Three Square Meals Ch. 151

The gunship swooped low over the Larathyran city, the midday sun making its white armour sparkle in the glorious sunshine. Skimming the rooftops of the ornate buildings, the high-tech spacecraft was a startling contrast to the ancient baroque architecture that flashed past below, as the Raptor raced towards the outskirts of the sprawling metropolis.

“It shouldn’t be far to the suburbs,” Jehanna said, standing beside the pilot’s chair. “Just keep heading north-west.”

“Okay!” Betrixa cheerfully agreed, her eyes alight with excitement as they flew towards their destination. “Just tell me when you want to stop.”

Sakura walked over to the cockpit canopy and cast her gaze over the leafy boulevards in the distance. “I can see vehicles blocking the streets up ahead.”

“This should be it, Betrixa,” Jehanna said to the Nymph. “Kylantha said they haven’t had a chance to clear this city district yet.”

“Just tell me where you want me to land,” the cheetah catgirl replied, pulling back on the throttle.

The blaze from the gunship’s engines dimmed dramatically, then the retro-thrusters on the Raptor’s bow flared to life and further slowed the vessel’s airspeed.

“What about over there, in that park?” the reporter suggested.

Betrixa swung the flightstick to the right and the responsive vessel performed a quick roll as it banked to starboard. The tips of its wings whistled over the tiled roofs, causing them to rattle in the backwash.

“Oops,” the Nymph blurted out, without looking remotely apologetic.

Sakura gave her a look of concern. “Don’t do anything too reckless, Betrixa. John won’t be impressed if you wreck any buildings, and he’ll be really mad if you crash the Raptor and end up getting hurt.”

“I won’t go crazy, I promise,” Betrixa replied, without taking her eyes off the readouts on the console.

The gunship righted itself, then coasted over to a a grassy verge at the edge of the park. It descended in a smooth arc, then touched down without so much as a judder.

The Asian girl laughed and rolled her eyes. “Okay, you made your point. That was a textbook landing.”

“Just give me a shout when you want picking up!” Betrixa called back to the departing girls.

They waved goodbye, then left the cockpit and walked over to the starboard airlock, which had already spiralled open for them in invitation. The two Lionesses stepped out into the untended park, then their matching smiles quickly faded as they looked around to get their bearings.

“I’m glad Alyssa didn’t come with us,” Sakura said in a hushed voice. “This place must be swarming with psychic echoes.”

Jehanna nodded, her expression equally grim. “I didn’t realise it would be this bad. It’s like something from a horror movie...”

She activated the cameras in her Paragon suit, then slowly turned to get a panoramic view of the macabre scene. All around them were the husked corpses of Larathyran thralls, the women slain where they’d stood during the catastrophic conclusion to the battle with Larn’kelnar. Hover-cars had crashed into each other and wrecks covered the streets, the dead drivers slumped forward with the impact.

“I should have brought some Shimenawa,” Sakura muttered, staring sorrowfully at the desolation.

“What are they?” Jehanna asked, as she walked away from the stationary gunship.

“They ward away evil spirits,” Sakura explained, keeping pace at her side. “Part of the Shinto faith.”

Behind them, the Raptor lifted off with a throaty rumble, the sound intensifying as the gunship roared skyward. The raucous noise from the powerful engines dispelled the unsettling silence that had settled over the park.

“I didn’t know you were religious,” Jehanna asked, glancing curiously at her friend.

“I’m not... I’ve just been familiarising myself with some of my family’s old traditions recently,” Sakura said, giving her a self-conscious smile. “It’s been strangely comforting.”

Jehanna clasped her hand and gave it a reassuring squeeze. “I know what you mean.”

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“John, it’s time to wake up,” Alyssa whispered, her breath in his ear making him shiver.

He opened his eyes and looked up into her affectionate gaze. “What time is it?”

“Quarter-past two,” she replied, before her eyes flicked to his left. “Auralei should be waking up in a couple of minutes.”

John turned to face his sleeping companion, the young Larathyran looking peaceful and content where she lay beside him. The covers has slipped down while they rested, giving him an unimpeded view of her deliciously perky breasts, the delicate nipples a slightly darker shade of green than the rest of her nubile body. As much as John admired the enticing view, he didn’t want Auralei to wake up to find him ogling her, so he pulled up the covers to protect her modesty.

Alyssa’s muffled giggle drew his attention, and John looked at her inquisitively. \*What’s making you laugh?\*

She had a fond look in her eyes as she leaned down to kiss him. \*You are, handsome.\*

He returned the tender embrace, wrapping his arms around the blonde. \*Oh really? How did I amuse you this time?\*

\*Auralei’s your thrall and as devoted to you as I am,\* she explained between loving kisses. \*If you asked her to, she’d eagerly roll over and give up her virgin ass... and you’re feeling guilty about taking a peek at her boobs.\*

John flushed self-consciously and pulled back to look into Alyssa’s eyes. “I’m just treating her with the respect she deserves. Auralei’s been through a lot and it’s my responsibility to take care of her now. She’s a lovely girl and I want to make sure she’s happy living her new life with us.”

“Thank you, John,” Auralei murmured, sounding touched by his sincerity.

He shot a playful glare at Alyssa, realising that the blonde must have been well aware that her ward had just woken up. She’d distracted him with kisses, then goaded him into openly declaring his affection for the impressionable young Larathyran. Alyssa did her best to look innocent, but the twinkle in her cerulean eyes gave her away.

After rolling his eyes at her, John turned to face the Larathyran Empress and propped himself up on an elbow. “Hello, beautiful. Did you sleep well?”

Auralei gazed up at him with a look of utter adoration. “I really did. I can’t believe how much better I feel now after a good rest.” She hesitated and her cheeks flushed a darker shade. “Although I had some very vivid dreams...”

Alyssa crawled over to recline on the bed beside her. “Were you imagining what it would be like to have a baby with John?”

A doe-eyed look appeared in Auralei’s eyes as she slowly nodded. “It was wonderful,” she murmured, her hand drifting reflexively to her stomach. “We had a beautiful daughter. She was-... oh!”

The Larathyran stared at the rounded bump at her waist in astonishment, then quickly pulled the covers down to gape at her swollen belly.

She shot a startled glance at John, and asked, “Am I...?”

“No, you’re not pregnant,” he replied, placing his hand on the curved dome.

“At least not yet,” Alyssa helpfully interjected.

John ignored the blonde and kept his focus on Auralei, while gently stroking her rounded tummy. “Do you remember what we did this morning?”

Auralei’s expression rapidly shifted from disappointment to understanding, then to arousal as she remembered being on her knees before him. “I do,” she replied, closing her eyes in bliss as she revelled in his touch.

“The next time I feed you, you’ll remember everything,” John explained. “Your body is just adapting to being intimately connected with me.”

She gave him a smouldering look of desire. “I’m ready now.”

John smiled and leaned down to give her a reassuring kiss. “That’s a very tempting offer, but I really would like to get to know you a bit better first.”

Auralei returned his smile, then hesitated before saying, “I’ll gladly tell you anything you want to know, but I’m not sure where to start.”

“Maybe start by telling me what your life was like a few months ago?” he suggested.

Before she could begin, Alyssa slipped off the bed and rose to her feet. “I’ll let you two have some privacy,” she said, with a knowing smile. “Have a fun afternoon.”

“Don’t leave, Alyssa,” the Larathyran maiden requested, reaching out to clasp her hand. “Please stay.”

Alyssa looked at her with surprise. “Don’t you want some time alone with John?”

Auralei paused as she considered it, then shook her head. “I like you being here and telling me how best to serve as his matriarch. I don’t want to make any mistakes.”

Frowning with concern, John said gently, “You don’t need to worry about that, honey. I doubt there’s anything you could say or do that I’d consider a mistake. Even if there was, I wouldn’t be upset with you about it, I promise.”

She turned to look at him, an anxious look in her dark eyes. “I didn’t mean to imply that you would treat me badly; I never thought that for a moment! It’s just that... you chose me to be the Larathyran Empress and to serve as one of your matriarchs, but I haven’t the first idea how to do either of those things. I feel so overwhelmed and I don’t want to disappoint you!”

Alyssa gave her hand a sympathetic squeeze. “John doesn’t have any expectations at the moment. He just wants to get to know you a little bit better.”

John nodded in agreement. “There’s no need to put yourself under any unnecessary pressure. I just thought it would be nice to have a friendly chat.”

“Please ask her to stay, John. Having Alyssa here makes me feel much more confident,” Auralei requested again. She turned to the Terran teenager and added, “You did say that being one of John’s matriarchs was a special honour and we had to work closely together as a team.”

“That’s true,” Alyssa conceded, interlacing her fingers with their newest recruit.

With an amiable shrug, John glanced up at the blonde. “It’s fine by me. You’re welcome to stay if that makes Auralei feel more comfortable.”

“Okay, you twisted my arm!” Alyssa eagerly agreed, releasing the girl’s green hand so that she could remove her dress and slip under the covers.

“Oh! I didn’t mean to hurt you!” Auralei exclaimed, jerking her hand back in alarm.

“She’s not hurt, it’s just an expression,” John said, his voice warm and soothing. “It means that we convinced Alyssa to stay... but she never really wanted to leave in the first place.”

“You didn’t?” Auralei asked in surprise.

The blonde shook her head as she slid closer. “I love watching John get closer to our new recruits; I only offered to leave because I thought you might like some time alone with him. Now, turn on your side so I can snuggle with you.”

Auralei did as she was asked and rolled over so that she was facing John, with Alyssa immediately spooning up behind her. She immediately relaxed in the comforting embrace, then let out a contented sigh as her fellow matriarch started to caress her rounded stomach.

“Comfy now?” John asked affectionately.

“I am,” the Larathyran agreed, giving him a shy smile. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” he said, reclining beside her on the bed. “Now, tell me all about your life here on Larathyra.”

Auralei did as he asked, describing her past in detail. She talked about growing up in the family home in the suburbs of the city, and described her mother in glowing terms. Seldanna had been a kind and loving parent, who took pleasure in bringing life to the expansive grounds around the palace. It was that love of horticulture that encouraged Auralei to become a student at the Botanical Institute and follow in her mother’s footsteps. Joy turned to sadness with the weight of her grief, and Auralei fought back tears as she told him about finding her mother’s husked body in her beloved garden.

“I’m sorry for your loss, Auralei,” John said, his sympathy tinged with guilt. “Seldanna sounds like she was a very special woman.”

“She was,” the Larathyran agreed, brushing away the tears that rolled down her cheeks. “I miss her so much.”

Alyssa gave the grieving girl a sympathetic squeeze. “I’m sorry too, Auralei. I lost my mother when I was very young, so I know how much it hurts.”

Auralei turned to look at her over a shoulder. “How old were you at the time?”

“She died in childbirth,” the blonde quietly replied.

“Oh, how awful,” the Larathyran said with sympathy, tears welling up in her eyes again.

“Never getting a chance to know my mother really hurt for a long time,” Alyssa admitted. Her blue eyes softened as they flicked to John, and she continued, “But meeting him changed everything.”

“How did you two meet?” Auralei asked with interest.

“Do you want the long version or the short version?” the blonde asked, reaching over to clasp hands with her fiancé.

“I want to hear all the details!” the green-skinned beauty gushed, her gaze flicking between the pair.

Alyssa locked eyes with John. “You should tell her everything. Don’t leave anything out.”

“This might take a while,” John said, kissing Alyssa’s fingertips before resting his head on the pillow again and looking into Auralei’s eyes. “Some of this might be hard for you to hear. If you want me to stop at any point, just say so.”

She nodded, looking even more intrigued. “I want to know all about you.”

John took a deep breath then began recounting his tale. He started the story with being abandoned by his mother at Olympus Shipyard, then about his childhood being raised by his grandparents. He’d recounted his personal history numerous times for the girls, but this was the first time since finding out the truth behind Jessica Blake’s actions. He had always hoped that finding out the reason why his parents had abandoned him would bring some small measure of peace, but instead it sparked anger and resentment that he had to quickly fight down.

Auralei listened spellbound as he talked about never knowing his parents and the questions plaguing him for most of his life. She was shocked at the thought of him joining the military at eighteen, an age not even considered adulthood by the long-lived Larathyrans, which then prompted an explanation of the different life-spans between the species. He was brutally honest about his military service and the circumstances behind his retirement, the grief for his friends sending him spiralling into depression.

After receiving a comforting hug from his sympathetic audience, he continued his tale of life before meeting the girls. John glossed over the lonely decade spent accumulating wealth as a sole-trader, before finally reaching the moment when he met Alyssa after departing Karron. Auralei listened enthralled as they described that first meeting, and the dramatic effects the Change subsequently made to the petite stowaway.

John was modest about the part he’d played in the daring rescues and ferocious battles that had occurred over the ensuing eight months. Unfortunately, the attempt to downplay his heroism was demolished by Alyssa, who was happy to embellish his tale with glowing accounts of John cheating death to steal victory against impossible odds. Auralei was captivated by the tales of bravery, her eyes shining with admiration as she looked at John in awe.

During the retelling of their adventures, John mentioned the repeated encounters with a mysterious black ship, leaving Auralei intrigued to find out more. When he reached his duel with Baledranax in the Battle of Terra, Alyssa took over the narration, revealing what she’d discovered when reading the dragon’s mind. She explained that the dreadnought was owned by a Progenitor, and that he had instigated all the wars and conflicts they’d been entangled with over the previous six months.

“The Progenitor’s name was Larn’kelnar,” Alyssa said quietly, waiting for his daughter’s reaction.

Auralei’s fascination with the story shifted to deep anxiety, a worried frown creasing her brow. John noticed the shift in her expression despite the young Larathyran’s best attempt to hide it.

“Are you alright, Auralei?” he asked, cupping her face and stroking her cheek. “You look upset.”

Her composure crumbled and she had trouble meeting his concerned gaze. “My father caused so much pain and suffering to all those people you care about... do you really hate him?”

John hesitated, unsure how she would take the news about Larn’kelnar’s death. He glanced at Alyssa who gave him an encouraging nod.

“He caused us a lot of trouble, but I didn’t really hate him... not until after we fought on his dreadnought,” John admitted, his expression turning sombre.

“Until afterwards?” Auralei asked with mounting trepidation. “Why? What happened?”

“That’s another long story,” he explained, the look on his face increasingly grim. “After defeating the Kirrix, we travelled to a planet called Arcadia in search of my parents. Your father ambushed us as we were leaving. A very close friend of mine died in that attack... but I didn’t find out she’d been killed until after the battle.”

“Oh no... I’m so sorry,” she said in a hushed voice, dismayed at seeing the raw grief in his eyes. Her face fell and she looked even more upset.

“You have nothing to apologise for,” John said, stroking her cheek. Knowing intuitively what was really upsetting her, he continued, “I don’t blame you in any way for the things your father did, Auralei. I swear, I don’t harbour any resentment towards you at all.”

“Really?” she asked, searching his face for any sign of lingering anger.

“I promise,” he said sincerely. “I just hope you don’t end up hating me.”

“Why would I ever do that?” she asked in bewilderment.

“Your father captured me after we were forced to abandon ship in the ambush,” John explained gently, trying to lessen the blow as much as possible. “I was taken prisoner and interrogated, until the girls managed to sneak aboard his dreadnought and free me. Larn’kelnar caught us as we were trying to escape and he attacked again. We fought a long battle and most of the girls were badly hurt. In the end... I killed him.”

“Lord Larn’kelnar is dead?!” Auralei gasped, staring at him in astonishment.

He nodded in confirmation, bracing himself for a grief-stricken outburst. When none was forthcoming, he studied her closely, but didn’t see any hint of anger.

“That explains why he never returned,” the Larathyran woman said, stunned by the shocking news.

John watched her for a long moment, then asked tentatively, “Are you okay? You don’t seem to be angry with me.”

Auralei had been staring into the distance, but the concern in John’s voice snapped her out of the reverie. “No, I’m not angry at all, just shocked,” she explained. “I never met my father, but I saw him on the news all the time. Everybody loved him... my mother most of all. She would’ve been absolutely devastated to hear that he died.”

“Were they very close?” John asked, feeling a fresh surge of guilt.

She shook her head, white locks tumbling across her shoulders. “I don’t think they ever spoke to each other again after the night I was conceived, but she never forgot their time together. My mother would often talk about how wonderful he was, and I believed what she told me... until now.”

Auralei frowned, an odd look on her face as she trailed off into silence.

“What’s wrong?” John asked, wishing he could hear what she was thinking.

“It’s hard to describe,” she murmured, lost in her troubled thoughts. “You’ve told me a very different story about the man my father was, but I know in my heart that everything you said was true. I used to be proud that Lord Larn’kelnar was my father, but now I feel... ashamed.”

“Don’t feel that way; nobody blames you for anything he did,” John said with an encouraging smile. “I do know how you feel though. My father is a Progenitor too and he did a lot of really horrible things in his time.”

Alyssa kissed Auralei’s shoulder, then said, “We rescued John’s father from Larn’kelnar’s dreadnought. Rahn’hagon seemed friendly at first, but he ended up trying to kill John.”

Auralei’s eyes grew wide and she looked at him in dismay. “Oh, John... I can’t believe he’d do that! And after you spent all those years searching for him!”

“Yeah. It wasn’t exactly the family reunion I was hoping for,” John joked, trying to hide his pain with humour.

She leaned in and gave John a tender kiss, the empathy in her eyes revealing that she could see how much Rahn’hagon had hurt him.

With a heavy sigh, John said, “There’s more that I need to tell you, Auralei. This won’t be easy for you to hear, but you deserve to know the truth. Did Alyssa talk to you about our psychic network?”

Auralei was startled by the seemingly abrupt change in conversation topics, but nodded in confirmation. “She said that when you first gave me a full tummy, I became psychically connected to both of you. When I joined your psychic network, it made you stronger... and she said that you’d return that gift many times over.”

“I try to,” he said quietly, stroking her cheek. “Did Alyssa explain how she can tap you and the rest of the girls for energy?”

Mesmerised by his sombre gaze, Auralei slowly nodded again. “Alyssa can give our energy to you and help you fight your enemies. I liked that part; I was really glad that I could help you.”

“You’re a good girl, Auralei. I’m really grateful that you chose to join us,” he said, leaning forward to taste her soft lips again.

She looked elated at his praise, then moaned with desire when he kissed her. When he finally pulled away, she looked hungry for more.

“There’s a very dark side to the psychic network though,” John explained, watching her carefully. “We would *never* do this, but it’s possible to keep draining psychic energy from the girls, past the point where their reserves are used up. When that happens, a person’s life force is drained instead... until it eventually kills them.”

“That’s what a Soulforge does,” Alyssa interjected, her expression equally bleak. “Larn’kelnar built one here on Larathyra, on the far side of the planet. John strapped himself into the Soulforge and used it to make a component we desperately needed for our ship. That’s why John looked so haggard this morning.”

“Oh, that’s awful,” Auralei said, her eyes full of concern for John. She froze and looked at each of them in dismay. “Wait.. my father built a machine that drains the life out of people?!”

John nodded in confirmation. “That’s how he built all the ships in his fleets. He must have killed hundreds-of-thousands of women over the years to construct that many warships.”

Auralei’s shocked disbelief quickly morphed into a look of utter revulsion, as any residual feelings of pride in Larn’kelnar being her father were irrevocably shattered.

“He was a monster...” she whispered, distraught at the revelation. The loathing in her eyes was plain to see.

“He was. And I’m sorry to have to tell you all this... but there’s more,” John said quietly. “The battle with Larn’kelnar was three weeks ago. It was a long, gruelling fight, and the only way we were able to defeat him was wearing him down and outlasting his psychic energy reserves. When Larn’kelnar started running out of eldritch energy, his matriarch began draining the life from all the thralls in his network.”

John went quiet and let that information sink in.

Auralei was a bright young woman, and her mind had already grown sharper under John’s careful nurturing. It only took her a few seconds to make the connection.

She sucked in her breath, her eyes wide with horror. “No...”

John swallowed around the lump in his throat and answered her unspoken question with a nod.

“My mother... all my friends...” Auralei gasped, her eyes filled with tears and anguish. “He killed everyone I cared about! Everyone I loved!”

Alyssa hugged her from behind. “We’re so sorry, Auralei.”

“But my mother adored him,” the Larathyran protested in anguish. “How could he do that to her?!”

John’s heart felt heavy in his chest as he saw the innocent girl suffering with her grief. “I think the only woman that Larn’kelnar truly cared about was Ailanthia, his matriarch. I met her briefly aboard his dreadnought, when she was the last surviving thrall in his network. It was obvious that she loved him, but it didn’t stop Larn’kelnar from draining the life out of her as well. You were right before... he was a monster.”

Auralei wept bitter tears for her mother, who had been so cruelly betrayed by the one man she’d loved above any other. John and Alyssa held her close between them, trying their best to comfort the devastated young woman. After a while, her outpouring of grief ran its course, and the stream of tears ran dry.

Lifting her head, she met John’s worried gaze. He was expecting to see her hollowed out and exhausted after weathering such a terrible storm of emotions, but Auralei’s dark eyes glinted with cold fury.

“How did Larn’kelnar die?” she hissed. “Did he suffer?”

John flicked a concerned glance at Alyssa, who replied with a firm nod.

“Near the end, Jade dropped down on him from the ceiling and ripped his arm off,” John soberly explained. “Larn’kelnar looked terrified. Sakura had already stabbed him in the back, Alyssa had impaled his leg with a telekinetic lance, and I’d chopped off his hand. He managed to regenerate those injuries, but he finally realised he was overmatched and ran away.”

Staring into the distance, John remembered the final minutes of the battle. “I chased him through his dreadnought, taunting him for being a coward. He was running to meet Ailanthia in one of the hangars and trying to escape in his shuttle. I caught up to him there and tackled him to the ground... then I smashed his face in, each punch revenge for the millions of people he killed in his stupid, pointless wars.”

“Ailanthia begged me to spare his life... and I did... but I wish I hadn’t listened to her. If I’d ignored her and beaten him to death, it’s possible that she might have survived. In the end, I offered Larn’kelnar a choice: I’d let Ailanthia leave if he sacrificed himself for her safety.” John sneered with contempt as he continued, “He then tried to bargain for his own worthless hide, and asked if I’d let him leave unharmed if he left Ailanthia behind instead.”

With a melancholy sigh, John concluded, “Ailanthia was devastated and couldn’t believe he’d abandon her like that. Then Larn’kelnar drained the life out of her before I could stop him.”

“Good! She deserved to suffer for what she did!” Auralei interjected, her voice seething with anger. “What happened to Larn’kelnar after that?”

“My guide never intended to let him go; he would’ve always posed a threat to us if I’d allowed him to leave. We stabbed Larn’kelnar in the back and burned him in eldritch fire.” John paused and made eye contact with Auralei again. “Your father died a horrible death. His final moments were filled with agony... but I think murdering Ailanthia hurt him far more than my flames ever could.”

Auralei lay there in silence for a long moment, a long procession of conflicting emotions crossing her expressive face as she digested his grim tale of revenge. The anger slowly ebbed away, until all that was left was sadness.

John watched with sympathy, wishing there was more he could do to help her. “I realise how difficult it must have been to hear all that. Would you like us to leave you alone for a while?”

As his considerate offer registered in her shocked subconscious, Auralei quickly shook her head in alarm. “No, I don’t want you to go! Why would you think that?”

“I’d understand if you didn’t want to be around me right now,” he replied, wracked with guilt. “You just found out that I played a part in your mother’s death.”

She blinked in surprise and shook her head. “That’s not how I interpreted the story you just told me. My father attacked you, so you were forced to defend yourself. How could I blame you for that? Larn’kelnar was the one that ordered his matriarch to murder my mother and all the other thralls.”

“Yeah... but if I hadn’t made the decision to try to outlast his energy reserves, Larn’kelnar might not have drained his entire psychic network,” John confessed.

Auralei stared at him with an ambivalent expression on her face. “Is there anything you could have done differently? Could you have defeated Larn’kelnar another way that might have spared my mother?”

John carefully considered her questions for a long moment. “No... I can’t think of any. We were caught completely by surprise when he ambushed us. The only advantage we had left was a large reserve of psychic energy, so trying to outlast Larn’kelnar was our only real chance of surviving.”

“We’re still trying to figure out the best way to kill a Progenitor,” Alyssa admitted to her fellow matriarch. “We’re going to try overwhelming the next one with brute force and take him down as quickly as possible. If he never gets close to running low on psychic energy, then there shouldn’t be any reason to drain all his thralls. That’s going to take some careful planning and preparation though.”

“We had no time to do any of that against Larn’kelnar,” John said with certainty. He met Auralei’s pensive gaze and continued, “I’m sorry, honey; I don’t think there’s anything we could have done to save your mother. We barely survived that battle and half the girls were critically injured by the end. We weren’t strong enough to do anything other than just try to outlast him.”

The tension left Auralei, and was replaced with a sad sense of acceptance. She pressed her lips against his in a poignant kiss, then said quietly, “Thank you for avenging my mother.”

John wasn’t sure what to say in response, as replying with, “You’re welcome,” seemed trite and lacked the empathy he wanted to convey. Instead, he pulled Auralei into a hug, wrapping her up in his arms as if trying to protect her from harm. She relaxed in his protective embrace, feeling comforted and safe beside him. They lay together in peaceful silence for a while, with John briefly adjusting the way he held her to let Alyssa snuggle up with Auralei from behind.

Making eye-contact with the blonde over the Larathyran’s green shoulder, John asked, \*Did I handle that okay? How’s Auralei feeling now?\*

Alyssa gave him a reassuring smile. \*You were open and honest with her, and she really needed to hear the truth. She’s a bit overwhelmed, but is still very grateful to be here with you.\*

\*She seems like a really nice girl,\* John said, stroking the young woman’s arm. \*It’s amazing... I wasn’t expecting to find someone with her temperament on a Progenitor’s homeworld. If you compare her to the old Maliri matriarchs, Auralei ends up looking like an absolute saint.\*

\*Yeah, I know what you mean. I like her a lot too,\* the teenager agreed. \*Her father was such a manipulative asshole, it’s amazing she grew up to be so well-adjusted. My impression is that Larn’kelnar was disengaged from Larathyran society, and basically left his thralls to get on with their lives without much interference.\*

\*I wonder if that’s the case with the rest of the Progenitors and their empires?\* John said thoughtfully. \*From what we’ve seen, Mael’nerak was quite aloof from the Maliri as well.\*

\*True, but we only saw what he was like under the Shroud,\* Alyssa reminded him. \*Don’t forget that when he built Nexus and started experimenting with genetics, he’d also been free from Xar’aziuth’s control for thousands of years. Who knows how much he changed in all that time?\*

\*Good point,\* he conceded, nodding thoughtfully.

“John?” Auralei asked quietly. “What’s going to happen now?”

He glanced down and saw her looking up and watching his face. “Do you mean just this afternoon, or are you talking about our plans for the future?”

She tilted her head to one side, then gave him a hint of a smile. “Both?”

“Well... now that you’ve woken up, I was going to properly introduce you to the crew. I know you met a couple of the girls when Alyssa brought you up here for the dress fitting, but I’m sure the rest are eager to meet you as well. They’ve been busy working on plans to help your people re-establish the supply chains, restore all the infrastructure, and make sure everyone on Larathyra will be okay.”

“That’s wonderful news, thank you!” Auralei gushed, looking like a huge weight had been lifted off her shoulders.

“After that, I’m afraid we’re going to have to leave Larathyra for a while. A friend just warned us that another Progenitor is beginning an attack on my territory, so we’re going to need to rush back to prepare our defences.”

“You’re leaving?!” she exclaimed, eyes wide in distress.

“*We’re* leaving,” John corrected her, cupping her face and giving her a tender kiss. “I want you to come with me, Auralei.”

She looked immensely relieved, and gave him an adoring smile. “I’d love to come with you.”

He chuckled at her enthusiasm. “Well, that was easy. You didn’t need much convincing.”

Auralei blushed, then her brows furrowed in confusion. “Were you only joking about me becoming the Larathyran Empress? I don’t mind if you were... but if you were being serious, wouldn’t I need to stay here to lead my people?”

“It’s complicated,” John said with a grimace. “Do you remember our first time together in the throne room?”

She nodded and licked her lips instinctively. “Where I pledged my allegiance to you?”

“That’s right. When I gave you a full tummy, you became part of my psychic network... but I also inadvertently claimed the entire Larathyran species. Normally, a Progenitor only ever claims one thrall race to fight for him, but it seems I managed to claim the Larathyrans too. We’re not sure exactly how another Progenitor will react to that, but if they ever found you, I do know you’d be in terrible danger.”

Alyssa gave her a comforting squeeze. “We don’t want anything bad to ever happen to you, so that’s why we want you to come with us where we can keep you safe.”

The green skinned Empress gave them a grateful smile. “Thank you.”

“There’s another reason too,” John reluctantly admitted. “As long as you’re alive and well, I don’t think another Progenitor will be able to claim your people. Your safety is my primary concern, but keeping you alive will also keep the Larathyrans free from another Progenitor enslaving them.”

Auralei reached up to place her hand on his. “I understand... and I want to do whatever I can to help you and the Larathyran Empire.” A flicker of doubt crossed her eyes and she continued quietly, “But I need to be honest with you; I’m afraid I won’t be a very good Empress. I was just a botany student, I don’t really know anything about leading people. After all those women died, everyone suddenly expected me to be in charge.”

“Don’t worry about that, I wouldn’t ask you to do such an important role without proper training,” John said, with a reassuring smile. “When the Wormhole Generator has fully charged, we’ll jump back to Maliri territory, and then I’d like to introduce you to their Queen. Edraele is an incredible woman and an exceptional leader; if both of you agree, I’d like for her to teach you everything she knows about ruling an interstellar empire."

She looked at him with profound gratitude, as John casually addressed her biggest worry. “Oh, I agree! I promise I’ll listen very carefully to everything she says, and learn all I can about being a good leader! I want to become the best matriarch and Empress I can be for you.”

“That’s great to hear,” John said, touched by her dedication to him. “I couldn’t have got this far without Edraele; she’ll teach you everything you need to know. In fact, there are a couple of naughty matriarchs around here that could do with taking a few lessons from her.”

Alyssa stuck her tongue out at him, but the sparkle in her cerulean eyes let John know that she hadn’t taken offense.

Despite her happiness at the news she would be leaving with him, a frown suddenly appeared on Auralei’s face. “John, what will happen to the people on my homeworld if another Progenitor does come here and finds out that you’ve claimed the Larathyran Empire?”

He hesitated, then cautiously replied, “We don’t know for sure. These are very unusual circumstances and I don’t think this kind of scenario has ever happened before. Progenitors fight each other with their thrall armies so that their master, Xar’aziuth, can feed off all the death and destruction. He wouldn’t gain anything if a thrall is killed when she has no psychic connection to a Progenitor, so it would be pointless to attack the Larathyrans.”

“So they should be perfectly safe?” she asked with relief.

“As I said, I don’t know for sure,” John said, his expression grim. “A thrall species must be a valuable resource, so finding out I’ve claimed the Larathyrans will probably make Xar’aziuth furious and even more eager to kill me. With me dead, he could then send another infant Progenitor to Larathyra and the cycle would start all over again... but he can’t do that if he wipes them out.”

Auralei nodded as she followed his logic. “I agree, that does make sense. Killing my people would be foolish and only harming his own interests under those circumstances.”

“Yeah, but I can’t guarantee anything,” John said with a troubled frown. “Xar’aziuth might order a Progenitor to kill everyone anyway. I don’t know enough about him to be able to make any accurate predictions about how he’ll react to anything. That means we’re taking a gamble that the Larathyrans will be left alone. I’m not happy about it, but unfortunately I don’t have much choice. The Maliri are definitely about to be attacked, so I need to make defending them a priority.”

“I understand,” she said quietly.

John paused and gave her a guilty look. “There is something else I need to be honest with your about. The main reason we travelled to Larn’kelnar’s empire was to search for the thrall fleets that he left behind. We knew that he’d wiped out his thrall network, which meant there must be hundreds of crewless warships left floating in space. Right at this moment, Maliri fleets are flying to those locations, to salvage those vessels so that they can be used to defend my territory. I feel bad, because we’re basically stealing Larathyran warships from your empire.”

A warm smile lit up Auralei’s beautiful face. “If you have need of them, I gladly give them to you as a gift.”

“That’s very generous, thank you,” he said gratefully.

Her smile dimmed a little as she shook her head. “After what my father did to all his thralls, I doubt there are enough adult women left in the Larathyran Empire to crew a single warship.”

“It’ll take time but your people will recover,” John stated with conviction. “I promise that I’ll do everything I can to make sure they have a bright future ahead of them.”

“I want that too,” she said softly. “I want to help build a legacy you can be proud of.”

“That *we* can be proud of,” he agreed, feeling a surge of affection for the earnest young woman.

Auralei felt that closeness too and she pressed herself against him, seeking out his lips for another kiss. She was flushed when they finally parted, her eyes smouldering with desire. John felt another set of eyes on him too and glanced across the bed at Alyssa, who was grinning with anticipation.

“Come with me, gorgeous,” she said to Auralei, holding out her hand and wiggling her fingertips. “Let’s freshen you up.”

The Larathyran brushed away the drying tears from her cheeks, then gratefully accepted Alyssa’s hand. “Thank you,” she said, before turning to give John a self-conscious smile as she was towed towards the bathroom.

He settled down on the covers and crossed his hands behind his head. \*I’m sorry for suggesting that training idea to Auralei without discussing it with you first, Edraele,\* he said to his Maliri matriarch. \*It suddenly came to me that you’d be the perfect mentor.\*

\*Is it alright if I reserve judgement until after we’ve been properly introduced?\* Edraele replied, not sounding thrilled by the plan in the slightest. \*If we can’t tolerate each other’s presence, I would strongly advise against establishing me as her instructor.\*

\*Of course, honey,\* he said, trying to be as conciliatory as possible. \*If we can’t overcome the antipathy between you two, then I wouldn’t dream of going ahead with it. I was just hoping that Auralei could sit in on some of your mentoring sessions with the new matriarchs and learn some useful tips.\*

There was a long pause before Edraele replied, \*Putting aside my own feelings on the matter, is it wise to leave Auralei on Genthalas, where her mere presence will unsettle every Maliri in her proximity?\*

\*She’ll be spending most of her time just associating with you and the other matriarchs. If I top up everyone in the Council of Matriarchs, we should be able to avoid any unpleasant confrontations.\*

\*As you wish, my Lord,\* Edraele replied, her polite reply sounding a little strained.

He sighed with frustration and wished they could depart immediately to resolve this situation between his matriarchs. Unfortunately, the Wormhole Generator still required another five hours to be fully charged.

Alyssa cleared her throat by the bathroom entrance. “May I present the Larathyran Empress to you, my Lord?”

John tilted back his head and replied, “I’m afraid not; I’ve got a busy schedule this afternoon. Could you send in Auralei instead please?”

“As you command, my Lord,” Alyssa replied with a playful grin.

Auralei came back into his field of vision wearing only a smile, accompanied by the blonde who now wore the Empress’ sparkling tiara on her head.

“It’s just me, as you requested, John,” Auralei said shyly, returning to the bed.

In the brief time that they’d been away, Alyssa had worked wonders, removing any trace that Auralei had been crying only a few minutes ago.

He moved down to sit on the end, where he pulled her towards him. “You look stunning,” he said admiring her beautiful face. “Do you know why I asked to see you and not the Larathyran Empress?”

She hesitated, then shook her head, genuinely confused. “Alyssa thought you might find it arousing. I was happy to indulge your fantasy if it made the experience more exciting for you.”

John placed his hand on the graceful curve of her stomach and gently caressed her silky skin. “When we arrived on your homeworld and Alyssa suggested recruiting a Larathyran, I wasn’t thinking about choosing an Empress to rebuild an empire. I picked you because I felt drawn to the lovely woman you are, and imagined what it would be like to start a family with you. We’ll be together for eternity, Auralei, and getting closer to you personally is what’s important to me, not indulging a fantasy.”

Her eyes softened and she looked down at him with blissful adoration. “I never even dreamed a man like you existed,” she whispered in awe.

“I’m glad I exceeded your expectations,” he said with a self-effacing smile. He met her reverent gaze and continued, “You belong to me now, beautiful, and I’m very happy you’re mine.”

She flushed with arousal, then slowly sank to her knees. “I want to be as close to you as possible too.”

“I know,” he said with understanding.

They worked together to strip off his clothes, both as eager as each other. John was strongly attracted to the green-hued beauty, and the genetic conditioning of her species made sure those feelings were fully reciprocated and magnified to an intense degree. Auralei was practically panting with lust as she reached for him, her fingers encircling his shaft with the same care she would handle a priceless object.

John watched enraptured as she leaned forward to lap at the swollen head of his cock, then he couldn’t help groaning with pleasure as she worshipped him with her velvety tongue. Even though he’d filled up her stomach only four hours earlier, his quad ached with the urgent need to make her belly swell with another heavy load of cum. They locked eyes as she enveloped the head with her flushed lips, then her swirling tongue drew out another blissful moan.

Hugging him from behind, Alyssa rested her chin on John’s shoulder and admired the view.

“You chose so well, handsome,” she purred, her voice low and sultry. “She’s amazing.”

He could only nod in agreement as he affectionately brushed his fingers through Auralei’s snowy-white hair.

“I think Auralei’s proved what a good girl she is,” the blonde continued, kissing his shoulder. “Are you going to let her listen to your thoughts?”

John paused and said in surprise, “Oh, I didn’t realise I was blocking her out.”

Focusing his mind inward, he concentrated on his mental barrier, then pictured opening a door that would let Auralei listen to his inner voice. Instinctively drawn to him like a moth to a flame, her subconscious fluttered inside, the delicate telepathic construct eager to be as intimately connected with him as possible. The effect was instantaneous and dramatic, with Auralei sitting back and staring up at him in amazement. John watched her in fascination, as the Larathyran matriarch realised that she could hear his unfiltered thoughts.

He decided to give her an insight into how he viewed their budding relationship, and thought about the wonderful first impression the sublime young woman had made on him so far. John admired her bravery and civic duty in volunteering to become the Larathyran Empress, and was impressed at how much she genuinely cared about her fellow survivors, despite persevering through her own grief. He was enchanted by her beautiful face and mysterious dark eyes, but it was her kindness and sweet nature that were really making him fall hard for the lovely girl.

Auralei’s mouth fell open in wonder, as any lingering doubts and insecurities were swept away by a tidal wave of respect and heartfelt admiration. It was like watching a switch being flipped inside the smitten young woman, as her initial lust and infatuation metamorphosed into a passionate and all consuming devotion.

Alyssa let out a happy sigh as she saw the enraptured look on Auralei’s face. “It does a world of good for the ego, doesn’t it?”

She nodded, then raised herself up to give John a tender kiss. “I’m yours,” she said in a hushed voice. “I belong to you.”

Her words echoed his own, and with a sincerity that assured John that this was no fleeting fancy. The connection between them had deepened dramatically, and was continuing to do so in a positive feedback loop that left the young woman giddy. She dropped down to her haunches again, then renewed her grip of his cock and returned to the task in hand.

They locked eyes with each other, as she slid her pursed lips over his engorged head once again, and continued her veneration of his throbbing shaft. John met her doting gaze, then lost himself in those enchanting dark eyes, the windows to her soul wide open for her mate. Time seemed to move in a languid blur, everything outside his connection to Auralei just a distraction. Recognition flickered across her face as she mirrored his feelings, losing herself in the man she pledged to be with for the rest of eternity.

It was intoxicating to be that intimately connected with her, and it didn’t take much coaxing before John’s first spurt of cum splashed down into her stomach. She moaned with delight and eased him deeper into her throat, only refraining from taking him to the hilt because she didn’t want to break eye contact. Her eyes glazed over briefly as the psychic connection was thrown wide open between them, but Auralei quickly recovered, the light of awareness blazing brightly once again.

She knelt there submissively, sucking lovingly on his shaft as she swallowed down another huge load of cum. Her tummy expanded to contain his prodigious output, until her belly button popped out with the huge volume rounding her stomach. John wavered when he was finally spent, feeling dazed himself after the intensity of his climax. Fortunately, Alyssa was still hugging him from behind and she cradled him in her arms as he recovered.

“That was so hot,” the blonde murmured, planting appreciative kisses on his earlobe.

Auralei let his softening cock slip from her lips, giving the head a parting kiss as she released him from the slick warmth of her oral attentions. She then turned her attention to the huge weight of cum that had turned her slim midriff into a bulging dome. Rather than reacting with shock or surprise, Alyssa saw only blissful contentment on her face as she cradled her swollen belly.

“Wow... what happened?” John mumbled as he regained his senses. “I wasn’t expecting that.”

“I think I can hazard a guess,” Alyssa replied with an knowing smile.

Before she could explain, John reached down for Auralei’s hand. “Come up here, honey. I need a lie down after that.”

The Larathyran seemed dazed herself, but it was quite different from the suckling trance, which she had easily shaken off after their third time together. She rose to her feet as he requested, then snuggled up with him on the bed, letting out a happy sigh as John spooned her from behind.

“So... you had some idea about what just happened?” John asked the blonde.

Alyssa nodded as she faced them on the bed. “I think it was a combination of things. First of all, you made Auralei into a matriarch, not just an ordinary thrall.”

John grimaced and said, “I hate calling the girls thralls. Can we use ‘ward’ instead?”

“Sure,” she replied with a shrug. “Anyway, your connection to me, Edraele, and Jade are much broader than the rest of the girls. As your matriarchs, we’re designed to channel huge volumes of psychic energy to you, so you really need all that extra bandwidth.”

“But the three of you haven’t reacted like that before,” John said in confusion.

“That’s true, but we’ve all been with you for a while, and you’re much more powerful now than you were when we first joined you. I was with you at the very start, Jade was a ‘ward’ initially until you promoted her to be the Nymph matriarch, and Edraele had been mind-wiped before you made her into your Maliri matriarch. The situation is very different with Auralei. You’ve already got a fully developed psychic network, and you just made her into a new matriarch. That must have been a hell of a rush... for both of you.”

He chuckled in agreement. “It definitely was for me. What about you, beautiful?” he asked the verdant girl lying in his arms.

Auralei didn’t respond, but he realised by her deep breathing that she must have fallen asleep.

“She’s out for the count,” Alyssa confirmed with a fond smile.

“Is she alright?” John asked with concern.

“I don’t think she’ll ever be the same again,” she said sombrely. “You love-bombed the poor girl into oblivion.”

John’s look of concern eased and he rolled his eyes. “You had me worried for a moment. Are you sure Auralei’s going to be okay?”

Alyssa wriggled closer, then reached out to stroke his cheek. “This was her first time using telepathy, and you just gave her an unfiltered glimpse into the way you feel about her. It took me some time to get used to dealing with that kind of pure uncritical love, and it’s very addicting. You tend to put us girls on a pedestal, and Auralei just found out that her dream guy is just as besotted with her, as she is with him. Ecstatic doesn’t really cover it.”

“There is something very special about her,” John agreed, kissing the slumbering girl’s shoulder.

“Oh, she’s a sweetheart alright,” Alyssa said with a wry smile. “But I think the big difference is with you.”

“Me?” he remarked in surprise. “How so?”

“You picked Auralei out of all those Larathyrans and chose to recruit her, rather than feeling obligated to do it. You’re also past all the remorse about recruiting new girls, so for the first time you’ve been able to just enjoy being connected to her without any guilt trips.”

“Hmm, I don’t know about there being no obligations,” John replied with a mock frown. “I seem to recall being browbeaten into letting you cash in a favour.”

Alyssa wasn’t to be deterred and gave him a knowing look. “If you really objected, you would have flat-out refused and asked me to save that favour for something else. I don’t blame you for being so quick to agree. There were some exceptionally beautiful girls fluttering their eyelashes at you, and Auralei really is quite lovely.”

John was about to protest that he only agreed because he didn’t want to upset Alyssa by refusing, but even he was forced to admit to himself that it was weak justification. He truly hadn’t seen anything morally wrong with recruiting a Larathyran girl, not when they were so obviously thrilled at the prospect. Without the whole process being tinged with guilt, he’d been able to simply choose the woman that he felt the strongest attraction to.

“You’re right, it was different,” he quietly conceded, glancing down at Auralei and kissing her cheek as she slept. “It doesn’t change how I feel about the rest of you girls, but I’ve been much more willing to just dive into this relationship with her.”

“I thought you might feel that way,” Alyssa said, smiling with satisfaction. “I know how much you hate Progenitors and everything they stand for, but this was the closest we could get to you experience what it must be like to start your own thrall empire. Without being an obnoxious, self-centred, psychopathic asshole, obviously.”

“I’m glad you added the disclaimers,” he said with a wry smile. “I’d like to agree that this was a very valuable lesson in ‘knowing my enemy’, but is it really? We know how little regard Mael’nerak, Larn’kelnar, and my father held for their matriarchs, at least until their connection to Xar’aziuth was cut by the shroud. I really don’t understand how they could be so cold and indifferent to a woman like Auralei.”

“Who worships the ground you walk on?” Alyssa asked, her cerulean eyes sparkling.

He blushed and reluctantly nodded. “Yeah, basically. Did I really go overboard with her earlier?”

“You were just honest with how you feel about her,” the blonde replied with a shrug. “The fact that it was music to her ears certainly won’t have done your relationship any harm.”

“On the plus side, she knows that I wasn’t trying to take advantage of her genetic conditioning or manipulate her in any way,” John said thoughtfully.

“Yep,” Alyssa said, stretching contentedly. “Auralei’s never going to doubt your good intentions, because you’ve made yourself an open book for her now.”

“True,” he agreed, while stroking a green-hued arm. “How long do you think she’ll sleep for?”

“No idea,” his Terran matriarch admitted. “She might just need a quick power nap after sharing such an intense psychic connection, or Auralei could be out for 24 hours like when I merged with Edraele. We’re in uncharted territory here.”

“I guess we’ll just have to wait then,” John said, darting a glance at the chronometer. “I hope she wakes up before the Wormhole Generator is fully charged though. She’ll probably want to say goodbye to her friends before we whisk her away.”

“If she’s still asleep then, I think we should head out. Auralei seems pretty sensible to me, and I’m sure she’ll understand that we had to leave. We’re facing an imminent invasion and there’s a hell of a lot at stake.”

“Yeah, that’s the most logical decision,” he reluctantly agreed, not wanting to disappoint the young Larathyran.

Alyssa smiled as she listened to his thoughts. “You old softie. Would you mind moving into the middle? I really want to snuggle up with you.”

“Sure,” John replied, easing out his arm from under the slumbering girl.

They repositioned themselves on the bed and Alyssa cuddled into his chest as they waited for Auralei to awaken.

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The door to the prison visiting room swung open and Tom Walker rose from the steel chair to greet his guest. Annabelle Newmont glided inside, his beautiful fiancée looking incredibly out of place in the drab grey prison. It wasn’t just her pretty face, golden blonde hair, and sparkling blue eyes that made for such a sharp contrast, but her bright smile and upbeat personality were a dramatic change from the scowls and glares he usually received from the guards.

“Tommy!” she gushed, hurrying over to give him a hug. “I’ve been missing you so much!”

He opened his arms and wrapped them around her, desperately needing the physical contact. “Me too, baby. Me too...”

Annabelle pulled back to look at him with concern. “What’s wrong, Tommy? Have you had bad news?”

Tom sighed and nodded as they sat down across from each other at the table. “I had a visit from my lawyer this morning. Caspian tried to delay the trial for as long as possible, but the judge overruled all his objections. They’re starting the trial tomorrow.”

“But that’s a good thing!” the blonde exclaimed, beaming at him in delight. “The sooner they start this farce, the sooner we can prove you’re innocent! Then you’ll be acquitted and we’ll be back together again!”

He hesitated, then nodded. “That’s what I want more than anything... but Caspian said his experts are still struggling to prove all their evidence has been fabricated.”

She frowned in frustration. “He needs to hire better analysts. Is there any way you can release copies to me? Between me and Archie, we know a lot of specialists in the division. I’m sure we can get them to take a look and help clear your name!”

Tom clamped down the sudden surge of jealousy and desperately wanted to tell his fiancée to stay away from her ‘platonic’ friend. Despite managing to keep his mouth shut, Annabelle knew him too well, and instantly understood the reason behind his sudden tension.

Annabelle rolled her eyes. “You’re not worrying about him again, are you? I told you before: Archie’s harmless. We’re just good friends... and that’s all we’ll ever be.”

“You might just view him as a friend, but I know Archie’s been trying to seduce you for years. He’s bad news, Anna,” he said as gently as possible.

Her eyes tightened, and she said with a hint of irritation, “That’s not fair, Tommy. He’s been incredibly supportive though this whole nightmare and never made a move on me. I suppose you’re going to tell me that men and women can’t be friends and that men are always just waiting for an opportunity to sleep with their female friends?”

“Well yeah, basically,” Tom admitted, pleasantly surprised that he wouldn’t have to explain that concept to her.

“Like you and Beth then?” Annabelle asked, her tone turning frosty.

“That’s... different,” he said, trying not to wince at how weak that sounded. “I never thought of Beth as more than just a friend and I had no idea she felt differently about me.”

Annabelle let out a heavy sigh and her face shadowed with grief. The mention of her brother’s ex-girlfriend sharply reminded her of his loss. “I don’t want to fight, Tommy. Please... not when you’re locked up in this terrible place.”

“I’m sorry. I don’t want to fight with you either,” he apologised, squeezing her hand. “I’ll message Caspian and see if he can authorise you as a new technical expert for the trial. He won’t be able to release copies of the evidence for you to review until you’ve signed a NDA.”

“I’ll contact him straight away!” she gushed, rising from her chair. “If we work all night, we might be able to find something his experts missed!”

After a heated kiss goodbye, Annabelle gave him an optimistic grin and hurried out of the visiting room. She looked so enthusiastic and full of hope that it triggered a cascade of childhood memories, with himself, Mason, and Anna making up the inseparable three musketeers. Tom still couldn’t believe that Mason had turned on him and betrayed him the way that he had. They had been so close for over two decades and now it was all over, their friendship ending in an ugly outburst of bitterness, paranoia, and jealousy.

“On your feet, Walker,” the guard ordered, announcing that visiting time was over.

He followed him back through the prison towards his cell, and tried to ignore all the shouted insults and abuse from the other inmates. For the first time, it was easy to block them out, as his thoughts were all focused on the mountain of evidence stacked against him that Caspian was yet to disprove. When the cell door clanged shut and he was isolated once again, Tom Walker desperately wished for the nightmare to be over and to be properly reunited with his fiancée as a free man.

Despite knowing he was innocent of any wrongdoing, he couldn’t help feeling a dark sense of foreboding about the upcoming trial.

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John felt his bedmate start to stir, her slender green legs, shifting under the covers. \*She’s awake.\*

\*Okay, I’m already on my way back,\* Alyssa replied.

“Hey,” he said gently to the girl lying against his chest.

She brushed aside her tousled mane of white hair and gave him a bashful smile. “Hello.”

“How are you feeling after that?” he asked, stroking her back. “I must admit, it took me a little while to recover. I wasn’t expecting our connection to be that powerful.”

Auralei’s smile broadened and she nodded in agreement. “I’ve never felt this way about anyone before. It should be scary how fast and hard I’m falling for you, but now I can hear what you’re thinking and I know how much you like me too.”

“Well, you are quite adorable,” he said, admiring her beautiful face and enjoying her youthful exuberance in equal measure.

She bit her lower lip and searched his face in fascination as she listened to his inner voice. Colour bloomed in her cheeks as she heard his thoughts, then she oscillated between self-conscious embarrassment, and being thrilled by his unspoken flattery.

“It does take a bit of getting used to,” Alyssa remarked, as she sauntered into the room. She carefully folded a long dress over the sofa nearest to the bed. “Did you have a nice nap, gorgeous?”

Auralei’s blush deepened. “I don’t think I’ve ever slept so much in my life. You two must think I’m incredibly lazy.”

“No, not at all,” John said, giving her a reassuring smile.

Alyssa sat beside her on the bed and placed her hand on the Larathyran girl’s rounded stomach. “Your body’s adjusting to absorbing John’s cum,” she said, gently caressing her curves. “The girls have all been through exactly the same thing, so nobody’s going to think badly of you.”

“If you’ve fully recovered, would you like to meet everyone?” John asked, sitting up on the bed.

Auralei nodded eagerly, intrigued to get to know the important women in his life. She gratefully accepted their assistance sitting up, then glanced down at her cum-filled belly.

“Maybe we should wait a while for this to go down?” she suggested, her blush deepening.

“Don’t be silly, you look amazing,” Alyssa insisted, leaning down to place a tender kiss on her pale green stomach. “We all know what it’s like to have a big tummy like this. I can guarantee it will only make the girls love you more.”

The Larathyran relaxed almost immediately. “Alright, I trust you.”

“It’s nice, isn’t it?” Alyssa asked with a knowing smile, as she helped the young woman rise from the bed.

Auralei nodded, then met the blonde’s friendly gaze. “Thank you, Alyssa... for everything you’ve done for me. I know I wouldn’t be here now if it wasn’t for you.”

“There’s no need to thank me. You’ve already repaid me in full,” she murmured, glancing coyly at John before moving closer to her and giving Auralei a seductive kiss.

The Larathyran was startled at first, but she quickly relaxed when she sensed John’s approval. She eagerly returned the kiss, her flushed green lips pressing back against Alyssa’s rosy-red.

“It’s very different kissing a girl, isn’t it?” Alyssa purred, when they slowly separated.

“Different... but just as wonderful,” Auralei agreed, then her blush intensified.

“I’m sure you’ll get lots more practice later,” John said with a chuckle, before clasping both their hands. “Why don’t we freshen up in the shower, then we’ll get dressed and head up to meet the girls.”

Experiencing a Terran shower for the first time was another thrilling experience for their newest recruit. She moaned in bliss as John and Alyssa soaped her down from either side, then the pair worked in concert to soap down and massage her nubile body.

“Oh... that feels amazing,” she panted breathlessly.

“Showering together is always a lot of fun,” Alyssa noted. “In fact, that’s one rule you mustn’t ever break. As one of John’s matriarchs, it’s our responsibility to make sure he never showers alone, and always has a sexy shower companion.”

“I never asked you to do that,” John protested.

“Would you like us to stop?” the blonde asked archly, raising an eyebrow.

“I wasn’t complaining,” he hastily clarified. “Just setting the record straight.”

Auralei giggled and said, “Don’t worry, I won’t forget.”

“I always have lots of volunteers,” Alyssa confided with a grin. “When you have your own network of girls, I’m sure there won’t be any shortage of nubile Larathyran maidens eager to get naked with John.”

The Empress paused, a thoughtful look on her face. “Are you planning to recruit more Larathyrans before we leave?”

John hesitated, then replied, “Unfortunately, we don’t have much time and really should leave as soon as the Wormhole Generator is charged. We also need to think very carefully before adding more Larathyran girls to the network. If another Progenitor does come to Larathyra to investigate, any women connected to us would be easily identifiable with their white hair. I dread to think what he’d do to any of them he got his hands on.”

Auralei nodded, her expression grim. “I understand. Thank you for being so considerate of their safety.”

“I’ve claimed the Larathyrans,” he replied, stroking her cheek. “That means I’m responsible for protecting all of you.”

She kissed his fingertips and her eyes shone with happiness and gratitude.

“Come on, you two lovebirds,” Alyssa said with an affectionate smile. “The girls are all eager to meet our newest recruit.”

After drying themselves off, they quickly got dressed, with Auralei putting on the clothing Alyssa had provided for her. The purple maxi dress was accented in white and nicely complimented the Larathyran’s verdant complexion. Auralei pulled it into place, then glanced down at the prominent bump that the soft fabric was clinging to like a second skin.

“This dress is lovely, but I don’t want to stretch it out of shape,” she said with a worried frown.

“Don’t worry, I designed it to be stretched like this,” Alyssa explained, smoothing the material out over her impressive curves. “You’re a similar skin tone to Jade, so she’ll be able to lend you plenty of outfits that will look great on you. Best of all, you can use them as maternity wear when the time comes.”

Auralei cradled her swollen belly and gave John a doe-eyed look.

“Your tummy’s gone down a bit while you slept,” Alyssa murmured, gently caressing her. “But you still look at least six or seven months pregnant. What do you think, John? Isn’t she going to look stunning when she’s carrying your baby?”

“Absolutely,” he agreed, kissing the swooning young woman.

“Oh, I can’t wait,” she cooed, letting out a breathy sigh.

John hesitated, then said quietly, “Auralei, I really, really want to start a family with you, but it might be sensible to wait for a little while first. You’re going to be very busy learning as much as you can from Edraele, then you’ll be focused on helping the Larathyran civilisation to recover. Being a mother is a full-time job, and I don’t want to put you under too much pressure.”

Her face fell with disappointment, then she stopped to consider what he’d just said. “You’re right, it would be sensible to wait,” she ruefully conceded. Breaking into a smile, she added, “I have only just turned thirty. Until I met you, I honestly hadn’t even thought about starting a family, at least not for a few more decades.”

“Thanks for being so understanding,” he said with relief. “I’m already planning to have children with all the women on the crew, as well as quite a few Maliri, and I don’t want to overcommit myself. I really want to be a good father to my kids and take an active part in raising them with their mothers.”

“That would be wonderful,” she agreed, sighing wistfully as she imagined it. With a flicker of anxiety, she then asked, “But you do want to have a family with me?”

“Oh, definitely. I’d love to have a big family with you,” he agreed, placing his palm on the bump tenting her dress. “I promise I’ll make it up to you for being so good about waiting.”

Auralei gave him a bright smile and placed her hand over his as if to seal the deal. She looked so trusting and hopeful for the future that it warmed his heart, and he instinctively knew that the guileless young woman would make a wonderful mother for his children. He felt a flicker of regret at having to postpone starting a family with her, and pictured what it would be like to bed the gorgeous young woman. He could easily imagine how incredible it would be to claim her fertile womb, to hear her cries of ecstasy as he filled the Larathyran Empress to the brim...

“Ahem,” Alyssa coughed, drawing his attention.

John turned to look at her with interest, then frowned in confusion when she glanced meaningfully at Auralei. After listening to him fantasise about ravishing her, the Larathyran was blushing furiously, her pale cheeks now as dark a shade as Jade’s sultry green. He was mortified to have embarrassed her like that, until he saw the hungry gleam in her smoky gaze.

“That was... fascinating,” she murmured, almost breathless with anticipation.

He chuckled self-consciously. “Trying to do the right thing around you is going to be a real challenge; you’re very tempting.”

“I don’t mind if you give into temptation,” Auralei said softly.

“I bet you don’t,” Alyssa said, slipping an arm around the Larathyran and towing her towards the grav-tubes. “Come on, let’s go see the girls. The sooner we wrap up everything here, the sooner you two can spend all day in bed together.”

They exited the Raptor, then walked across the hangar to the corridor that led to the Invictus’ central grav-tubes. Auralei fidgeted nervously with her dress as they ascended in the blue gravity field, worried about making a good impression.

“You have nothing to be nervous about. You look good enough to eat,” Alyssa said with a reassuring smile. “Most of the girls don’t speak your language, but just relax and talk to them normally. I’ll translate everything you say for them, and do the same for you.”

“Alright, I understand,” Auralei said, clutching Alyssa’s hand a little bit tighter.

They arrived on the Command Deck and walked through to the Briefing Room where the entire crew, except for the Maliri twins, were waiting to meet their guest. When Auralei saw the huge variety of fetching skin tones and striking hair colours, she stared at the girls in astonishment.

“Hello again, little kitten,” Jade said, greeting the Larathyran Empress with a warm smile. “It’s wonderful to see you.”

Auralei was relieved to hear the friendly greeting in her own language and replied, “It’s lovely to see you too, Jade. Thank you for helping restore power and water to the city.”

“I was just there to fly everyone around. Dana did all the hard work,” the Nymph replied modestly, gesturing towards the redhead.

Dana stepped forward and said haltingly, \*A-aneth maeheim... ish-grel-athair.”

Auralei covered her mouth and tried her best to stifle a giggle.

“You’re honoured to be a hippopotamus?” Alyssa asked, raising an eyebrow. “Well that does explain a lot, Sparks.”

The redhead flushed with embarrassment and glared at Jade. “I told you this was a dumb idea... I totally suck at learning new languages!”

Auralei approached her with open arms, and gently enveloped Dana in a hug. She then began speaking quietly and sincerely in Larathyran.

“I’m so sorry for laughing,” Alyssa translated for her. “I’m touched that you went to all that effort to make me feel more at home. Solana and Riniya couldn’t stop talking about what a genius you were, but they didn’t tell me you had a big heart too.”

Dana’s pout faded as she listened, then she affectionately returned the hug. “Solana and Riniya told me what a great leader you were and how much you cared about everyone. I’m really glad John chose you.”

The rest of the girls welcomed Auralei aboard, managing the unfamiliar Larathyran phrases with considerably more success than the erstwhile Grand Engineering Overlord. With the ice broken, they chatted comfortably with the new matriarch, and made playful references to her cum-filled belly. It didn’t take long for Auralei to relax, a bright smile on her face as she got to know the girls.

John left them to get acquainted and approached Jade, who was happy to watch proceedings from the periphery of the group. \*I hear you were busy after I passed out.\*

\*Passed out? Is that the official medical term for dying of a heart attack, Master?\* the Nymph said, her warm smile fading into a stern look of reproach.

He’d been intending to gently chastise Jade for putting her own health at risk in the Soulforge, but considering what had transpired, she had just skewered him for his own hypocrisy.

Before he could defend himself, she continued, \*I understand how protective you are of us, but you literally killed yourself rather than risk exposing me to minimal danger. You’re taking this overprotectiveness much too far, Master! What if Rachel hadn’t been able to bring you back again!\*

She looked up at him with anguish in her emerald eyes, and John could see the Nymph was on the verge of bursting into tears.

\*We’ll be back in a few minutes,\* he informed Alyssa, before scooping Jade up in his arms and carrying her from the Briefing Room.

“I was so scared! I thought I’d lost you forever, Master,” she sobbed, weeping against his chest as he crossed the Bridge and entered his Ready Room.

John sat down on one of the sofas with the Nymph on his lap. She clung to him fiercely, as if terrified of letting him out of her grasp.

“You’re right,” he said gently, stroking her back. “I should have stopped it when the pain got too much. I only continued because I knew how many lives were at stake... but I couldn’t subject any of you to that kind of torment. I couldn’t live with myself if I let that horrible machine drain the life out of any of you.”

“But you did stop living! At least for a few seconds until Rachel revived you,” Jade reminded him through her tearful sobs. “It was awful, Master! I’ve never felt such terrible pain before!”

“I know,” John said with a grim frown. “We’ve got to stop the Progenitors from using the Soulforges. They’re an abomination.”

“I don’t mean the Soulforge! I barely felt that!” Jade exclaimed looking at him incredulously. “I was talking about how much it hurt when I realised you were dead!”

“Oh,” he said, his face falling with regret. “I’m sorry, Jade.”

“You’re sorry?!” she said indignantly. “You died! That hurt me far worse than the Soulforge ever could!”

Despite being racked with guilt at having upset Jade so badly, a sudden realisation broke through his cloud of regret and self-recrimination. “Wait a minute! I died, Jade... but you didn’t reset and start searching for a new master!”

She paused and the tears stopped rolling down her cheeks. An adoring smile slowly spread across her verdant face. “You did it, John. You freed me and my sisters. None of us will ever be slaves again.”

John hugged her tight, filled with a profound sense of accomplishment at having reversed such a terrible injustice.

“I love you, Master,” the Nymph whispered, tenderly kissing his cheek. “Even if I am very mad at you for putting yourself in so much danger.”

“You have every right to be upset,” he admitted, meeting her troubled gaze. “I should have asked all of you girls to help me with the Soulforge. I just hated the idea of subjecting any of you to something so horrible.”

“If each of us only took brief turns, the discomfort would’ve been easily bearable for everyone,” Jade said quietly. “You’ve assembled a very powerful team of Lionesses, Master... but whenever we’re faced with real danger, you keep trying to shield us from harm, and usually at your own expense. If you’re not careful, your unique strength is going to become a crippling weakness.”

His mouth fell open in shock at the blunt truth of that statement.

She turned to straddle his waist and stared intently into his eyes. “Please just promise me that the next time you plan to shut us out and bear a burden alone, stop and remember this conversation. We all need you, Master. None of us will survive if you let yourself be killed by some foolish sense of chivalry, or overprotectiveness, or self-loathing, or whatever else might drive you to do it.”

John cupped her face with both hands and gave her a contrite kiss. “I promise. No more grand selfless gestures that’ll put me at unnecessary risk. We’re stronger working together as a team.”

Jade kissed him again, but deeply this time, crossing her wrists behind his neck as she pressed herself against his chest. \*You’re forgiven, Master.\*

They enjoyed making up again, before the Nymph reluctantly slid off his lap.

“Do your sisters know what happened to me last night?” John asked, as he rose from the sofa.

She gave him a pointed look. “Of course.”

“I’ve got some more apologising to do, haven’t I?” he said with resignation.

Jade gave him a grim nod.

They walked over to the door leading to the Bridge and when John hit the button to open it, he found all five of Jade’s sisters waiting for him on the other side. He was immediately surrounded by doting Nymphs, who alternated between giving him hugs and kisses.

“They accept your apology too, Master,” Jade said with a fond smile.

“You did it, Master!” Neysa exclaimed, her hazel eyes shining with delight. “No matter what happens, we’ll always be your fantasy women!”

“Yours forever,” Marika agreed, nuzzling into him affectionately.

“I’m so glad it worked,” John said, slipping his arms around Leylira and Betrixa and pulling them into a fierce hug. “All of you are perfect exactly as you are.”

“And this one too, Master?” Ailita asked tentatively, not fully understanding what had happened.

He released the tigress and cheetah, then embraced the pink-haired catgirl. “Yes, you too. I like you so much, you’ll never need to change for another master again, and will stay like this forever.”

She perked up immediately. “Oh, thank you, Master! Jehanna will be delighted!”

“I think so too,” he said with an indulgent smile. He glanced around at the Nymphs, and continued, “Unless any of you need me for anything, we should head back to the Briefing Room.”

The catgirls were all just happy to accompany him, so John returned to the rest of the crew as their introductions to the Larathyran Empress were concluded. Auralei glanced at him with concern when he entered the room, but John gave her a reassuring smile, and she focused her attention on Calara again.

“We’ve tried to make everything as easy to understand as possible,” the brunette explained, as her slender hands danced across the interface. She looked at her guest and quickly clarified, “Not because that’s any reflection on the Larathyrans, but I just assumed that anyone studying the chart would be completely unfamiliar with the required tasks.”

“Don’t worry, I didn’t take offence,” Auralei replied, lightly patting Calara’s forearm.

They exchanged a friendly smile, then the Latina activated the holographic diagram.

Auralei’s sharp intake of breath spoke volumes and she stared awestruck at the wall of colourful charts that swept the full length of the Briefing Room.

“The initial plan was just to chart out the supply chain from harvesting produce at your farms, to the delivery of processed food at retail stores,” Calara explained. “That was surprisingly straightforward, so we started looking at any other operational tasks that we could map out for you. We’ve charted the standard procedures needed to keep all your basic infrastructure services running as efficiently as possible for the foreseeable future.”

“This is incredible... you’ve thought of everything,” Auralei murmured in a hushed voice, her eyes welling up as they swept over the charts. “I can’t believe how much effort you’ve put into all this!”

“I can’t take all the credit,” Calara replied modestly. “The rest of the girls have all been working hard on this too, particularly Irillith and Tashana.”

“Thank you so much!” Auralei gushed, throwing her arms around the startled brunette. “For the last three weeks, we’ve been dealing with one disaster after another... it was awful! But now I’m sure we can save everyone and I know everything’s going to be okay!”

“You’re welcome, Auralei. I’m glad I was able to help,” the brunette replied, returning the overwhelmed Larathyran’s hug.

Brushing the tears from her eyes, Auralei struggled to keep her emotions in check. “You’ve done so much for me... even after my father did so much to hurt each of you.”

Alyssa walked over to her and slipped an arm around her shoulders. “No one here blames you for anything your father did. Larn’kelnar belongs in the past.”

“And you’re our friend now,” Helene said with a welcoming smile.

“Part of our family,” Alyssa agreed, giving the Larathyran an affectionate squeeze.

Auralei looked even more moved, which prompted a fresh round of hugs from the girls. John stayed back and watched from a distance, not wanting to distract their newest recruit from the warm welcome she was receiving.

Calara watched as Sakura embraced Auralei, then felt a surge of guilt about the reason why they’d travelled to the Larathyran Empire in the first place. “Auralei, I have a confession to make...”

The neophyte Empress pulled back from the latest hug and gave her an astute look. “You feel guilty that the Maliri are taking our warships?”

Calara looked surprised for a moment, then glanced at her fiancé with a knowing smile. “I should have known that John’s conscience wouldn’t let him keep quiet about that.” Returning her attention to the green-skinned beauty, she added, “It was my idea originally though, and I’ve been obsessed with retrieving those thrall fleets to defend Maliri territory. I was so single-minded about it, I must admit that I never stopped to think about the consequences for the Larathyrans.”

“Before you arrived, millions of people were in danger of starving to death. The last thing that any of us were thinking about was trying to salvage some spaceships,” Auralei replied. “We don’t even have the crews to fly those vessels, so please take them with my blessing.”

“They’ll make a tremendous difference, thank you,” Calara said earnestly. “With these fleets, we actually have a chance of defending Maliri territory against this invasion.”

“If there’s anything else you need, don’t hesitate to ask,” the Empress stated with conviction. “The Larathyran Empire isn’t able to fight at your side against the Progenitors, so that makes it even more important that we support you as much as possible.”

“I really appreciate that,” the brunette replied, touched by Auralei’s sincerity. “I wasn’t expecting to make a new ally here, but I’m so glad we did. Hopefully, we can become good friends too.”

“I’d like that as well,” Auralei said, looking radiantly happy.

John walked over to the two girls. “I hate to interrupt while you’re getting on so well, but the clock’s ticking, ladies. What do we need to do now, to put all your plans into action, Calara?”

“Irillith has already uploaded all the charts to the hospital’s mainframe, so everything should be accessible to the Larathyrans. All Auralei needs to do is allocate people to the various tasks and they should be able to start immediately. We’ve included simple instructions for day-to-day operations, and links for more detailed documentation to deal with any unforeseen problems should they arise.”

Auralei glanced through the closest chart and shook her head in admiration. “You’ve made everything so easy to understand. We should be able to get all those roles filled immediately, then it won’t take long before everything is running properly again.”

“That was the general idea,” Calara said, feeling tremendous satisfaction when she saw the young Empress’ profound relief.

John walked over and stroked Auralei’s back. “Are you ready to save the day, your Imperial Highness?”

She grinned and nodded eagerly. “I can’t wait to see Kylantha’s face when she sees all this. She won’t believe her eyes!”

“I have a feeling that won’t be the only thing she’ll be shocked by,” Alyssa said with a wry smile.

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Lynette Devereux padded out of the shower with a towel wrapped around her waist, still feeling a bit fragile after thoroughly drowning her sorrows the previous night. As she dried herself off, Lynette glanced at the chronometer on the wall, then cursed as she realised she’d wasted more time in the bathroom than intended. The conference call would be starting in two minutes, and she was still undressed!

Donning her uniform in record time, Lynette just remembered to activate her holo-disguise before the communications interface chimed with the incoming call. She took a seat on the sofa and took a deep breath to calm herself, knowing how important it was to maintain a cool and collected facade, especially at a time like this. The winged sword icon pixelated and streamed away, revealing nearly two-dozen concerned admirals seated around the circular meeting chamber.

“Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen,” she said to the assembled members of High Command.

“I’d hardly classify it as ‘good’,” Admiral Caldwell bristled. “According to rumours, Zelig’s fleet has been completely wiped out and we’re being invaded by unknown aliens! What the hell’s going on out there, Lynette?!”

“That’s the reason for calling this emergency meeting, to provide you with a status update,” she explained. “To address the points you’ve raised: Admiral Zelig is currently missing in action, and at least 80% of his fleet assets have been confirmed to be destroyed.”

There was a sharp intake of breath from the admirals as she confirmed the terrible news.

“I’ve spoke to Commodore Flores, who was aboard the heavy carrier Anemoi in the battle. She said that they were contacted by a Captain Narzera, in command of a cruiser from the Galkiran Empire. Their ships have technology that’s radically better than ours, giving them a huge advantage in speed, shield strength, and firepower. Admiral Zelig made peaceful first contact with the aliens, but they attacked unprovoked.”

“They must have had some reason to attack,” Admiral Cartwright said quietly. “A species in possession of such advanced technology would hardly be prone to random acts of violence.”

“They were searching for someone, a male named ‘Baen’thelas’, presumably from their species,” Lynette replied, maintaining the pretence that she had no idea who they were referring to. “When Zelig was unable to offer them any information about this person, they attacked our forces, presumably to intimidate the survivors into telling them what they wanted to know.”

“According to Commodore Flores, Zelig ordered his fleet to return fire when they were engaged by the Galkirans. However, our ships were massively outclassed by this scout cruiser, leading to the loss of a significant number of picket ships and strike craft. More alien reinforcements arrived and Zelig ordered the rest of his fleet to retreat.”

Lynette’s face fell with genuine sorrow as she continued, “Zelig positioned the Porphyrion to hold the line and cover the rest of his forces as they withdrew. If not for his bravery, the entire carrier group would have been massacred as well, but thankfully they were able to escape. Before Commodore Flores jumped out of the local system, battle data recorded by the Anemoi confirmed that Nathan’s battleship was destroyed.”

“Is there any chance he was able to abandon ship?” Aeri Malone asked, her brow furrowed with concern.

“Unknown at this time,” Lynette replied, with a regretful shake of her head. “Tracking data from the border defence grid confirmed that the enemy cruisers left the system shortly after the battle.”

“Where did they go?” Caldwell asked, looking increasingly alarmed. “Are they launching an invasion?”

Lynette hesitated, then said with caution, “It appears that the Galkiran ships departed together, and set a course towards Maliri Space. They encountered more elements of Zelig’s fleet that were out on patrol along the border and destroyed them.”

“So we’ve lost almost the entire border fleet?” Charles asked, looking shocked. “There’s nothing protecting the Outer Rim from the Kirrix?!”

Lynette let out a heavy sigh and nodded. “We still have Commodore Flores’ carrier group, but the rest of the fleet took massive casualties. As the Galkiran scouts have now left this area, the border patrols are returning to the battlefield to perform search and rescue operations.”

“Why did these Galkirans change course towards Maliri Space?” Caldwell asked pensively. “Are they allies? Was this some kind of pre-emptive strike from the Maliri?”

She paused before replying, listening intently to Alyssa, as her matriarch quickly outlined what information was safe to disclose.

“What I’m about to tell you is Ultra-level Intelligence,” Lynette began ominously. “The public is not adequately prepared to handle this information. If this does get out, I will order a high-level security audit on all of you, so there will be no leaks... am I understood?”

The admirals nodded, transfixed by the Fleet Admiral as they waited to hear the top secret information she was about to reveal to them.

“The Maliri are at war with the Galkiran Empire,” Lynette said quietly. “The reports from the border fight are accurate; their ships massively outclass our own.”

“How are we supposed to defend our borders against warships with that much firepower?” Caldwell asked fearfully.

Lynette met his anxious gaze. “We can’t.”

The officers darted shocked glances at one another, not sure if they had heard the Fleet Admiral correctly.

“What are you saying, Lynette?” Connor Malone asked, his expression grim. “You’re not seriously planning to abandon the Kirrix border?!”

“Any fleets that engage the Galkirans will be destroyed, just like Zelig’s was,” she stated bluntly. “If the Galkirans attack us in strength, there is literally nothing we can do to stop them flying directly to the Core Worlds and pulverising Terra into oblivion.”

They gaped at her in shock, the admirals stunned into silence by that terrifying thought.

“The one faint silver lining to this very dark cloud, is that the Galkirans will have also annihilated any Kirrix forces they’ve encountered within their territory. It’s somewhat ironic that at this present moment, the Outer Rim is the safest it’s ever been from Kirrix invasion in over four-hundred years.”

“But only because we’re about to be invaded by an even more powerful enemy!” Caldwell protested.

“Not necessarily,” Lynette clarified. “If the Maliri are able to defeat them, then the Galkirans will cease to be a threat to us. If the Maliri lose, it’s just a matter of time before the Galkirans start to eliminate all the neighbouring empires.”

Cartwright gave her a penetrating stare, then let out a humourless laugh. “So you’re saying that all we can do is pray that the Maliri are victorious?”

“I’m certainly not suggesting we sit here and do nothing,” Lynette explained. “We need to continue refitting our old fleets and ramping up production of new warships.”

“But you just said that they don’t stand a chance against the Galkiran fleets!” Caldwell exclaimed, looking at her incredulously.

“They’d be massacred,” she agreed. “But we still need to protect the Federation from other hostile forces, like the Brimorians.”

Lina Van Den Broeck sat forward in her chair and asked anxiously, “What about the Lion? Where is John Blake and could he be recalled to help protect our borders?”

“John is fighting alongside the Maliri to help defend against this invasion. He’ll be fighting deep within Maliri territory, so he won’t be available to assist on our borders.”

“Is there any chance he could provide us more technology?” Charles asked, giving his fiancée a meaningful look.

“I’m sure he’d be willing to if it was possible, but we lack the manufacturing capabilities to actually build the next generation of weapons and armour,” Lynette patiently explained. “Maliri weapons, hulls, and armour are based on a crystalline manufacturing process that we’re currently unable to replicate.”

The members of High Command sat there in dumbfounded silence, as realisation sunk in that there was nothing they could do to prevent a Galkiran invasion.

“I can see why you want this kept secret,” Lina said in a hushed voice, clasping her hands together to stop them shaking with fear.

“I know. This news is terrifying,” the brunette agreed, looking at her with sympathy. “The public would revolt if they realised just how precarious our current position is.”

“What about the Outer Rim?” Connor Malone asked insistently. “You warned us that levels of dissent have been rising out on the border. Now that Zelig’s fleet has been destroyed, they’ll assume we’ve abandoned them for a second time if we don’t immediately send a massive wave of reinforcements.”

Lynette couldn’t prevent her shoulders from sagging with disappointment. “I’ve had lengthy discussions with all the colonial governors in that quadrant. They’re mostly reasonable people who are simply looking to ensure their colonies are protected and prosperous. I had managed to convince them all to deepen financial ties with the Terran Federation, but I can’t accurately predict how they’re going to react to this.”

“Give it to us straight, Lynette,” Admiral Kester requested, locking eyes with her from the holo-screen. “What are the Maliri’s chances of beating the Galkirans?”

She was quiet for a long moment, before finally replying, “Maybe 50/50.”

For one of the first times in Terran history, the ruling members of High Command were unified in their opinions. They were all equally shocked and frightened, as realisation sunk in that the future of their entire civilisation hung in the balance, and they were powerless to do anything that might avert disaster.

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“John, when can I meet Irillith and Tashana?” Auralei asked as they walked towards the airlock. “I’d like to thank them for all the work they did with Calara.”

“I’ll introduce you to them later tonight,” John replied, releasing her hand so that he could operate the airlock’s mechanism. “First we need to modify the genetic conditioning that makes your species react so badly to each other.”

She glanced down at her rounded stomach, still heavy with his lunchtime load. “Can’t you make the changes now? I thought that’s how this worked?”

“You’re right, that is how it works,” he agreed, turning to face her and place a hand on her curves. “But I’d like to make the alteration to you and Edraele at the same time.”

Alyssa darted a glance at Auralei, then the young woman blushed and nodded in understanding. “Whatever you think is best.”

John raised an eyebrow and looked over his shoulder at Alyssa suspiciously. “What did you just say to her?”

Her eyes sparkled with mischief. “Do you really want to know?”

He groaned in protest, but John was relieved to see that Auralei was looking at him speculatively rather than in anger or disapproval.

Pausing by the outer airlock door, he interlaced his fingers with the Larathyran Empress. “Are you ready?”

“I am,” she agreed, self-consciously brushing a hand through her majestic mane of snowy-white hair.

He activated the airlock mechanism and the outer door spiralled open, exposing them to the bright Larathyran sunshine. It was mid-afternoon in the capital and there were plenty of people travelling to and from the hospital, which had become the central hub of the recovery effort. It took just under three seconds for the first Larathyran to notice the visitors. A young woman hurrying towards the hospital noticed the flicker of moment as the airlock door opened and just happened to dart a curious glance at the people emerging from the Invictus.

John heard her sharp gasp and turned to see the dark-haired girl staring in rapt fascination at Auralei’s radically different look. Like a colony of meerkats standing guard around their home, more and more Larathyrans started to gape at them, enthralled by Auralei’s spectacular new look. John drew plenty of attention too, but the difference between her pristine white locks, and the jet-black hair of every other woman on the planet, made for a shocking contrast. By the time they reached the hospital complex, quite a substantial crowd had gathered around them, with all the passersby continuously adding to the numbers.

“It takes a bit of getting used to,” John confided, as they entered the hospital. “The Maliri reacted the same way to Edraele and the other matriarchs.”

“I thought Edraele was your only Maliri matriarch?” Auralei asked, frowning in confusion.

“Edraele is the only proper matriarch, who has psychic abilities and can transfer me energy,” he clarified. “When the Maliri ruled themselves without a Progenitor for ten-thousand years, the leaders of each Noble House adopted the title of ‘matriarch’ to emulate the last genuine one. Edraele rules a Council of Matriarchs, who each rule over their own territory, and help keep the Maliri Protectorate running efficiently.”

“That’s an interesting approach,” she said thoughtfully.

“They’re lovely girls. I’m sure you’ll really like them,” Alyssa said, as she followed in their wake. “John *really* likes them too. Don’t you, handsome?”

Auralei looked at him curiously and laughed when she saw his reddening cheeks. “I knew that Alyssa was hinting at something! What is it that you- oh!”

The young Larathyran looked at him in surprise and admiration as she listened to his thoughts. “You’re planning to get all of them pregnant?”

He flushed a bit darker. “It’s a cultural thing with the Maliri. Their noblewomen are under a lot of pressure to establish a strong noble line for their Houses. They were all desperate to start a family with me, and I wanted them to be happy in their new life, so...”

“The fact that most of them are exceptionally beautiful young women, who all absolutely adore him had nothing to do with it,” Alyssa interjected with a straight face.

Auralei laughed at his flustered expression, then happened to notice her friend from the Botanical Institute amongst the crowd of onlookers. “Kylantha!” she exclaimed, walking over to greet her with a hug. “I was hoping to find you.”

Kylantha stared at her with wide eyes. “I’m honoured, Empress.”

“There’s no need to be so formal, I’m still me,” Auralei said with a warm smile, clasping the young woman’s hand. “Come on, let’s go up to my office. We’ve got lots to talk about!”

John placed his hand on Auralei’s back and said, “I’m going to leave you to catch up with your friend. I need to speak to the girls about our plans for when we return to Maliri territory. Unless Alyssa has any objections, I’d like her to stay here with you, and help you start implementing Calara’s recovery processes.”

“That’s fine by me,” the blonde agreed.

Auralei’s face fell, but she quickly recovered. “I understand. How much time do I have until we need to leave?”

“Just under four hours,” Alyssa interjected.

“If you run into any big problems, just let me know,” John said to the pair of matriarchs. “But I’d really like to head out as soon as the Wormhole Generator is charged. The Galkirans fleets will probably reach Maliri territory in the next day or two and we can’t afford to waste any time.”

“We’ll be ready,” the Larathyran Empress said, giving him a goodbye kiss.

A kiss from Alyssa immediately followed. “See you soon!”

They waved goodbye as John left the hospital and returned through the awestruck crowd to the Invictus. Making his way up to the Command Deck, he entered the Briefing Room and found his Lionesses there waiting for him.

“Auralei seems really nice,” Helene said, greeting him with a hug.

The rest of the girls echoed her sentiments.

“Yeah, she’s a sweet girl,” John replied, walking hand-in-hand with Helene over to the conference table. He glanced at the twins and added, “Sorry you weren’t able to meet her too. I’ll introduce you later this evening.”

“I look forward to it,” Tashana said, as her sister nodded in agreement.

“So... I’m guessing that Alyssa told you why I wanted to have this meeting?” John asked, looking around at the nine women in attendance.

Sakura nodded in confirmation. “She said you want to discuss our plans for defending Maliri territory.”

“That’s right,” John replied. “We should be leaving here... hopefully... in four hours time.”

“Hey! I hope that wasn’t a dig at one of my devices?” Dana protested good naturedly. “The chance of us accidentally jumping into a star isn’t all that high. Maybe thirty percent... tops.”

John looked at her in alarm for a moment, then chuckled when he realised she was just teasing him. “Assuming we aren’t instantly killed in a miss-jump, we’ll have another twelve hour window at Genthalas while we wait for the Wormhole Generator to charge again. I’d like to use that time as wisely as possible.”

“I have some ideas,” Calara said, leaning over the table to activate the holo-interface. “While I was working on the Larathyran recovery project, I spent a bit of time thinking about the best way of handling the Galkiran invasion.”

A holographic map showing their quadrant of the galaxy appeared before them, floating in the air above the conference table.

“We know for a fact that thrall scouts engaged Terran Federation forces along the Kirrix border,” she began, highlighting the site of the battle with a crossed swords icon. “We also encountered their Progenitor on Arcadia, and we’ve made the assumption that he’s constructed a Hyper-Warp Gate in the vicinity of that system.”

“That seems the most likely location to me,” John said, nodding thoughtfully. “So you’ve calculated an attack vector?”

“I have. The Progenitor might have sent scouts in all directions to track us down, but it would make sense to use the Gate itself as a rallying point for his fleets. By reinforcing that position, he could make sure it’s well defended against counter-attack and not risk splitting his forces. Therefore, we can safely assume that his fleets were located close to Arcadia before the border battle with the Terrans, and it’s highly likely that they set course for Maliri territory shortly afterwards.”

“How do you know they’ve discovered where Maliri territory is located?” Jehanna asked curiously.

“Because Lynette informed Alyssa that when the Galkiran scouts left the battlefield, the Terran sensor grid tracked them heading directly towards Maliri Space. The thralls must have retrieved that data from a Terran wreck, so I think it’s a safe assumption that any maps they recovered were shared with the Progenitor and the rest of his fleets.”

“How long does that give us until the Galkiran fleets reach the border?” John asked as he studied the map.

“Tomorrow night,” the Latina replied, adjusting the map to only show the Maliri Protectorate. “And flying by the most direct route, they should cross the border at this location.”

“Then roughly three days to reach Valada?” John murmured aloud, as he checked the distances involved and estimated the thrall hyper-warp speed.

“Three days, six hours,” Calara clarified. “But that’s making the assumption that they know precisely where Valada is located. If the Galkirans did discover the location of Maliri Space from the Terrans, then they still won’t know the location of the Maliri homeworlds.”

John heard the undercurrent of excitement in her voice and gave her a knowing look. “So you’re planning on steering them where you want them to go?”

“Based off Rahn’hagon’s and Larn’kelnar’s astonishment at your unique way of operating, it seems highly likely that this new Progenitor will make the same assumptions. He’s probably expecting you to have established a throne world somewhere within Maliri Space... so why not guide him towards a Progenitor’s throne world?”

“Kythshara,” John said, nodding in agreement. “It’s perfect. There’s no civilian population there to get caught in the crossfire, and we can use Mael’nerak’s defence grid to help even the odds.”

“That’s the plan,” Calara confirmed, highlighting a flight path from the border to Kythshara.

“So how do you plan to steer them there?” Rachel asked, studying the map in fascination.

Calara’s confident smile faded, and she ruefully replied, “That’s going to be the tricky part. We’re going to need to lay a trail of breadcrumbs from the border to Kythshara, along with a series of traps to slow down or immobilise as many thrall warships as possible. They could be invading with anywhere from twenty to thirty thrall fleets, and if they arrive at Kythshara with that many, we won’t stand a chance of defeating them, even with the defence grid assisting.”

“How long will it be until the Maliri start recovering the Larathyran fleets?” John asked. “And how quickly can they get back to Kythshara?”

The Latina activated another series of icons on the holo-interface and a map of the Larathyran Empire appeared.

“The matriarchs decided to send their fastest ships through our Hyper-Warp Gate first, so they could salvage some thrall ships as quickly as possible. Under normal circumstances, it would make more sense to send the slowest first, so that they capture all the marooned vessels at around the same time, then bring them into battle as a coordinated armada. Fortunately, your matriarchs are very smart, and remembered to take into account the narrow jump window at the Hyper-Warp Gate.”

“So the fastest ships get their quickly, capture their allocated thrall fleets, then bring them straight back to the gate... and we can start jumping them back to Maliri Space hours ahead of schedule.”

“Exactly,” Calara said with a smile of approval. Her voice turned sombre as she continued, “However, there is a significant downside. We’ll be receiving a slow trickle of reinforcements through the gate directly into the Kythshara system. That means that if the Galkirans get there too quickly, they’ll massively outnumber the few fleets we’ve retrieved, and be able to easily destroy them, along with the Gate itself.”

“Which means no more reinforcements,” John said, his expression equally grim. “So it’s imperative that we delay the Galkirans long enough to amass enough fleets to square off against them.”

“Yes.”

“And how are we planning to delay them exactly?” he asked with interest.

“By using us as bait,” Calara replied. “We’re fast enough to be able to keep our distance from the thrall fleets, but my plan is to continuously harass them with hit and run ambushes. We should be able to lead them on a merry dance through Maliri Space, and avoid any highly-populated systems as we retreat.”

Turning towards the map again, she pressed another button, and a glowing flight path appeared on the holograph. It swept back from the border almost perpendicular to the most direct course to Kythshara, then eventually took a dog-leg that skirted along the internal borders between House Loraleth, House Baelora, and House Torcyne, before finally ending at Kythshara.

Jehanna frowned in confusion. “Forgive me if this sounds stupid, but why lead them to Kythshara at all, if that’s your staging ground? Wouldn’t it make more sense to choose somewhere completely different for the final battle? Then there won’t be any risk of the gate being destroyed.”

“That’s a good point, and if there were no other factors in play, I’d completely agree,” Calara replied, before glancing at their tawny-haired doctor. “Rachel, do you want to explain the problem?”

“The issue we’re facing is the unstable temperament of the enemy Progenitor,” the brunette began. “We can delay him for a while, but if he gets too frustrated chasing after us, we might see another outburst like the planetary bombardment on Arcadia.”

“What would happen then?” Jehanna asked, listening in fascination.

Calara and Rachel exchanged a glance, then both shrugged helplessly.

“I can’t predict the future,” Calara explained, before quickly correcting herself, “Or at least not that far into the future. If we’re being chased by the Progenitor and his thrall fleets, we need to keep them in a cohesive group. The absolute last thing we want is for the Progenitor to scatter thirty warfleets across Maliri Space in an attempt to corner us. The amount of damage they could do to populated worlds if they ran amok doesn’t bear thinking about.”

“Okay, let me just summarise a moment,” Sakura requested. “So we need to lead the Galkirans on a detour through Maliri Space, wasting as much of their time as possible. However, we mustn’t get the Progenitor too frustrated in case he snaps, has a wild tantrum, and does something crazy?”

“Yes, that’s correct,” Calara confirmed.

“Then we guide the thralls to Kythshara, where we use all our captured Larathyran fleets and Mael’nerak’s defence grid to fight the Galkiran invasion force. If we get there too soon, the Maliri fleets will be heavily outnumbered, and they’ll be exterminated along with our Hyper-Warp Gate, at which point we lose. If we’ve delayed the bad guys long enough, we should have roughly equal forces, so we have a good shot at winning a conventional battle with the benefit of your tactical expertise.”

“Thank you for the compliment,” Calara said modestly. “Yes, I’d say we have a good chance of defeating their forces under those circumstances.”

Sakura frowned in confusion. “But I thought our plan was to cut the head off the snake? If we can just kill this invading Progenitor, then won’t we instantly neutralise the threat from his thrall fleets?”

“I don’t know,” Calara ruefully admitted. “We’ve never seen how thrall forces react when their Progenitor is killed. They could just as easily go on a berserk rampage.”

“But the battle you’re planning for is really a worst case scenario,” the Asian girl persisted. “If we have to grind down the Galkirans in some massive-scale fleet battle, I have no doubt you’ll be victorious, but the casualties on both sides will be appalling! Surely that would be a strategic loss overall?”

Calara sighed and reluctantly nodded. "We’re dealing with so many unknown factors, I thought it sensible to assume that we’re inevitably going to end up fighting a huge fleet engagement. Of course, I’d much prefer it if we could lure out the Progenitor and avoid a massive battle entirely, but that’s much easier said than done. Does anyone have an idea how we could do that?”

“Maybe he’d respond to a personal challenge? Like a duel?” Sakura suggested.

John rubbed his chin as he mulled it over. “I could try goading him into a fight, but he might not even be accompanying the thrall fleets. From everything we know about Progenitors, including what my father said, they don’t tend to get involved with thrall battles and definitely don’t lead from the front. Rahn’hagon took it as a personal insult that Mael’nerak engaged his forces and detonated that explosion to destroy his dreadnought.”

“Perhaps if we cause enough trouble to his invasion forces, it might prompt this Progenitor to intervene personally?” Sakura suggested.

“That might work,” Rachel conceded cautiously. “But it might also trigger some other wildly unpredictable behaviour.”

“And the Invictus still isn’t strong enough to slug it out with a dreadnought,” John said, his jaw tightening in frustration. “Which means we’d have to try boarding them in the middle of a losing firefight, which is never a great idea, or somehow lure the Progenitor out of his ship.”

They all went quiet as they tried to think of an alternative solution.

After a long moment, John cleared his throat and said, “Let’s come back to that later. We’ve still got a bit of time to think up some new ideas before the thralls invade, so let’s focus on what we’re going to do on Genthalas for the moment.”

“Yeah, we got a bit sidetracked,” Calara agreed. “I was going to suggest using Genthalas’ construction facilities to help us build as many disruptive devices as possible. If we can load up the Invictus with cloaked mines and gravity well generators, we can drop them in front of the invasion force to harass them and slow down their progress.”

“I’ve been working on something that’ll help out with that,” Dana said, holding out her hand for the remote.

When Calara passed it to her, she quickly searched through her archive of schematics for her latest creation. Dana tapped a couple of buttons, then her blueprints replaced the holographic map. John studied the strange device, which looked like eight mechanical legs attached to a retro-thruster.

“A spider mine?” he asked, reading the title on the schematics. “What does it do?”

“Well, I figured we’d want to disable thrall ships without blowing them to pieces, right?” she asked, looking at John and Calara for confirmation. When they nodded, she continued, “So I designed this cloaked spider mine to target a thrall ship’s engines.”

Calara’s brow furrowed and she said, “That’s a great idea, but it won’t be able to pierce their shields. Every thrall ship is equipped with-”

“A solid-phase shield matrix... yeah, I know,” Dana said rolling her eyes playfully. “But they can’t run their shields 24/7 in hyper-warp or they’ll burn out the shield projectors. What we do is this...”

She pressed another icon on the remote and a crude line diagram appeared, showing thrall ships approaching the Invictus. A gravity-well generator suddenly appeared in their path, knocking them out of hyper-warp, with several cloaked spider mines hidden nearby. As soon as the thrall ships were halted, the spider mines rocketed into their hulls.

“I thought they were supposed to target the engines?” Calara asked in confusion.

“Yeah, but we’ll only have a few seconds after they drop out of hyper-warp before the crews react and raise their shields,” Dana explained. She held up her arm to demonstrate, and continued, “So we place the spider mines where the thrall ships are going to be disrupted by the artificial gravity well. The thralls ships stop, and the mines immediately attach to the hull before they can get their shields up. Then they walk to the rear of the ship, locate the engine... and Ka-boom!”

She used her other hand to represent the spider mines crawling down her arm towards her elbow, then splayed her fingers to simulate an explosion.

“Wow,” John exclaimed, suitably impressed. “And you’re sure they’ll be able to locate the engines?”

“Yeah, that won’t be a problem,” the redhead explained. “Configuring the spider mines to find their way around the hulls shouldn’t be too tricky. I’m sure Irillith could do it in her sleep.”

“I can definitely help with that,” Irillith volunteered. “I could build a VI and upload simulations of the various thrall hull layouts from our copies of their schematics. It’ll easily be able to navigate to the engines after landing on any point on the hull.”

“A virtual intelligence?” John asked with concern. “It’s not going to be sentient is it?”

Irillith shook her head. “No, not even close. This would be a very basic VI, not even as complex as the one we used for ‘The Game’ in the Maliri civil war.”

“Okay, good,” he said with relief. Turning back to Dana, he continued, “So what parts of the spider mines do you want to construct on Genthalas? We should probably let Edraele know in advance so they can reconfigure their fabricators.”

Dana shook her head. “We can build most of it on the Invictus, but we don’t have any explosive ordnance stockpiled. All we need from the Maliri are some torpedo warheads or something like that. The payload will just need to be powerful enough to punch through thrall armour plating.”

\*Our battleships are equipped with high-explosive torpedoes; will the warheads from those be sufficient?\* Edraele enquired.

“Yeah, they’ll be perfect!” Dana said enthusiastically.

\*We’ll begin transferring an adequate supply to the loading docks,\* Edraele informed everyone in attendance. \*I’ll also include our stockpile of gravity-well generators and magnetic mines.\*

“That should give us plenty of options to harass the Galkirans,” Calara said, smiling appreciatively. “Thanks very much, Edraele.”

\*You’re welcome,\* the Maliri Queen replied, when Alyssa relayed their gratitude to her.

“It sounds like we’ve got plenty to keep us busy on Genthalas,” John said with satisfaction. “After the Wormhole Generator is charged again, I want to jump to Geniya Trade Station next and meet with the Maliri males. We need to convince them to migrate away from the border stations back to the homeworlds.”

Jehanna leaned forward, her eyes shining with excitement. “Are we still going ahead with my plan?”

John grimaced and reluctantly nodded. “I’m still not entirely comfortable with it, but I haven’t been able to come up with any better ideas. As long as the matriarchs agree, then I guess I have no more objections.”

\*I took the liberty of consulting with the matriarchs already, Lord Baen’thelas,\* Edraele purred, a teasing lilt to her voice. \*They unanimously agreed; even Emandra Holaris gave her consent.\*

“I’m not sure if I should be pleased or horrified,” John muttered, much to the amusement of the girls in the Briefing Room.

Jehanna beamed a triumphant grin. “Trust me... it’ll be perfect! When the Maliri males see this, they’ll be desperate to rush home!”