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John and Dana followed the two Maliri males as they led them away from the auditorium and through an adjoining door in the corridor just outside. This room was much smaller, with six ornate chairs placed around a gilded table. Kaedos and Laedrallas remained silent as the others entered, then Laedrallas sealed the door behind them, while Kaedos activated a device on his wrist.

“We apologise for being so secretive,” Laedrallas said as he joined his colleague at the table. “The leaders of our guilds have kept this information hidden from the matriarchs for many centuries.”

Dana bounced up and down with glee. “Is this about the trade stations being secret fortresses?!”

The two Maliri males stared at her in dumbfounded astonishment.

“I knew it!” the redhead squealed, grinning in delight.

“B-but... how did you...?!” Kaedos stammered, struggling to string a coherent sentence together.

John placed a reassuring hand on his shoulder. “Don’t worry, your secret’s still safe. Edraele told us about the history of these trade stations a while ago. She said that they were originally defensive platforms that are thousands of years old. All the rest were decommissioned, but four were repurposed into trade hubs. We also recently discovered a network of advanced gun emplacements that date back at least nine millennia, so Dana just put two-and-two together.”

The two men looked greatly relieved and the tension eased from them both.

“The Valaden Matriarch was partly correct,” Kaedos clarified. “There are eleven defensive stations located around the periphery of Maliri territory. All of them were decommissioned many thousands of years ago, as our civilisation continued to face no external threats and looked ever inwards. The matriarchs, in their infinite wisdom, believed that crewing the stations was a waste of valuable personnel and abandoned them.”

He shook his head in disapproval, then continued, “When our alien neighbours began to venture into the stars and made first contact with the Maliri, our ancestors volunteered to reactivate the most conveniently positioned stations as trade hubs. By channelling all the trade traffic to those key locations, it would blunt alien curiosity about our people, and reduce the number of border incursions. Over the centuries, more males came to live on these stations, as they proved to be a safe refuge from the madness on the homeworlds. Geniya, Genirath, Genwynn, and Genkiri stations have since been greatly expanded, increasing their capacity for onboard personnel.”

“To accommodate all the males who left the homeworlds,” John said, nodding in understanding. “And if there are now millions of Maliri living here, the additional facilities must be substantial.”

“That is correct, Lord Baen’thelas,” Kaedos said sombrely.

Dana placed her hands on the table and leaned in excitedly. “So, basically what you’re saying, is that there’s some super badass space station buried underneath a bunch of houses and shit? Is that the schematics there? Can I take a peek?”

Deflating slightly, Kaedos sighed. “Yes, that is what I was trying to explain. And yes, I was about to show you the schematics.”

“Awesome!” Dana gushed, watching him with breathless anticipation.

He removed the device from his wrist and placed it on the centre of the table, then activated the holo-projector. The glowing blueprints for the original starbase floated before them, and John could immediately see the similarities between its construction and the gun emplacements located around Kythshara.

“Holy shit...” Dana muttered, as her eyes darted back and forth across the schematic, committing everything to memory.

“Are those Quantum Flux Cannons?” John asked, recognising the distinctive shape of the weapons built into huge turrets.

He counted twenty of the massive guns, as well as scores of Tachyon Lance batteries placed in areas where their firing arcs would provide a lethal crossfire.

“Yep! Mael’nerak loaded this place up for bear!” the redhead replied, before blinking and turning away from the schematic. “Thanks for showing me that, Kaedos.”

The Maliri structural engineer could only stare at them both in open-mouthed amazement.

“It appears our greatest kept secrets are like an open book to you both,” Laedrallas murmured, shaking his head in disbelief.

“I still have a few questions,” John said, his gaze still locked on the starbase. “If those weapons are as powerful as the ones we discovered, then they were better than anything the Maliri fleets were equipped with. Why didn’t the matriarchs strip these stations of all their weapons before they were decommissioned?”

“That’s an excellent question, my Lord,” Laedrallas replied, perking up. “You are quite correct. The weapons on these defensive installations are very powerful, but we are unable to replicate them ourselves, or the necessary devices to support them. I imagine that reduced interest in them considerably. In addition, these guns would be extremely difficult to remove from the station. The armour in the sealed turrets is practically indestructible, and impervious to our most potent cutting beams.”

“After not being fired in anger for thousands of years, the matriarchs likely forgot about those weapons,” Kaedos interjected. “But we continued to perform regular maintenance.”

“This is excellent news. Thank you for trusting me with this information,” John said gratefully. “If we can reactivate all these defensive starbases, they’ll be incredibly useful for defending our territory.”

Kaedos and Laedrallas shared a pensive frown.

“Umm, that might be a problem,” Dana said hesitantly. “We won’t be able to use the station’s defensive capabilities until we detach all the additional crap that’s been stacked on top of it. I’m sure Calara could blast it all clear in a few minutes using the Invictus guns, but I’m guessing you probably want to evacuate the trade stations first?”

“That might be sensible,” John said with a wry smile.

She tapped a finger on her chin. “Well, at least we can bring the other seven stations back online without having to worry about trashing anything.”

John turned to the two Maliri. “Can you tell us where they’re located?”

“They’ve been abandoned for thousands of years, so pinpointing their precise location will prove to be challenging,” Kaedos explained. “We can make an educated guess as to their most probable location, but there is an additional complication...”

“There usually is,” Dana said with a groan. “What’s the problem?”

“Each station is concealed by a powerful cloaking device, rendering sensor sweeps useless for tracking them down,” Laedrallas regretfully informed them.

John grimaced as he imagined how difficult it would be to find them. “Are you sure they’re cloaked?”

“Yeah, they totally are,” Dana interjected with a frustrated sigh. “Geniya’s equipped with a massive cloaking device; I can see it on the schematic. The rest are bound to have the same capabilities.”

“Could we hide Geniya using the cloak?” John asked hopefully.

“Nah, the cloaking field is nowhere near big enough,” Dana replied, shaking her head. “Before you ask me if we can boost the range, Geniya is at least ten times bigger now than the original space station. There’s no chance in hell we can cloak anything that size.”

“Ah well, it was just an idea,” he replied with a shrug. Turning to the two Maliri, John continued, “Could you forward the location data to the Invictus please? We’ll do our best to track down the deactivated starbases as soon as we get a chance.”

“We shall do so at once,” Kaedos readily agreed.

“This was all incredibly helpful, thank you,” John said with gratitude.

“I’m glad that we were able to contribute towards our defences,” Laedrallas said, sharing a broad smile with his colleague. “When Geniya has been evacuated, we will guide you through activating the station’s defensive capabilities.”

“I can’t wait!” Dana gushed.

They filed out of the meeting room, then said their final goodbyes to the two Maliri leaders. When John and Dana returned to the debating chamber, John could tell by the elated grin on Calara’s face that Alyssa had been keeping her informed during the entire discussion.

“Well, that was quite the lucky break,” John said, as he joined the girls.

“I don’t know why I didn’t think of it before,” Calara said, unable to stop grinning. “Edraele told us how old these trade stations are, and she even mentioned that they used to be defensive starbases.”

“I must admit, I never thought twice about it,” John said, nodding in agreement. “Geniya’s architecture looks identical to their current ships and cities, so it’s not that surprising that we assumed that’s all there was to them.”

“I never suspected the truth either,” Edraele admitted with a troubled frown. “As Kaedos said, my predecessors were obsessed with internal House conflicts. When I became Matriarch, I never paid any real attention to the border stations or the males’ activities here either.”

John gave her a supportive hug. “That’s a probably a good thing.”

She broke into a rueful smile. “Very true.”

“Alright, ladies, put your helmets back on, it’s time to head back to the Invictus,” John said, before turning to Ceraden. “Have you and your girls made a decision about leaving?”

“We’re coming with you, my friend.”

“Great. I’ll see you back at the ship then,” John said with relief.

He looked at the Trade Guild leader and was about to thank him for his help, when he noticed that the old Maliri was inhaling and exhaling deeply.

“Are you alright, Natharion?” he asked with concern.

The sparkle had definitely returned to the Maliri male’s eyes and he vigorously shook John’s hand. “These Terran ladies are marvellous, simply marvellous!”

“You’ll get no argument from me there,” John said, startled by just how spry the older Maliri seemed to be.

“My cough’s completely gone! I haven’t been able to breathe like this in years!” Natharion exclaimed, beaming at him in delight. “Thank you for everything, dear boy!”

\*Rachel gave him a healthcheck,\* Alyssa informed him, winking at John before she pulled on her helmet.

“You’re welcome, Natharion,” John said, patting his arm. “The best way you can repay us, is keep everyone focused on evacuating the station. Don’t let the males forget what’s at stake here.”

“I don’t think anyone could forget what happened here today,” Natharion said with a chuckle. “We’ll be ready to leave as soon as the fleets arrive, I’ll make sure of it.”

They parted company and the girls fell into formation around John as they left the auditorium. He was quietly reflective as they walked back through the station to the Invictus, thinking about everything that had transpired in the meeting with the guild leaders. While he was elated that the males had almost unanimously agreed to return to the homeworlds, the trade stations were still in considerable danger. Genwynn station was at particular risk, as it lay perilously close to the invasion path Calara had pre-selected for the Galkirans.

The fact that the trade stations might have substantial defensive potential was also a huge boon, but that only increased the pressure on him to ensure the males were evacuated as quickly as possible. The sheer number of ships they would need to transport that many people was a daunting prospect, let alone the logistical nightmare of ensuring the civilians were adequately provisioned for the journey home. He suddenly felt gauntleted fingers clasping his hand, and when he glanced to the Lioness on his right, Edraele’s soothing voice drifted through his mind.

\*Don’t fret over the details, John,\* she said softly. \*Your role here was to galvanise the males into action, and your performance was a spectacular success. Leave the logistical planning to your exceptionally gifted girls; they’ll let you know if and when they need your assistance.\*

He considered that for a moment, then realised that Edraele made a very good point. Letting the tension ease from his shoulders, he flashed her a grateful smile. \*You’re right. Thank you.\*

She gave his hand a gentle squeeze, and John simply enjoyed her company for the rest of the walk back to the Invictus. They all trooped back into the battlecruiser, then John followed the girls into the express grav-tubes, where they ascended to the Armoury to stow away their gear.

Jehanna was the first to remove her Paragon suit, and as soon as the robotic arms lifted away, she ran into John’s open arms. “We did it!” she gushed, her dark eyes shining with delight.

He twirled her around before setting her back down on the deck. “The message from the matriarchs blew their minds! You did an incredible job, honey!”

She giggled with glee. “I told you it was going to be a huge hit! I was watching the audience at the part where all the matriarchs gathered around your throne. You should’ve seen the males’ faces! They all loved you being the man in charge!”

Rachel smiled as she joined them. “I never doubted you for a moment. I mean... how could a plan like that fail? We told a bunch of horny guys, that if they went back home, we’d set them up with a harem of adoring babes. I’m just surprised the decision wasn’t completely unanimous!”

Dana bounded over, a big grin on her pretty face. “She does make a good point. Those poor guys were going through an epic dry spell! I mean, they’ve all literally got blue balls!”

The girls all giggled and laughed, and even Edraele’s lips twitched into a smile of amusement.

The only exception was Irillith, who slowly shook her head.

John saw the movement and looked at her with concern. “Is something wrong, Irillith?”

“I know Rachel was only joking, but I don’t think we should downplay what a daunting task this actually was. Most of the males on the border stations *loathed* the females on the homeworlds. Even if they hadn’t personally suffered at the hands of the matriarchs, many of those men had lost daughters to the political infighting. I’ve never felt more universally despised in all my life, than during my time associating with the males on Geniya.”

After releasing Jehanna, John pulled Irillith into a hug. “I’m sorry, honey. I never even thought that this might stir up some bad memories for you.”

She hugged him back tighter. “Don’t feel sorry for me, I didn’t mention it in a bid for sympathy. I deserved their hatred back then; I was exactly the same kind of narcissistic monster that drove those males away from their homes to the border stations. I just wanted to make you understand how difficult a feat this actually was, and what an incredible thing you’ve done for the Maliri.”

“Irillith’s absolutely right,” Edraele agreed, looking at her daughter with newfound admiration. “This was a huge accomplishment, Baen’thelas. You’ve just set in motion the reunification of our species and encouraged a massive population boom that will supercharge the birth rate. The effect this will have on the homeworlds can’t be understated.”

“It was a team effort,” John said magnanimously, looking around at each of the girls in turn. “Not just with the contributions each of you made to the meeting today, but we’ve been working towards this for months. Even befriending the Maliri engineers, and giving them a wonderful example of cooperation and teamwork all helped. You heard about the impact those girls have made on Ceraden’s life, and the positive influence from all the others will have rippled out through Geniya. I’m very proud of all of you.”

“Have we got time for a celebratory orgy?” Alyssa asked, an excited gleam in her eyes.

John glanced at the chronometer on the wall and smiled when he saw that it was four in the afternoon. “We’ve got a few hours to kill until the Wormhole Generator is fully charged... and I feel like a good celebration is in order.”

The girls cheered, and rushed to the xpress grav-tube, eager to get naked in the Observatory.

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Jade sat in the Command Chair on the Bridge, wearing her master’s peaked hat at a jaunty angle, and feeling quite flustered. She’d carefully listened to John work his magic on the Maliri males, and now he was working a very different kind of magic on his mates. The Nymph had been expecting John and the girls to embark on a wild orgy, but her master had caught her by surprise.

She’d underestimated the impact the quiet moment of intimacy with Myriana had on John, and he wasn’t in the mood for pounding his Lionesses senseless. Instead he’d been sensuously making love to each of the girls in turn... and they’d all absolutely adored it.

\*Jade, are you sure you don’t want to join us?\* John asked his Nymph matriarch. \*It’s Helene’s turn next...\*

She was greatly tempted to rush down there, but Jade had been planning her own night of debauchery with John and her fellow Nymphs. \*I don’t want to be greedy, Master. I have lots of exciting plans for you and my sisters.\*

\*I don’t think anyone would object to you being at both,\* he said in amusement.

Betrixa skipped up the steps to the Command Podium, then the cheetah catgirl deftly plucked the officer’s hat from her matriarch’s head.

“I’m in charge now!” she declared, striking an imperious pose. “I order you to go and get laid!”

Jade leapt to her feet and tried to snatch the hat back. “This is mutiny, Betrixa! I’ll have you spanked the length of the ship for this!”

The tawny catgirl giggled and landed a hefty smack on Jade’s taut rump. “It’s Captain Betrixa now! Move your sexy ass, Jade!”

Neysa smiled as she watched her mischievous sister’s antics. “We’re fine here, Jade. Go and have some fun with Master.”

Jade only hesitated for a moment longer, then she bounded down the steps towards the grav-tube. “I’ll bring you back a party snack!”

The Nymphs all licked their lips and purred at the thought, then they overheard each other and broke into laughter.

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John fully hilted himself inside Helene, the head of his cock gently nudging into the deepest part of her womb. He watched her lips part in a breathy gasp, then he leaned down to kiss her deeply, his tongue eagerly accepted into her mouth. She moaned in response, and her arms curled around his neck, pulling him even deeper into her sensuous embrace.

Making love to the aquatic girl was a breathtaking experience, as not only was she stunningly beautiful, she was also incredibly responsive to his every effort to please her. Every caress was gratefully received, and every thrust left her panting for more. He circled his hips, putting pressure on Jade’s warm fingers that were sandwiched between them. Helene groaned into his mouth as the Nymph sensuously rubbed her clit, making the aquatic beauty arch her back as she crested towards another massive climax.

Bringing her to the precipice with smooth strokes of his pistoning cock, John savoured the feel of her gorgeous body wrapped around him. Her rounded breasts pushed up against his chest, as if she were presenting him with two soft pillows to rest against. Those long teal legs were wrapped securely around his waist, the inside of her thighs deliciously smooth and silky soft as she coaxed him onwards.

Resisting the urge to fill up the beautiful, sensual girl, he gazed into Helene’s eyes as she reached her fourth climax of the evening. Her pupils widened into dark pools as endorphins pumped through her body, and she gazed up at him in adoration as she cried out his name in ecstasy. John gradually slowed his thrusts as she panted through the aftershocks of her climax, feeling her pussy rhythmically squeezing him as she yearned for his load.

They finally came to rest and he smiled down at the dishevelled but very satisfied young woman. “Am I forgiven for taking you on the galaxy’s most terrible date?”

She let out a disbelieving laugh, then gave him a warm smile. “Yes... you’re very much forgiven.”

“Good,” he said, giving her a peck on the tip of her nose. “I promise I’ll do much better next time.”

Helene moaned softly as he eased himself from her exhausted body, then she accepted Jade’s welcoming hug with a contented sigh.

John sat back on his haunches and stroked the pair affectionately, then glanced around the huge hexagonal bed. He’d paid valiant tribute to his harem of gorgeous girls, each of them climaxing at least twice before he’d moved on to the next in line. They’d paired up in his wake, revelling in the afterglow together, all except the last two on his list.

His looked over at the Maliri Queen and the Larathyran Empress, and he felt a flicker of doubt about how he should proceed. The two were intertwined together, with Edraele reclined on her back and Auralei draped over her luscious body, the two matriarchs sharing a very intimate kiss. John didn’t hesitate out of any fear of interrupting them, as he knew his attention would be gratefully received. However, he had good reason not take things further with either of them, at least not there and then.

As if sensing his indecision, they ceased their gentle kisses and turned to give him inviting smiles.

“I’m still more than sated from this morning, my Lord,” Edraele purred, before stretching like a cat for emphasis.

“Me too. That was a wonderful breakfast,” the Larathyran agreed, idly caressing her slender stomach to remind him of the full tummy he’d given them both earlier.

John smiled with relief, but then something about their sultry expressions didn’t ring true. He’d been around enough horny girls to instantly recognise the glimmer of lust in their eyes, despite their words to the contrary.

“Why do I get the feeling that you aren’t being completely honest with me?” he asked curiously, as he moved across the bed to join them.

The two women exchanged a glance, then Edraele whispered, “I heard what you were thinking, John.” Her eyes flicked meaningfully to the twins, before she looked up at him again. “I know you have certain trepidations about any acts of intimacy that might hurt my maternal bonding with my daughters.”

John flushed self-consciously, as he’d been thinking exactly that, having been coupled with Irillith then Tashana only half-an-hour earlier. While he was honest enough to admit to himself that the prospect of bedding the trio was a massive turn on, they’d so far avoided a scenario with them all in an orgy together. By contrast, the Maliri had been completely blasé about it, the females of their species having a very practical outlook to sharing males out of necessity.

Unsure how to respond in that awkward moment, he glanced at Auralei next. “I just want your first time to be special. I think it would be better to wait until I can give you all the attention you deserve.”

She nodded in understanding. “I trust you, John. We can wait, if you think that’s best.”

Despite her assurances, the hungry gleam in her dark eyes hadn’t dissipated in the slightest. “Is that really what you want? Please be honest with me, honey.”

Her resolve broke and she slumped in defeat. “I’m so turned on!” she whimpered, rubbing her thighs together reflexively. “I couldn’t take my eyes off you earlier. You looked so handsome... and you’ve got all those big muscles... I just kept wishing we could be together!”

“She needs it bad,” Alyssa purred, hugging John from behind.

“Alyssa...” he protested, turning to look at her over his shoulder.

The blonde grinned and gave him a quick kiss. “Don’t say another word. We can still make this really special for her; leave everything to me!”

John glanced back at Auralei, who sat up with a look of gleeful anticipation on her face. He didn’t have the heart to disappoint the lovely girl, so he just decided to trust Alyssa knew what she was doing.

“She won’t be disappointed!” Alyssa gushed, her cerulean orbs sparkling with delight. Rising to her feet, she clapped her hands together imperiously. “Let’s get to work, ladies!”

Dana lay snuggled up with Rachel, and the drowsy redhead groaned in protest at having to move, until the tawny-haired brunette elbowed her in the ribs.

“Hey! What was that for?!” Dana protested, as she sat up with a frown.

“Matriarch’s orders,” Rachel said glibly.

Alyssa gave her friend a stern look, and their quick telepathic conversation caused the redhead to blush with embarrassment.

“Sorry...” Dana apologised with a rueful smile. “I was just super chilled and didn’t want to move. I always get like that after John screws my brains out.”

“I should be the one apologising!” the Larathyran said with concern.

Bouncing over the bed to offer her a hand up, Dana shook her head. “Nah, I was just being lazy. Basking in the afterglow is almost as good as getting fucked senseless.”

“Ah... I wouldn’t know about that,” Auralei admitted, her cheeks darkening.

“Yeah, but not for much longer!” Dana said with a playful wink.

Alyssa and her entourage ushered the blushing Larathyran out through the door into the Lagoon, leaving John alone with Edraele.

“Well that solves both conundrums, doesn’t it, my Lord?” Edraele noted, turning to look at him with an arched eyebrow.

He chuckled in agreement, then moved to mount Edraele as she spread her azure thighs in invitation. She moaned with pleasure as he pushed inch after inch inside her soaked pussy, until he met momentary resistance at her cervix, then eased his way into her womb. When he was hilted, she groaned with relief and gave him a passionate kiss.

“Someone else needs it bad too,” he teased her.

“I really do,” she agreed, her hips undulating seductively beneath him.

He interlaced his fingers with hers and pinned her to the bed.

“Fuck me!” she panted, gazing up at him with lust blazing in her purple eyes.

John did exactly that, pounding her into the mattress as she urged him onwards. He drove her to climax in record time, and as she cried out in ecstasy, he couldn’t help comparing her deliciously sexy moans to those her daughters had made earlier. He very nearly came himself at that salacious comparison, especially when Edraele’s snug passage gripped him even tighter as she overheard his lewd thoughts.

While the beautiful Maliri panted breathlessly to recover, John glanced down at her and winced. “I’m so sorry about that, Edraele... my mind ran away with me.”

She laughed, and wrapped her arms and legs around him in a loving hug. “Oh, John... only you could apologise for giving me a world shattering orgasm.”

He chuckled and brushed a stray lock of white hair from her eyes. “You know that wasn’t the reason why.”

Edraele gave him an affectionate smile. “You’re going to have to set aside some of your Terran morality if you’re planning on keeping the three of us perpetually pregnant.”

“I wasn’t planning back-to-back pregnancies,” John protested. “Just every thirty years or so. That would give our children time to become adults before we thinking about having more.”

She nuzzled into him and murmured, “It soon adds up when you’re immortal. Three children for each of us per century, thirty per millennia... that’s a lot of swollen bellies.”

John couldn’t stop his cock from flexing in anticipation at that thought, and Edraele gave him a knowing grin.

“Let’s move on from my wavering Terran morality for the moment,” John suggested with a wry smile.

“Whatever my Lord commands,” she agreed, her purple eyes twinkling. “Oh, I have one bit of good news for you.”

“Oh yeah?” he asked, propping himself up on his elbows to keep his weight from crushing her.

“Do you remember the four fleets we sent to intercept the Brimorians in the Kintark Empire?” she murmured, hugging him closer and planting loving kisses on his throat.

“Of course. There were two from House Perfaren, one from Aeberos, and another from Naestina, all led by Fleet Commander Aadya. When we stopped the Brimorian invasion, they helped mop up the stragglers.”

Edraele nodded in confirmation. “After wiping out the Brimorian forces, they subsequently captured a sizable number of troop transports.”

“That we were going to use to move the Abandoned,” John said, his eyes widening.

“That’s correct. After discussions with Calara, we agreed it would be wise to guard the troop transports on their return journey to Maliri Space. We considered the captured ships too important to risk leaving them unprotected.”

“So where are all those fleets now?”

“It took some time to modify the Brimorian vessels for our crews, and those transports also have slower hyper-warp drives than our ships. That means that the combined fleet group has only just crossed the Maliri border with the Kintark.”

“Which means they must be very close to Genirath!” John exclaimed, grinning with relief. “Can you order them to divert to the Trade Station?”

“If you give the order, the Young Matriarchs will direct their Fleet Commanders to alter course.”

“Go for it!” John urged her. “If we load up the Maliri warships first, they can bring all the males they evacuate straight back to Valaden. That’ll give us access to four more fleets just before the Galkirans arrive. We could then send the Brimorian transports to worlds that are closer to the Brimorian border, so they’ll be in close proximity for when we launch our attack against the Enclave.”

“That’s an excellent suggestion, but I thought it might be prudent to bring all the evacuees back to Valaden. The males can take alternate transportation from there to the other homeworlds.”

“Are you planning on hogging all the men for your own planets?” John teased her.

Edraele shook her head. “Calara suggested upgrading the entire Brimorian transport fleet with faster hyper-warp drives. If we refit all those ships at Genthalas, they’ll be able to quickly reach the Abandoned populace, and return them to Maliri Space much faster. With the reduced travel times, we’ll radically reduce the amount of provisions required for that many passengers during the journey.”

John blinked in surprise. “That’s a great idea... but can you refit that many ships in time?”

“If we start manufacturing the required parts immediately, we should have considerable numbers of completed drives ready for when the transports arrive. Refitting those vessels in drydock will take some time, but considering the massive speed increases they’ll obtain, it will still be much quicker overall.”

“You’ll certainly get no objections from me,” he said, nodding in agreement. “Considering how huge the Abandoned population might potentially be, we could do with those transports being as fast as possible for all the repeat journeys.”

“My thoughts exactly,” Edraele said, before her eyes lost focus for a moment. “I’ve just given the go ahead to the Young Matriarchs. Our fleets should arrive at Genirath in the early hours tomorrow morning, and the Brimorian transports will arrive tomorrow evening.”

“Can you ask the matriarchs to contact the males at Genirath, and warn them that the fleets are incoming. Hopefully the men took our warning seriously; I don’t want to leave our warfleets hanging around for days just so the evacuees can pack a few extra pairs of socks.”

“I don’t think you left them in any doubt about the severity of the threat we’re facing. I strongly suspect that Aadya and the other commanders will fill up their fleets in record time.”

“Let’s hope so,” John said, his brow furrowing with concern. “The sooner we can evacuate Genirath, the sooner we can refit those transports and move everyone from the other border stations. We’re going to need to get those men out of the firing line as quickly as possible.”

Edraele looked up at him affectionately. “Thank you for caring so much about our people. We’re very lucky you found us.”

“I feel responsible for the Maliri,” John said with a worried frown. “I just hope that I’m not leading you all into disaster.”

“I have faith in you,” she said with earnest sincerity. “We all do.”

“Well... you’ve given me lots of incentive to win this war,” he said with a wry smile, as he reached down to idly caress her stomach.

She tilted her head up to give him a tender kiss. “I long for that too... as do my daughters.”

John flushed guiltily and wasn’t sure how to respond.

Edraele laughed and stroked his cheek. “As much fun as it is teasing you, we should start getting you ready for Auralei.”

He darted a glance at the chronometer. “Oh crap! I lost track of time.”

\*Relax, we wouldn’t leave her waiting,\* Alyssa purred, her telepathic voice drifting through his mind. \*Edraele’s right, it’s about time to get a shower.\*

The Maliri Queen gave him a fond squeeze, then she unwrapped her slender limbs from around his body, freeing John to gently slide out of her. He offered her a hand and they stood up together, then walked into the en suite bathroom for a shower. John stood under the jets of water, then closed his eyes and tried to distract himself from thoughts of the girls to deflate his raging erection. It was difficult with Edraele washing him at the same time, but he eventually managed to get his raging libido under control.

“Thanks, honey,” he said gratefully, as he stepped out of the shower to dry himself.

“You’re very welcome.”

They parted ways with a kiss, and John headed into the walk-in wardrobe to get dressed. Following Alyssa’s guidance, he put on a white linen shirt and cream linen trousers, with shoes to match. It wasn’t something he’d normally wear, but he figured that his blonde matriarch was colour coordinating him with whatever outfit she had planned for Auralei.

\*So... where to now?\* he asked Alyssa as he entered the Observatory.

\*The Lagoon...\* she replied, and he could the eager anticipation in her voice.

John walked over to the door, and when it opened, he could see that the overhead lights were dimmed in the huge room. The bridge over the lake was softly illuminated by flickering torches, as was the long stretch of golden sand bordering the water. He expected to see a bed freshly set up, as it had been with Alyssa, but a quick glance along the shoreline revealed nothing on the sand. However, he did spot a soft glow emanating from the jungle at the end of the beach.

Taking Alyssa’s conspicuous silence as confirmation he was on the right track, John crossed over the Bridge, then followed a trail of footprints across the unblemished sand towards the copse of trees. As he drew closer, there was no mistaking the muted light that was only partially concealed by the leafy fronds of the jungle foliage. He ducked under a low-hanging branch and followed the short path to a secret glade that was hidden amidst the trees. John was expecting the girls to try to make this special for Auralei, but he was genuinely shocked by what he found.

Centred in the glade was a bed, but it was unlike any he’d seen before. The frame was wooden and seemed to have been sculpted from living trees, with thick branches intertwined together to form the base and headboard. Reclining demurely on the spotless white sheets was Auralei, the Larathyran Empress wearing a diaphanous robe that sparkled with strings of tiny precious stones. Delicate chains of glistening jewels were draped across her skin, drawing his attention to her verdant green limbs as she posed for him coquettishly. The overall effect was quite devastating and the enchantingly beautiful woman looked every part the sylvan princess.

“Do you really like it?” she asked softly, studying his shocked face.

“You look absolutely stunning,” he replied, moving across the glade to sit beside her on the bed.

Auralei glanced down at her resplendent gown. “Thank you... but I feel like a bit of a fraud wearing all this. It’s not the real me.”

John brushed the back of his fingers down her forearm. “Hmm. You feel real to me.”

She laughed and interlaced her fingers with his. “You know that’s not what I meant. I heard your thoughts earlier, that I looked like a magical elven princess... but I’m really just an ordinary woman. There was never anything all that special about me.”

“I’d definitely disagree with you there,” John said, causing Auralei to blush at his compliment.

He gently guided Auralei back on to the bed, then lay down beside her, propping himself up on an elbow.

“Is there something else bothering you? Or did Alyssa just go a bit overboard with this outfit?” he asked, looking at her with concern.

She glanced down at her ornate gown, a conflicted expression on her face. “It’s not Alyssa’s fault; I really love this dress. I was just feeling a bit overwhelmed with everything.”

“That’s understandable, you’ve been through an awful lot in a very short time,” he said with sympathy. “Were you having any second thoughts about us?”

Auralei quickly replied, “No, not at all! I think you’re amazing and I still want... this... very much.”

John nodded in understanding, then gazed down into her eyes. “Do you want to know why I was so shocked earlier?”

She bit her lip and nodded.

He let his fingers trail down over her shoulder, caressing her bare skin beside a string of priceless jewels. “Because this *is* the real you now, Auralei... and it took my breath away to finally see it.”

Auralei looked at him sceptically and he could tell she wasn’t convinced.

“You were a sweet, lovely girl when we first met... and I think that’s what drew me to you on Larathyra,” he clarified. John’s finger brushed along her velvety skin, moving down her forearm before sliding lower to circle her navel. “But you’re not just that kind-hearted botany student any more. I’ve enhanced your mind and body many times since then, preparing you to be my perfect Larathyran Empress. You must be able to feel the differences already? Would the old you have been confident enough to stand in front of all those Maliri males and warn them of the terrible dangers they were facing?”

Auralei looked thoughtful for a moment, then shook her head. “I wouldn’t have had the courage to even talk to a big audience like that, let alone when they all reacted so badly to seeing me without my armour. It was a horrible feeling to be instantly disliked by hundreds of people, just because they were reacting instinctively to the colour of my skin.”

“But you didn’t let their reaction faze you for a second,” John said, looking at her with admiration. “You understood exactly why they reacted the way they did, but you were brave enough to ignore it and continue speaking to them anyway.”

“All their lives were in danger. My personal discomfort meant nothing when I knew that the future of the Maliri was at stake,” she stated with conviction.

“Spoken like a true leader,” he said fondly.

Auralei blinked in surprise, then her eyes widened at that insight. “You’re right. I am different now.”

John hesitated, a flicker of doubt on his face. “I started enhancing you without discussing exactly what I was going to do. Are you sure you don’t feel any resentment towards me for doing that?”

“Do you like the way I am now?” she asked quietly, a hint of vulnerability in her eyes.

“I liked you from the first moment we met,” he clarified. “I’ve fallen in love with the incredible woman you’ve become.”

“Oh, John...” she murmured, her gaze softening.

Auralei reached up to embrace him, then pulled John down into a tender kiss. She was passionate and responsive, the kisses fanning the flames of desire that were already burning brightly inside her. When John felt her fingers deftly unbuttoning his shirt, he leaned back and helped her slip it off his shoulders. As her hands roamed over his bare chest and the Larathyran beauty moaned with desire, John eyed her elaborate gown, wondering how to go about removing it.

She paused and looked up at him in surprise. “You want me to take it off?”

“It looks incredible on you, but yeah... you’d look even better without it.”

Auralei sat up and unfastened a couple of clasps, letting the elaborate gown fall from her shoulders.

“Well that was easier than I expected,” John said with a grin.

“Alyssa designed it and she knows what you like,” Auralei said, her eager smile matching his.

“She does,” he agreed, admiring her spectacular body.

Auralei had a thrall’s typical physique, in all its athletic and curvy perfection. While her body wasn’t any different from the rest of the girls in terms of size and proportions, her pale green complexion made her quite unique from the others. He reached out to caress her, letting the backs of his fingers lightly glide across her silky skin, and leaving a trail of goosebumps in their wake. The contrast between their skin tone was thrilling, as was the thought that he was bedding a girl from a completely different species for the first time.

“It’s exciting for me too,” she whispered softly.

John glanced up at her and winced. “Sorry... I forgot you could hear everything I was thinking.”

“Don’t be... it was all very flattering,” she said, giving him an adoring smile.

Realising that he was now overdressed, John quickly kicked off his shoes and took off the rest of his clothes. While he was getting undressed, Auralei scooped up her robe and draped it over a nearby branch, before reclining on the bed once more. Now that they were both naked, they fell into each other’s arms, hungrily seeking out more kisses.

John began kissing her jawline, and as Auralei tilted her head back and moaned with pleasure, he left a trail of kisses down her exposed throat. Her slender neck seemed so slim and delicate, that he marvelled she was able to handle his length and girth with seemingly no effort at all. As he moved lower to brush his lips across Auralei’s soft and pliant cleavage, he wondered if she’d have any difficulty stretching to take him for the first time. The last thing he wanted to do was cause her any unnecessary pain or discomfort when he took her for the first time, so he moved lower, determined to make sure she was fully aroused.

She giggled self-consciously and said, “John... I’m already really, *really* turned on!”

He glanced up at her as his lips hovered over her trim stomach. “I want to anyway. Is that okay?”

Auralei bit her lip and nodded, then slowly parted her thighs for him as he moved down the bed.

This was the first time he’d been this close to her pussy, and he paused to admire the sleek mound. She was bare there, like the rest of the girls, letting him get a good look at her most intimate places. Her inner lips were hidden by the peach-shaped cleft, but when he lapped at her with his tongue, he could taste her own moisture. She was slick and wet, her body just as highly aroused as he was.

Looking up at Auralei, he saw a flicker of apprehension in her eyes. John gave her a reassuring smile and said, “You look beautiful... and you taste delicious.”

The tension eased from her shoulders and she returned his smile, then let out a quiet gasp as he lapped at her clit. Auralei watched him intently as she responded to his attention, her composure slowly starting to crumble with each expert roll of his tongue. Her long eyelashes fluttered and she stared at him with hooded eyes, until her hips started undulating instinctively as she crested her first orgasm. John smiled with satisfaction when Auralei finally climaxed, her back arching as she was overwhelmed oral pleasure from him for the first time.

He just wanted to take the edge off, rather than leave her completely satiated, so John moved up her body as she recovered. “That looked like a good one,” he said with a knowing smile.

Auralei panted for breath, then gave him a dreamy smile. “It was amazing... the best ever.”

He paused when he was facing her, unsure if he should offer to go wash his face before giving the breathless young woman a kiss. Before he could move or say another word, Auralei wrapped her arms and legs around him, then pulled his head down to lick his wet lips.

\*You’re right... I do taste good,\* she murmured softly.

It took John a moment to realise that with her mouth preoccupied by the kiss, she’s spoken directly to his mind. He pulled back to look at her in surprise. “I didn’t know you could use telepathy!”

“Alyssa and Edraele have been teaching me,” she explained, her fingers caressing his temple. Her brow furrowed with concern as she quickly added, “Was I wrong to do that? Should I have asked your permission first?”

He shook his head, then sought out her flushed lips again to continue the kiss. \*You can speak to me like that whenever you want. I trust you, honey... that’s why I gave you full access to my mind.\*

Auralei let out a happy sigh of contentment, then held him even closer. He could feel her writhing underneath him and knew that she was as ready as she was ever going to be. They made eye-contact and Auralei slowly nodded, the look she gave him full of trust and devotion. John repositioned himself at her entrance and gently nudged forward, making sure he was lined up correctly before pushing any deeper.

Her outer lips parted in invitation, the labia spreading obscenely wide to accept the broad head of his cock. She was incredibly tight, but the snug opening stretched wider and wider to accommodate every inch of him. Auralei’s pupils expanded at the same rate, and she gazed up at him in open-mouthed wonder as she revelled in the exquisite new sensations. She didn’t seem to experience any discomfort, so John reasoned that if she’d had an intact hymen, breaking it didn’t cause her any pain.

He carefully pushed deeper, exploring virgin territory inside her gorgeous body as she moaned and gasped with pleasure. It was exciting to think that he was the only man she’d ever experienced, and he enjoyed watching her expression of awed disbelief as she stretched to take his cock for the first time. When her pussy had swallowed about eight inches of his thick shaft, he felt the head of his cock nudge against her cervix, and he paused for a moment to let her adjust.

“Are you okay?” he asked, cradling her head in his hands.

“I feel so full,” she moaned, rolling her hips to adjust to his huge girth inside her abdomen.

“You look incredibly beautiful,” he said, gently caressing her long lustrous hair that filled his hands.

“So do you,” she cooed, gazing up at him in awe. “I never dreamed it could feel this good!”

“Just wait... it gets better,” he said with an indulgent smile.

“Better than this?” she asked dubiously, biting her lip as she writhed beneath him.

“Mmm hmm. Are you ready to take all of me?”

When she eagerly nodded in confirmation, John pushed forward with his hips, putting more pressure on her cervix with the blunt head of his cock. Auralei’s body had been modified to accommodate him and the tight barrier slowly yielded, stretching open to admit him into her womb. Her eyes rolled back as he thrust deeper, until he’d buried his entire length inside her exquisitely snug body.

Being fully sheathed inside the gorgeous young woman was almost too much for John to take, and he froze as he struggled not to lose control. He closed his eyes and breathed deeply, trying hard to resist the urge to fill her womb with his cum. After the extended orgy with the girls, his balls had been working overtime, and his quad felt taut and heavy as it rested against Auralei’s pert asscheeks. When he finally reopened his eyes, he saw that Auralei was staring up at him, an excited grin on her face.

“Do I really feel that good?” she asked, looking thrilled.

He nodded and returned her smile. “You’re a very sexy girl.”

John slowly eased back and Auralei started to protest, thinking he was going to pull out, until he reversed direction and slid smoothly up to the hilt inside her. She gasped and looked at him in amazement, her expression one of pure bliss.

“More like that, hmm?” he teased her.

“Yes please!” she eagerly agreed.

He chuckled and began to pick up the pace, thrusting into her at an even tempo. Auralei responded with sultry moans, her arms and legs wrapping around him as she clung on for the ride of her life. They shared a deep kiss as he drove her on to another climax, and she whimpered with ecstasy as she came, her snug passage flexing around him again and again.

By her fourth explosive orgasm, John could tell she was tiring, her body unused to so much erotic pleasure. Satisfied that he had satiated her lust, John shifted his rhythm, focusing more on chasing his own release. Auralei could sense his change in mood, even through her haze of euphoria, and gave him loving kisses as he stroked in and out of her luscious body.

John looked deep into her dark eyes, relishing the powerful connection they shared. He knew she was his forever, her pledge of allegiance a pale shadow of the utter devotion he now saw in her fervent gaze. Auralei belonged entirely to him; he owned her nubile body and had claimed her innocent soul. That thought tipped him over the edge, and he cried out with his release, shooting long spurts of cum into her virgin depths. Her pussy gripped him with every pulse, as if Auralei’s fertile womb was trying to milk him of every drop.

It was a long, powerful release, and John had to raise himself up to give her belly room to grow, filling her to the brim until her stomach was a curved dome. When he was finally spent, he collapsed on the bed beside her, panting for breath as he recovered. He turned his head on the pillow to look at Auralei and saw that she watching him, her flushed lips curved into a beatific smile.

“I hope that was worth waiting for?” he asked, turning on his side to face her.

She nodded enthusiastically, her dark eyes shining with happiness. “Alyssa tried to explain what making love felt like, but it was better than I ever dreamed. I felt so close to you... it was wonderful.”

“If I hadn’t known, I never would’ve guessed that was your first time,” John said, gently caressing her cheek. “You didn’t seem nervous at all... and you seemed to know exactly how to move to make it feel better for both of us. I don’t think I’ve ever felt so in tune with someone that quickly.”

Auralei blushed and quietly admitted, “I asked Alyssa to listen in and tell me exactly what to do. I wanted to make sure it was perfect for you.”

“You didn’t need to do that, honey,” he said, touched that she’d gone to such lengths to please him. “The most important thing to me was that you enjoyed yourself and had a wonderful memory of your first time that you could look back on fondly. This wasn’t about me at all.”

She shook her head, her smoky-eyed gaze fixed on him intently. “You’ve done so much for me, John, and given me more than I could have ever dreamed possible. The least I can do is always make sure that you’re my number one priority... with everything we do together.”

John could tell she was being completely sincere, and was rendered speechless by her selfless declaration. More than anything, he wanted to give the remarkable young woman a hug, and convey how much she meant to him. With the Larathyran matriarch listening attentively to his thoughts, it therefore didn’t come as much of a surprise when Auralei rolled onto her side so that he could spoon her from behind. John kissed her shoulder as he enveloped her in his arms, her green skin deliciously soft against his lips.

“Oh, that feels amazing...” Auralei murmured with a breathy moan, as he caressed her swollen belly.

“The girls have told me that it feels different like this, compared to when I’ve fed you.”

She nodded and shivered with pleasure. “It’s very different. All I can think about is how wonderful it’ll be to start a family with you.”

“You’re going to be an incredible mother,” he whispered in her pointed green ear. “You’re so selfless and have such a big heart... our children are going to be very lucky to be loved by you.”

Auralei let out a wistful sigh and snuggled back against his chest, encouraging him to hold her closer. As he looked down at the beautiful young Larathyran, he could see that her eyes were closed, and her expression one of pure rapture. They basked in the afterglow for a while, until Auralei turned her head to look up at him over her shoulder.

“John... can I ask you a favour?”

“Of course, honey. What do you need?”

“Would you mind if Alyssa joined us? She’s done so much for me, and I wouldn’t even be here if it wasn’t for her. I feel like I should share this moment with her too.”

“That’s fine by me,” he agreed.

It didn’t take long for the blonde to arrive and she ducked under the curtain of leafy bowers to join them in the glade.

“Well you two look adorable,” she said, padding over towards the bed.

“I hear you were cheering Auralei on?” John asked with a raised eyebrow.

“Just giving her some gentle encouragement. We all adore your huge cock, but it’s a bit daunting to take for the first time,” Alyssa explained, as she climbed onto the bed beside her fellow matriarch. “Hello, gorgeous. You were amazing.”

“Thank you,” Auralei said bashfully, before returning her sensuous kiss.

John felt Alyssa’s hand slide over his on top of the Larathyran’s cum filled belly. \*You were wonderful with her, handsome. She’ll treasure this memory of her first time with you.\*

\*I think you and the girls deserve most of the credit. I can’t believe how much effort you put into setting up this jungle boudoir. How on Terra did you grow a bed out of the trees?!\*

Her cerulean eyes twinkled as she paused mid-kiss and looked at him over Auralei’s cheek. \*Take another look at the bed.\*

Dragging his attention away from the smooching girls to the bed frame, John blinked in surprise when he saw it shimmer before his eyes. The beautifully intertwined wooden branches disappeared, revealing the glistening white of metallic Crystal Alyssium beams.

\*Jehanna...\* John murmured in sudden understanding, realising that she must have dropped her illusion.

\*She’s very creative. This was all her idea,\* Alyssa purred, before gently ending the kiss with Auralei. “Do you have any objection to me stealing this beautiful young lady’s attention for a little while?”

“Her attention?” John asked, looking at the blonde in confusion. He suddenly realised what she was hinting at and his eyes widened in surprise. “You can bond with her? Already?!”

“She’s such a good girl,” Alyssa murmured lovingly, placing light kisses on Auralei’s dark green lips. “So responsive and eager to please.”

Auralei blushed at the praise, then glanced up at John. “Is that okay? Alyssa said it would help bring us all closer together.”

“It’s fine by me... I just didn’t expect you to be ready this fast.”

“You chose the perfect girl to be your matriarch,” Alyssa gushed, gazing at Auralei with open admiration. “She’s completely committed to serving as your Empress and helping you rebuild the Larathyran Empire. You don’t have even a flicker of doubt, do you, gorgeous? You want this life more than anything.”

Nodding solemnly, Auralei said, “I really do. When you arrived on Larathyra, I couldn’t believe it when you just swept in and starting making all our problems disappear. Helping you reunite the Maliri was such an amazing feeling... and it just confirmed what I already knew in my heart. That choosing to be with you was the best decision I’ve ever made.”

“Alyssa’s right... you are perfect,” he said fondly, leaning down to kiss her.

She let out a happy sigh, then John moved aside to let Alyssa and Auralei focus their full attention on each other. He watched them fall into that familiar trance as they opened up their minds to share every aspect of their subconscious. A new glow filled the glade and John became aware of the psychic link between the two girls, the brightness intensifying as they opened up the connection with each other.

He resisted the temptation to eavesdrop on the intimate moment between Alyssa and Auralei, and lay back on the bed. John crossed his arms behind his head and broke into a lopsided grin as he thought about his other matriarchs.

\*Alyssa seems to have bewitched Auralei. If only there were some other lovely girls here to keep me company...\*

It didn’t take long for Edraele and Jade to respond to his none too subtle invitation. After entering the glade, they immediately disrobed, before climbing on the bed to either side of him.

“Poor Master... feeling all neglected,” Jade purred as she snuggled into him.

“Let us take care of you, my Lord,” Edraele cooed, draping an arm and leg over him as she kissed his cheek.

He turned to look into her violet eyes. “Actually that reminds me about something; please take good care of Auralei while we’re away. She’s going to be the only Larathyran aboard a station full of Maliri and I don’t want her to feel homesick.”

“Don’t worry about a thing,” Edraele said with a reassuring smile. “The chances of Auralei having an awkward encounter with unfriendly Maliri has been massively reduced after Jade’s phenomenal recruitment drive. Auralei will be our special guest and we’ll make sure she feels very welcome.”

“Thanks, honey,” John said gratefully.

Jade’s quiet purring was making him feel drowsy, especially after all his exertions. He felt his eyelids grow heavy as the Nymph and Maliri matriarchs kissed and stroked him, until he was lulled into a deep sleep.

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John’s eyes closed and the rhythmic purring faded away. A moment later, he found himself standing in the front garden of Athena’s house, with the radiant girl waiting for him on the porch.

“Hello, John,” she said with an enigmatic smile. “I hear Alyssa’s been busy.”

“You mean bonding with Auralei? Yeah, that was very fast,” he agreed, walking up the steps to greet her with a kiss. “Hello, beautiful.”

Her smile brightened, and she clasped his hand then guided him over to the swing seat. “Don’t forget that Auralei is a thrall; the Larathyrans were designed to be devoted to the Progenitor that claimed them. As a species, they’re very malleable and responsive to psychic influence.”

John sat next to her and stared away into the distance, not really focusing on the distant castle walls. “Then why did it take so much longer to bond with Edraele, Tashana, and Irillith?” he asked with a bemused frown. “The Maliri are a thrall species too.”

Athena curled her legs underneath her, then leaned against his shoulder. “It might be best to think of the Maliri as somewhat of an outlier as far as thrall species go. They’ve been left to their own devices for a considerable length of time, and the mess the matriarchs made of their society has had far-reaching consequences. With Auralei, you were lucky enough to choose a girl that was surprisingly unburdened with psychological problems. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said for Edraele or her daughters... at least not when you first met them.”

“Most of the Maliri nobility had been through hell at the hands of their mother’s and sisters,” John said with a heavy sigh. “The stories from their childhoods are heartbreaking.”

“Edraele was wise to choose the least traumatised of the Maliri nobility to serve you as matriarchs,” Athena said with a nod of satisfaction. “You took a convoluted path to get there, but the final outcome with mostly the youngest daughters replacing their mothers was quite satisfactory.”

“Aside from the dozens of women slaughtered in Sarinia’s bloodbath?” he asked with a raised eyebrow.

“I wasn’t intending to make light of their deaths, merely observing that the younger Maliri were able to quickly acclimatise to the dramatic changes you’ve made to their society. Auralei was carrying even less emotional baggage, so she’s been able to smoothly adapt to a new life serving as your Larathyran Matriarch.”

“That’s a fair point,” John agreed. “I thought the Young Matriarchs had settled in quickly, but Auralei was even faster. I suppose it helped a lot that she wasn’t traumatised by her mother growing up. I must admit that I was expecting life in Larn’kelnar’s Empire to be a lot more vicious and twisted; it actually seems like he ran quite a benign civilisation.”

Athena turned to look at him, a thoughtful expression on her pretty face. “That surprised me as well... until I had a sudden epiphany.”

“Which was?” he asked, intrigued by any insight she might be able to share.

“We’ve only seen a very distorted view of the Larathyran Empire so far, seen almost entirely from the perspective of the survivors. I’m sure the Terran Federation would seem like a utopian paradise, if a mysterious plague struck down all the adults, and you spoke to a group of teenagers who’d been living pampered lives in pre-bombardment Unity City. How much could they really tell you about the insidious machinations of High Command?”

“Not all the adults died though,” John reminded her.

“Ah yes... the males,” she said, her lip curling up into a smug smile. “If I’m not mistaken, weren’t they living as a poorly educated underclass, subservient to the Larathyran females?”

John acknowledged the point with a thoughtful nod. “Alright, I see what you mean. Maybe Larn’kelnar’s Empire did have a darker side to it after all.”

“It’s a moot point now, as all the upper echelons of that society were wiped out prior to his death. I know that you never intended for that to happen, but it neatly disposed of any dysfunctional elements to their civilisation, allowing you to mould their future society as you see fit. The Larathyrans are essentially a blank slate now, eager to follow you and Auralei in building a new, benign Empire.”

He grimaced and looked at her askance. “Athena... countless millions of Larathyrans were betrayed by Larn’kelnar and died agonising deaths. I really don’t think you can describe them as being ‘neatly disposed of’ without sounding appallingly callous.”

She studied him with a curious expression on her face. “If it would make you feel better, I could wring my hands together and lament their fate, but it wouldn’t bring those women back to life. The truth is that the Larathyrans were our mortal enemy until you defeated Larn’kelnar, so I’m only interested in the welfare of the survivors because they’ve now become your allies.”

“I can’t afford to be that cold,” John said, shaking his head in disapproval. “If I took that approach, I wouldn’t even try to save any of the thralls. I’d just wear down each Progenitor, and let him wipe out his own forces, trying to keep up with our psychic energy reserves. We’d leave a trail of devastated Empires in our wake, with a death toll in the billions... and that would make us no better than Xar’aziuth.”

“I’m certainly not suggesting you alter your plans,” Athena said, while settling down with her head against his shoulder. “I was just making an observation about how much simpler rebuilding the Larathyran Empire will be compared to the Maliri. Auralei lacks leadership experience, but she won’t have to fight with stubborn remnants of the old regime, who struggle to adapt to the new status quo.”

“Yeah, you’re right,” John conceded, putting his arm around her. “The Maliri matriarchs might be onboard with the various changes I’ve suggested, but they still have to deal with dozens of planetary governors who are used to pursuing their own agendas. The new Larathyrans governors will all be young and inexperienced, so they’ll be more likely to listen to Auralei if she projects confidence. Hopefully Edraele will be able to give her a crash course in strong leadership.”

“Your Maliri Queen seems to have done a remarkable job of preparing the Young Matriarchs for their new roles. I don’t think she’ll have any difficulty imparting her knowledge and experience to Auralei.”

John nodded in agreement, then his thoughts drifted to the third thrall race that had just made its presence felt. “I wonder what the Galkiran civilisation is like?”

“It’s probably a reflection on the Progenitor that claimed them,” Athena said quietly.

When she didn’t elaborate and stayed silent, John glanced down at the radiant girl and saw a pensive expression on her face. “What is it?”

“I’m concerned that you don’t seem more worried about the impending battle with another Progenitor.”

“Well, we managed to defeat Larn’kelnar when he ambushed us and we were caught at a severe disadvantage without our gear. All of us are more powerful since then, so facing a Progenitor isn’t quite as terrifying a prospect as it was a couple of months ago.”

“You shouldn’t underestimate them,” Athena warned him, her brow furrowing with worry. “You only survived the last battle because Larn’kelnar was recklessly overconfident, and never considered you or the girls to be a threat until it was too late. The Invictus is still at a severe disadvantage against a Dreadnought, and you won’t be able to even face a Progenitor in personal combat unless you can lure him into a trap and somehow board his ship.”

“I still don’t know how we’re going to pull that off,” John ruefully admitted. “Ever since we found out about the Galkiran invasion, I’ve been preoccupied with trying to evacuate the Maliri males from the border stations.”

“I’d advise you to start taking that problem very seriously indeed. If you’re not able to actually confront and eliminate this Progenitor, then all the effort you’ve put into evacuating the males will be for nought. The Maliri will take terrible losses if they’re forced to fight the Galkiran thralls, and even if you win that battle, the Progenitor could just retreat and assemble a new invasion force. He can constantly replenish his fleets, but you have no way of replacing the Larathyran ships when they get destroyed.”

“I hadn’t thought of that,” John said glumly.

He slumped in the seat, the idea of being forced to fight a protracted war of attrition a nightmare scenario.

Athena stroked his chest and said, “I didn’t mean to dishearten you, but you must make sure you’re fully prepared for this fight. You were ambushed before and suffered severe consequences for it.”

“I needed this reminder,” he said, giving her shoulder a grateful squeeze. “Thanks, Athena.”

“If a guide doesn’t guide, what use is she?” she said with a sardonic smile.

“You’re more than just a guide,” he said, leaning down to give her a kiss. “I haven’t forgotten my promise. We’ll find a way of resolving this situation with you co-existing in Alyssa’s mind.”

“Focus on what’s important for now,” Athena urged him. “Your main priority should be preparing to fight the Progenitor.”

He nodded thoughtfully, and relaxed on the seat with Athena beside him, as he pondered ways to lure the Progenitor into a fight.

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The bed seemed to lurch violently and John’s eyes snapped open as he was shaken awake.

“What the hell?!” he blurted out, his stomach roiling.

“Easy... we just jumped using the wormhole generator,” Alyssa explained, her hand stroking his chest reassuringly.

“It’s eight o’clock already?” John asked, rubbing his eyes. “Damn! I haven’t even said hello to Ceraden and his...”

He hesitated, unsure how to describe the relationship between Ceraden and the six female Maliri Engineers who were now all pregnant with his children.

“Girlfriends?” Alyssa suggested helpfully. “Lovers? Concubines? Doting harem?”

“Companions,” John finished with a satisfied nod.

“Boo! Boring,” she snorted derisively. “Anyway, don’t worry about it. The girls made sure our guests were welcomed aboard and Ceraden said not to disturb you.”

John glanced around the empty glade. “What about Edraele and Auralei?”

\*You were in a deep sleep, my Lord. We thought we’d let you get as much rest as possible,\* Edraele dutifully informed him. \*When you reach Kythshara, you’ll have a busy night ahead of you.\*

\*We know you’re in a rush to depart,\* Auralei chimed in a moment later. \*As soon as Jade docks at Genthalas, we’ll disembark and you can set off immediately.”

John threw aside the covers and slid out of bed. “Screw that. Not without saying goodbye first!”

Alyssa chuckled quietly to herself. “I win. Your clothes are over there.”

He walked over to the tree limb and was pleased to see that she’d brought him some casual clothing. “Win what?” he asked, as he slipped on his trousers.

“A bet between matriarchs,” the blonde explained with a smug smile.

“Dare I ask what you won?” he asked, as he pulled a t-shirt over his head.

“You’re welcome to ask,” she said glibly, rising from the bed and walking over towards the leafy archway at the edge of the glade. “But if I tell you, then I’m afraid I’d have to...”

“Kill me?” he interjected, clasping her outstretched hand. “It’s a good job I didn’t ask then. You matriarchs really guard your secrets!”

“Actually, I was going to say ‘blow you’,” she joked, licking her lips for effect. “Death by oral pleasure; what a way to go.”

He groaned at the dull ache in his quad. “I’m still reeling from earlier. You probably would kill me.”

“You really filled up Auralei,” Alyssa agreed as they padded across the golden sand. “I think you enjoyed that almost as much as she did.”

“It was different,” he admitted, fondly remembering his beautiful bedmate. “I’ve always had some doubts whether I’m doing the right thing when I’ve slept with the girls for the first time, but with Auralei there was none of that. I knew we belonged together, and if I hadn’t claimed the Larathyrans, a Progenitor eventually would have. It felt great sparing her from that nightmare.”

Alyssa nodded in understanding, but didn’t respond. When John glanced her way, he saw her cerulean gaze was drawn to the beach where he’d taken her renewed virginity.

“Alright, Miss Pedantic,” he said lightly. “It was different with you too.”

“You knew there was no getting rid of me at that point, so you figured you might as well just enjoy it?” she teased him.

“No, I figured I’d better seduce this beautiful untouched maiden, before some suave Casanova caught her eye.”

A flicker of uncertainty crossed Alyssa’s face, as he triggered the obfuscated memories of her terrible life on Karron before joining him on the Invictus.

“I’d given you a completely new body by that point, so that was definitely your first time,” he gently explained, giving her hand a comforting squeeze. “You belong to me now, and I’ll never share you.”

“Girls don’t count, right?” she asked him airily, unable to contain her beaming grin.

John winked at her, then laughed as Alyssa gave him an enthusiastic hug. It was wonderful to see her looking so happy, and she looked every bit the exuberant, carefree teenager she should have had a chance to become. Alyssa blushed when she heard his thoughts, and the rare bit of self-conscious vulnerability actually made her look even more adorable.

“You had to grow up fast,” John said as they stepped into the grav-tube. “But you’re still a sweet young girl where it matters.”

“Thank you,” she said softly, her heartfelt gratitude covering too many things to list.

He held her close as they descended in the grav-tube, enjoying the quiet moment together. When they reached Deck Nine, John heard a bustle of activity coming from the open hangar door and when he walked through, he was surprised at how many people were there. Ceraden was standing next to Edraele and Auralei, and was involved in a deep conversation with them both. The Lionesses were clustered around the Maliri Engineers, all chattering excitedly together, and circling around them all, were a dozen maintenance bots who were bringing down luggage via the express grav-tubes.

Alyssa peeled off to meet the girls, but John continued onward to speak to Edraele and his two matriarchs. Auralei turned to flash him a lovely smile as John approached and he embraced her when she hurried into his open arms.

\*You’re looking especially beautiful this evening,\* he said to the beaming Empress.

She gave him a kiss, her eyes sparkling. \*Thank you for coming to see me before we left. I honestly wasn’t expecting it.\*

\*You should know me better than that by now,\* he said, giving her delectable bottom a playful squeeze before turning to face the two Maliri. \*I wasn’t going to let you leave without saying goodbye.\*

Auralei blushed, then looked chagrined. \*Yes, but Alyssa knew.\*

Before he could ask what the reward for the bet was, Ceraden clapped him on the shoulder.

“I’m so glad to see you, my old friend,” the merchant said, breaking into a broad smile. “I must say, jumping through wormholes isn’t the most pleasant experience, but being able to travel vast distances instantaneously is quite astounding! With a few freighters equipped with these miraculous devices, I could save myself a fortune in shipping costs! I don’t suppose I could convince you to sell me a Wormhole Generator by any chance?”

“If we can ever figure out how to mass produce them, you’ll be first on the waiting list,” John said, with a rueful frown. “Unfortunately, they’re damn near impossible for us to build at the moment. I nearly died trying to make the one installed on the Invictus.”

“A steep price indeed,” Ceraden remarked, his eyes widening.

“Hello, Lord Baen’thelas,” Edraele said, stepping forward to greet him with a hug. “I’m sorry the jump disturbed your rest.”

“I’m not.” He gave her a mock frown of disapproval. \*I was expecting to wake up with you beside me, but then I find out you’re trying to sneak off the ship at the very first port we dock. Anyone would think you were desperate to escape from my clutches.\*

\*I sincerely apologise, my Lord,\* she said with a contrite kiss. \*It won’t happen again.\*

John filled his other hand with her asscheek as he pulled her close, sharing a three-way hug with the two matriarchs. He could feel a soft curve to their stomachs as they leaned into him, and he realised that Jade must have shared the last load between them.

\*A tummy full of your cum made leaving just about bearable,\* Edraele confided sadly.

\*I didn’t want to leave either,\* Auralei admitted, hugging him tighter. \*I love being on the Invictus with you.\*

\*You’re both good girls, but I can’t risk your lives by taking you into combat,\* he explained, reluctant to see them leave as well. \*I’m really going to miss you both.\*

\*How long will you be away?\* the Larathyran asked.

\*I’m not sure. When we start engaging the Galkiran fleets, I doubt we’ll have much of an opportunity to return to Genthalas until it’s over,\* he admitted. \*Please look after each other while I’m away. You’re both my matriarchs, so you’ll be in a unique position to support each other.”

\*We do work well as a team,\* Edraele said, flashing an affectionate smile at the young Empress. \*As I’m sure you can attest, my Lord.\*

Auralei giggled and nodded. \*You do seem to enjoy having us... work together.\*

\*I can’t help it. You two got me addicted to the ego rush,\* he freely admitted, hugging them both. \*Now we better wrap this up. We’re getting funny looks from Ceraden’s girlfriends because we’re standing here in silence.\*

\*Umm, actually I think they’re just uncomfortable being around me,\* Auralei said, peeking at the six female Maliri over her shoulder.

John frowned in confusion. \*But they’ve got white hair. They’re already part of our network.\*

\*Unfortunately, Auralei is correct,\* Edraele said with a pensive frown. \*You recruited all of those women before you altered the psychic connection to remove the antipathy towards rival thralls. They are all experiencing a lesser version of the discomfort I felt when I first met Auralei.\*

\*Ah, crap... that means all the engineers we recruited will be affected as well,\* John said with a grimace.

Alyssa walked over to them and gave him a reassuring smile. \*Don’t worry about it for now, we’ll sort things out when we return. Jade’s about to land at Genthalas, so you better say your goodbyes.\*

John hugged the two emotional women until the Invictus touched down and the hangar door began to open. Luna was waiting for them in the docking bay, accompanied by several Maliri who were waiting to take the luggage from the maintenance bots.

“Hey, Luna,” John said to the former assassin, when she walked over to join them. “Thanks for loaning me your girlfriend.”

Luna laughed as she eagerly accepted his hug, then warmly greeted Auralei then Edraele.

Jehanna approached the group and handed a data chip to Edraele. “I recorded the speech John gave to the Maliri males, as well as their reaction to seeing you and then Auralei. I thought the matriarchs might enjoy seeing how they contributed to encouraging the men to return to their homeworlds.”

“This is a wonderful gift, thank you so much,” the Maliri queen said gratefully.

Everyone else quickly exchanged hugs and goodbyes, then they watched as their guests disembarked, before turning to wave them off. By the time the hangar doors began to descend, John was already starting to miss having Edraele and Auralei aboard.

\*I love you,\* he said to them both, making eye contact with each in turn.

With their replies ringing in his ears, he let out a sigh, then turned to face the girls waiting with him in the hangar. All of the lionesses were there, except for Jade and her Nymph sisters.

“It must’ve been hard to say goodbye,” Calara said with sympathy, as the battlecruiser lifted off from the landing pad.

“It was, but they’ll be much safer here on Genthalas,” he replied, putting his arm around her shoulders. “I’d prefer to keep all of you out of this war if I could, but the truth is that I’d have no chance of winning without your help.”

“They know,” Alyssa said, kissing his cheek. “There’s no place any of us would rather be.”

“We’d better get to work then,” John said, straightening his shoulders. “We’ve only got twelve hours until the Wormhole Generator is fully charged again and we can engage the Galkiran forces. We need to use this time wisely and prepare for the battle.”

“Actually... I have a suggestion,” Alyssa interjected. “I’ve already laid in a course to Kythshara for Jade and she’ll get us there as fast as she can. That gives us a few hours of flight time before most of us can get to work on everything we need to do in the palace. I suggest we all get some sleep now, so we’re fully rested by the time we arrive at Kythshara.”

“That is a good idea,” he agreed, nodding in approval.

Jehanna groaned and said, “Now I see why you all ended up as night owls.”

“It’s not normally this bad, but I think our schedules are going to be dictated by the Wormhole Generator for the foreseeable future. Or at least until we’ve dealt with the Galkiran invasion,” John said, pulling her into a sideways hug. Looking around at the girls, he continued, “Alright, let’s head off to bed; we need to get as much sleep as we can before we reach Kythshara. I have a feeling tomorrow is going to be a very long day.”

“At least I got a post-coital doze earlier,” the former reporter sighed as they headed for the express grav-tubes. “I need my beauty sleep.”

Sakura laughed and nudged her with an elbow. “I bet you’ll still look gorgeous with bed hair.”

“Don’t worry, you’ll be raring to go after a quick power nap and a top up, trust me,” Alyssa said with a playful wink.

Jehanna flashed an eager grin at John. “Too-wit too-woo!”

“That’s the spirit,” he said, following her into the glowing anti-gravity field.

They crossed the Lagoon and entered the Observatory, where they found Ailita waiting for them, kneeling on the huge hexagonal bed.

The pink-haired catgirl greeted him with a bright smile. “Hello, Master!”

John stripped off his t-shirt and dropped it on the edge of the mattress. “I was going to ask Jade to send for you. Where’s Helene? I need to start making up for the worst date in the history of dates.”

“It really wasn’t that bad,” the aquatic girl said, smiling at him fondly as she sat beside him on the bed.

“It sucked!” Dana called out, and the girls all laughed in agreement.

John glanced at Tashana, who gave him a quick nod, confirming that Alyssa had informed her what had transpired with the unpleasant encounter in the crowd.

“I checked the Geniya departure logs. There were two Bolon ships docked with the trade station while we were there, but neither of them left during your meeting with Ceraden. I don’t know who Helene sensed, but it probably wasn’t the Bolon that attacked me. They would still have been on Geniya when Alyssa did her telepathic sweep and she didn’t detect any excessive malice or cruelty.”

“Are you sure you’d know if it was the right Bolon?” he asked the blonde.

She gave him a grim nod. “It’s easy to detect rapists, especially one as sadistic as the creature that assaulted Tashana. Their whole subconscious is saturated by dark thoughts and they’re like a black stain compared with normal people.”

“The Bolons are telepaths though,” Rachel reminded them. “Is there any chance they could be strong enough to block your telepathic sweep?”

“I made telepathic contact with the Bolons on the station,” Alyssa replied. “They have weird minds, but I was still able to do a surface scan.”

“The Bolons are gestalt entities aren’t they?” the brunette asked curiously. “What are their minds like?”

Alyssa paused and tried to think up a suitable metaphor. “They’re a bit like a bucket of tiny pebbles, with each stone matching the thoughts of all the others. As individuals they’re weak, but they get much stronger as a colony.”

“Does anyone have any other ideas who Helene might have sensed?” John asked, glancing around the bed at the other Lionesses.

“It seems odd that this person’s malice was only directed at the girls,” Rachel said with a frown. “I can’t think of anyone that would bear any ill-will towards Helene and Ailita, and who wouldn’t also hold a grudge against you too. The Bolon predator was the most logical conclusion.”

“I guess it’s a dead end at the moment,” John said, before turning to Helene. “If you ever sense anything like that again, please let me or Alyssa know immediately.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t warn you before,” she said with regret.

“It’s not your fault,” John said, giving her a comforting kiss. “But I hate the thought of you feeling anxious or scared by someone like that. Tell me if it ever happens again... and we’ll deal with them.”

“Deal with them?” she asked, raising an eyebrow. “You mean kill them?”

“If it’s a bad guy, they’ll get what they deserve,” Alyssa stated with a reassuring smile. “We’ll just be making the galaxy a little bit safer for innocent people.”

Helene considered that for a moment, then nodded thoughtfully. “I suppose we’d be protecting future victims from harm?”

Tashana gave her a grim nod. “I wouldn’t want anyone else to suffer through that nightmare.” Her violet eyes flashed dangerously. “It’s all about protecting the innocent...”

“I’ll pay closer attention next time,” Helene said, as she cuddled up against John. “I really want to help you catch this bad person.”

“You’re a good girl,” he said affectionately, pulling both her and Ailita closer to him.

The Nymph and the mermaid let out happy sighs as they draped themselves across his body, then settled down with their heads resting on his shoulders.

“Goodnight everyone, sleep well,” John called out to the girls.

They echoed him as they paired off and snuggled up together, before Daphne dimmed the lights in the Observatory and everyone drifted off to sleep.

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Edraele walked into the conference room with Auralei at her side, where they were promptly welcomed by a host of excited Maliri. She smiled as she watched them fawn over the Larathyran Empress, the matriarchs greeting Auralei with warm hugs and friendly words. Even Emandra Holaris managed a genuine smile as she said hello, and Edraele acknowledged her efforts with a nod of approval.

“Please take a seat, ladies,” she said, gliding over to the semi-circular conference table. “Auralei, would you like to sit here, in John’s chair?”

Auralei looked at the beautifully engraved throne that stood taller than any of the high-backed chairs around the table. “Are you sure that’s alright?”

“Of course, darling girl,” Edraele replied with an indulgent smile. “It’s not every day we’re visited by an Empress.”

The green skinned beauty blushed. “You don’t need to give me any special treatment.”

Edraele stepped closer and placed a gentle kiss on her cheek. “You’re our honoured guest and I promised Baen’thelas that I’d take good care of you. Please, Auralei... it means a lot to me that you feel happy and secure here with us.”

Realising that the Maliri Queen was not going to be easily dissuaded, Auralei nodded her consent. “Alright, if you insist.”

“I definitely do,” Edraele said, giving her a delighted smile.

She turned and deftly inserted a data chip into the holographic interface built into the desk.

“Now, would any of you be interested in seeing Lord Baen’thelas address the males at Geniya station?” Edraele asked airily.

“Oh, yes please!” Kali gushed, sitting forward on the edge of her seat.

“What did they say when they saw you?” Tsarra asked, her dark-green eyes sparkling with excitement.

“Why don’t you see for yourselves?” Edraele suggested, before activating the holo-projector.

The matriarchs watched spellbound as they listened to John make his passionate plea for unification to the Maliri males. They were thrilled to see their reaction to the special video they’d shot with Jehanna, and all the matriarchs laughed when they saw the horrified reaction to Edraele’s surprise unveiling. The giggling and laughter went silent when they witnessed how the males reacted to seeing Auralei for the first time, and they turned to look at her with sympathy.

Faranise rose from her chair and walked around the table to hug the Larathyran. “I’m so sorry they treated you like that. Their behaviour was appalling.”

“It wasn’t really their fault,” Auralei said, gladly returning the Eshenestria matriarch’s embrace. “We’ve all been designed to dislike each other on sight.”

Garinia frowned, a puzzled look on her face. “I don’t understand. We didn’t react badly when Baen’thelas introduced us to you.”

“Don’t you remember the visit from Jade?” Faranise patiently reminded the House Quisayne matriarch. “We each received a special Nymph’s kiss to prepare us for that meeting.”

“That’s correct, Faranise,” Edraele said, stroking her shoulder.

Her sharp eyes noticed Garinia trying not to look embarrassed, but the noblewoman’s cheeks flushed a dark indigo.

Not wishing to draw any attention to the cringing Matriach, Edraele quickly continued, “As you can see, the visit to Geniya was a resounding success. We’re expecting the first fleet of males to arrive here from Genirath station in approximately three days. We’ll have to give them a very warm welcome to Genthalas.”

“How are the males going to be distributed throughout the Protectorate?” Nyrelle asked. “Their presence has been sorely missed on Aeberos.”

“I’d like to arrange a meeting with the male elders and discuss that point along with many others,” Edraele explained. “I’m sure that their return to any of your worlds would be met with joyful celebrations, but we must be cognisant of the fact that the males are still distrustful of females in general and the matriarchs in particular. We must be sensitive to their needs and do our best to accommodate their preferred destinations as graciously as we can.”

“Don’t worry, we won’t do anything to scare them off,” Valani said with a grin. “I still can barely believe that Baen’thelas actually managed to get them to return. Despite everything he’s done for us so far, it seemed an impossible task.”

Edraele laughed and nodded her agreement. “I was there and could scarcely believe it myself. He was magnificent, ladies... as was our esteemed guest.”

Eighteen sets of eyes all focused on Auralei and she blushed self-consciously. “I didn’t do anything particularly worthy of praise. I’m sure anyone would have been glad to help if they were able to do so.”

Sitting gracefully in the seat beside her, Edraele clasped the Larathyran’s hand. “You do yourself a great disservice Empress. Your address to the males was passionate and sincere, and most importantly, you managed to drive home the danger they were all facing from the Progenitors. If you hadn’t been so eloquent, they wouldn’t have taken your words of warning seriously. The Maliri people owe you a huge debt of gratitude.”

Auralei was shocked at the effusive praised, and she glanced around to see that all the matriarchs were gazing at her with admiration and respect.

“I-I’m not really like that... not usually,” she stammered. “It’s mostly John... he’s been enhancing me to make me a good Empress for my people.”

“We know. He’s done the same for each of us to varying degrees,” Edraele said gently, gesturing towards the Maliri noblewomen. “But the willingness to help and the effort you put into preparing your speech all came from you. Thank you, Auralei. You’ve helped make a tremendous difference to a great many lives.”

The rest of the matriarchs murmured their thanks too, and the Larathyran smiled back, her eyes sparkling with happiness.

Edraele rose to her feet and smiled at the assembled Maliri. “Lord Baen’thelas was greatly relieved to see how well Jehanna’s video was received by the males. He was concerned that it might undermine our authority, but I think it set the perfect tone in showing how we are now an extension of his will. I’m sure he’d be mortified if he knew that I told you how much he enjoyed seeing the video himself.”

“He really liked it?” Phelora gushed, grinning in delight.

The Maliri Queen nodded as she walked around the table to the House Romenor matriarch. “He was proud to publically acknowledge that he’s claimed all of us for himself,” she said, watching the effect her words had on her captivated audience. Pausing behind Phelora, she continued, “When he returns, I shall do my best to encourage him to start deepening the intimacy with each of you.”

There were excited gasps as the thrilled matriarchs pictured themselves in bed with John. She locked eyes with Emandra, and gave her a subtle nod in confirmation, leaving the House Holaris matriarch shocked and amazed.

“The best way to encourage Baen’thelas to give you all what you really want, is to impress him with acts of service to our people,” Edraele said quietly. “Anything you can do to aid in the war effort, or improve the lives of citizens on your planets will all be very positively received. He desires the same outcome as all of us... and showing that you have a kind, caring side to your personality will prove that you’re ready to take that step with him.”

The new additions to the Council of Matriarchs shared excited grins with each other, their lustful gaze flicking to the Young Matriarchs, who they desperately aspired to emulate. Kali reflexively stroked her slender pregnant tummy, then shared a furtive smile with Sarene.

Edraele continued her circuit around the conference table. “I will keep you updated on the attack vector of the Galkiran forces as soon as I receive confirmation from Baen’thelas. The most probable entry point will be along the Kirrix border and we will reconvene when we know the full extent of their invasion corridor. Some Houses will be much more adversely affected than others, so I ask that those on the far side of the Protectorate offer all the support they can.”

“If any of you need assistance, please feel free to ask,” Tsarra said, her own House Perfaren worlds safely located along the Kintark border. “All my resources will be at your disposal.”

“I’ve cautioned civilian traffic to avoid using the space lanes,” Kehlarissa Venkalyn said with a worried frown. “I also warned my Governors that they could be facing an imminent planetary bombardment and to take appropriate measures to protect the populace. Are there any other precautions I should take?”

Edraele paused beside Auralei’s chair. “Until our fleets return, we will be unable to mount any defence of populated planets. The Galkirans could just be seeking to destroy military vessels, but there’s also a high likelihood that they might initiate widespread attacks on civilians. We do not have the time or the available transports to evacuate our people from those planets, so our strategy must focus on concealment, subterfuge, and evasion.”

“There are cave networks on Venkalyn,” Kehlarissa said hopefully. “Should I suggest an emergency evacuation of the capital?”

“Perhaps we should hold a separate meeting and we can formulate individual evacuation plans for each of your worlds,” Edraele suggested. She glanced at Leena and Nakiasha, and added, “The outer edges of your territories are also likely to come under attack. I think you should join us.”

“I’ve already given orders to disperse people from the civilised zones on my worlds,” Leena said sombrely. “The citizens are seeking shelter amid previously abandoned cities in order to avoid any population clusters. If the Galkirans are unable to detect any high-yield targets, I reasoned that they would move on to search elsewhere, rather than waste time bombarding sparsely populated ruins.”

“Excellent, well done,” Edraele said, sincere with her praise. “I’m sure that all our worlds will have previously abandoned suburban areas, and a temporary dispersal of the populace could save many lives. If any of the rest of you can suggest pragmatic solutions like this, your input will be greatly appreciated.”

“I have some ideas,” Faranise offered. “I’d be happy to share them with you.”

“That would be much appreciated,” Edraele said graciously. “I think we’ll end this meeting there. Anyone that wishes to discuss emergency evacuation plans, let’s reconvene in my suite.”

The earlier excitement had muted into grim resolve, and the matriarchs spoke quietly to one another as they filed out of the conference room.

“Auralei, would you accompany Leena please,” Edraele said to her guest. “I’ll join you in a moment.”

“I’d love to,” the Larathyran said, sharing a smile with the friendly matriarch who she knew was pregnant with John’s baby. “Would you mind if I ask a few questions?”

Leena laughed and held out a hand. “I think I can guess what they might be about. I’d be happy to answer any questions you have.”

As they moved towards the exit, Edraele glanced at one of the matriarchs near the back of the group. \*Garinia, may I speak to you for a moment please.\*

The House Quisayne matriarch blinked in surprise at the unexpected telepathic contact, then nodded and cautiously approached the Maliri Queen.

Garinia waited until they were alone in the conference room, then blurted out, “I’m sorry about earlier, Queen Edraele. I wish I’d stayed silent instead of making a fool out of myself again.”

Edraele looked at her with sympathy. “Nobody was thinking unkind thoughts about you, Garinia. Trust me... I know.”

The despondent matriarch shook her head, her shoulders slumping. “I keep saying the dumbest things. I can feel Faranise looking at me with pity... like I’m a moron who keeps embarrassing herself with my stupidity.” She paused, a look of consternation on her face. “Or... I-I mean with her stupidity. Or I embarrass myself with my own stupidity. Oh, I don’t even know what I’m trying to say!”

Seeing the tear roll down her cheek, Edraele held out her arms to the distressed noblewoman. “Come here, darling girl.”

Garinia hesitated for a moment, then lurched into Edraele’s comforting embrace. She trembled, softly crying as the Maliri Queen stroked her back.

“Faranise is a lovely girl... and exceptionally intelligent,” Edraele murmured in her pointed ear. “There’s no need to compare yourself with her. Faranise makes everyone feel inadequate at times, even me.”

That didn’t cheer Garinia up though, and she continued to quietly weep, her emotions awash with embarrassment and despair.

“You’re certainly not stupid, Garinia... but you are surrounded by some very bright young women, and they’re going to keep getting smarter,” Edraele said with sympathy. “When Baen’thelas returns, I’m going to ask him to give you some special attention.”

The House Quisayne matriarch let out a heartbroken sob when she heard the first part, then paused, looking at her in bewilderment. “Special attention? What do you mean?”

“Baen’thelas wants his matriarchs to be truly exceptional women. Every time he feeds us, he’s enhancing our minds and bodies,” Edraele gently explained. She looked at her curiously and asked, “Is this about making a good impression on Faranise?”

Realising that the perceptive Maliri Queen had figured out her secret, Garinia winced with embarrassment. “I can’t help it, Edraele. I think she’s amazing, but I know I just remind Faranise of her dull-witted older sisters that bullied her for years.”

“You’re partially right...” Edraele conceded. “That’s why Faranise is something of an elitist when it comes to intellect. She despises stupid people for that exact reason.”

The noblewoman’s shoulders slumped with defeat. “I knew it.”

“But you certainly aren’t stupid, Garinia,” Edraele said with conviction. “You were certainly bright enough to understand exactly why Faranise feels the way she does. If Baen’thelas gives you a few extra full tummies, he can greatly enhance your intellect... even to the point where Faranise takes notice I’d imagine.”

“He could do that?!” Garinia asked, her eyes alight with hope.

Edraele nodded in confirmation. “But I must warn you that Baen’thelas has also taken a particular liking to Faranise. If I ask him to give you some special attention, and you then become romantically involved with Faranise, it’s highly likely that he’s going to want to get you pregnant when he starts a family with her. Are you sure that’s what you want?”

Garinia covered her mouth as she stifled a gleeful giggle. She nodded enthusiastically, not trusting herself to form a coherent reply.

Brushing the tears from her cheek, Edraele gave her a warm smile. “Leave everything with me. Just remember what I said about the ways you can really impress Baen’thelas.”

“Oh, I will! Thank you so much, Edraele!” the Maliri gushed, gazing at her with newfound admiration and gratitude.

“You’re welcome,” Edraele replied.

She was pleased to see the dramatic reversal in the matriarch’s mood, with Garinia leaving the conference room with an extra spring in her step. Edraele also knew that if Garinia was successful in impressing Faranise and the two became an intimate couple, then John was far more likely to start a family with both matriarchs. She followed Garinia out of the conference room, enjoying the uplifting moment, before having to discuss bleak topics like planetary bombardments on undefended civilian populations.

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John woke from his slumber, senses awash with pleasure. A wonderful soft and slick sensation was gliding along his cock and when he opened his eyes, he found himself staring into Ailita’s aquamarine orbs. Her vertically-slitted pupils expanded into dark circles as the horny Nymph responded to his arousal, and she gave a cute whimper of desire.

She planted tender kisses down his jawline until she reached his ear, where she whispered, “Can this one give your mates a midnight feast, Master?”

He spotted Jehanna watching them intently out of the corner of his eye, the dark-skinned beauty biting her lip as she rubbed herself in time to Ailita’s gyrating hips.

“Definitely... but not like this. Ailita, reverse cowgirl. Jehanna, on top of her please.”

They both looked at him in surprise, then Ailita grinned with delight, an expression quickly matched by the dusky reporter. The Nymph moved into position first, turning around and leaning back against his muscular chest. John steadied her by holding her hips, his throbbing cock resting on her pale stomach. He watched Jehanna move around the bed, her dark eyes gleaming with lust at the sight before her.

She carefully straddled him, trapping his shaft between their deliciously wet pussies, then lowered herself so that her breasts were squashed against Ailita’s gravity-defying bust. With a sultry moan, she sought out the catgirls soft pink lips and the two began passionately kissing as they rubbed themselves against his cock.

“That’s it... good girls,” he praised them. “You can take it from here... but whatever you do, don’t stop kissing!”

He could feel the vibrations in their chests as they laughed, their mirth muffled by their duelling tongues. At that point, John simply laid back and watched the show, loving the contrast between Jehanna’s dark chocolate complexion and Ailita’s pale pink. They worked well as a team, sliding up and down his shaft in perfect coordination, the unique sensation very like sex but with a kinky twist.

He had a ringside seat as they groaned through multiple climaxes, the two gazing into each other’s eyes as they rode him in bliss. Not having to support his own weight, John’s hands were free to roam over their perspiration soaked bodies, before settling on Jehanna’s firm bottom and grinding her against him.

“I’m getting close. Who’s going to take it?” he muttered, thrust his hips up between them.

They shared a long look, as an unspoken conversation passed between them. Ailita then raised herself up with surprising strength, adjusting the angle so she could sink down on John's full length. As she lay back against his chest again, a couple of inches were exposed, and Jehanna sank down to ride him, making sure he was completing engulfed in moist feminine warmth.

“That’s right... stroke me off into her tight little pussy,” John growled, holding onto Jehanna’s hips as she ground against him in time to his thrusts.

She let out a strangled groan, then all three of them climaxed together. John felt several hands gently massaging his quad, lovingly caressing his balls as they clenched and pumped huge spurts of cum into the Nymph. The orgasm was intense, leaving John seeing stars as he filled up the sexy catgirl to the brim.

After that, he was dimly aware of the two girls being helped off his body, then the sounds of slurping echoed around the Observatory as the Nymph shared out his load. As he panted to recover his breath, John felt a pair nubile girls moving across the bed to cuddle him between them. He tentatively opened his eyes, and smiled as he recognised the golden blonde mane and dark-brown locks spread across his chest.

“Hey, gorgeous,” he said, stroking Calara’s back. “Do you know what the time is? Is it still your birthday?”

“Seven minutes left,” she replied, snuggling into him and licking her lips. “Thanks for the final birthday treat.”

“Ugh...” Alyssa groaned, sounding decidedly annoyed.

“What’s up with you?” John asked, surprised by her reaction.

“I had all these amazing plans for Calara’s birthday, then this fuckwhit Progenitor invaded and ruined them all!” she protested angrily.

“I still had a really amazing day,” Calara insisted, hugging them both. “All that really mattered was being with you, but I got some incredible gifts, and everyone made a big fuss over me. Plus I got to be one of the first women allowed into Geniya’s secret debating room, and I watched as you made history by reuniting the Maliri!”

“You have to admit, that does sound pretty good,” John said, stroking Alyssa’s back.

“We were going to have a cocktail party in Saelihn Immanthe,” Alyssa grumbled. “There would’ve been canapés and exotic drinks, and thirty women in gorgeous cocktail dresses. At the end of the evening, we’d all toast Calara’s birthday, then go skinny dipping in the pool and watch the fireworks together.”

John and Calara shared a glance.

“I’ve never been to a cocktail party before,” the Latina said wistfully.

“I know,” Alyssa grumbled.

“So it was definitely going to be a formal affair?” John asked, his curiosity piqued.

“Yep,” the blonde replied, sticking out her lower lip in an indignant pout. “We would’ve all looked so hot, you wouldn’t have been able to resist filling up sexy girls all night.”

Calara perked up and said, “What about a victory party? When we beat this invasion, we should definitely hold a celebration!”

“That could work,” John agreed.

Alyssa’s scowl faded, and she nodded thoughtfully. “Yeah... maybe.”

She sprang to her feet, then offered John a hand. “Let’s get moving! The sooner we beat this guy’s ass, the sooner we can have Calara’s party!”

John laughed and let her pull him to his feet. He then staggered to the bathroom, with the blonde and brunette accompanying him into the shower. The rest of the girls soon joined them, and they all got washed in record time. After drying off, John entered the walk-in-wardrobe to get dressed, with the girls flitting around him to get their own jumpsuits.

“I assume you want us wearing Paragon armour?” Alyssa asked, as she reached for her own tight-fitting garment.

“I think it’s wise not to take any chances,” John agreed. “Until we’re absolute sure that we’ve discovered all the traps Mael’nerak might have left, we should treat it as a high-threat area.”

“Makes sense,” the blonde agreed, pulling the jumpsuit up over her toned limbs.

“So, this is your rodeo,” John said, fastening his jumpsuit closed. “Where are we going? And who’s going with us?”

“We’re going to Mael’nerak’s palace with Calara, Dana, Rachel, Irillith, Tashana, Sakura, and Jehanna,” Alyssa replied without missing a beat. “We’ll land right outside and I’ll take you on a tour, then show you what you need to see.”

“Alright, lead on,” he said, gesturing towards the door.

She gave him a flirtatious smile, then flounced out into the bedroom. The rest of the girls quickly joined them, then they crossed the Lagoon and took the express grav-tubes down to the Armoury. After donning their Paragon armour, they armed themselves, then regrouped in the Secondary Hangar.

“Jade’s just bringing us down to the surface,” Alyssa explained. “We should land in about thirty seconds.”

“We couldn’t have timed that any more perfectly,” he noted with surprise.

Alyssa winked at him. “We woke you up when we arrived at Kythshara. The Invictus was hovering over the palace while you were still screwing Ailita and Jehanna.”

“Ah, the magician reveals her secrets,” John said with a wry smile. “You could’ve amazed me by saying you timed it all down to the last second.”

“Ailita was originally going to just give you a quick blowjob. You threw my timing off by getting adventurous.”

He blinked in surprise, and was no longer sure if she was joking.

Slight vibrations ran through the deck plates, alerting them that the Invictus had touched down on the planet’s surface. With a whine of hydraulics the hangar door lifted open, revealing the gleaming golden palace illuminated by thousands of sparkling lights.

John’s jaw dropped as he gazed across the immaculately sculpted grounds at the most ostentatious building he’d even seen. Mael’nerak’s personal residence was absolutely huge, but the graceful architecture was also very beautiful, composed of fluted columns and soaring towers.

“Not bad, eh?” Alyssa said, standing beside him.

He shook his head in awe. “I thought you were exaggerating about this place compared to Larn’kelnar’s Imperial palace. He was just an amateur in comparison.”

“See you inside!” Dana called out, giving John a cheerful wave before setting off with the others.

He watched the girls sprint off through the gardens, and something about their quick pace made him pause. He could tell that they weren’t just eager to get started on fully activating the cloak breaker network. The girls were genuinely excited by something, and couldn’t wait to get inside the palace.

Alyssa gave him an enigmatic smile and beckoned him to follow. “Come on. Let me give you the tour.”

The robotic inhabitants of Kythshara had continued to maintain the grounds during their nine-millennia long vigil, and the palace looked in pristine condition. It was easy to imagine Mael’nerak taking a walk through the elaborate gardens with Valada at his side, the pair blissfully happy together, and oblivious of the tragic fates that awaited them both.

Removing her helmet, Alyssa turned to give him a worried frown, her golden mane fluttering out behind her in the pleasant breeze. “Are we like them?” she asked, a shiver of fear running down her spine.

John removed his own helmet, then leaned in to give her a tender kiss. “I’d never abandon you like that. I know why Mael’nerak did it, and if I didn’t know the terrible consequences, I would’ve been tempted to do the same in his position. But I do know now... so that means we’ll be side-by-side until the end, whatever happens.”

She searched his face for a moment, then relaxed and smiled once again. “I believe you.”

They continued onwards towards the palace, climbing the marble steps up to the colonnade that led to the massive doorway. Alyssa guided him inside the grand hall, and once again, John was stunned by the incredible opulence on display.

“I did alright for an orphan,” Alyssa said with a wry smile. “Engaged to the richest man in the galaxy.”

He chuckled and gazed up at the bejewelled chandelier. “I really could buy most of the Terran Federation with all this lot.”

She clasped his hand, and tugged him towards one of the adjacent corridors. “Come on, Daddy Warbucks, I want to show you something much more interesting.”

John let her lead him through the gilded corridors that made Saelihn Immanthe seem like a modest holiday home. He looked around at the incredible wealth on display and couldn’t help wondering who Mael’nerak had been trying to impress. His thralls would’ve already been swooning over him and paid no real attention to the gleaming palace. He guessed that Mael’nerak’s residence must have predated the war with Rahn’hagon, which was also long before his predecessor decided to turn Kythshara into an irresistible trap for hostile Progenitors.

“Maybe he just did it for himself?” Alyssa suggested. “If he grew up in poverty, maybe he still had a chip on his shoulder about it thousands of years later?”

“Do you ever feel that way?” he asked curiously.

She smiled and shook her head. “I was so poor, all I cared about was getting my next meal. I barely even saw any credits, let alone enough to fall in love with them. Give me a full tummy and I’m a happy girl.”

“We were a perfect match all along,” he said, clasping her hand.

“Definitely,” she agreed, before approaching the next set of impressive double doors that opened before her. “Now, check this out.”

John walked into the long hallway, and stared up at the murals adorning the walls, each one a celebration of Mael’nerak’s execution of another Progenitor. He watched as the murals silently shifted, depicting scenes of incredible destruction, as ships, thralls, and Progenitors were all blown to pieces.

“They’re all space victories,” John noted, looking at each one in fascination.

“Maybe Mael’nerak had no taste for personal combat,” Alyssa suggested.

He mulled that over for a moment, then shook his head. “We know Mael’nerak was one of Xar’Aziuth’s most powerful Progenitors and we also know the guy was a genius. I’m sure he was such a gifted strategist that he was able to beat his opponents just using his thrall fleets. I doubt there was ever any reason for him to expose himself to any danger.”

“That fits with everything we’ve discovered about him so far,” Alyssa conceded, staring at the huge mural before them. “We certainly know he was arrogant; a man like that would probably consider personal combat beneath him.”

John pictured the sneering face of Mael’nerak in the thousands of years before his doting matriarch softened his temperament. “Yeah, that definitely fits.”

They continued to study the destruction of the sixty-two dreadnoughts on display, until Alyssa paused and turned on her heel to face him. “The girls are ready. I can either show you Mael’nerak’s throne room now, or wait until afterwards?”

“Show me later. I’m more curious to see this big surprise you have for me,” he replied amiably. “What about the Command Bunker? Is that part of this guided tour?”

Alyssa nodded as they walked back the way they came. “Calara, Tashana, and Sakura are in there now. They’re searching for the cloaked defensive stations that the Maliri males told us about.”

“Any luck so far?” John asked as they continued along the hallway.

“Nothing yet,” she replied, before breaking into a grin. “But it’s only been ten minutes.”

After making their way back to the grand hall next to the main entrance, Alyssa led him up sweeping flights of stairs that took them up to the top floor.

“Mael’nerak’s personal quarters are on this level,” she explained, looking flushed with excitement herself now. “I’ll show you them later too, but first... let’s check out his lab.”

“I must admit, I wanted to see this place more than anything,” John said, as he followed after his youthful companion. “I still find it incredible that Mael’nerak created so many species right here in this palace, including humanity.”

“Yeah, it’s a real mindfuck,” Alyssa agreed, skipping along and beckoning him onwards. “It’s just up here, past Valada’s art studio.”

“What’s that like?” he asked, quickening his pace to keep up.

“She was an exceptionally talented artist, so the works there are breathtaking,” the blonde said, darting a glance at him out of the corner of her eye. “But she poured her heart and soul into them, so it’s much more personal than anything else in the palace.”

“I’d like to see that too, later,” John said, clasping her hand.

Finally they reached the door to Mael’nerak’s laboratory and Alyssa turned around to face him. “This is it.”

He glanced at her and saw that Alyssa wasn’t just excited, she was nervous now too.

Opening his mouth to ask what she was up to, she stepped forward and quickly silenced him with a kiss. “Just come and see for yourself.”

John took a deep breath and nodded, then let her lead him through the doorway into the massive laboratory. He recognised many parts of it immediately, having seen large sections of Mael’nerak’s workshop via the various video logs they’d recovered. There was even a hexagonal shaped indentation on the floor exactly where Nexus had originally stood.

As his curious gaze swept around the room, he saw Dana, Rachel, and Irillith all standing by various machinery. Rachel gave him a quick wave, and he was startled to notice that her hands were shaking with nerves. He was so unused to seeing the girls act this way that it was making him feel unsettled, and he started to turn to ask Alyssa exactly what was going on.

That was when he saw it.

There were rows of cylindrical machines lined up against one of the walls, and John immediately recognised them from the Nexus files. They were the incubation chambers that Mael’nerak had used to create the Trankarans, the Ashanath, and Terrans, then much later the Drakkar. And one was clearly occupied.

Snaking cables were hooked up to a sealed incubation chamber, the bright illumination highlighting that this particular cylinder was currently in use. It stood out dramatically amidst the row of darkened tubes, but it wasn’t that it had power which shocked John speechless. There was a window into the pod, allowing Mael’nerak to study his creations in various stages of their development. From this window shone a gentle purple light.

John was drawn inexorably towards the incubation chamber, needing to see for himself what he could scarcely dare to believe was inside. His fingers trembled as they wiped away the light sheen of condensation from the window and then he gaped in shock when he saw the figure inside.

It was Faye.

Her luminous eyes were closed and she looked like she was sleeping, her adorably cute elfin features a picture of peaceful slumber. A slight flicker of movement drew his attention and he watched in stunned disbelief as her chest rose and fell, the living, breathing girl, very much alive.

He turned to gape at the girls, who were all watching him, holding their breath in anticipation. “What did you do?” he finally managed to stammer.

“We brought her back,” Rachel said quietly. “And this time, she’s going to get her wish.”