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Ashryn slammed her fist into the training dummy’s face, leaving a broad dent in its polycarbonate features that would have crushed a thrall’s cheekbone. She grabbed it behind the neck to yank its head down, and drove her knee upwards to connect with a satisfying crunch. The automaton staggered backwards, reeling from the powerful blow, and opened up the distance between them. Pivoting on her left foot, the Galkiran Fleet Commander whirled around to land a spinning kick that lifted the dummy off its feet, before it crashed to the floor in a crumpled heap.

She breathed deeply after her sparring session, enjoying the rush of adrenalin after the intense physical exertion. Stripping off her training jumpsuit on the way to a steam bath, Ashryn paused by the mirror to study her crimson-hued curves with a critical eye. Despite being half-way through her second century, rigorous training helped her to maintain a beautifully toned figure, defiantly resisting the onset of time. While her breasts were not quite as firm and pert as they had been in her youth, her cleavage had definitely developed a pleasing fullness over the years.

\*Prepare to receive an incoming transmission from Lord Gahl’kalgor.\*

Her matriarch’s sharp voice cut through Ashryn’s idle musings, and she tugged on a robe, then bolted from the training room. Ignoring the startled glances from the crew at her scantily clad form, she dashed along the corridors until reaching her personal quarters, then darted inside. Hurrying over to her desk, she activated the comms interface just in time to see the incoming call notification.

Ashryn spotted her tousled reflection in the gleaming surface of the holo-screen, and her slender fingers hovered over the rune to accept the call. Her hair flowed wild and unkempt over her shoulders, and her flushed cheeks made her look like a ruddy-faced farm worker from the agri-colony where she’d been raised. Mortified at her dishevelled appearance, Ashryn felt her heart hammer in her chest as she watched the rune blink insistently on the console, demanding her attention.

\*Where are you?!\* Valeria demanded indignantly. \*You’re keeping Lord Gahl’kalgor waiting!\*

Fear gripped the Galkiran officer and she jumped in her seat, the sudden jolt inadvertently causing her finger to jab down on the rune.

“-and analysed the attack patterns of the enemy’s dreadnought,” Gahl’kalgor stated, as his impossibly handsome visage appeared on the holographic screen.

His steely gaze flicked to Ashryn in irritation, then he suddenly blinked, his eyes widening with astonishment. The Progenitor’s stern composure seemed to soften, and grim resolve melted into startled fascination. He stared at the tardy fleet commander with a burning intensity, and there was no mistaking the intrigue in his piercing gaze.

Ashryn heard an echo of breathy sighs, then blushed furiously when she realised the sound had also come from her. The flush of embarrassment was like having a bucket of cold water dumped on her head, and the Galkiran officer suddenly realised she was staring moon-eyed at her Progenitor master, when she should have been grovelling for his forgiveness.

“I apologise for being late, my Lord!” she blurted out frantically. “I was sparring, and this was the closest console I could...”

Her voice trailed off as he waved away her flustered apology.

“Please don’t get upset, Delsanra,” he murmured, a strangely anxious note to his voice as he tried to calm her. “I could never be mad at you.”

The fleet commander looked at him with startled confusion, suddenly unsure if he was addressing her or another one of the Galkiran officers. The name didn’t sound familiar, but it was always possible that a new thrall had been promoted up through the ranks.

“Her name is Ashryn, my Lord,” Valeria reminded him, a hard edge of disapproval to her voice.

Gahl’kalgor nodded distractedly, his eyes lingering on the ruffled woman for a few more seconds, before sweeping along the rows of Galkiran battleship captains.

“As I was saying,” he began again, after clearing his throat. “I have analysed the enemy’s ambushes and he is not using a standard dreadnought. I want you to hold fire with your main gun batteries and only shoot when you are being directly attacked at close range. Wait until you see the beams from his Tachyon Lances and aim for the muzzle flashes.”

“As you command, my Lord,” Ashryn responded, her obedient reply echoed by all the other officers in attendance.

“My Lord, may I ask a question?” one of the other fleet commanders asked politely.

“What is it? And... who are you?” he replied, taking an uncharacteristic interest in his most senior officers.

“I’m Keylessae, my Lord,” she gushed, eager to introduce herself. “I just wondered... where are the enemy fleets?”

Gahl’kalgor sat back in his chair, a grim look of anticipation on his face. “They’ve been wiped out. If this Baen’thelas had any thrall ships left after butchering Larn’kelnar, he would have sent them against us by now. That’s why he’s playing these pathetic games... because it’s the only thing he can do.”

“So we just need to drive him back to his throneworld?” the Galkiran officer asked eagerly.

The Progenitor nodded, a wicked smile spreading across his face. “We’ll corner him there and finish this farce... then I can claim this prize for myself.”

That intriguing comment sparked a number of questions for Ashryn, but she didn’t feel bold enough to risk asking them, not after drawing attention to herself earlier.

Keylessae felt no such reservations and asked again, “Has contact been made with the scouts? Have they located his throneworld yet?”

“Not yet, but we should cross their path soon,” he replied curtly, a flicker of irritation crossing his face as his patience was tested by her questions. “That’s all. You are dismissed.”

Ashryn’s surge of disappointment at the conference ending was tempered by the lingering glance Gahl’kalgor shot in her direction. She blushed under his scrutiny, then bit her lip and returned his gaze with a heartfelt look of longing. Before she could express her desire for him, Valeria appeared next to Gahl’kalgor’s throne, an angry scowl on her face.

“My lord, I have a question for you about our fleet formations,” she said respectfully, while moving to stand in front of him and blocking Ashryn from view.

“Ask...” he muttered, his attention now focused on the Galkiran matriarch.

The call abruptly ended and Ashryn was left staring at a blank holo-screen. She snarled with impotent fury, seething at her matriarch for deliberately ruining that magical moment. After plotting and discarding a dozen different assassination plans, Ashryn grudgingly admitted to herself that she had zero chance of deposing the lethal Gladiatora. With grim determination, she rose from her chair. There was only one way she could think of, that would guarantee she got Gahl’kalgor’s attention again, and she was determined not to waste this priceless opportunity.

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“We’re all set, Calara,” John said, as he strode down the ramp into the Combat Bridge, his Paragon boots making a ringing note with every footfall on the deck.

She looked up at him from her console. “Perfect. We’re moving into attack position.”

He glanced up at the holographic sector map, and his eyes were drawn to the two rows of glowing red icons, each of them representing the remaining 24 Galkiran fleets. The thrall forces were sweeping through Maliri territory, making rapid progress towards a huge wall of tiny green dots, which were spread out between a pair of colourful nebula.

“Will those mines actually do anything to the thrall ships?” Jehanna asked, staring at the minefield with a puzzled frown. “I thought regular mines were ineffective.”

Calara glanced at the minefield and ruefully shook her head. “They’re part of a misdirection and hindering plan I drew up weeks ago, but we haven’t had time to set up everything else. It probably wouldn’t work now anyway, not after we’ve intervened directly with the spider mines.”

“Thirty seconds until we start our attack run,” Jade informed them, her feline eyes locked onto the Invictus as it raced ahead of the Galkiran forces.

The Latina acknowledged her with a nod. “Just remember, whatever happens, stay out of those nebula.”

Jade gave her a predatory grin. “Don’t worry, I know exactly where I’m going.”

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Ashryn stepped out of the shower cubicle, the air vents thrumming as they powered down after use. She padded over to her closet and retrieved a jumpsuit, then staggered as the whole room shook with enough force to knock her off her feet. The comms interface on her desk began to chime, but she ignored the alarm from the Bridge, knowing that her fleet had just been knocked out of hyper-warp.

The Galkiran officer bolted out of her quarters thirty seconds later, now fully garbed in a glistening suit of black armour. She sprinted down the crimson-hued corridors, then slapped her hand down on the security runes, opening the reinforced bulkhead that led onto the Command Deck.

“Captain, it’s the Progenitor again. We’re under attack!” the Senior Tactical Officer called out in warning.

Streaks of blue light lanced overhead, the battle playing out in blazing detail on the three-dimensional hologram. The Galkiran forces were already responding to this latest ambush, and purple beams criss-crossed the battlefield as they tried to blast their hidden attacker.

“Return fire with all Tachyon Lance batteries,” she barked out, marching over to her Command Chair. “Divert fire control for the Quantum Flux Cannons to me.”

The Tactical Officer looked up from her targeting controls in surprise. “My apologies, Captain... did you just ask for fire control?”

“Are you deaf? Do it now!” Ashryn snarled.

She sat down in her Command Chair and activated the targeting grid, the main gun controls still familiar after all those decades. The Galkiran Captain hadn’t always commanded a battleship; in her youth, she’d spent many years serving as a tactical officer. She swept the targeting matrix back and forth, getting a feel for how quickly the Quantum Flux Cannons could rotate and elevate. While her hands re-familiarised themselves with the weapon controls, she stared at the raging battle, watching for each burst of dazzling sapphire beams.

“There you are...” she muttered, eyes narrowing with anticipation.

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“I’ll strip the shields from the battleships on the right!” Calara called out to her Nymph gunners. “You hit that one at the back, then go for the cruisers!”

“I’ll kick their ass!” Betrixa said, aligning her crosshairs with the huge thrall capital ship.

John watched as the Nymphs lashed one of the Galkiran battleships with salvo after salvo from their Tachyon Lance batteries, the beams leaving azure trenches when they slashed across its hull. At the same time, Calara unloaded with the Quantum Flux Cannons on her own target, each impact thundering into its protective barrier like a blazing meteor strike. When its shields collapsed, the successive rounds bored through the stern, immobilising the huge vessel in a chain of explosions.

“Nice shooting,” John said, as the Invictus savaged the invading forces.

Rather than being pleased by his praise, Calara’s brow was creased with worry.

“What’s wrong?” John asked, confused by her anxious expression.

“They’re not firing back with their main guns,” she replied, her eyes starting to glow with an inner light.

John’s focus snapped back to the map and he watched an unscathed battleship as it banked around, retro-thrusters blazing along its hull. As the bow swung about, he saw the massive warship tracking them with its primary guns, the enormous turrets rotating around in a desperate attempt to keep their barrels on target.

No sooner had Calara tapped into her psychic abilities, she immediately felt an eerie tingling sensation in the recesses of her mind. Her attention was drawn to the same battleship as John, which fired back frantically with its Tachyon Lances, the purple beams streaking out into space as they shot wide of their target. However, it wasn’t just the smaller guns that were bathed in purple light, and power seethed along the barrels of the Quantum Flux Cannons as they prepared to fire.

Calara sensed that time seemed to be stretching out, then fragmented into dozens of distinct snapshots, each one depicting the imminent future of the Invictus...

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*Neysa opened fire with a fusillade from her forward Tachyon Lance array, the blue beams raking across the sinister form of a Subjugator class cruiser. Shields rippled violently as they struggled to contain the powerful surge of energy, then the protective bubble burst, leaving the warship exposed. The two foes exchanged another broadside, with the cruiser’s shots fired too low and wide, while the Nymph’s second barrage carved through the thick armour protecting its engines.*

*As the propulsion systems exploded in blazing explosions, the Invictus was suddenly caught in a crossfire. A pair of violet-hued targeting beams momentarily connected both vessels, each one scorching a trench through the Invictus’ flank. That was followed a few seconds later by a burst of charged rounds, which rocketed through space to pound the white battlecruiser.*

*The first scored a glancing hit, just catching the outer edge of the topdeck as the Invictus rolled, and blasting out a gaping chunk from the hull. There was a secondary explosion from inside the ship, and the cluster of Tachyon Lances on that flank gouted fire from their barrels as the turrets detonated. However, it was the second round that proved far more devastating.*

*The Quantum accelerated slug smashed into the underbelly and punched straight through the Crystal Alyssium armour. It ripped through the decks, ploughing through the Invictus’ innards until it hit a vital organ, in this case the Power Core supplying energy for the starboard pair of Quantum Flux Cannons. The topdeck bulged outwards, then erupted in a catastrophic blast that speared through the ship like searing beams from the sun.*

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Eyes wide with horror as she witnessed her friends vaporised by the overloading fusion reactor, Calara sat bolt upright in her seat. She knew that the Invictus was seconds away from disaster, but the deadly crossfire was so intense, it was difficult to pick out a safe path.

“Jade, pull up!” she yelled out across the Bridge. “And roll to the right! Do it now!”

The Nymph heard the distress in the brunette’s voice and reacted without a moment’s hesitation, trusting Calara’s guidance implicitly. She yanked back on the flight stick, then used her thumb on the hat control to roll the huge starship. The Invictus’ lower bank of three engines blazed with power, as did the retro-thrusters under the bow, and along the upper port flank. Responding like a vessel a fraction of its size, the Invictus’ tilted upwards and began to roll, lifting up from the horizontal plane where the thrall ships fought in loose formations.

There was a massive crash and the Invictus suddenly lurched sideways, the force of the impact so severe that it even overrode the dampening effects of the Null-inertia Gyroscope.

“What the hell was that?!” John blurted out, as he clung onto the armrests to avoid being thrown from his command chair.

He glanced up at the tactical map and watched wide-eyed as twin volleys of charged bolts bracketed the Invictus, the spray of shots narrowly avoiding the hull. The rear of the white ship was burning, with nothing left of the lower-left engine but a blackened charred ruin.

“But I did exactly what you said!” Jade protested, throwing a shocked look at Calara.

“Shields up!” the Latina said grimly, ignoring the reproachful glance. “Jade, evasive manoeuvres! Get us out of here! ”

Dana released her clenched grip on the Engineering Station, and charged up the Invictus’ shields. A red icon flashed on her holo-screen, warning that the cloaking device was now deactivated due to insufficient power.

“We’ve got shields again... but they all know exactly where we are now!” she called out in warning.

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Gahl’kalgor had been watching the latest ambush with avid interest, as his dreadnought altered course and began to close the distance towards the cloaked attacker. Dazzling bursts of blue beams were immediately followed by a forest of purple lances, as the thralls tried to hit back at their hidden tormentor. One of the battleships opened fire almost at point blank range, and the volley of slugs from its Quantum Flux Cannon finally struck their target.

As he sat forward to take a closer look, he heard a shocked gasp from his matriarch.

“What is that thing?!” Valeria blurted out, unable to believe what she was seeing.

The Progenitor didn’t have any answers for her, and was just as stunned at the sight of his adversary’s flagship. The white vessel was barely any larger than a subjugator class cruiser, and he rose from his seat to stare incredulously at the sword-shaped vessel. He’d guessed that his opponent’s ship was smaller than a conventional dreadnought, but this tiny white tugboat beggared belief. He threw his head back and laughed, the deep booming chuckles reverberating around the bridge of his dreadnought.

Valeria broke into a lop-sided grin and bounded over to join him. “No wonder he keeps running away! That ship’s tiny!”

“This is going to be even easier than I thought,” he agreed, his broad smile matching hers. “Order the fleets to finish him off.”

She nodded eagerly and sent out the telepathic command, then stood beside Gahl’kalgor and watched the battle with a gleeful smirk.

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“Yes!” Ashryn crowed, clenching her fist in triumph.

She grinned in delight at the huge explosion, then gaped in astonishment as the enemy ship flickered into view. Lord Gahl’kalgor had warned her that they were not facing a traditional dreadnought, but it was unbelievable that a ship not much larger than a cruiser, had blighted their every step through this region of space. She glanced at the status display for the white ship and was startled to see that its shields were still up, when she was expecting to find them worn down and fully depleted. That made her even more confused, as it meant the enemy ship must have started the ambush with its shields deactivated.

The Invictus limped away, leaving a trail of flaming debris behind as it made a series of desperate evasive manoeuvres. All around Ashryn’s battleship, thrall fleets powered up their engines and surged after their fleeing opponent, the entire Galkiran force hungry for revenge against their tormentor.

“After them!” she yelled at the helmswoman. “Destroy them now before they escape!”

Her tactical officers opened up with their forward Tachyon Lance batteries, the purple beams slashing across the rear of the white cruiser. The shields shrugged off the impacts, and Ashryn could see that the protective barrier was barely affected and still holding strong. More thrall warships joined the pursuit, firing every weapon they had at their bolting foe, the cruiser lurching wildly from side-to-side as it tried to avoid the storm of beams.

The pursuit reminded her of a pack of Grathkaeri hounds chasing after a Relauraun buck, with the hunters snapping on the heels of the terrified quarry. Veering sharply to one side, the enemy cruiser managed to avoid almost all the shots fired in its direction, the evasive manoeuvres taken to extreme lengths. At the same time, it blasted back at the enemy harrying its haunches, like the buck swinging its head around with sharp antlers to discourage pursuit.

Ashryn laughed at the inaccuracy of its attacks, with blue Tachyon beams firing off in all directions, and even their Quantum Flux Cannons shooting a haphazard spray of slugs. Gone was the unerring precision of the earlier attacks, with the enemy gunners just desperately blasting at the fleets of Galkiran thralls that were charging after them to deter pursuit. She shook her head in amusement at their foolhardy pilot, who was so fixated on weaving around to dodge incoming fire, they were dramatically cutting their speed and letting the horde of thrall fleets close the distance.

“Get out of my way, you Caigeirosian bitch!” the chief tactical officer hissed, her frustration bubbling over.

A battleship from a rival fleet had veered in front of Ashryn’s vessel, blocking her gunners’ line of sight to the target. Ashryn seethed with anger at Ciradyl trying to steal her kill, and angrily stabbed a gauntleted finger at her chair’s holo-interface to yell at the other captain to step aside. Sharp chimes rang out from the Fleet Command overview, and she glanced at the device in irritation, wondering what it was bothering her with now.

All the ships in her fleet were still intact, although Ashryn had lost one battleship and a handful of cruisers in the initial ambush, their shields knocked out and engines disabled. The chime rang out again, alerting her that yet another cruiser had been stripped of its shields... just like almost every other warship in her fleet. She hesitated, suddenly feeling a flicker of uncertainty that all was not quite what it seemed.

The enemy lurched violently to the side, in an almost comically exaggerated evasive manoeuvre, bringing the white cruiser nearly parallel to its attackers. The storm of ferocious Galkiran firepower swept harmlessly wide of their jinking target, and the ship shot back with its own batteries of Tachyon Lances and Quantum Flux Cannons. The chaotic flurry of beams and bolts strafed wildly across the Galkirans... but their ships were now so densely packed in pursuit, every single shot managed to land on a target.

Ciradyl’s battleship took four charged slugs to the bow, dropping its shields as they bore the brunt of the devastating broadside. The last two rounds of the salvo went wide of their target, streaking harmlessly past its flank. In a stroke of bad luck, those rounds slammed into Ashryn’s own ship, just as the black-hulled behemoth veered around the Galkiran battleship blocking its path. The fleet command interface chimed twice more, warning the thrall captain that every ship in her fleet had now been denuded of its shields.

Ashryn felt her blood run cold and she stared at the tactical map with mounting dread. She suddenly realised that bad luck had nothing to do with two battleships being rendered shieldless by one Quantum Flux Cannon salvo. The enemy was systematically stripping the shields off any Galkiran warship that got too close, and they were all so caught up with their bloodlust they were blind to the looming danger.

Her hands were shaking with fear as she yelled out, “Stop pursuit! Engines full reverse!”

The shocked crew all turned to look at her in disbelief, wondering if their captain had lost her mind.

“It’s a trap!” she screamed. “Do you fools want to be left behind?!”

Their eyes widened with the same sudden desperation, the thought of being immobilised, then abandoned by Lord Gahl’kalgor was too dreadful to even contemplate. As the crew rushed to follow her orders, Ashryn frantically sent out a warning to the rest of her fleet, commanding them to cease all pursuit. The thrall captains reluctantly followed her shrieked orders, and the ships in Ashryn’s fleet slowed or stopped entirely as they broke off their pursuit.

Ciradyl’s fleet were more than eager to try to steal the kill for themselves, and her forces roared past, rapidly closing the distance on their target. The Invictus suddenly banked around in a sweeping turn, moving much faster than should have been possible with one of its engines disabled. It roared away from its pursuers, putting significant distance between them... just as space seemed to erupt in flames around Ciradyl’s fleet.

Ashryn winced against the dazzling glare from so many explosions, as the hapless Galkiran pursuers ran headlong into a densely packed minefield. Ciradyl’s battleship was rocked by a series of ferocious detonations, the entire stern of the massive vessel breaking up as its engine housings were ripped apart by the blasts. In less than ten seconds, the whole fleet was crippled, with hamstrung warships tumbling out of control as they reeled from the explosions.

She glanced back at the enemy Progenitor’s ship, which rocketed away into the distance, leaving the Galkirans floundering in its wake. As another wave of explosions knocked out more reckless thrall ships, Ashryn gritted her teeth with impotent fury as she watched the white battlecruiser escape to safety. It smoothly rocked from side to side as it departed, taunting them playfully by wiggling its rear, before leaping into hyper-warp and racing towards the stars.

The Galkiran captain let out a frustrated sigh and slumped back in her command chair. Being powerless to prevent the enemy progenitor from escaping was infuriating, but at least she wasn’t in Ciradyl’s unenviable position. She knew that her rival must be inconsolable at having been knocked out of the fight, the battleship captain and her crew now distraught at being left behind.

The comms interface suddenly emitted a stern chime, alerting her that she was being hailed by Lord Gahl’kalgor himself. Ashryn stared wide-eyed at the holo-interface for a second, then accepted the call with trembling fingers.

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“I’m really sorry about the engine,” Calara apologised, giving John a guilty look.

He chuckled and shook his head. “Don’t worry, you’re forgiven. You were making the escape look more authentic, right?”

She nodded, relieved to see that he wasn’t upset with her. “That point blank broadside from the thrall battleship should have destroyed the Invictus and killed everybody onboard. It was too good an opportunity to pass up, so I deliberately gave Jade some bad orders. Sorry about that, Jade.”

The Nymph wiggled her nose at her. “It was very sneaky. This one was just worried that I’d failed you.”

“We should have died?!” Jehanna balked, her eyes like saucers as she stared at Calara.

John walked over to her and gave the unsettled young woman a reassuring hug. “We were never in any real danger, not while Calara was watching out for us and keeping us safe. Admittedly, that was a bit too close for comfort, but she knew exactly what she was doing.”

Dana nodded enthusiastically. “Our shields were still at 17% when we legged it. We were totally fine.”

Jehanna shuddered and clung to John tighter. “All of you are so confident; I keep forgetting how much danger we’re actually in.”

“Sorry, Jehanna, I didn’t mean to scare you,” Calara said, looking at her with sympathy.

“I’ll be alright... I just realised I’m not as big a fan of space battles as I thought I was,” the dusky-hued reporter replied, a wan smile on her lips.

“It’s different when you’re actually involved in the fighting and not just a spectator,” Sakura noted. “Any chance you could build her a mech, Dana?”

The redhead looked dubious, her mouth downturned into a rueful frown. “We’ve got a huge backlog of shit to build already. I won’t be able to start working on a big project like that for quite a while.”

Jehanna pulled away from John and shook her head. “I can’t even imagine how stressful it would be to pilot the Valkyrie in a battle like that. I appreciate the thought, but I’ll just stick to ground ops.”

John winked at her. “Good call. I’ll be glad to have you on my team.” He turned to glance up at the map. “Can you girls start looking for a decent hiding place to make repairs?”

“I’ll start searching right now,” Calara agreed, turning back to her console and activating the Sector Map.

“Thanks. Well, I better go build us another engine,” John said, before giving Jehanna a speculative look. “Do you fancy keeping me company?”

Jehanna nodded enthusiastically, then glanced up the ramp, where a pink-haired catgirl was waiting for him in the Armoury. “I thought that was Ailita’s role now?” she asked with a teasing grin.

“She’s been doing a fine job,” he agreed. “But I was hoping you could show me your progress with your psychic abilities, then afterwards, maybe we’d end up in bed together. If you’re not interested though...”

“Wait! I never said I wasn’t interested!” Jehanna blurted out. “I’d love to come with you!”

“Yeah, I bet,” Dana noted with a smirk.

John held out his hand to the blushing reporter, and led her towards the ramp. “I’ll be busy for a while,” he said to the rest of the girls over his shoulder. “Just let me know if there’s any problems.”

“Don’t worry about replacing the spider mines,” Alyssa called out to him. “You can leave building them to me.”

He paused, and turned back to face her. “Are you sure?” John asked with concern. “That’s a lot of psychic shaping.”

“Definitely. You’ve been doing so much already, it’s only fair that I share some of the load,” Alyssa replied, before holding a finger up towards Dana to pre-empt any lewd innuendo. “Yes, I’m always eager to swallow his cum.”

The redhead pouted as her ribald comment died on her lips. “Spoilsport.”

The girls’ laughter echoed around the Combat Bridge as John and Jehanna entered the Armoury and removed their Paragon suits.

“Would you like any refreshments, Master?” Ailita asked considerately.

“Some fruit juice would be great, thank you,” he replied, as he stepped out of his armoured boots.

The pink-haired catgirl gave his companion a beaming smile. “And what would you like, Jehanna?”

“I’ll have the same,” she said gratefully, leaning in for an appreciative kiss. “Thank you so much.”

The two girls hugged and it was easy to see how close they’d become, their beautiful faces reflecting their heartfelt affection for each other. After a cheerful wave goodbye, the Nymph bounded towards the express grav-tubes and ascended in the soft blue glow. Jehanna watched her depart, then joined John in descending in the second set of grav-tubes, down to the Secondary Hangar.

“She’s loving being your adjutant,” Jehanna noted, as she gave him a knowing look. “And you seem to be getting very used to having a personal assistant.”

John smiled self-consciously. “Ailita has quite a way about her... she’s a very special girl.”

“Supportive, affectionate, friendly, attentive...” Jehanna observed, watching him intently as they walked past the Raptor gunship. “She’s the kind of girl that you just can’t help falling in love with.”

He paused by the hangar’s reinforced doors and gently cupped Jehanna’s face in his hand, his thumb caressing her temple. “You were already very smart and perceptive before you joined us; I should’ve known it wouldn’t take you long to figure it out.”

“Why?” she asked, leaning into his hand and enjoy his touch. “You were always enough for me.”

“There’s a few reasons,” John replied cautiously. “Will your curiosity be satisfied if I simply said that I wanted you to be happy?”

Jehanna considered it for a few moments, then gave him a rueful shake of her head. “Sorry, I can’t help it. Once I sniff out a lead, I need to chase it as far as it goes.”

“Alright, you deserve to know everything.” He gestured towards the control panel and the door opened with the whine of hydraulics. \*I need to have a private conversation with Jehanna for a few minutes, Ailita. We won’t be too long.\*

\*Okay, Master!\* the Nymph replied cheerfully.

They walked hand-in-hand through to the Cargo Bay, and once they were inside, John opened the lids of several ore containers. He used telekinesis to melt the psychically responsive metal, then it arced upwards in a white stream, merging together into a huge rotating globe. John led Jehanna over to one of the empty crates, then picked her up and sat her down on it. She parted her toned thighs in invitation, before wrapping her legs around him as he moved in closer.

“So, you wanted me to be happy?” she prompted him.

“Absolutely,” John agreed, placing his hands on the alluring curve of her hips. He paused for a moment, then looked into her inquisitive gaze. “Rather than me boring you with a long monologue, why don’t you tell me what you’ve figured out so far?”

“You want to see how clever you’ve made me?” she asked, raising an eyebrow playfully.

“We all have our kinks,” he replied, knowing the sultry reporter had more than a couple of her own. “Smart women turn me on.”

She blushed, knowing exactly what he was referring to. “Well, let’s start with that. After I accidentally let slip about my sordid ventures into holo-porn, and you chose Ailita’s catgirl body based on my... preferences... the two of us became an obvious match.”

“Very good. That was the start,” he confirmed. “You’ve got excellent taste by the way; I think Ailita looks very beautiful.”

“So do I,” she agreed, which did nothing to abate her flushed cheeks. “You also really like the contrast between our skin tone, hair colour, eye colour... everything.”

“I know it’s superficial, but yeah... it really turns me on,” he agreed, brushing his finger across her dusky cheek and admiring the differences between them.

Jehanna leaned down to kiss his fingertip, then made eye-contact with him again. “Then you have all this misguided guilt about not being able to give each of us enough attention. So you like pairing us off, so we don’t end up pining after you when we’re not together.”

He let out a regretful sigh, then conceded the point with a nod. “I disagree with you about it being misguided to feel guilty. The fact is that I’m now the proud owner of two harems, and I’ve promised to start a family with nearly forty women; there’s no way that I can give each of you the attention you deserve. It does sounds horribly manipulative when you talk about me pairing you girls off, but I promise I haven’t forced anyone together.”

“You just made Ailita so irresistible that I’d have to have a heart of stone not to fall for her?” Jehanna asked with a wry smile.

John was quiet for a moment, as he brushed his fingers through her silky black hair. “Yes, I tailored her personality specifically for you. You’re competitive, driven, ambitious... and I knew that a traditionally feminine girl would complement you perfectly.”

Jehanna looked shocked as that sank in. “But Ailita’s a fully sentient being in her own right! How could you turn her into someone that’s specifically designed to appeal to me?!”

“I like her too; everyone does,” John said defensively. “As you said before, ‘She’s the kind of girl that you just can’t help falling in love with’.”

“You know that’s not what I meant,” Jehanna said with a reproachful look.

He blew out his breath, then ran his fingers through his hair. “Alright, I do know what you mean. The thing is... I ran out of ideas.”

Her brow furrowed in confusion. “Ideas about what?”

“It’s difficult to come up with a completely new personality for someone,” John admitted. “Ailita’s not the first... she’s actually the seventh girl I’ve had to build up entirely from scratch.”

“Seven!” Jehanna exclaimed, then she closed her eyes and started counting them off. “Jade, Edraele... Leylira, Betrixa, Neysa, Marika... and Ailita.”

“Yeah, and Ailita’s four older sisters are really just based on exaggerated aspects of Jade’s personality,” he explained. “You all know what I’m attracted to, and all the Nymphs would’ve turned out identical to Jade, unless I made a conscious effort to make each of them a bit different.”

“And you based Edraele on elements of the girls’ personality... as well as a certain unattainable fantasy woman of yours,” Jehanna said, with another knowing smile.

He gave her a helpless shrug. “Maria made a big impression... and I figured that being a caring mother was a good starting point for being a caring leader. Not to blow my own trumpet, but Edraele has turned out to be a phenomenal matriarch, and I couldn’t have asked for a better Maliri Queen. Well, apart from the way she dealt with her four main rivals, but that was mostly my guide’s fault.”

“Oh, I don’t disagree with you there,” Jehanna said, holding her hands up. “Edraele is amazing.”

\*Stop, you two,\* Edraele murmured to both of them. \*You’re making me blush.\*

“It’s all well-deserved praise,” John said aloud, sharing a smile with Jehanna. “Anyway, back to you and Ailita. If I hadn’t made a conscious effort to make Ailita appealing to you, she would’ve ended up as another variant of Jade... although I really was running out of ideas how to make her different from her sisters.”

Jehanna sat back, a thoughtful expression on her beautiful face. “I hadn’t really thought about what a massive responsibility it is to give someone a completely new personality. Not only that, but it must be a real creative challenge to keep inventing someone new. You’re having to do it again with Vestele Waephyra aren’t you? And Sarene Baelora.”

“Sarene’s more of a hybrid between the best parts of Sarinia and her youngest sister, Tehlariene, but yeah, Vestele’s another one. Her mind was so fragmented after the brain damage from her injuries, there wasn’t much left to work with. All these women trust me to take care of them, and it’s a huge responsibility to live up to that trust.”

Her gaze softened and Jehanna leaned in for a kiss. “You’ve got a good heart, John.”

“I try my best,” he said with a self-conscious shrug.

As Jehanna sat there, absorbing everything they’d discussed, John glanced over his shoulder at the shifting orb of Crystal Alyssium. New streams of metal fanned out in all directions, then began forming dozens of separate components.

“There’s something else isn’t there?” Jehanna finally asked. “There’s no real reason to keep any of that secret. Giving Ailita a really lovely personality is hardly something to feel guilty about, even if you were gently nudging the two of us together.”

John gave her his full attention again. “I was very conscious of the fact that you were joining the crew quite late, at least compared to the other girls,” he admitted. “You’ve seen how much combat brings us all closer together, but you missed out on months of action, where we all bonded as a tightly-knit team. I was hoping that if Ailita and you did get close, she’d make you feel more at home in our family. I also didn’t have any other role in mind for Ailita, and helping you settle in was really important. Like I said before, making sure you were happy has always been my main priority.”

“What about Ailita though?” Jehanna asked with concern. “I’m really touched that you’ve gone to these extreme lengths for my happiness... but is this fair on her?”

“I used to think the same way about the Nymphs,” John said, stroking her cheek. “But they’ve helped me understand something very important about their species. Jade and her sisters might look like exotic coloured Terrans-”

Jehanna placed her hands palm-forwards on either side of her head. “Apart from the cat ears and tails?”

“They’re just cosmetic differences,” he explained. “At their core, Nymphs are an alien species with very unique needs and desires. They need a master, and they derive pleasure from making me happy. Ailita knows that I’m really pleased the two of you have built a close connection, and that gives her a profound sense of contentment.”

“So you’re telling me my girlfriend has a secret obsession with gratifying my fiancé?!” Jehanna joked, feigning jealous outrage.

“Afraid so,” John said, playing along. “And the only way you can keep Ailita truly satisfied, is by letting her make you feel contented, happy, and loved.”

Jehanna blinked in surprise, then slowly shook her head. “It sounds so selfish... but I think I understand what you mean about the Nymphs having a very alien outlook.”

“I’ve tried to change it, but pleasing their master is too deeply ingrained in a Nymph’s psyche for me to alter the way they think. I decided to just accept them the way they are, and give them whatever they need to be happy. Jade and her sisters have all been delighted with the way I treat them now, so I figure why try and fix what isn’t broken.”

“Thank you for telling me all this,” Jehanna said gratefully. “I didn’t realise how much of a responsibility it is to be a Nymph’s master, even if I only am by proxy. I’ll make sure I give Ailita everything she needs to be happy.”

“She’s very lucky to have you,” John said, relieved and delighted with how well the discussion had gone with Jehanna. “You’ll be able to give Ailita the kind of dedicated attention that I don’t have the time to devote to her.”

“I’ll do my best,” Jehanna promised. She studied him perceptively once again, and continued, “But telling me that you’ve given me a precious gift still isn’t something you should feel guilty about. What aren’t you telling me?”

John grimaced and reluctantly met her probing gaze. “Yeah, you got the deluxe upgrade alright.”

“No more deflections,” she murmured, giving him a tender kiss. “Just tell me.”

“Ailita’s an experiment,” John finally admitted. “Or maybe I should say both of you are... as a couple.”

 Jehanna pulled back and looked at him in curiously. “Alright, I didn’t see that one coming. What do you mean we’re an experiment?”

John let out a heavy sigh. “I know it sounds awful, but just let me explain. Before you joined the crew, Jade told me she’d grown close to Helene. She felt guilty about it... as if she was betraying me by falling in love with another girl, when she should have been 100% dedicated to her master. I reassured Jade that I wasn’t upset with her for having those feelings, and I think she tried to initiate something more with Helene... but it didn’t work out.”

Now Jehanna frowned, confused by his explanation. “I thought they were a couple? They love swimming in the Lagoon together, and I see them cuddled up at night all the time.”

“No, they’re just close friends. It’s platonic... except for the occasional bit of intimacy if I get involved.”

“So you wanted to see if Ailita could genuinely fall in love with me,” Jehanna mused aloud.

“And I think she has, as much as a Nymph is capable of. Obviously, there’s a special kind of hierarchy to the way she feels about both of us.”

“With me in second place?” she asked, raising an eyebrow.

John gave her an apologetic nod. “A Nymph’s Master is always the centre of her existence. Ailita’s shown remarkable growth in becoming as close to you as she has. I didn’t order her to start a relationship with you, that’s all come from her, and Ailita’s feelings for you are quite genuine. I am sorry for not being more open about any of this before, but as I said before, I wasn’t trying to force you two together. If you did end up getting close, I wanted it to happen naturally.”

“It’s okay, I’m not jealous of Ailita’s relationship with you.” Jehanna smiled shyly and admitted, “You’ll always be the number one priority in my heart, so I’m hardly in any position to get upset if Ailita feels exactly the same way.”

“I doubt it’s a coincidence that a Nymph being obsessed with her Master is so similar to a normal girl being enthralled by a Progenitor. The Nymphs were created by Mael’nerak, and he probably designed them to emulate the connection he had with his thralls.”

“This one is very contented, Master,” Jehanna purred, nuzzling into him.

“You’re such a good little Nymph,” he joked, tousling her hair affectionately.

She laughed, then gave John a sly look. “Is it bad that turns me on?”

John chuckled and rolled his eyes. “We can have some fun later. I’ve still got some psychic shaping to do, and I want to see how much progress you’ve made with your psychic abilities.”

“Okay!” she said enthusiastically, releasing the snug grip of her calves around his back.

He stepped back and offered Jehanna a hand as she hopped off the ore crate.

“Wow!” she gasped, staring up at the scores of components floating in the centre of the Cargo Bay, now that she had an unobstructed view.

As she watched, the sphere of Crystal Alyssium was siphoning more psychic metal into the next set of engine parts, which consisted of a dozen distinct components.

“How can you control so many different objects at the same time?” Jehanna marvelled.

“It looks a lot more impressive than it actually is,” John confided. “I’m only actively working on the orb in the centre and shaping the dozen new parts. All the rest are floating without any conscious thought from me; I’m just maintaining the psychic energy to keep them hovering there.”

“What about making all those different shapes simultaneously?” she asked, staring at the partially-formed engine components. “That looks incredibly complex.”

“I’ve memorised the schematics, so I just start making each new part, then keep pushing the metal to form that shape. Once I’ve started the process off, I can move on to the next, and the next, until they’re all done.”

“Amazing,” she murmured, shaking her head in admiration. “I’ve been trying to actively control multiple illusions at the same time, and it’s really difficult.”

“Yeah, I bet. What I’m doing is setting up batches of psychic instructions, like Dana preparing batches of manufacturing jobs on the mass-fabricators.”

Jehanna looked at him blankly over her shoulder. “Um, I’m not sure what you mean.”

He laughed and hugged her fondly from behind. “I forget you’ve only been on the Invictus for a couple of weeks, it feels like so much longer. We’ve used those machines a heck of a lot over the past six months.”

She snuggled into his embrace. “It feels like I’ve been here much longer too.”

John kissed her cheek, then said thoughtfully, “Dana’s the only one of us who can genuinely work on multiple complex tasks simultaneously. Irillith’s been trying to develop the same ability, but at the moment she’s been using workarounds like me.”

Jehanna clasped his hand and guided it to her stomach. “Can’t you just load her up and pump that ability into her tummy?”

“I’m not actually sure how I enhanced Dana like that,” John ruefully admitted. “Some of her psychic abilities use runes that aren’t even on the extended Kyth’faren runic alphabet. There’s also a limit to how many different abilities I can give each of you before you reach your mental capacity. Otherwise, I could just give everyone psychic speed, along with as many other powers you needed.”

She turned to look at him, studying his face in awed fascination. “But you can do everything.”

He blinked in surprise, then gave her a lop-sided smile. “No, not really. I was able to start everyone off with their unique abilities, but then each of you has really embraced those powers and spent countless hours mastering them. I use psychic speed, strength, and telekinesis a fair bit, but I don’t have a clue how to do half the things the girls are capable of now. I could probably fumble together a pretty weak illusion using Shadow, but I’m sure you’re already much more proficient than me.”

The door to the Cargo Bay slid open and Ailita glided through, carrying a silver tray with tall drinks and some intriguing looking edibles. She balanced it all on one hand, and moved with such effortless grace that the contents didn’t so much as wobble as she crossed over the deck plates to join them.

“Perfect timing,” John said with a warm smile. “I’m dying for a drink after all that chatting.”

He gratefully accepted a glass and enjoyed a refreshing sip of the thirst-quenching fruit juice. As he was drinking, he watched Jehanna out of the corner of his eye. She also drank from a glass, but her gaze was fixed on their pink-haired companion, a deeply thoughtful and affectionate expression on Jehanna’s pretty face.

“Helene made some snacks for you to try,” Ailita said, gesturing towards the little parcels of colourful food. “Apparently, they’re a bit like sushi, but using Maliri ingredients.”

John popped one into his mouth, then nodded appreciatively. “Delicious.”

“Yeah, really tasty,” Jehanna agreed.

“I’ll tell her you liked them,” Ailita said looking delighted. She glanced at John, then bit her lip and reached out with a tentative telepathic touch. “Master? May I?”

He opened up the mental barrier for her, and felt the Nymph’s elation as he welcomed her back inside his mind.

John placed his glass back on the tray, then took the silver platter from Ailita and set it aside on the ore crate. Now that she was unburdened, he opened his arms for the jubilant Nymph.

“Jehanna was just about to show me what she can do,” John said, as he wrapped Ailita up in a hug. “Are you ready for the big show?”

Ailita nodded exuberantly. “She’s exceptionally talented, Master. This should be spectacular!”

“Hey, you two are setting the bar way too high,” the blushing reporter protested.

“Just setting our expectations,” John said with a playful grin. “I didn’t think you were the kind of girl to back down from a challenge?”

She opened her mouth to object, then shut it just as quickly, a look of determination in her lustrous brown eyes.

Backing away from them, Jehanna made an elaborate flourish with her hand. “I started off by practicing making illusions of all different shapes and sizes.”

A scarlet hued dragon appeared, towering over them with its massive draconic bulk. There was no mistaking Tamolith, looking exactly as she had before they had departed Kintark all those weeks ago. From her powerful crimson-scaled flanks to the broad span of her leathery wings, the attention to detail was remarkable. Jehanna had even managed to capture the aching grief in the majestic dragon’s reptilian gaze, the loss of her brood of dragonlings leaving the Empress distraught and heartbroken.

“Tamolith’s a proud and arrogant dragon, but she set aside her pride to accept your offer of immortality,” Jehanna narrated, gesturing towards the terrifying behemoth.

The enormous hulking form of the red dragon began to shrink and metamorphose, the changes subtle at first before becoming more pronounced. Gradually, the bestial form of the dragon shifted into a hybrid of sorts, until she had completed her transformation into a stunningly beautiful woman that carried exotic hints of her draconic heritage. John immediately recognised the image of Tamolith that Jehanna had created a week earlier. However, when she’d previously summoned that illusion, it had been a good first effort, but was not very convincing. The new version of a thoroughly enthralled Tamolith who had completed the Change was something else entirely.

The statuesque draconic beauty had a beautiful physique, her toned muscles rippling with strength and vitality. Her luscious bronzed skin looked so real, John was quite certain he’d be able to reach out and touch the alluring softness of her nubile flesh. It was cool in the Cargo Bay and Tamolith’s voluptuous body responded accordingly, with goosebumps appearing on her arms, and her nipples pebbling in response to the chill in the air.

It was the exotic dragoness’ expression that John found the most intriguing though. He could see Tamolith’s prideful arrogance in her sultry gaze, but as he met her smouldering amber-eyed stare, John instinctively knew that it was just an act. Behind the air of superiority, there was a subtle hint of something deeper and achingly familiar. Tenderness, love, and an endearing vulnerability, which he’d seen many times before.

“You’d need to feed Tamolith for months for her to go through this much of a physical transformation, and her personality would end up very different from the way she is now,” Jehanna explained, watching his face for a reaction. “She’d be kind and loving, looking to you for protection as she embraces her maternal instincts and becomes the mother to a new species.”

 John shook his head in admiration as he studied the intricate illusion. “The difference between this image and your first version is remarkable. Intellectually, I know she isn’t real, but I’m having trouble believing that a Changed Tamolith isn’t standing here in front of me.”

“She’s an exceptionally beautiful mate, Master," Ailita murmured, casting her speculative gaze over the illusion. “I can see why you find her so arousing.”

Now it was John’s turn to be embarrassed, much to Jehanna’s amusement.

“You like seeing a big ferocious dragon turned into a broody, doe-eyed vixen?” she asked with a teasing grin.

“I think we’ve spent quite enough time discussing my kinks this afternoon. Have you been working on anything else?”

Jehanna nodded, then dismissed the vision of Tamolith with a wave of her hand. “Sakura was really helpful. She’s been giving me lots of advice on how to use my abilities in combat.”

“That’s always a good focus for your training,” John agreed. “What did you two come up with?”

She stepped back a few paces, her brow furrowing with concentration as the radiance in her eyes intensified to a bright pink glow. All around her, duplicates of Jehanna began to appear, until she was surrounded by six exact replicas. They mirrored her appearance as well as her movements, so when the dusky reporter began to make a series of comically exaggerated kung-fu kicks and punches, her images followed suit.

“Very intimidating,” John said with an indulgent smile, as Ailita giggled at her girlfriend’s antics.

He reached out to brush his fingers against the closest image, and her jumpsuit covered arm felt as solid as the real thing.

“They’ll disappear with a heavy blow,” the seven Jehannas explained. “Unless I make a conscious effort to simulate an injury, or come up with a creative way for them to survive the hit.”

“You’d be distracting to fight against,” John observed as he studied her mirror images. “But how do you stop your opponent from just striking at you in the centre?”

“That was one of the first points Sakura made as well,” Jehanna replied, before breaking into a broad grin.

Her silhouette began to vibrate, with all the images mimicking her distracting appearance, then she darted backwards and all six illusions whirled around her in a blur.

“Which is the real me now?” she taunted him, as the seven versions of Jehanna solidified once more.

John stepped forward and touched the closest replica, who promptly shook her head. It took him four more tries to find the real girl, who was standing in the rear-left position.

“Now that was a good trick,” John said approvingly.

“It takes a bit more effort, but I think it’s well worth it,” Jehanna agreed. “Now check this out!”

She made another dramatic flourish, and then all her replicas were wearing Paragon suits and wielding Tachyon rifles. They backed away from John, then the armoured Lionesses took cover behind the stacks of ore crates that were spread out around the huge room.

“Try to take me out!” she yelled, holding up her hand in the shape of an imaginary pistol.

The squad of Jehannas took aim and opened fire, sending streams of blue tachyon bolts towards him.

John squinted against the glare, then aimed his two fingers at Jehanna as she shot at him around a cargo crate. “Pow!”

Her suit’s shield rippled with the impact, and the brunette ducked behind cover, while her clones laid down suppressing fire. The rest of them grinned and shook their heads.

John aimed at another one, who was firing at him from a ledge formed from a stack of ore containers. “Pow!”

She fell back with a rippling shield, while the other girls shook their heads and kept firing. It took another six tries before John finally found the correct Jehanna, because the ‘injured’ replicas kept emerging from cover to rejoin the gunfight. The real one was shooting at him from the first location he’d targeted, having snuck around there while out of sight.

“Very nice,” John said, looking at her with admiration. “If you could keep that up in a protracted firefight, you’d massively increase your survivability.”

“That’s the plan!” she said, thrilled by his praise. “I thought it’d be sensible to focus on using my abilities for defence, because I’ve already got a lot of firepower with a Tachyon rifle.”

“Sounds very sensible to me,” he said, before looking at her speculatively. “Could we try again? I’ll push you a bit harder this time.”

She nodded eagerly. “Go for it.”

The squad of Jehannas wasted no time in opening fire on him, so John ducked behind cover himself. He aimed at the armoured girl on the right then fired his imaginary gun. “Pow!”

Her clones shook their heads, and kept firing, but this time John ducked down and shifted to his left. After popping up again and taking another rapid shot, he moved position again. He noticed that the squad of Jehannas had stopped smiling, and now had expressions of intense concentration on their pretty faces. It took another three shots before he found the real Jehanna, then he walked around the ore containers to discuss the imaginary battle with her.

“Your aim goes to pieces when you’re concentrating on your mirror images,” he observed. “It also takes you a couple of seconds to react to me changing firing positions.”

Jehanna grimaced and let out a frustrated sigh. “Yeah, I know. It’s really hard to concentrate on multiple things simultaneously.”

She dismissed her illusionary copies, then walked over to accept his open-armed invitation for a hug.

“Don’t be discouraged. You’ve made some incredible progress in a really short time,” he praised her, rubbing her back. “From what we know, thralls don’t fight defensively, and just throw themselves into battle in waves of shock troops. You’ve picked exactly the right tactic to deal with them, while minimising casualties on our side.”

“Thank you... but I can’t take all the credit,” she said magnanimously. “Sakura was a big help in working out an effective counter strategy for gunfights with attacking thralls.”

“You need to be very careful if you ever face an actual Progenitor though,” John cautioned her. “They have access to a lot of psychic abilities and are extremely dangerous and unpredictable.”

“Don’t worry about that, I’ll leave them to you and Sakura,” Jehanna said with a shudder. “I see myself in more of a defensive role, providing protection and support for the other Lionesses.”

John lifted her chin and gave her a tender kiss. “I think you’re going to be an amazing addition to the team. Thank you for working so hard on developing your abilities.”

She beamed at him in delight, her eyes shining with happiness.

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“Hey Ladies, sorry to keep you waiting,” Alyssa said, as she walked into the Briefing Room accompanied by Calara.

“We found a good place to make repairs and we’re heading there now,” the Latina explained. “The Nymphs are keeping an eye on the Bridge while we have this meeting.”

Dana, Rachel, Sakura, Jade, Helene, and the twins were all sitting around the conference table, and they exchanged furtive glances.

“So why are we having this secret meeting anyway?” Dana blurted out, voicing what most of them were thinking.

Alyssa nodded towards Sakura, who revealed the runesword she was holding on her lap, then placed it onto the middle of the conference table. Everyone turned to look at the magnificent blade, the Kyth’faren runes resonating with latent psychic energy.

Dana rolled her eyes. “Yeah, I know this is about her new sword... Sakura said you wanted to talk about it. But what’s the problem exactly? Is it cursed or something?”

“I don’t know for sure, but there’s something going on,” Alyssa said quietly.

The fact that the blonde hadn’t immediately dismissed Dana’s quip about it being a cursed weapon had all the girls on edge.

Rachel studied the blonde intently. “Is this somehow related to Kyth’vindathys? I mean the runeblade obviously, not John himself.”

Alyssa slowly nodded. “There’s been several times where John picks up his sword, then goes into something like a trance. It’s not like he’s incapacitated or anything, he’s just... distracted.”

“Baen’thelas has a tendency to be introspective,” Tashana said, looking at each of the two girls. “That doesn’t sound wildly out of character for him.”

“Yes, but I can’t hear any of his thoughts when this happens,” Alyssa said, her tone solemn and full of concern. “I’ve been keeping a close eye on John, but I haven’t noticed any other side-effects, so I’ve let it go until now.”

“What changed?” Rachel prompted her.

Alyssa’s cerulean gaze flicked to the Asian girl seated opposite. “When Sakura picked up her new runeswords, she went into the same kind of trance... and I couldn’t hear her thoughts either.”

All eyes settled on Sakura, who frowned as she gazed down at her gleaming sword.

“Can you remember exactly what happened?” Rachel asked her. “Try to be as specific as possible.”

“It’s hard to recall any details,” Sakura replied, her brow furrowing with concentration. “I was so excited about receiving a gift from John, and when I actually saw the runeswords, I was completely blown away. I mean... they’re absolutely gorgeous weapons, and he crafted them for me personally.”

“Yeah, I heard all that,” Alyssa interjected, waving her hand impatiently. “Your mind went blank to me afterwards, when you touched the sword for the first time.”

Sakura took a deep breath and closed her eyes. “It felt like... the sword was the perfect tool. That it would help me eradicate Progenitors from the galaxy. It was easy to imagine me dispensing justice to those tyrants and executing them for their horrible crimes.”

“Was that when you felt the sword getting hungry?” Dana blurted out. Her eyes widened as she added, “Maybe it’s hungry for blood? Like a vampire!”

“Dana, stop interrupting,” Rachel said firmly. “Let her explain in her own words.”

“There is a sensation of hunger...” Sakura said quietly. “But these swords don’t want blood, they hunger for eldritch power. It’s like they’re eager to be charged with psychic energy, to make them more lethal against your enemies.”

“John said he’s been experiencing the same sensation with Kyth’vindathys,” Alyssa noted. “Can you remember anything else?”

“Not much else, sorry,” Sakura apologised. “While I was practicing with them, I really felt attuned with the swords, and couldn’t wait to use them in combat. They felt like a perfect fit for me, and I knew they’d make me much more effective at assassinating Progenitors. That’s everything I can think of.”

“It sounds to me as if they’re specialised weapons for destroying Progenitors,” Calara suggested. “It’s like the hero of a story being given a special magic weapon to defeat the evil dragon.”

“So you’re saying John has been making Progenitor bane weapons?” Irillith asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Kyth’vindathys literally means the vengeance of the Kyth’faren reborn,” Tashana murmured, looking thoughtful. “It makes sense that the Kyth’faren would supply him with the tools for the job.”

“Can you feel any negative emotions from the runeblade, Helene?” Alyssa asked the aquatic girl.

Helene’s eyes began to glow with a soft teal light as she studied the weapon. “I don’t sense any bad feelings, but it’s not a person, so I don’t know if that means anything.”

“So where does that leave us with these swords?” Calara asked. “Can we trust that they’re safe to use?”

“I don’t believe that John would ever put my life in danger,” Sakura said without a moment’s hesitation.

“Not consciously, no,” Rachel mused, her perceptive gaze lingering on Alyssa. “But it’s the unknown that has you worried, isn’t it?”

Alyssa nodded in confirmation. “Nothing’s happened yet that would justify any real suspicion of these weapons... but I am concerned that we don’t know everything about them.”

“Should I continue using them?” Sakura asked, studying the runeblade warily.

Rachel and Alyssa shared a long look, an unspoken conversation carried out by eye-contact alone.

“I don’t think we have any choice,” Rachel finally said. “We can’t afford to reject what could be our most lethal weapons in the fight against the Progenitors.”

“What are you planning to say to John?” Irillith asked her blonde matriarch.

Alyssa nibbled her lip, but remained silent.

Irillith sighed in exasperation. “You’re not seriously planning to keep this from him are you?”

“He’s got more than enough to deal with at the moment,” Alyssa said quietly. “The last thing I want is for John to start worrying about his runesword.”

“Well I vote we tell him everything,” Irillith declared. “What does everyone else think?”

“I think it’s cute that you believe this is a democracy,” Alyssa said with an arched eyebrow.

The Maliri rolled her eyes, then turned to look at the rest of the girls sitting around the conference table. “What about the rest of you, what do you think we should do?”

“I don’t like keeping secrets from John,” Dana muttered, unable to meet Alyssa’s gaze. “I think we should just tell him.”

“I’m inclined to be open with John about our concerns,” Rachel admitted, much to Alyssa’s surprise. “Yes, I know this might trigger some existential crisis that we have to spend the next few months helping John come to terms with. But we resolved his guilt about recruitment through discussion and reason.”

“A lot of discussion,” Alyssa noted wryly. “And an awful lot of reasoning.”

Rachel shrugged and looked at the other Maliri twin. “What about you, Tashana? Do you agree with your sister?”

The azure-skinned girl considered it for a moment, then shook her head. “I believe in Baen’thelas. He forged Kyth’vindathys personally, and that means it’s a force for good in the galaxy. The same applies to Sakura’s new runeswords; he created them to help her administer justice to those tyrants, and that means they’re a force for good too.”

“Well I trust Alyssa’s judgement,” Calara declared.

“There’s a surprise,” Dana teased her, sticking out her tongue. “Matriarch’s pet!”

The Latina blushed. “I’m not just blindly agreeing with her. Alyssa knows John better than any of us, and she’s also right about not bothering him with unnecessary distractions. I don’t think we have any real evidence that there’s a problem with the runeswords, just a few suspicions related to those telepathy-blocking trances. Unless we discover that these weapons pose an actual threat, I think we should just let John focus on the Progenitor War.”

“Alright, that’s three to two in favour of telling him,” Irillith said with a confident grin. “Sakura, what’s your opinion?”

“I’m going to abstain,” Sakura said quietly. “John forged these new runeswords especially for me, and I can’t wait to use them. I don’t think I can be objective about this.”

“What about you, Helene,” Irillith asked, pretty sure she already knew her answer in advance. “Do you think we should be honest with John, or keep secrets from him?”

Alyssa rolled her eyes at the way the Maliri phrased the question, but didn’t interrupt.

“I don’t really know as much about the Kyth’faren as the rest of you,” Helene ruefully admitted. “They sound like they were nice people, but a horrible thing happened to them, and that sometimes makes people turn mean. I think we should always be truthful with John, but Calara is right as well; we don’t actually know for sure that there’s anything bad about these weapons.”

“So how would you like to vote?” Irillith prompted her.

Helene shrugged helplessly. “You all make very good points and I don’t know what the right thing is to do. I think I should pass, like Sakura.”

“Which just leaves you, Jade,” Rachel said, turning to the Nymph. “You haven’t told us your opinion about the runeswords yet; what do you believe we should do?”

“If the swords turn out to be a threat, then we deal with them,” Jade said with a shrug. “For now, Master needs his runeblade. He can’t be the cat if we de-claw him.”

“I believe that’s a tie,” Alyssa noted, darting a sly smile at Irillith. “Which gives me the deciding vote.”

Irillith threw her hands up in exasperation. “Fine, we keep it a secret then. But if this blows up in our faces, I’ll gladly take a spanking, but I can’t deal with John being disappointed in me.”

“I’ll take full responsibility,” Alyssa offered with a conciliatory smile. “And I’ll even say to John that you were a good girl, and argued that we should tell him everything.”

The Maliri relaxed and nodded. “Alright, we’ll play it your way.”

“Thanks, ladies,” Alyssa said, rising from her chair. “I’ll continue to keep a close eye on John when we’re in combat and he’s wielding Kyth’vindathys. If any of you notice anything unusual, let me know immediately. That goes double for you, Sakura. Tell us if you feel anything weird when you’re using your runeswords.”

She picked up the weapon and turned it so the curved blade sparkled in the light. “The real test will be when I drive this into a Progenitor’s black heart,” she declared, staring at the runesword in fascination. “I’ll let you know if I feel anything when that happens... other than elation.”

Dana raised a hand. “Umm... is she being weird? I can’t tell.”

The girls laughed and Alyssa smiled as she shook her head. “I can’t wait to start vaporising those bastards either. I think a bit of run-of-the-mill bloodlust is fine.”

“Okay, just checking,” the redhead said with a grin.

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Gahl’kalgor strode purposefully down the dimly-lit corridor, with Valeria hurrying to keep up with him.

“Split the fleets,” he commanded, his boots clanging on the deck plates as they marched towards the forbidding set of black doors. “Half continue onwards, the other half spread out and pursue that ship. I want him found and destroyed!”

“Yes, my Lord,” she replied, trying to keep her voice respectful and obedient, no matter how angry and jealous she might feel.

He made a sharp gesture at the door controls, then the huge portal yawed open, the serrated fangs splitting apart as the segmented door retracted into the frame. The Progenitor crossed the hangar towards the sleek black ship that was parked there, the airlock door already opened for him by the crew.

“How long will you be away from your flagship, my Lord?” Valeria asked, trying to frame the question as innocently as possible.

Gahl’kalgor turned as he reached the airlock and looked out through the wide open hangar door. His gaze was drawn to the thrall battleship that was floating alongside his dreadnought, the black warship awaiting the arrival of its Progenitor master.

His lips curved into a smile of anticipation. “I may be some time. Alert me if you find his ship, otherwise I’m not to be disturbed.”

“As you command, my Lord,” Valeria said softly, watching him as he turned his back on her and entered the ascendancy class shuttle.

She backed away from his personal transport when the pilot ignited the retro-thrusters, then her amber eyes followed the shuttle as it lifted off the deck plates and swept out of the hangar. Emotions raged within her, until anger and jealousy were replaced by feelings of sadness and abandonment. Valeria watched forlornly as the shuttle peeled away from the massive dreadnought, and closed the distance with the thrall battleship. She saw the small transport disappear inside the hangar opposite, then she turned her back and stalked towards the exit, unable to watch any longer.

Inside the shuttle, Gahl’kalgor waited by the airlock, an unfamiliar thrill of excitement making his pulse race much faster than normal. He found himself working out precisely how long their short flight would take, then counted down the seconds until they landed. As soon as the warning rune shifted from red to green, notifying him that the shuttle had entered a pressurised atmosphere, Gahl’kalgor opened the airlock door.

The fanged teeth peeled apart, and wind whistled past the doorway as the shuttle glided into the hangar. His sharp eyes picked her out immediately, the Galkiran officer waiting patiently beside the entry doors. Her hair was intricately braided, which was considered the current high fashion on his homeworld, after Valeria had worn her hair that way during a recent arena battle. The thrall was also immaculately dressed in her uniform, looking smart and elegant in a fleet admiral’s full regalia.

Gahl’kalgor felt a surge of homicidal rage at her pristine appearance; why couldn’t the stupid thrall just look the way she had before?! He took a deep breath and slowly let it out, until he’d got his temper back under control. When the anger had subsided to mere seething irritation, he saw that the shuttle was about to land, and Ashryn was gazing up at him from the edge of the landing pad, her face alight with anticipation.

As soon as the shuttle touched down, the Galkiran officer hurried across to greet him. “Welcome, my Lord! It’s such an honour to finally meet you in person!”

He stepped back and beckoned her forwards to enter the shuttle. “I wanted to meet the woman who was clever enough to navigate the treacherous tides of battle, and damage my enemy’s ship.”

Ashryn looked thrilled, elated to have his approval. “I was only following your brilliant plans, my Lord. You deserve all credit for our victories.”

“Tell me, how did you realise that our forces were being led into a trap?” Gahl’kalgor asked, gesturing for the scarlet-hued woman to accompany him down the corridor.

She chattered away, eager to recount the battle, as he led her towards the lifts. The thrall’s inane prattle was already starting to bore him, but he nodded occasionally, making her think that he cared in the slightest about anything she had to say. The lift reached the upper deck, and Gahl’kalgor guided her down the corridor to the doorway at the end.

He pressed the rune to open the door, then the thrall’s monologue faltered into silence as she peeked into the lavish bedroom. A huge bed dominated the chamber, its black silk sheets bathed in a blood-red light. Gahl’kalgor glanced down at her and saw a mixture of elation and lust on her beautiful, mature face. He grit his teeth and quickly turned away, before he did something he knew he’d probably regret. This was all going terribly wrong.

“Tell me about how you took the shot yourself,” he requested, as he clasped her hand and led her inside.

The thrall started babbling again, her voice shaking with nervous excitement.

Gahl’kalgor nodded distractedly, then waved his hand at her uniform. “Why don’t you get more comfortable... and remove your jacket.”

Her fingers trembled as she rushed to obey his request, fumbling with the clasps until she was able to slip the garment off her shoulders.

The Progenitor avoided making eye contact with her, knowing he’d see nothing but carnal desire in her lustful gaze. He slowly walked around the thrall, until he was standing directly behind her back.

“You were recounting the battle. Continue,” he ordered, breaking the moment of awkward silence.

Reaching up with his hand, he lifted her tightly bound hair, then nodded with satisfaction when he saw how the elaborate hairstyle was maintained. He began removing clips as the thrall continued to talk, then gently brushed out her glossy black hair until the thick mane was loose around her shoulders.

He walked around her again to survey his handiwork, then his heart skipped a beat when he saw her tousled appearance. She was so alike his mother it took his breath away, and he stared at the red-skinned thrall, captivated by her natural beauty.

Ashryn had gone quiet again as he stared at her, until she couldn’t resist him any longer. She stepped closer, and in a moment of brazen courage, gave him a tender kiss on the cheek. “I adore you, my Lord,” she whispered reverently. “I will serve you in any way you desire.”

Gahl’kalgor jerked his head back, scowling with irritation. “Don’t call me that!” he said sharply. “Just call me... Kal.”

She stared at him wide-eyed, awed at the new level of intimacy he was offering her. “Of course, Kal.”

The tension in his expression faded away, and he offered her a hand. Gahl’kalgor carefully led her towards the bed, then he sat down, and patted the sheet beside him. “Why don’t you sit down here.”

Holding her breath, she gracefully sat on the bed, then shifted over to the middle where he’d indicated. “Is this alright?” she murmured.

He nodded, then lay down next to her... and rested his head on her lap. “This is perfect.”

Ashryn’s eyelashes fluttered, and she let out a soft moan at the intimate contact. Her Progenitor master was so much bigger than the feeble Galkiran males she’d known in her youth, his broad body incredibly muscular and breathtakingly handsome.

“I have a question for you,” he asked quietly. “Do you know the song: ‘The fisherman’s toil?’.”

She blinked in surprise at his unusual request, then desperately racked her brain for memories from over a century and a half ago. Having grown up on an agricultural world, the songs she knew were about working the soil, and harvesting crops.

“I’m sorry, Kal... I-I don’t know that one,” she stammered, dismayed that she might disappoint him.

Gahl’kalgor sat up again, and stared intently into her eyes. “I’ll teach you. Listen closely.”

Ashryn cocked her head to one side, and listened attentively as he sang the simple melody.

“Do you know it now?” he demanded impatiently.

She nodded, feeling confident now. “Yes, my Lo-. I mean... Yes, Kal, I know the words.”

“Sing it for me... please,” he requested, before settling down again with his head on her lap.

A glowing hand appeared in the air in front of Ashryn, then the disembodied telekinetic limb gently clasped her own. The hand guided hers to rest on his head, then softly stroked her fingers, encouraging them to do the same.

“He rowed his boat,” she sang softly, brushing her fingertips through his thick hair.

The Progenitor hugged her closer, his head resting on her toned thigh.

“He caught a fish,” she murmured, feeling an unfamiliar warmth blossoming in her chest.

Gahl’kalgor’s shoulders began to tremble and he clung to her desperately. “I’m so sorry, Delsanra,” he whispered, his voice breaking.

Ashryn was shocked at the sudden vulnerability he’d revealed to her, then her heart melted as she realised he’d specially chosen her to comfort him and ease his pain. She gently caressed him as she sang the song he’d just taught her, doing her best to fill every verse with as much tenderness and sympathy as she could.

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“Just give us twenty minutes to prepare for you, Master!” Ailita requested, her aquamarine eyes sparkling with excitement.

Jehanna wiggled her fingertips at him, then she let the Nymph lead her towards the exit. “See you soon!”

John returned their wave goodbye, before focusing his attention on the hundreds of components floating in the Cargo Bay. He made a gesture towards the fuel compression assembly and the parts began to lock together with a series of satisfying clicks. It was hypnotic to watch the engine components build themselves, and he gazed up at the propulsion system as it rapidly took shape, his thoughts lingering on Jehanna and Ailita.

“Hey, handsome,” Alyssa said, gliding into the room as the reinforced doors slid open.

He greeted her with a warm smile. “This is a nice surprise. What brings you down here?”

She stood on tiptoe to give him a kiss. “I need some Crystal Alyssium; I was going to start making some more spider mines, remember?”

“Right, of course,” he replied. “We’re actually getting low on supplies after building so much recently. We’ll have to be careful not to run out, especially as we can’t resupply at Genthalas until the war against the Galkirans is over.”

“We don’t have that many warheads left anyway,” the blonde said with a shrug. “We should have just enough metal to build another hundred or so mines.”

“It’s worth it. They’ve been very effective.”

Alyssa studied him for a moment, before giving John a playful nudge. “It’s not like you to forget what I’m up to. Got a lot on your mind?”

“Just thinking about a few things,” he replied, amused by Alyssa pretending that she hadn’t been listening to his every thought. “But you know that already.”

“Yeah, but it’s a lot smoother to segue into it, rather than just blurt out: ‘You were thinking about proposing to Jehanna; let’s talk about it’,” the blonde said bluntly.

He chuckled and nodded in agreement. “Forget I said anything. I like the smooth approach much better.”

“I thought you might,” she said, crinkling her nose at him affectionately. “Can I see the ring?”

John removed it from his pocket and handed it over. Alyssa compared the beautiful piece of jewellery to her own engagement ring, her gaze softening as she remembered his romantic proposal to her. “It’s gorgeous. She’s going to be thrilled.”

“I’ve been carrying it around for a while now, just in case,” John said, accepting it back. “After all, we do have a tradition to uphold; a ring for a ring.”

She pouted and gave him a disapproving frown. “Don’t be like that. This will mean everything to Jehanna.”

“I know, I’m sorry,” John said, pulling her into an apologetic hug. “It still feels weird to only be handing out engagement rings after we’ve... you know.”

“After you’ve buggered your prospective fiancée senseless?” Alyssa asked with mock sympathy. “What could be more romantic than that?”

John couldn’t help laughing at her crude summary. “I think you hit the nail on the head. Pretty much anything?”

Alyssa was quiet for a moment as she studied him. “You’re looking at this all wrong. You think that we deserve to be wined and dined, then you should take us to some incredibly romantic setting, and get down on one knee to pop the big question. Right?”

“That is the normal convention,” John agreed with a wry smile.

“But we’re not normal people, not anymore,” Alyssa said gently. “You’ve taken in your collection of wounded little birds, and nursed us all back to health. Then you’ve gone far beyond that, and gifted us with incredible bodies, amazing psychic abilities, and if that wasn’t enough... immortality! You’ve already given each of us so much, our relationship already feels unbelievably one-sided, so putting the burden on you to make a romantic proposal feels unfair. You’re the prize, not us.”

He frowned in confusion. “Are you saying you wanted to propose instead?”

“Absolutely not!” she exclaimed, making a disgusted face. “I can’t think of anything more emasculating. Yuck!”

“Now I really am confused,” John said, feeling bewildered.

“It’s simple,” she said, gently cupping his face.

“Obviously not,” he retorted playfully.

She ignored his attempt at levity, and leaned in to give him a tender kiss. “It’s simple. We take the lead in letting you know when we’re ready to give you full access to our bodies. For the only time in our relationship, we’re able to give you a special gift of intimacy, and it’s coupled with an unspoken pledge of willing submission that will last for the rest of our lives together.”

John stared at her wide-eyed. “Is that the way Jehanna feels?”

“That’s the way we all feel,” Alyssa murmured, tracing the outline of a heart on his chest. “It was never about coupling a romantic proposal with something kinky.”

“Wow... that’s a very different way of looking at it,” John said, startled by her earnest explanation of the girls’ perspective.

They stood quietly together, with Alyssa wrapped up in John’s loving embrace. He thought back to their relationship, and while their escalating intimacy had followed a slightly different sequence, the principle still felt the same. It was easy for him to believe what she was saying, as many of the girls had previously told him how they’d felt like they would never be able to repay everything he’d done for them. John had graciously brushed aside any suggestion that they owed him anything, but he could see that the girls would leap at the chance to redress the balance.

He glanced down at Alyssa and smiled. “You’re right, that does make me look at things differently.”

“Good,” she said softly, kissing the tip of his nose.

“How long did it take you to come up with all that?” John asked, his mouth curling up into a lop-sided grin.

“It took ages!” she admitted, blowing out her breath in an exaggerated sigh. “Did you like the part where I made getting ass-fucked sound deeply romantic?”

John nodded and broke into a burst of rumbling laughter. “That was the best bit.”

She giggled along with him, her eyes shining with happiness.

When their laughter had subsided, John met her sparkling cerulean gaze. “It was all true though, wasn’t it?”

“Yes,” she confirmed with a gentle smile. “That wasn’t my conscious thought at the time, but when I stopped and really considered what this meant to each of us, I realised that all of us girls felt the same way. I’ve discussed it with Edraele, and this is even more meaningful for the Maliri with their cultural taboos.”

\*Luna definitely felt that way,\* the Maliri matriarch murmured in agreement. \*And I’m quite certain that the Young Matriarchs will have an identical outlook. They feel like they owe you for every moment of happiness they currently enjoy, and would be thrilled to be able to repay you in some small manner.\*

John was tempted to make a jovial comment, like he had with Alyssa, but he could tell Edraele was being completely sincere. His relationship with the matriarchs was similar to those he shared with the Lionesses, but with the Maliri being a thrall species, it made some of their reactions even more pronounced. They had all told him how much he had transformed their lives for the better, and coupled with their pregnancies, he knew they all doted on him to the point of adoration.

\*I’ll make some time for the Young Matriarchs as soon as I can,\* John promised. \*You’re right, this is important to them too.\*

\*Thank you,\* Edraele said gratefully.

John glanced up at the replacement engine, which was now almost complete. “Are you going to need any help installing this?”

“No, absolutely not,” Alyssa replied. “I’ll handle this, you just focus on Jehanna.”

He gave her a knowing look. “Are you sure you don’t want to be there too?”

She bit her lip and considered his offer for a moment, then shook her head. “We’re already bonded, so I’ll get to hear all Jehanna’s thoughts and share everything she’s feeling. As long as you don’t block me out, I’ll be experiencing everything in stereo. Trust me, that’s more than enough to keep me satisfied.”

“Well the offer’s always open,” he said, before giving her a spontaneous hug. “Thank you for coming down here to chat about the engagement. I feel so much better about everything.”

“You’re welcome!” Alyssa gushed, delighted that providing a different perspective had been helpful.

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The Galkiran scout cruiser held position in space, looming over the much smaller object beside it. The thrall vessel was dark and sinister in its appearance, a sharp contrast to the gleaming gold Maliri comms beacon, which had been hacked and compromised by the invaders.

Captain Narzera stared at her holo-screen, listening intently as the group of blue-skinned thralls spoke some peculiar, overly formal version of her own language. Their dialect made these Maliri sound haughty and aloof, as if they thought they were superior to everyone else, but all the evidence about their civilisation she had uncovered so far proved to the contrary.

“They’re hideous, aren’t they?” a voice sneered off to her right.

The Galkiran Scout Captain glanced at her Comms Officer and nodded in agreement, her lip curling in disgust. “Their pale hide looks like congealed afterbirth.”

The younger woman smirked at the grotesque imagery. “I couldn’t have put it better myself.”

“What do you want?” Narzera asked bluntly, her limited patience running out.

“I’ve been scanning the feeds routed through the hacked Comms Beacon and I found something interesting. Take a look at this, Captain,” the thrall replied, tapping a rune on her wrist interface.

An icon flashed on Narzera’s holo-screen and she swiped across it, tapping into the hijacked feed and displaying it on her holographic panel.

“What am I looking at?” she demanded, staring at the sprawling array of stars.

“This appears to be a map of Maliri territory,” the communications officer explained. “There are some sectors missing, but the stellar cartography covers a substantial area.”

Narzera frowned in confusion. “Why would they broadcast a map through their comms beacons? Is this some kind of crude navigation aid?”

“No, I don’t believe so,” the Galkiran thrall replied, shaking her head. “Look at this!”

She clumsily repositioned the map, jerking the image from one sector of stars to another.

“I don’t have time for this,” Narzera said impatiently. “Hurry up.”

“Just one more moment, Captain,” the communications officer muttered, before triumphantly pointing at the holo-screen. “There they are!”

Narrowing her eyes and studying the floating image, Narzera was startled to see sensor contacts being tracked across the hijacked map.

“This is live sensor data!” Narzera blurted out. “Why are these fools broadcasting classified military data across an unsecure comms network?!”

“I was just as mystified, Captain,” the thrall said with a helpless shrug. “Perhaps they falsified this data and it’s intended as misinformation?”

“I want all available personnel studying this data feed,” Narzera ordered. “We need to ascertain if this is a ruse, or if the data is genuine and the Maliri are as stupid as they are ugly.”

“As you command,” the thrall replied with a wicked grin, snapping to attention.

“Has there been any contact with the main invasion force?” the captain asked, eager to inform Gahl’kalgor of their startling discovery.

“Not yet, but if they invaded on their original attack vector, they should have already intercepted our chain of comms beacons.”

“Why are you stating the obvious? I know they should have made contact by now!” Narzera snapped. “They must have encountered resistance from the Maliri fleets. See if you can locate and track our invasion force using the sensor data they’ve been broadcasting.”

“Acknowledged, Captain,” the comms officer replied. “I’ll notify you if we discover anything new.”

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John stepped out of the anti-gravity field, then walked the dozen paces to Jehanna’s quarters with an extra spring in his step. Recruiting the former TFNN reporter had been a unique experience compared to the rest of his crew, taking place over a protracted few months, rather than during a torrid fortnight of ever-increasing intimacy. The main difference between Jehanna and the other girls, was that she already had a supportive family and successful career, so she’d been understandably reluctant to leave her old life behind.

Having her cover blown as a secret Lioness, then the unfortunate fight with her parents, had been the sudden catalyst for Jehanna to join them. John was painfully aware of everything the smart and very capable young woman had sacrificed to become part of his crew, and he was determined to make sure that she would not regret that decision. He stopped in front of her bedroom door and patted the engagement ring that he had stowed in his pocket. When the right moment came, John wanted to make sure that everything was perfect for his proposal.

He didn’t bother to announce his presence with the door chime, as Alyssa had already informed him that the occupants were ready and waiting for his arrival. The door wasn’t locked, so he was able to hit the access button, and step right inside. There he froze, and all noble thoughts of romantic proposals flew right out of the window.

The room had been prepared with seduction in mind, the flickering glow of candlelight adding a mystical air to the sensual ambiance. Jehanna and Ailita were posed coquettishly on the bed, with the raven-haired beauty reclining against her feline companion. The nymph leaned down to kiss Jehanna’s bare shoulder, her lips brushing against glistening mocha skin. John saw that the Terran beauty had an alluring sheen to her body, and realised at once that Ailita must have massaged oil into her nubile flesh.

Jehanna rose from the bed, and prowled towards him. “Hello, Master,” she purred.

John tried to come up with a pithy reply, but he was struck speechless by Jehanna’s exotic beauty.

“He’s lost for words, sister,” Ailita said mischievously, her eyes glinting with delight as she padded over to join them.

He swallowed thickly, then nodded, still not trusting himself to speak. John reached out towards Jehanna, then brushed the backs of his fingers across her slick abdomen. Her skin was velvety soft, and his fingertips were able to glide across her stomach, their path lubricated by massage oil.

“Are you going to give me a full tummy?” Jehanna whispered, gazing longingly into his eyes.

Ailita embraced their newest recruit from behind, her pale hands resting on Jehanna’s dusky hips.

“Master wants you to take his cum another way tonight,” the Nymph murmured, her nimble fingers caressing Jehanna’s taut stomach. “Why don’t you show him your body, and make sure it meets with his approval?”

Jehanna blushed, but she slowly turned to face Ailita and looked back at John over her shoulder. “My bottom’s a bit bigger and rounder than it was before. Do you prefer it like that?” she asked self-consciously.

John took that as an open invitation to touch her pert cheeks, and he cupped the pliant flesh, savouring the feel of her firm muscles. “You look magnificent.”

She groaned with mounting arousal as he massaged her body, then inhaled sharply when he parted her cheeks, exposing her ass to his hungry gaze. Jehanna’s skin was a rich chocolate complexion, flawlessly smooth and unblemished, but the muscle between that perfect rump was much darker, hinting at secret erotic pleasures.

“I prepared her for you, Master,” Ailita whispered, her hand slipping around Jehanna’s waist, before delving into the exposed crevice. She circled Jehanna’s lubricated anus with the pad of a fingertip, making her writhe at the intimate touch. “She’s been looking forward to this...”

“Why don’t you two get on the bed,” John suggested, as he reluctantly released the dusky beauty.

He watched them as he removed his clothes, relishing the sight of the two gorgeous girls intertwined on the covers. Ailita lay on her back, with Jehanna resting on top of her, their luscious bodies identical in shape and proportions except for the startling contrast in skin-tone, and Ailita’s sinuous tail. The differences between them was even more pronounced with Ailita hugging her girlfriend, her pale limbs wrapping around Jehanna in a comforting embrace.

When he’d stripped off, John joined them on the bed, taking position between their splayed thighs. Ailita reached down and separated Jehanna’s cheeks again, allowing him to guide the head of his cock so that it was pressed right against the tight knot of muscle.

“Relax,” John said, stroking Jehanna’s tensed back. “You know I’d never hurt you. Your body’s been changed to let you take me without any discomfort, so there’s nothing to be anxious about.”

Jehanna turned to smile at him over her shoulder. “That’s easy for you to say. Have you seen the size of that monster?”

He laughed with her, then gently brushed his fingers down her spine. “There won’t be any pain, I promise.”

“I trust you,” she said softly, and he could see all the tension ease from her body.

Jehanna relaxed in Ailita’s arms, and the Nymph gave him an encouraging nod. He pushed forward, feeling her sphincter stretch impossibly wide to take him, then Jehanna let out a low groan as she took the throbbing head into her body. The dark ring tightened around his girth once the crown was inside, and John paused to give her a moment to adjust.

“Did that hurt?” he asked with concern.

She slowly shook her head. “It just feels really weird to be stretched this much. Give me a moment to get used to it.”

John massaged her back, patiently waiting as Jehanna slowly gyrated her hips, letting herself adjust to being penetrated this way for the first time.

“Okay, I’m ready,” she finally said, giving him a reassuring smile.

John placed his hands on her hips and held her in place, using his grip for leverage as he sank several more inches into the indescribably snug passage.

“Oh my god...” Jehanna groaned, her fists clenching the sheets.

“Do you need me to stop or pull out?” John asked considerately.

She shook her head again. “No... give me all of it. You were right... it doesn’t hurt a bit.”

He pushed deeper and deeper, watching her writhe in Ailita’s arms, Jehanna panting in disbelief as he impaled her with his thick cock. John only stopped when she taken his entire length, his quad nestled up against her soaked pussy.

“You feel huge...” she groaned, her muscles flexing as she tried to adjust to his size.

John pulled back a couple of inches, then slowly hilted himself again, triggering a drawn-out moan of pleasure from Jehanna. He repeated the same motion several more times, until he was pistoning deep into her belly at a slow and measured pace. Jehanna stopped writhing around and carefully matched his methodical tempo, just moving an inch or so, but more than enough to get the feeling of being repeatedly stuffed full.

He was watching Jehanna intently for any signs of distress, when he suddenly remembered there was another girl in bed with him. Ailita made eye-contact over Jehanna’s shoulder and rewarded him with a sultry smile, her feline eyes hooded with pleasure. She watched his face intently for a long moment, then turned to nuzzle into Jehanna, seeking out her lips for a kiss.

The Terran girl eagerly responded, and John slowed his pace even further so that he wouldn’t break their passionate clinch. They looked spectacular together, each of them a stunningly beautiful woman in her own right, but complementing each other perfectly as a couple. He watched them with a sense of profound satisfaction, enjoying seeing the warmth and tenderness they shared with that loving kiss.

He couldn’t wait to repeat this with them when the fighting was finally over and the Progenitor war was won. Ailita’s tummy would be swelling with a litter of nymphs, and Jehanna just starting to show as his baby grew in her womb, each girl gazing at him with devotion as he alternated between them. The fantasy was almost as exciting as the real thing, and John’s cock throbbed in the snug grip of Jehanna’s tight passage.

A mewling cry drew his attention to Ailita, just as her eyes rolled back in her head, and she arched her back as she climaxed in the most powerful response she’d ever displayed before. She ground against Jehanna, the slick pressure against her clit more than enough stimulation for the Indian temptress to follow suit. They both cried out in ecstasy, and John had a first row seat as the two girls rode out their climax together.

It took a while for Jehanna to recover, then she gave him a languid smile, her adoring gaze already reflecting deep satisfaction. She raised herself up from being sprawled across Ailita, and gave John a wanton look under her long lashes.

“Just focus on you now,” she murmured breathlessly. “I came so hard, I can barely think straight.”

He leaned down so his muscular chest brushed against her back and whispered in her ear, “Are you sure? I love seeing you get off like that.”

She nodded, then ground her ass back against his groin. “I just want your cum now, then this will be perfect.”

John glanced over her shoulder at the comatose nymph. “I think we overloaded Ailita.”

Jehanna giggled, sending pleasant vibrations along his buried shaft. “She was loving every second of it.”

He patted her thigh and said, “Move to the side, let’s let her rest.”

She moved obediently with him, until Jehanna was kneeling on the covers, her heaving chest held upright by her slender arms. John knelt behind, her spectacular ass in his lap, with him leaning over her statuesque figure. She fit perfectly underneath him like that, the size difference between them emphasised by her submissive position.

“This feels so naughty,” she purred, writhing back against him. “I love having you covering me like this.”

“You feel amazing,” he agreed, covering her hands with his and interlacing their fingers together.

He picked up the pace again, sliding in and out of her well-lubricated passage, drawing appreciative moans from Jehanna every time he pushed in up to the hilt. She arched her back, improving the angle, and letting him take her with longer strokes.

“I’m getting close,” John warned her, nuzzling into her ear.

“Me too!” she panted, turning to give him a steamy kiss.

He gazed into her eyes as he pounded her from behind, Jehanna’s mouth falling open as she whimpered in ecstasy. It felt like his quad was about to burst, a dull ache in his four balls growing more insistent by the second. She was pinned in place underneath him, the gorgeous girl waiting with breathless anticipation for him to fill her with his load.

His orgasm swept over him in a rush, and he pumped a long spurt of cum into her depths. Jehanna felt the first splash deep inside her stomach, the warm jet of semen soothing her heated passage, and triggering her own climax. Her feminine moans of pleasure were music to John’s ears, and he nuzzled into her raven mane as he filled her swelling belly.

They undulated together in perfect harmony, with Jehanna’s clenching cheeks doing their best to milk John dry. He was panting too by the time he’d finally finished, and he had to fight the temptation to just sag down on her back to recover. Uncoupling their intertwined fingers, John reached down to stroke her rotund stomach, the skin stretched taut around the pints of cum filling her to the limit.

“You’re such a good girl,” he whispered in her ear. “That was incredible.”

Jehanna cooed in delight, enjoying his earnest praise as much as his soothing caress. They stayed together like that for a while, just savouring the afterglow after the passionate coupling. John closed his eyes and relaxed, until he felt a light touch on his shoulder to get his attention. When he reopened his eyes, he saw Ailita was kneeling beside him, a sleepy look of contentment on her pretty face.

“Shall I feed her now, Master?” she asked, glancing meaningfully at the dusky brunette’s rounded abdomen.

He nodded and carefully eased back, drawing a weak moan of protest from Jehanna. “Can you share it between you? I want to be connected to you both.”

Her gaze softened and she gave him a loving smile. “Of course, Master.”

When John pulled out, the Nymph was ready to take his place. She gently pushed Jehanna forward, so her cum-stuffed stomach was resting on the bed and her gloriously perky ass was high in the air. Ailita wasted no time in pressing her face between Jehanna’s cheeks, and she began to enthusiastically suck the cum out of the whimpering Terran girl.

John slumped back on the bed, and lay beside Jehanna, stroking her hair as she writhed on Ailita’s probing tongue. Her soft gasps and low moans were like music to his ears, and he soon dozed off, serenaded to sleep by the alluring sounds of her final orgasm of the night.

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Emandra Holaris walked purposefully along the corridor, wracking her brain for a plausible excuse for her behaviour. She was heading towards the Maliri Queen’s quarters, and any reason would suffice, other than admitting the unpleasant truth. The simple fact was that she was feeling lonely, and the House Valaden matriarch was the closest person she had to a friend.

The guards outside recognised Emandra immediately, and made no move to stop her from entering Edraele’s quarters. The Maliri Queen had given her circle of matriarchs an open invitation to visit at any time, and Emandra was relieved that she didn’t have to wait outside for her presence to be announced. The guards opened the door as she approached, the crystal portal spiralling up into the ceiling, so Emandra acknowledged their courtesy with a nod and breezed inside.

She was pleased to find Edraele in the very first room. The beautiful monarch was sitting demurely on one of the chaise longues in the foyer of her suite, almost as if she was waiting for her arrival. Emandra’s relief at finding Edraele so quickly was tempered by discovering that she wasn’t alone, and Vestele Waephyra was already keeping her company.

“Welcome, Emandra,” Edraele said, her tone warm and inviting. “This is a pleasant surprise.”

Vestele turned in her seat and beamed a friendly but rather vacant smile. “Hello, Emandra. How wonderful to see you.”

Emandra snorted and eyed her rival matriarch with suspicion. She felt an irrational surge of anger when she saw the happy demeanour of the House Waephyra matriarch, something about the cheerful noblewoman grating on her nerves.

“Really, Vestele?” she snapped caustically. “I don’t recall you ever being pleased to see me before. Do you recall when I stole the Tanelia System from you? You had some very colourful things to say about that.”

The taunt passed her lips reflexively, but instead of being glad to see Vestele’s uncomfortable expression, she felt a pang of guilt. Vestele didn’t respond with anger, she just looked hurt and sad, like a kicked Darshee puppy.

“I was very angry and said some mean things,” Vestele said with regret. “Please accept my sincere apology for my rude behaviour.”

Emandra stared at her in disbelief, unsure if Vestele was being genuine or scathingly sarcastic. Before she could respond, Edraele cleared her throat, drawing both of her guests’ attention.

“That was very considerate, Vestele,” Edraele said with an encouraging smile. “I’m sure Emandra greatly appreciates your apology. Isn’t that right, Emandra?”

Despite the Maliri monarch’s benign words and friendly tone, there was no mistaking the flinty edge to her uncompromising glare. Emandra was quite certain that disagreeing with Edraele would be a particularly bad idea.

“It was a long time ago,” Emandra said awkwardly. “Let’s just leave any arguments in the past.”

“I’m so glad you said that!” Vestele gushed, beaming at her in delight. “Then we can all be friends.”

Emandra walked warily around the House Waephyra matriarch and sat down in one of the vacant seats, where she glared at the other Maliri noblewoman with suspicion.

Sensing how uncomfortable Vestele was making her guest, Edraele reached out to gently touch the matriarch’s arm. “Why don’t you prepare yourself for bed, Vestele? It’s important you get plenty of rest. Luna and I will join you later.”

Vestele nodded obediently, then rose from her seat. “Good evening, Emandra. I hope you sleep well and have nice dreams.”

“Bye,” the other matriarch muttered, then watched with a scowl as Vestele glided serenely out of the room.

When she turned back to look at Edraele, she realised the Maliri Queen had been watching her the entire time that Vestele was departing. Emandra slumped in her chair, feeling self-conscious under that close scrutiny, and sensing she was being judged.

“Was it really necessary to try to antagonise Vestele?” Edraele asked, raising an eyebrow.

It was tempting try to lie her way out of trouble, but Emandra dropped eye contact and quietly replied, “It came out before I could stop myself. She just... irritated me.”

Rather than chastise her, Edraele looked at her curiously. “And why was that?”

Emandra didn’t want to admit that it was because she was jealous of the other matriarch for taking Edraele’s attention. “Because she’s a braindead moron!” she blurted out. “And everybody is acting like she’s normal!”

“That’s correct, Emandra... she died,” Edraele said quietly. “The old Vestele is gone, and it will take some time for this new version to adjust to her developing personality. You’re taking out your misplaced anger on someone who has all the sophistication of a child.”

Sinking lower in her chair after Edraele’s reproach, Emandra felt a flicker of guilt, but she couldn’t help still feeling angry and resentful towards the House Waephyra monarch.

Edraele watched the other matriarch with her perceptive violet gaze, as Emandra steamed in silence. She gave her a minute for the bad mood to pass, but it became clear that was not going to happen. “What’s really vexing you, Emandra?”

The older noblewoman was planning to remain silent, but then blurted out, “It’s just not fair!”

“What isn’t fair?” the Maliri Queen asked, her tone measured and curious.

“Vestele did just as many questionable things as me, but she gets to sweep her past under the rug, while I have to suffer all this guilt! Where’s the fairness in that?! I have terrible nightmares every night over the things I’ve done, while Vestele doesn’t seem to have a care in the world. She’s as happy as Kali Loraleth and all the rest of her insufferable clique of simpering imbeciles!”

“You shouldn’t make the mistake of conflating happiness with a lack of intellect, Emandra,” Edraele noted, frowning in disapproval. “Baen’thelas has been carefully nurturing those girls, and they are all significantly brighter and more capable than any of the previous generation of matriarchs.”

Emandra felt the sting of that backhanded insult, then she grimaced, knowing that it was probably the truth. Edraele had been quite open about the many benefits to be gained by closely aligning themselves with the new leader of the Maliri Protectorate, and the Young Matriarchs were about as close as they could get.

“Does that include you as well, Edraele?” she retorted, unable to resist pointing out that the Queen was also from that previous generation.

Appearing amused rather insulted, Edraele nodded. “I possessed a self-serving Machiavellian cunning, but the Young Matriarchs are superior in raw intellect, which is amplified by their willingness to work in a collaborative team.”

Emandra let out a derisive snort. “Preposterous! I don’t believe that for a second. Baen’thelas might have made those girls brighter than they ever were before, but they’re still nowhere near your league. And what are you talking about with regard to collaboration? You’re the one that brought all of us together!”

Edraele gave her an indulgent smile. “I was referring to my prior incarnation. In many ways, my circumstances are not dissimilar from Vestele’s, and I was also a ‘braindead moron’ when Baen’thelas rebuilt my personality after my death.”

The House Holaris matriarch cringed with embarrassment, realising that the insults she’d been throwing at Vestele could easily have applied to Edraele as well. She suddenly frowned in consternation, wondering if she was now going to face the Queen’s ire.

Edraele’s musical laughter echoed around the Sitting Room. “Don’t worry, Emandra, I wasn’t offended.”

Emandra felt relieved, but still couldn’t get past her resentment towards Vestele. “I just don’t understand, Edraele. You talk about how benign and generous Baen’thelas is, but why does he make me suffer, when Vestele is immediately forgiven her past indiscretions. It would’ve been kinder to just wipe my mind, and let me start over like you did.”

“Baen’thelas isn’t a sadist, and he takes no pleasure in you atoning for your crimes,” Edraele corrected her. “However, he doesn’t want to feel like he’s rewarding you with a plethora of priceless gifts, when your previous behaviour was nearly as atrocious as mine.”

The other Maliri was about to protest about Vestele, but Edraele raised a hand to interrupt her objection.

“Wait, I hadn’t finished. Vestele is walking a different path to you, but it’s one that has painful hazards of its own. She might not feel guilt about her previous acts of cruelty in the same way you do now, but when she’s reached a certain level of development, Vestele will have to come to terms with some very unpleasant facts. I might not be the old version of Edraele who tortured her daughters, but I retained all the horrific memories of those events.”

She turned her slender azure hand back and forth, studying it with disdain. “These very fingers gripped the hilt of a neural lash and flayed the skin off my daughter’s back. The mere thought of it turns my stomach and fills me with horror... but am I actually responsible? My mind was not present at the time, but my body certainly committed those acts, and my daughters are still reserved when they’re in my company.”

“Vestele will never be able to escape her notoriety, and her new personality must come to terms with the fact that she will always be associated with her previous incarnation. That’s a heavy burden to bear, especially when the new version of her is a good person, who is thoughtful, compassionate, and kind.”

“How is that any worse than what I’m having to endure?” Emandra muttered with resentment.

“You are the monster that hurt all those people... but you’ve chosen to atone for your crimes. You’ll always carry a degree of guilt with you, but that burden can be lightened considerably by the comfort of knowing that you’re walking a righteous path of redemption. Vestele will always have to struggle with her conscience over the terrible things her predecessor did. She’ll always wonder if she deserves any credit for being a good person, or if she’s not actually real, and any praise for her benevolent deeds really belongs to Baen’thelas.”

Emandra looked at her in surprise. “Is that how you feel, Edraele?”

The Maliri Queen leaned back against the Chaise Longue, a distant look in her eyes. “I know in my heart that I’m a good person, but I was literally made to be this way. I think there is special value in deliberately choosing to turn away from a life of cruelty and evil, even if you were bribed to do so by promises of immortality. I know that you’re suffering now, Emandra, but in some ways I envy you.”

The House Holaris matriarch went quiet as she considered everything she’d just heard. “Is it really worth all this trouble?” she finally asked, looking tired and vulnerable.

“Are you referring to the gift of eternal youth?” Edraele asked with a coy smile, before giving her a knowing look. “Or the virtue of leading a good life?”

Emandra hesitated then quietly replied, “It just doesn’t seem real. I see the Young matriarchs smiling and laughing with each other, and I keep expecting the vicious punchline to a cruel joke that sees one of them flee in tears. But it never comes.”

“That’s because you’ve never experienced love or friendship before,” Edraele said gently. “Once you’ve had that in your life, you’ll never be able to understand how you survived without it.”

The older matriarch slowly nodded, a flicker of hope in her eyes.

Edraele rose from her chair and walked over to a cabinet. “Would you care for a nightcap, Emandra? I feel we’ve earned it after such a heartfelt discussion.”

Emandra shook herself out of her reverie. “Yes, I would... as long as it’s none of that Valaden swill.”

The Maliri Queen turned and showed her guest the bottle, with the House Holaris crest embossed on the crystal. “It was a gift from a friend. I believe it should be acceptable to even your refined palette.”

“That was a fine vintage that year,” Emandra said gruffly, trying to conceal how touched she was at being referred to as the beautiful monarch’s friend.

Edraele returned with a pair of crystal goblets, then handed one over, and sat beside Emandra on the chaise longue. “To your good health and eternal happiness.”

“And to yours,” Emandra replied, dismissing a brief flicker of caution about the possibility of poison and taking a deep drink.

“Thank you for trusting me,” Edraele said with a warm smile, before sipping the drink herself. “You’re right, this is a delicious vintage.”

Emandra felt a pleasant warmth in her chest, and she knew from decades of experience that it wasn’t from the wine.

They sat quietly together, enjoying the delicate fragrance of the priceless beverage, until Edraele set aside her glass on the table. “Emandra, may I ask a favour from you?”

The House Holaris matriarch had to fight down nearly two centuries of well-earned suspicion, and the instinctive reaction to immediately refuse. “If it’s in my power,” she said grudgingly.

“I’d like you to take up Vestele’s offer,” Edraele requested, gazing into her eyes.

Emandra looked at her in confusion, trying to replay their brief conversation in her mind. “But I already accepted her apology?”

Edraele smiled and shook her head. “No, not that. She wants to be your friend.”

“What?!” Emandra sputtered, her lip curling in disgust.

The thought of spending more time than necessary with that vacuous bimbo was galling, and she opened her mouth to immediately deny her queen’s request.

Moving quickly, Edraele touched a finger to her lips. “Before you refuse, would you at least let me explain why?”

Emandra scowled, then reluctantly nodded. “It won’t change my decision.”

“There are two reasons. Would you like to hear the benevolent one, or the self-serving one?”

Painfully aware of their recent conversation, Emandra grimaced and muttered sullenly, “The benevolent reason.”

Edraele laughed and reached out to clasp her hand. “It’s so gratifying to see you embrace this new path of virtue with such heartfelt enthusiasm.”

Emandra’s temper flared, then she just as quickly realised how ridiculous it would be to get so angry over some gentle teasing. Encouraged by Edraele’s laughter, she chuckled herself, surprised at how nice that felt.

Giving her hand an affectionate squeeze, Edraele said, “I think building a friendship would be very good for both of you. You’re the only two surviving matriarchs from the previous generation, myself not included, which means you’ll have a lot in common. Neither of you are close to any of the other matriarchs, so I think some friendly companionship could be very rewarding and help you more quickly adjust to the new life you’ve chosen to lead.”

Torn with indecision, Emandra looked plaintively at the Maliri queen. “Can I be honest? Without fear of repercussion?”

“Please do. This is only a friendly request, you are under no obligation to agree.”

“The very idea of spending more time with Vestele makes me feel nauseous,” Emandra muttered sourly.

“Thank you for being honest. Can you at least appreciate that a friendship with her would benefit you both?” Edraele enquired with amusement.

She sighed and nodded. “I’m trying my best, Edraele... but there are limits. My answer is still no.”

“Fair enough,” Edraele said with a shrug. “Thank you for doing me the courtesy of listening.”

Emandra hesitated, her curiosity piqued. “What was the other reason? The self-serving one?”

Edraele gave her a wicked conspiratorial smile that sent a thrill down Emandra’s spine. “I was only going to remind you that Baen’thelas likes to breed us in pairs. Tsarra and Leena, Nyrelle and Valani, and as soon as he returns, Kali and Sarene. He beds Luna and me as a couple, and he plans to make Luna’s belly swell every time I’m blessed to carry his heirs.”

“Vestele... and m-me?” Emandra stammered, staring at her wide eyed.

Leaning closer, Edraele brushed her fingers across the noblewoman’s stomach, the touch sensual and arousing. “This is the fastest way to get what you want, Emandra. Two fully reformed elder matriarchs would be an irresistible temptation for Baen’thelas. Before you knew it, you’d have the gorgeous body of a fertile thirty-year-old, and his baby would be kicking in your womb.”

“Do you really mean it?” the noblewoman asked, shocked by the intriguing possibilities.

“When I said this reason was self-serving, I was referring to me,” Edraele confided with a gleam in her eyes. “I want the Council of Matriarchs to be John’s personal harem... his breeding stock of the most beautiful and gifted Maliri we have to offer. That includes you, Emandra. I want you to rebuild your House with his heirs, forging a dynasty that will shake the foundations of the galaxy.”

Awed by her Queen’s vision, Emandra could only nod in agreement. “I’ll do whatever you want. I’ll be Vestele’s friend if that’s what it takes.”

“That’s excellent news,” Edraele gushed, with a broad smile of satisfaction. “And I’ll do everything I can to help you get what you desire.”

Emandra grinned with excitement, then leaned forward herself and gave Edraele a tentative hug. “Thank you.”

They embraced for a long moment, then after they parted, Edraele rose to her feet. She held out her hand in invitation. “Join us for the night, Emandra. It’s lonely sleeping on your own.”

The older noblewoman stared at Edraele’s slender hand, knowing it represented an offer of close friendship. Only six months ago, she would have fought Edraele to the death, and now she trusted her implicitly. Emandra clasped her hand, and accepted her offer without any reservations.

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“How are you proceeding with evacuating the capital?” Kehlarissa asked, conversing with her planetary governor on a holo-screen.

The Maliri administrator looked tired, the bag under her eyes indicative of lack of sleep. “We commandeered all the ships in the system, and they’ve been evacuating civilians to planets that are furthest away from the border. Several abandoned cities on Venkarys are in the process of being re-inhabited, and we’ve started dispersing everyone we can’t evacuate off-planet to locations around the globe.”

“Excellent work, well done,” The House Venkalyn matriarch said, greatly pleased by their rapid progress. “What about construction of emergency bunkers in the cave networks?”

Nimeraeni grimaced with frustration. “With the rush to evacuate, it’s been difficult to locate engineers with the subterranean construction expertise we require. We’ve installed some rudimentary storage and living facilities so far, but transferring adequate supplies to outlast a planetary siege has been proceeding slower than I would have liked. We have managed to build signal dampeners on the surface though, which should confuse sensors and make it difficult to detect life-signs underground.”

Kehlarissa was surprised by the pang of sympathy she felt for the stressed governor. “It sounds like you’re doing the best you can under very trying circumstances. I greatly appreciate your efforts, Nimeraeni.”

The older woman appeared equally startled by the unfamiliar praise. “Thank you, Matriarch,” she stammered, before pulling herself together. “If all goes well, then we should be able to-”

She was interrupted by loud and insistent knocking, which seemed to be coming from her office door. Nimeraeni glanced that way in irritation, then opened her mouth to continue speaking, before the hammering got even louder.

“Go ahead. It sounds important,” Kehlarissa said, waving her away with a look of understanding.

“I sincerely apologise for the interruption,” the governor replied through gritted teeth.

Nimeraeni rose from her chair and stalked off-screen, leaving Kehlarissa staring at the back wall of the governor’s office.

The sun was starting to set over Venkarys, casting a russet orange glow over the planet’s capital city. Kehlarissa could see the lengthening shadows through the long windows, the shining spires reaching towards the sun’s diminishing light, as if pleading for the golden orb not to leave them in darkness. The House Venkalyn matriarch knew that if she was in the palace on her homeworld, she would have a spectacular view of the setting sun from her mother’s balcony.

Kehlarissa gazed away into the distance and allowed herself a wry smile. Even though Keishara Venkalyn was now dead, murdered by Kehlarissa’s own hands, it was hard not to still think of the Venkalyn palace as her mother’s domain. For over a century, Keishara had tortured and tormented her five daughters, and as the sole survivor of her House, Kehlarissa harboured plenty of mental scars from that abuse.

Movement in the distance drew her attention, and Kehlarissa focused on the busy skyline that was visible through the window. Soaring between the golden towers of Venkarys were hundreds of hover vehicles, their path from the city illuminated by the bright lights of floating nav buoys. The capital’s sky-lanes were bustling with more activity than they’d seen in centuries, as the Maliri citizens hurried to evacuate the ancient metropolis.

The governor suddenly reappeared on the holo-screen, blocking Kehlarissa’s view of the city. Nimeraeni’s prior anger at the interruption had evaporated and she now looked deeply fearful.

“What it is?” Kehlarissa asked insistently. “What did they want?”

“I’d blocked all incoming calls... so we wouldn’t be interrupted,” the governor stammered, her face ashen. “We’ve picked up unknown sensor contacts on the outer markers. The Galkirans are coming!”

Kehlarissa cursed under her breath. She’d been desperately hoping for more time. “Get as many people away from the cities as you can. You need to work out exactly how many people you can hide underground, then allocate precisely that number to the cave networks. And try to do it discreetly; you don’t want a panicked mob of civilians fleeing to the caves and drawing an invading force there.”

“Yes, matriarch,” the governor replied, looking calmer now that she had stern orders to follow.

\*Is something wrong, my dear?\* Edraele asked with concern. \*You seem greatly disturbed.\*

“I’ve got to go,” Kehlarissa declared, raising from her chair. “Keep me informed of any new developments.”

The governor acknowledged her orders with a nod, then the House Venkalyn matriarch abruptly ended the call and ran from her office.