Three Square Meals Ch. 150.2

John collapsed on the bed and groaned as his muscles ached in protest. “Holy fuck!”

Betrixa lay with her head on the mattress, but she was still up on her knees, her ass raised high. Beneath the panting catgirl, her stomach was hugely swollen, the nymph’s womb packed full of cum and keeping her propped up.

She gazed at him through dazed eyes, the endless climaxes leaving her floating in euphoric bliss. “You were a wild man, Master. I’ll have to try to eat you more often.”

He chuckled and turned to grin at the dishevelled blonde. “You seemed to like being eaten too.”

She snorted with laughter, then flexed her supple muscles and toppled over onto the bed with her back towards him. Betrixa wriggled backwards, until her perfectly rounded bottom was pressed against his hip. To make the invitation to spoon her even more obvious, Betrixa’s sinuous tail wrapped around his forearm and gently tugged him towards her.

John rolled onto his side and encircled her in his arms, feeling her skin radiating a comforting warmth. “So you’re not all about fun and naughty games?” he teased her, his hand stroking the new curves he’d added to her body. “I think you’re secretly as gentle as a kitten inside, just like Marika.”

Betrixa nuzzled against his bicep, then playfully bit him, her pointed canines actually piercing the skin.

“Ouch!” he protested, smacking her delicious rump.

“You haven’t broken me in yet, Master,” she purred, settling down again.

He healed the scratches before he started bleeding over the bed, then held her close. “I know... and that’s going to be a lot of fun,” he agreed. “But please promise me that you won’t ambush me like that again. It’s not that I can’t take a practical joke, but you were seconds away from being splattered all over the Lagoon. If Jade hadn’t stopped me in time...”

Betrixa interlaced her fingers with his, then brought his hand up to her lips. “I’m sorry for being so reckless, John,” she said between kisses. “I promise I won’t do that again.”

“Good girl,” he said, kissing her shoulder. “I’m very fond of you, Betrixa. I’d never forgive myself if I accidentally hurt you.”

“I know,” she murmured, her eyes softening. “This one is very lucky that you’re her master.”

They shared a tender kiss, then cuddled together in the bed, enjoying the afterglow. John had just drifted off into a light sleep when he heard someone politely clear their throat.

“Hello, father,” Daphne said. “I’m sorry to disturb you, but we are ready to install the bed.”

John glanced over at the synthetic girl and saw that she was accompanied by several maintenance bots and two of the cleaning robots. One of the maids had fresh bedding folded in her arms, while the other was eyeing his rumpled sheets with a look of gleeful anticipation.

“Yeah, sure,” he said awkwardly, reddening in embarrassment as he slid out of the bed onto the hangar’s cold titanium deck plates. “Sorry about the mess.”

[Ah, monsieur, ce n’est rien,] Trois said, with a coquettish giggle. [Un noble sacrifice pour l’amour!]

Daphne held out a hand towards his nubile companion and helped the cum-stuffed Nymph off the bed. “Those were some interesting noises you were making, Betrixa. With your feline ancestry, would you classify them as ‘yowling’?”

“Yeah, I was definitely in heat,” the cheetah catgirl said with a cheeky grin. “Your father fucked me so hard, I thought I was going to get knocked up for sure!”

“Betrixa!” John protested, reddening in embarrassment. “She’s my daughter!”

The Nymph smirked at him and rolled her eyes. “Your darling daughter’s seen you pound your entire harem into oblivion more times than I can count. Isn’t that right, Daph?”

“Father is quite prolific,” the synthetic girl said without judgement.

When he glanced at Daphne, he noticed her mouth had turned up into the hint of a smile, and suspected her deadpan delivery was intended for comedic effect.

John chuckled and shook his head. “Great... it looks like I’m getting teased by my daughter now too. You’re lucky you aren’t ticklish, Daphne.”

 She giggled, then brought her hand up to her mouth in surprise. “Oh!”

“I like hearing that laugh,” he said, leaning over to kiss the top of her head. “Thanks a lot for helping out with assembling the Raptor... and the Collective too for that matter.”

[It’s our pleasure, your lordship!] the second maid declared, unfolding the fresh sheets with a snap as Trois deftly stripped the bed.

One of the maintenance bots slowly lifted a clenched hand, his thumb upraised. [No problemo!]

Betrixa bounded over and gave John a sizzling kiss. “I’ll go fill up Irillith and Jehanna for you, Master. Thanks for the nooner, that was super hot!”

He slapped her rump as she flounced away, then gathered his hastily discarded clothes. As the Maintenance bots floated off with his freshly-made bed, John saw that Dana was still hard at work behind her engineering console. He walked over to join her and saw dozens of holographic screens projected above the station.

“How’s the weapons research going?” he asked, watching in fascination as she worked on multiple schematics simultaneously.

“Really great actually,” she murmured, not taking her eyes off the screen. “I started copying the improvements Mael’nerak had made to the turret guns, then it felt like a whole bunch of things suddenly clicked into place. I don’t want to be rude... but I’m working on some really complex calculations at the moment.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll leave you in peace.” He leaned over to give her a peck on the cheek. “Good luck, Sparks. Let me know whenever you need anything shaped.”

He turned to walk away, but she grabbed him and pulled him back to her pursed lips. “I need a proper kiss before you go!”

The perky redhead got what she was looking for and she hummed happily to herself as John left the hangar. He took the grav-tubes up to Deck Two, then padded down the corridor towards the Commander’s quarters to use the shower facilities there. He dropped his clothes on to the chair, knowing that the cleaning bots would take them away to be cleaned with their usual efficiency.

As he was entering the bathroom, his sharp ears heard the faint fluttering of wings, and a green songbird banked around to fly over his shoulder. Jade shimmered in the air before him, then landed lightly on her feet before he’d taken another step.

“Hey Jade,” he said with a warm smile. “Are you here to join me for a shower?”

She nodded eagerly. “Alyssa’s determined to make sure you never shower alone and I managed to beat everyone else to volunteer first!”

“Thanks, honey,” he said, entering the cubicle and activating the water jets. “I always enjoy your company.”

They took turns in soaping each other down, with the Nymph matriarch murmuring her gratitude for taking such good care of her sister. It was a very pleasant bathing experience and as they dried off afterwards, John thanked her for accompanying him.

“I enjoyed it too, Master,” she replied, following him out to the walk-in-wardrobe.

John picked out comfortable clothing that he could wear under his training armour and began getting dressed. “How are your other sisters doing on the Bridge? Have they located any of the missing thrall vessels yet?”

“Betrixa was supposed to tell you that they’ve already spotted two of the destroyers, but I think she was worried about upsetting you. Neysa scanned the marooned ships for life forms, and confirmed that the crews were all dead.”

He pulled on a t-shirt and nodded in understanding. “I can see why Betrixa didn’t want to ruin the mood. I’ll have to get the coordinates for any ships they find and Edraele can pass their location on to her Fleet Commanders.”

“Leave it to me, Master. I’ll relay the information to Edraele myself.”

“Thanks, Jade,” he said gratefully, walking over to give her a goodbye kiss. “I’ll see you later.”

“John... please wait a moment,” she requested, placing a hand lightly on his chest.

“Sure, honey. What’s on your mind?” he asked, stroking her arm.

“I know how hard it was for you, boarding the Larathyran battleships and finding all those dead thralls,” she said with sympathy. “I just wanted to warn you that the situation on Larn’kelnar’s homeworld might be bad too.”

“Really?” John asked, looking at her in surprise. “But aren’t nearly all the thralls recruited into a Progenitor’s fleets?”

Jade shook her head. “Mael’nerak had many thralls living with him on Kythshara. It’s quite likely that Larn’kelnar had a sizeable number on his Throne World too.”

“Alright... well thanks for warning me,” John said, leaning in to give her a grateful kiss. “We’ll just have to wait and see what the situation is like on Larathyra.”

She waved goodbye and John took the grav-tube down to Deck Three, where he proceeded down the corridor to the Dojo. As he entered the Armoury, he heard the brittle sound of ice shattering, followed in rapid succession by two more high-pitched crashes. John opened the door to the training area, and saw that the floor of the pagoda was covered in brittle shards of ice, the frozen debris clustered around a training dummy wearing a black breastplate.

Sakura looked up when he entered, then her face brightened with a welcoming smile. “Hey, John!”

“Hi, honey.” He walked towards her and glancing meaningfully at the icy carpet. “What are you up to?”

“I’m just practicing punching through armour,” she replied, rapping her knuckles on the thrall breastplate.

John saw that it was severely dented from dozens of impacts, but there were also some holes where she had managed to pierce through the armour plating.

“It looks like you’re making great progress,” he noted, poking his finger into one of the holes and realising that it cored straight through the dummy. “I’m amazed you managed to penetrate thrall armour. Well done.”

Her smile widened and she shook her head. “No, you misunderstand what I’m trying to accomplish. Let me show you.”

Sakura beckoned him to follow her across the mats and when she’d backed up to the other side of the room, she turned to face the training dummy. After closing her eyes, Sakura’s brow furrowed with concentration as she gathered her will. There was a unnerving cracking sound and a javelin of ice formed in the air, the glacial chill drifting down to the floor in a shower of frosted flakes.

The cryokinetic Lioness made a sharp gesture towards her target and the two-metre spear rocketed across the Dojo to slam into the dummy. With a shrieking crash it punched through the armour plating, impaled the target dummy, then exploded out the backplate in a shower of polycarbonate chips.

“Very impressive,” John remarked, nodding his approval.

“It’s effective... but I’m too vulnerable having to concentrate that intensely,” Sakura said, not looking happy. “This is what I’m working on at the moment.”

She made a casual wave of her hand and a trio of icy javelins appeared above her shoulder. When Sakura pointed towards the target dummy, they pounded the black breastplate one after the other, each frozen spear shattering into a thousand pieces and sending ice chips skittering across the floor. As the ringing slowly subsided, John gaped at the breastplate which was now sporting three huge dents in the torso plating.

“You see?” she said, frowning in frustration. “Unless I really focus, I can’t hit hard enough to pierce through the armour.”

He gestured towards the dents and gave her a wry smile. “If someone was actually wearing that when you slammed those icicles into them, I doubt they’d survive. The concussive force from the impact would cause some nasty internal injuries.”

“Hmm, that’s a good point,” Sakura said thoughtfully. “I’d still prefer to completely neutralise a target rather than risk allowing them to continue fighting.”

John stared at the thrall armour and tried not to think about the carnage Sakura could inflict on a Progenitor’s forces when he unleashed her on them.

The former assassin swept her hand in a semi-circle and the carpet of ice chips evaporated into frozen mist. “So what should we train today? Do you want to work on developing new techniques for your own school of swordsmanship?”

“I thought it would be a good idea to practice synchronising with each other again,” John suggested, giving his training partner his full attention. “We need to get familiar with using that ability while outside of the Shroud.”

Sakura’s eyes lit up with excitement. “That’s a great idea! Let’s get geared up!”

“Hold on,” John said, catching her hand, and pulling the eager young woman into his arms. “Let’s practice without our Paragon suits first. All that armour would be a distraction.”

She bit her lip and nodded eagerly. “Okay!”

The pair stepped apart and John steadied his breath, calming himself until he felt his mind ease into that familiar Zen state. Bright shafts of sunlight shone down through a break in the clouds above Mount Daisen, illuminating the beautiful girl before him as they stood together in the Dojo. He moved into the first Tai Chi stance and Sakura smoothly mirrored his movements, raising her hand and stepping sideways to stand directly in front of him.

John turned his torso and swept to the right, then his eyes locked with Sakura’s as she matched his next stance. They both felt that special connection between them, the sensation intensifying with every practiced move they made. He let himself fall deeper into the trance, his awareness of her body expanding as they became perfectly synchronised with each other.

“Do you feel the difference?” John asked, sliding across the mat into another position.

“It’s like my body is an extension of yours,” she murmured, closing her eyes and surrendering to the sensation.

He watched her in fascination as she effortlessly performed the Tai chi routine, experiencing the same phenomenon but from the different side. John led the intricate dance and Sakura followed, the pair moving together as intuitively as breathing. When they finished the series of stances, he stepped closer and embraced her, and as they stood together in each other’s arms it was hard to tell where one ended and the other began.

Sakura opened her eyes and looked up at him reverently. “Thank you for choosing me for this.”

“You made the decision easy,” he said, brushing his fingers through her silky black hair. “Come on, let’s get geared up. I’m eager to see how well we work together with weapons.”

She nodded enthusiastically and they entered the armoury to collect their weapons and armour. The equipping frames hummed as the robotic arms swung the armour plating into place, then their Paragon suits made a series of rippling clicks as the occupants were sealed inside. With swords in hand, they returned to the training mats and squared off against each other, but standing several metres apart.

“Let’s start with offensive strikes,” John said, knowing they were Sakura’s forte.

He raised his sword, then whipped it around at head level, the blade making a whispering hiss as it sliced through the air. At the same time, Sakura dropped to her haunches, and her twin ninjato slashed in the opposite direction, the rapid cuts designed to viciously hamstring her opponent. They paused and shared a grin, knowing how difficult it would be to fend off the diametrically opposed assaults at the same time.

The pair progressed through dozens of different kata, alternating between a deadly combination of crippling attacks and finishing moves. John pictured Larn’kelnar standing before him as his katana whipped back and forth, looking for openings in his adversary’s defences. He glanced to the left, then lashed out at the imaginary Progenitor’s weapon, with a stinging slap of his blade that was intended to knock the mace wide. At the same time, Sakura stepped closer and drove her ninjato into the precise spot where the Progenitor’s armpit would now be exposed.

“Very nice,” John said with satisfaction. “We need to work on more combinations like that, with me setting a Progenitor up to make him more vulnerable to backstabs by you.”

“Or vice versa,” Sakura said, her gaze dropping to his long blade. “I was just thinking that if I attack at full speed, trying to knock out as many hexagons as possible, a Progenitor would have to respond to that level of threat before his shield destabilised. Then while he’s distracted, you can end him with a big finisher.”

John nodded thoughtfully, knowing several attacks that would be absolutely devastating, but that he couldn’t normally use because they’d leave him too exposed. “That’s a good idea. We should try that next.”

“Okay!” Sakura agreed, twirling both ninjato around her wrists as she dropped into an offensive stance. “Get ready!”

\*\*\*

Anastasia Volkov carefully reviewed the holographic document, nodding with satisfaction to herself as she read through the long list of concessions. “You’ve been extremely generous, Lynette. I want to thank you on behalf of the citizens of Lithotania; this will make a tremendous difference to their lives.”

The Fleet Admiral sipped her coffee. “Thank you for giving me such a prompt and positive response to my offer. How was it received at home?”

Breaking into a smile, Anastasia’s blue eyes sparkled with amusement as she replied, “My husband could scarcely believe his ears when I told him. It took some convincing to even get him to raise the list with the Politburo, but once the ministers realised the offer was genuine, they begged me to accept.”

“I’m glad this will solve many of the problems you’ve had at home,” Lynette said, gesturing towards the document as Anastasia signed it. “I am sorry that excessive financial demands from the Admiralty have made governing your system more difficult. In our defence, the state of galactic politics was quite different back then than it is now. We were surrounded by enemies and we desperately needed funding.”

“It’s been a tumultuous year,” Anastasia replied, sitting back in her chair and placing the digital stylus on the desk. “If you’d told me in January that the Kintark would go from being valued trading partners to our mortal adversaries, only for them to concede half their Empire to us to avoid annihilation, I would have thought you quite mad.”

“That’s just the half of it,” Lynette said, gazing off into the distance, her thoughts turning to John and the looming Progenitor War.

The Governess nodded, but her expression turned sombre. “In light of your generosity, I feel I owe you a fair warning: I think this will be the one and only time that you’ll be able to peacefully dissuade these colonies from seceding. If there’s another security lapse that results in another Kirrix invasion, you will never be able to prevent these colonies from rising up against you.”

“I appreciate the warning, and I feel very fortunate that your colleagues have been so open to diplomacy,” the Fleet Admiral replied. “This is a second chance for the Terran Federation to treat its outlying colonies with greater respect, care, and understanding. I won’t allow this opportunity to be squandered.”

Anastasia broke into a smile. “I believe you, Lynette. I can see that you have our best interests at heart... and that fills me with hope for the future.” She rose from her chair and continued, “Now, I think I’ve taken up more than enough of your valuable time. I’ll take my leave so that you can continue this discussion with the other governors.”

“It’s been a pleasure meeting with you,” Lynette said, as she accompanied her from the conference suite. “And that’s not some meaningless platitude, Anastasia. It’s very reassuring to know that there are governors who really do care about their colonies.”

“I feel the same way about our illustrious Fleet Admiral,” Anastasia replied, pausing by the airlock. “I think you should be congratulated on everything you’ve accomplished here, Lynette. You’ve done a great service to all the people of the Terran Federation, Core Worlders and residents of the Outer Rim alike.”

“I’ve just tried to find the best solution that will benefit everyone... but thank you for your kind words.”

They parted ways and Lynette watched the Governess depart from the Docking Bay. She glanced around and saw no sign of Stefan Vaughn, then let out a sigh of disappointment and returned inside.

\*\*\*

John rinsed the shampoo from Sakura’s hair, the soapy suds washing over her glistening body. “So what’re your thoughts after that training session?”

“I think we should try to coordinate each battle so that whoever’s being attacked by a Progenitor goes on the defensive, while the other goes full offense,” she said, tilting her head back further. “That should minimise the risk of us taking injuries, while maintaining constant pressure on our target.”

He nodded thoughtfully. “We’ll have to watch out for them suddenly switching targets, but I think that should be our default strategy. The one thing we need to prepare for though, is near the end of the fight, when we’ve worn a Progenitor down and we’re getting ready to make the killing blow. I don’t want to ever get into another situation where we exhaust a Progenitor’s energy reserves and they start draining their thralls.”

“If that ever seems to be the case, we can both hit him with everything we’ve got,” Sakura said, turning around and soaping up his chest. “In fact that would be a useful tactic to adopt even in the early stages of a battle. If we can catch him off guard with a coordinate burst of attacks, we might be able to overwhelm a Progenitor’s hex shield before he realises how much danger he’s in.”

“Yeah, that sounds ideal,” John agreed. “I’m sure it’ll get easier with practice.”

Sakura looked up at him and asked, “Have you given much thought as to how we’re going to actually track down each Progenitor? It’s not going to be easy with them skulking around in cloaked dreadnoughts.”

“We’re probably going to have to rely on Dana to come up with a tech solution to breaking a Progenitor cloak, but I am hoping we can ambush some of them on their homeworlds.”

The Asian girl raised an eyebrow and didn’t look convinced. “It doesn’t matter how well we fight together if we can’t actually find them.”

John chuckled at her dubious expression. “I know... I freely admit it’s not a great plan. For the moment I’m mostly focused on making defensive preparations. Salvaging the thrall fleets and upgrading the Invictus had to take priority in case we came under attack.”

She tilted her head to one side and nodded. “I suppose if we kill enough thralls, it might provoke their Progenitor into attacking us personally.”

“I’d like to avoid that if I can,” John said with a frown.

“A few million dead thralls is better than the Maliri being exterminated and us being destroyed,” Sakura said bluntly. “We might be forced to make some very unpleasant choices if we’re not able to hunt down each dreadnought to cut the head off the snake.”

“Our one ace in the hole, is Mael’nerak’s sensor grid. If we can get that up and running so that we have full coverage, we can hunt down any Progenitor that comes after Kythshara.”

“But what happens if the Progenitor stays behind in his own territory?” Sakura pressed him. “We’ll be forced to wipe out an invading force to the last thrall. We wouldn’t even be able to take prisoners... not with the Maliri in the grip of bloodlust fever. Tashana relished every moment of incinerating Larathyrans on the dreadnought... and I imagine the rest of the Maliri will be just the same.”

“Yeah, I saw how she responded to my father,” John said bleakly, remembering the psychic attack that led to the Kyth’faren citadel being destroyed. “Alright, I get your point. We have to make breaking Progenitor cloaks a priority too.”

“Sorry for bringing that up,” she apologised. “I don’t want you to be forced into making some horrible choices later on.”

“No, it’s good to think about this now while we still have options,” he said, as they got out of the shower and dried off. “Thanks for the training session and the chat afterwards.”

She crossed her wrists behind his neck and gave him a smouldering kiss. “Any time.”

John saw the lust in her eyes and stiffened with anticipation. “Now we’re nice and clean, how about getting dirty all over again? We do have a tradition to uphold.”

“I’d love to... but there’s someone waiting for you in the Dojo.”

He looked at her in confusion. “They’re welcome to join us in here.”

Sakura tried not to laugh and shook her head. “That wouldn’t be fair...”

Intrigued now, John pulled on a fresh top and sweatpants from the wardrobe in the bedroom. “I better go and see who this mysterious person is then.”

She blew him a kiss. “Have fun.”

“By the way, I haven’t forgotten about our date...” John said over his shoulder. “I’m really looking forward to it.”

Sakura blushed, suddenly turning shy. “I haven’t forgotten either, but I’m still planning it. I’ll let you know when I’m ready.”

They waved goodbye to each other and John padded out into the armoury, then through to the Dojo. When the door opened, he was startled to find that the ancient pagoda atop Mount Daisen had disappeared, and he was now looking at a clearing in a steamy tropical jungle.

“Hello?” he called out, walking into the lush glade. “Who’s there?”

His greeting was met by a throaty roar, the ominous sound of an enormous predator sending a shiver down his spine. “Jade? Is that you?” he asked, turning to look for his matriarch.

The hulking feline that stalked out of the foliage wasn’t sporting Jade’s viridian colours, but a tiger’s traditional orange, black, and white. John knew at once that it was Leylira, but when she bared her massive fangs and snarled at him, he was fairly sure the feral Nymph wasn’t interested in conversation. In fact, he knew exactly why she was stalking towards him.

The ferocious tigress didn’t disappoint, and she launched herself across the clearing, her huge claws extended to rake at his face. John reacted just as quickly and he sidestepped in a blur as she went sailing past. Her wild swipes missed by several metres, but Leylira wasn’t to be deterred, and after skidding to a halt, she twisted around to lash out with her next attack.

John was moving much faster than her though. The moment Leylira landed, he had already circled around to her flank, and pounced as she began to turn. His hand clamped down on the scruff of her neck and he pressed down firmly, pinning her to the mat.

“Submit,” he said calmly, not having broken so much as a sweat.

Leylira let out a startled yelp, and tried to break free, but between John’s implacable grip on the scruff of her neck and the dozen telekinetic hands pinning her paws, she was completely helpless. She let out a pitiful meow and sagged in defeat.

“Change back to normal, honey,” John requested, releasing his grip.

The tigress shimmered in an amber blur, shrinking in size until she was back to her familiar catgirl form. “Well that was embarrassing,” she admitted, reclining on her side on the padded mats. “You’re much too strong for me to challenge now. I was foolish to wait so long.”

“I know why you waited,” John said, squatting down beside her. He stroked her lustrous mane of black hair and continued, “It was just unfortunate timing. We recruited Jehanna and Ailita unexpectedly, so you waited while I gave them the attention they needed. Thank you for that, it was really thoughtful.”

She purred at his caress, then scowled in irritation. “This is humiliating, Master. I’m trying to convince you to let me fight alongside you, and I’m about as threatening as a little kitten!”

John looked at her with sympathy. “You couldn’t risk a proper ambush after what happened with Betrixa, right?”

Leylira nodded glumly. “Jade forbid it. She said you were very upset after nearly killing my idiotic sister.”

“I’m sorry, honey,” he said, ruffling her hair. “If it’s any consolation, that tiger was quite terrifying. If you’d been able to catch me completely by surprise, I would’ve lashed out by instinct to defend myself. Jade was sensible to be cautious.”

She brightened for a moment, then looked dejected once again. “I still wouldn’t have been much of a challenge though, would I? Even if I had been able to ambush you properly.”

“True, but that’s no reflection on your capabilities. Even Jade would struggle to put up a good fight against me now,” John said with conviction. “Since I merged with my guide, I’ve become much more powerful.”

“That’s true,” she conceded, nodding thoughtfully.

John smiled at her and pulled off his t-shirt. “Besides, you wouldn’t want to be owned by a weakling, would you?”

The Nymph’s gaze roamed over his muscular chest, a hungry gleam in a her amber eyes. “That’s a very good point. You are quite magnificent, Master.”

“Roll over on your tummy,” he requested, while pulling off his sweatpants.

She bit her lip and did as he asked, giving him a smoky look over her shoulder.

John straddled the backs of her thighs, lined himself up and pushed inside her glorious body. “You’re such a good girl,” he groaned, sinking into her pliable depths.

Leylira was slick and tight, her virgin passage gripping his length as he inched deeper. She let out a low cry, shuddering in ecstasy as she revelled in her Master’s pleasure.

“Fuck... you feel amazing,” he murmured, palming her firm breasts as he ground into her rump.

“Kiss me, Master... please,” she whimpered, turning to face him where he leaned over her shoulder.

John was happy to feed her his tongue and enjoyed the way she writhed beneath him when he gave her long strokes of his cock. “I love it when you’re like this,” he panted, savouring the sensation of dominance. “My fierce little Nymph... being so submissive for her Master.”

Her eyes rolled back and Leylira climaxed, her tiger-striped body bucking back to match his rhythmic thrusts. John held her down and rode her hard, giving in to his primal desires. He was far rougher with the Nymph than he ever would be with one of the Terran girls, but he knew she was tough enough to shrug off a broadside from a Terran battleship and was built to take a pounding. Leylira grunted and moaned, taking everything he gave her with cries of ecstasy.

Lying with his full weight on her, John interlaced his fingers with Leylira’s and raced towards the finish. She arched her back to raise her hips, making it easier for him to fully hilt himself with every thrust. It was the most self-indulgent he’d ever been with any of the Nymphs, taking his own pleasure from her beautifully sculpted body, but the more he focused purely on what felt good for him, the more intensely Leylira responded.

When his orgasm finally arrived, John let out a roar as he came, her anus gripping him so tight that he felt every thick spurt as it rocketed out of his shaft. Leylira squealed when she felt his cum shooting into her belly, her sexy moans turning him on even more as she took his load. When he was done, John carefully withdrew from her trembling body and collapsed beside the comatose Nymph. He rolled Leylira onto her side and spooned the exhausted girl from behind, hugging her protectively as he drifted into unconsciousness.

\*\*\*

John felt his companion stir in his arms, the brief movement bringing him fully awake.

“I’m sorry, Master. I didn’t mean to disturb you,” Leylira whispered, turning to look at him reverently over her shoulder.

He gave her a reassuring kiss. “It’s okay. How are you feeling after that? I wasn’t too rough with you was I?”

The Nymph nuzzled into him, throaty purrs making her body vibrate. “You were amazing, Master... the best ever. I’ve never felt you be so unrestrained with me before.”

“I figured if you were planning on leaving me, I should make our last time together memorable.”

“Leaving you?!” she exclaimed in alarm, then Leylira’s face relaxed a moment later. “You’re teasing me. You know what prompted me to seek you out today.”

“You deserved a bit of teasing... you’ve kept me waiting ages compared to your sisters,” John said, kissing the tip of her nose.

Leylira laughed and relaxed in his arms. “You always knew I would never abandon my Master.”

“Yes, but are you staying because you have to, or because you want to?” he asked, his hand gently stroking her swollen belly. “I’m the only man you know that can get you pregnant... but you don’t have to stay with me for that. If you want your freedom-”

She placed a quick kiss on his lips to silence him. “Please don’t make me beg to stay with you, Master. That wouldn’t be kind.”

“Just making sure,” he replied, giving her a reassuring hug. “So... what kind of future do you hope to have with me, Leylira?”

The tiger striped catgirl placed her hand on top of his. “Besides the obvious, Master?”

“I think it’s important to be sure about your decision,” he said, cradling her tummy. “Your sisters are eager to help me bring Nymphs back to the galaxy, but I didn’t want to make any assumptions with you. You’re wilder than they are and more independent; you might not necessarily want to spend centuries raising a huge family with me.”

She melted in his arms and the fierce tigress became a fawning kitten. “I want that so much, Master,” Leylira said, nuzzling his cheek.

“But you’d still like to fight for me first?” he asked, already knowing the answer.

She nodded, gazing up at him with hope-filled eyes.

“We’ll get you there, Leylira,” he said honestly. “You understand why I need to be cautious though?”

“I do,” she said solemnly.

“Tell me why,” he requested.

“Because you need me to help repopulate the Nymph species,” Leylira explained, her skin warming up with arousal. “When the Progenitor War is over, you plan to keep each of us pregnant until we’ve had thousands of kittens...”

“That’s true, but it’s not the main reason,” John said with an indulgent smile. “I love you... and I’d be devastated if anything happened to you.”

She turned around so that she was facing him. “Do you want me not to fight, Master?”

He thought about her question for a while, before replying, “You’ve already been a huge help keeping watch over the Bridge and I have no problem with you crewing the Invictus in battle. I am worried about exposing you to ground combat against thralls. Even if I can make you strong enough to take hundreds of hits from tachyon rifles, I still wouldn’t want you anywhere near a Progenitor.”

“I think that’s a fair compromise, Master. I wish to fight at your side, but I’m not suicidal... I know how dangerous Progenitors can be. You proved today how outmatched I am against you.”

John glanced down at her stomach and realised she wasn’t radiating pulses of light from absorbing his cum. “That was for you, honey. You definitely earned it.”

“Are you sure? I know you’re helping Irillith and Jehanna improve their abilities,” Leylira said, an ambivalent look on her face.

“No, go ahead. I want to make you stronger and tougher,” he replied, giving her an indulgent smile.

Leylira let out a soft moan as amber light began to pour off her rounded stomach, the glowing bands sweeping down her limbs as John enhanced her body. “Thank you for the delicious gift, Master.”

“You’re welcome,” he said, sharing a kiss with her. “Like I said, you earned it.”

John got up and gathered his clothes, then offered the Nymph a hand.

“What are you going to do now, John?” Leylira asked, as he accompanied her out of the sparring area.

“I’m going to grab another quick shower, then I’ll head down to see Sparks to help finish the Raptor.”

“Would you like me to wash your back?” the Nymph offered.

“Okay, but I really was planning on being quick,” John replied. “After that, you should get some rest. You can relax and think about me enhancing your body... as well as our future together.”

“That’s a wonderful idea, Master,” she replied, overjoyed at the prospect of spending the afternoon focused entirely on thoughts of him.

They cleaned themselves up in the shower, then once they had dried each other off, John tucked Leylira into bed. She kissed him lovingly before settling down under the covers, a blissful smile on her face as she watched the soft amber light arc across the walls. John got dressed and waved the Nymph goodbye, before leaving the Dojo behind.

\*Does Dana need my help yet?\* he asked Alyssa.

\*She’s still working on the new prototype guns, but the Raptor’s ready to be assembled,\* the blonde explained. \*I’ll let you know when dinner’s ready.\*

\*Thanks, beautiful,\* he replied, strolling down the corridor to the grav-tubes.

When he reached Deck Nine and entered the Primary Hangar, John could see how much work had been done on the Raptor. The Collective were nowhere to be seen, having already finished installing all the new components. Dana was still hard at work behind her Engineering Station, her attention riveted to the schematics floating above the console.

“Hey, Sparks,” he said to the redhead as he walked over to join her.

“Hi!” she exclaimed with a cheerful grin. “I won’t be long, I’m just making the final tweaks.”

He looked at the schematic and immediately saw the difference. “You went for a triple-barrelled design instead?”

“Yeah. You can dramatically reduce the heat build up by cycling through multiple barrels,” she replied, gazing up at the holographic blueprints. “I was surprised that Mael’nerak only went with a single barrel on his design, but I guess he didn’t care about durability if the gun emplacements were just going to get blasted by a dreadnought.”

“Are there any drawbacks to going with multiple barrels instead of just one?” John asked with interest.

“It adds complexity and more moving parts to the design if you use a rotating barrel. I’m going to use fixed barrels, but adjust the focusing aperture within the cannon to cycle between each barrel. Normally that would result in a significant loss of energy output, but we’re using Eternity Crystals, so that’s not a problem.”

“So all the benefits of heat reduction and no downsides?” he asked, smiling with admiration. “Nice.”

Dana winked at him, then turned her attention back to the design. “I decided to upscale the guns a bit to make them hit harder and have longer range. They’ll be turret mounted using a frictionless cupola, so Jade will be able to do a bunch of crazy manoeuvres and the cannons will still be able to track their target.”

“So you decided to do away with the old gunship’s pair of Tachyon Lances?” he asked with a puzzled frown. “Won’t that meant the new Raptor is under gunned in comparison?”

“I’ve still left space to mount some kind of primary guns,” she replied, pointing towards the broad holes in the wings near the fuselage. “I was just thinking that maybe we could rely on the turrets to knock out shields, then add some ordnance based weapons to inflict maximum damage on the hull. Thralls warships aren’t as indestructible as a dreadnought, but they’re still insanely tough. Do you remember how much shit the Vulkat had to throw at that destroyer to knock it out of action?”

John recalled the images of the Tormentor class destroyer that had been pummelled by countless missiles. Even then, the resilient warship hadn’t been completely destroyed, letting the Vulkat retrieve a number of intact components from the wreckage.

“That sounds sensible to me. I assume thrall hulls are very good at absorbing hits from energy weapons?”

“Exactly! Trying to blast your way through their hull just using beams would massively suck,” she replied, making a pained face.

“Yeah, I bet. Alright, shall I assemble the wings and fuselage, then start plating her up?”

She leaned over to give him a grateful kiss. “You’re a superstar, thanks!”

\*\*\*

“How much bigger do you want the flowerbed, Ma’am?” the man asked, drawing Auralei’s attention.

She looked up from her work and saw Kerym resting with his hand on the shovel, while his friend used the garden fork to turn over the soil.

“That looks amazing!” she exclaimed, genuinely surprised at how quickly they’d dug out the flowerbed to the dimensions she suggested. “It’s more than big enough for all the plants I brought with me.”

The man with the fork shook the soil off the prongs. “Is there anything else we can help you with, Ma’am?”

“Would you mind digging a row of little holes about that far apart?” she requested, holding up her hands to show how far she meant. “It’s slow going with this trowel.”

“Of course,” Kerym replied, brandishing his shovel again. “Leave it to us.”

“Thank you both very much,” she said gratefully, before returning to her work.

Auralei reached for one of the Merellien lilies and carefully lowered it into the hole she’d dug, then used her trowel to fill in the soil around its roots. The flower had beautiful yellow and purple petals, and she leaned forward to smell the delicate fragrance. Its scent brought back a flood of memories from time spent in the garden with her mother, and she smiled wistfully before moving onto the next plant. It felt good to work with the soil and help plants to grow, nurturing life where it didn’t exist before.

“Nevariths are my favourite,” a familiar voice said from behind her.

Auralei paused to survey her work. “I like them too. They always seemed like happy flowers.”

“I thought you were supposed to be resting?” Kylantha asked, kneeling on the grass beside her.

“I tried, but I couldn’t just stay at home and do nothing,” Auralei explained. “I was looking at my mother’s garden and the colourful flowers made me smile. I thought maybe I could make some other people smile too.”

“It was a lovely idea, Auralei,” her friend said softly. “And it worked...”

The young Larathyran turned around and saw that a crowd had gathered. The bright bouquets drew lots of attention, and visitors to the hospital stopped to watch her work, taking simple pleasure from the colourful display. They stood silently, hand in hand, with some people crying... but all had wistful smiles on their faces.

“Your mother would’ve been very proud of you,” Kylantha said earnestly. “Everyone at the Botanical Institute would be too.”

Auralei brushed a tear from her cheek, leaving a smudge of dirt behind in its place. She smiled self-consciously at the onlookers, then darted a furtive glance up at Kylantha. “No one has said anything about power coming back on. Are Solana and Riniya making any progress?”

Kylantha let out a heavy sigh, then slowly shook her head.

\*\*\*

Alyssa slid the disc-shaped platter out of the oven and looked at in fascination. “Is that ready?”

“That looks perfect!” Jehanna gushed, licking her lips. She looked askance at the blonde and added, “You’ve really never had pizza before?”

“No, never,” Alyssa replied, before inhaling the aroma deeply. “It smells wonderful though...”

“Just wait until you try it,” the Indian girl said, before stooping down to start removing the other pizza trays.

The kitchen door swung open and Calara strode in, greeting her girlfriend with a beaming smile. “Something smells good in here...”

“Hey, gorgeous,” Alyssa purred, sauntering over to give her a peck on the lips.

Calara returned the kiss, then her eyes lit up when she saw the food on the worktop. “Oh my god! Pizza! I haven’t had any in months!”

Jehanna looked at her quizzically. “Didn’t John’s grandparents run an Italian restaurant? I’m surprised he hasn’t made any for you yet.”

“We can interrogate him when he gets here,” Alyssa said, opening the next two ovens and sliding out more trays. “Can I put you in charge of drinks, Callie?”

“Sure thing. I saw Irillith laying the table, I’ll ask her to give me a hand,” the Latina said, heading for the door. “By the way, are we *‘drinking’* drinking?”

Alyssa shook her head, sending her golden locks tumbling. “No, we better not. We’ll be arriving at Larathyra in a couple of hours.”

“Cold stone sober it is,” the brunette replied, returning to the dining room.

The rest of the girls arrived soon after, their eyes drawn to the dozen pizzas carefully placed on the long dining table. By the time John and Dana arrived, the room was abuzz with chatter and laughter as they stood around with drinks in hand.

“Wow, what’s all this?!” Dana exclaimed, bounding over to stare at the feast. “Oh awesome, this is pizza right?”

Jehanna looked astounded. “You’ve never had pizza either?”

“I cooked a rat on a hubcap one time. That looked vaguely similar,” Dana replied, eyeing one of the pizzas that was covered in several different types of meat.

Rachel shook her head in sympathy. “Oh, babes...”

“What? It tasted pretty good,” the redhead said with a shrug.

“Well, feel free to start everyone,” the former reporter said, grinning as she waved at the food. “I survived on pizza when I was at college.”

John looked at her curiously.

Before he could ask why, Jehanna continued, “You want to know why I didn’t cook myself curries, bhajis, and samosas, all that stuff?”

“Well... yeah. Indian food is amazing. Your mom can cook can’t she?” he asked with interest. “Didn’t she teach you?”

“She did... and she’s really good,” Jehanna replied with a nostalgic smile. “But I’d spent sixteen years eating curry and I was sick of it!”

Rachel laughed and then took a slice of the chicken and sweetcorn. She took a bite, then nodded her approval. “This is excellent.”

“Holy crap!” Dana muttered, her eyes widening as she devoured her meat pizza. “This is the food of the gods!”

Tashana took a tentative bite of her Hawaiian pizza. “Mmm!” She swallowed the mouthful, then gushed, “Whoever thought of adding pineapple and ham as a topping must be a mad genius! The mixture of sweet and savoury is divine!”

“I really like this seafood one,” Helene said, pointing to her slice. “It’s got so many different types of shellfish on it!”

“Can I get you a slice, John?” Jehanna asked, reaching for a plate. “What do you prefer?”

She glanced back at him and saw his expression flicker before he smiled and said, “I’d like to try any that you made personally.”

Jehanna lowered her plate and looked at him suspiciously. “John... don’t you like pizza?”

He sighed and gave her an apologetic shrug. “You know that my grandparents ran an Italian restaurant?”

She nodded, listening avidly. “Yes, I was just discussing that with Alyssa. How come you haven’t made pizza for the girls before?”

“Well we often had a lot of leftovers, and it was even worse when they started a pizza delivery service. I guess I felt the same way about pizza as you felt about curry.”

Jehanna’s face fell and she gave the dining table a guilty look. “I’m so sorry. I thought everybody loved pizza. I should’ve checked with Alyssa.”

“He kept that one close to his chest,” the blonde replied, giving her a supportive hug.

“It wasn’t a big secret, it just never came up. I did most of the cooking when we all first got together, so I just made a bunch of my favourite dishes,” John explained. “It’s not like I hate pizza... I just don’t enjoy it as much as everyone else.”

Dana frowned playfully and devoured her next slice. “We’ve been missing out!” she protested.

“Tastes better than Rat à la hubcap then?” Rachel asked with a raised eyebrow.

Her girlfriend pretended to consider it for a moment before nodding enthusiastically.

“I’ll have some of the seafood pizza,” John requested. “That was one flavour we didn’t do, because my grandparents didn’t want to risk pizza delivery with shellfish.”

Jehanna slid a couple of slices onto his plate and he dutifully tried a bite. He looked pleasantly surprised and quickly finished it off.

Nodding appreciatively, he said, “This is actually really good pizza. The dough’s not too soft or thick and it’s not overcooked. The sauce also works really well with the seafood.”

The chef looked delighted, even more so when he gave her a congratulatory hug. After that there was mostly silence as the girls quickly demolished all twelve pizzas, until there was nothing left but a few crumbs.

“I’m sorry about dinner, John,” Jehanna apologised. “You were so sweet with what you said about the seafood one too.”

“No problem,” John said, before breaking into a smile. “I’ll forgive you if you promise to cook me some Indian dishes and share your recipes. I love curry!”

She laughed and nodded. “Alright, it’s a deal.”

“How did you get on with your psychic abilities today?” he asked, nodding gratefully to Calara as she poured him another drink of fruit juice.

“I’ve been making some good progress. It’s definitely getting a lot easier with all the practicing I’ve been doing,” she replied modestly.

“Practice makes perfect,” Sakura interjected. “The fastest way to improve is by pushing yourself with training.”

John nodded in agreement. “How about you, Irillith?” he asked, looking down the table at the Maliri. “Are you getting more confident with your abilities?”

“Irillith’s a natural,” Alyssa said airily. “She just needed the right... motivation. Didn’t you, gorgeous?”

The Maliri hacker turned a fetching shade of dark blue. “I’ve been making some good improvements.”

“I’ve been really impressed by how much effort you’ve been putting into your training. You’ll have to show me what you can do on the return trip,” John said, before glancing at Jehanna. “You too, honey.”

Jehanna nodded, then her face lit up with excitement. “I’ve just had a fun idea! Yeah... I’ll have a chat with Irillith and we’ll let you know when we’re ready.”

“Sounds good,” he said, raising his glass to them and taking a sip. His thoughts turned to Faranise again and he smiled at her cunning ploy.

“What about you, John?” Calara asked, looking intrigued. “Alyssa told me you’d nearly finished the Raptor already.”

“Do you want to see?” he asked, finishing his glass and standing up.

“Yeah, definitely!” she enthused, rising from her chair.

The rest of the girls stood too, eager to see the new gunship.

Helene hesitated, then touched John’s arm. “I’ll join you in a minute. Jehanna made an extra seafood pizza for the Nymphs, so I’ll take it up to them.”

“Thanks, honey. That’s very thoughtful,” he said with a smile. \*Are you on the Bridge too, Jade?\*

\*I am, Master,\* she replied, with an especially affectionate tone to her voice. \*After the ravishing you gave Leylira, she could barely walk straight, let alone pilot the Invictus in an emergency, so I’ve been covering her shift with Neysa. I want to see the Raptor though, so I’ll see you down there.\*

\*Is Leylira alright?\* he asked with concern.

\*Of course, Master,\* the Nymph said, sounding amused. \*Physically she was always fine, but it’s taken her a few hours to recover mentally. Leylira spent the afternoon enjoying fantasies of flying into battle as a dragon with you riding on her back, or daydreaming about the two of you raising a huge brood of tiger-striped kittens. She’s very happy at the moment.\*

John followed the rest of the girls out of the Officers’ Lounge and stepped into the grav-tubes. “Good,” he said, hugging Jade as she descended into his arms. “She’s a lovely Nymph and I’m sorry that she was disappointed about her ambush. Did I handle that badly?”

Jade shook her head and whispered in his ear, “You showed you respected her by not holding back. She was very, very turned on at being dominated like that, Master... and it made me love you just a little bit more.”

“Only a little bit?” he teased, giving her a fond squeeze.

She pulled back to gaze into his eyes. “Imagine the sun is my love for you. Now picture a blazing bonfire a hundred feet tall. The bonfire’s impressive... but not if it’s built on the surface of the sun.”

“That’s a lot of love,” John said sombrely.

“Mmmhmm,” she agreed.

They reached Deck Nine and followed the rest of the crew through the Secondary Hangar. Calara had stopped beside the reinforced door, her hand hovering over the button to open it.

“I can’t wait to see the Raptor,” she said eagerly. “Are you going to give us a guided tour?”

John held up both hands. “Hey, all I did was follow the instructions. The real credit goes to Daphne and the Collective for installing all the components, and to Dana for designing the gunship. Do you want to show them around, Sparks?”

“Sure thing,” the redhead agreed. “Hit the button, Calara!”

The Latina did so and when the doors parted, there was a collective intake of breath as the girls got their first look at the new Raptor.

“Wow, it looks amazing!” Calara gushed, striding into the hangar to get a closer look. “I love the new design. It looks so much more elegant and deadly than the old Raptor!”

“Thank you kindly,” Alyssa said with a theatrical bow. “I’m glad you approve.”

“Yeah, it does look tons better after you gave it a makeover,” Dana freely admitted.

Calara jogged over to the chin-mounted cannon and ran her hands over it lovingly. “This is new! What is it?”

“A chunkier version of the Tachyon Cannon,” Dana explained. “It’s got longer range, hits a lot harder, and you can fire it non-stop.”

“How many extra turret mounts are there?” Calara asked, peering up at the gunship. “I see two underslung on the wings. Where else?”

“There’s another two on top of the wings, as well as a mid-spinal and an upper-spinal,” Dana replied, ticking them off with her fingers. “Seven total, with all of them able to fire forwards, four straight up, three straight down, and five to the rear.”

“Nice coverage,” the Latina said, nodding her approval.

“Plus, I kept the optical tracking and beefed up the automated targeting,” Dana explained to Jade. “That means you can glance at a target, lock on, then concentrate on dodging like crazy while all the guns shoot at the bad guys. You can allocate a primary and secondary target, and the turrets will shoot at whichever one of them is currently in their firing arcs.”

“That sounds great!” Jade said, looking delighted.

“I see you got rid of the forward loading ramp,” Sakura noted, squatting down to study the fuselage.

“I wanted to keep it originally, but it didn’t really work with the new layout,” John explained. “We’ve kept the flank airlocks, but I expect we’ll do most of our combat deployments from the rear. I’ll show you.”

They followed him around to the Raptor’s stern and walked underneath the gunship’s two big engines and their hexagonal exhaust ports.

Dana pointed upwards at the propulsion systems. “We’ve upgraded to Progenitor engines and retro-thrusters, so this baby will really move. G-Force won’t be a problem because the Null-inertia Gyroscope will counter it.”

John walked up the ramp and said, “The Raptor was really useful for evacuating civilians, so I asked Dana to make sure the Cargo Bay had plenty of room.”

“It’s huge back here,” Sakura said, nodding her approval.

“If we ever need to deploy larger ground teams, this extra space will be really useful,” Jehanna agreed.

There was an armoured cylinder facing them towards the rear of the Cargo Bay and as they walked around it, they could see the telltale red and blue anti-gravity fields on the other side.

“I’ll show you the upper deck in a minute,” John said, continuing on towards the door in the rear wall.

They crossed a broad corridor, which ended on either side with the port and starboard airlocks. Ignoring them, John opened the door opposite, leading the girls into the big room beyond.

“You moved the cockpit to the lower deck!” Calara exclaimed, spotting the pilot’s and co-pilot’s chairs up ahead.

Sakura looked around her in surprise. “Armour-equipping frames? So you moved the Armoury into the Cockpit?”

Dana pointed at John and grinned. “This was his bright idea. Tell them why, John.”

He beckoned the intrigued onlookers forward. “When we were discussing the interior layout of the new Raptor, Dana’s initial prototype had everything on one deck. I liked the idea, because it saved us having to constantly use grav-tubes, but it made the Raptor too big. It would’ve needed to be the size of a corvette to accommodate everything.”

Dana walked past him and sat down on the curved bench seating that was positioned behind the pilot’s chair. “We talked about how we usually spend most of our time in the cockpit, until we’re ready to deploy on a mission.”

Rachel sat next to her and leaned back on the padded seat. “Very comfy.”

“So we can hang out here,” Alyssa said, sitting on the curved seating behind the co-pilot’s chair. “Then when it’s time for action, we go straight into the armoury, and out the back door.”

“Shall we do a time check?” John suggested.

“I will!” Sakura volunteered, springing forward and perching on the bench.

Dana leaned forward and tapped a couple of buttons on the console. A digital stopwatch appeared as well as a view of the Cargo Bay from one of the internal security cameras.

“Okay, ready... go!” she exclaimed, starting the timer.

The Asian girl bolted from the chair straight into the closest armour-equipping frame. She was fully garbed in a Paragon suit a few seconds later, then she reached for a Tachyon rifle and a magazine, before running through the rear doors. Sakura leaped out the back of the gunship with her rifle loaded and at her shoulder, then turned to wave at the camera.

“Thirteen seconds,” Dana noted, stopping the timer.

Jehanna laughed and shook her head in admiration. “That’s insane.”

Jade slipped into the pilot’s chair, her hands reflexively reaching for the flightstick and thrust control. “It feels just like the old one.”

“We reused a bunch of things like the flight controls,” Dana explained. “If we had new tech, the gunship got an upgrade. If not, it’s basically the same.”

Helene walked into the cockpit with Sakura. “Hey everyone,” she said, before glancing around wide-eyed. “It’s so big in here! And I really like the skylight.”

They all looked up and saw a clear crystal ceiling, that gave the cockpit excellent visibility.

“What’s up there?” Calara asked in fascination. “Is that an observation gallery?”

“Come on, I’ll show you,” John replied, heading back to the door.

He waited for Sakura to remove her gear, then they returned to the Cargo Bay and took the grav-tube up to the upper deck.

“Engineering’s back there,” Dana said, pointing towards the rear of the gunship. “You can access the Power Core, Tachyon Drive, the Cloaking device, and the Null-Inertia Gyroscope in separate secured compartments.”

“And this is the living quarters,” John explained, walking towards the front of the gunship. He pointed towards the adjoining doors on opposite sides of the sofa-lined Lounge. “The bathroom and kitchen are through there and there... and we can look down into the cockpit from here.”

He stood by a balcony that gave him an excellent view of the pilot and co-pilot below, as well as a panoramic view out the front of the Raptor.

“And the most important item of all...” Rachel said, reclining coquettishly on the sunken bed in the centre of the living area. “Because we all know how much you value us getting our beauty sleep. Isn’t that right, John?”

He laughed and sprawled out beside her. “Sleep is very important.”

The rest of the girls kicked off their shoes and joined them on the mattress, which was just big enough for them all to fit.

“So what do you think?” he asked, stroking Calara’s and Rachel’s hair as they cuddled up to him.

“I love the new layout,” Sakura said, sitting cross-legged beside him. “It’s much more efficient for combat deployments.”

“I think it’s perfect for what we need,” Calara said, nodding her approval. “You’ve managed to improve on the old one in almost every way. Well done, the pair of you.”

Dana beamed at her, then held up her hand for a high-five with John. “Nice work, assistant.”

“You too, Grand Engineering Overlord.”

Alyssa patted the covers and said coyly, “I’d suggest breaking in the bed, but you did a splendid job of that with Betrixa this morning.”

“We still need to have a celebratory orgy in here,” Dana was quick to point out.

“Is that a tradition now?” John asked with a grin.

“Yes!” all the girls enthusiastically agreed.

He laughed and hugged those closest to him. “Maybe later. I’m still recovering after Leylira wore me out this afternoon.”

“The trials and tribulations of running an adoring harem,” Rachel cooed in mock sympathy.

“Two adoring harems,” Tashana quickly corrected her. “Don’t forget about all the matriarchs!”

Irillith caressed his shoulder and said earnestly, “It’s such a hard life, John. How do you manage?”

“I think I’m pretty stoic about it,” he replied modestly.

“Wait a minute,” Alyssa said with a frown. “He’s saying we’re hard work, ladies!”

“Outrageous,” Calara agreed, sitting up in faux indignation. “I think he deserves to be tickled.”

John was soon surrounded by giggling girls and despite his best efforts to fend him off, he couldn’t help bursting into laughter as they tickled him into submission.

“I surrender!” he protested. “I can’t fight ten-to-one odds!”

“Alright, we’ll let you off this time,” Alyssa said with a broad smile.

The girls relented and he chuckled as he sat up. “Thanks for the laugh, I needed that.” He glanced at Alyssa and continued, “How much longer until we reach Larathyra?”

“Not long,” she replied. “We should pick up the system at extreme range on our sensors in about ten minutes.”

“Okay,” he said, acknowledging her with a nod. “Let’s head up to the Combat Bridge and get geared up.”

“You’re expecting a fight?” Sakura asked, looking at him in surprise.

“No, but it doesn’t hurt to be prepared for anything,” John replied. “Will we have much trouble tracking down the Soulforge?”

Dana considered it, then shook her head. “Those things suck up power like crazy. If we scan the planet for energy signatures, it should light up like a supernova.”

The sudden tension in Alyssa’s body was obvious, so John sat up and pulled her into a hug. “I don’t want you going anywhere near that thing, okay?”

She nodded and didn’t make a word of protest.

“Good girl,” he said gently. “Alright, ladies, let’s get ready.”

They disembarked from the Raptor and took the express grav-tubes up to the Combat Bridge. Jade didn’t need any equipment, so she bounded down the ramp and took her place in the Pilot’s chair. The rest of the crew joined her shortly afterwards, fully armoured in Paragon suits, and carrying their weapons.

John slotted away his Tachyon rifle beside the Commander’s Station, then sheathed his runesword behind the high-backed chair.

“Sit here, Helene,” he said, spinning the seat around for her. He glanced at Dana and grinned. “Sorry, we haven’t got somewhere for you to sit yet.”

Alyssa tsked in annoyance. “It’s our Chief Engineer’s fault... she’s so unreliable.”

Dana clenched a fist at them in mock anger. “Why, I oughta...”

The laughter helped ease some of the tension as the girls took their places around the Combat Bridge.

Jehanna waved away Sakura’s offer to sit. “I’ll get some Bridge shots. Don’t worry about me.”

“Sensor contacts, John,” Jade warned them, pointing towards the extreme edge of their sensor range.

“Let me know when you’ve identified them,” he said to Calara. As she nodded and began analysing the sensor data, he turned back to the Nymph pilot. “Did you find the rest of the thrall ships, Jade?”

“We found two more cruisers,” she replied. “No life signs.”

“They were probably sending them to the staging area as soon as they were finished,” Calara said thoughtfully.

“We’re coming into range of Larathyra,” Alyssa said, pointing up at a golden yellow star.

As they watched, dozens of sensor contacts began to appear, the numbers rapidly increasing as the extreme edge of their sensors covered Larn’kelnar’s homeworld.

“They’re all stationary,” Calara informed them. “What’re the odds that all those ships were manned by thralls?”

“About one in one,” Rachel murmured, her eyes widening when she saw the number of spacecraft appearing within the Throne World system.

“They don’t look like thrall warships...” Calara said, studying the contacts intently. “Size, mass, all the readings are way off.”

“Probably freighters or some other civilian traffic?” Tashana suggested.

“That would be my guess,” John replied, staring at the forest of immobile ships. “I can’t believe they were all manned by thralls. Weren’t there any ordinary women there? And what about the men?”

“If there are non-thrall survivors, they should have had enough rations aboard to stay alive for the last few weeks,” Rachel said thoughtfully.

“Can you perform active scans of those ships and check for survivors,” John asked Dana.

She began tapping icons on the Engineering Station. “Yep, on it. We’ll just need to wait a few minutes to get in range.”

The crew watched in silence as they approached, nobody feeling like making jokes now.

“Nothing,” Dana said quietly as they neared the first sensor contact.

Her shoulders slumped a little at the second one. “Nothing...”

“Nothing...”

“Nothing...”

“Nothing...”

“Alright, Sparks,” John interrupted her gently. “Keep scanning, but just let us know if you find anyone. Okay?”

She nodded. “Yeah... sorry.”

“No problem,” he replied, waving away her apology.

“These all look like civilian ships to me,” Calara said, confirming Tashana’s suspicions. “That’s definitely a cargo hauler and that one looks as though it’s carrying fuel... the configuration is identical to the tankers we saw at Valgeiros Fuelling Station.”

There were many more orbital facilities in the local area, each circling one of the seven plants in the star system. Some were long-abandoned refineries, others appeared to be trade stations, but there also many military installations there too, the starbases bristling with gun decks. Dana shook her head when he glanced in her direction, confirming there were no life signs found anywhere among them.

“That’s Larathyra,” Alyssa said, pointing towards a beautiful emerald world on the fourth orbital track around the star. “It’s the only habitable planet in-system. The rest are all gas giants.”

“Alright... take us in-system,” John said, staring intently at his former adversary’s homeworld. “Do a planetary scan as soon as we’re close enough.”

Alyssa waited until they reached the star’s gravity well. “Dropping us out of hyper-warp. The helm’s all yours, Jade.”

The Nymph angled the flightstick towards the Gaia-class planet, then shoved the throttle forward to maximum. The six Progenitor engines exploded into life, the incandescent flare leaving long plumes in their wake as the battlecruiser leapt forward.

“Damn we’re fast,” Calara murmured, shaking her head in awe as the Invictus charged into the system.

It didn’t take long for them to approach Larathyra, with Jade carefully weaving the turbo-charged warship through the forlorn sea of marooned spacecraft.

“That’s weird...” Dana muttered, her brow furrowing in confusion.

“What is it, Sparks?” John asked, glancing at her with concern.

“I’m not getting shit on the energy scans,” she replied, before thumping the console with her gauntleted fist.

“Did that fix it?” Rachel asked, raising an eyebrow.

The redhead flushed. “Sorry, old habit. And no, I’m still not picking up-... wait!”

The crew did as she asked, waiting in silence as Dana stared intently at the planetary scan.

“Sparks?” John prompted her, unsettled by her deepening frown. “What’s wrong?”

“I am getting a handful of energy readings, but they’re pretty faint,” she replied, sounding incredulous. “That can’t be right...”

Now it was John’s turn to frown in confusion. “But Larn’kelnar had full access to Progenitor technology. There should be a fusion reactor down there.”

“Yeah, I know!” Dana exclaimed, hitting several icons and displaying the planetary scan for them all to see. “But I’ve checked the sensor configuration three times. There’s nothing wrong with our sensor array, which means the fusion reactor has either been shut down or destroyed.”

“Check for radiation,” John said immediately, his heart sinking.

“Only trivial amounts,” Dana announced a short while later. “At least there wasn’t a reactor breach.”

“So they’ve got no power anywhere on the planet?” John asked, shaking his head in disbelief. “What the hell happened down there?”

“The thralls all died,” Jade said quietly.

John felt a shiver run down his spine. “Dana... check for life signs.”

Her eyes were like saucers as she performed the scan, they she let out her breath in a big sigh of relief. “There are survivors down there... millions of them.”

“But they’ve got no power?”

“Just a few minor readings, but it’s almost like they’ve been knocked back to the stone age. There might be a few minor power cores dotted around, but no large-scale reactors.”

John nodded grimly. “Show me the biggest energy readings. There’s bound to be survivors near there and maybe they can tell us what happened.”

“There you go,” Dana said, updating the planetary map with an overlay showing energy spikes. “The biggest one is in the middle of a major metropolitan area.”

“It’s early evening on that side of the planet,” Alyssa noted, checking Larathyra’s rotation around the sun. “We’ve got a couple of hours until sunset, then it’s going to get really dark down there.”

John stared at the lustrous green world, dreading to think what could have knocked out most of the power on the surface.

“Who do you want to take with us?” Alyssa asked, before glancing meaningfully at the twins.

“I’ll stay on the Bridge,” Calara volunteered. “If there’s any trouble, I’ll be the most use here.”

He thanked her with a nod, then turned to the Maliri sisters. “Tashana, Irillith?”

“I can’t wait to see a Larathyran city,” Tashana gushed, her eyes alight with anticipation. “I wonder if their architecture is anything like ours?”

John shook his head. “I want you two to stay here on the Invictus.”

Tashana looked shocked and started to protest, “But-”

“We can’t take that chance, Tashana,” he interrupted her. “Do you remember how you reacted to meeting my father?”

She blinked in surprise, then slumped dejectedly. “Oh...”

“You both hated the thralls we met on Larn’kelnar’s dreadnought,” Alyssa gently reminded her. “We have no idea how either of you might react to meeting Larathyrans on their homeworld. Do you really want to risk going berserk and burning down the city?”

“You’re right,” Irillith agreed. “It’s far too dangerous to take us with you.”

“What about watching from the Bridge?” Tashana asked hopefully. “Neither of us had a bad reaction to watching videos of Mael’nerak.”

“But you are related to him,” Rachel reminded her. “We don’t know if that’s a mitigating factor.”

The sisters shared a worried glance.

With a dejected sigh, Tashana finally said, “I’m being silly. I can’t put my curiosity above the lives of all those innocent civilians. If you want, we can stay in the Brig until you’ve determined it’s safe.”

John shook his head. “That’s not necessary. Why don’t you take off your gear and relax in the Lagoon for a few hours. Once we’ve figured out what’s happening down on the planet, we can set up a tightly controlled meeting between you and one of the Larathyrans to check if you have an adverse reaction.”

“That sounds sensible,” Irillith agreed, rising from her IntOps station. “Let’s go for a swim, Shan.”

With a final lingering look at Larathyra, Tashana waved goodbye and followed her sister up to the Armoury to remove her Paragon Suit.

“I’d like to come with you, Master,” Jade requested. “I’ve asked my sisters to assist Calara on the Bridge.”

John nodded in agreement. “I was going to ask if you wanted to come. I’d like your verdict on the new Raptor’s flight characteristics, and if we need to tweak anything.”

“Sure!” the Nymph said cheerfully.

“I’d like all the rest of you to join the ground team too,” he said, glancing around at Dana, Rachel, Sakura, Jehanna, and Helene. “It should be self-explanatory why.”

Jehanna tentatively raised her hand.

John smiled and gestured for her to go ahead. “Just chime in. You don’t need my permission.”

“Are we going down to the planet fully geared up for combat?” she asked carefully. “I was just thinking that if all Larn’kelnar’s thralls are dead, then we shouldn’t be in any danger down there. So us looking like we’re launching a planetary invasion probably isn’t going to create a very good first impression.”

He blinked in surprise, then gave her a wry smile. “Yeah, I can see how we might look just a little bit intimidating.”

“We could just carry sidearms and protect ourselves with psychic shields,” Alyssa suggested. “We can keep our weapons and armour in the Raptor, then if there’s any trouble, Jade can pick us up and we’ll be ready for action.”

“That sounds reasonable to me,” John agreed. “Nice suggestion, Jehanna.”

“No problem!” she replied, delighted to have been helpful.

“Alright, lets’ go,” he said, retrieving his weapons and heading for the ramp.

He was followed out by the seven Lionesses that were accompanying him down to the planet, and they descended to the Secondary Hangar in the express grav-tubes.

“We should switch the shuttle and the Raptor at some point,” Alyssa suggested as she fell into step beside him. “The Secondary Hangar is a more convenient location for the Raptor.”

“Yeah, I agree,” he said, walking with her towards the Primary Hangar. “I’d suggest asking Tashana to move it while we’re away, but that might not be wise.”

“I think your plan of setting up a ‘safe’ meeting is a good idea,” Alyssa said thoughtfully. “If we can confirm that the Maliri and Larathyrans aren’t going to try to kill each other on sight, we won’t need to worry about any of these precautions.”

“I could always build a psychic dampener,” Dana suggested. “Then Tashana won’t be able to incinerate anybody.”

“I was just going to ask Rachel to shield them, but your idea is probably better. I don’t fancy trying to subdue Tashana while she’s enraged.”

“It doesn’t work like that, Master,” Jade said over her shoulder. “Tashana’s your thrall; she doesn’t require the compulsion of the psychic connection to obey your commands. You would only need to order her to cease fighting and she would do so immediately. Her adoration of you far exceeds any hatred she might hold towards an enemy thrall.”

“You sound very confident about that, Jade,” John said, exchanging a glance with Alyssa. “Do you remember that from a memory fragment?”

“No, not really,” she replied, turning around to smile at him. “I just know your mates.”

Alyssa shrugged. “She’s probably right. Tashana snapped out of trying to murder your father pretty quickly and he’s a Progenitor.”

“We can figure out the best way to handle it when we get back,” John said, as he followed his Nymph matriarch through the Raptor’s airlock. “Fire her up, Jade, and take us down to the city.”

“Okay, Master!” she eagerly agreed, skipping over to the Pilot’s chair.

“That one’s yours,” Dana said, pointing to the larger equipping frame in the right corner.

“Thanks, honey,” John said, as he placed his weapons on the racks.

A few seconds later he was stripped of armour, the robotic limbs peeling the plates from his body.

He walked back to the weapon’s racks and studied the Punisher pistols. “Our sidearms are getting pretty outdated. We need to bring all our gear up to the same tech level, Sparks.”

“Yeah, I know. I’ve just been so busy lately,” she said with a rueful frown. “Tashana urgently needs a pistol variant of the Tachyon rifle; I’ll draw something up for her when we get back.”

“Great. I’m happy to shape all the parts you need, just let me know when,” he said, strapping on a holster and sliding in a loaded pistol.

“I better get some flight experience in with the Raptor too,” Alyssa said, walking past Jade to sit in the co-pilot’s chair.

John took a seat on the curved bench behind her, then looked at the girls in confusion as they glanced at each other but remained standing.

\*They’re just negotiating who gets to sit next to you,\* Alyssa explained with a wry smile.

He rolled his eyes, then patted the seats beside him. “Jehanna, Helene, can you sit here please. I need to speak with you on the flight down.”

They didn’t need to be told twice and smiled radiantly as they sat beside him. John put his arms around their shoulders, making them even happier, then watching as Jade took off from the deck, the Nymph effortlessly handling the Raptor as if she’d been flying it for years. She pivoted them towards the opening hangar doors, then the gunship rocketed forwards, narrowly missing the raising door by inches.

“Oops!” Jade said with a giggle. “The new Raptor’s a lot quicker than the last one!”

She hurled the gunship from side to side, really putting the newly minted vessel through its paces on its maiden voyage.

“These new thrusters are very nice, Dana,” she said with admiration. “The HUD says we’re making 84 G turns.”

“Can I take control for a minute?” Alyssa requested.

Jade nodded and transferred over flight control to the co-pilot’s station.

“What was it you wanted to talk to us about, John?” Helene asked politely.

“You’re our best chance of avoiding any trouble, Helene,” he said, rubbing her shoulder. “If we do get confronted by an angry mob of Larathyrans, would you be able to calm them down?”

“I should think so,” she said confidently. “I worked with big groups of colonists when we freed them from the Kirrix.”

“Don’t forget to ask Alyssa for help if it’s too difficult,” he said, giving her an encouraging smile. “She’ll be able to give you a lot of assistance.”

“I’ll remember,” she said earnestly.

“Thanks, honey,” he said, before turning to Jehanna. “I should have mentioned this before, while we were back on the Invictus: are you planning to do any filming?”

Jehanna held up a tiny recording device and grinned. “Definitely.”

“Oh, nice,” he said in surprise. “I was going to suggest it might be a good idea to stay in your Paragon suit, so you could use the built-in cameras. It looks like you’re way ahead of me.”

“I always try and keep this nearby,” she explained. “You never know when the scoop of the century might fall into your lap. In your case it’s usually the scoop of the millennium!”

He chuckled and gave her a wry smile. “We do seem to be a magnet for trouble.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll get plenty of footage we can use,” Jehanna said. “I assume you want to show some of it to the twins to check how they react?”

“Yes, exactly.”

A flash of green caught his attention and John glanced up at the crystal canopy. Jade was back in control of the gunship and had turned them towards Larathyra, the lush planet now filling the sweeping view from the cockpit. The Raptor plunged down towards the surface, feathery banks of cirrus clouds whipping past them when they reached the troposphere.

As they descended lower, the Nymph dipped and weaved the gunship, rocketing past the fluffier altocumulus and leaving swirling vortexes in their wake. She gradually eased them out of the dive as they reached ten-thousand feet and she swept towards the city that spread out for miles below them.

“Can I take over again please?” Alyssa requested politely.

Jade checked that Alyssa had her hand on the flightstick, then transferred control to her again.

The teenager immediately rolled the Raptor, then dived down until they were skimming only a few hundred feet above the ground. She ramped up the thrust and the gunship roared over the city, triggering a deafening sonic boom that rolled across the metropolis.

“Just announcing our arrival,” she said, grinning at him over her shoulder.

John rolled his eyes at her antics. “Put us down by the energy source please, Jade,” he said, rising to his feet. “It should be that big building over there.”

The Nymph banked the gunship around, then slowed their descent, bringing them to a sedate hover above their destination. “It looks like we got their attention,” she noted, seeing the crowds of shocked faces below. “I’ll find us a spot to land.”

“Don’t risk hurting anyone,” John said firmly. “Bring us down to twenty feet above the ground. Alyssa and I can fly down to land and use telekinesis to bring the others with us.”

“Will do, Master,” Jade said, waving him goodbye.

“Let’s go, ladies,” he said, strolling out of the cockpit.

His six companions followed him into the Cargo Bay, where Dana jogged over to the ramp controls on the wall. She hit the button and the ramp began to lower, then the roaring of retro-thrusters filled the air.

John stepped closer towards the ramp and looked down. There were already hundreds of Larathyrans below, with more running in their direction from the surrounding streets. The green faces below were mostly looking shocked beyond belief, but he saw some children running around, the young Larathyrans pointing and chattering away together in excitement.

“What’s the mood like down there, Helene?” he asked, glancing behind him at the teal-hued girl.

She closed her eyes and reached out with her mind, the gentle current of her thoughts washing over the crowd below.

“They’re very shocked. A little bit scared... but hopeful... and relieved,” she murmured, making light contact with the Larathyran minds. “I don’t sense anyone feeling angry towards us.”

He nodded to her gratefully, then glanced at Jehanna. “I guess it’s showtime.”

She grinned and gave him a thumbs up.

\*Alyssa? Are you ready?\* he asked, as the Raptor hovered above the ground.

\*Right here beside you,\* she replied, walking out onto the ramp with him.

They stepped off the ramp and floated down, levitating the rest of the girls behind them. Their sudden leap into thin air triggered a collective gasp that was loud enough to be heard over the Raptor’s retro-thrusters. The crowd backed away a good distance to give them plenty of room to land, then as John and the girls touched down and looked around, he heard sharp intakes of breath from every direction.

Aside from their skin colour, the Larathyrans were almost identical to the Maliri in every way. There were a lot more men in the crowd than he was used to seeing, but they looked very similar to Ceraden’s height and build. The women were all young, but most of them had the familiar proportions of mature Maliri, which led John to conclude they were adults of around Kali’s age. Both men and women had pointed ear tips, the size and shape identical to his own.

The last thing that the Larathyran women shared with the Maliri was the look of shocked fascination on their faces as they stared at him. It was an enraptured stare that he’d seen many, many times before... and apparently he wasn’t the only one who had noticed.

Alyssa turned around to look at him, an acquisitive gleam in her eyes. \*I want one.\*

\*What?!\* John asked, gaping at her in surprise.

\*I’m cashing in my favour,\* she declared, her face alight with excitement. \*Pick one of those sexy green-skinned babes and let’s add her to the team!\*

He shook his head and protested, \*Now, just hang on a second-\*

\*Nope!\* she interrupted, holding up a hand. \*You said I could have any favour I wanted and you’d agree with no objections. I want you to pick the most beautiful girl here and make her yours.\*

John opened his mouth to object, but he saw the hurt look on Alyssa’s face and fell silent.

\*Please, John,\* she begged him. \*You promised me. I don’t ask you for much, but I’m asking for this now. I’ve had to browbeat you into recruiting all the girls on the crew, but just this once, I want you to choose someone for yourself.\*

As much as he objected to what she was proposing on moral grounds, John couldn’t help feeling a thrill of excitement as he glanced at the crowd of gorgeous alien women. Every single one of them was staring at him in awed fascination, their inbuilt genetic programming drawing them to him like moths to a raging inferno.

\*Oh god... I can’t believe I’m agreeing to this,\* he said with a groan.

\*Yes!\* she crowed in triumph.

Alyssa floated up into the air, her eyes shining with a radiant light. She began speaking to the crowd in ancient Maliri, her captivating voice even managing to draw the attention of the Larathyran women away from John. Suddenly they were all watching her intently, their eyes opening wide with excitement.

“What’s she saying to them?!” Dana whispered, nudging John with an elbow.

“You don’t want to know,” he said, shaking his head.

“Come on, tell us!” Jehanna begged him.

John winced with embarrassment. “She told them that I’ve arrived on their planet to help them in their hour of need.”

“Ah, that’s really nice,” Helene said, beaming at him proudly. “No wonder they all look so happy.”

“Yeah...” John said wryly. “Then she told them that I’m also searching for the most beautiful woman on the planet to join me at my side.”

“What?!” Rachel blurted out, looking at him astonishment. “You’re actually going along with this?!”

He nodded glumly. “Now she’s asking any woman who isn’t interested to back away and make room for the others.”

“Nobody moved,” Helene informed him helpfully.

“Yeah... that doesn’t really surprise me.”

Dana giggled at his stricken expression. “She’s cashing in that bet, isn’t she?”

“She really suckered me on that one,” he admitted. “I promised her I wouldn’t object to whatever she asked for and now she’s got me over a barrel. Alyssa might tease me about a lot of things, but I know she’d be genuinely hurt if I break my word to her over this.”

“I’m sorry, John,” Rachel said with sympathy. She broke into a grin and continued, “If it’s any consolation, those are some really beautiful women... and they all seem very interested in you.”

Alyssa chose that moment to descend to the ground beside him.

“It’s time,” she announced, giddy with excitement. “Let’s choose the lucky girl!”

John turned to face the crowd and saw there were hundreds of Larathyran women watching his every move. They all looked thrilled to have his attention, and he could see they were all silently pleading for him to pick them. He was half-tempted to just choose the closest one to put them all out of their misery, but a furtive glance at Alyssa quickly changed his mind. Her steely-eyed glare of disapproval made it quite clear that he better take this seriously, or she would not be amused.

Turning back, he looked out at the lovely sea of femininity, and realised that whoever he chose deserved to have her feelings reciprocated. Suddenly this wasn’t a game anymore, but there were so many beautiful Larathyran women there, it was impossible to choose between them. He took a deep breath and calmed his pounding heart, then reached out with his will, making gentle contact with the minds of the women before him.

He was acting purely by instinct, but he felt drawn to someone in the crowd, her mind opening up to him like the petals of a beautiful flower. John turned and stood before her, then looked down at her exquisite heart-shaped face. Her enchanting eyes were dark and mysterious... shadowed with a hint of sorrow, but filled with passion and desire. John reached up to gently brush the smudge of dirt from her cheek, feeling the warmth and softness of her skin.

“What’s your name?” he asked quietly.

She looked up at him, her eyes widening in shocked disbelief that he’d chosen her.

“I’m Auralei,” she replied in a breathless whisper.

“Hello, Auralei,” he said, smiling warmly at her. “That’s a lovely name. I’m called John.”

She blushed, her cheeks flushing a dark green, and the young Larathyran seemed to be so overwhelmed that she was lost for words.

\*Oh, John...\* Alyssa murmured, her voice catching. \*She’s absolutely perfect!\*

The blonde dismissed the dazzling glow from her eyes, then walked over and greeted Auralei with her most charming smile. Alyssa leaned forward and whispered something in her pointed ear that made the Larathyran giggle and blush even harder as she gazed up at John. Alyssa continued to murmur in her ear and eventually Auralei turned away from him to whisper some urgent responses.

John was dying to know what they were discussing, but his attempts to listen in were thwarted by a low groan of disappointment from the crowd. The Larathyran women realised that he had made his choice, and were trying hard not to burst into tears. They made no move to disperse though, and the women continued to study him in rapt fascination. John glanced around warily at the men, wondering how they were reacting to his abrupt arrival in their city and captivating all the women at a glance. To his surprise, the men merely seemed curious rather than infuriated, their gaze flicking between him and the Lionesses.

Alyssa turned around, a look of eager anticipation on their face. “I had a quick chat with Auralei. The Larathyrans are in big trouble and they need our help, but just leave all that to me. You need to get ready!”

“Get ready?” he asked in confusion. “Ready for what?”

Alyssa’s playful grin left him feeling unsettled and John suddenly wondered what he’d signed himself up for.

\*\*\*

“We’re being hailed, Captain,” the comms officer said, turning to the leader of the scout cruiser.

“Put her through,” Captain Narzera replied, a sly smile spreading across her face.

The holoscreen flickered, then a Galkiran officer appeared, leaning forward in her command chair. “I hear you’ve found some interesting prey, Narzera?”

“Indeed I have, Viessa. Take a look at these intriguing specimens,” she replied, tapping several runes on her console.

The broadcast routed the pictures through the comms beacons to the second Galkiran cruiser. Captain Viessa studied the images in shock, her eyes lingering on the tall men with their impressive muscles.

“These look just like our males... but they’re so much bigger,” she murmured in a hushed voice. “They’re definitely not a thrall race though. What manner of species are they?”

“They’re known as ‘Terrans’,” Narzera replied with a wicked smile. “Esta and Yganna are here already and eager to aid with the interrogations. Camae and Vemi will arrive shortly. How soon can you join us?”

“Change heading to rendezvous with Captain Narzera’s cruiser!” Viessa barked at her crew. Her eyes flicked back to Narzera and her malevolent smile matched the other scout captain. “We’ll be there in three hours.”

“Lord Gahl’kalgor arrives at midnight; we shall begin our assault then,” Narzera declared. “Don’t be late, Viessa... you might miss out.”

“We’ll be there,” Viessa replied, her eyes glinting with anticipation.

\*\*\*

The Raptor hovered over the palace gardens, then glided forward to land in front of the majestic row of columns that led up to the grand entrance.

“Are you sure you don’t need me to go with you and translate?” John asked Dana as she lowered the loading ramp.

She shook her head and gave him a sympathetic grin. “Sorry, Alyssa already thought of that. Jade’s fluent in ancient Maliri, so she’ll be able to explain everything I’m doing to Solana and Riniya.”

The two Larathyran women perked up when they heard their names mentioned, and they glanced briefly at the redhead to see if she wanted to speak to them. When there were no questions forthcoming, they returned to staring at John, their wide eyes drinking in the sight of him wearing his pristine white suit.

He flushed at their intense scrutiny, then said to the two young women, “Jade and Dana are going to take you to the Fusion plant now. Dana will fix the problem and explain how to keep everything running, but she can’t speak your language, so Jade will translate for her.”

“We understand, Lord Baen’thelas,” Solana said quietly. “We will document all her instructions.”

“Thank you so much for helping us,” Riniya added, close to tears with gratitude.

“You’re welcome,” he replied, giving them a reassuring smile. “Don’t worry, everything’s going to be okay now.”

The tension visibly eased from their shoulders and they returned his smile.

John glanced at Jehanna, making eye-contact through her clear-crystal faceplate. “Are you ready?”

She saluted him and made no attempt to stifle her grin. “Lead on, Lord Baen’thelas.”

He shook his head at her teasing, then strode down the ramp to the intricate mosaics that led up to the palace. \*Is all this really necessary, Alyssa?\* he protested.

\*It’s all going to be so worth it,\* she replied. \*Trust me, handsome... please?\*

John let out a sigh of resignation. \*Fine, just no more guilt trips. So, what am I looking for again?\*

\*I need you to try and find Larn’kelnar’s throne room. He’s bound to have one and it’s practically guaranteed to be in the palace somewhere.\*

He glanced up at the massive structure and wondered how long it would take to find it in such a grandiose building. \*Okay, we’re heading inside.\*

\*Thanks, John!\* she gushed gratefully.

Jehanna followed him up the steps, her booted feet clicking on the marble.

\*Are you sure it’s a wise idea to have Auralei on the Invictus before we’ve safely introduced her to Irillith and Tashana?\* he asked the excited matriarch.

\*Don’t worry, she’s perfectly safe. I’m right here with her, so she’s in no danger from the twins,\* Alyssa said confidently. \*Even if they went berserk, which I don’t think they will, I’ve got Helene, Rachel, and Sakura here as well to keep the peace.\*

\*I still don’t understand why you needed to take Auralei back to the Invictus,\* John muttered.

\*The poor girl was wearing dirty gardening clothes!\* Alyssa said indignantly. \*I had to find her something decent to wear!\*

He gritted his teeth and chose not to dignify that with a reply.

Jehanna looked at him with concern. “Is Alyssa driving you mad?”

“I’m sure she means well, but I don’t see why she’s making such a big meal of this. I already agreed to recruit Auralei, so I don’t see the point of dragging it out. Larathyran society is teetering on the brink of collapse and we shouldn’t be wasting time; they need our help right now.”

The reporter was quiet for a moment, then asked, “John... has Alyssa ever done anything that’s not in your best interests?”

He grimaced, then shook his head. “No.”

“And if unnecessary delays caused more hardships to the Larathyrans, you’d get pretty upset about that, wouldn’t you?”

“Yes, of course,” he replied, as they reached the top of the long flight of marble stairs.

“Can you imagine a scenario where Alyssa would intentionally do something that would risk upsetting you?” Jehanna asked, turning to face him.

John hesitated, remembering a few incidents where she’d sailed pretty close to the wind. “Yes, but ultimately everything worked out for the best,” he reluctantly conceded.

“In that case, my advice is to just trust her,” Jehanna said with a shrug. “I think you underestimate Alyssa sometimes. She’s incredibly smart... and she usually has a very good reason for the things she does.”

His shoulders slumped in defeat. “I know. I’m just worried about Auralei too I guess.”

Jehanna patted him on the shoulder. “You need to trust me on this. It’ll be a cold day in hell before Alyssa lets anyone or anything harm a hair on that girl’s head. She’s obviously got something special planned for Auralei and doing anything to upset her is the absolute last thing on Alyssa’s mind.”

“Yeah, you’re right,” John conceded, before giving her a smile of admiration. “When did you get so smart?”

“When you filled me up with cum, and greatly enhanced my intellect,” Jehanna said with a shrug.

John stared at her in shock at her brusque reply.

Jehanna promptly burst into laughter. “Oh, John, you should see your face! I can see why Alyssa loves teasing you so much.”

“Hmph,” he grunted, in mock indignation.

She stroked his arm and gave him an apologetic smile. “I’m sorry, that wasn’t nice. I was telling you the truth though; I’ve already noticed a difference since being with you. I’m able to make logic jumps much more easily, my fact recall has dramatically improved, and I’m able to concentrate on complex tasks for a long time without feeling any fatigue.”

“How do you feel about those changes?” he asked cautiously as they approached the entrance.

She pulled off her helmet and leaned over to give him a big kiss. “I love it! All the girls are so clever, and now I feel like I can actually keep up with them.”

“You were always a bright girl,” John said, stroking her hair. “It’s one of the reasons I was attracted to you.”

“And I loved how earnest and humble you were,” she said, smiling at him fondly. “Here was this larger-than-life hero of the Federation, but you were determined to give credit to your crew and not hog all the glory for yourself. You were very different from most of the officers I’d interviewed.”

“I’ve never been interested in fame and glory,” John said, clasping her hand as they walked towards the huge double doors. He gestured towards the doorway and they swung open before him. “I got pushed into all of this, and I’ve just been trying to keep all of us safe as we dealt with one disaster after the other.”

“I know... and I’m really glad you let me help you,” Jehanna said flashing him a smile. “I’ve never felt this fulfilled before. Don’t get me wrong, I loved working for TFNN, but that pales in comparison to saving the galaxy from ancient godlike beings who are intent on slaughtering billions of innocent people.”

“Well, it’s definitely something interesting to add to your resume,” he joked.

“I don’t think my next job will need a heroic resume,” she said, giving him a doe-eyed look.

“You’ve already meet the rigorous qualifications,” John agreed, returning her smile.

They walked into the massive hallway and paused, gazing up at the baroque architecture in fascination.

“This palace is incredible,” John muttered, shaking his head in disbelief. “I wasn’t expecting Larn’kelnar to be so ostentatious.”

Jehanna laughed, the cheerful sound echoing in the vast room. “Believe it or not, this is actually quite mild in comparison to Mael’nerak’s palace on Kythshara.”

“Really?” John asked with interest. “Was it really over the top?”

“Gold and jewels everywhere!” the reporter said with a grin. “If you melted it all down, you could probably just buy Terra.”

He shook his head as they continued walking. “Their egos are just wildly out of control.”

“You can see how it happens though,” Jehanna said, swinging their arms together. “Surrounded by a doting harem of yes-women for thousands of years... that’s bound to corrupt anybody.”

John stared into the distance and couldn’t help wondering if that fate might eventually befall him too.

“Yeah, there’s no chance of that, not with all of us teasing you to distraction,” Jehanna smirked, correctly guessing the reason for his sudden silence. She suddenly froze and looked at him in surprise.

“What?” John asked, looking at her quizzically.

“Nothing,” she murmured, pulling him down for a kiss. “Just very grateful for my handsome, clever, man.”

He eyed her suspiciously. “Are you buttering me up for something?”

“Nope! Let’s keep looking for this throne room,” she replied, tugging his arm. “I want to sit on his throne and pretend I’m a egomaniacal tyrant. It might be a fun career change!”

John laughed and followed his exuberant companion deeper into the palace.

\*\*\*

Lynette Devereux walked back into the diplomatic shuttle and stretched her lithe body, feeling her taut muscles crying out for attention. She was determined not to let herself ever get out of shape again, not after being given this incredible chance at a new lease on life. The Fleet Admiral decided to call on the privileges of rank when she returned to the Aphrodite, and commandeer the gym for her own personal use. A couple of hours of strenuous exercise would work out the kinks in her weary muscles.

It was late now and time to return to the battleship after another long day of arduous meetings with the governors. She tapped the comms interface on her desk and contacted the shuttle’s flight crew.

“I’m ready to head back to the Aphrodite, Commander,” she informed him. “You may depart when ready.”

“Yes, Ma’am,” he replied, with a sharp salute. “We’ll be airborne in a matter of minutes.”

There was a murmur of conversation off-screen and the Commander turned to frown in their direction. He glanced at his console, then looked back at her in surprise.

“There’s somebody approaching the shuttle airlock, Fleet Admiral. Should I contact Commander MacCallum and have the man removed from the docking bay?”

“No, it’s alright. I’ll go see who it is,” she replied, ending the call.

Lynette hurried over to the airlock and tapped on the button to open it. When the doorway spiralled open, she was delighted to see Stefan Vaughn, despite his sour expression.

“Stefan, this is a pleasant surprise,” she said warmly, standing aside. “Please come in.”

He followed her into the shuttle, darting wary glances at the plush conference suite, as if expecting a horde of ISD operatives to leap out from the cupboards and begin an agonising interrogation.

“It’s just us here, we won’t be disturbed,” Lynette said, before gesturing towards the conference table. “Please take a seat. Can I make you a drink?”

Stefan slumped down in the chair she had pointed to. “Yeah, I’ll have a whiskey. I think I’m going to need it.”

Lynette went to the liquor cabinet and poured him his drink of choice. “There you go.”

He took a sip and his eyes widened at the smooth taste. “Nothing but the best, eh?”

“I’m not going to bribe many people by giving them swill, am I?” she asked, pouring herself a tumbler of the amber drink.

Stefan looked at her in surprise.

“What?” she asked, sipping her drink. “That’s what you’re thinking isn’t it?”

His eyes narrowed and he placed his glass on the table. “It’s the truth. You’ve thrown billions of credits at these governors to get them to do what you want... that’s a bribe where I come from.”

“That’s a fair assessment,” she agreed, relaxing in her seat.

“So you’re just openly admitting it then?” he asked, looking at her in disbelief.

“I admit to trying to help these colonies by supplying them financial support, or easing some of their financial obligations,” Lynette clarified. “If you wish to classify that as a bribe, that’s your prerogative.”

“And I’m sure none of those greedy bastards had their private bank balance padded too?” Stefan said with a sneer of contempt.

“You’d be surprised at how few there were,” she replied. “But yes, in some cases.”

He snorted and shook his head. “I knew it.”

Lynette let out a sigh of frustration. “You’re missing the point here, Stefan. These colonies have been deprived of funding for a long time. They deserve all the money I’ve pledged to them, and a number of them were owed compensation for not receiving the military protection they were due. It’s true that I asked the governors to stay with the Terran Federation, but the aid packages I gave them were not contingent on that pledge of loyalty.”

“Yeah, of course they weren’t,” he muttered sarcastically.

“It doesn’t matter if you believe me or not,” she said with a shrug. “The reality is that all the governors you’re sneering at realised something very important.”

“Really? And what was that?”

“That the Terran Federation has trillions of credits at its disposal,” Lynette said openly. “Those colonies need funding and I was happy to offer it to them with no strings attached. That speaks volumes.”

He opened his mouth to protest, then shut it with a snap.

“I’m just being brutally honest with you,” Lynette said to the shocked governor. “I don’t want any of these colonies to leave. It looks very bad for the Terran Federation and it would be really bad for the colonies. At the same time, I have access to massive amounts of credits, and the Outer Rim desperately needs funding. Who’s the villain here? We’re all just getting what we want.”

“But... you’re just throwing money at the Outer Rim to make us stop complaining!” he blurted out indignantly.

“Well... yes,” she replied bluntly.

Stefan gaped at her, lost for words.

“I’ve spoken to all the governors involved and you each have two major grievances in common,” Lynette replied. “Number one: You were abandoned by the Terran Federation military and have huge concerns about future security. Number two: The Outer Rim colonies have not received adequate funding for decades, which has caused countless other problems. That’s what this rebellion boils down to, correct?”

He reluctantly nodded.

“So if I *‘make it rain’*, to use the local vernacular, we take care of the financial problems... at least in the short term. I’m hoping that it will be enough to dissuade your colleagues from future attempts at secession, until I can prove to them that they will continue to be protected by the Terran Federation. Once their security grievances are addressed, as long as the Terran Federation continues to meet the obligations we’ve committed to in the funding packages, there’s no reason left to leave... correct?”

Stefan gave her a grudging look of admiration. “I always took High Command for a bunch of incompetent, self-serving narcissists, but I totally underestimated you, Lynette. You knew exactly what you were doing all along. Screw the morality of leaving citizens to be raped to death by the bugs... you knew they’d all come running back if you threw enough money at them.”

“That’s quite the generalisation,” she commented, taking another sip of her whiskey.

“But it’s true, right?” he said with a scowl.

“No, and I’ll explain why not,” Lynette replied. “Your rebellion consists of two distinct groups of colonies. Those that were invaded by the Kirrix and those that were not. I wouldn’t be surprised if the colonists that were horrifically abused never forgive the Terran Federation for abandoning them... and I couldn’t find fault with them for that. The other group of colonies deeply sympathise with those that were invaded... but their main grievances are financial.”

“So you bribe the second group and the rebellion falls apart,” he said, shaking his head in disgust. “I have to hand it to you... you played us like a fiddle.”

Lynette put her glass down and looked at him intently. “I don’t know what else to tell you, Stefan. I care about those colonies... I really do... but I can’t undo the past. I can offer those victims compensation, and try to improve their lives in as many meaningful ways as I can, but I can’t bring back the children they lost, or undo the horrible indignities they suffered. What more do you want from me, to atone for what they all went through?”

He slumped, his eyes tired and sad. “I don’t know. It just... doesn’t seem enough.”

“I don’t think so either,” she said gently. “But turning your back on the Terran Federation is just cutting off your nose to spite your face. It’s not a better path for the Outer Rim... I promise you, Stefan, it really isn’t.”

The governor let out a weary sigh. “Don’t waste your time with any more justifications, Lynette. Just show me where to sign so I can get my people their thirty pieces of silver.”

Lynette looked at him with regret, then nodded and activated the holo-interface.

\*\*\*

Night was falling on Larathyra, and dark shadows crept across the marble floors of the Imperial palace.

“You better activate your external floodlights,” John said to his armoured companion.

“Umm... how do I do that exactly?” she asked, looking around the Paragon HUD.

“Just look for the headlight icon in the corner. It’s a triangle with lines sticking out the wide end.”

Jehanna spotted it a moment later and the optical recognition activated the battle armour’s external lights. Bright beams pierced the darkness, banishing the shadows from the floor.

“Well done,” John said, as they proceeded along the corridor.

They reached a T-junction and Jehanna swung back and forth, looking in each direction. “Which way should we go now?”

“Hold on a second, I’ll check,” he muttered, focusing his will inwards.

Activating his X-Ray vision, John swept his gaze around, staring through the translucent walls and searching for the distinctive shape of a throne.

“There it is,” he announced, pointing towards the corridor on their left. “It’s down there about sixty metres away.”

“Well that was easy,” Jehanna said, turning to smile at him in admiration. She paused and swept her lights over his face. “Are you blushing? Why?”

“I should’ve done that at the start,” he admitted, his cheeks reddening with embarrassment.

She laughed and patted his arm. “Don’t worry, your secret’s safe with me.”

“Unfortunately, you’re not the only one listening,” he said, tapping his temple.

\*What was that, Master?\* Jade asked innocently. \*Sorry, I was distracted with thoughts of kittens.\*

Edraele yawned theatrically. \*Did you need my assistance, my Lord? I do apologise... I drifted off to sleep.\*

\*How’s the search for the throne going?\* Alyssa enquired. \*I’m sorry I haven’t been paying attention, I was having a lovely chat with Auralei.\*

\*You bunch of fakers,\* John said affectionately.

A loud clunk echoed around the palace and suddenly the entire building was flooded with light.

John winced against the glare, his eyes taking a moment to adjust. “It looks like Dana fixed the fusion reactor.”

“She’s amazing,” Jehanna said, turning off her suit’s floodlights.

“You’ll get no argument from me there,” John agreed, as they walked along the corridor towards the throne room. He glanced at Jehanna and added, “I’m glad we didn’t rush straight here. I enjoyed having a walk and chat with you.”

She slipped her hand into his. “Me too.”

They shared a smile, then John used telekinesis to push open another set of huge doors. The corridor beyond was far more ornate, lined with four statues on either side. Each one depicted Larn’kelnar standing over a vanquished foe, the long dead Progenitors looking up at him in terror.

“He killed eight,” John noted, as they walked past the monuments to Larn’kelnar’s towering ego.

“He was in the minor-leagues compared to Mael’nerak,” Jehanna said, gazing up at the statues. “The twins’ great grandfather killed sixty-two.”

“Really?” John asked in surprise. “How did you find that out?”

\*I’m sorry, John, I was going to let you see that for yourself,\* Alyssa apologised. \*There are walls filled with murals in Mael’nerak’s palace that lead to his throne room. They show the sixty-two victories he must have achieved before he came to the Shroud.\*

He whistled under his breath. \*Mael’nerak must have been an absolute monster in his prime.\*

“I didn’t know that was meant to be a surprise,” Jehanna said with a frown. “Sorry for ruining it.”

“It’s no problem. I’m curious to see the palace on Kythshara, but I’d rather know about any useful information your girls discovered,” John said with a shrug.

Raising his hand, he gestured towards another set of ornate doors that were blocking their path. They swung open obediently, revealing the dead Progenitor’s throne room.

“And there’s his throne,” Jehanna said, pointing up a set of marble steps to a plinth, the seat of Larn’kelnar’s power taking centre stage.

The throne was sculpted from marble to match the plinth. High-backed and grandiose, it towered over anyone that entered the Imperial chamber.

John walked up to it, and patted the padded upholstery. “Your seat awaits, your highness.”

“I haven’t earned the right to sit there... my Lord,” Jehanna said, performing a sweeping bow. “That honour is yours.”

He laughed and patted it again in invitation. “Honestly, I don’t mind.”

She smiled and shook her head, then walked back towards the entrance.

“Hey, where are you going?” he asked in confusion.

Jehanna closed the doors again, then snapped to attention and stood rigidly beside the doorway. John was about to ask her what she was doing, when he heard the march of booted feet from the corridor outside. When the door opened again, Alyssa glided inside, flanked by a pair of armoured Lionesses. He recognised Calara and Rachel from the colour of the cats on their pauldrons, but they didn’t say a word, joining Jehanna at attention.

“Greetings, Lord Baen’thelas,” Alyssa said, as she swept towards him at a regal pace. “I trust you had a pleasant evening?”

He was shocked into silence by the sight of her wearing a beautiful gown, the ornate style emphasising her stunning figure whilst still retaining her modesty. It reminded him of the matriarchal robe that Edraele had worn for him on their last day together at Genthalas.

“You look incredible,” he murmured, getting his wits back again.

“Thank you, my Lord,” she replied, unable to contain her lovely smile. She glanced at the throne behind him and added, “Would you care to take a seat? Tradition dictates that our... guest... should be received that way.”

“Ah... sure,” he agreed, sitting down on Larn’kelnar’s throne.

When he was seated, Calara’s voice echoed around the throne room. “Empress Auralei requests an audience, my Lord.”

\*What are you up to?\* he asked, glancing at Alyssa who stood at his side.

\*Just play along,\* she replied, giving him an impish grin.

He chuckled then cleared his throat. “Alright, send her in.”

His smile was wiped away by the vision of loveliness that appeared in the doorway, and he could only stare in wonder at Auralei as she approached the throne. She was wearing a magnificent white dress that would have truly been fit for an empress. He couldn’t begin to describe the intricate detailing, the delicate filigree, or the dazzling trails of jewels that adorned her body.

Despite covering almost all her exposed skin, the dress somehow managed to showcase her spectacular figure, hugging her generous bust and the graceful curve of her hips. Atop her head she wore a dainty tiara, but it wasn’t necessary; just one glance at Auralei would tell anyone that this woman ruled from the pinnacle of her empire.

She glided up the steps to stand before him, then slowly knelt on the marble plinth. “I wish to pledge my allegiance to you, Lord Baen’thelas,” she said softly.

John snapped out of his daze and quickly dropped to one knee in front of her. “You don’t need to do any of this, Auralei. I don’t expect you to submit to me or anything like that... and look,” he said, pointing up towards the brightly illuminated ceiling. “We’ve already fixed the power for you... so none of this is necessary.”

Despite having only met once before, Auralei gave him a knowing look and a loving smile. “Alyssa warned me you would react like this. I didn’t believe her... but you tried to dissuade me from serving you, exactly as she said you would.”

He glanced back at Alyssa, giving her a guilty look. She just rolled her eyes at him and laughed, her melodic voice echoing around the room.

Auralei reached up to place her hand on his chest. “I want this with all my heart, John. I wish to lead my people with your support and guidance... but I want to be with you most of all.”

“You’re really sure?” he asked, looking into her eyes.

She nodded solemnly. “I am. Alyssa explained everything... at great length.”

John saw her blush and realised Alyssa had spared none of the details.

\*I would never be anything less than completely honest with one of the girls,\* Alyssa said softly.

\*I know.\* He rose up and retook his seat. “I accept your pledge of allegiance, Empress.”

Alyssa turned to their white-armoured guards. “Please grant us some privacy,” she requested politely.

The Lionesses glanced wistfully at the kneeling Larathyran, then left the trio alone in the throne chamber.

Alyssa immediately moved around to the front of the throne and sank down beside Auralei. “Did you see the look on John’s face when he first set eyes on you?” she whispered.

The green-skinned beauty nodded, smiling as she looked up at John. “Did you really like my dress?”

“You looked absolutely stunning,” he admitted, returning her smile. “I thought you looked beautiful before... but this time you took my breath away.”

She looked delighted by his warm praise, her chest swelling with pride, which gave John a tantalising glimpse of what promised to be an impressive cleavage.

“Now, let’s make you one of us,” Alyssa said warmly, reaching for John’s trousers.

She undid the clasp with practiced movements of her fingers, then slid them down to reveal his stiffening shaft.

Auralei stared at it wide-eyed, a look of absolute astonishment on her face. “But... you’re enormous... That can’t possibly fit!”

“Oh, trust me, it will,” Alyssa said, glancing up at John and giving him an adoring smile. “Do you mind if I demonstrate, handsome?”

He shook his head and ran his fingers through her silky blonde hair as she kissed his cock. She slowly opened her mouth and descended down his shaft, taking inch after inch until he was fully sheathed in her throat. Auralei stared at the feat with a look of pure admiration on her face, the momentary fear and trepidation fading away.

Alyssa eased back and planted a loving kiss on the head as it passed her lips. “You see? Easy. You just need to get some practice... lots of practice.”

Following the blonde’s instructions, Auralei carefully wrapped her fingers around the base of John’s cock. “Is that alright?” she asked, looking up anxiously. “I’m not hurting you?”

“You’re doing fine,” he said, giving her an encouraging smile. “Just listen to Alyssa’s advice and she’ll make sure everything’s wonderful.”

The Larathyran girl relaxed and giggled when Alyssa gave her a sideways hug.

“Now, do you want to try?” Alyssa asked, her cerulean eyes gleaming with excitement.

Auralei nodded and leaned forward to gently kiss the head, her lips deliciously soft against his skin.

“That felt really good,” John murmured, reaching out to brush his fingers through her long dark hair.

Encouraged by his praise, Auralei gave him a tentative lick, then a longer slower one, following the contours of his head with her tongue.

“That’s right,” Alyssa whispered, nodding enthusiastically. “Get to know the shape, the size, and the feel of his skin. This gorgeous cock belongs inside your beautiful body.”

Auralei moaned with desire, locking eyes with John as she carefully enveloped more of the head with her flushed lips. Now that John could stare into those adoring orbs without distraction, he saw that her eyes were a very dark grey, so dark that they were nearly indistinguishable from her pupils. The effect was to make her eyes look huge, like deep dark pools drawing him in, the effect greatly enhanced by the expertly applied makeup.

When she lathered the head with a loving swirl of her tongue, he couldn’t help giving Auralei her first taste of pre-cum. His cock jerked and she moaned in delight at the sweet taste covering her tongue, then her eyes began to glaze over as she sank into the suckling trance. Her movements became smoother and more confident, her lips descending further down his shaft as she took him deeper.

Alyssa nodded with satisfaction, then moved around the throne to kneel beside John. “She’s such a sweet girl, handsome,” she said, leaning into his arm. “We had a lovely talk earlier.”

“I felt drawn to her,” John murmured, stroking Auralei’s hair as the head of his cock nudged into the back of her mouth. “I knew there was something special about her.”

“She’s all alone, an orphan like me and Sparks,” Alyssa whispered, watching as the young woman eased his cock into her throat. “Auralei needs someone to take care of her, to protect her, and give her all the love she deserves.”

John already felt protective towards the beautiful girl on her knees before him. He knew that in only a few more minutes, she would be connected to him forever, their fates inexorably intertwined. Instead of the usual doubts he felt about recruiting a new Lioness, he longed to invite Auralei into his family, and spend hours discovering all there was to know about this mysterious Larathyran beauty.

“So close... I can feel it,” Alyssa said in a hushed voice, her eyes locked on Auralei. “She’s going to look so gorgeous with a tummy full of you cum. I can’t wait until she can look up at you with those big beautiful eyes, watching in adoration as you fill her belly.”

He groaned, feeling an intense climax rapidly approaching, his taut quad aching for release. He could hear Alyssa’s voice telling him everything he was already feeling, his heart longing to connect to this ravishing young beauty.

“She really is special,” Alyssa whispered in his ear.

John nodded, feeling the climax crash over him.

“She’s Larn’kelnar’s daughter...” Alyssa purred, licking his earlobe.

His cum was already shooting up his shaft and it shot straight into Auralei’s trim stomach, instantly establishing a psychic connection between them. He felt the Larathyran girl light up in his mind as she joined his psychic network, then Alyssa’s last words finally registered in his brain.

Alyssa eyes shone with excitement as she listened to his thoughts. “That’s right... make her yours forever!”

There was no way he could stop his release even if he wanted to, and John cried out in ecstasy as he cradled her head in his lap. His cock throbbed deep in her throat, pumping a huge load into the submissive girl’s belly, rounding it out with pint after pint of thick spunk. She moaned in response, suckling lovingly as her throat massaged his length, coaxing out every long rope of cum.

John knew that he was sitting on Larn’kelnar’s throne, claiming the remnants of his empire, and now taking Larn’kelnar’s daughter too. It was like a final spectacular victory over the defeated Progenitor, and John was seeing stars as Auralei milked his quad of every last drop. It was one of the most powerful climaxes he’d ever known, the intense pleasure mingling with the rush of victory, making for an intoxicating combination.

Alyssa also felt Auralei appear in their psychic network and nodded with satisfaction as she appeared beside Helene as one of her girls.

\*What the hell was that?\* Sakura blurted out in shock.

\*Tell me... what happened?\* Alyssa asked urgently.

\*I saw a wave of light sweep past us,\* the Asian girl replied. \*It was like the pulses you send out to identify the guilty... but this was blue!\*

\*Umm... Alyssa?\* Dana said with concern. \*Something weird just happened to Solana and Rinaya! They were fine one minute, now they look... oh nevermind, they seem okay now.\*

Alyssa glanced down at Auralei, then back at John, and her face lit up with a triumphant smile.