Three Square Meals Ch. 153

The Officers’ Lounge was abuzz with chatter when John led Calara inside, as the entire crew were already gathered near the dining table. When they entered, Alyssa hurried over to greet them both with a warm hug.

“I felt how close you two were... it was wonderful,” she gushed, looking at them both with love shining in her cerulean eyes.

“I’m a very lucky guy,” John agreed, giving the blonde and brunette an affectionate squeeze.

\*Thank you for cheering Calara up,\* Alyssa said, her voice filled with gratitude. \*I knew you’d be able to help her in exactly the right way.\*

\*It was a team effort,\* he said magnanimously. \*I know you care about her just as much as I do.\*

Alyssa let out a happy sigh, and if anything, the look she gave him was even more adoring.

“Would you like a drink, John?” Rachel asked. “Can I tempt you with a Whiskey? Or a glass of wine?”

“Better make mine a fruit juice,” he replied. “I’m sparring with Luna later this evening.”

“I told Faranise that you’ve developed a real taste for Liakas berries,” Edraele said as she glided over to join them. “The devious little minx looked quite happy with herself.”

“They make me think of her every time,” he agreed, as he accepted a glass from Rachel. He took a sip and couldn’t resist a fond smile.

“Very sneaky,” Irillith said in admiration, as the twins walked over to the group accompanied by Auralei.

“I see you three have finally met,” John said to the trio. “I hope there were no fireworks.”

“There were... but only the good kind,” Tashana said as she gave the Larathyran an affectionate sideways hug.

Auralei nodded as she smiled at the twins. “After getting to know Edraele, I expected her daughters to be beautiful and kind, but I was still very pleasantly surprised.”

“She really is quite charming, Baen’thelas,” Tashana said, beaming back at her. “I’m so glad we were able to make a good first impression with no antipathy between us.”

Neither Tashana nor Irillith made any mention of the dark history between them and Edraele, for which the Maliri matriarch looked tremendously relieved. John realised that by thinking about it, Auralei would have heard his thoughts, but when he darted a quick glance at her, she didn’t look surprised in the slightest.

\*I told her everything, John,\* Edraele said softly. \*She’s part of our family now and there should be no secrets between us.\*

Auralei slipped her hand into Edraele’s and gave her a supportive smile.

John looked at the matriarchs with admiration. “It’s amazing to see you two becoming friends. I know it wasn’t easy for either of you; I was touched that your loyalty to me overrode your natural instincts to fight each other.” He reached out to gently cup their faces and said, “I’m very proud of you both.”

Edraele let out a happy sigh, while Auralei’s eyes welled up with emotion.

“Take it easy, handsome,” Alyssa said with a fond smile. “She’s not used to glowing praise from a father-figure.”

The girls all laughed as John rolled his eyes.

“Dinner’s ready!” Sakura called out to them, saving John from any more teasing.

They all took their usual places at the dining table, but shifted down one space to allow Auralei and Edraele to sit on either side of John. He held the chairs out for his guests before they sat down, with the Larathyran watching how Edraele responded, before following her lead when it was her turn.

“It’s old Terran etiquette,” Alyssa explained. “Terran men are bigger and stronger than their women, so it was consider good manners to take care of the fairer sex.”

Auralei blushed, but looked thrilled. “What a lovely custom. Terra sounds like a fascinating place.”

“I’ll have to take you there someday,” John said as he sat down himself. “You should visit Valaden as well. Their capital, Melfalas, is a beautiful city.”

“I’d love to!” she exclaimed, her eyes lighting up at the prospect.

Sakura and her numerous helpers began placing dishes on the table and conversation died out as the girls all admired the exotic food on display.

“That looks like Szechuan chicken!” John said in surprise. “I didn’t know you could cook Chinese food?”

“I couldn’t until recently. I’ve been splitting my time between the dojo and the kitchen,” Sakura explained as she placed a platter of vegetable spring rolls on the table. “I figured as the only Asian girl on the crew, I had an obligation to represent all East Asian cultures, not just Japan.”

“You’ve got to give her props for embracing the clichés,” Rachel said, as she placed a big bowl of chicken Chow Mein on the table.

Dana picked up a lightly-battered King prawn, and dipped it in the red sweet and sour sauce, then took an experimental bite. “Holy crap!” she exclaimed, her eyes widening. “This tastes incredible!”

Sakura bowed and said, “Qǐng nín yòngcān. That means ‘enjoy your meal’.”

Everybody took that as their cue to tuck in, and there was plenty of light-hearted banter as they shared out the dozens of dishes between them.

“You have to teach me how to prepare all this,” John said in admiration. “It tastes as authentic as the dishes I’ve had in any of the best Chinese restaurants I’ve visited.”

“I’d be happy to,” Sakura said, smiling happily at the unanimous praise she was receiving for their meal.

John noticed that despite enjoying the food, his Chief Engineer wasn’t in her usual upbeat mood. After they’d all finished eating, he asked, “How’s the diagnostic work going, Dana?”

She blew out her breath and pouted. “It’s kicking my ass.”

“What’s the problem?”

“That’s just it! There isn’t any!” she blurted out, scowling in exasperation. “I’ve spent the last few hours crawling down maintenance ducts and checking all the connections between the Null-Inertia Gyroscope and the Wormhole Generator, but it’s been a total bust. The devices check out, the power-couplings check out, everything’s working just fine!”

“Maybe it’s something else? Could you be getting any interference from any other ship components?” John suggested. “What about the Singularity Generator room for the Singularity Driver? That’s definitely not standard Progenitor hardware.”

“Well the generator room isn’t anywhere near either the of the other devices, so it’s a real long shot,” she said, tapping a finger on her chin. “I guess it’s worth checking out though. It could be something really random causing interference with the wormhole stabilisation... even though the sensors all say that it was performing within expected parameters.”

“We’re all willing to help, so just let us know if you need any assistance,” John offered.

“Thanks, but I’ll be okay,” she said with a strained smile. “I’m just not used to something I’ve built screwing up like this.”

“Well we built everything exactly to spec, so if anyone’s to blame, then it’s me for giving you dodgy schematics,” John said with a rueful frown. “We’ve always assumed that all the blueprints I inherited were perfectly accurate, but one to many knocks to the head screwed this up?”

She gave him an indulgent smile. “I actually thought of that already, but we used a schematic already pre-loaded into the Soulforge. Our Wormhole Generator is an exact replica of the one in Larn’kelnar’s dreadnought.”

“Aside from the colour,” Alyssa interjected.

“That’s true, ours looks much more stylish,” Dana said with a smirk. “But I don’t think a few swirls of green and blue have much of an effect on wormhole stability.”

“Yes, but the negative psychic aura from all those tormented thralls might,” Alyssa said patiently.

Dana gave her a sceptical frown. “I thought of that too... but generating a wormhole is just an incredibly complex feat of astrophysics. I refuse to believe that you need to use psychic powers to create a stable wormhole.”

“I can take a look if you want?” Alyssa offered. “Check your sums add up.”

The redhead stuck out her tongue. “There’s nothing wrong with my sums!”

Alyssa paused for a moment, then asked gently,“Are you sure?”

Dana hesitated, suddenly looking uncertain. “If I can’t find the problem by tomorrow morning and the Wormhole Generator fucks up again, then yeah... I’m going to need your help.”

“Sure, Sparks,” the blonde agreed. “I hope you figure it out for yourself.”

“Thanks,” Dana said gratefully.

“If this is turning into a status update meeting, I’ve finished the VI for the spider mines,” Irillith informed everybody. “I’ve transferred all the data files to the Engineering Bay, so you can upload it to the drones whenever they’re ready.”

“That was quick,” John said, suitably impressed.

She shook her head modestly. “It was trivial really. The VI’s are only very simplistic guided automatons.”

“I’ll swing by my Workshop and check it out after dinner,” Dana said, before glancing at Jade. “I can go through the schematics with you and your sisters if you’re still up for helping?”

“Jade’s coming with me to watch the sparring session,” John interjected.

Dana laughed and gave him a knowing look. “Right, I forgot you’d made plans with Luna.”

“We’d still like to help,” Neysa offered, as her sisters nodded in agreement.

Before the redhead could reply, Daphne spoke up across the intercom. “I believe assistance from the Nymphs is unnecessary. The Collective has already begun mass production of the Spider Mines. Might I suggest Neysa, Leylira, Betrixa, and Marika be more gainfully employed with pilot and gunnery training in the Raptor?”

The Nymphs looked at each other in surprise, then Betrixa broke into an eager grin. “That sounds like much more fun to me!”

“Do we have your permission, Master?” Marika asked, the tabby catgirl waiting patiently for his decision.

“Hold on a sec,” John said, before glancing up at the internal camera. “We need to build a lot of spider mines, Daphne. Are you sure the Collective can handle it on your own?”

“We have successfully built seventeen arachnid chassis, installed Irillith’s VI, and primed them with Maliri ordnance. Spider Mines eighteen to twenty-one are mid-construction, and the maintenance bots are awaiting your completion of the next set of Crystal Alyssium casings.”

“Goddamn you guys are awesome,” Dana said, shaking her head in admiration.

“They’re like the shoemaker’s elves,” Jehanna said with a wry smile.

Dana suddenly looked at John in surprise. “So you’re still shaping parts right now?”

“I’ve already learned your schematics and all the parts we need, so I’m just pushing the metal into each distinct shape. After making the prototype, it’s just simple repetition.”

“Nice! You’re like a psychic Mass Fabricator!” she exclaimed, her blue eyes sparkling with glee.

He laughed, then said, “It sounds like the Collective is doing an incredible job already. If the Nymphs would prefer to work on their piloting and gunnery skills, that’s fine by me.”

“Yay!” Betrixa crowed, skipping around the table to kiss him on the cheek.

“I’ll go with them,” Alyssa volunteered. “I might be able to teach them a thing or two.”

“I’ll come along too,” Calara chimed in. “I could use the distraction.”

“What about everyone else?” John asked, looking around the table. “Anything interesting to share?”

“I want to review the script for out meeting with the Young Matriarchs tomorrow,” Jehanna replied.

“Is there an issue with it?” John asked with concern.

She shook her head and grinned. “No, not at all. I think it’s going to be rating’s gold, but I’m not taking any chances.”

“Would you have a drink with us after dinner, Auralei?” Irillith asked their newest recruit. “My sister and I would like to get to know you better.”

“I really would, thank you,” Auralei replied, eagerly accepting their invitation.

“It was awful hiding in Paragon suits and not being able to say hello to you earlier,” Tashana said with a playful pout.

The Larathyran Empress frowned in confusion. “Why weren’t you affected when you saw me?”

“I fed them earlier, while you were sleeping,” John explained.

“They saw me while I was asleep?” she asked, her eyes widening in alarm.

“We were very careful not to expose you to danger,” he hastily added. “I had the girls on standby to help subdue Irillith if necessary, and she only got to see you through a reinforced Crystal Alyssium window.”

“Don’t worry, you looked adorable,” Irillith said, sensing the real reason why Auralei was feeling self-conscious.

Tashana glanced at their resident mermaid who was listening to the conversation with interest. “You’re very welcome to join us, Helene. Perhaps we could make it a pool party?”

“Oh, yes please!” the teal-hued girl exclaimed. “Can you swim, Auralei?”

The Larathyran shook her head. “No, I never really had the opportunity. I was too busy with my botany studies.”

“Would you let me teach you?” Helene asked, then held her breath as she waited for a reply. When Auralei agreed, the Abandoned girl clapped her hands with joy. “Oh, this is going to be so much fun!”

Betrixa frowned with irritation. “I don’t want to miss a pool party! Can I change my mind about the flying lessons?”

Alyssa laughed and shook her head. “We’ll just take the Raptor out for a quick spin. When we get back, we can join them in the Lagoon.”

“We’ll join you later as well,” John said, rising from his chair.

“Yay!” the cheetah catgirl whooped in delight.

“Well that was a wonderful dinner. Thank you very much, Sakura and assistants,” John said, tipping his hat to the star chef.

“I’m really glad you enjoyed it,” she said with satisfaction.

John offered a hand to his Maliri Queen. “Can I interest you in working up a bit of a sweat, Edraele?”

She laughed at the innuendo as she stood up and clasped his hand. “Thank you for the offer, but I don’t expect I’ll be perspiring much. I’m sure Luna will be more than capable of *‘kicking your butt’* on her own.”

“Oh, ouch!” Jehanna called out. “Edraele’s straight out of the gate with the smack talk!”

Sakura grinned as she walked over to join them. “John’s not just a pretty face. Believe it or not, he can be quite a handful.”

John frowned in mock disapproval. “You’re not supposed to smack talk your own teammate!”

“There were a few back-handed compliments in there too!” Sakura protested.

The girls laughed and waved goodbye, as Jade jogged over to join them and they left the Officers’ Lounge.

They descended in the grav-tubes to the Invictus’ lower deck, then left the battlecruiser through the airlock. When John entered the huge golden hangar, he saw that the Maliri were still loading ordnance into the Invictus’ Cargo Bay. It was stacked high with shock-resistant crates, each one marked with Maliri runes warning of high-explosive contents, and there were many more waiting to be securely stored away.

“Remind me not to get into a firefight while we’re carrying all that lot,” John said quietly.

“Do you know what strategy Calara has in mind for laying minefields?” Sakura asked, studying the hundreds of warheads.

John shook his head. “Not yet. I’m just focused on trying to build everything she needs at the moment. She’ll tell us soon enough.”

They walked along Genthalas’ golden corridors, with John responding to the starstruck Maliri with warm smiles and friendly waves. They ran into several white haired engineers who were thrilled to see him, and John greeted them by name, saying how good it was to see them again.

Sakura glanced back at the swooning women as they continued on their way, then shook her head in admiration. “How do you remember all their names? No offence, Edraele, but I find it really hard to tell most of your matriarchs apart from each other, let alone all the personnel on Genthalas.”

“No offence taken,” Edraele said with an understanding smile. “To your eyes, you must just see blue faces and white hair, or blue faces and dark hair. The Maliri actually find it difficult to identify Terrans sometimes, because you’re all just so different from each other, the complexity is almost overwhelming.”

“Not so much anymore,” Sakura said, bumping hips with John. “You like your girls ‘one-size fits all’, don’t you, John?”

“It does make life easier when we’re handing out body armour,” he agreed.

She laughed and glanced down at her impressive bust. “Ah, so I went up a few cup sizes just to fill out my Paragon suit properly?”

“Of course. I was only thinking about your comfort, obviously,” John replied, before playfully swatting her on the ass.

Edraele watched them with amusement, until John noticed she was unusually quiet.

“Are we making you laugh?” he asked, enjoying seeing her smile.

“I was just thinking that it’s nice to see this side of you in person. I hope you can build up this level of rapport with the Young matriarchs; they’d love to be this relaxed with you.”

“I’ll try to make the effort to include all your matriarchs in more social events,” John said, before acknowledging a friendly nod from a couple of passing Maliri guards.

“Please don’t feel under any pressure. Time is on our side after all,” Edraele said, sounding genuinely optimistic about the future.

He glanced at her perceptively. “You seem very positive about that, despite knowing what we’re up against.”

“I’m feeling... hopeful,” she clarified, meeting his curious gaze. “And despite your best efforts at brooding earlier, so are you.”

“Really? What makes you say that?” John asked, furrowing his brow with a sceptical frown.

“Auralei. If you truly believed we were doomed and had no chance of survival, you never would’ve agreed to recruit her, or made such a concerted effort to mould her into a gifted leader. The very fact that you made Auralei into a matriarch rather than a regular thrall, is ample proof that you instinctively want her to preside over a psychic network of civic-minded Larathyrans, all striving to build a glorious new civilisation.”

John stared at her in dumbfounded amazement.

“I think she’s got you there,” Sakura quietly confided. “Did you really make Auralei into a fully-fledged matriarch?”

“You’ve given her telepathy,” Edraele interjected, before he could say a word.

Jade patted him on the shoulder. “Sorry, Master. All hope isn’t lost after all.”

He let out a wry chuckle. “Well, I can’t really argue with any of that. So apparently, I’m an eternal optimist.”

“Seems so,” the Asian girl said with a grin.

Despite the jokes, John did feel uplifted after hearing Edraele’s profound observation. He found himself walking with an extra spring in his step, after she reminded him that billions of people were all counting on him to succeed. Rather than being a crushing responsibility, it actually felt like a privilege, knowing that all the Maliri and all the Larathyrans could go on to lead extremely positive lives if he was victorious.

They arrived at the training facility that Edraele had constructed for him, and after passing through the reception area with a wave at the giddy receptionist, then entered the armoury. John entered the only equipping frame sized for a male, with Sakura choosing the one adjacent to him. She exited at the same time as Edraele, who was also wearing a matching suit of armour.

“I’ll see you inside,” the Maliri matriarch said, before walking demurely over to the door into the temple area. “Jade, would you like to come with me? We’ll find you a good location to watch the fighting.”

“Bye, Master!” the Nymph chirped as she bounded after Edraele. “Good luck!”

Sakura retrieved her matching pair of ninjato from the weapon racks, and swung them in loops around her wrists to loosen herself up. At the same time, John drew his two-handed sword, the long-bladed weapon a close replica of Kyth’vindathys.

“Are we going to use the tactics we discussed before?” Sakura asked, as she pushed her limber body through a number of stretches.

“Whoever Luna targets fights defensively, with the other going full offense?” John replied, twisting his torso to prepare his muscles for combat. “I think it’s a sensible plan. If it doesn’t work for whatever reason, we can always try something different.”

She gave him a confident smile. “It’ll be nice to put Luna on the defensive for a change. She demolished me in our duels.”

“I know what you mean; she beat me 35 to 1,” John admitted, shaking his head as he remembered the hours of intense swordplay.

They walked through the doorway that Edraele and Jade had travelled through a few minutes before, and stood in the beautiful gardens surrounding the majestic temple.

“This training facility is something else,” Sakura marvelled, taking a moment to appreciate the spectacular architecture.

“I dread to think how much this must’ve cost Edraele,” he agreed, as they set off down the paved path to the temple entrance.

Sakura glanced up at the viewing galleries overlooking the training area, and saw that word had got out about the sparring match. Every window was packed with Maliri, the women watching their every move.

“I’d wave to them, but I doubt anyone would notice,” she said airily.

John stopped and looked up at the viewing windows, then smiled and waved at the crowd, turning to acknowledge everyone present. “Hmm, they seemed to notice that.”

Sakura laughed at the devastation he left in his wake, as hundreds of Maliri swooned, fanning their flushed faces.

Entering the temple, they found Edraele and Luna waiting patiently for them, the two women standing on the far side of the of the padded mats.

“Good evening, ladies,” John said, as he walked over to join them.

“Good evening, Baen’thelas,” they said together, before turning to warmly greet Sakura.

Facing Luna, he gave her a rueful frown. “I haven’t made much progress on developing a new fighting style yet, I’m afraid. I did ask Sakura to demonstrate the fighting techniques she knows, to see if I could find something that better fit me personally. It’s still very much a work in progress though.”

Luna gave him an understanding smile. “It took me over fifty years to fully develop my own fighting style. You’ve already honed your skills to the point where you’re an excellent swordsman, so you’ll need to devote a considerable amount of time and effort to see significant progress.”

“There’s no chance we can speed things up a bit? I wanted to be ready before this Progenitor invades?” John asked hopefully.

The Maliri swordmistress looked at him incredulously for a moment, then broke into laughter when she realised he was joking. “I’m afraid it’s unlikely.”

“Damn. That’s a shame,” John said, winking at her. “Alright, so what’re the rules of engagement for our duels? Are we going to put a limit on psychic power usage?”

Edraele cleared her throat, drawing everyone’s attention to her. “I believe the primary purpose of this training exercise is to simulate a fight against a Progenitor, and improve the coordination and teamwork between you and Sakura.”

John nodded in confirmation. “Any practice we can get will be invaluable.”

“In that case, can I suggest that we consider Luna to be your Progenitor adversary, and I will merely represent the use of his psychic abilities. Therefore, all you need to do to achieve victory, is defeat Luna.”

“So we ignore you completely?” John asked, nodding thoughtfully. “That makes sense.”

“I’ll do my best to stay well out of everyone’s way,” Edraele said.

Sakura gave Luna a look of sympathy. “I know you’re good, but this seems a bit unfair.”

Luna responded with a nonchalant shrug. “We’re just trying to simulate you ambushing a Progenitor and attempting to assassinate him as a team. You should have the advantage, so if it turns out to be a one-sided slaughter every time, I’ll actually be relieved.”

“With regard to psychic powers,” Edraele continued. “I think John should forego the use of his enhanced strength. We can assume a Progenitor would have the same ability, thereby nullifying any advantage for either combatant. Sakura should also avoid parrying as much as possible, because any situation pitting her strength against a Progenitor’s would be highly unadvisable.”

“I agree completely. I need to avoid giving a Progenitor any chance to overpower me,” Sakura said thoughtfully. “What about the rest of our abilities?”

“There are no other restrictions, but you’ll all need to be very careful about accidentally harming each other,” Edraele replied, glancing at John, Luna, and Sakura in turn. “Breaking an opponent’s psychic shield and exposing them to a potentially lethal attack will be counted as a victory.”

“You can shield yourself?” John asked the former assassin in surprise.

“Edraele taught me,” Luna explained.

“Nice! Well in that case, I agree about using psychic abilities,” he said after finding no reason to object. “Alright, let’s start ten metres away from each other.”

The two sets of combatants split up, with John and Sakura retreating across the mats until they were in position.

“Just say the word, Jade,” he said, glancing across the temple towards the Nymph, who was watching from the sidelines.

She grinned and held up her hand. “Round one... fight!”

John and Sakura glanced at each other, then their eyes began to glow as they both activated psychic speed. Snapping their attention back to Luna, John saw that she was observing the pair, her curved blade held loosely in a non-threatening posture. Edraele was backing away from her partner, moving much slower from their quicker perspective.

“Split up,” John said to Sakura. “Let’s flank her.”

She nodded in acknowledgement, then darted nimbly to the right as he moved left, splitting up to circle Luna so that she would be caught between them. The Maliri kept her eyes on John and started casually walking towards him, prompting Sakura to veer in closer to close the distance. Suddenly, John was staring at a translucent purple wall that had materialised in front of him, the telekinetic barrier interspersed between him and Luna. Before he could react, Luna broke to her left and took off like a shot, lunging towards Sakura.

“Shit!” John cursed, caught completely off-guard.

He span to his right to go around the psychic obstacle, but another one appeared directly in front of him, blocking his path once again. The sound of clashing blades reached his ears and he knew that he needed to reach Sakura quickly. He glanced to his right again and another barrier slammed down, then looked up as he thought about flying over it, only for a purple lid to appear on the half-formed box.

\*Are you listening to my thoughts, Edraele? That’s cheating isn’t it?\* he teased his matriarch.

John gathered his psychic might and zephyrs of energy coiled down his arms, then sheathed his imitation runeblade in a projection of psychic force.

\*The Progenitor could be watching your body language to see where you intended to move next,\* she glibly countered.

\*While duelling with Sakura?\* he asked sceptically, before setting his feet and whipping around his sword in a massive blow.

The blade smashed into the telekinetic barrier, sundering it instantly, just in time for him to see a score of telekinetic darts slam into Sakura’s frosted shield. The hex barrier collapsed under their combined assault, then Luna slid inside the distracted girl’s defences and touched her throat with the tip of her blade.

“Sorry, John,” Sakura apologised, her shoulders slumping in defeat as she backed away to join Jade.

Luna advanced confidently towards him and Edraele started summoning more telekinetic darts, which floated over her shoulders as she prepared to fire.

John held up a hand, realising it was pointless to continue. “Alright, I concede. Nice work, ladies.”

They moved back to their starting point and Sakura bounded over the mats to rejoin him. “They took down my shields so fast,” she said, shaking her head. “Luna’s incredibly quick with her blade and it took most of my concentration to keep her at bay, then Edraele hammered the hell out of my shields with all those darts.”

“Well at least we know what their tactics are now,” he said with a grim nod. “Edraele keeps me out of the fight, then they can focus fire you. I’m prepared for that now, so I’ll be able to break through her barriers much faster.”

“Okay, so shall we try the same thing?” Sakura asked. “We didn’t engage her at the same time in the last round, so it’ll still be new to Luna.”

“Sure, “ John agreed, before gesturing towards Jade. \*Whenever you’re ready.\*

“Round two... fight!” the Nymph called out, her lovely voice echoing around the temple.

John and Sakura were more wary this time, splitting up as before, then began cautiously circling Luna.

The Maliri assassin bounced on her heels, then surged forward, charging full pelt towards John.

“Careful, John!” Sakura called out, pivoting on the ball of her foot and reversing direction to intercept Luna.

She made it two steps, then slammed into a shimmering purple wall. Telekinetic barriers popped into existence to both sides, and behind her, before she was sealed away with a perfectly fitting lid. Sakura flipped up her ninjato and reversed her grip on the hilts, then started stabbing at the barrier in a frenzy, causing them to splinter and crack.

John turned to run to her aid, but then Luna was on him, her curved Maliri blade slicing through the air. She was quicker than him, but he had more reach with his two-handed sword, so Luna had to be careful that he didn’t counter-attack with a riposte after each parry. It still took most of his concentration to stop her hacking away at his hex barrier, but that left him horribly exposed to Edraele.

With a whistling screech, a telekinetic lance smashed into his shield, the impact strong enough to shatter a hexagon. John replaced it almost instantly, but the volley of lances didn’t stop, taking a relentless toll on his hex barrier. As he concentrated on replacing them, Luna started alternating between attacking him and his shield, skewering hexagons with deadly thrusts before ducking his counterattacks.

He heard frustrated cursing from Sakura off to his right, and could only assume that Edraele was keeping her busy hacking through more telekinetic walls. Luna paused her assault, her sword drawn back in preparation, then she lunged forward, just as Edraele knocked out another hexagon from his spinning shield. The assassin’s blade seemed to be guided by the telekinetic lance to the exact same spot, and her extended thrust slid the tip of the blade through the hole just after the hexagon shattered.

John froze as she prodded the joint between his chestplate and armoured codpiece, knowing that if she’d put her full force behind it, Luna could have gutted him like a pig.

Sakura gaped at the Maliri swordmistress in open-mouthed astonishment. “How the hell did you do that?! There’s no way that was intentional! It had to be pure fluke!”

With a grimace, John said, “Umm... I might have synced them up last time we were here.”

His teammate looked at him in disbelief. “What?”

“I wanted to even the odds a bit, so I gave them the same ability as us,” he admitted with a rueful frown. “I didn’t know they’d be this effective working together!”

“Not just here,” Edraele said coyly, removing her helmet.

Luna sauntered up to Edraele, removed her headgear and kissed her lover. “Our de-briefing sessions after training have been... breathtaking.”

John tried to ignore the highly-erotic mental imagery that evoked, but he knew how incredibly close he felt to Sakura when they shared that connection. Edraele and Luna in the throes of that passion must have been quite the sight.

“Just how much training have you two been doing?” Sakura asked with a suspicious frown.

Edraele and Luna looked at each other questioningly. “Ten, maybe twelve hours a day?” Luna suggested.

“That sounds about right,” the Maliri Queen agreed. “We’ve been training like that every day since you last departed from Genthalas.”

Sakura laughed and shook her head. “We’ve got a lot of catching up to do, John.”

“I think we might have underestimated you just a bit,” he admitted to Luna and Edraele. “Will you give us a minute, ladies?”

“Take as much time as you need, my Lord,” Edraele said magnanimously.

“Alright, what’s our plan now?” Sakura asked, walking away from the Maliri to discuss tactics.

“One second, let me just block Edraele to stop her eavesdropping,” John replied, while temporarily banning the matriarch from his subconscious. “Alright, done.”

“We’re getting wrecked by Edraele’s psychic abilities,” Sakura said thoughtfully. “We’ve got to find a better way of countering her incapacitating one of us.”

“We can’t attack her directly, which means we’ll just have to get better at breaking her barriers,” John replied. “Can you use Cryokinesis to shatter them?”

The Asian girl considered her options. “An ice cyclone would rip those barriers to pieces, but it covers a pretty big area and you’d be caught up in it too.”

“Could you steer the ice around me?”

Sakura immediately shook her head. “I don’t have that much control over the storm. I can make tunnels through it, but that’s when I’m stationary and completely focused on the cyclone. If you’re moving around in melee combat, there’s no way I could prevent the ice from hitting you.”

“What about when we’re synchronised?” John suggested. “When I’m connected to you like that, you feel like an extension of my body. I’m sure you feel the same way.”

“That’s definitely worth a try,” Sakura agreed, her expression brightening.

They faced each other and gazed into each other’s eyes, concentrating on slowing their breathing until their chests were rising and falling at the same time. John felt his mind reaching out to meld with hers, the sensation of sharing such an intimate connection sending a delicious shiver down his spine. Sakura’s eyelashes fluttered and it was clear she felt that same sensation.

The wind began to pick up, slowly at first, then with greater acceleration as the temperature started to drop. The glacial cyclone began to form as ice skittered across the floor, then the shards lifted into the air as the wind picked up into an eerie howl. John stood beside her as the frozen storm intensified, watching the ice fragments hurtle around the sparring area of the temple.

“I can feel exactly where you are,” Sakura murmured, diverting a stream of jagged ice shards to whistle around both his shoulders. “You’ll be safe.”

John gathered his own will and focused it inwards, drawing from his psychic reserves to send eldritch energy swirling down his arms. He shifted into a combat stance with his blade and prepared himself to start unleashing waves of force at their opponents.

“Sorry, Edraele!” John yelled, shouting to be heard over the storm. “The gloves are coming off now!”

“Wouldn’t that just make you more vulnerable?” Luna yelled back with a puzzled frown, replacing her helmet.

“Let’s see shall we...” Edraele murmured, her eyes blazing with an intense inner glow.

The lights around the temple began to flicker, and Edraele slowly rose from the ground, shrouded in a regal purple aura. Telekinetic lances began to appear above her, until three of the deadly projectiles hovered above each shoulder.

Sakura turned to look at John in shock. “What the hell did you do to her?!”

“It’s not my fault!” John protested. “You know how much she turns me on, so I give her a fully tummy every time we come back to Genthalas. I didn’t know I’d made her this strong!”

She groaned and rolled her eyes, then activated a frosty hex-barrier that began to rotate as fast as her cyclone. John created his own shield, and as it started spinning, Jade’s voice pierced through the storm.

“Round three... fight!”

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The Raptor roared through a tiny gap between a pair of asteroids, the wash from the Progenitor engines strong enough to send them slowly tumbling away.

“Very nice,” Alyssa said, watching as Betrixa rotated the gunship to level it out again, putting the wings on the same horizontal plane as the asteroid belt. “Okay, loop around that big one over there.”

“Sure!” The Nymph eased her flightstick to the right, sending them hurtling towards a huge chunk of rock.

Calara stood beside the co-pilot’s chair, watching Marika firing off repeated bursts from the gunship’s turret mounted Tachyon Cannons. The tabby catgirl was proving to be an excellent shot against the stationary asteroids, leaving her latest target peppered with glowing craters.

“Now let’s try something a bit trickier,” the Latina suggested. “Keep shooting at that asteroid over there, while Betrixa’s doing her manoeuvres.”

Marika narrowed her brown feline eyes, and focused intently on her aim. A solid stream of blue bolts rained down on the asteroid, the hail coming in waves as the Raptor briefly looped out of sight, then reappeared again. It was an impressive display of marksmanship, especially without any kind of communication between the pilot and gunner. After the initial loop, Alyssa tapped Betrixa on the shoulder, then pointed at the next asteroid to dive around, then another, and another.

“That’s some really great shooting,” Calara said, watching as Marika made the huge rock look like a chunk of Swiss cheese.

Alyssa narrowed her eyes with suspicion as she glanced at the pair. “Your coordination is a little too good. Are you two talking to each other telepathically?”

“We can all speak to each other that way,” Neysa replied for them.

“How long’s that been going on?” Alyssa asked, raising an eyebrow.

“A couple of weeks,” Neysa replied. “Master lavished a lot of attention on us, and we eventually noticed that we were able to tune into each other’s thoughts.”

“What about Ailita?” Alyssa asked, referring to the only Nymph who wasn’t present on the Raptor.

Leylira shook her head. “Nothing yet. She claims to have heard a few whispered thoughts from Jehanna... but that doesn’t make any sense.”

“I don’t know about that; they spend a lot of time together,” Alyssa reminded her.

The tigress appeared to be genuinely shocked. “But Jehanna is a Terran female!”

“I’m well aware of that,” Alyssa said with a wry smile.

Leylira opened her mouth to protest again, but the blonde interrupted her with a quick kiss.

“Jehanna and Ailita joined the crew much later than everyone else,” Alyssa explained. “John felt bad that Jehanna was feeling like an outsider, and he was worried he wouldn’t be able to give Ailita enough attention. When Jehanna suggested the pink catgirl look for Ailita, it was inevitable that she’d be attracted to your sister... and they got closer.”

The tiger-striped catgirl waited impatiently until Alyssa had finished her explanation, then blurted out, “But John is Ailita’s master, and Jehanna is his mate! Ailita shouldn’t be able to ‘get closer’ to Jehanna!”

“What if that’s what her master wants?” Alyssa asked.

Leylira looked stumped, but Neysa nodded thoughtfully. “John does like to defy convention.”

“He does... and he’s still Ailita’s master,” the blonde explained. “When the time comes, I really hope she chooses to help all of you rebuild the Nymph population. Until then, Ailita seems to be greatly enjoying Jehanna’s company.”

Neysa narrowed her hazel eyes and studied Alyssa perceptively. “Is this really about Helene?”

Alyssa gave her an ambivalent smile. “Maybe...”

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John tugged the Lion helm off his head, and panted for breath as he sank down onto the mats. A moment later, Sakura collapsed next to him, tossing aside her ninjato.

“Forty to zero,” she muttered, shaking her head in disbelief. “That was a massacre.”

Luna looked at Edraele with concern as they approached their thoroughly defeated opponents, but the Maliri Queen answered with a reassuring smile.

“Perhaps we should have altered the rules to take into account the lack of time you’ve had to train together?” Edraele suggested as she sank to her knees beside them on the mats.

John shook his head as he placed his sword and helmet on the floor. “You can learn a lot more from a defeat than you can an easy victory. Some of the things we just learned were invaluable.”

“Like the fact that Edraele’s a telekinetic powerhouse?” Sakura said, inclining her head with respect to the Maliri matriarch.

“Well that’s certainly true,” he agreed, smiling at his Queen before continuing, ”But there were a lot of other important lessons too. We learned that we need a lot more experience fighting against psychic powers, especially when they’re used to divide our team and attack one of us when we’re vulnerable.”

As the adrenalin wore off, Sakura calmed down and was more introspective. “You’re right, we did learn a lot. I found out that I can guide an ice storm around you and not hit you with a single icicle.”

“Yeah, that was impressive,” he agreed, giving her a congratulatory pack on her on the back. “We also need to find a good way to mimic their double-tap technique and get better at collapsing hex barriers. Edraele breaching my shield and opening it up for Luna to gut me was a nasty shock.”

“That took quite a bit of practice,” Luna admitted.

“I bet,” John said, looking at the Maliri with respect. “The amount of effort you’ve both put into your training, just to help us improve, was incredible. I really appreciate your support, ladies.”

“I just hope that we can help you avoid making any mistakes when you’re fighting actual Progenitors,” Edraele said emphatically.

“Me too. I think we should definitely keep training like this,” John said, looking around at the three women for their feedback.

They unanimously agreed, having all enjoyed the practice session for different reasons.

Jade walked over to join them and John greeted her with a smile. “Did you enjoy watching your master get steamrolled, honey?”

“I did!” she replied cheerfully. “It was exciting to see you and Sakura improve with each fight.”

“We’ve still got a long way to go,” John said, hugging the Nymph when she sat next to him. “But I’m glad we didn’t make those mistakes against an actual Progenitor. I have a feeling they won’t be quite as merciful as our lovely Maliri hostesses.”

“At least we won’t make the mistake of underestimating a psychic opponent,” Sakura said, as she recalled their initial quick defeats. “When we get into a fight with a Progenitor, we’ll need to go all out, right from the start.”

“Agreed,” John said, looking at Luna and Edraele. “You two definitely saved us from making a bunch of fatal mistakes in the future. Thank you.”

Luna and Edraele shared a jubilant glance, then beamed at him in delight.

“It was our pleasure,” Edraele said, hugging her teammate in celebration.

“Speaking of which...” John said, admiring the statuesque couple. “Are you two still up for some post-match stress relief?”

Luna bit her lip and blushed a dark blue, then she met his curious gaze and slowly nodded. “I wouldn’t miss this for the world.”

John got to his feet, then offered a hand to the seated girls. “Let’s stow our gear, then we can head back to the Invictus.”

“There’s no need. I’ve prepared adequate facilities here,” Edraele explained, giving John a sultry look as she glided towards the exit.

He noticed Luna glancing up at the crowds of spectators, her expression shifting through a mixture of emotions. He saw her flush a little more, and he guessed that this time it wasn’t from embarrassment.

“Maybe another time,” he said to her quietly. “I don’t want to share this with anyone else.”

She darted a smile at him and slipped her hand into his as they left the temple. The sense of anticipation was building between them, and the atmosphere felt sexually charged as they entered the armoury and removed all their arms and armour.

“This way,” Edraele said, walking towards the blank wall opposite.

A door-sized section began to shift, then rotated up into the ceiling, admitting them into the luxurious bedroom suite beyond. The muted lighting added a seductive allure to the opulent surroundings, with the centrepiece of the room a huge, cushion-adorned bed that was set into the floor.

“I see what you mean about ‘adequate’,” John joked, as he followed Edraele inside. “I guess this’ll have to do.”

“Would you care to freshen up, my Lord?” she asked, approaching the wall to the right, which spiralled open to reveal a lavish en suite bathroom.

“Absolutely,” he agreed, pulling his perspiration soaked t-shirt over his head.

Edraele quickly divested herself of her own clothes and activated the Terran-style shower set into a deep recess in the corner. John followed her inside, and was quickly accompanied by Sakura, Luna, and Jade. Soaping up the nubile girls was wonderfully erotic, and John enjoyed himself immensely as he let his hands explore their glistening bodies.

Being the centre of attention, he was spotlessly clean much faster than everyone else. Edraele leaned in to kiss him, then gazed up into his eyes. “Will you give me a few minutes to prepare Luna for you?”

“Of course,” he agreed, kissing the tip of her nose.

He left the shower and grabbed a warm, fluffy towel, then walked into the bedroom to dry himself off. He was nearly done when Sakura slipped out of the bathroom after him, a towel wrapped around her waist.

“I thought I’d keep you company,” she said, giving him a hungry look.

He laughed and beckoned her over to the bed. “You’re looking a bit pent up, honey. Are you sure it’s just my company you’re after?”

“Do you mind?” she asked, gently grasping his shaft in her soft hand. “Luna said I was welcome to warm you up a bit.”

John climbed on the bed and propped himself up with a pile of the plush cushions. Sakura wasted no time straddling his lap, then she let out a long moan as John helped her slide down his thick shaft.

“There you go... is that what you needed?” he asked, when she’d descended to the base.

“It’s a good start,” she purred, pressing her pliant breasts into his chest and slowly circling her hips.

John wrapped his arms around her and used his greatly superior strength to pin her in place. Sakura paused and looked at him quizzically, her exotic almond-shaped eyes peeking out from under her tousled mane of glossy black hair.

“You were amazing today,” he said earnestly.

She laughed and nuzzled into him. “John, in case you didn’t notice, they kicked our butts.”

“Yeah, but you never got disheartened and kept trying your hardest every time. We’ve already made some huge improvements as a team and I couldn’t have chosen anyone better to be my partner for this. I’m proud of you, Sakura. I think you’re an incredible girl.”

“Oh, John...” she murmured, leaning in to give him a tender kiss.

He relaxed his firm grip and stroked her back to encourage her to move. She gyrated in his lap, lifting herself a couple of inches, before sinking down to take his full length deep inside. It didn’t take much of that for Sakura’s breathing to quicken, then her snug passage clamped down around him and she cried out as she climaxed.

“That was quick,” he whispered in her ear. “I feel like you’ve been short-changed. Do you want another?”

“Mmm, yes please,” she cooed, lifting her head from his shoulder and gazing down into his eyes.

Sakura began to move her lithe body, and John felt himself being drawn into synchronisation with her again. Her heartfelt look of adoration was like a seductive siren’s call, offering him endless euphoria and gratification.

“Naughty girl,” he chastised her, with a playful smack on her taut bottom. “If you keep that up, you’re going to end up with a full tummy.”

Fighting down the urgent desire to have her womb stuffed with his cum, she closed her eyes and broke the tantalising connection. “Sorry. I’ll be good.”

John enjoyed watching Sakura focus on her own pleasure and by the time Luna, Edraele, and Jade emerged from the bathroom, his bedmate was very close to her second climax.

“You look like you’re having fun,” Edraele said, as she knelt beside them and kissed Sakura’s shoulder.

“Just... lubing him up... for Luna...” Sakura panted, before pulling the other Maliri in for a heated kiss.

The two former assassins moaned into each other’s mouths, with Sakura’s voice rising to a strangled squeak soon after.

“Let me help you, little kitten,” Jade purred, as she hugged the Asian girl from behind.

John could feel the Nymph’s nimble fingers sliding into Sakura’s ass, while the other hand curled around to gently massage her clit. The effect on the girl riding him was explosive, as Sakura squealed through a massive climax that left her dazed in the aftermath. Jade helped him to slide Sakura off his throbbing shaft, then scooped up the exhausted young woman and whisked her away.

“I’ll take care of her, Master,” Jade called back over her shoulder. “You concentrate on Luna.”

He turned to look at the Maliri bodyguard, who was watching Sakura being carried across the bed with a sparkle of anticipation in her eyes.

“Oh yes,” Edraele crooned. “It really does feel that good, my love.”

Colour flooded Luna’s cheeks and she glanced back at John, to find him watching her.

“You’ve been looking forward to this?” he asked, slipping his hands around her waist, before pulling her towards him.

She moved eagerly to take Sakura’s place, then whimpered as she rubbed her soaked pussy against the base of his glistening shaft. “Edraele teases me about it constantly...”

“Teases? Surely not,” the Maliri Queen replied, raising an eyebrow. “I seem to recall you asking me for all sorts of lurid details... and getting very hot and bothered as a result.”

John followed the exquisite curve of her taut buttock down to the crack between her cheeks. He used the moisture gathered down below to wet his finger, then massaged the virgin knot of muscle. She froze at the initial contact, then pushed back imperceptibly and let out a soft moan.

“You’ve been curious for a while?” he asked, gazing into her angular yellow eyes.

She bit her lip and nodded, too embarrassed to speak the truth.

“That’s okay to be curious,” he said, without any judgement. “I know it’s a Maliri taboo, but I don’t feel that way.”

Edraele smiled in agreement. “Baen’thelas is quite eager to change our cultural outlook, one noblewoman at a time.”

“Only the debauched vixens from House Valaden,” John said with a grin.

“So far,” she added, giving him a knowing look.

“I know Nyrelle Aeberos is quite eager for her turn,” he replied, before focusing on Luna again. “But I wanted you to be next.”

“Why?” Luna asked, genuinely surprised. “I’m not a matriarch or even a noblewoman, and Nyrelle’s carrying your baby.”

“It’s not complicated,” John said with an amiable shrug. “I just feel closer to you than any of the other Maliri.”

“Really?” she asked, her gaze softening.

“You know it’s true. I’m probably closest to the Young Matriarchs out of everyone else, so just think about how I interact with them compared to you. It helps a lot that you’re bedding Edraele and I can’t get enough of seeing you two together, but you’re not just her lover. Remember all the conversations we’ve had recently, about you training me, you being there for Edraele... it shouldn’t come as a surprise how much you mean to me.”

Luna looked deeply moved and was lost for words for a moment. When she recovered, she said softly, “I do know... but it was so hard for me to believe. You just blazed into our lives and turned our whole world upside down. It’s been like falling in love with a god.”

He laughed and held her close. “I’m not a god, honey. I’m just a guy... who has the utmost admiration and respect for an intelligent, compassionate, loyal, and very beautiful woman. Is that a bit easier to believe?”

She bit her lip and nodded, her eyes welling up with unshed tears.

“Plus... you have an absolutely spectacular ass,” he noted, moving his hands to cup her deliciously perky bottom. “I know you Maliri have the same body type, but holy crap... all that training has paid off!”

Luna giggled as he broke the tension and leaned down to give him a very passionate kiss. “I love you, Baen’thelas.”

“I love you too,” he replied, not just saying the words, but really feeling they were true.

Edraele was giddy with excitement beside them, watching the whole conversation spellbound. She hugged them both, too overjoyed to speak. John stroked their backs as he watched them hug, then idly wondered how he was going to segue into the main event. Moving from “I love you, Luna,” to “Shall we get started on breaking in your virgin ass?” seemed to be quite the jarring leap.

Fortunately, his Maliri matriarch was there to help smooth the transition. “Come and give me a proper hug, Luna.”

The assassin took her hand and they moved a couple of paces across the bed. Edraele lay down on her back, then opened her arms in invitation to her girlfriend. Luna gracefully lay on top of her lover, then Edraele cradled her between her smooth thighs and encircled her in a warm embrace. The Maliri Queen’s hands drifted lower, azure fingers sliding down sky-blue skin, until they rested in the same place John’s had been only a moment ago.

\*We discussed the perfect position for you to take her, my Lord,\* Edraele murmured, before slowly prising apart Luna’s cheeks.

She exposed the dark-blue star to the light, the surface glistening wetly with lubrication.

Luna glanced back at him over her shoulder, a mixture of anxiety and anticipation on her beautiful face. “I’m ready for you, Baen’thelas.”

He knelt behind her and gently massaged her ass, his fingers stroking Edraele’s as he did so. “Trust me... I promise this won’t hurt a bit.”

She nodded, granting him permission, and John moved closer, the blunt head of his cock looking like it would never fit inside such a tiny hole. When he pushed forward, he heard her gasp, then her head dropped down to rest on Edraele’s shoulder. Luna let out a low groan as she started stretching to accommodate him, the dark ring enveloping his painfully hard cock, until it was stretched to its limit around his pulsating girth.

John paused when the head was inside, giving her a chance to acclimatise to being opened up like this for the first time. “That was the thickest part,” he said, stroking her muscular back.

“You’re huge!” she moaned, wriggling her hips. “I feel like I’m being split in half!”

“Do you want me to pull out?” he asked with concern.

“No! Just take it slow,” she begged him.

He pushed forward again, and watched Luna grab fistfuls of the bedding as she let out a guttural moan. She didn’t say anything about stopping, so he continued to feed her inch after inch, until he felt her soft cheeks press up against his abdomen.

John leaned over her and whispered in her pointed ear, “You took all of me.”

“I feel totally stuffed,” she panted, turning to look up at him in disbelief.

“Just relax,” he said, stroking her back. “The hardest part is over now.”

“You did so well, my love,” Edraele said, hugging her close.

The tension eased from Luna’s shoulders and she relaxed in Edraele’s loving embrace.

“Can I see you two kiss?” John requested, slipping his hand under Luna’s stomach and rubbing her drenched pussy.

Luna nodded compliantly and moaned into Edraele’s mouth as their lips came together, responding to the bursts of pleasure John was triggering with her clit.

“Good girls... you look so sexy,” he murmured in approval, determined to make it good for her.

“Let me take over, Master,” Jade said, appearing at his side.

The Nymph slid her hand under Luna’s tummy and continued stimulating her body when John removed his hand.

“She’s nice and relaxed for you now, my Lord,” Edraele purred over Luna’s shoulder. “Feel free to concentrate on your own pleasure.”

John pulled back a couple of inches, then slowly impaled Luna again, relishing the feel of her snug walls gripping his cock.

He held her waist and said, “Raise yourself up a bit, honey.”

Luna did as he asked, raising her ass submissively to give him even better access. John held her hips and slid deep into her belly again, settling into a steady rhythm. She whimpered and then clenched around him, crying out in ecstasy as her body convulsed in the throes of an intense orgasm.

Edraele kissed her cheek and gazed adoringly into John’s eyes. “That’s it... such a good girl,” she murmured. “You need to learn to love being taken like this. Baen’thelas will stretch your bottom thousands of times when we’re both pregnant with his children.”

“Fuck!” Luna squealed, her fists clenching the sheets as Edraele set her off again.

“Does she feel good, my Lord?” Edraele teased him. “Is it exciting breaking in another naughty Maliri?”

“Incredible,” he agreed, pistoning his cock deep into Luna as far as it would go.

“I love how you give us white hair,” Edraele murmured, brushing Luna’s mane aside as she cradled the panting Maliri on her breast. “It shows everyone that you own us... that we’re here to serve all your desires.”

John leaned over Luna’s back and kissed Edraele, then alternated to the panting assassin. They continued the three way kiss, with John being careful not to squash the two accommodating women beneath him.

\*Luna’s strong, my Lord. We can easily support your full weight,\* Edraele encouraged him, as she sucked his tongue into her mouth.

He half-lay on Luna’s back, shifting to the perfect position to give her a smooth pounding. Her whimpers intensified with every thrust, until he held her still and buried himself right up to the quad. They both cried out with his release, as long ropes of cum shot into her heated bowels, the heavy load quickly filling up her belly and causing it to swell.

“That’s it,” Edraele cooed in Luna’s ear. “He likes you squeezing him... yes, just like that. Make sure you get every drop... Jade needs to feed all my matriarchs.”

Luna grunted in disbelief and her eyes rolled back.

“You like that idea?” Edraele teased her. “Maybe next time, Baen’thelas can fill you up in the council room. Then they can just eat you out afterwards.”

Edraele had pushed too many of Luna’s buttons, and triggering her kinky exhibitionist side as well, was to much for her to handle. She slumped insensate on top of the Maliri Queen, her tummy hugely swollen with John’s massive load.

“Let me help you, Master,” Jade offered, aiding a completely drained John in sliding out of Luna and collapsing on the bed.

The bedroom was quickly filled with slurping noises, letting John know that Jade was preparing her midnight feast for the Maliri matriarchs. Even though his senses were dulled into stupification by his intense climax, John knew that he’d soon be able to alter their DNA, and erase their instinctive antipathy towards another thrall species.

“That was so hot!” Sakura exclaimed, snuggling up against him. “It made me think about my first time.”

“You were amazing too,” John said, kissing the top of her head.

She let out a happy sigh, and hugged him a bit tighter.

A few minutes later, Jade rose from the bed, her breasts sitting high and enormously engorged on her chest. “You made him cum so hard, little kitten,” she said fondly.

Jade leaned down for a kiss and John could see Luna’s throat bobbing as the Nymph fed her part of his load. That seemed to perk her up in an instant, and she thanked Jade before crawling over to cuddle his vacant flank.

“See you in the Lagoon, Master!” Jade said, as she cheerfully waved him goodbye.

“Bye, honey. Thanks for your help,” he replied, returning her wave. \*Edraele, could you get the ring from my pocket please.\*

\*Yes!\* she gasped with joy.

Edraele surreptitiously placed it in John’s hand when she returned, then she gladly swapped places with Sakura when the Asian girl made room for her.

“I hope that lived up to expectations?” John asked, while stroking Luna’s back. “It probably goes without saying that I loved it... but I’ll say it anyway. You were incredibly sexy and I loved every minute of it.”

“It was different to what I expected,” Luna said softly. When she sensed John look at her with concern, she quickly clarified, “It was wonderful of course! I just wasn’t expecting to feel so intensely connected with you. For something that we consider incredibly taboo, it was surprising how intimate it felt.”

“I think it was originally a taboo because good Maliri girls should be having sex to get pregnant, not indulging in anything naughty in the bedroom,” he said with a wry smile.

“Why not do both?” she asked, giving him a wicked grin.

“A girl after my own heart,” he replied, hugging her closer. “Which brings me nicely to this. I’d like to give you a gift, Luna.”

She looked at him in surprise. “A gift? What is it?”

He uncurled his arm from around her back, then slowly opened his closed hand in front of her.

“Oh, Baen’thelas... it’s beautiful,” she whispered, reaching for it with trembling fingers. She paused and looked at him. “May I touch it?”

“Of course you can,” he replied with an indulgent smile.

“The gemstone is the same colour as my eyes,” she noted, gazing at the lustrous yellow jewel as it sparkled in the light.

“You have Edraele to thank for that,” John said, glancing at his matriarch. “We both wanted it to be perfect.”

Luna studied the intricate symbols surrounding the band, and instantly recognised the crossed blades for House Valaden. Her gaze flicked to Edraele’s own ring, then her eyes widened in surprise.

“The design for your ring has changed!” she gasped, holding hers up against Edraele’s. “They’re the same!”

“That should show you how highly Baen’thelas thinks of you,” Edraele said gently. “He wanted us to have matching engagement rings.”

“This is an engagement ring?!” Luna gasped, turning to stare at John in disbelief.

John stroked her trembling hand and said, “I know you’re Maliri and your outlook towards marriage is a bit different to Terran girls. This ring shows my commitment to you for the future... that when the Progenitor War is over, I want to start a family with you. If that’s something you still want?”

“It is!” she gushed, nodding exuberantly. “I want that with all my heart!”

“Look at the inscription on the inside,” Edraele suggested with a gleam of anticipation in her eyes.

Luna peered at the inside of the band, then broke into a jubilant smile. “Oh, that’s perfect! It’s just how I feel!”

“We better put it on then,” John said, splaying the fingers on her left hand and sliding the ring onto her fourth finger.

She admired the ring on her hand, tears of joy rolling down her cheeks. “I love you so much! Thank you!”

John pulled her into a hug, then saw Edraele grinning smugly. “Okay, you were right. She really did like the inscription.”

“You’ve claimed us,” Edraele said, caressing his chest. “We belong to you.”

“That’s how I feel too,” Luna agreed, showering him with kisses.

“So I don’t need to worry about either of you being swept off your feet by some suave Maliri male? If we can convince them to evacuate the border stations, there should be thousands of men returning to Valaden.”

“Have you seen Maliri males?” Edraele asked him with a raised eyebrow. “We’ve all grown accustomed to our man being considerably... bigger.”

Luna nodded emphatically. “Besides, I’m your property now. If one of the border males dared to talk to me inappropriately, he’d lose his tongue.”

“Luna...” John said gently. “What Edraele was saying was just sex talk to turn you on.”

“No it wasn’t, I meant every word,” Edraele declared.

She switched her ring to the other hand, then interlaced her fingers with Luna’s, so that the two rings were adjacent to one another over John’s heart.

“Nae’sethe Baen’thelas,” Luna murmured, gazing up at him in adoration.

Edraele nodded in agreement. “We’re here to serve you, body and soul.”

John gaped at the pair for a moment, then realisation sunk in that it was genuinely how they felt, and disagreeing would be rude and only cause offence.

“In that case,” he said sincerely. “You’ve both given me a far more valuable gift.”

The Maliri let out happy sighs, both knowing that their fates were now tightly bound to the man lying between them.

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The Glowing Queen knelt in her meditation chamber, lost in quiet introspection. The lengthy conversation with the Terran governor had been quite enlightening indeed, as he spoke of strife within the Terran Federation, and of dark betrayals that left innocent civilians at the mercy of the Kirrix. As the insectoid aliens were bereft of mercy, the death tolls on Terran worlds had rivalled those on Trankaran planets ravaged by those malevolent creatures.

She let out a heavy sigh, wondering if Trankaran perception of humanity had been misplaced. While it was true that the Terran Federation had not been at war with the Trankarans, they had been less than helpful during the recent Kirrix invasion, and prior to that had strongly opposed any friendly overtures towards closer ties. To hear that the Terran government was mistreating their own citizens was most troubling, and did not paint High Command in a flattering light at all.

If Stefan Vaughn was to be believed, the colonists living in the region known as the Outer Rim were much more open towards closer ties with their neighbours. She realised that it was almost certainly out of necessity, but such a situation would greatly benefit the Trankaran Republic, should she choose to exploit it. Still, the thought of undermining someone who was ostensibly an ally didn’t sit comfortably with Niskera. She certainly had no desire to antagonise High Command, not without concrete proof that verified they were as corrupt and tyrannical as Stefan Vaughn claimed.

His mention of John Blake’s interest in the matter was a development that Niskera hadn’t been expecting. If the Great Protector had chosen to support the establishment of a new faction of Terrans, then she would follow his wise example. The compelling question was whether she could trust Governor Vaughn’s word on the matter, and if Admiral Blake had truly thrown his full backing behind the Outer Rim colonies.

Deciding that there was only one way for her to find out the truth, she rose from the rough stone floor and returned to her office.

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The water cascaded over John as he held Luna and Edraele in his arms. He closed his eyes in contentment as Sakura hugged him a little bit tighter, pressing her soft breasts into his back.

“I’m really glad you had a great shower installed,” John said to his Maliri matriarch. “We’ll be getting a lot of use out of it showering after training, then showering after the post-match stress relief.”

“That’s going to be a lot of showers,” Sakura agreed, kissing his neck.

Before Edraele could respond, they heard an urgent chime from the bedroom.

“Oh, damn!” Edraele blurted out, glancing towards the open door. “After missing Maria’s call, I set up emergency notifications if any of your friends attempted to contact me... but I can’t answer it like this!”

“Let me,” John said, sliding out of their wet embrace. “If it’s one of my friends, they won’t care how I look.”

He grabbed a couple of fluffy towels from the stand and wrapped one around his waist, then hurried into the bedroom. A holographic comms interface had appeared on the wall, the instigator of the incoming call identified as Chancellor Niskera. He quickly answered the incoming call, happy to be able to speak with the kind-hearted Trankaran leader again.

“Queen Edraele, I’m so-” Niskera’s voice trailed off and she stared in shock at John’s bare chest.

“Edraele’s indisposed at the moment,” John replied, breaking into a warm smile. “Is there anything I can do to help?”

“John!” she exclaimed, beaming at him in delight. “It was actually you that I was attempting to speak with. I tried contacting the Invictus, but there was no response. I thought that Queen Edraele might be able to pass on a message to you... then lo and behold, here you are!”

“It’s really great to see you again, Niskera,” John said, before suddenly frowning. “Are you in trouble? Is that why you needed to track me down?”

“No, my people fare very well indeed after your intervention. I met with the Rock Brethren of Dun Hergrun and heard many accounts of your courage in liberating them from the foul Kirrix invaders.”

“I couldn’t just sit by while Trankarans were suffering,” John said with a pained frown. “I like your people, Niskera; they’re very brave and their hearts are in the right place. I was just glad to be in a position where I could help them.”

“You have proven once again that you are our Great Protector,” she said, genuflecting reverently.

John ran his hand through his damp hair self-consciously, then asked, “So... was there something else you needed to talk to me about?”

“Yes, there is,” Niskera said solemnly. “I received a very interesting communication from one of the Governors in the Outer Rim. Your name was mentioned, as well as intriguing offer that has left me perplexed and in somewhat of a conundrum.”

“That does sound interesting,” John agreed, reaching for the spare towel to dry his hair. “I can probably guess what this is about, but you better tell me the details. Oh, wait a second, is this a secure call?”

“It is indeed, John,” the Glowing Queen replied. “I did not wish to reveal the identity of the Governor to someone from High Command for fear of the repercussions he might suffer.”

“Okay, tell me what Governor Vaughn had to say.”

She looked at him in surprise. “But how did you know it was him?”

“Call it an educated guess,” John said with a wry smile. “He was trying to instigate a rebellion in the Outer Rim, until the Terran Fleet Admiral did a surprise visit. Lynette’s been pulling her hair out trying to pacify all the governors and encourage them to voluntarily stay in the Terran Federation.”

“Governor Vaughn told me terrible stories about Terran High Command,” Niskera said warily. “Can this Fleet Admiral be trusted?”

John hesitated, not sure where to even start. “Before we get into that, it might be a good idea for you to let me know exactly what you discussed with Stefan first. There are a few matters that I’m still not willing to discuss over a secure comms channel, but I’m sure Alyssa can fill you in on the details personally.”

“I understand, John,” Niskera said, listening attentively. “In that case, let me relate our conversation to you...”

The Trankaran leader carefully explained everything that had been discussed, outlining the request for support and what was offered in exchange. John listened without comment, even when he really wanted to interject at certain points, and waited until Niskera had finished her account of events.

“Well... first of all, I don’t ‘*want the Outer Rim to leave the Federation*’,” John said with an exasperated frown. “Stefan was deliberately exaggerating to make his position sound stronger.”

“I see,” Niskera said, her slab-like features turning downward in disapproval.

“But, that’s not to say that the Outer Rim colonies don’t have legitimate grievances,” John said, the sympathy showing on his face. “High Command did abandon them and left their colonies exposed to the Kirrix. The Outer Rim has also been criminally neglected by the Terran Federation for centuries, and the conditions on some of those worlds are appalling.”

“It appears the situation is more complex than I initially believed,” Niskera said thoughtfully.

“Oh, you don’t know the half of it,” John said with a wry smile. \*Alyssa, we can trust Niskera, can’t we?\*

\*She’s the most trustworthy person I know,\* the blonde replied. \*Anything we told her in secret would go with her to the grave.\*

\*Can you tell her about Lynette please.\*

Niskera’s calm demeanour shifted as she heard Alyssa’s telepathic voice, the Trankaran obviously pleased to hear from her again. Her glowing eyes then widened in astonishment as the blonde told her all about Lynette Devereux’s alternate life as a secret Lioness.

“By the Great Protector!” Niskera blurted out, before looking at John with guilt and contrition. “Please accept my deepest apologies, John... to take your name in vain, especially while I’m speaking to you is unforgivable.”

“Don’t worry about it,” John said, waving away her apology. “You’ve done an enormous amount of good for your people, Niskera. I’m fairly sure you could get away with calling me an asshole, and not only would I not be offended, I’d probably have to check to see if I was being out of line.”

She looked at him in astonishment, then inclined her head gratefully. “You are gracious and forgiving, John. Thank you.”

“No problem. So as you can probably guess, I want to support Lynette as much as I possibly can, but at the same time, the Outer Rim colonies have very good reason to be furious with High Command. I was hoping that Lynette could resolve the situation diplomatically, but then Galkiran scouts turned up and destroyed the Terran border fleets.”

“The Galkirans?” Niskera asked, looking concerned. “I have never heard of them before.”

“Brace yourself,” John said quietly.

Alyssa quickly brought the Glowing Queen up to speed on the horrifying reality of the Progenitor invasion they were facing. As Niskera listened with mounting dread, John’s youthful matriarch went on to explain the scale of the impending Progenitor War, a conflict that would make the War of the Heavens seem like a playground squabble. Her granite features lost some of their colour, and the pulsing amber lines that suffused her body began to dim.

“Please forgive me... I did not take your warning to brace myself seriously enough,” she said weakly. “Will you excuse me a moment, John?”

“Take your time, you’ve just had a nasty shock,” he replied with sympathy.

Niskera staggered out of frame, but he could hear her laboured breathing as she tried to regain some semblance of control.

\*Is she alright?\* John asked Alyssa with a worried frown.

\*She’s trying to fight off a panic attack,\* the blonde replied. \*The last time a Progenitor launched a full invasion around here, your dad nearly exterminated the Trankarans. Larn’kelnar’s screwing around left the Republic vulnerable to the Kirrix and millions more Trankarans died. Niskera’s quite rightly terrified of another Progenitor assault.\*

It took a few minutes, then Niskera reappeared again, a haunted look in her eyes.

“I bet you’re regretting calling me now?” John said with sympathy.

“I can only humbly apologise, John,” she began, her voice lacking its earlier passion. “I should not have disturbed you with my trivial problems, when you carry the burden of being the Great Protector for everything we hold dear.”

“Don’t say that, Niskera,” John said with a worried frown. “I’m glad you reached out to me, and the issues you’re facing are not trivial.”

“I had convinced the workers of Vulkamduhr to redouble their efforts,” she said glumly. “In my own hubris, I believed that our new fleets of advanced warships would be a force to be reckoned with. It seems that my people will be punished for my false pride. I will reject Governor Vaughn’s offer; there is nothing to be gained by spreading our forces thin to protect the Outer Rim, when those ships will be incapable of stopping what is to come.”

“Hey, don’t give up yet!” John said, alarmed to see how despondent she was. “The situation’s grim, but not completely hopeless. I won’t let the Trankarans be destroyed, Niskera. I promise I’ll fight to my last breath to protect you and all our friends from the Progenitors.”

She took a deep breath and let it our slowly, then the pulsing orange lines regained their previous vigour.

“I have faith in you, Great Protector,” she said solemnly. “I will make a similar pledge to do whatever it takes to support you in this war effort.”

“I know I can always count on you, Glowing Queen,” John said, nodding his approval. “One of the things I’d like us to work on is providing you more tech, but we need to work out how to make it possible for you to build the next level of weapons and armour. Give us some time and we’ll make it happen.”

“Thank you!” she said with profound gratitude.

“I’d really like to come to visit you soon, but I’m also worried about you being that close to the border. Are you planning to return to Trankara soon?”

“We have completed the tour of the previously besieged worlds,” Niskera replied. “My intention was to return to our homeworld soon, but we can depart immediately if that is what you would prefer?”

“Yes please.”

“One moment, John,” She requested, before tapping runes to activate the internal intercom. “Good evening, Thandrun. Yes, I can see that you have been very pious indeed... that is a lot of tankards. Please can you order our immediate departure? No, nothing’s wrong. Thank you, I appreciate it.”

When she ended the call, John asked, “Are you on your way back home?”

“Thandrun will issue the appropriate orders,” she replied. “Although... It might be prudent to check in a few minutes, just to make sure.”

“That might be wise,” John agreed. “I’m sorry that this call didn’t go the way you expected, Niskera. It really was good to speak with you, and I’ll look forward to visiting you on Trankara as soon as we get the chance.”

“I am glad you informed me of the danger we are facing. I cannot serve my people to the best of my ability if I am unaware of any imminent threats,” she said stoically. “Your visit to Trankara will be like a welcome light in the darkness. I dreamt that one day I might be able to show you Vulkamduhr shipyard and now that may come to pass. It would be a great honour to walk through its revered halls with you and the Maliri, just as the Great Maker did with his favoured ones. I have often wondered if he was also accompanied by a Glowing Queen.”

“Wait! What did you just say?” John asked sharply.

“Your visit to our capital will be like a shining light that banishes the darkness?” she replied, looking at him in confusion.

“No, after that... the part about the Great Maker,” he said, leaning forward in his seat.

“Oh... I’ve longed to show you Vulkamduhr ever since my last visit. It is a relic from a bygone era and my Rock Brethren take great pride in knowing that we were able to restore it from destruction. The Star Forges are a magnificent sight, and guiding you through its hallowed hallways would be like accompanying the Great Maker to show him his lasting legacy to my people.”

John burst out laughing, then grinned at the shocked Trankaran. “Niskera, you’re amazing! If I was there, I’d give you a big kiss!”

“Umm... thank you, John,” she murmured, staring at him in astonishment.

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Dana was waiting impatiently for John’s return, and when he entered the golden docking bay accompanied by Sakura, Luna, and Edraele, the redhead bounced on her feet and gave him an excited wave. She sprinted across the deck to join him and leapt into his arms.

“Alyssa said you found it!” she gushed, her blue eyes sparkling with glee. “Have the Trankarans really got Mael’nerak’s next generation Soulforge?!”

“It certainly sounds like it,” John replied, grinning back at her. “They call it Vulkamduhr and according to Niskera, they use it to build all their fleets. Listen to this: apparently there are six black rings they call Star Forges and they just pour metal in, then it builds ship hulls for them!”

“Oh my god, that sounds super awesome!” she exclaimed, literally vibrating with excitement. “When are we going to jump there to check it out?!”

“Not for a while,” John admitted with a frown. “We need to deal with the Galkiran invasion first. Besides, Niskera’s out near the Kirrix border right now, and I want to wait for her to return to Trankara. She knows all the history of Vulkamduhr, and she desperately wants to be our tour guide.”

Dana’s face fell, then she reluctantly nodded. “Yeah, I guess we’ll just have to wait. It’s not like we can just churn out a bunch of ships in time to help fight this Progenitor anyway.” She brightened immediately afterwards, and continued, “But still... it’s incredible that the thing’s still working. Mael’nerak was crazy smart!”

“Niskera said that it was destroyed during the War of Heavens, but the Trankarans managed to rebuild it, even though it took them centuries,” John explained.

“I love those guys!” Dana gushed, giving him a big hug. “This is so awesome, John. Studying the Star Forges is going to save me years of research!”

“I know. I couldn’t believe it when Niskera mentioned that the Great Maker used to visit their shipyards. I knew that if Mael’nerak was involved, it had to be important.”

She gave him a passion-fuelled kiss. “You’re super smart too!”

He laughed and shook his head. “I don’t know about that, but this bit of good news couldn’t come at a better time.”

“Yeah, tell me about it,” she agreed, nodding sombrely.

“Still having trouble finding out what wrong with the Wormhole Generator?” John asked with sympathy.

He placed his hand on the DNA scanner to open the airlock, while supporting Dana with the other, her long legs still wrapped around his waist. The airlock spiralled open, and he stepped aside, then waved through Sakura and the two Maliri.

“Yeah, it totally sucks,” she admitted, sagging in his arms. “I’ve gone over everything I can think of, but I still can’t find anything wrong with it.”

John rubbed away a grease smudge from her forlorn face, then gently stroked her cheek. “Okay, I think you’ve done enough diagnostics for one day. Go get a shower, put on your hottest bikini, then I’ll meet you in the Lagoon. We’ve both earned a good drink.”

“Fuck yeah!” she crowed, dropping lightly to her feet, then giving him a parting kiss.

He smiled as he watched her scamper away down the corridor, before diving into the grav-tubes.

Sakura turned to their two guests and made a point of studying their figures. “I’m pretty sure I’ve got a couple of bikinis in your size. Are you joining us for the pool party?”

“Absolutely they are,” John interjected, making them all laugh. He spotted Alyssa descending in the grav-tubes, so he patted Edraele and Luna on their bottoms, and added, “Go get ready with Sakura. I’ll be up in a couple of minutes.”

“You’re being very presumptuous, my Lord,” Edraele noted with an arched eyebrow.

He clasped her hand, then tapped a finger on her engagement ring. “Nae’sethe Baen’thelas.”

She blushed and gave him a demure kiss. “I hope Sakura has something flattering I can wear.”

“Don’t worry about that,” Alyssa said, as she joined them. “I know she’ll be able to find something you’ll fill out nicely.”

Sakura and the Maliri laughed as they departed, waving flirtatiously at John before they rose up in the grav-tubes.

“Welcome back,” Alyssa said, slipping her hand into his. “You’ve had a busy evening.”

“Yeah, tell me about it,” he agreed, leaning down to give her a tender kiss.

“You made some excellent progress working with Sakura. Edraele and Luna couldn’t be any more smitten with you right now, then you just went ahead and found Mael’nerak’s Soulforge. Not bad work, Mr. Blake.”

He laughed and pulled her into a hug. “I didn’t mean literally tell me, but yeah... we got a lot done.”

Alyssa’s cerulean eyes sparkled with happiness as she slowly walked with John towards the grav-tubes. “The Nymphs did well. Both Calara and I were very impressed.”

“Oh yeah?” he asked, his curiosity piqued. “Do you think they’re combat ready?”

“As ready as they’ll ever be. I think we should pair up Betrixa and Marika and make them our permanent Raptor crew. Betrixa’s totally wild, but she’s an exceptionally gifted pilot. Marika’s an excellent shot, and she’s so easy going, nothing her sister does ever rattles her.”

“What about Leylira and Neysa?” John asked as they stepped into the blue anti-gravity field.

“Leylira’s a cunning predator through and through. I think she’ll excel at the kind of hit and run ambushes we’re going to need against the thrall fleets. I don’t have any reservations about giving her the green light to fly combat missions in the Invictus. Neysa’s exceptionally bright and very perceptive, and probably the second best gunnery marksman we’ve got after Calara. I highly recommend we start giving her some combat hours on the Invictus’ guns.”

“That’s an impressive analysis, XO,” he said appreciatively. “I accept your recommendations.”

\*They’ll be thrilled, Master!\* Jade gushed, sounding equally elated. \*I’ll tell them right now, if that’s alright with you?\*

\*Go ahead, Jade,\* he said with an indulgent smile. \*They’ve worked hard for this and really earned it. We’ll have to find a way celebrate their graduation from training school.\*

She responded with happy Nymph noises that made him smile.

John and Alyssa emerged from the blue gravity field on Deck Two, then strolled down the corridor to their old bedroom. Alyssa wasted no time stripping off, then she idly browsed through her extensive collection of swimwear.

He glanced at the stunning blonde, admiring her spectacular nude figure, then smiled when he saw her trying to choose which bikini to wear. “You’ll look breathtaking in any of them.”

“But I need to choose the perfect one,” she replied with a frown. “If I wear one in blue, then it makes a statement because it’s your colour. The problem is that we’ve got several Maliri onboard, who just happen to have the exact same skin tone, which would dilute the impact and be awkward to say the least. So do I go a few shades darker, or a few shades lighter? Or do I forget blue entirely and go with another colour? Then I need to think about the cut and how much skin I want to show...”

“Okay, you made your point!” John protested, holding his hands up in defeat. “I feel exhausted just listening to all the choices. I’m glad I’ve just got the one pair of swimming trunks.”

“Two,” she corrected him, reaching into a shelf and tossing a scrap of material in his direction.

John caught it and held it up the tiny speedos with a look of disdain. “I am not wearing that.”

“You’d look hot,” she said with a teasing grin.

“No way. Not with all of you looking gorgeous in bikinis. I’d get a boner, and this thing would be catapulted across the Lagoon.”

Alyssa giggled at the evocative imagery then reluctantly conceded. “Yeah, better go with the shorts.”

They got changed and Alyssa posed for him in a scandalously cut red bikini that would have instantly destroyed his other swimwear. She heard his lascivious thoughts, beamed in triumph, then sashayed out into the bedroom. After John picked his jaw up off the floor, he jogged to catch up with her, then they took the express grav-tubes down to Deck Three.

The Lagoon looked like it was ready for a lu’au, with tiki torches casting their flickering firelight over the golden sands. All the girls except Jade were already there, and they called out to John and Alyssa when the couple emerged from the jungle foliage. They walked down the steps and were met by a gaggle of excited young women, who chattered animatedly as they sipped their drinks.

“You’ve got some catching up to do!” Rachel gushed, pressing a tumbler of whiskey into John’s hand and giving a colourful fruit-filled glass to his blonde companion.

“How do we look, Baen’thelas?” Edraele purred, posing provocatively with Luna, the two blue-skinned beauties wearing matching white bikinis.

That spectacular sight would have been devastating enough, but Edraele’s daughters were also posing with her. Irillith and Tashana were wearing the exact same swimwear, which revealed positively indecent amounts of nubile azure flesh. The bottoms were cut low, completely exposing the sculpted muscles of their toned stomachs, while the flimsy tops struggled to contain their ample curves and mouth-watering cleavage.

“Holy fuck...” John muttered, before knocking back the whiskey in three big gulps. “Bartender, I need another one!”

The girls cheered and Rachel bounded across the sand to fetch him another drink.

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It was dark in the Observatory as Jade slinked inside, her feline gaze roving over the familiar shapes curled up under the bedcovers. Four of her sisters rose from their beds, their pointed ears twitching with delight to see the Nymph matriarch return. She glanced at Ailita and saw she was entwined with Jehanna, her arms held protectively around the dusky-hued reporter. Jade smiled fondly at the pair and decided not to disturb the pink-haired catgirl, then padded towards the largest shape in the middle of the bed.

She was careful not to disturb Luna and Edraele, who were draped across John’s chest, their fingers interlaced over his heart. Moving with incredible feline agility, Jade picked her way closer to her Master, until she was gazing down at his face. Jade admired his impossibly handsome features for a moment, her crystalline heart resonating with boundless desire.

With a happy sigh, she leaned down and brushed her lips against his. \*Hello, Master.\*

John stirred awake and looked up into the big emerald eyes that were staring down at him. \*Oh... hey, Jade.\*

He responded sleepily to their kiss and Jade moaned appreciatively into his mouth.

\*Did you visit all the matriarchs?\* he mumbled, when she reluctantly withdrew.

\*Your cum is right where it should be, warming all their tummies,\* she confirmed, kissing the tip of his nose. \*You started making the necessary DNA changes after I informed you about each one.\*

\*Oh yeah,\* he agreed, stifling a yawn. \*Sorry, I forgot.\*

\*That’s understandable, Master. It’s very late and you’re sleepy,\* she said, caressing his cheek. \*I’m sorry I wasn’t back in time for the beach party.\*

\*We missed you,\* he mumbled, stroking her hair.

She nuzzled into his hand, trembling with euphoria at his touch. \*Will you feed me, Master?\*

\*Sure, honey. Love you.\*

Jade quivered with delight, then began placing a trail of soft kisses down his chest and over his stomach. She effortlessly engulfed his cock in her mouth, then swallowed the broad shaft into her welcoming throat. Her worries melted away as she serviced her master, lovingly pleasuring him with a slow, languid blowjob.

Four verdant tentacles emerged from her back to snake over to her sisters, who eagerly suckled on each phallic-shaped tip. However, Jade didn’t transfer that intensity to the rippling caress of his cock, choosing instead to gently milk him in his drowsy daze. It didn’t take long for her master to reach his release, not after his taut quad had been teased to distraction by hours spent in the company of bikini clad temptresses.

Jade hummed in approval as she gulped down the massive load, sharing it out equally with her four Nymph sisters. When her work was complete, Jade tucked her exhausted master under the covers, then padded over to her sisters, the tentacocks withdrawing into her body.

\*Come along, little kittens,\* she said, beckoning the four Nymphs to follow. \*We have work to do.\*

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\*Hey, handsome... it’s time to wake up,\* Alyssa whispered, her lovely telepathic voice drifting through John’s subconscious.

He opened his eyes, then grimaced at the blinding glare of the lights. “What the hell?! Dim lights!”

The lights dipped their illumination, but it did nothing to relieve his pounding headache.

“Shit! My head’s killing me,” he groaned, uncurling his arm from behind Luna and rubbing at his forehead.

“Did you have a bit too much last night?” Alyssa asked with a knowing smile.

“No, I only had three whiskeys,” he protested.

She looked at him with a puzzled frown. “Really? I don’t remember you drinking excessively, but I wasn’t watching your every move. Can you heal the headache yourself?”

John tried, then shook his head... which he immediately regretted... as even concentrating was painful.

Alyssa darted a concerned glance to her side, then Rachel sat bolt upright. “Okay, I’m awake! There’s no need to yell.”

The brunette crawled over to join them and studied John with concern.

“Sensitivity to light and an intense headache?” she whispered curiously, placing a soft hand on his forehead as a grey mist rolled down her arm.

He was about to nod, but thought better of it. “Yes.”

“Shh... just relax,” she murmured, her voice gentle and soothing. “Let me take your pain away.”

John felt wonderfully cool waves of relief wash over his mind, the sharp stabs of pain fading away into a distant memory.

“What was that about?” Alyssa asked their medic, as she massaged his temples.

“That wasn’t a hangover,” Rachel said with a worried frown. “You had all the symptoms of massive psychic overexertion.”

“From what?” John asked, staring up at her in bewilderment from the flat of his back. “All I did was duel with Luna and Edraele, but I hardly made a dent in my energy reserves. I changed Luna and the matriarchs so they wouldn’t be unfriendly towards Auralei anymore... and that’s literally it.”

Luna’s eyelashes fluttered open, as she was woken up by all the conversation.

“Good morning, Baen’thelas,” she said warmly, before glancing up at the teenagers. “Hello, Alyssa. Hello, Rachel.” She suddenly paused, picking up on their tense mood. “Is something wrong?”

That was when Edraele woke up, the Maliri Queen stretching languidly as she opened her eyes. “Oh my... I feel won-der-ful!” she gasped, before dissolving into a fit of giggles.

“Holy shit!” Dana muttered, sitting up and staring at the commotion. “What the fuck happened to her eyes?!”

Dazzling purple light blazed across the ceiling of the Observatory, all shining from the delirious Maliri Queen.

“Is Edraele alright?” Tashana asked, kneeling beside Rachel. “What happened to her?”

Irillith winced at the glare, then shielded her eyes and glanced down at John. “Did you give our mother the Lumen affinity, to make her like Alyssa?”

“No, I didn’t do anything,” he protested.

“She’s high as a kite,” Alyssa muttered, shaking her head as she studied the giggling Maliri. “You must have massively upgraded her psychic energy reserves.”

John couldn’t help looking sceptical. “Just from Luna? I know Edraele loves her, and the two of us got really close yesterday, but this can’t just be from that.”

“They’re like beautiful little stars!” Edraele sang. “There’s so many of them... and they’re so pretty!”

“Stars?” Calara asked, glancing at each of her friends with a puzzled frown. “Can she see through the armour plating? Did you give her X-Ray vision, John?”

He looked up at the ceiling and the armoured panels that were currently covering the crystal dome. “No, I haven’t given her any new abilities... not on purpose, anyway.”

Rachel shook her head. “Edraele said that they were ‘like’ little stars, not that she can actually see stars in the sky.”

“Hold on a second,” John said, closing his eyes and focusing his mind inward.

He envisioned their psychic network, with his matriarchs at the top and all the girls connected to them below. At first glance everything seemed to be normal, but after checking through all the Invictus crew, he moved onto the Maliri wards in Edraele’s network. There was Luna, the Young Matriarchs, Almari and Ilyana, then the rest of the House matriarchs. They shone brightly, contributing much more to her psychic energy reserves after their relationships had been carefully nurtured over the past few months.

After them were the Maliri that weren’t quite as intimately connected, like the senior naval officers, the engineers, the Genthalas security personnel, then the base administration staff. John paused and frowned in confusion. He knew all of Edraele’s security staff by name, having introduced himself to them while on the station, but he definitely hadn’t recruited any of them yet. He went back to her network of thralls, and couldn’t believe what he was seeing as the list went on... and on... and on.

“What the hell?!” John blurted out, his eyes snapping open. “Edraele’s got a huge number of new Maliri in her network! There must be thousands of them!”

“How?” Alyssa asked, sounding just as bewildered as he felt. “You were both asleep!”

“I don’t know,” he replied with a helpless shrug. “They just appeared overnight!”

John froze and slowly turned to look across the bed at the only women who were still slumbering peacefully in the Observatory. Jade lay on her back, a contented smile on her beautiful face, as her four sisters cuddled up next to her.

“Jade woke me up in the middle of the night...” he said quietly. “She asked me to feed her.”

“How on Terra did she recruit so many Maliri?” Sakura asked with a puzzled frown.

The tawny-haired doctor rubbed her chin thoughtfully. “At least that explains your headache this morning.”

Dana’s brow furrowed. “How? I thought adding Maliri to the network was supposed to give John *more* energy, not drain him dry!”

Rachel gently tousled John’s hair. “That’s how a Progenitor’s connection is supposed to work, but you made some tweaks to yours, didn’t you, John?”

Alyssa relaxed and nodded in understanding. “Okay, that makes sense. John giving each of them a little psychic bundle of TLC isn’t a big deal... unless you recruit ten-thousand Maliri at the same time.”

“Exactly.” Rachel glanced at him speculatively. “You’ve also modified what happens when you make a new connection, haven’t you?”

John nodded in confirmation. “When we started having to feed the Maliri again to stop them being unfriendly to neutral thralls, I thought it might be sensible to avoid having to do that in the future. Now whenever I recruit someone, that change is automatic.”

“Times ten-thousand...” Alyssa said meaningfully. “No wonder you had a headache, you’ve been a busy boy.”

John tentatively sat up, then relaxed when he confirmed that the headache was gone. He looked down at Edraele and saw that she had passed out once again.

“We better let her sleep this off,” he said, brushing his fingers through her soft white hair. Glancing over at the pile of slumbering Nymphs, he rolled his eyes. “Them too. We can ask Jade exactly what they did when she wakes up.”

Alyssa nodded in agreement, then glanced over at Calara with a worried frown. “How are you feeling this morning?”

The Latina looked at her in surprise. “I’m fine. Why?”

“Well, you did age another whole year overnight,” she said sombrely, before breaking into a broad grin.

John and the girls all chimed in together, “Happy Birthday!”

Calara blushed and gave Alyssa a disapproving frown. “You told them.”

The blonde laughed and tackled her to the bed. “Of course I did! Oh, we’re going to make such a huge fuss over you today!”

“Alyssa!” Calara protested with a groan, then couldn’t help smiling.

Dana sprang to her feet. “Wait right there! I’ll be back with your present!”

The rest of the girls followed after her, leaving the Observatory by the opposite door to usual, and descending in the forward grav-tubes.

“You should see the armoury,” Rachel called back over her shoulder. “I’ve never seen so much ribbon and wrapping paper!”

John waited until Alyssa helped Calara sit upright again and said, “I couldn’t really wrap my present.”

Calara gave him a fond smile. “John, you didn’t need to get me anything.”

“Are you kidding? Of course I was going to give my beautiful fiancée a present,” he replied, leaning in to give her a tender kiss. “That wasn’t it by the way.”

“Alright, I admit you’ve got me curious,” the brunette said, her brown eyes glinting with excitement.

“I thought your retirement gift idea for your father was incredibly thoughtful, and it was horrible seeing you get upset when you realised it would never happen. So when Jack does retire, I’m going to personally build him an exact replica of the Damocles,” John said sincerely. “It won’t cost you a penny; I’ll pay for the entire ship myself.”

Calara gasped and held a trembling hand over her mouth as her eyes welled up. “Oh, John, thank you!” she gushed, flinging herself into his arms.

“You’ll still get your dream of the Fernandez family ship,” John said, as he rubbed her back.

“That’s incredible generous, thank you so much!” she said, wiping away her tears. Calara paused and gave him a tentative smile. “Umm... does it have to be an exact replica?”

He laughed and shook his head. “I’m sure we can convince Dana to throw in an upgrade or two.”

She giggled in delight. “Oh, I wish I could tell dad right now!”

“I don’t mind you talking to him about it before he actually retires. Having his own ship is going to hugely effect his retirement plans, so it’s probably wise to give him a head’s up.”

Calara nodded thoughtfully. “I won’t mention it to him for a while, he’s too upset about the friends he lost on the real Damocles.” She looked into his eyes and said sincerely, “This is the best gift I’ve ever had in my entire life. I love you so much.”

“You’re welcome,” he managed to reply, before she gave him a passionate kiss.

The moment was shattered a second later as the door opened and Dana dived onto the bed, a beautifully wrapped present in her hands. “This is for you! Happy Birthday!”

The rest of the girls followed after her, and soon the bed was festooned with strips of colourful paper and an impressive collection of presents. They’d all taken time to make or buy her thoughtful gifts that Calara was genuinely touched to receive. Even Auralei handed her a present, having been forewarned of the custom by Alyssa.

“I love all of you guys so much,” Calara said, filled with emotion as she looked around at her friends.

“Edraele has a gift for you too,” Luna said quietly in her melodic voice. “If you don’t mind, I’d like to wait and give you mine at the same time.”

“You’re so sweet, thank you,” the Latina said, giving her a grateful hug.

Alyssa glanced at the sleeping Nymphs. “Jade and her sisters have presents for you as well.”

Calara let out a chuckle of disbelief. “This is already the best birthday ever. After all this, I dread to think what kind of disaster we’re in for this afternoon.”

Dana gasped, her eyes wide in alarm. “Don’t jinx it!”

Rachel laughed and rolled her eyes. “Superstitions are so ridiculous. Why would Calara having a nice birthday automatically mean that something terrible is going to happen to ruin it?”

“I don’t make the rules!” the redhead protested. “I just learned to duck when the shit’s about to hit the fan!”

“And on that charming note, can I interest anyone in breakfast?” John asked rising to his feet.

The girls were all eager to accompany him to the Officers’ Lounge, except for Luna, who offered to stay behind and watch over Edraele and the Nymph.

“Thanks, honey,” John said, leaning over to kiss her. “I’ll bring you a plate of food.”

Luna thanked him, then waved goodbye as they left the Observatory.

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Dawn broke over the city of Elaren, the sun’s brilliant rays glinting off the lofty spires and making them gleam with a lovely golden glow. The sun rose higher in the sky, shining it’s bright radiance on the rows of spotless boulevards and sculpted parks. Despite the immaculate state of the Maliri city, not a soul stirred on the streets below, giving the deserted metropolis a feeling of haunting melancholia.

A small flock of Naethala-doves swooped over the silent city, then banked around towards the sweeping coastline. They dived down, gliding low over the pristine sandy beach, then snatched tiny insects out of the air until they’d had their fill. Spreading their wings, they swooped up, then landed on the tree-lined promenade that overlooked the crystal-clear aquamarine sea. The tiny birds chattered and squawked, hopping around and playing noisy games, their cheerful trills and warbles adding a welcome flicker of life to the vacant buildings.

The lonely serenity of Elaren was shattered by the deep roar of retro-thrusters, sending the flock of Naethala-doves racing for safety. High above them, huge golden spacecraft emerged from the billowing cloudbanks, with scores of tiny shuttles peeling away to land at key points around the city. More and more ships appeared, descending like a swarm of gleaming locusts, their purpose not too dissimilar to those ravenous insects.

One of the golden shuttles landed on the promenade, it’s crystal door spiralling open to allow the occupants to disembark. Two lithe young women emerged from the shuttle, moving with catlike grace as they walked out onto the paving stones and looked around.

“The rehabilitation crews have done excellent work,” Ilyana noted, admiring the flawless state of the deserted Maliri city.

Her companion inhaled deeply, filling her lungs with fresh sea air. “It’s lovely. I hope the Abandoned are happy here.”

A heavy carrier blotted out the sun as it swept overhead, the immense vessel slowly descending until it landed on the massive landing pad for coastal commerce. Airlocks in the golden hull spiralled open and teal-hued figures began to emerge, the Abandoned elders gawking in wonder at the immaculate alien city. Their Maliri hosts walked among them, checking that they were comfortable in the balmy climate.

Ilyana grinned at her friend. “Come on, Almari. Let’s go see what they make of their new home!”

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John sipped his coffee and smiled as he listened to the light-hearted banter over breakfast. It was strangely comforting to hear their laughter and relaxed conversation, like a wholesome feast that nourished his hungry soul.

He felt like someone was watching him and when he glanced to his right, he saw that Alyssa was studying him with a smile of contentment.

\*You look very happy with yourself,\* he noted, returning her smile.

\*I was just thinking that it’s lovely to celebrate things as a family... and this is the closest I’ve ever got to that feeling.\*

He clasped her hand and gave it an affectionate squeeze. \*I know exactly what you mean.\*

They listened to their friends in companionable silence, until the rest of the girls quickly drew them into the conversation.

\*Good morning, John,\* Edraele said, her pleasant voice sounding somewhat subdued.

\*Edraele!\* he exclaimed, rising from the table and striding towards the exit. \*Are you okay? You sound tired out.\*

\*I am feeling somewhat delicate this morning,\* she admitted. \*It feels like I overindulged to excess last night.\*

\*You have Jade to thank for that little mishap,\* John noted, pausing in the doorway to wave goodbye to everyone as Rachel and Alyssa hurried after him. \*Do you remember what happened?\*

\*It appears your roaming pack of catgirls took it upon themselves to add just over 11,000 Maliri to our psychic network. The Young Matriarchs have informed me that Genthalas is full of excited whispers about lucky women receiving a special gift from Baen’thelas. Now all the Maliri aboard the shipyard are eagerly awaiting their chance to receive a Nymphs’ kiss.\*

“So that’s how they did it,” Rachel marvelled, shaking her head in admiration.

John glanced back at her and frowned. “I’m not sure we should be applauding Jade taking her sisters on a mass recruitment drive.”

The brunette shrugged. “It is very impressive though. Between the five of them, they each shared your load between 2200 Maliri.”

“That’s a lot of kisses,” Alyssa noted.

“Very true,” Rachel agreed. “Besides the remarkable smoochathon, the Nymphs found a way to dilute their share of your ejaculate and evenly distribute it between thousands of women, while still ensuring each Maliri received enough to establish a connection to the network.”

“I wonder how strong the connection is though?” John asked, intrigued by their feat, despite his reluctance to give it his full approval.

\*Actually, the connection is still surprisingly strong, especially amongst the security personnel,\* Edraele informed him. \*They’re at least comparable to the engineers.\*

Alyssa laughed and gave John a knowing look. “Well that explains it then.”

“What do you mean?” he asked, still none the wiser.

“I’ve heard you flirting with all the security staff.”

“I was just making friendly conversation,” he protested. “I know how boring guard duty can be and they seemed to really enjoy having a chat.”

“Right... the Maliri who take one look at you and get all goo-goo eyed, would never misinterpret your ‘friendly conversation’ as a flirty prelude to a roll in the sack with mighty Baen’thelas.”

Rachel tried to stifle a laugh. “It seems you don’t know your own persuasive charm, John.”

He groaned and rubbed at his temple. “Please tell me they’re not all hoping to sleep with me, Edraele?”

\*Every Maliri on Genthalas, and every crewwoman aboard your fleets are hoping to sleep with you, my Lord,\* Edraele informed him helpfully.

“You know what I mean...” he grumbled as they entered his old bedroom.

\*No, they’re not expecting to,\* she clarified. \*But the guards all like you very much.\*

After taking the express grav-tubes down to the Lagoon, John led the way over the arched bridge to the Observatory. He walked inside and was relieved to see that the beams of brilliant light that had shone from Edraele’s eyes had subsided to a soft purple glow.

He dropped to his knees on the bed and pulled her into a hug. “I was worried about you.”

She was about to reply, when Rachel placed a hand on a blue shoulder and suffused Edraele with her healing aura. The grey mist soothed away any lingering discomfort, leaving the Maliri Queen to relax with relief in John’s arms.

“Well now I feel absolutely fine,” she said, glancing up at Rachel with gratitude. “Thank you, darling girl.”

“You’re welcome,” Rachel said, patting her shoulder.

The chronometer on the wall caught her eye and Edraele gasped. “We were supposed to meet with the matriarchs an hour ago!”

“I let them know we were running a bit late,” Alyssa said, stroking her arm.

“But the Wormhole Generator will be fully charged soon,” Edraele protested. “You need to jump to Geniya trading station!”

“The main reason we came back to Genthalas first was to film me with my matriarchs,” John replied, holding her close. “You’re the star of the show, Edraele. Of course we were going to wait until you recovered.”

Edraele let out a happy sigh, then place a tender kiss on his cheek. “Rachel’s right, you don’t know the power of your persuasive charm. Still, I feel fully recovered now. Shall we be on our way?”

Alyssa darted into their walk-in wardrobe and emerged with a suit bag folded over her arm. “Here’s your suit, handsome. You should shower at Edraele’s quarters and you can both get changed there, it’ll be faster.”

John got up and offered both Edraele and Luna a hand. “Let’s go make rating’s gold.”

“I believe that’s the plan,” the Maliri Queen said, quickly slipping on the dress she wore yesterday.

“Jehanna and Auralei will meet you down at the airlock,” Alyssa informed them.

“Thanks, beautiful,” John said, giving her a parting kiss as she handed him the suit bag.

The trio waved goodbye and hurried from the Observatory.

Alyssa turned to glance at the sleeping Nymphs. “You can stop pretending now, Jade.”

Her emerald eyes snapped open and Jade gave her a look filled with remorse. “Is he really mad at me? This one had no idea that he would get hurt!”

The blonde teenager let out a flustered sigh. “I know you were only trying to give him a nice surprise. It was a lovely idea to make Genthalas a much more welcoming place for Auralei, but you know how John gets about recruitment. And 11,000 Maliri, Jade? Come on...”

“I know it’s bad,” Jade admitted with a guilty frown. “But we only recruited them. It’s not like we made all those sexy little kittens pregnant.”

Alyssa gazed into the distance, just imagining how furious John would have been in that case. He would get over it eventually though, and then there’d be 11,000 Maliri tummies swelling with his babies.

She swallowed at that tantalising vision, then wagged a chastising finger at Jade. “Naughty kitty. Stop trying to distract me!”

“Sorry, Alyssa,” Jade murmured, but she looked just as distracted by the very same thought.

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John walked along the golden corridors of Genthalas with Edraele at his side, and Luna, Auralei, and Jehanna following close behind. It was impossible to miss the dramatic increase in white-haired personnel aboard the orbital shipyard, and it seemed John’s popularity seemed to have increased in leaps and bounds. The Maliri were so distracted by his presence, that the couple of dark-haired women they ran into, were so busy gazing wistfully at John, they didn’t even notice the Larathyran hiding unobtrusively behind his back.

Their group reached Edraele’s quarters without incident, passing the two blushing guards. When they entered, Luna excused herself to get her equipment, while John, Auralei, and Jehanna accompanied Edraele towards her bedroom.

“You were very quiet on the way here, Edraele,” John asked with concern. “Is everything alright?”

She nodded and gave him a bright smile. “I was busy issuing orders. I have some wonderful news for you, John: Leylira’s fleet have arrived at the coastal city I had prepared for their arrival. The Abandoned are disembarking from her ships, and seem very happy with their new lodgings.”

“That’s great news!” he said, following Edraele into her bedroom. “How long will it take Lilyana to drop everybody off and return to Genthalas?”

“She should arrive tomorrow evening,” the Maliri Queen replied, as she stripped off her dress. “Eradon was the best option I could find for the Abandoned. It was a deserted coastal city, with a pleasant temperature and calm seas. Helene’s people should be able to explore the water to their heart’s content, and they’ve got the entire city to themselves.”

“You’re letting them fend for themselves?” John asked in surprise, as he helped Auralei out of her dress, then quickly pulled off his t-shirt.

“No, no, of course not,” Edraele replied. “The planet is still populated by Maliri and thousands of civilians will be on hand to provide vital services, as well as educate them on how to use our technology. I just meant that there aren’t any Maliri residents in Eradon; the city was abandoned a century ago.”

“Abandoned to the Abandoned,” Jehanna said as she followed them into the bathroom. “I’d love to do some filming there, to show their strength and courage.”

“When we get a chance, sure,” John agreed. “It’s probably a good thing that Eradon is located on the far side of Genthalas. At least that keeps them safely out of the way of the Galkiran invasion corridor.”

“I can’t claim that was intentional,” Edraele admitted, as she activated the shower. “But it was a stroke of luck, at least on the Abandoned’s behalf.”

Auralei sighed with pleasure. “These showers are wonderful.”

John started soaping her down, which only improved the Larathyran’s opinion of the facilities. “Have you heard any news about Helene’s parents?” he asked his Maliri Queen.

“I’m afraid not. Nobody we rescued was from Coarem village,” Edraele said sadly.

“Hey, no news is good news,” Jehanna reminded them. “There’s no reason to believe the worst until we receive evidence to the contrary.”

“You’re right, there’s no point worrying,” John agreed.

Edraele finished washing her hair, then studied Auralei with an appraising eye. “I have just the dress for you, darling girl. You’ll look magnificent.”

“I wasn’t planning on filming Auralei, unless you’ve changed the script without telling me?” Jehanna asked, looking at her in alarm.

“No, but I really want to introduce her to my matriarchs,” Edraele explained. “And we want to make just the right first impression.”

“Well at least Jade topped them all up last night... before she went rogue,” John said, shaking his head. “You won’t have to worry about them disliking you on sight.”

\*I’m very sorry, Master,\* Jade said contritely.

\*Jade!\* he exclaimed in surprise. \*We need to talk...\*

\*Yes, Master,\* she said, sounding exceptionally glum.

“Jade’s awake,” he explained to the girls.

They soaped him down as a team effort and John was soon clean in record time.

\*So what happened last night?\* he asked, as he stepped out of the shower cubicle and started drying himself in the auto-driers. \*What possessed you to start recruiting every Maliri in sight?\*

\*It wasn’t quite as random as that, Master,\* the Nymph patiently explained. \*We visited Genthalas’ command centre, where I told the females there that we wished to give them a gift from Baen’thelas. All we asked in return, was to summon all the base personnel they could contact, starting with security, and ask them to gather in one of the largest hangars. There were actually over 15,000 Maliri in attendance, but we ran out of your cum.\*

\*Okay that explains how you did it, but not why?\* John persisted.

\*I know how much you like Auralei, and I just wanted to make Genthalas as comfortable and welcoming for her as possible. It would’ve be awful for her to see scowling, angry faces every day! I never even dreamed you might be harmed, Master!\*

John sighed and shook his head. He could hear how devastated Jade was at having accidentally hurt him, and he already knew that she would never intentionally bring him harm. She also had no way of knowing about the accumulated psychic toll it would take out of him by recruiting so many thralls in one sitting.

\*It was a very thoughtful idea, honey,\* he said gently, as he entered the bedroom. John unzipped the suit bag and started pulling on his shirt and trousers. \*But we have to be very careful about recruitment for all sorts of reasons. Promise me that you won’t try something like that again unless everyone knows exactly what’s going on?\*

\*I promise, Master.\*

\*Alright, well at least there was no permanent harm done,\* he said with relief, slipping on his shoes. \*And it seems you accidentally gave Edraele a massive boost to her psychic energy reserves, and that’s definitely no bad thing either.\*

\*So I actually helped?\* the Nymph asked tentatively.

He laughed and slid his arms into his jacket. \*Apparently, you made a lot of Maliri very happy, but remember your promise, Jade... okay? No more mass recruiting drives without permission first.\*

\*I won’t forget, Master!\* she exclaimed, sounding happy once again.

“Wow, you look perfect!” Jehanna remarked, her high-heels clicking as she strode into the room wearing a smart business suit.

John glanced at the mirror and realised to his surprise that this wasn’t his usual Mael’nerak inspired suit. The style was similar, but it did more to emphasise his height and physique, rather than just being an elegant and flattering cut.

The click of more heels announced the arrival of the next two women, then Auralei and Edraele appeared, wearing regal gowns that left him in no doubt about their positions of authority. The Larathyran Empress and Maliri Queen both wore sparkling tiara’s in their flowing white hair, completing their stately appearance.

“You do look magnificent,” he said to Auralei, agreeing with Edraele’s prediction. “You both do.”

Jehanna clapped her hands together and grinned in anticipation. “It’s showtime!”