Three Square Meals Ch. 97 – part 1

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

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

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

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

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

He reached across the table to clasp her hand. “Yeah, I know what you mean.” Glancing around the group, he continued, “Okay then, anyone got anything new they want to update me on?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He tensed, a flash of guilt crossing his face.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Hey, John,” she said softly.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She walked inside and turned around, her big eyes brimming with emotion.

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

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

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

“From humble beginnings come great things.”

“Thank you for being our friend.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Yeah, that’s true,” John admitted.

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

The twins, Calara, and Jade all nodded emphatically.

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

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

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

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

All the girls looked at John in consternation, appalled at the thought that they might somehow be inhibiting him from getting stronger.

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

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

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

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

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

John nodded. “I’ve already dropped the warding shield I was using to keep me hidden. When we’re ready, I’ll create another one of those hex domes like the first time. That ought to protect us for a few minutes and give us some time to prepare ourselves before we’re in danger.”

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

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

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

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

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

“Absolutely not!” the Latina protested.

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

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

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

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

Dana nodded, her mind made up. “Even if we’re just standing around with our thumbs up our butts, at least we’ll be useful as energy batteries!”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*“As resilient as a mountain.”*

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

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

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

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

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

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

She nodded enthusiastically. “Sure!”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“John!” Calara screamed, grabbing his arm.

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

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

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

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

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

There was an outraged howl from deep in the mists, the indignant rage finally coalescing into understandable words.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Alright, get geared up everyone!” John called out, brandishing his two-handed sword. “Just imagine you’ve got your armour and weapons and they’ll appear!”

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

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

“Save your energy, I’ll handle it,” Rachel replied firmly, her brow furrowed in concentration.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

To see the kind-hearted Nymph severely hurt like that filled John with rage and he channelled his hatred of the beast deep inside, focusing his will on his physical form. The ground seemed to fall away as he soared upwards, his body growing to massive proportions. The sword he clenched in his fist became a weapon fit for a titan, thirty-metre-long tongues of blue flame curling up the colossal blade.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Jade turned and unleashed her lightning breath on the next wave of beasts, then bounded away to continue her enthusiastic slaughter, ripping the survivors apart with her gigantic claws. John stomped down on the body of a slithering reptilian monster that was bigger than a hover-truck and neatly decapitated the pinned creature with his sword. He paused to take stock of the battle and saw that below them, Dana, Tashana, and Sakura were busy shooting, freezing, and burning the incoming packs of monsters. Mangled carcasses were piling up around the group, as relentless waves of abominations lumbered out of the fog. Although his team were holding their own against the horde, they’d run out of energy eventually and by the sounds coming from the fog, there were an unending legion of monsters still on their way.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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