

Planet 457-23, GFDate 4034:0719

"My favorite part of this so far was when Draygon had her," Melissa giggled, spinning her chair around so she could look at the woman she had come to think of as her mother. "It wasn't as informative as the bit with the kaayes, but it just looked *fun*."

"Yes, dear," whispered Madeline, her head bowed, her eyes closed. The footage the clone had shown her would stay with her for the rest of her life. "Perhaps you would care to try it...?" She hoped she sounded sincere.

Soft footsteps trailed over to where she sat.

A warm hand cradled her face, lifted her chin.

"Mother, she survived that because I wanted her to," Melissa said, kneeling, taking Madeline's hands in her own. "I want my first time to be with someone special. Someone special. That's who my first time should be with."

Melissa was looking in her eyes, Madeline realized, but not looking at her – rather, she was staring at the reflection of the screens she had abandoned.

The Hunter was there.

*Samus Aran.*

The two of them and the mewling slave curled at their feet had watched the aftermath of her battle with Draygon. The Hunter had gone to the smoking corpse and used stones to batter out a tooth, used intestine and bark to craft herself a fine knife, leaves to make a slight covering for herself.

A week went by.

She'd explored every inch of the coastline before returning to the cave that the Draygon clone had been resting in. She'd been cautious in her approach, so very careful.

Nothing else was waiting for her inside. She'd moved in, discovered hidden passages, a whole network of caves. She'd been in there for months now, mapping them out, learning the paths down in the dark. She'd seen and avoided the many kago and shaktools and zoomers that littered the caves, conserving herself, returning to the coastline to rest before pressing on.

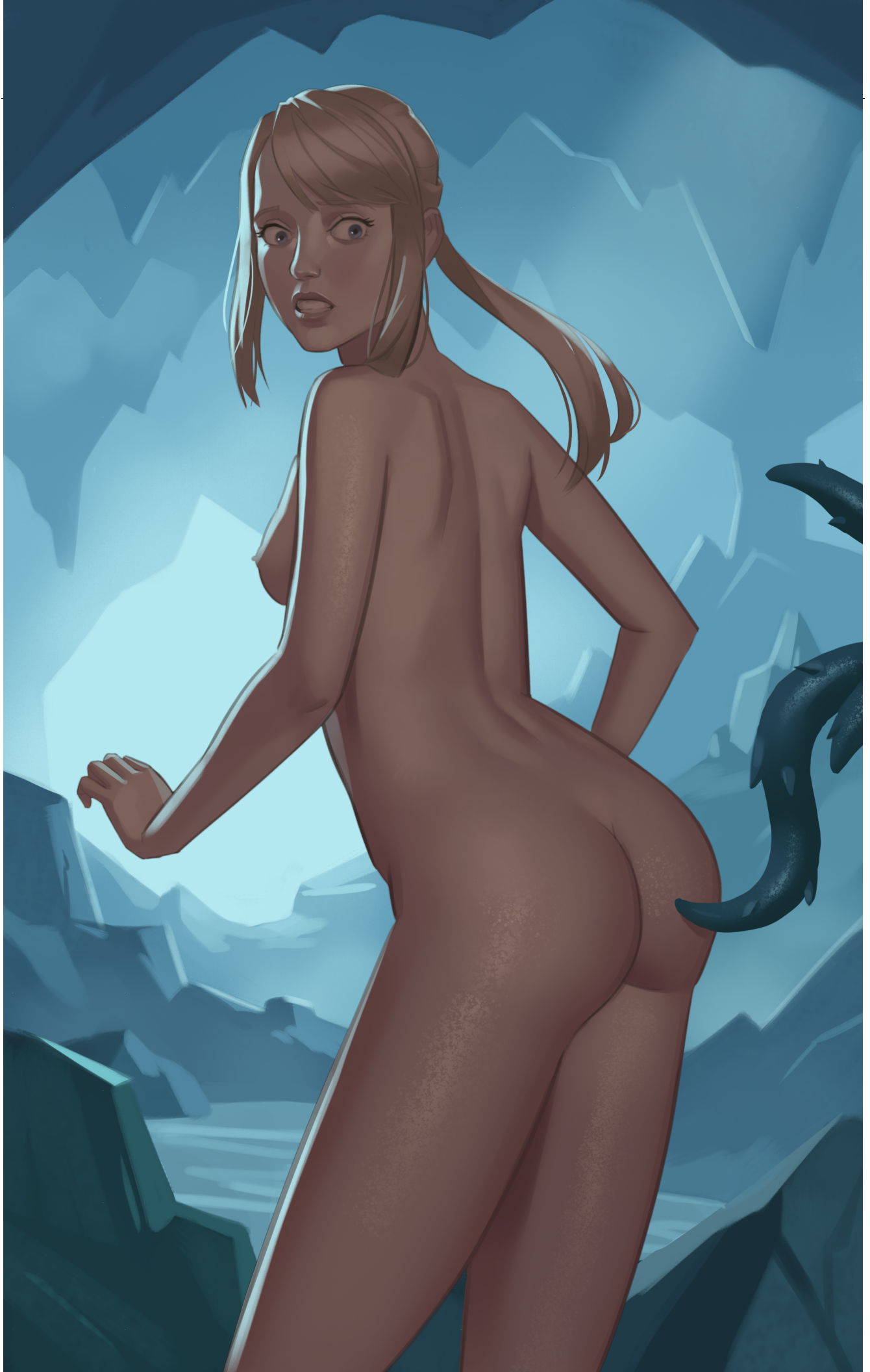
When she could bring herself to look at the screen, it was always with awe. Samus never gave up, never slowed down, always kept a steady and determined pace. She risked a glance now, whimpering when she saw Melissa's expression change.

"She's not your daughter, mother," Melissa murmured. "We share blood, but you and I share souls. There's more than one kind of genetics, right? Right? I know there is. Do you think she'd bored? She looks bored to me. We could move the kaayes in. Do you think we should? Yes. Let's get on with it. It's time to move. Time to move."

Melissa giggled, pulling Madeline into a warm embrace.

Below them, a once confident man whimpered and writhed and Madeline wondered how long it would be before Samus Aran joined him.





*Planet Daibon, GFDate 4034:0331*

"Come in." Chairman Keaton leaned back in his chair as his secretary entered. She was properly cowed now, he noticed. He waited for her to kneel, studied her. "What is it?"

"The press is expecting a statement," the woman said, her voice hushed but steady. There was protocol between them; she was cowed but not afraid. Something about that tickled him. "I've arrange a conference and just wanted to confirm the date with you."

"What is this one about?" Keaton asked, rubbing his right temple with one finger; the pain a solid comfort. She brought him up to speed. He nodded, listening, asking the right questions and told her he'd get back to her. "Any word on the Hunter?"

"Commander Higgs hasn't said."

"You heard from him when...?"

"Two or three weeks ago."

"Alright, tell him I need an update." Keaton grimaced, dismissing her with a wave of his hand. "I need to know if the Kriken Empire is making noise or actually ready to go to war."

The secretary nodded and scampered away, but something caught his eye.

"What is that?" Keaton asked. "The plant with the fruit?"

"Oh, my aunt sent it to me. She was visiting WD1-967 and thought I might like one. They're becoming very popular because they require very little care. Do you want one?"

There was something strange, Keaton thought, about her eyes when she made the offer. He licked the lips of both mouths and prepared to answer.

*Planet 457-23, GFDate ?????:????*

It was slow going. The caves were lit by small pools of glowing liquid on the ground and fungus on the walls that offered more shadow than light. This wouldn't have bothered her at all if she'd had her visor but, things being what they were, she had to take her time and let her eyes adjust to the mostly dark that surrounded her.

She had no idea how long she'd been down here, creeping along and avoiding detection, mapping out the whole of the caverns. There were some beautiful sights down here, stunted forests that grew from the light of the liquid. She wondered, vaguely, if the liquid was some sort of life that transferred sunlight all down it's length.

The thoughts helped her pass the time.

Zoomers roamed in small packs down here, climbing the fruit that fell from the trees and devouring what fell. Samus noted that the fruit was similar to the fruit-eyes she'd seen outside, another iteration of the monsters that had tried to subdue her mind back along the coast. She looked away whenever they glanced in her direction, shot them and left them for the small spiked insects to eat.

There were smoothed holes carved into the stone around her. She used them to climb up and down ledges, always careful to make sure nothing was in them. Nothing ever was. It was getting boring, really.

She was letting her guard down.

– RELAX –

She wasn't sure if the thought was hers or not. She spent a moment, closed her eyes, took a deep breath. One of the sickly eye-fruit was hovering above her. She looked at it, grimaced, shot it, waited. Nothing in the cave seemed different. It never did after she shot something. Sighing, she climbed the wall she'd been ascending.

*There has to be a way out of this place, Samus thought. How am I going to drive everything here to extinction if I can't find whoever made those shaktools?* The thought made her smile, reminded her of the things she had experienced outside of the cave, back in the light.

Unbeknownst to her, the thinking of those things made her hips roll.

– WANT – DESERVE – NEED – KNEEL –

Gritting her teeth, she took a moment to claim her thoughts back before glaring around herself. Four of the fruit-eyes were hiding in the shadows, all of them looking at her. She shot all of them, taking a moment to catch her breath and watching as the minnows in the water below fed on her victims.

Finally, rested, Samus shook her head to keep focused and ignored the fullness she felt settle between her legs. She kept on climbing until she crested the latest ledge, peeking over the rock.

A kago rested there.

She spent a full minute looking at it, trying to decide if it was a threat to her or not. Kago were traditionally non-hostile, but her experiences along the coast had made her wary of everything on this world.

*Let's see if I can do this without the scanner, she thought, trying to ignore the feelings of irritation that rose up in her. Kago are hive insects. They attach their hives to deep structures, are herbivores and scavengers, and don't typically come after people unless bothered.* She muttered a quiet prayer under her breath, an oath she'd picked up while serving under Adam, and pulled herself up over the ridge.

The kago did nothing.

Samus paused, staring at it, waiting.

A green cage made of super-dense material, protecting the softer red membranes inside. A series of webs suspended the pulsating red, winged-spider like creatures crawling along the length of both. She tensed, waiting.

Nothing happened.

Sighing, she moved on and – STOP – TURN – SHOOT – pivoted, turning to shoot at the eye-fruit that had floated up after her, their commands battering her psychic defenses and trying to force her to shoot the Kago. She managed to jerk her arm away, wasting the shot, aiming instead at the damned hypnotic creatures that were trying to control her.

Those three shots didn't miss.

One of the eye fruits splattered down onto the kago.

*Shit.*

Spiders swarmed out of the membrane, crawling onto the cage, a buzzing echoing in the corridor around her as they began to take flight. She wasted a moment staring at them before turning to

run, retreating to the next ledge, hauling herself up. She glanced back, down, saw the spiders climb into one of the holes in the wall and managed to move her hand just as they came out of another.

Jumping down, she surveyed her situation: flying spiders everywhere, leaving trails of silk behind them. They hadn't been much of a threat to her when she'd had her armor, but now? Now she was not so sure. Setting her shoulders, she fired a couple test shots into the swarming mass to no effect.

*Knife's not going to make much difference here, either,* she thought, biting her lip. The kago were tightening their circle, their silk weaving into a cage all around her. Her eyes widened as she understood what they meant to do to her and she shot at the web, running forward and cutting through the hole she'd made with her knife, seeking to escape.

They had a second weave waiting just outside the first one. She nearly fell into it, managed to get her pistol up in time, managed to shoot a hole and cut as she rolled, freeing herself. The ledge she'd come up was thirty feet away and she sprinted for it.

A zoomer came up over the ledge. She grit her teeth, rolled back and fired, knocking it off the ledge. Glancing behind her, she saw that the kago were chasing her, were nearly on her, but she had plenty of time to – *DROP – KNEEL – STOP –*

The gun fell from her hand but she managed to hold onto the knife. By the time she was moving again the kago had reached her, not bothering to circle this time. Their weave fell on her, bound her. She thrashed and fought, trying to free herself but – *STOP – STOP – STOP –* another eye-fruit had made its way up, its commands slowing her responses.

The kago bound her, lifted her into the air, a mighty buzzing filling her ears as thousands of the spiders added their weaves to the net that bound her and carried her back to where their hive lay waiting and there was nothing she could do to stop them...

