

Calara considered that for a moment. “They fire pulsed tachyon beams that hit like a Laser Cannon blast. They’re basically a one-shot-kill on strike craft and could tear apart a Kintark cruiser in about ten seconds. I found them really handy for crippling hive ships; those pulsed beams slice through their chitin armour like a hot knife through butter. It was great being able to knock out engines or power regulators without worrying I was going to core through the entire ship.”

Mateo exchanged a shocked glance with his father. Terran Federation Laser Cannons had ten-metre-long barrels and were the primary weapons of much larger ships like a destroyer. It was astonishing to think that a mere gunship could be packing so much firepower.

“How fast do they fire?” Jack asked, turning to look quizzically at his daughter. “Once every ten seconds like a Laser Cannon?”

“No, they fire in a continuous stream. Imagine if a Laser Cannon could fire as fast as a Gatling Laser, but didn’t have any spin-up time and never had to stop shooting to cool down,” She made a flourish with her hand towards the terrifyingly powerful gun. “And that’s essentially a Tachyon Cannon.”

“Jesus...” Mateo muttered, his eyes wide in awe.

Jack looked at the glinting muzzles of the ten-metre weapons mounted in the hull above the Raptor’s wing. “Wasn’t this originally fitted with a pair of Laser Cannons too?”

Calara nodded, a wistful smile on her face. “That’s right. It seems so long ago now...”

“What have you upgraded those weapons to?” he asked, turning to study his daughter

“Tachyon Lances,” she replied with an enthusiastic grin. “They’re very similar to the Nova Lances mounted in Maliri battleships, but more compact and faster firing. They don’t have the same punch, but a pair of those is still strong enough to take out a cruiser in a single shot.”

“And you’ve got two of them mounted on a gunship?!” Jack marvelled, truly astounded.

“Unfortunately, we haven’t got the hard points to add any more; too much hull space is dedicated to troop carrying capacity,” Calara said wistfully, staring up at the Raptor. “We’ve got forty Tachyon Lances mounted on the Invictus and they’re my go-to gun batteries now. The Nova Lances are incredibly powerful, but they take thirty seconds to recharge and are forward-firing only.”

Mateo let out a low whistle. “So you could take out thirty cruisers in an alpha strike?!”

“Yes... and Tachyon Lances have got 50% longer range than Beam Lasers,” she replied with a smile of satisfaction. “If we fought the Battle of Terra again, the Invictus would’ve destroyed triple the amount of Kintark warships without taking a scratch.”

“How did you get your hands on guns like this?” her brother murmured, staring at the Raptor’s primary weapons with newfound respect.

“Dana designs all our equipment...” Calara replied evasively, before turning to stride over to the hangar wall. She pressed her hand to the concealed DNA reader and opened the hidden door, then beckoned for them to follow. “Come on, there’s lots more to see.”

They stepped into the express grav-tube with her, then let out startled shouts when they were hurtled upwards to Deck Four.

“You could have warned us, Callie!” Mateo protested with a groan as he stepped clear of the tube.

“I forgot they take a bit of getting used to... sorry,” she apologised, steadying her father as he stumbled out of the blue anti-gravity field.

He leaned on her for support until his stomach had stopped roiling, then looked around in fascination. “What is this place?”

“Our main Armoury and the Combat Bridge,” Calara explained, walking past the weapon racks filled with Tachyon rifles. She gestured towards the second set of express grav-tubes. “Those lead up to the Officers’ Quarters. John wanted us to be able to respond quickly to interdictions if we were ambushed while sleeping, so we built all of this so we could be combat-ready within thirty seconds of an alarm being raised.”

Mateo choked back a laugh.

Calara looked at him quizzically. “Why is that funny?”

“I just pictured all of you sitting at the Bridge in your pyjamas,” he replied with a grin.

“Actually, Alyssa prefers to sleep nude... all the girls do,” Calara said blithely, then giggled at the reaction that evoked from her guests. “But we usually put on a jumpsuit and body armour before combat.”

“In thirty seconds?” her father asked sceptically.

“I’ll show you,” she eagerly volunteered, kicking off her shoes.

Calara walked over to one of the armour equipping frames, then stepped into the armoured boots and slipped her hands into the gauntlets. The robotic arms swung down, bringing the armour plating with them, and within seconds she was fully-geared in a suit of Paragon armour. Calara grabbed one of the rifles and a spare magazine, then loaded the weapon as she sprinted down the ramp into the Combat Bridge. Sliding the Tachyon rifle into the holster at the Tactical Station, she took her seat, then spun around to wave at her startled guests.

“Damn... what was that, ten seconds?” Jack marvelled, sharing a startled glance with his son.

“It took the Damocles’ Bridge Crew nearly three minutes in our last combat drill... and we weren’t even wearing armour!”

Calara retrieved her rifle, then jogged back up the ramp to join them. “We usually just have one person watching the Bridge instead of running full shifts, so every second counts.”

“Amazing,” Jack murmured, watching as his daughter unloaded her weapon, then removed her Paragon suit.

“Which one is John’s?” Mateo asked, his gaze flicking from one frame to the next.

“That’s his Lion armour right there,” Calara replied, pointing to a slightly larger set of white boots. “The rest are for the Lionesses; luckily we’re all very similar builds, so we can all wear any of the female suits.”

She glanced meaningfully at her father and he nodded his understanding.

Mateo reverently touched the gold-embossed Paragon gauntlets, then turned his attention to the adjacent weapon rack. Taking pride of place was John’s archaic rune sword, the flawless white blade gleaming as it reflected the light. He reached out to brush his fingers over the hilt, then jerked them back, startled by the sudden tingling in his fingertips.

“Let’s head back down to the lower decks and I’ll continue the tour,” Calara said over her shoulder, already walking towards the express grav-tubes.

They dropped down to Deck Nine, taking a few seconds to recover after the rapid descent, then followed Calara through the reinforced doors into the Primary Hangar. Both Jack and Mateo froze when they got their first glimpse of the Progenitor Shuttle, staring up at the alien ship in awe. Unlike the sparkling white Raptor, the large black vessel looked sinister and malevolent, looming over them like something out of a maddened old spacer’s nightmare.

“What the hell is that?” Mateo muttered, shivering with dread.

Calara made brief eye-contact with her father. “We captured it last week. I’m afraid I can’t go into too much detail about its origins... for your own safety.”

Jack stared up at the terrifying vessel, finally getting a true glimpse of the enemy his daughter was facing. The trio stood in hushed silence for a long moment, studying the shuttle in all its malignant glory.

A minute later, Jack cleared his throat. “Mateo, would you mind giving me a moment alone with your sister? We need to discuss something above your clearance level.”

Mateo nodded respectfully. “Of course, dad. I’ll go take another look at the Raptor.”

“You can wait for us in the Mech Bay, if you’d prefer?” Calara suggested, pointing across the vast room to the doors on the far side. “Just go through those doors and the ones opposite; that’s where Sakura keeps the Valkyrie.”

His eyes lit up with anticipation. “Oh, I have to check that out!” With a parting wave, he set off, jogging across the cavernous hangar.

Jack waited until his son was well out of earshot before he asked quietly, “This is a Progenitor ship, isn’t it?”

Calara nodded, her expression turning bleak. “This was Larn’kelnar’s personal shuttle. His dreadnought was about fifty times bigger... and packed with enough firepower to exterminate both sides in the Battle of Terra single-handed. He ambushed us in orbit above a planet called Arcadia and cut the Invictus in half before we even knew what was happening.”

He looked appalled, then quickly wrapped his daughter up in a comforting hug. “My God... I nearly lost you, didn’t I?”

She shivered in his arms and said in a whisper, “It was terrifying, dad... I’ve never been so scared. Larn’kelnar was an absolute monster. He killed millions of people just for fun... and he almost killed most of the girls too. Dana, Rachel, Sakura, the twins, Jade’s sisters... they all nearly died.”

Jack stroked Calara’s back to comfort her. “He’s gone, Callie. You’re safe now...”

Pulling back to look him in the eye, she shook her head. “The rest of the Progenitors are still out there. There’re dozens more of them and they’re all twisted evil monsters! They sacrifice their own thralls... murder women by the thousands... just to make these cursed ships!”

“Coño!” Jack cursed, his eyes widening in horror. “Why the hell would they do that?!”

“They drain their women of psychic energy, using something called a Soul Forge,” she replied in a haunted voice. “The Progenitors use that energy to make the black metal, then build all their ships and equipment from it. That armour plating is incredibly tough; our guns aren’t strong enough to punch through it.”

He turned his shocked gaze towards the black shuttle and shuddered with revulsion. His eyes swept over the sinister onyx surface of the ship, then paused as he spotted the gaping hole in the armour plating.

“Your guns might not be able to penetrate the hull... but it can definitely be breached!” he exclaimed, pointing out the hull damage to his daughter. “Look up there, Callie!”

She smiled at him fondly, touched that he was trying to buoy her spirits. “Alyssa did that, dad.”

“What do you mean?” he asked, looking at her in confusion.

Calara sighed, her troubled brown eyes lifting to look at the hole cored through the shuttle’s superstructure. “Alyssa was on board that monstrosity when she figured out exactly why it gave her the creeps. She freaked out... and when Alyssa couldn’t escape quickly enough, she made her own exit. When she gets really mad, Alyssa can project psychic blasts like a nova lance... and she melted her way out of the hull.”

Jack’s mouth dropped open and he gaped at her in disbelief.

Oblivious to her father’s state of shock, Calara continued staring at the shuttle, “Alyssa used up most of our psychic energy reserves to power that blast, so it’s not practical in a firefight because it would leave us too vulnerable afterwards. Our best hope for penetrating that armour, is if Dana can somehow reverse engineer the Progenitor’s Quantum Flux Cannons. If she can find a way to build them so they don’t need the black metal, then we can upgrade the Invictus’ Heavy Cannon battery... and we’ll finally have a way of taking out those bastards.”

“Alyssa blasted her way out?” Jack asked in a hushed voice, staring incredulously at the hole in the hull. “Just using her mind?!”

She looked at him with sympathy. “I’m sorry, dad... I forgot this is all so new to you. I’ve been dealing with this kind of thing every day for the last six months; it must be overwhelming trying to wrap your head around everything in one go.”

“As your girlfriend put it so aptly: it’s a total mindfuck,” he said with a wry smile. Jack’s smile faded and he looked at his daughter with concern. “Just dealing with all these psychic powers would be daunting enough, but knowing what you’re facing, it’s just the tip of the iceberg. How do you cope with all the stress?”

Calara thought about that for a long moment before answering. “We each have our roles to play and I just focus on preparing our forces for the upcoming war, as well as planning our tactical and strategic operations. I’ve got John and the girls to support me every step of the way, just as I try to support them however I can.”

“You really have grown up,” he said, his voice tinged with a poignant mix of pride and sadness. “You don’t need my guidance anymore...”

She hugged him tight. “I’ll always need you, dad.”

He squeezed her back just as hard, then they shared a smile.

“We better catch up to Mateo, he’ll be feeling left out,” Calara said, clasping her father’s hand and leading him across the vast hangar.

They found her brother in the Mech Bay, Mateo gazing up in wonder at the Valkyrie that towered over him.

“It looked so tiny in the combat footage,” Jack noted as they walked over to join his son.

“Sakura was sprinting across Kintark battleship hulls and they’re enormous in comparison,” Calara explained, before stopping next to her awestruck sibling. “Sorry to keep you waiting, Mateo.”

“How does Sakura get that mech to move the way she does?” Mateo marvelled. “She makes it leap around like a ninja!”

Calara raised an eyebrow at his choice of phrase, immediately making her brother blush.

“Not just because she’s Asian!” he hastily corrected himself. “You know what I mean... the Valkyrie’s incredibly quick, and able to do all sorts of jumps and dives. I’ve never seen a machine able to move with that kind of agility.”

She gave her brother a reassuring smile. “It’s alright, Sakura has eagerly embraced all the clichés.” Patting the mech’s huge armoured foot, Calara continued, “The Strike Valkyrie Ultra was Dana’s pet project and she developed all sorts of new tech to make it as powerful as she possibly could. Sakura controls the Valkyrie by standing in an anti-gravity harness and the mech mirrors her movements. The limb joints are frictionless, so the mech can move just as fast as Sakura can.”

Her father’s eyes focused on the four Tachyon Lance barrels. “It’s astonishing to think that a combat machine this size has more firepower than the Damocles... or the Orion for that matter. How many Kintark battleships did Sakura take out on her own? A dozen?”

Calara followed his gaze up to the shoulder-mounted guns. “The Valkyrie was equipped with quad Photon Lasers during the Battle of Terra, but it’s been upgraded to Tachyon Lances now. In Sakura’s hands, this mech is probably more powerful than a Terran dreadnought. All she’d have to do is land on the hull and she could rip the ship apart... the gun crews wouldn’t be able to do a thing to stop her.”

Jack and Mateo could only marvel at the raw power the Valkyrie possessed, staring at the mech in amazement. Calara stood beside them in silence, but her thoughts had taken a very different turn. She pictured the Valkyrie landed on a Progenitor dreadnought, Sakura trying to blast its way through the incredibly tough armour plating... and not making a dent.

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John glanced at the holo-reader again and studied Dana’s schematics, then made the finishing touches to the last set of components she needed.

“There, all done,” he said, levitating the sparkling Crystal Alyssium tube over to the neatly stacked piles of parts.

“Awesome, thanks,” the redhead replied from up on the Engineering podium, her focus on a rotating set of holographic schematics. “I’ll ask Daphne to get the bots to move everything down to the Cargo Bay.”

Walking up the illuminated steps to join the distracted teenager, John asked, “What’re you working on there?”

“Improvements to the Vulkat psi-communicator,” Dana replied, showing him an expanded view of the elongated psychic vanes. “I reckon I should be done in a couple of hours.”

“How long will it take to fit them on the Invictus?” he asked, wrapping his arms around her and studying the intricate webbing.

She leaned back against him and sighed. “It’s not time that’s the problem. They’re pretty big... and we’re almost out of Crystal Alyssium. We’ve built a shitload of new stuff in the last few weeks and we had to use a load more when the armour got trashed in the Battle of Terra.”

“Then we had to repair the Invictus after it got cut in half,” John interjected, resting his chin on her shoulder.

“Yeah, exactly,” Dana said, turning to give him a regretful look. “I don’t think we’ll be able to build the psi-communicator before we get to Genthalas and resupply.”

“That’s okay. Just finish the schematics when you can and we’ll transmit them to the Ashanath. They can start building receivers while we’re heading home, then the whole system will be up and running as soon as we upgrade the Invictus.”

“Sure thing!” she agreed, perking up again. “What tech are you thinking of giving them next?”

John considered her question for a moment. “That’s something we’ll all need to get together and discuss. I want to give the Ashanath as much as possible, without giving anything away that would put us at risk if it fell into the wrong hands.”

Dana nodded thoughtfully. “I’ll try to come up with a list.”

“You could send them their new ship designs too,” John suggested. “According to Edraele’s Fleet Commander on Ashana, the Greys have nearly completed repairs to their fleets. They’ll be ready to start building new warships soon.”

“Ah, shit!” the redhead cursed vehemently. “I totally forgot about those! I’ll start working on them as soon as I’m done with these schematics.”

“Don’t beat yourself up,” John said, giving her a comforting squeeze. “You’ve had a hell of a lot to deal with over the last few weeks. Besides, the Ashanath shipyards were too busy upgrading the Maliri fleet to start constructing anything new.”

She gave him a grateful kiss. “Still, I’ll get right on it. I really like the Ashanath and I want them to have some kickass ships!”

“It’ll be good practice for when you design that destroyer we talked about,” he said with an indulgent smile.

Dana gave him a rueful frown. “Actually, it might be wise to hold off on that for a while. I want to master Progenitor tech, then build something that improves on it in every way.”

“A dreadnought killer?” he asked, turning the redhead to face him.

She nodded, a grim look in her eyes. “Exactly.”

“We’re going to need every advantage we can get,” John said, gently brushing a lock of auburn hair away from her face. “I’m so lucky I found you, Sparks. We’d have no chance without you on the team.”

Smiling self-consciously, Dana said, “Nah, you’d have been okay. You could’ve got yourself any woman engineer and made her just like me.”

“I could’ve given her your powers and enhanced her with the Change, but the ingenuity and resourcefulness? That’s all you, honey,” he said with conviction.

Dana crossed her wrists behind his neck, then gave him a tender kiss, conveying all her love and adoration for him in that simple display of affection. John returned it and kissed her back passionately, leaning the gorgeous redhead back against the Engineering Station. Machinery activated throughout the Workshop as her bottom rubbed against the console, the Mass Fabricators humming as they powered up. She moaned into his mouth and writhed against him, wrapping her legs around his waist. John reached down and ripped away the crotch to her trousers, accompanied by Dana’s squeal of joy.

“Yeah, fuck me!” she panted, a wild gleam in her sky blue eyes.

John tugged down his pants then thrust himself home, burying himself up to the quad in her slick pussy. Dana’s scream of elation echoed around the Workshop, quickly turning to loud cries of pleasure as he hammered into her. She came explosively, fully-impaled on his cock, then whimpered in delight as he pounded her through a chain of back-to-back climaxes. John couldn’t hold back any longer and he pinned her to the console as he hilted himself, his cock throbbing as he spurted long ropes of cum into her womb. Groaning in ecstasy, she cradled her belly as he filled her up, pumping his spunk into her until she had taken his entire load.

“Holy fuck...” Dana murmured, looking up at him with a disbelieving grin. “Where did that come from?!”

He chuckled and leaned against her, panting for breath after the frenetic romp. “You were just too sexy to resist. Sorry I didn’t last longer.”

“Are you kidding? That was awesome!” she gushed, hugging him tight. Glancing around him at the door, she giggled at their compromised position. “We were lucky Calara didn’t bring the tour this way!”

\*Don’t worry, you’re safe. Calara’s in the Mech Bay at the moment,\* Alyssa advised them both. \*Although she was avoiding the Workshop because you two were supposed to be working on Maria’s gift... not fucking each other senseless!\*

John shared a smile with his young lover, then glanced down at her hugely swollen belly. “Oops.”

Dana grinned in anticipation. “I better go find some hungry kitties...”

\*Jade, is Emily still with you?\* John asked his Nymph Matriarch.

\*Yes, she’s here in the Lagoon.\*

John caressed Dana’s rounded stomach. “It might be wiser for you to stay here and Jade can send her sisters to you,” he said, before reluctantly easing out of her depths. Pulling up his trousers, John tugged playfully at what was left of her ruined pants. “I should probably get them to bring you some new clothes too.”

Dana ran her hands over her new curves, then gave him a beautiful smile. “I really loved that, John. You were so wild and passionate... it was amazing!”

“So were you, honey,” he said affectionately, cupping her face and kissing her.

They parted company with a wave and John could still hear Dana chuckling to herself as he left the Workshop, the redhead stripping off what was left of her ravaged clothing.

\*Alyssa, where’s Sakura at the moment?\* he asked the blonde, as he strode down the corridor and into the grav-tube.

\*She’s with Rachel, making lunch for everyone. Sakura thought our guests might enjoy a picnic on the beach.\*

\*That’s a great idea,\* John said appreciatively. \*Do they need a hand?\*

\*It’s okay. Just head to the Lagoon and she’ll meet you there.\*

\*Are you coming down too?\* he asked, not wanting her to miss out.

\*I better stay up here. We passed Port Heracles an hour ago and there’s a lot more traffic around now that we’re getting closer to the Core Worlds. The twins are keeping me company and we’ll have our own picnic on the Bridge. Rachel’s going to eat with Dana and the Nymphs, so it’ll just be you, Helene, Sakura, and Calara.\*

John stepped out of the grav-tube on Deck Three. \*Alright, but let’s all eat together for dinner tonight.\*

\*It’s a date,\* Alyssa said, sending him a lovely telepathic smile.

He opened the door to the Lagoon and immediately heard laughter and splashing. A tiger-striped dolphin flipped over the bridge ahead of him, followed in rapid succession by Leylira’s sisters. They plunged into the crystal-clear water and as he walked out into the room, he could see the Nymphs were chasing each other around the huge lake. When he glanced at the beach, he found the source of the laughter; Emily was giggling at Jade, who had been drenched from head to toe.

“Hey,” John called out, as he strode down the steps that curved around to the beach. “Are your sisters misbehaving, Jade?”

“They are, but I’ll get them back, Master!” she exclaimed, stripping off her dress and sprinting across the beach before diving into the Lagoon, fins rippling into place along her arms and legs.

John kicked off his shoes and strolled across the beach to the two lounge chairs, enjoying the feel of the soft sand between his toes. “Hi, Emily,” he said, greeting her with a warm smile. “Have the Nymphs been taking good care of you?”

Emily was wearing a bikini covered modestly with a wrap and she sat up to beam at him in delight. “They’re amazing, John! You won’t believe the different creatures they can transform into!”

He tilted the sodden beach lounger to dump the water on the sand, then sat down next to the blonde. “Oh, I think I have a pretty good idea...”

She blushed and nodded. “Silly me, of course you do.”

Turning to watch the antics in the pool, Emily smiled as Jade cut through the water like a knife, quickly reaching Betrixa and hurling the mischievous Nymph high into the air. Betrixa’s dolphin form turned hazy, obscured by a blue blur, then she shapeshifted into a falcon that swooped and cartwheeled high above them.

“They’re lovely girls. They have a sweet kind of innocence to them that’s really endearing,” Emily said, her gaze tracking the sleek bird of prey. “It’s amazing that they can be so friendly and charming considering what they’ve been through.” She glanced at John and added quietly, “Jade was telling me all about the Lenarrans... and how you rescued them.”

“It’s a tragedy what happened to the Nymphs,” John agreed, watching as Marika was next to be launched out of the water. “I can’t undo the past, but I can try to make sure they have a bright future.”

He got to see what a dolphin looked like when it was surprised, then saw a look of shock on an eagle’s face, when Betrixa swooped down to intercept Marika after she shifted. The squawking birds tumbled back into the lagoon, plunging headlong under the water.

“They’re really happy here with you. They were constantly singing your praises when I chatted with them earlier,” Emily said, darting an admiring glance his way. She looked at him curiously and was about to ask a question, then seemed to change her mind.

John raised an eyebrow. “Go ahead and ask... I won’t be offended.”

Emily leaned over towards him and whispered, “I’ve heard lots of rumours about Nymphs, and yesterday, Betrixa called you ‘Master’. Are the rumours true?”

“It depends on the rumours. Nymphs do need to have a master; it’s something that’s built into their DNA. I’m trying to help them break the rules that have turned them into helpless sex slaves and make sure they’ll never be abused again. Jade is already free and her sisters are getting there.”

“What does Calara think about you being the master to five Nymphs?” Emily asked in a hushed voice.

“She’ll be joining us soon. Why don’t you ask her?” he replied, smiling at the blonde.

Emily looked mortified. “I couldn’t ask her that!”

“I don’t think she’d mind. If you want a really honest answer, I’d ask her when Jack and Mateo aren’t around.”

Before Emily could ask him anything else, the Nymphs shimmered into their familiar forms and splashed out of the lake. They shook themselves off, drying almost instantly, before bounding across the sand to join him. There was an enthusiastic chorus of “Hey, John!” from the four nude catgirls, each greeting him with friendly kisses before they waved and smiled at Emily.

“I really like her, Master!” Betrixa gushed, her sapphire eyes twinkling impishly. “Is Emily going to be joining us as your latest mate?”

He coughed and avoided making eye-contact with Emily, who blushed furiously. “No, honey. Emily is Mateo’s girlfriend.”

Betrixa pouted. “That’s a shame, she’d look gorgeous with a ba-” Before she could continue, Leylira and Neysa grabbed their grinning sister. “Hey, let go of me!”

Ignoring her protests, they flung her back into the lake, the startled catgirl making a huge splash.

Marika gently stroked their guest’s long blonde hair. “Betrixa’s just teasing you. Don’t pay her any attention.”

“She only does it to people she really likes,” Neysa explained, rolling her eyes. “It’s her bizarre version of a compliment.”

“It’s okay, I don’t mind,” Emily said, smiling at them shyly.

Jade padded across the sand to the group and slipped on her dress. \*I’m sorry about that, John. We were quite open with Emily earlier, so she knows it’s easier for us to call you Master, than use your real name.\*

\*No harm done,\* he said amiably, greeting his third matriarch with a kiss.

Helene was the last to emerge from the water, her beautiful teal skin glistening with moisture. The sparkling sheen made her gorgeous bikini-clad body look incredibly exotic.

“Hello, John!” she called out to him, skipping across the sand to give him a very damp hug.

He gave her an affectionate squeeze. “Hey, honey. Enjoy your swim?”

“It was lovely!” Pulling back to give him a radiant smile, she saw the dark patches soaking his shirt and her face fell in consternation. “Oh no, I forgot I was so wet! Look at the mess I made!”

Betrixa smirked and shook her head, only to be elbowed by Leylira.

“What? I didn’t say anything!” the cheetah catgirl protested.

“I was going to change anyway,” John said, giving Helene a reassuring kiss on the cheek.

“We’ll leave you to enjoy the picnic,” Jade said with a wry smile, before glancing at her sisters. “Come on, naughty kittens. Dana’s got a tasty lunch waiting for you.”

The four catgirls could barely contain their excitement as they rushed to get dressed in the clothes that they’d left carefully folded on the beach furniture.

“Wait!” Emily called out, as Jade waved goodbye and padded after them. “I haven’t seen you do any shape-shifting yet, Jade! You promised you’d ask John!”

The elder Nymph turned to look at John, a playful gleam in her emerald eyes. “Is that alright with you, Master?”

He smiled at her indulgently. “Alright, go ahead.”

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“And that’s one of our spare armouries,” Calara said, letting the door close without entering. “We need to restock it with the latest versions of our guns and armour, but we’ve been upgrading our gear so quickly, we haven’t had the time.”

“You’ve got stashes of equipment everywhere,” Mateo marvelled, following his sister to the forward grav-tube.

Jack nodded, a thoughtful look on his face. “I’ve served on Federation warships for the last thirty years, but I’ve never been on a ship that’s so purpose-fitted for warfare.”

Calara stepped into the soft blue luminescence of the anti-gravity field. “We’ve been in almost non-stop combat for the last six months and the Invictus was never designed for such relentless fighting, especially with so small a crew. We had to make some extensive modifications to customise the ship to better suit our needs... but not all the changes we made were combat-focused.”

“Like the swimming pool?” Mateo asked with interest.

She smiled and nodded. “The Invictus actually came with a fully-furnished gym and a pool, but we had to get rid of them to build another brig. The new pool is much better though and John installed a magnificent dojo... which I’ll show you after lunch.”

“I can’t wait to see that!” Mateo enthused, sharing a smile with his father.

Looking upwards at the exits from the grav-tube, Calara pondered aloud, “I think we can skip the Power Cores and Magazines on Deck Five, so I’ll take you through the Observatory to show you the pool, then we can stop for lunch.” She glanced at Mateo and added, “If you still want to take a look at the Invictus’ main Bridge, you can head up to the Command Deck this afternoon. Alyssa will be up there for the rest of the day and she’ll be happy to show you the navigation systems.”

“I definitely want to see that,” he said enthusiastically, his brown eyes alight with anticipation. “Touring the Invictus is like getting a glimpse of the future; I’ll be able to see what Federation ships will be using decades from now!”

His comment made Calara pause in surprise. “That’s an interesting way of looking at it. I’ve got so used to the rapid pace of all these upgrades that I forget what it must be like seeing the Invictus with fresh eyes.”

“I really appreciate you showing us around,” Mateo said gratefully. “I understand that almost everything we’ve seen is incredibly classified. It means a lot that you’d trust me with top secret technology like this.”

“I love you, big brother... of course I trust you.” Calara said with a fond smile, before giving him a hug. “Not even the Fleet Admiral has had a personal tour of the Invictus.”

“I’ll try not to gloat the next time she phones me for a chat,” Mateo joked, hugging her back.

Calara laughed and pulled away from him, then gestured towards the next exit. “Okay, jump out here.”

Jack and Mateo followed her into the short corridor that led through to the Observatory. Calara darted ahead and crouched down by the console beside the oval bed, pressing a couple of buttons to open up the roof. The Crystal Alyssium armour plating peeled back, giving them a spectacular view of space through the huge transparent dome overhead.

“Wow...” Mateo murmured, gazing up at the glittering stars in amazement. “The view from here is incredible!”

“Stargazing’s a lovely way to relax,” Calara agreed, tilting her head back to enjoy the breathtaking view. “The Invictus went through a major refit when we lengthened her to accommodate the Singularity Drivers and the Heavy Cannon battery. We had loads of spare space on the lower decks, so we included the Observatory to make the ship feel more like a home.”

She noticed that her father was suspiciously quiet and glanced in his direction. Jack was studying the huge bed with a raised eyebrow and it was quite clear from just counting the pillows that the entire crew all slept together there.

When he saw her pensive expression, Jack gave her a reassuring smile and gently patted her shoulder. “You’re very lucky to have this, Callie. I’m happy for you.”

“Thanks, dad,” she whispered, giving him a fierce hug.

“What’s through these doors?” Mateo asked, blissfully unaware of the important exchange between father and daughter.

Calara smiled at Jack as they separated, then she walked over to her brother. “That one over there leads to a bathroom and this one’s our walk-in-wardrobe and emergency armoury.”

Mateo smiled in amusement. “How very convenient. Get out of bed, brush your teeth, then get dressed for another day in the office?”

She laughed and nodded. “Yeah, something like that.”

“So what’s through here?” he asked, walking over to the door on the far side of the Observatory. “Is this the way to the swimming pool?”

“That’s right,” Calara said, gesturing for him to proceed.

Her brother tapped the button on the wall, opening the double doors and giving him his first glimpse of the Lagoon.

And the colossal green dragon that turned to study him with inquisitive emerald eyes.

“Holy fuck!” Mateo gasped, staggering backwards in fear.

Jack realised at once who it was, having recognised Jade’s colouration from her shapeshift into a tiger the previous evening and the video he’d seen of her in action. That knowledge was the only thing that stopped him fleeing in terror from the enormous draconic behemoth that dominated the cavernous room.

“Mateo, stop!” Calara said firmly, grabbing his wrist to stop him from running, her grip surprisingly strong. “It’s just Jade.”

“W-what?” he stammered, fear numbing his brain into insensibility.

“She’s not going to hurt you,” his sister said, her voice calm and soothing. “Jade’s a Nymph... a shape-shifter, remember? She can turn into a dragon.”

The enormous reptilian monster blurred in a verdant haze, rapidly shrinking until Jade reappeared in humanoid form. She bounded across the bridge to join them, a look of contrition on her beautiful face.

“I’m so sorry! I didn’t mean to scare you!”

The Nymph was entirely nude and the alluring bounce of her gravity-defying breasts did a lot to help Mateo recover from his shock.

“That was a hell of a shock,” he admitted, taking a big breath to steady his pounding heart. “Sorry I overreacted... I don’t have a good history with dragons.”

“Of course... you were captured by Tamolith,” Jade said with sympathy. “I really am sorry I frightened you, I was just showing Emily what I could do.”

Mateo looked at her in bewilderment. “She asked you to change into that?!”

Jade nodded, then glanced over her shoulder at the blonde who was hurrying across the bridge.

“Mateo!” Emily gushed, running into his open arms. She gave him a big kiss, her eyes sparkling with joy. “Isn’t Jade amazing? Thank you so much for bringing me with you! This trip has been so exciting!”

He struggled valiantly to regain his composure. “I’m glad you’ve been having a good time.”

“Oh I have, the Nymphs have been wonderful! They spent the morning changing into all sorts of different creatures for me!”

Mateo glanced at Jade with a flicker of trepidation. “All of you can turn into dragons?”

Jade shook her head. “Only me at the moment.” She caught his eyes flicking down to admire her bounteous cleavage and her full lips curved into a knowing smile. “I can see you’re feeling better already. I’ll let you enjoy your lunch without worrying about scary dragons trying to steal your sandwiches.”

Turning away, she shifted in a verdant blur and reappeared as a green falcon, lifting into the air with rapid beats of her wings. Jade swooped across the Lagoon to rejoin her sisters, where she returned to her normal shape and slipped on the dress that Neysa handed over. The five Nymphs waved goodbye, then left through the door opposite.

“Imagine being able to just change into anything you want,” Emily said with a wistful sigh.

“Yeah, you changing into a dragon would be great,” Mateo said with considerably less enthusiasm.

Calara smiled and clasped his hand. “You must be starving after being dragged around the ship all morning. Let’s go have some lunch.”

John met them half-way across the bridge. “Are you alright, Mateo? I can’t apologise enough for you getting a scare like that. I’ll have to have a stern word with Alyssa.”

\*I’m really sorry about that, handsome,\* Alyssa said quickly. \*I’m a bit distracted at the moment and wasn’t paying attention.\*

\*Are you alright?\* he asked with concern.

\*I’m fine. I’ll explain why later.\*

“Why would you blame Alyssa?” Mateo asked in confusion, sweeping his gaze over the beach to look for the statuesque blonde. “I can’t see her. Is she joining us for lunch?”

“Ah... no, she needs to stay up on the Command Deck to make sure we don’t crash into anything,” John replied, covering his accidental slip. He plucked at his damp t-shirt. “I just got drenched, so I’m going to get changed into some beach-wear before the picnic. Feel free to do the same and have a swim before we eat if you want.”

“Can we swim first?” Emily pleaded with her boyfriend. “The water looks so good, but I wanted to wait until you got here before I went in.”

“Sure, I’ll go get changed,” Mateo agreed, gladly accepting her grateful kiss.

The couple set off, leaving John with Calara and her father. Standing at the apex of the bridge offered the best view of the Lagoon and Jack paused to survey the breathtaking tropical paradise. He was astounded that such outstanding natural beauty could be hidden within the most powerful warship in Terran Federation history.

Calara slipped her hand into his. “What do you think, dad?”

He turned to smile at his daughter. “You mentioned that the Invictus doesn’t have a night shift for the Bridge... I can hold my own at Tactical and my wife’s one hell of a Comms Officer.”

She laughed, then hesitated and turned to look quizzically at John.

\*Oh my...\* Alyssa said softly. \*Can you imagine living with Maria?\*

Clearing his throat awkwardly, John had absolutely no idea how he was going to respond to that.

Before he could say anything, Jack held up his hand. “Relax, I’m only joking.” He broke into a lopsided smile. “Mostly...”

John chuckled and tried not to sigh with relief. “I really respect you as an officer, Jack. It’s just that...”

Jack clapped him on the shoulder. “It’s okay, I understand. You already explained why you have an all-female crew.”

“I know this must be incredibly difficult for you,” John said to him, before glancing meaningfully at Calara. “This can’t be the life you ever envisaged for your daughter.”

“It’s not, but who am I to judge?” Jack smiled at his youngest child. “I can see how happy you are, Callie, living here with John and the girls. It took me a while to get there, but you both have my blessing... and apparently my wife already knows all about your living situation and approves wholeheartedly.”

“Mom’s been very supportive,” Calara said with a broad grin.

“Yes, I bet she has,” he said, giving her a wry smile. His expression turned serious as he continued, “All joking aside, I know you’re about to embark on a war with the Progenitors. That thought terrifies me and I’m not even involved in the fighting. Your crew has skills and abilities that I can barely comprehend... and I know that I’m just not capable of being able to fight beside you.”

Calara opened her mouth to protest, but her father shushed her with his hand in the air.

“Just let me get this off my chest, sweetheart, then you can talk to your heart’s content. After our conversation last night, I thought long and hard about how I could help you in the upcoming war. I realised this morning that the best way I can support you is to keep Maria and my boys out of danger. Devereux was right. You don’t need the distraction, Calara, you’ve got far bigger problems to deal with.”

“You’re not a distraction!” she protested.

He nodded, his expression solemn. “Yes, we are. You can’t keep running back to save us all the time. You’ve got to focus all your attention on taking down this group of tyrannical demigods. Whenever you need to visit your family for some love and support, then we’ll welcome you home with open arms... I think that’s the best way we can help you.”

Calara flung her arms around him. “You’re amazing, dad! I love you so much.”

Touched by his future father-in-law’s unreserved support, John gave him a look filled with gratitude. “I can’t tell you how much this means to us, Jack. Thank you.”

Jack kissed Calara on the cheek, then smiled at John. “I’d wish you good luck... but I don’t think you’ll need it, not with my daughter at your side.”

John gently rubbed her back. “You’re absolutely right. She’s the finest Tactician in the galaxy.”

Alyssa felt Calara’s burst of joy across her network... accompanied by another surge of previously untapped psychic potential. \*Not again!\* she groaned, riding that wave of bliss.

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The Bridge of the vast Progenitor dreadnought was dark and gloomy, illuminated only by the sinister crimson lights set into the floor and the muted glow from the scarlet icon hurtling across the map.

“How are they travelling so fast?” Jessica asked in an awed whisper, watching the Invictus cruise effortlessly between the stars.

Rahn’hagon shook his head, unable to believe his eyes. “They’re moving even quicker than before... I’ve never seen anything reach that hyper-warp velocity!”

“Are they actually flying through that gravity well?!” the brunette balked, knowing such a feat was impossible.

Her Progenitor lover increased the magnification, then watched as the Invictus swept majestically around the system, the star bathing the ship in a warm golden glow.

“That can’t be...” he muttered under his breath. “How are you doing that, John?!”

Jessica leaned back, then studied the map in confusion. “We’re hundreds of light years away... how can we still be picking up the tracking beacon?”

“It’s a psychic emitter,” he answered distractedly, never taking his eyes from the rune. “It sends locator pulses across the Astral shallows.”

She turned to look at him askance. “Could you explain that again in English please?”

He gave her a contrite smile. “My apologies... I forgot you’re not well-versed in the subtleties of the Eldritch dimension.”

Jessica raised an eyebrow. “If you’re trying to make me feel stupid, you’re succeeding beyond your wildest dreams.”

“That was not my intent, Jess,” he said earnestly, stroking her cheek. “I hold you in the highest regard... and would never do anything to belittle you.”

“Alright, you’re forgiven,” she said, clasping his hand and kissing his fingers.

Suddenly the Progenitor rune began to dim, the radiance oscillating wildly in spikes of red light before winking out.

“What the hell was that?!” Jessica asked, squinting against the flaring light. “Is it broken?”

Rahn’hagon shook his head in bewilderment. “I don’t know, I’ve never seen one of those devices fail before. They might have found the tracking device... or there could be some kind of background interference.”

“We need to jump ahead of that ship!” Jessica said urgently. “This might be our only chance to make contact before we lose them!”

“Have you decided what you’re going to say to John?” Rahn’hagon asked, looking intrigued.

“Me?” she asked apprehensively. “Aren’t you going to talk to him first?”

“Absolutely not,” he declared, a determined set to his jaw. “He banished me from his presence on pain of death. I have no wish to further antagonise him.”

“But you promised!” Jessica pleaded, looking up at him with big eyes.

“Your feminine wiles won’t work on me, Jess,” Rahn’hagon said stubbornly, turning away and shielding his gaze with a hand. “Besides, I only promised to help you atone with our son. I didn’t agree to make first contact with him... or speak to him in any fashion for that matter.”

She slumped dejectedly and leaned against the nearest console. “What the hell am I going to say to him, Rahn? Sorry I dumped you with my parents and didn’t think about you again for forty years? It’s no wonder he hates me... I’m the worst mother in the galaxy.”

Rahn’hagon lowered his hand and looked at her with sympathy. “I was the one at fault, not you. All you were doing was following my instructions... and truthfully, you were powerless to resist. Blame me for forcing you to abandon your son... my relationship with John is already beyond redemption.”

“But you’re his father,” she said softly. “I don’t want to make things any worse between the two of you.”

He sighed with regret. “It’s too late for that.”

Jessica hugged him, sharing his melancholy mood. “I don’t think I’m ready to speak to John... not yet. I need some time to plan what I’m going to say.” She looked at the holographic map over Rahn’hagon’s shoulder. “It looks like they’re heading into the Core Worlds. Can we jump to Alpha Centauri? I bet they’ll stop at Olympus shipyard... if it’s still standing after all these years.”

Rahn’hagon twisted around to reach the map interface, then shifted the location to the blue star in question. He cycled through the glyphs for that system, then selected one for the shipyard, bringing it into sharp focus.

“That’s it!” Jessica exclaimed, flashing an excited grin at her lover.

“This sensor data was collated only two weeks ago,” he said, reading the runic script. “Olympus shipyard appears to be fully functional.”

“Can we jump there, Rahn? Please?” Jessica begged him. “You can leave all the talking to me. I promise I won’t try to push you into doing anything you’re not comfortable with.”

He studied the map pensively for a long moment. “Alright... but when you make contact with John, we’re staying cloaked on the periphery of the system. If he makes any aggressive moves in our direction, we’ll leave immediately.”

“Sure, that’s totally fine,” she agreed, nibbling nervously at a nail as she stared at the map.

The thought that she could be speaking to her son again in just a matter of hours sent a host of butterflies fluttering in Jessica’s stomach. She felt drastically worse when Rahn’hagon activated the wormhole generator, the Progenitor dreadnought hurtling through the rip in space, and leaving her fighting to stop herself throwing up. As she choked down the wave of bile, Jessica stared out through the sweeping windows, her heart skipping a beat when she saw the huge six-armed battle station.

The titanium grey superstructure made Olympus look bleak and forbidding, the ominous feeling reinforced by the hundreds of Terran warships lined up in formation surrounding the shipyard. It was forty years since she’d last been here. Forty years since she’d sabotaged the Cora, murdered its crew, then fled from Federation territory in a stolen corvette. Jessica eyed the Terran forces with trepidation, wondering if she was still a wanted criminal, a death sentence hovering over her head.

As terrifying as that was, the thought of being sternly rejected by her son was far worse.