Three Square Meals Ch. 149

John pulled on a fresh t-shirt as he strode out of his bedroom, then waved his hand at the button next to the double doors at the end of the corridor. The telekinetic swipe opened the way into the Officers’ Lounge and he was able to stroll inside without pause. He was met by a beautiful song that drifted across the huge room, Alyssa’s melodic voice sending shivers down his spine.

She finished the verse, then greeted him with a bright smile. “Good morning, handsome!”

John walked over to join her and admired the flattering summer dress that showed off her lovely long legs.

“Good morning, beautiful,” he replied, encircling her waist with his hands and giving her a well-earned kiss.

When they parted, he noticed the mouth-watering spread of pastries and fruit that was waiting for him.

“This looks delicious. Did you make everything?” he asked, marvelling at the amount of work involved.

“Calara helped with the pastries,” Alyssa admitted. “She was going to join us for breakfast, but she went up to the Bridge.”

“What did I do to deserve all this?” he asked, his eyes flicking from the table of food to Alyssa’s outfit and her artfully styled blonde tresses.

“I missed you and it’s lovely to have you back again,” she replied, pursing her lips and giving him a peck on the tip of his nose.

John raised an eyebrow and pretended to give her a suspicious look.

Her shoulders sagged and she admitted, “I felt guilty about you not being able to explore Mael’nerak’s palace with us. I know you were really looking forward to it.”

Taking a seat, John pulled her down onto his lap. “Don’t worry about that, honey. I would’ve enjoyed exploring it with you, but I had important business to take care of with the Maliri. Besides, you did an amazing job organising the girls. I was really impressed with how much you all achieved in such a short time.”

“I just tried to copy what you would’ve done; keep everyone focused, but make sure they were all safe.”

“You got great results. I’m very proud of you,” he said, giving her a supportive squeeze.

Alyssa let out a happy sigh. “I’m so glad you’re back... and not just because you say lovely things. It’s so much easier being your XO and letting you make all the command decisions.”

“Commanding a battlecruiser full of gifted Lionesses is a walk in the park compared to running an empire. Talk about real pressure...” he said with a wry smile.

“Are you finding it tough?” she asked, wincing in sympathy.

John glanced at the food and said, “Let’s get started on breakfast while it’s still hot. We can talk and eat.”

“Okay,” she agreed, and joined him in piling up his plate with food.

He eyed the mountainous stack with trepidation. “This looks incredible, but I’m pretty sure I can’t manage all that.”

“We’re sharing,” Alyssa explained, reaching for a fork and spearing a slice of melon. She popped it in her mouth and hummed with pleasure at the succulent taste. \*The breakfast I really wanted is in Ailita’s and Jehanna’s tummies.\*

John paused with a piece of croissant half-way to his mouth. “I’m sorry, honey. I didn’t realise you were waiting for that one.”

Her cerulean eyes twinkled as she munched on a strawberry. \*I’d love it if you gave me breakfast, lunch, and dinner... but it was my own silly fault for recruiting so many hungry mouths to feed.\*

He relaxed when he realised Alyssa was just teasing him, and tried the delicate pastry. \*This is delicious. Compliments to the chef.\*

\*Calara says, ‘You’re welcome!’\* Alyssa replied, before tearing a piece off the same croissant to try for herself. \*So you were saying that being Emperor Baen’thelas is hard work?\*

\*To be fair, Edraele’s made it as easy for me as she possibly could. The matriarchs do the bulk of the work, and handle all the logistics with their Houses. All I really have to deal with is the strategic decisions.\*

\*That’s not so bad,\* the blonde agreed. \*So just the life or death stuff, where billions of lives hang in the balance?\*

He chuckled and nodded. \*Yeah, basically. Edraele is really supportive and seems impressed with the decisions I’ve made so far, but I just don’t want to make any bad choices. My mistakes could cost the Maliri everything, so there’s a huge pressure to get everything right.\*

Alyssa gave him a comforting hug, then pulled back to gaze into his eyes. \*You’re bound to make mistakes eventually. You can’t be right all the time.\*

\*I know... that’s what scares me,\* he admitted, his brow furrowing with worry.

She swallowed her food, then leaned in to give him a kiss. “Just remember that you’re surrounded by women who love you and we’re here to support you in every way we can. You might be the man in charge, but you never need to make any decision alone.”

John thought about that for a moment, then the tension eased from his shoulders. “You’re right. It’s Team Blake versus the bad guys.”

“Exactly!” she said enthusiastically, grinning at his positive change in mood.

“Talking of Team Blake, where is everyone this morning?” he asked, reaching for a poached egg vol-au-vent.

“Well, Ailita and Jehanna are sleeping off breakfast, and you KO’d the rest of the Nymphs,” she replied, playfully nudging him with an elbow. “Rachel and the twins are researching data they retrieved from Mael’nerak’s palace, and I’m sure Calara will start working on that too when our Bridge crew wake up again.”

“You mentioned that Helene was with Jade?” he asked, before drinking some fruit juice.

“They were taking a dip in the newly modified Lagoon. Helene seemed happy with the changes.”

“That’s a relief; I know how much she enjoys swimming there,” he said, pleased that she wasn’t upset by the alterations Alyssa had made. “What about Sparks and Sakura?”

“Sakura’s training in the Dojo and Sparks is getting everything set up for our shaping session this morning. She got up early and has already modified the engine schematics. When we’ve finished breakfast, we should be good to go.”

“Nice. Upgrading the engines should make a huge difference in combat,” John said, before popping the other half of the pastry into his mouth.

\*When do you want to do the actual refit? The Invictus will be very vulnerable when we start dismantling the engines,\* Alyssa said, taking a sip of her drink.

John chewed thoughtfully. \*It depends on when we finish building them and how safe we think we are at that point. We’ll just have to play it by ear.\*

Alyssa reached up with a finger to playfully stroke his eartip. \*Sounds good to me.\*

They quickly finished off the rest of their breakfast, which tasted as good as it looked. While John was clearing the table, Alyssa selected a broad variety of all the different dishes that had been prepared and arranged them tastefully on a plate.

“I’ll just take Calara her breakfast,” she explained. “Feel free to head down to the Primary Hangar and start without me. I’ll join you in a few minutes.”

“Any excuse to get out of psychic shaping,” John teased her, feigning a disapproving frown.

“I have absolutely no idea what you’re talking about,” Alyssa protested as she sashayed out of the Officer’s Lounge, putting an extra swing into the seductive sway of her hips.

John chuckled as he followed her out, then stepped into the red anti-gravity field as the blonde ascended in a sapphire glow. He dropped down through the levels until he reached Deck Nine, then opened the door into the Secondary Hangar. The Raptor had been dumped unceremoniously in the middle of the room, looking battered and forlorn in the aftermath of the desperate battle to reach Kythshara.

The gunship had served them well and John gave its pockmarked hull a respectful pat as he passed the wrecked vehicle. He was sorry that it was beyond repair, but some things couldn’t be fixed after being that badly broken. As he walked away, John couldn’t help wondering if that was a metaphor for some of the other troubling aspects of his life, like his relationship with his parents. Waving his hand at the controls beside the reinforced door ahead, he quickly left the Secondary Hangar, not wanting to be around the painful reminder any longer than necessary.

“That’s perfect right there!” Dana yelled across the hangar. “Can you bolt it down and hook up the power coupling?”

The two maintenance bots that were carrying her engineering console carefully settled the base plate down on the titanium decking.

One of the robots curled his six-fingered hand into a thumbs up gesture. +++ [/begin humorous acknowledgement] Okey-dokey! [/end humorous acknowledgement] +++

“Thanks, guys!” she called out cheerfully, before returning her attention to the hundreds of ore crates stacked in the hangar.

“Hey, Sparks. How are you getting on down here?” John asked, walking over to join her.

“Hey, John! We’re just about ready to go!” she replied, bounding into his open arms and greeting him with an enthusiastic kiss. “The Collective were superstars and moved all the materials in here last night. It’s a good job we got fully stocked up in Genthalas, we’re definitely going to need all this stuff for the engines!”

“Have we actually got enough space in here to build all six replacements?” he asked, studying the vast hangar speculatively.

“Nah, not completely, and especially not with the Progenitor Shuttle in here too. I think the best plan is for Alyssa to strip down the Raptor of everything we can salvage, then we can dump the chassis, and move the shuttle into the Secondary Hangar. That should give us enough room to do the bulk of the work in here, then we can assemble the outer casings when we’re ready to mount the new engines.”

“Sounds like a good plan to me,” John said agreeably. “Alyssa mentioned that you’ve already modified the schematics?”

“Yeah! Come and check them out,” she replied, beckoning him to follow her towards the newly installed console.

The multi-tools built into the maintenance bots arms’ whirred and clicked as they finished bolting the framework down. The engineering station burst into life a few seconds later when the robots connected the power coupling, a flurry of lights flicking on across the console.

“Looking good,” she said gratefully.

+++ [/Begin query] Do you require any additional assistance, Grand Engineering Overlord? [/End query] +++

“Nah, we’ll be fine now,” Dana replied, patting him affectionately on the arm. “Thanks a lot for all your help. I’ll let Daphne know when we’re ready to start installing the engines.”

The two robots waved goodbye and floated silently out of the hangar.

“I love the Collective, they’re so helpful,” the redhead said, watching them leave.

“You certainly seem to have them well-trained, Grand Engineering Overlord,” he joked, nudging her with an elbow.

“I have no idea why they started calling me that,” she said, feigning innocence.

He laughed and nodded towards the console. “Let’s see the new engines, you big fibber.”

Dana activated the holo interface and brought up the latest schematic she’d been working on. A three-dimensional model appeared of the new engine, then the view expanded to show the Invictus with the Progenitor propulsion system installed. Unlike the Trankaran engines, which had been blocky and utilitarian, the new variant looked vicious, angular, and altogether more aggressive.

The colour change had slightly lessened their sinister appearance, but it was obvious at a glance that they’d been developed by a very malevolent alien mind.

“I made a few tweaks so we could make them out of Crystal Alyssium instead,” Dana explained, oblivious to John’s misgivings. “While I was at it, I also managed to make a few minor improvements on heat venting and overhauled the fuel injection system.”

John glanced at her and smiled. “Hey, look at you, pushing the limits on cutting-edge technology.”

She broke into a grin. “It wasn’t anything earth shattering, but every little bit counts, right? The Trankarans get the most out of their engines by shoving in as much fuel as possible and I guess I picked up a few tricks from them.”

“That’s really impressive work, Dana... well done,” John said, slipping his arm around her and staring at the blueprints.

She blushed and snuggled into his hug. “Thanks, John.”

He kissed the top of her head, then asked tentatively, “Can I make one minor suggestion?”

“Sure, go ahead,” the redhead replied, looking up at him with interest.

“Would you mind letting Alyssa modify the aesthetics a bit?” he asked, frowning as he studied the holographic projection of the Invictus.

“Why would I mind? It wasn’t me that made them look all creepy and evil,” she said with a giggle. “Are you worried they might damage your good guy credentials?”

He gestured towards them as if the answer was self-explanatory. “Well they do kind of scream: ‘We’re here to blow up your planet!’.”

“Yeah, they do look pretty scary,” Dana agreed, tilting her head to one side to view the battlecruiser from a different angle. “We can still get started on building all the internal components. Changing the aesthetics will only affect the design of the outer casing, so we don’t need to wait for Alyssa to give the engines a facelift.”

John cracked his knuckles. “Alright, I’m raring to go, Grand Engineering Overlord. Show me what to make first.”

“Let’s start with the thrust chamber venting assembly,” Dana said eagerly, returning to the original engine schematic.

“That’s the hexagonal thingie at the back that used to be a rectangle, right?” John asked, squinting at the holograph.

“Check out Mr. Engineer showing off with the technical jargon,” Dana teased him. “Yeah, you got it in one.”

Despite her jovial tone, he could tell that Dana was actually impressed. “How long will it take to make all six engines?”

She rubbed his arm in sympathy. “Probably most of the day. The engines are really fucking big and there’s thousands of components in each one. Sorry, John... you’re going to end up popping painkillers for a nightcap.”

“That’s alright,” he said with resignation. “The engines will make a big difference, won’t they?”

The redhead nodded, a wicked smile creeping back onto her face. “Dreadnoughts have six engines like us... but they’re three kilometres long.”

He laughed and glanced back at the schematic. “Yeah, let’s get this done.”

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Governor Kang Yuun-Mi sat rigidly in the chair beside Lynette, her dark eyes flicking back and forth as she reviewed the long list of concessions that had been offered to Segonis Sigma. She was a slim, attractive woman, but her skin was very pale, as the near constant rainfall on her sodden homeworld meant that citizens rarely saw the sun.

“Tch...” The abrasive sound she made with her tongue, summarised the governor’s dissatisfaction.

“Did you find something that wasn’t to your liking, Yuun-Mi?” Lynette asked politely. “I assure you that all the terms we discussed have been listed in good faith. If anything seems ambiguous and you would like further clarification, I’m happy to add as much additional detail as you require.”

“On the contrary. You have been exceedingly forthright and generous with the offer you’ve made to Segonis Sigma,” Yuun-Mi replied, her head slowly turning until she stared directly at the Fleet Admiral. “But this is all meaningless if our colony should be overrun by the Kirrix. If their rampage had continued through the Outer Rim, we would have been next to fall. I’d imagine that shiny new power stations and bulging bank accounts will provide scant comfort, when one is being brutally raped by a Hive Lord.”

“You’re absolutely right... and as I already explained, the Terran Federation will be obligated to maintain a minimum of 20% of our fleet strength along the Kirrix border. That’s a substantial number of ships, Yuun-Mi. We’ll be protecting Federation territory with at least two fully-reinforced fleets at all times, with an additional fleet added as we complete the next generation of warships that are currently under construction at Olympus Shipyard.”

The Governor rubbed her thumb and forefinger together and Lynette looked at Yuun-Mi in surprise, having never expected her to silently request a bribe. Lynette felt a pang of disappointment in the woman, who she had clearly misjudged. As the Fleet Admiral was about to cautiously probe for details on the sum of credits she was expected to pay, they made eye-contact and Lynette hesitated. Yuun-Mi wasn’t studying her with furtive avarice, instead she seemed distracted... anxious... and frightened. The governor made the gesture again, and this time it was obvious that it was a nervous tick, not a surreptitious prompt for a handout.

Reaching out to her, Lynette clasped the governor’s hands and gave them a comforting squeeze. “We won’t betray your trust again, Yuun-Mi. You have my word as the Fleet Admiral that your safety is paramount in my concerns. The Terran Federation is your best hope of protecting your colony from the ravages of the Kirrix and I’m willing to publically state that, as well as reiterate High Command’s commitment to reinforcing the border in perpetuity.”

“You can give me your guarantee that we will never be exposed to the Kirrix again?” Yuun-Mi asked, desperately looking for reassurance in the Fleet Admiral’s gaze.

“I promise, Yuun-Mi,” Lynette said solemnly. “We will never leave the border undefended again.”

The governor stared off into the distance, lost in thought. While she was distracted, Lynette glanced down at their touching fingers and winced inwardly at making such a careless mistake. Judging that Yuun-Mi no longer needed reassurance, she slowly withdrew her hands, then folded them in her lap. She was greatly relieved to see that the other woman had not noticed the brief flicker in her holo-disguise.

Taking a deep breath, the governor let it out and nodded decisively to herself. “Then on behalf of Segonis Sigma, I wish to accept your kind offer. In exchange, we will remain committed to our ongoing partnership with the Terran Federation.”

“That’s excellent news!” Lynette gushed, breaking into a triumphant smile. “You won’t regret it.”

Yuun-Mi gave her a brave smile in return. “I sincerely hope so. It’s my ass on the line here, Lynette... literally.”

With the governor now much more at ease, Lynette concluded the meeting and guided her guest out to the shuttle’s airlock. They said their goodbyes, then Kang Yuun-Mi departed, leaving the Fleet Admiral alone in the docking bay. Lynette glanced around the starport’s hangar and let out an exasperated sigh when she saw no sign of Stefan Vaughn.

The Brecken’s World governor was next in line, and while their scheduled meeting was not due to start for another five minutes, Lynette was cautiously optimistic that he would be there waiting. She went back inside and watched the minutes tick by, until half-an-hour had passed and it was quite clear that Governor Vaughn would not be attending the meeting. Lynette drummed her fingers on the desk as she thought how best to handle the slight.

Even if he had no intention of accepting any offer, Stefan Vaughn was still obligated to meet with her, as the Fleet Admiral of the Terran Federation held absolute authority over Brecken’s World. She allowed herself a wry smile as she pictured throwing the rebellious governor into the Aphrodite’s brig, but it faded into a grimace as she imagined how the rest of the governors would react. Reaching over to the comms interface, Lynette clicked a button to open a channel.

Commander MacCallum’s face appeared before her, the grizzled veteran unnervingly calm. “Good morning, Fleet Admiral.”

“Commander, I need to visit the administration complex. Please could you arrange for an honour guard to accompany me.”

“Of course, Ma’am. Will a dozen troopers be sufficient?”

“That would be ideal, thank you,” she said gratefully, returning his nod before closing the call.

By the time Lynette returned to the airlock and walked outside, a dozen black-garbed soldiers were fanning out into a protective detail. She left the starport at an unhurried pace and watched as the locals scurried out of her way, then stood and gawped at the shocking sight of the Fleet Admiral strolling down their sawdust strewn high-street. The staff at the planetary administration complex reacted in much the same way, as they scrambled to look busy for the most senior figure in the Terran Federation. A man in a rumpled suit hurried towards Lynette as she strode through the lobby, until his progress was abruptly blocked by one of her bodyguards.

“It’s alright, Lieutenant Commander, let him pass,” Lynette said, studying the man she recognised as Governor Vaughn’s assistant and beckoning him forward.

“I’m so sorry, Fleet Admiral,” the man said, wringing his hands together. “I reminded Stefan about the meeting several times, but then he kicked me out of his office!”

“Don’t worry, you’re not in any trouble. Where is Governor Vaughn’s office?” she asked, as her eyes flicked around the reception area.

“It’s on the first floor, fourth door on the right,” he blurted out in a hurry. “I can show you the way...”

“That won’t be necessary, thank you.”

The assistant knew he’d been dismissed, but he hesitated, reluctant to withdraw. “He’s been under a lot of stress recently, Fleet Admiral. I know it’s not an excuse... but still...”

“I’ll take that into consideration,” she replied, before glancing towards the leader of the platoon.

Lieutenant Commander Donnely issued curt orders to his squad and they swept through the building, securing the route to the governor’s office. The special forces soldiers didn’t bother to knock and entered first, their sharp eyes alert for danger. Governor Vaughn had turned his leather chair towards the window and was staring out at the forested hills, while nursing a glass of whiskey in his hand.

“I thought I’d make things easy for you, Fleet Admiral,” he drawled. “Now you can just lock me up and throw away the key. A fitting end to the most pathetic rebellion in Terran Federation history.”

Donnely leaned over the desk and deftly retrieved a handgun that was holstered out of sight.

“Thank you, Lieutenant Commander,” Lynette said with an appreciative nod. “I’d like to speak to Governor Vaughn in private please.”

“We’ll be just outside, Ma’am,” he replied, following the rest of the squad into the corridor.

When she was alone with the despondent governor, Lynette sat demurely in the seat opposite. “I was disappointed you didn’t come to see me, Stefan. I was bracing myself for whatever outrageous demands you could come up with to try to derail my relief effort.”

He sipped his whiskey sullenly. “What’s the point? Any support we get will only be temporary... until High Command needs to throw a load of money at the next big problem. These colonies aren’t going to make a squeak in the future, not with two T-Fed fleets parked on our doorstep.”

“I’m not trying to stick a band-aid on a gaping chest wound,” Lynette said quietly. “I know how much everyone suffered here... and on Valia Gate, Carolus III, Tasmaris Prime, Menganus IV... and Karron.”

Stefan snorted and waved his drink at the window. “Those idiots seem to have already forgotten what happened with the Kirrix. Maybe I was wrong about my friends being in agony when they were raped? It can’t have been that bad if these fools are this eager for another turn.”

Lynette sighed and shook her head reproachfully. “I know you’re upset with the other governors... but there’s no need for that.”

He grimaced and looked guilty for a few seconds, then blurted out, “I just don’t get it! They were furious at High Command until you showed up, then they all folded like a pack of cards. I can’t believe you managed to buy them all off that easily!”

“I’m not buying anyone off,” Lynette patiently explained, keeping her tone calm and soothing. “I genuinely want to help these colonies, and after years of inadequate funding, I have plenty of leeway to redress that deficit.”

Stefan turned to face her, defeat in his eyes. “Yeah, but for how long? You’ve got maybe ten years as Fleet Admiral before you retire? Even if you do genuinely care about our colonies, there’s zero chance that your replacement will give a shit about the Outer Rim.”

“That’s not true, Stefan,” Lynette replied, shaking her head. “I’ll grant you that High Command doesn’t have a great track record with investing in these worlds, but I’m determined to see that changes in the future.”

He let out a weary sigh. “You just don’t get it.... you never will.”

She fought the temptation to bite back with her own retort. “Alright, explain it to me then. Why won’t High Command ever change its outlook towards colonies on the border?”

“Because it’s not in your best interests,” he muttered, sipping his whiskey.

She frowned and shook her head. “Of course it is. You’re part of the Terran Federation and we’re all stronger standing together.”

Stefan snorted and rolled his eyes. “I don’t know how you got to be Fleet Admiral when you’re this naive. People are selfish and look out for themselves... why would the Admiralty be any different? Most of humanity lives in the Core Worlds and they’re always going to be High Command’s primary focus. That’s where all the big corporate money is, and where their real interests lie. It probably cost more to build the fleets to protect the border than our colonies are worth in deductible credits... am I right?”

Lynette hesitated, confirming his suspicions. “But it’s not just about how much things cost in credits,” she protested.

“You just cut the Kintark Empire in half and annexed hundreds more systems,” he said, his expression bleak. “For the next couple of decades, there’s going to be a colony rush, with everyone looking to exploit those worlds for everything they can get their hands on. That’s where the real opportunities are, not in a bunch of half-developed colonies on strip-mined worlds.”

“It doesn’t have to be that way, Stefan,” Lynette said quietly. “The Terran Federation is big enough to financially support the Outer Rim as well as absorb the former Kintark worlds. Besides that, you’re much safer within the Terran Federation than trying to go it alone. If you went independent, there’s no possible way that you can match the fleet strength we’re willing to provide, even if you managed to convince Andros Petrides to secede with Port Heracles.”

“The Terran Federation isn’t the only major player around here, Devereux,” he muttered, a glimmer of defiance in his eyes. “We’d find a way...”

“Alright, let’s lay out all our cards on the table,” Lynette said with a nonchalant shrug. “Who would you go to for support? The Ashanath are pacifistic and reclusive; you’d never be able to convince them to patrol your borders. The Trankaran fleets were decimated during the Kirrix invasion and their populations slaughtered by the sieges. How can they save you from Kirrix incursions, when they can barely muster enough forces to protect themselves? If you’re thinking about asking the Brimorians for help, then I hope you appreciate the irony of calling me naive. And that just leaves the Maliri...”

He flushed in anger, smarting from her dig about the Brimorians. “Yeah, and what about the Maliri? They have tech that beats anything the Terran Federation has to offer. You said yourself that they’re looking to greatly expand trade with their neighbours; we could give them a hell of a lot of raw materials in exchange for protection.”

Lynette studied him for a long moment, considering how much she should reveal, then slowly shook her head. “The Maliri fleets are preoccupied at the moment and will be for the foreseeable future. They might be willing to increase trade with you at their border stations, but you have absolutely zero chance of persuading the Maliri to protect you from the Kirrix.”

Stefan waved a hand at her dismissively. “That’s a bunch of bullshit! We’ve seen the Maliri on the warpath for the first time in centuries. You’re just bluffing.”

“Am I?” she asked, her expression turning grim. “This is a high-stakes game for a bluff. If it turns out that I’m telling you the truth, which I am, what are you going to do to protect yourself from the Kirrix if you leave the Terran Federation? You’ll have dozens of colonies looking to you for protection, and nobody willing to help. If the Kirrix sniff out any sign of weakness along your border, they’ll be crawling all over these worlds before you can blink.”

The governor looked like he was going to continue arguing, then he gave up and slumped in his chair. “What’s the point even talking about it? The Outer Rim is going to obediently toe the line in exchange for whatever you’ve offered them. You’ve won, Devereux. Congratulations.”

She sighed and looked at him with sympathy. “I’m not your enemy, Stefan. Have a think about what we’ve discussed, then meet with me tomorrow, and we can talk about how to help your colony. Please don’t let Brecken’s World miss out on this opportunity because you’re angry at me and the other governors. These colonists are trusting you to look out for their best interests and they deserve all the support we can give them.”

He sank lower and glared at his tumbler of whiskey, silently fuming.

Lynette saw that there was nothing further to be gained when Stefan was in this mood, so she rose from her chair and walked to the door. “I’ll look forward to seeing you tomorrow,” she said, before stepping outside.

Lieutenant Commander Donnely was waiting patiently by the door. “Do you wish to return to your shuttle, Fleet Admiral?”

“Yes please, I have a busy afternoon ahead.”

They walked back towards the stairs leading down to the lobby, and behind her, Lynette heard the faint sound of a glass tumbler shattering against a wall.

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A grating squeal reverberated around the hangar as a glowing blade sawed through the Raptor’s titanium hull. Completing the cut, Alyssa tugged the telekinetic weapon clear and the detached wing crashed to the floor with a deafening boom.

\*Hey, Sparks? I’m done in here,\* she alerted her friend, as she surveyed her handiwork.

The Raptor looked like a chicken carcass that had been picked clean, with every last bit of Crystal Alyssium stripped from its bones. Stacked by the far wall were all the internal components that Alyssa had been able to salvage, ranging from the Power Core to the Null-Inertia Gyroscope. The largest item was the one remaining Tachyon Lance, which was the only weapon that had survived the battle.

The reinforced doors into the hangar slid open and Dana walked over to join her. “Damn... it’s sad to see the Raptor looking like that.”

“It was a good ship,” Alyssa agreed, feeling that same sense of melancholy. She put her arm around Dana’s shoulder and gave her a comforting hug. “You made the right call decommissioning her; the Raptor was too badly torn up for us to fix.”

Dana nodded and brushed away the tear that rolled down her cheek. “Why didn’t you melt down the wing? There’s bits of titanium sticking out of it.”

“I can’t melt it down, it’s too difficult for me to reshape,” the blonde explained. “I had to cut it off the hull and John will just have to recycle it later.”

“I don’t think that’ll be a problem...” Dana murmured, glancing back towards the Primary Hanger.

“How’s he getting on?” Alyssa asked, accompanying her friend as they walked away from the gunship.

“Ah... pretty good,” Dana replied, an odd catch to her voice.

Alyssa looked at her curiously, but the redhead had filled her thoughts with fluffy kittens, effectively preventing the telepath from reading her mind. “What are you up to?” she asked, smiling in amusement.

“Check it out for yourself,” Dana replied, darting forward to slap her hand down on the button next to the door.

Peering inside, Alyssa gaped in astonishment at the massive engines that loomed high overhead. John had already built three of the enormous propulsion systems and was working on the fourth, with hundreds of components suspended in the air.

Dana face lit up with a broad grin. “He’s been going at it like this for hours. It’s totally awesome!”

Alyssa watched in fascination as John slowly rotated the enormous engine, slotting dozens of components into the correct place simultaneously. It was like watching a meteor shower being sucked into a gravity well.

“How the hell is he doing all that at the same time?” Alyssa whispered in awe.

“I dunno, but he’s going to run out of room in here pretty quick. We need to get Tashana to move the shuttle and you need to start working on redesigning the engine housing.”

“Yeah, I’ve got some ideas already. I’ll finish them off after lunch,” Alyssa agreed, nodding distractedly. \*Hey, Tashana. Could you move the shuttle into the Secondary Hangar please.\*

The former smuggler responded immediately. \*On my way!\*

\*Calara, can you drop us out of Hyper-Warp in two minutes. We need to switch hangars for the shuttle.\*

\*Setting a timer,\* Calara replied. \*Just to let you know, the Nymphs have started to wake up.\*

\*Are they alright?\* Alyssa asked with concern.

\*A bit groggy, but they seem very happy,\* the Latina said affectionately. \*When I’m sure they’ve fully recovered, I’ll start reviewing the data we retrieved from the palace. I’ll stay up on the Bridge while I work, just in case.\*

\*Thanks, gorgeous,\* Alyssa replied, blowing her a telepathic kiss. \*Jade, how are you doing?\*

\*That was wonderful...\* the Nymph said with a contented sigh. \*My sisters are so happy.\*

\*I’m glad you’re all okay,\* Alyssa said with relief. \*I could use your help a bit later, if you’re feeling up to it?\*

\*I’ve never felt better!\* Jade gushed. \*I’d love to help.\*

“The new Raptor design is going pretty well. When I’ve finished, would you mind a few tweaks so that it looks awesome?” Dana asked, giving her a hopeful smile.

“Sure, no problem,” the blonde agreed, focusing her attention on the redhead again. “As soon as I’m done with the engines, I’ll check out the schematics and see what I can do.”

“You’re the best!” Dana exclaimed, giving her a hug.

Alyssa walked over to John and gently touched his arm. “Hey, handsome.”

“Oh, hey,” he replied, turning to smile at her. “I don’t think you’ll need to do any psychic shaping after all.”

“Now I know why I love you so much,” she growled, standing on tiptoe to give him a smouldering kiss. When she pulled back, Alyssa glanced over her shoulder at the rotating engine that was still being assembled during their clinch. “Seriously though, that’s amazing, John! How are you manipulating so many objects at the same time?”

“I don’t know, but this is so much easier than before. I was even able to psychically shape new parts while I was assembling the first three engines. I only stopped doing it because we’ve run out of space,” he replied, giving her a lopsided grin.

“Tashana will be coming down in a minute to move the shuttle,” Alyssa explained. “Do you need me for anything else at the moment? I have to go take care of a couple of things.”

“I’m okay. I’ve got my hands full right now anyway,” John said, jutting his chin towards the complex assembly procedure. “I guess everyone’s busy at the moment, but shall we get everyone together for dinner tonight? It’d be nice to eat as a group.”

“That’s a lovely idea,” she agreed, her eyes sparkling. “I’ve got several volunteers who are very enthusiastic about being the chef.”

“I was going to offer to cook for everyone, but I’m always happy to see what dishes you girls can come up with.”

Alyssa patted his arm and smiled. “Let us take care of you instead. You’re doing such an amazing job here, I wouldn’t want to interrupt you.”

“Fine by me. I’ll look forward to dinner.”

She sauntered away and blew John a goodbye kiss when she realised he was watching her leave.

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Edraele waited patiently in the docking bay, her purple eyes following the Maliri shuttle as it swept into Genthalas. The sleek and elegant craft was unique amongst the scores of similar vessels stationed at the vast shipyard, its hull a sparkling white instead of gleaming gold. It touched down on a landing pad just in front of the Maliri Queen, then an airlock in the side spiralled open. The woman who walked outside was wearing the military uniform of House Valaden, the jewelled insignias on her chest identifying her as a Fleet Commander.

“Queen Edraele, this is an unexpected honour,” Amlaril said, bowing respectfully.

“I’ve been awaiting your return, Amlaril,” she replied, giving the officer a warm smile. “I was very impressed with your unorthodox methods of improving Maliri relations with the Ashanath.”

The Fleet Commander laughed in response. “They really are quite obsessed with curved objects. Everywhere I went on Ashanath, I could feel them staring at my body, even though I was wearing full body armour. It was a little unsettling at first, until I realised that they meant no offence and are simply fascinated by our appearance. The High Council couldn’t stop thanking us after we spent an evening showing our appreciation for their work in refitting the Entheas Alari.”

“Baen’thelas considers Councillor Ularean to be a close friend and ally. I know he wanted to reward you personally for working so well with the Ashanath, but unfortunately he’ll be away for several more days.”

Amlaril blushed and fidgeted with her short white hair, as her eyes were inexorably drawn to Edraele’s luxurious snowy mane. “I shall count the minutes until he returns, my Queen.”

Edraele turned and gestured towards the doorway behind her. “Would you accompany me for lunch, Amlaril? Your fleet currently possesses the most powerful warships in the Protectorate, and I’d like to discuss a very important assignment with you.”

“Thank you for the invitation; I gladly accept,” she replied, inclining her head respectfully.

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John lowered his hand and the fourth completed engine slowly settled onto the deck plates. He nodded with satisfaction, then stretched his tired muscles, feeling sore from standing in the same position for hours. Tashana had moved the Progenitor shuttle to the secondary hangar, so there was now plenty of room to make the last two engines, but John decided to take a quick break. He glanced back at Dana, who was engrossed in the holographic images floating above her engineering console, and walked over to see what his illustrious Chief Engineer was working on.

“Hey, Sparks,” he said, giving the redhead a sideways hug. “What’re you up to?”

Dana had zoomed in the schematic as she added under-floor conduits to a Power Core chamber, but she expanded the view so that John could see the layout of the new gunship.

“I thought I’d try something a bit different for this version,” she replied, glancing up at him and carefully watching his reaction. “What do you think?”

“It looks bigger than the old Raptor,” John noted, studying the design with interest.

“Yeah, 60 metres long instead of 40,” Dana confirmed, rotating the ship onto its side to show a lower profile. “I decided to put everything on a single deck instead of having it split between two levels. It means we can deploy faster from the cockpit without having to use a grav-tube.”

“I like the way you’re thinking about improving our combat efficiency,” John said, nodding his approval. “I’m just a bit concerned how long it is. That’s nearly as big as a T-Fed Corvette and there’s a lot to be said for having a small, nimble, strikecraft that can fly through tight spaces to drop us exactly where we need to go.”

“That’s the downside of putting everything on a single level,” Dana explained with a rueful frown. “I needed to make the dimensions a bit bigger to make room for all the necessary ship components, as well as give us some space for living accommodations. Unless you want to strip that out and make it as bare-bones as possible?”

John glanced at the huge cannon mounted under the cockpit that ran the length of the gunship. “Are you sure you didn’t make it bigger just to strap some huge guns on it?” he asked, raising an eyebrow.

Dana blushed and gave him a sheepish look. “That might have had something to do with it...”

He chuckled in amusement. “Can I make a few suggestions?”

“Yeah, of course. Knock yourself out,” she replied, giving him an encouraging smile.

John studied the schematics and remembered the configuration of their old gunship. “The layout of the original Raptor wasn’t ideal for us, because we weren’t using it the way the T-Fed fleets deploy their special forces. The gunship crew are independent from the troops, who stay in the loading areas during the short flight time until they’re deployed. The ground forces would have no reason to visit the cockpit, so them being on the level below didn’t matter.”

Dana nodded thoughtfully. “Yeah, that makes more sense now. We all used to hang out in the cockpit until it was time to deploy, then everyone had to take the grav-tube down to the loading areas. So what do you suggest we do instead?”

“Let’s keep the new gunship relatively small, but flip the design to make it work for us,” John replied, rubbing his chin. “I think we should definitely include living accommodations...”

She giggled and gave him a knowing look. “Yeah, I thought you might.”

“You didn’t like me topping you up in the Raptor?” John asked, returning her grin.

“I never said that!” she was quick to point out.

“Actually, I was thinking about the more obvious reason to include a bedroom. There might be times when we need to split up, like that time when we rescued the Menganus IV colonists from the Kirrix. If we’re spending a night on the Raptor, we might as well be comfortable.”

“Living accommodations: mandatory,” Dana quickly agreed. “Got it.”

“If we put those on the upper level, along with all the utility rooms for the major ship components, we can keep the lower deck clear for combat operations. Starting at the front, we’d have the cockpit, then we need quick access to an armoury so we can get geared up. Port and starboard airlocks after that, then free up as much space possible for the cargo area in the rear. We’ve had to evacuate large groups of civilians before, and we definitely need that flexibility in an emergency.”

Dana nodded to herself as she mulled over his suggestions. “That’s some really helpful feedback, thanks!”

“You’re welcome. I’ll leave the weapon configuration in your capable hands, but it might be worth asking Calara and Jade for their input. Calara will be able to give you the best advice on optimising weapon arcs and Jade’s racked up more combat time in the Raptor than anyone else.”

“Yeah, I’ll definitely have a chat with them,” Dana eagerly agreed. “I want the new gunship to be perfect!”

“I’m sure you’ll do an awesome job,” he said, giving her an encouraging squeeze. An item on her holographic schematics caught his eye and John pointed to the subsystem compartment. “You’re planning to include a cloaking device?”

“Pretty cool, right?” she said with a grin. “It’ll be like a Progenitor shuttle, only much better!”

“That reminds me... did you figure out if the gun emplacements had cloak detection capabilities? We assumed they had, but I don’t remember you mentioning having found anything.”

“Yeah, that’s because I didn’t find shit,” she admitted with a disappointed frown. “I would’ve liked to take one of those emplacements apart and really see what was going on inside, but cutting through their armour would’ve been damn-near impossible.”

“We can take a proper look when we go back through the hyper-warp gate,” John suggested. “I should be able to cut through the plating without too much trouble, assuming they aren’t equipped with a psychic dampening field.”

“They aren’t. I was able to use my abilities next to one with no problem,” Dana explained, perking up considerably.

“Alright, consider that a date,” John said, waggling his eyebrows at her.

She giggled and gave him a tight hug. “The sad thing is that I’m really looking forward to it! How much of a tech geek am I?”

“The cutest kind,” he replied affectionately.

Dana blushed, then pulled his head down for a sizzling kiss. When they finally pulled apart, John held the panting teenager close and was sorely tempted to break in her engineering console.

\*I’m sorry to interrupt, but I could use your help with something important, John,\* Alyssa requested, her telepathic voice floating through his mind.

\*Sure. Where are you?\*

\*Up on Deck Three, in the Observatory.\*

\*Okay, I’m on my way.\*

Dana pouted and looked at him with longing. “I was just about to get a good pounding, wasn’t I?”

John gave her an apologetic shrug. “Sorry, Sparks. Alyssa needs my help with something. How about I make up for it by giving you some proper attention tonight, instead of just a rough quickie over the console?”

“Deal!” she quickly agreed, sticking out her hand to shake on it.

They shook hands, then exchanged waves goodbye as John strode towards the exit.

He took the express grav-tubes up to the Lagoon, then stepped out into the steamy tropical jungle. It was the first time he’d had a chance to study the recent changes, having slept in Jehanna’s bedroom the previous night. The four turret wells at the corners of the cavernous room were slightly wider to support the bigger guns, but the central cylinders had been completely removed. Even with the beach tripled in size, the overall result was that the artificial lake seemed substantially bigger, with his view now unimpeded for its entire 200 metre length.

Cavorting in this lush paradise were two beautiful girls, their green and teal bodies surging through the water before leaping into the air in a spray of water droplets. John walked across the bridge and applauded as Jade and Helene dived over him, the pair barely making a splash as they submerged under the Lagoon again. He squatted down and watched them play, enjoying seeing them both looking so happy.

Jade turned back and swam in lazy circles beneath him. \*Did you want to speak with me now, Master?\*

\*No, you have fun with Helene. I’ll catch up with you later,\* he replied, returning her wave as she dove under the water again.

He walked under the rainbows that they’d created with all their diving and splashing, then entered the Observatory. The room was brightly lit, but there was no sign of his blonde matriarch.

\*Hey, I’m here,\* he called out to Alyssa as he walked inside. \*You said you needed my help with something important?\*

The lights dimmed to give the Observatory an enchanting ambience, illuminated by the starlight shining down from above. A moment later, Alyssa glided out of the en suite in a silk robe that clung to all her alluring curves.

“Hello, handsome,” she greeted him in a sultry voice. “I definitely need your help. I can’t have an XO meeting on my own, can I?”

He chuckled as he wrapped his arms around her. “You’re right,” he agreed, letting his hands slip down to cup her delicious pert bottom. “That is very important.”

She moaned at his touch, then looked up at him with regret. “I’m sorry, John. We’ll have to do that another time.”

“Oh okay,” he said, trying not to sound too disappointed. His cock was already throbbing at the thought of taking the blonde matriarch in that intimate way.

Alyssa laughed, her cerulean eyes twinkling in the starlight. “You look like someone took away your favourite toy! Did you honestly think I’d lead you on, then leave you with blue balls? The only reason I think you should wait to bugger me, is I brought you a present that I think you’ll enjoy even more. I invited a guest to our XO meeting...”

She glanced to her right and John heard the pad of bare feet before Irillith sauntered into the bedroom. The Maliri was wearing a silk robe that matched her matriarch’s, the short length exposing a mouth-watering view of her toned legs.

“Good afternoon, Lord Baen’thelas,” she crooned, prowling towards him with a hungry gleam in her violet gaze.

John swallowed as he watched her approach.

Alyssa grinned in anticipation, then slipped out of his arms to hug Irillith from behind. “It must’ve been so *hard* on Genthalas, being surrounded by all those adoring Maliri maidens. They’re all panting to be with you, but you’re being so good... waiting to give all those beautiful virgins a first time they’ll never forget.”

He undid the clasp on Irillith’s robe and carefully parted it, then drunk in the intoxicating view of her gorgeous azure body.

“It’s been... very tempting,” he admitted, brushing the backs of his fingers against Irillith’s toned tummy.

Her breath caught and she gazed longingly into his eyes.

“I know it has,” Alyssa cooed with genuine sympathy. “Edraele was doing so well as your primary matriarch; she really outdid herself by bringing together such a stunning harem... but then she went and ruined it all.”

John knew that Alyssa was only being playful, but he glanced at her curiously. “How so?”

Irillith turned around and Alyssa slipped the robe off her shoulders, letting it fall to the floor. “By teasing you with Luna...” she whispered, cupping Irillith’s pert bottom and slowly parting her cheeks.

He was lost for words as the dark-blue knot of muscle was revealed, the way it glistened in the starlight letting him know that Irillith had already been prepared for him.

Alyssa watched him with passionate intensity, revelling in his mounting excitement. “Before we start the XO meeting, you might be wondering why Irillith isn’t as feisty as usual...”

John brushed his fingers across the Maliri’s lower back, then circled her dimples of Venus. He smiled with satisfaction when he heard her respond with a soft moan. “And why is that?”

“Because today isn’t about her, it’s about fulfilling your desires. Besides... all the rest of the Maliri are good girls and would willingly give you anything you wanted, without pretending to fight you every step of the way.”

“Is that right?” John asked, stepping closer and pressing himself against her bottom. “Are you going to be a good Maliri princess for me?”

Irillith turned to give him a smouldering look over her shoulder. “Yes, Lord Baen’thelas.”

He lifted her chin and gave her a tender kiss, pouring all his love and affection for her into it. She was starry-eyed when their lips parted and she leaned back against him with a blissful sigh.

Alyssa slipped off her own robe, then pressed herself against Irillith, sandwiching the Maliri between them. She pursed her lips for a kiss, then moaned low in her throat when John cupped her head in his hand and gave her what she was seeking. Their tongues duelled for a tantalising moment, before the blonde pulled back and gave him a wicked grin.

“Do you want more foreplay, or shall we get down to business?” she asked, gently kissing Irillith’s shoulder.

“Get in position for me,” he replied, tearing off his clothes with indecent haste.

Alyssa lay on her back and opened her arms in invitation for Irillith, who eagerly embraced her. The Maliri was straddling her at first, but the pair worked in graceful synchronisation to reposition their lithe limbs, so that Irillith was cradled between Alyssa’s parted thighs. They began to kiss while waiting for John to join them, their bodies undulating together as they enjoyed the physical contact, but urgently needing much more.

When John was naked, he sank to his knees behind Irillith and took a moment to appreciate her stunning figure. She was a breathtaking mix of soft femininity and the toned athleticism of a trained warrior, her muscles rippling under velvety skin. He ran his hands down her flanks, watching as they dipped in at her tapered waist, before flaring out for her rounded hips. There was no trace of scars on her back, all evidence of the years of abuse she’d suffered had been gently smoothed away with every hot meal he’d pumped into her belly.

“Your very first Maliri,” Alyssa whispered, watching him over Irillith’s shoulder. “She’ll always hold a special place in your heart.”

“So beautiful and so gifted...” John murmured in agreement, leaning forward to kiss Irillith’s shoulder. “But you were so desperate for me to save you...”

She trembled at his touch and gave him a shaky nod. “I knew the first time I saw you...”

“Knew what, honey?” he asked, brushing back her curtain of white hair so that he could see her face.

“That I belonged to you,” she whispered, glancing seductively at him out of the corner of her eye.

Alyssa sighed in mock exasperation. “Now she tells us! We could have saved so much hassle if you’d just let us know right at the start.”

Irillith laughed, her shoulders shaking with amusement. “Sorry about that,” she apologised between giggles. “I did make life very difficult for a while, didn’t I?”

“Totally worth it though,” John said, leaning forward to kiss her.

She nuzzled against him. “Can I make it up to you?”

“Yeah, I can think of a way,” he replied, pressing himself against her upturned ass.

Irillith bit her lip and nodded.

Alyssa raised her legs up higher so she was caressing the Maliri’s flanks, then reached down with her hands to prise apart her cheeks. Now that she was so exposed, it was easy for John to reposition himself and push forward, applying gentle but insistent pressure until her tight ring spread open for him.

She let out a lusty groan as the head eased inside. “Yeah... that’s it... give it to me.”

John held her hips steady and pushed deeper, inch after inch swallowed up by her deliciously tight passage. “Tell me if you need me to stop,” he murmured considerately in her ear.

Irillith shook her head, a feverish gleam in her eyes. “Don’t stop! I can take all of you.”

He did as she asked, taking his time to smoothly impale her belly with his huge shaft. “You’re such a good girl,” he whispered in her ear, as she panted beneath him.

John started to reach around her tummy to stroke her clit, but Alyssa repositioned her thigh to block him. “Let me take care of Irillith. We both want you to just concentrate on enjoying her body.”

The Maliri nodded, squeezing him with her internal muscles. “Do you want me to start moving? Tell me what feels best for you...”

“Stay still for a moment,” he requested, repositioning his hands on the bed to interlace his fingers with hers. “I want to concentrate on how good that feels.”

She nodded obediently, then let out a soft whimper as he carefully pulled back, withdrawing inch after inch from her clutching depths. Her whimper turned into a groan of relief as he reversed direction, sinking his full length inside her until his quad was resting on her gushing pussy. John was slow and methodical to begin with, then gradually picked up the tempo until he was fucking her ass like a well-oiled piston.

When he’d built up a smooth rhythm, Alyssa used a pair of telekinetic hands to massage Irillith’s clit, and probe inside her pussy to massage her g-spot. Irillith had been savouring every moment as John increased the pace, her body building towards a huge climax that Alyssa triggered with her attentions. She bucked underneath John, her spectacular body shaking with convulsions as she was overwhelmed with one of the most powerful orgasms of her life.

John shared a delighted grin with Alyssa, then nuzzled into Irillith’s ear, whispering loving words as she climaxed repeatedly on his throbbing cock. He didn’t need to prompt her to start moving after that, and the Maliri gyrated her hips, driving back at him in perfect time with every thrust.

“Look down, handsome,” Alyssa prompted him. “Appreciate the view...”

He released Irillith’s hands and took a firm grip on her hips as he straightened up. The sight of her gorgeous blue body glistening with perspiration and trembling from one climax after another was incredible, and he watched her in fascination as he kept up the relentless pounding.

\*You’re going to take all the matriarchs like this,\* Alyssa reminded him, her voice heavy with lust.

John locked eyes with the blonde and nodded.

Her long eyelashes fluttered as she ground her pussy against Irillith’s, desperately seeking her own release. \*But they’re all going to be pregnant when they give up their ass for the first time... Kali... Tsarra... Nyrelle... they all want it so bad!\*

He could picture the Young Matriarchs as Irillith was now, but with gentle curves to their stomachs as they cried out with pleasure beneath him.

Alyssa whimpered, teetering on the edge. \*Then you’re going to knock up Sarene... Phelora... Kehlarissa... Faranise... and bugger all those sexy girls!\*

John suddenly pictured Alyssa and Irillith with baby bumps, the three of them repeating this erotic tableau in the future. He pushed those images out to the girls and they gasped in shock, before crying out as they joined him in a powerful climax, sharing one of his ultimate fantasies. John hilted himself inside Irillith then rocked against her pliant ass, groaning in ecstasy as her clutching body tried to milk him dry. Spurt after spurt filled her belly, rounding her out with his heavy load, until she was forced to prop herself up on her arms to give her stomach more room to grow.

He had sagged against Irillith’s back to stop himself collapsing, but as he regained his senses, John started to worry about squashing her.

“Relax, I’ve got you both,” Alyssa said with a languid smile, propping them up with several sets of supportive telekinetic hands. “Just rest a while and get your breath back.”

Realising that they were in safe hands, John reached down to stroke Irillith’s swollen tummy. She let out a sigh of contentment, and revelled in his gentle caresses. After they recovered, John started to pull back, only pausing when Jade bounded across the bed and dropped to her knees beside him.

“Let me make sure all that tasty cum ends up where it belongs, Master,” she said enthusiastically, her slender hand encircling his shaft.

When he withdrew, the Nymph quickly slid her nimble fingers inside Irillith and began to suck out his load. John collapsed on his back and Jade quickly engulfed his cock with her mouth, making sure she collected every last drop.

“That was so hot!” Alyssa gushed, snuggling in beside him. “How did you share that projection with us at the end? It was like you were sharing one of your favourite fantasies.”

“I don’t know,” he admitted, closing his eyes and relaxing. “It just felt instinctive... like using telepathy but with images instead of my voice.”

John heard a muffled moan and he raised his head to check on Irillith. Jade had the Maliri cradled in her arms, suckling from her engorged breasts, and there was a flash of violet as Irillith’s glowing eyes rolled back when she got her first taste. He immediately sensed the active connection between them, her mind and body receptive to any enhancements he was willing to make.

\*She was really upset at how much she’s lagging behind her sister,\* Alyssa murmured, looking up at him from where she was resting her head on his shoulder. \*Are you going to help make Irillith stronger?\*

\*Don’t worry, I’ll take good care of her,\* John said, rubbing his concerned matriarch’s back.

They relaxed together until Jade had finished feeding the Maliri hacker, then the pair crawled across the bed to join them.

“Come here, beautiful,” John said, sliding over and patting the space between himself and Alyssa.

Irillith eagerly took the vacant spot, then sighed with delight when John spooned up behind her. Alyssa pulled the covers over them and joined John in caressing the ecstatic Maliri.

\*Should I stay, Master?\* Jade asked wistfully. \*Or would you prefer me to leave and return to Helene?\*

John glanced at her over his shoulder and frowned. \*If you leave, who’s going to keep my back warm?\*

The Nymph giggled and wasted no time snuggling in behind him.

They lay there for a while, just basking in the afterglow, with Irillith enjoying being the centre of attention. John had filled her up with an impressive load, enough to even make her belly button pop out, which was a testimony to just how hard he’d climaxed.

He brushed his fingers across her curved tummy and smiled as she shivered with pleasure. “Was it still as enjoyable for you without your collar and all the theatrics about me being a brutish Neanderthal?”

Irillith blushed, her cheeks turning a dark indigo. “It was... different. I felt more exposed being submissive to you like that,” she finally admitted. “I couldn’t hide behind the collar and pretend that I wasn’t there by choice.”

“For what it’s worth, that’s the sexiest you’ve ever been,” John said, kissing her bare shoulder.

“Really?” she asked, turning to look at him in surprise.

He nodded. “You seemed so liberated... like you were finally at peace with yourself for the first time.”

Irillith smiled and settled down again in his arms. “I’m not saying that I’ll never wear my collar again... but I loved it too.”

“I’m really glad you did,” John said, hugging her close. They rested together for a long moment, until John let out a quiet chuckle. “I just realised... I haven’t even asked you about your morning.”

She broke into a smile. “You’re forgiven. You were very distracted.”

“I was,” he agreed, tracing his fingertips down her arm. “How is your research into rebuilding Nexus going?”

“Really well!” she enthused, her eyes literally lighting up with excitement. “I’ve been trying to build up an overview of all the code I retrieved and haven’t found any gaps in the modules so far. I should be able to make even bigger jumps in progress this afternoon after you gave me a full tummy... I feel like I’m brimming with energy!”

“That can wait until later,” John said, watching her react with confusion. “Your biggest priority right now is training your eldritch abilities and improving your psychic strength.”

Irillith’s smile faded and she started to look apprehensive. “Alright... that’s probably a better idea.”

John gently turned the worried Maliri to face him. “While I was on Genthalas, I took the time to erase Edraele’s memories of everything she did to you while you were younger. She kept torturing herself with the past, but it wasn’t her that did those terrible things to you, the evil monster that was truly responsible died months ago. I’d like to erase your memories of that abuse too; you’ll still know that it happened, but I don’t want you remembering specifics. I think it would help you get over some of your fears about using psychic abilities.”

She shuddered as she recalled some of those horrible incidents, then looked up at him with big trusting eyes. “Do whatever you deem necessary, Baen’thelas.”

“Alright, just give me a moment,” he requested, closing his eyes and immersing himself in her mind.

John already knew what he was looking for, having scoured Edraele’s mind of those traumatic memories. It didn’t take him long to find Irillith’s corresponding recollections of those events, and he grimaced at the riot of nauseating colours on her mental pathways, signifying hatred, terror, agony, and overwhelming grief at her mother’s betrayal of her trust.

After spending some time checking that he hadn’t missed anything, John opened his eyes again and gave Irillith a reassuring smile. “Are you ready?”

She looked apprehensive, but nodded, giving her consent.

He kissed the tip of her nose and just like that, the memories were wiped from her mind. “There you go, all better now.”

Irillith froze, then a look of astonishment swept across her face like a refreshing spring breeze. There’d always been a hint of darkness behind her violet gaze, but now her eyes shone just that little bit brighter.

“I can’t remember any of it!” she exclaimed, staring up at him in awe. “It feels like I was carrying this huge weight around with me for years... I never even realised.”

“Trust me, I know that feeling,” John said with a wry smile. “I’m really glad you feel better.”

She flung her arms around him and hugged him as if her life depended on it. “Oh, thank you! Thank you so much!”

“You’re welcome,” he said gently. “I’m just sorry it took me so long to help you. I was worried about using my abilities to make these kinds of changes, but sometimes things happen that are so horrible, you need some help to recover from them.”

Irillith lay back and brushed the tears from her eyes. “You’ve done so much for me, John. I’m so grateful for everything.”

John patted her rounded tummy. “Repay me with a little bit of debauchery like that every so often, and I’ll consider us even.”

She laughed, knowing he was joking. “Sounds like a good deal. I accept.”

He returned her smile, then asked, “So how do you feel about training to improve your psychic abilities now?”

Irillith looked thoughtful and this time, there was no dark memories holding her back. “I actually feel excited to start,” she said, surprised by her abrupt change in outlook.

“I’ll be happy to give you some pointers,” Alyssa offered, having watched the entire conversation with avid interest. “I need to help Dana with some design aesthetics, but I should be finished in a couple of hours.”

“I’d really appreciate any help you can give me,” Irillith said gratefully. “I remember you suggested speaking to Sakura and Tashana too. I’ll go and see them this afternoon and ask for some advice.”

“I think that’s a great idea,” John agreed, pleased by her positivity. “If you can find a training partner you’re really comfortable with, we can schedule me feeding you before you practice.”

“I’ll never say no to that,” the Maliri said with a sly smile. “Don’t blame me if I’m a slow learner and need hundreds of training sessions...”

“Oh no, how will I ever cope?” John said, grinning at the prospect. He rolled onto his back and pulled the girls into a hug. “Alright, five more minutes, then I better get back to work. I want to get the engines finished this afternoon, then I can make a start on the new Raptor.”

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The Subjugator class cruiser cut through space like a jagged knife, the malevolent vessel seeking out the heart of their hated foes that had been chosen for evisceration. Aboard the sinister black vessel, the crew of Galkiran thralls searched for any sign of their elusive foes, scouting the dozens of scattered derelicts that crossed their path. All the ships they’d discovered so far were shockingly primitive, and their hideously ugly owners had been long dead for thousands of years.

“We’re picking up sensor contacts, Captain,” the Tactical officer informed her leader.

Captain Narzera leaned forward in her command chair and stared at the outer edge of their scanning range. She held her breath as they approached the cluster of large metallic objects, wondering if they might have located the outlying forces of their adversary. However, as her cruiser drew closer, she spotted debris fields around the ships, and it became obvious that they had simply located more wrecks.

Gritting her teeth in irritation, she snapped, “Identify the vessels. Are any of them thrall warships?”

The red-skinned woman sitting at the Engineering station tapped several runes on her console, boosting the sensor signal in that direction. It took a moment to build up a picture of those ships at such extreme range, then the grainy image was displayed on the sector map. The wrecks looked almost floral in design, with petal-like armour plating covering the battle-scarred warships.

“More of those plant abominations, Captain,” the Engineer replied, curling her lip in disgust.

Narzera sighed with frustration and slumped back in her command chair. “Were they destroyed by thrall forces?” she asked hopefully.

The Tactical officer studied the battle site closely, then shook her head. “Those vessels were immobilised just like all the others we’ve found. They took multiple hits from weak beam weapons and sustained heavy damage to their engines.”

“Do you wish to board them, Captain?” the Navigator asked, preparing a course towards the wrecks.

They had scoured the previous vessels for navigation logs, searching for any sign of a thrall civilisation, but it had been a pointless exercise. It appeared that the hideous plant aliens were novices to spaceflight and had barely explored further than a dozen star systems away from their homeworld.

“We won’t learn anything from these dead fools,” Narzera said with contempt. “Continue on our present course.”

Before the helmswoman could acknowledge her order, the Communications officer sat bolt upright. “I’ve detected a signal, Captain!”

“Are we being hailed?”

“No, it’s more like background static... this region is seeped in it,” she replied, a peculiar look on her face as she stared at her console. “I managed to filter out some of the interference. The signal is faint... but I think you should see this.”

“Stop wasting time and show me,” Narzera muttered, gesturing impatiently towards the holo-screen.

The images appeared and she studied them in fascination. There were two males and two females, and at first she thought they were the thralls they were seeking... but she felt no antipathy towards them. Narzera was shocked that all four had the same skin tone as their Progenitor Lord, a pleasing shade of bronzed pink.

“Are the males wearing some kind of uniform?” she murmured, staring at the black suits and white shirts. Each male also wore a strange double-triangle scarf around their throats.

“Look at his ears!” the tactical officer exclaimed. “They’re round!”

“Is he some freakish genetic abnormality?” Narzera mused, her brow furrowing.

“I don’t believe so, Captain,” the thrall at engineering stated. “Look at that other female and the second male; their ears all match.”

The communications officer retuned the sensors to focus on the signal. “It appears the images are accompanied by audio.”

“Enable it,” Narzera ordered, snapping her fingers imperiously. “I wish to listen.”

The images flickered to a different shot and another male swaggered into the room. He was garbed in multiple sets of clothing, giving him a rotund appearance.

Narzera leaned forward, staring at him in confusion. “Why is he wearing so much apparel? And what is that irritating braying noise in the background?”

As one of the suited males reacted with distress, the raucous cacophony repeated.

“Is that... laughter?” the comms officer suggested, equally as bewildered.

Tilting her head to one side, Narzera listened intently. “I do not recognise their speech. While they have a strong resemblance to thralls, their language is unfamiliar.”

“Captain! Look how big that male is compared to that female!”

Narzera studied them thoughtfully. “Perhaps she is an adolescent?”

The thrall shook her head. “I don’t believe so. She appears fully developed.”

They watched in shocked silence until the broadcast ended, the images raising countless intriguing questions but no answers.

“We must investigate the source of this signal,” Narzera said decisively, rising from her chair. She quickly began barking orders. “Triangulate its point of origin and plot a course in that direction. Deploy another comms beacon to maintain contact with the fleet, then notify me when Lord Gahl’kalgor returns, I wish to update him personally. I will be in my command suite reviewing these signals and learning their linguistic structure; send me as many of these broadcasts as you can locate.”

The Galkiran captain had always had a gift for learning alien languages, making her the perfect choice to command a scouting vessel. As Narzera left the Bridge, she was eager to study these strange non-thralls, and see what valuable information could be gleaned about their target. It certainly didn’t hurt that their males were so pleasing to the eye; she looked forward to interrogating them with mounting anticipation.

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\*Time to wake up, gorgeous,\* Alyssa murmured, her gentle voice drifting through Irillith’s subconscious.

Irillith stretched and let out a contented sigh. She’d fallen asleep in John’s arms and had enjoyed a wonderful nap, but she didn’t want to waste the entire afternoon sleeping. The Maliri always felt rejuvenated after he gave her a full tummy and today was no exception. Instead of John’s muscular arms wrapped around her, she was now being held by a pair of slender green limbs, and Jade reluctantly released her from the loving embrace.

“Thanks for the cuddle, little kitten,” Jade said with a fond smile. She rose smoothly to her feet and offered the Maliri a hand. “Let me help you up.”

Her swollen belly had gone down considerably as she absorbed John’s load, but Irillith still appreciated the assistance. “I should be the one thanking you, Jade. Would you like to join me for a shower?”

The Nymph nodded enthusiastically, and followed her into the cubicle. She took great delight in pampering the Maliri, her nimble fingers gliding over Irillith’s curves as water cascaded over them.

\*Alyssa, where are Tashana and Sakura now?\* Irillith asked, closing her eyes in bliss as Jade lavished attention on her.

\*I talked to them both and they’re eager to help. Your sister’s in the Briefing Room, reviewing the video files she downloaded from Mael’nerak’s command bunker. Sakura’s waiting for you in the Dojo.\*

\*I better not keep her waiting any longer,\* she replied, giving Jade a grateful smile. “Thanks for everything, Jade.”

“It was very much my pleasure,” the Nymph matriarch replied, towelling her dry. “You’re one of John’s favourite mates and he always enjoys being with you. Today was no exception.”

Irillith turned to look at her in surprise. “Really? But the other Lionesses are so much stronger than me.”

“Your psychic strength has no bearing on the way he feels about you,” Jade replied, giving her a reassuring smile. “Master loves you very much.”

The Maliri beamed at her in delight and felt like she was floating on a cloud as she got dressed and said goodbye to the Nymph. Those good feelings stayed with her up until she entered the Dojo, where she stopped abruptly, gaping in astonishment at the maelstrom inside. A ferocious blizzard roared around the training room, the winds howling like a banshee as they scattered icy flurries everywhere in sight.

Irillith clung to the door, fearful of being sucked into that deafening storm, but as the seconds ticked by, she realised that the ferocious winds were leaving her untouched. Her racing heartbeat calmed and she stared into the room, watching the figure within in fascination. Sakura sat cross-legged in the centre of the Dojo, floating several feet off the ground and held aloft by some invisible force. Her eyes were closed in intense concentration, the raven-haired beauty making delicate gestures with her hands.

The frozen flakes responded to every sweeping motion, cavorting around their mistress as they followed her directions. Irillith tried to discern what her friend was doing, but the blizzard hurtling around only inches from her face made it almost impossible to see. She watched curiously for several minutes, until she realised that she still had no idea what the Cryokinetic was up to.

“Sakura! I’m here!” she called out, shouting louder and louder to get her attention over the shrieking din.

Those almond-shaped eyes snapped open and Sakura greeted her with a bright smile, then beckoned her inside. “Hello! Come on in.”

Irillith thought it unfair that Sakura’s calm voice was as clear as a bell, while she had to bellow to make herself heard. She eyed the vortex in front of her dubiously, but then the winds changed, the sleet lifting until a perfect arc appeared in the raging tornado. Beneath that curve, the air was perfectly still and as calm as the woman they obeyed.

Taking a deep breath, the Maliri placed her trust in Sakura and walked forward, then blinked in surprise as the roaring dropped away into a soft whistling. Sakura unfolded her legs and gracefully dropped to her feet, then even that background noise fell into silence. Her gaze dropped to Irillith’s rounded tummy and Sakura broke into a grin as she stepped forward to greet the Maliri with a hug.

“Did you have lots of fun with John?” she asked, reverently caressing her cum-filled stomach.

Irillith relaxed and gave her a furtive smile. “My mother’s been teasing him with promises of Luna’s final virginity. You’d never think that he spent all night ravishing Jehanna and the Nymphs... he was very enthusiastic.”

Sakura gave her a wistful look. “You always drive him wild, Irillith. I wish I had your confidence.”

“But you two are closer than ever now,” Irillith protested, startled by her friend’s admission. “You’ve got so much more in common with him and I know John loves sparring with you. With your new psychic abilities, you’re able to connect to him more intimately than any of us can.”

“That’s true... and when we’re together, it is wonderful,” Sakura conceded, idly kicking at a pile of frost that crunched beneath her boot. “It’s still hard to compete with an exotic alien princess, who’s addicted to his cum, and absolutely loves breaking all his favourite taboos. It really doesn’t help that you also have an identical twin, Irillith... that’s just not playing fair.”

Irillith didn’t respond, her attention riveted to the piles of frost beneath their feet.

Sakura reached out to stroke her arm, worry creasing her brow. “I was only joking about Tashana. You know how much I love you both.”

The Maliri nodded distractedly, and pointed at the intricate patterns adorning the floor. “How did you do that?!”

Stepping back to get a better view, Sakura smiled sadly as she gazed down at the frosty mosaic she’d created of her parents. “Alyssa made me a portrait of my mother and father to help me remember them. I’ve tried to memorise their faces so that I won’t ever forget.”

Irillith bit her lip, then leaned in to give the grieving girl a hug. “I’m sorry, Sakura.”

“Thank you. It still hurts when I think about them and I miss them a lot, but I’m so lucky to have all of you in my life.”

When Irillith pulled back, she gestured behind her to the turbulent maelstrom of ice that still raged around the Dojo. “What I actually meant was, how were you able to make something so intricate and beautiful, while keeping a terrifying storm going, AND floating in the air like that!”

Sakura heard the mixture of awe and despair in the Maliri’s voice and looked at her with sympathy. “There’s no great secret behind it, Irillith. Psychic abilities are simply tools that require extensive training to use. Whether you’re using your powers as a weapon, or for utility, you need to explore their strengths and limitations.”

She turned and made a curt slash through the air with her hand. The storm cut out in an instant, spraying ice all over the floor in a noisy clatter.

“Outside the protection of the Shroud our abilities run rampant,” she said, narrowing her eyes. “But we are their mistress and they must obey; order cannot be allowed to fall into chaos.”

Raising both hands, the jagged shards lifted off the floor and gathered together, clinking and rattling as Sakura moulded them with her will. As Irillith looked on in astonishment, the Asian girl sculpted a perfect reproduction of Saelihn Immanthe, the magnificent palace glittering as the ice reflected the light.

“That’s incredible...” Irillith said in a hushed voice. “I knew you were strong... I just didn’t realise how much of a gap there was between us.”

Sakura gave her an amiable shrug. “You can’t really compare my ice or wind to your lightning. We’re good at very different things.”

“But still...” Irillith murmured, gesturing to the frozen icescape in front of her.

The Asian girl clasped her hand and gave it an encouraging squeeze. “It just takes dedication and practice, Irillith. If you want, I’ll try to explain the various techniques I used to improve my control over my abilities?”

“I’d really appreciate that, thank you!” Irillith gushed, pulling her into a grateful hug.

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A heavy logging truck rumbled down the street, then slowed down as the driver saw a middle-aged woman approach the faded crosswalk. Lucyna heard the hiss of the hydraulic brakes, so she stepped back from the kerb and waved him onwards. He tooted his horn in gratitude and she grinned, exchanging a wave with the trucker as he rolled past.

It was a lovely day on Brecken’s World, the bright afternoon sunlight shining through the leafy trees was as close to paradise as Lucyna had ever seen. Having cracked the mystery of Lynette Devereux’s disturbing familiarity, which had vexed her for days, Lucyna felt like a huge load had been lifted off her mind. She strutted along the street towards the starport, humming to herself as she thought how best to handle the situation with the Fleet Admiral.

From the moment she met the dowdy officer, Lucyna could’ve sworn that they’d met before. After the conversation with Bryce the previous evening, she now knew exactly why she’d felt that way. The Fleet Admiral was unnervingly like the Lionesses, possessing the same eerie inner confidence that the stunning young women all had in spades. It was definitely no coincidence that Lynette Devereux acted that way... and it could mean only one thing.

She strolled into the starport and gave a friendly wave to the black-clad special forces troopers that were vigilantly guarding the central docking bay. They nodded to her with respect, making no move to block her path or check her credentials. Feeling even better about herself, Luce managed to smile in greeting at Reyes Angevin, who was practically rubbing his hands together with glee as the self-serving governor scurried away from his meeting with the Fleet Admiral.

Lynette Devereux was still standing outside the airlock as Lucyna walked into view and the officer inclined her head politely as the governor approached. “Good afternoon, Governor Novitsky.”

“Afternoon, Fleet Admiral,” Lucyna replied, trying and failing to suppress a grin.

Startled by her dramatic change in demeanour, Devereux looked at her curiously for a moment, before gesturing towards the shuttle. “Please join me in the conference suite, we have a lot of important matters to discuss. I’d really like this meeting to be as friendly and relaxed as possible, so feel free to call me Lynette.”

“Sounds good to me, Lynette,” Lucyna said cheerfully. “Most folks I like call me Luce.”

“Then I shall do the same. I hope by the end of our meeting, you might like me too,” Lynette replied, her hazel eyes twinkling.

“I reckon I will,” the Valia Gate Governor agreed, following the other woman into the luxurious conference room.

Lynette pulled out two of the chairs by the long conference table. “Please make yourself comfortable. Would you care for a drink?”

“Nah, I’m good,” Luvyna replied, shaking her head. “Glugged somethin’ before I came over... figured we’d be doin’ a lot of chin waggin’.”

She made no immediate move to sit down, so Lynette remained standing as she said earnestly, “Before we start, Luce, I wanted to tell you how deeply sorry I am for everything you endured recently. I can only imagine how harrowing it must have been for you and your husband to be captured by the Kirrix, and I want you to know that I’ll do whatever it takes to ensure you’re fairly compensated for the appalling way your colony was abandoned by my predecessor.”

“That’s okay, it wasn’t your fault,” Lucyna said magnanimously, waving away her apology. “Besides... there’s somethin’ else I wanted to talk about first.”

“Oh, really? What would you like to discuss?” Lynette asked with genuine interest.

Lucyna locked eyes with the Fleet Admiral. “I know your secret...”

There was an awkward silence and Devereux hesitated, then broke into a disarming smile. “That’s one of the downsides to being an Admiral; it’s hard to find your uniform sometimes, what with all those skeletons rattling around in your closet. Now... why don’t we discuss the compensation package I’ve put together for your colony?”

“It’s okay, Lynette,” Luce said soothingly, breaking into a grin. “You don’t need to worry about me telling anyone. I’m good friends with the Lionesses.”

“You are?” the Fleet Admiral asked warily.

“Uh huh. I spent a bunch of time with those wonderful girls when they rescued me and my colony from the Kirrix. The first time I saw you, I knew there was somethin’ very familiar about you... and I just figured out what it was.”

Devereux swallowed nervously. “Really, what was that?”

“My Theo just wasn’t the same after we got captured by the Kirrix... that poor man was broken inside. Then that sweet angel got talkin’ to him and she fixed him right up. Since then, Theo’s been swaggerin’ around Valia Gate like he owns the place... I ain’t never seen him with more confidence!” She lowered her voice and looked at Lynette with sympathy. “Those girls did the same thing for you after you got shot, didn’t they? Gave you some of the same spunk that makes them act like they just dropped down from heaven and want to fix everythin’ that’s wrong in the galaxy.”

Lynette stared at the governor in shock for a moment, then she finally processed what Luce had said and a relieved smile spread across her face. “You’re very perceptive, Luce. Alright, I admit it, John and the Lionesses did help me tremendously after I was shot. The bullets hit me in the spine and I thought I might not be able to walk again... I was in a very dark place for a while.”

“Yeah, I figured as much,” Luce said, nodding as her suspicions were confirmed. “You seem like a good upstanding woman, Lynette. I’m real sorry you had to go through all that.”

“Thank you,” Devereux said, touched by the governor’s heartfelt sympathy. “I really appreciate your kind words, Luce.”

Opening her arms, Lucyna smiled warmly and stepped towards her. “C’mere. You look like you could really use a hug.”

Caught completely off-guard, Lynette almost let the governor touch her before she lurched backwards in alarm. Unfortunately, her chair was just behind her and she bumped into it, preventing her retreat. Having never expected the other woman to try to hurl herself out of the way, Lucyna gaped at her in astonishment as she lost her balance and stumbled into her. Their legs got tangled up and the pair wavered, before toppling over together onto the floor.

Something didn’t feel quite right to Luce when they collided. She was expecting to bump into a soft, well-padded body, but the woman she landed on was slender, firm, and busty. Suddenly reason kicked in, and she realised that she was lying on top of the Fleet Admiral of the Terran Federation. Mortified, she opened her mouth to blurt out an apology, then gaped in stunned disbelief at the exquisitely beautiful face that was staring up at her in shock.

“Holy fuck!” Lucyna blurted out, recoiling from the Fleet Admiral like she’d just landed on a fluffy kitten. “You’re one of them! You’re a Lioness!”

Lynette groaned and held her head in her hands. “Oh shit...”

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“Oh shit...” Alyssa muttered, echoing the brunette a moment later.

John looked up from psychic shaping the fifth engine, concerned at hearing the distress in his matriarch’s voice. “What’s wrong?”

“It’s Lynette... her cover’s just been blown,” Alyssa explained, her expression grim.

“Oh shit...” John muttered, staring at her in consternation.

“Yeah, that’s what we said,” she agreed, leaning heavily on the engineering console.

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As Luce scrambled backwards in shocked disbelief, Lynette arched her back and sprang to her feet, landing like a cat.

With her hands held up defensively, she kept her voice quiet and soothing, “Now, Luce... just stay calm. Give me a minute and I can explain everything.”

Lucyna’s eyes were like saucers as she gaped at the stunningly beautiful young woman. “Holy fuck! You’re working for the Lion! He’s in charge of the Terran Federation!”

Lynette gritted her teeth with irritation, then forced herself to smile. “I’m a very close ally to John, but I am the Fleet Admiral, and I’m trying to change things for the better in High Command.”

“But... you’re barely out of high school!” Lucyna protested, shaking her head stubbornly. “What did you do with the real Lynette Devereux? How did you look like her a minute ago? What the fuck is going on?!”

Seeing that Lucyna had backed herself into a corner, both figuratively and literally. Lynette carefully knelt down in front of her, trying to look as unthreatening as possible. “It’ll be easier for me to explain if you just listen without asking me lots of questions. I promise I’ll answer anything truthfully afterwards... okay?”

Luce hesitated, then nodded her agreement. She slumped down with her back against the wall and stared in shock at the secret Lioness.

Blowing out her breath, Lynette stared up at the ceiling. “I don’t know where to begin...”

“How about explainin’ how someone young enough to be my daughter ends up runnin’ the Terran Federation?” Luce suggested sarcastically.

“Alright, that’s as good a place to start as any,” the Fleet Admiral agreed. “I really am Lynette Devereux and I’m actually older than you, Luce. I was born in 2727 and I’m fifty-two years old.”

Luce scoffed incredulously. “Bullshit! There ain’t no way you’re older than twenty!”

“It might sound far-fetched, but it’s the truth,” Lynette said with a shrug of resignation. “When I was shot by Buckingham’s troops, I was mortally wounded. They kept me alive in intensive care on a secret base, then John Blake set me free and healed all my injuries. In the process, he made me young and beautiful, just like the rest of his Lionesses.”

“Just like that? He waved his magic wand and you turned into a stunning supermodel?”

“In a manner of speaking, yes,” Lynette replied, trying not to smile at the apt analogy. “All of the Lionesses went through similar transformations and some were even more radical than mine. I won’t bore you with the details, but you should be well aware by now that Admiral John Blake is far from an ordinary man. He has special psychic talents, just like the Lionesses that healed your Theo.”

That made Lucyna pause as she remembered the glowing light that had surrounded the Lionesses as they worked their magic. She had seen for herself what they were capable of, and there was no denying the incredible difference that Helene had made to Theo, bringing her husband back from the brink of despair.

“Alright... let’s say I believe you. Why are you hidin’ behind a holo-disguise? Why not just be honest with everyone if you’re tryin’ to make things better?”

Lynette rose to her feet and slipped off her jacket, then did a graceful pirouette, showing off her spectacular figure. “Just look at me, Luce. Can you honestly say that someone like Stefan Vaughn would take me seriously if I looked like this? He wouldn’t listen to a word I said!”

Luce grimaced and was forced to concede that point. “I don’t think there’s a man alive who wouldn’t start thinkin’ with his dick when he got a look at you.”

Blushing at her blunt honesty, Lynette sighed and nodded. “The other Lionesses thought the same, so Dana created the holo-disguise to keep my appearance a secret. I’d prefer complete transparency and to tell everyone the truth, but you just reacted exactly as we predicted. If people knew what I really looked like, I wouldn’t be respected because of my youthful appearance, and anyone politically opposed to me would accuse me of being John Blake’s pawn.”

“Alright, I’m sorry about that,” Luce said, looking shamefaced. “It was just a hell of a shock.”

“It’s only natural,” Lynette said without accusation. “We instinctively associate age with wisdom and therefore assume that someone who looks like me is young and inexperienced. The rest of the Lionesses all work for the Lion, so it only makes sense that you’d assume I worked for him too.”

Now that she was over her initial reaction of stunned disbelief, Lucyna studied the Fleet Admiral in fascination. “So you really aren’t bullshittin’ me? You’re actually fifty-two?”

Lynette nodded. “That’s right. I underwent quite the transformation.”

“Yeah, no kidding,” Luce said with a chuckle. “Rachel healed some of my old injuries, but damn... I wish I could’ve signed up for what you got!”

The Fleet Admiral was about to explain that it wasn’t possible because Luce was married, but Alyssa quickly intervened. \*There’s no need to go into details about the Change. I like Luce... she’s got a good heart, but don’t tell her anything more than necessary. Just convince her to keep quiet about you being a secret Lioness.\*

Both women sat quietly, staring at one another and sizing the other up.

Lynette broke the silence and asked, “Luce, what are you-”

At the same time, Lucyna sighed and said, “I guess you want me to-”

They paused and their shared laugher relieved the tension in the awkward moment.

Holding her hand up, Luce said, “Just let me go first, alright?”

Lynette nodded and waited patiently.

“I’m not goin’ to say shit about this to no one... not even Theo,” the governor declared, making eye contact with her. “I thought you had your head screwed on right even before I found out you were a Lioness, but I’m not doing this for you, Lynette. I owe Blake and those angels... more than I can ever repay. If you’re one of them, then the last thing they’d want is me blowin’ your cover.”

“Thank you, Luce,” Lynette said, feeling a surge of gratitude for the blonde. She listened to Alyssa for a moment, then smiled as she added, “The ‘boss lady’ says thanks very much too.”

Luce’s eyes widened in astonishment. “You can hear her?!”

Lynette tapped her temple with the first two fingers of her right hand. “Alyssa explained to you that she’s a telepath; well, she can project her voice directly to my mind.”

“Goddamn...” the governor muttered as she tried to process that. “Are you able to pass on a message to her please?”

“Yes, of course,” the brunette agreed.

Luce thought about the wording of her message, then said, “Can you tell her: the strays have got a home now. They’ve settled in and they’re gonna be alright.”

Lynette frowned in confusion. “Umm... hold on a second, she’s getting emotional. She’s very grateful... something about being like family.”

“Alright, I get it,” Luce said with a smile. “I guess your secret’s safe with me, Fleet Admiral.”

Reaching out, Lynette gently clasped the other woman’s hands. “I promise you won’t regret it. I’ve got the Outer Rim’s best interests at heart.”

“Yeah, I reckon you do at that,” Luce agreed, the tension easing from her shoulders. “How’s it going with the rest of the governors? Have you convinced them that this rebellion is a terrible idea yet?”

Lynette sat down with her back to the wall beside Luce. “Part of me really sympathises with Stefan and I can understand why he’s done with High Command. I just don’t think that any of you, or your colonies, will be better off by rejecting the Terran Federation. Some of the governors have got legitimate grievances, while some just want to feel like they’re being heard. Either way, I don’t want anyone to think that I’m buying people off to convince them to stay.”

“Reyes Angevin looked as happy as a pig in shit to be linin’ his pockets,” Luce remarked drily.

“There’s always a few bad apples,” Lynette said with regret. “If the situation wasn’t so tenuous, I’d make moves to replace him with someone who genuinely cares about the other colonists. For the time being, I’ll have to hold my nose and deal with him. At least I can still help improve the lives of the people on Menganus IV.”

“For what it’s worth, I trust you, Lynette,” Luce said quietly. “When I get back home, I’m gonna tell everyone on Valia Gate to just sit tight and give you time to make things better. You deserve a chance to try and fix the problems out here.”

Lynette swallowed thickly. “Thank you, Luce. I won’t let you down.”

Luce bumped shoulders with the woman sitting beside her. “Alright, now that’s out the way, can we talk about the huge bribe you’re gonna pay me? After Bryce came out of his meetin’, he started dancin’ a jig and hollerin’ about how he was going to retire early with tons of coke and a harem of hookers.”

The Fleet Admiral looked shocked for a moment, then burst into laughter when she realised Luce was only joking.

She rose to her feet and offered the blonde a hand getting up. “Two million credits, that’s my final offer.”

Luce laughed too, then paused and looked at the beautiful young woman through squinted eyes. “You’re jokin’ right?”

Lynette raised an eyebrow and smirked as she sauntered over to the conference table.

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“I thought you said you were going to give me some proper attention later?” Dana asked, before trailing off into a groan.

“I did,” John agreed, leaning against the Engineering Station and idly running his fingers through her silky auburn locks.

Her eyelashes fluttered for a moment, then Dana continued, “So how come I still got pounded over a console?”

“I couldn’t help myself,” he explained with an unapologetic shrug. “You know I can’t resist smart women, and you’re sexy as hell when you come up with cool new tech. The new Raptor is awesome.”

Alyssa smiled at the redhead as she pulled on her figure-hugging dress. “Quit bellyaching, Sparks, you loved every second of it. Besides, you know he’s still going to give you some extra TLC tonight.”

“Yay!” Dana cheered, before letting out another guttural groan.

John glanced down at the Maliri kneeling behind the teenager’s splayed thighs. “How are you doing down there, honey?”

Irillith’s moan of pleasure left him in little doubt whether she was enjoying her late-afternoon snack, as she noisily sucked all his cum from the quivering redhead.

He stroked her snowy-white hair, then turned back to Alyssa. “So you really think Luce will keep Lynette’s secret to herself?”

Alyssa nodded. “I think so. After everything we did for her husband and the colonists, we proved we’re on her side. The fact that she knows the Fleet Admiral is a secret Lioness probably makes her trust Lynette more rather than less.”

“I hope you’re right. We’ve got a lot invested in Lynette and if everyone found out her secret it would be a disaster,” John said grimly. “We’re going to have our hands full dealing with the Progenitor War; we won’t be able to intervene if the Admiralty deposes her, then starts running wild and causing trouble.”

“I’m a pretty good judge of character and I think we can trust Luce,” Alyssa said, giving him a reassuring kiss on the cheek.

Irillith sat back on her haunches and let out a blissful sigh, her hands cradling her rounded tummy. “That was so good...”

John helped her to stand, while Alyssa moved to support Dana, who wobbled precariously on trembling legs.

“How did the training go with Sakura?” he asked, handing Irillith his t-shirt to wipe her face.

She smiled at him gratefully. “Really well. She’s incredibly focused and taught me a lot.”

“Good. I’m really glad she was able to help you,” he said, idly caressing her swollen belly. “Are you up for a training session with your sister, or do you need to rest?”

Irillith placed her hand over his and gave him a confident smile. “I feel full of energy again, thanks to you. I’m looking forward to seeing what I can learn from Tashana.”

“She’s waiting for you in the other hangar,” Alyssa said, nodding towards the reinforced doors.

“There’s no rest for the wicked,” Irillith smirked, sauntering towards the exit.

She laughed as John playfully slapped her bottom, giving him a seductive smile as she departed. Irillith really was looking forward to seeing her sister, although she couldn’t help wondering if she’d be met with some raging inferno. She braced herself for a blast of heat, but when the doors opened into the Secondary Hangar, it was cool and quiet inside. Glancing around, she searched for her twin, and finally spotted Tashana sitting on an ore crate.

The other Maliri aboard the Invictus was staring off into the distance, lost in deep thoughts. She didn’t see or hear her twin’s approach, and Tashana jumped in surprise when Irillith touched her bare shoulder.

“Hey, Shan,” Irillith said gently. “Sorry for giving you a fright.”

“It’s alright, I was miles away,” Tashana admitted, greeting her with a warm smile. “I was just thinking about what advice I could give you... and got a bit sidetracked.”

Irillith could hear her sister’s thoughts, but they’d been scattered and incoherent while she was in her reverie. There were consistent themes though and she knew that Tashana was reliving some of her past experiences during the long years they’d been apart.

“You were thinking about the Unclaimed Wastes, weren’t you?” Irillith asked, her voice filled with sympathy.

Tashana nodded, but didn’t seem under any distress. “Don’t worry, John did a thorough job of desensitising me to all the horrors I experienced there. I have memories of some terrible events, but barely feel any kind of emotion about them.”

“I’m sor-”

“Uh uh,” Tashana said playfully, putting a finger on Irillith’s lips. “I’ve told you before; no more apologies. That’s all in the past now.”

Irillith gave her a grateful hug. “You’re the best sister ever.”

Tashana glanced down and pouted. “Hmph... you’re not! How come you didn’t share?”

Cradling her huge tummy, Irillith grinned. “I would’ve been happy to... but John seems determined to make me waddle everywhere today.”

“You’re loving all the attention,” Tashana said with a giggle, stroking the azure dome.

Irillith bit her lip and nodded, enjoying the sensitive contact. “I did worry that now he has a whole harem of hungry matriarchs, the novelty might start to wear off being with us, but it seems the opposite is true.”

“You are quite irresistible,” her sister purred.

“Likewise,” she agreed.

Their lips met for a tender kiss, which Irillith quickly deepened. Tashana tasted a hint of John’s essence in her mouth and let out a wanton moan, her violet eyes rolling backwards in ecstasy.

“I was wrong,” Tashana panted. “You are the best sister!”

Irillith laughed and gave her a loving hug. “So did you have any tips for me today?”

Tashana nodded and hopped off the ore crate. “I thought it might be helpful to talk about how I harnessed our great-grandfather’s legacy.”

The thought that they were Mael’nerak’s direct descendents sent a shiver down Irillith’s spine, but it was difficult to tell if it was from fear or excitement.

Her sister walked away a few steps, her arms wrapped around herself. “As you know, my time in the Unclaimed Wastes left me horrifically scarred and grievously injured. I suffered there, Irillith... so much pain, so much humiliation, I endured every degradation of the vilest sort. It was enough to break any normal mind... but I managed to cling on to my sanity by my fingertips... and I never let them destroy me.”

“Tashana...” Irillith said softly. “You don’t have to do this.”

“I’m okay,” she replied, turning to smile at her sister. “Just listen and let me continue.”

Irillith was surprised at what she saw in her twin’s expression. Instead of anguish and horror, she saw only excitement and anticipation.

“In the midst of all that darkness, I finally found my inner light,” Tashana murmured, holding out her hand.

A flame guttered to life, weaving hypnotically as it slowly grew larger.

“I was so cold... so lonely...” the former pit-fighter whispered, captivated by the enchanting orange glow. “Then it came to me... such glorious heat... and it filled my heart with joy!”

The fire surged, enveloping her whole hand as Tashana made a sweeping gesture. She launched the ball of flame into the centre of the hangar, where it burst into a blazing pyre, the orange tendrils reaching up towards the ceiling. Tashana swirled in a graceful pirouette and the flames danced behind her, shifting into a recognisable shape... that of a kneeling man.

Tashana twirled around and gazed at the effigy of her former tormentor, a whimsical smile on her face. “Captain Tyr'kayda... oh how he loved to play his cruel games. He taught me so much... and I was so glad to be able to return the favour.”

Irillith watched transfixed as the blaze intensified, adding more detail to the fiery figure. The man wore a mask, but it seemed to shift in response to his facial expressions. The Enshunu Captain’s features contorted, twisting in agony as his mouth opened in a silent scream.

“Oh, how you begged...” Tashana crooned, watching as Tyr'kayda held up his hands in desperate supplication. “But that was one of the first lessons you taught me... there is no mercy.”

The conflagration turned white with the ferocity of the heat and Tyr'kayda stared in horror at his hands as they melted away like dripping wax.

Tashana tilted her head back and let out a shuddering sigh. “We played for days... the games were the best we’d ever shared. When Tyr'kayda couldn’t play anymore, there were always plenty of new volunteers...”

The flames trailed off across the deck plates and formed more fires, each one taking on new shapes that represented many familiar species. The Drakkar, the Trankarans, and a gruesome host of minor aliens all writhed in torment as they fed the inferno, consumed by the vengeful flame.

“My inner fire protected me... kept me safe,” she explained, gazing fondly at the conflagration. “It never betrayed me... never let me down. When I needed it desperately, it burst forth, eager to be by my side... and I learned to embrace it with all my heart.”

The fire spread towards the Progenitor shuttle, then surged up the landing gear, climbing higher and higher. Soon the black spacecraft was limned in amber, until it looked as if eldritch fire was consuming the entire vessel.

“Magnificent, isn’t it?” Tashana whispered in reverent tones, her eyes ablaze with violet light.

Irillith wasn’t quite sure if she should be awed or terrified by the inferno before her, and wondered if the vision of a burning shuttle would be a prophetic one. Her sister suddenly clicked her fingers and all the fires extinguished in a breathy whump.

“Don’t be scared,” Tashana said, her voice returning to normal as she walked back to her twin. She stroked Irillith’s arm and continued, “I showed you how I learned to fan my flames, so that you can see what you’re capable of too. These abilities are our birthright and are just waiting inside you to be claimed. You need to let go of your fears and feel the passion that I know burns within you.”

“I’ve never felt that same fascination with my abilities as you, Shan,” Irillith admitted. “I don’t know if I can embrace them the same way you have.”

“We’ll start small and build up!” Tashana said eagerly, refusing to be dissuaded. “I know you can do it!”

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Dana gave the small bundle of fish and rice a dubious look then popped it into her mouth. She gave it a tentative chew, then look at her girlfriend in surprise. “Babes... this tastes so good!”

Her enthusiastic verdict was repeated around the table as John and the girls tried the delicately wrapped pieces of Sushi.

“I just suggested we try making some traditional dishes,” Rachel said, before turning to smile at her fellow chefs. “Sakura and Helene did most of the work.”

Sakura laughed and patted her teal-skinned companion on the shoulder. “Who would’ve guessed that Helene is an expert at prepping fish.”

“I really hope you like the spicy stew,” Helene said, ladling out meaty chunks of fish into a bowl and handing it to John. “We didn’t have access to the Brimorian seasoning I normally use, so I had to make a lot of substitutions.”

She held her breath and watched as he blew on the stew to cool it, then bravely tasted a big mouthful.

John chewed for a moment savouring the explosion of flavour. “This is delicious!” he enthused, breaking into a grin.

Helene sighed with relief, then laughed when John pulled her into a congratulatory hug.

“I have to say, this is probably the first Japanese-Brimorian fusion cuisine the galaxy has ever known, but it gets two thumbs up from me,” Jehanna said, doing exactly that.

The food proved to be a big hit with the Nymphs too, who briefly joined them for dinner in pairs, before returning to their duties.

John watched Neysa and Marika leave, the pair taking a catnap before covering the night shift. “I feel bad that they’re missing out on most of the meal,” he said to his Nymph matriarch. “Are you sure they don’t mind?”

Jade shook her head. “Not at all, Master. They’re all delighted that you’re trusting them to watch over the Bridge. They know it’s a really useful role, because it lets you and your mates work on more important tasks.”

“That’s true and I really appreciate them covering for us. Just let me know if they start getting bored of being Watch Commander.”

She shook her head and laughed. “After your little ambush last night, my sisters are all thrilled to be on the Bridge. Neysa and Marika are just waiting for their turn to be ravished.”

“Keeping up morale and topping up the new recruits,” he said, darting a smile at Jehanna and Ailita. “Who says men are rubbish at multi-tasking.”

Alyssa reached over to pat his hand. “Nobody here has ever complained about you giving us multiples... and you deliver them a lot.”

He flushed as they all laughed, the girls making plenty of appreciative comments about his prowess. After that, they finished off a very pleasant meal, then cleared the table and moved over to the sofas.

“How long until we reach the thrall fleet?” John asked as Calara handed him a steaming cup of coffee.

“Just a little over two hours,” she replied, taking the seat next to him. “Not that I’m counting the minutes or anything.”

“They’ll be there, don’t worry,” he said, slipping his arm around her shoulders.

“I hope so,” the Latina replied, staring at her cup. “We took a big gamble letting the Maliri head directly for the expected fleet locations last night. I hope it pays off.”

“I really don’t think other thralls will be trying to salvage those ships,” John said with a reassuring smile. It faltered a moment later as he admitted, “I mean, anything’s possible, but it would be completely out of character from everything I know about them.”

She snuggled into his chest. “No, I didn’t mean that. I was just thinking that maybe Larn’kelnar might have left a few thralls alive on each ship and they could still pose a threat. They might have even moved their fleets back to the homeworld.”

John kissed the top of her head. “They’re all gone, honey. Larn’kelnar admitted as much before he drained the life out of his matriarch. Ailanthia was the only one left.”

He could see faces falling as that grim thought sunk in and decided to change the topic.

“Would you girls like to see the Invictus’ new engines?” he suggested, reaching for the holo-projector remote. “Alyssa finished redesigning them just before dinner.”

“I’d love to!” Calara gushed, darting a playful frown at the blonde. “She give me a preview earlier.”

The rest of the girls echoed her enthusiasm and John handed the remote to his Executive Officer.

“I’ll let you show them off,” he said with a grin. “You deserve all the praise.”

“You’re setting expectations too high,” she playfully chastised him. “You’ll feel terrible if everyone hates them.”

“Nope, I just don’t care,” he joked. “I love them and it’s my ship!”

“Uh oh,” Rachel said, pretending to look worried. “Is he turning into a tyrant now we’re outside of the Shroud?”

“Very funny,” John said, rolling his eyes as they all laughed. “Show them why, Alyssa!”

She pressed several icons on the remote and a holographic depiction of the Invictus appeared with Progenitor engines installed. “This was the original design.”

Sakura stared at them and shook her head. “That’s just not right. We look like the bad guys!”

“That’s what I said,” John agreed.

After giving everyone a chance to be suitably repulsed by their sinister appearance, Alyssa pressed more icons and displayed what she’d been working on that afternoon.

Calara sat forward on her chair and stared at the projection in awe. “Oh wow! They look amazing!”

Alyssa had cleverly sculpted the new engines to flow into the rear of the Invictus, making them look much more integrated into the battlecruiser. It gave the whole ship a much sleeker profile, like the vessel could slice through space at incredible speed. What really made them stand out however, was the stylised lion on the upper engine housing, and the lionesses leaping forward on each flank.

“Ten Lionesses,” Jehanna said, counting the feline predators. “One for each of us.”

“Alright, I understand why you pulled rank,” Rachel conceded with a gracious smile.

“I’ve already built all six engines, as well as their sculpted plating,” John said, acknowledging the brunette with a nod. “If there are no signs of life at the thrall fleet, I suggest we stop there to complete the refit. I’d prefer to upgrade the Invictus in a secure drydock, but we’ve run out of room in the hangars and I want to start constructing the new Raptor.”

“I can take a look at the gunship’s weapon loadout for you,” Calara offered. “I could use a good distraction to keep my mind occupied.”

“Awesome, thanks!” the redhead said gratefully. She turned to John and asked with concern, “Do you feel up to doing more shaping for the next couple of hours?”

He nodded, looking quite relaxed. “I feel fine, no headaches so far. What’ve you got in mind?”

“A shit ton of Progenitor-grade retro-thrusters?” she replied with an apologetic smile.

John chuckled and gave his assent with a nod. “Yeah, okay.” Glancing at Alyssa, he added, “Any chance you’re going to help this time?”

She let out a mournful sigh. “I’d really love to, but I promised Irillith I’d help with her psychic abilities after dinner.”

He rolled his eyes. “I guess I deserve it after you got stuck with all that armour plating for months.”

“We won’t be too long, I can help afterwards,” Alyssa conceded, feeling guilty.

“Nah, I don’t mind,” he replied, waving away her offer of assistance. “I can just switch off while I’m shaping and it gives me time to think about a few things. I actually find it quite relaxing.”

Alyssa looked at him in alarm. “You’re right, Rachel, there’s something seriously wrong with him! Xar’aziuth must be secretly driving John crazy!”

Her joke generated more laughter, which intensified when John calmly placed his cup on the coffee table, then pounced on Alyssa to tickle her.

“I’m sorry!” she pleaded between giggles. “I promise I’ll be good!”

He playfully swatted her on the bottom. “You better be.”

She gave him a parting kiss, then held out her hand to Irillith. “Let’s go, gorgeous. We’ll be in the Dojo if anybody needs us.”

They waved goodbye to everyone, then left the Officers’ Lounge together.

“How did the training go today?” Alyssa asked, glancing at the Maliri as they descended in the grav-tube.

“I learned a lot,” Irillith freely admitted. “I’ve barely used my abilities outside of the Cyber-Realm, so I felt like a complete novice, especially compared to Sakura and Tashana. They’re both incredibly powerful.”

“They are,” Alyssa agreed. “And what did you learn about them?”

“Excuse me?” Irillith asked in surprise.

They stepped out into the corridor on Deck Three. “You must have noticed that Sakura and Tashana have almost diametrically opposed views towards their abilities. Why do you think that is?”

Irillith went quiet, lost in thought. When they reached the entrance to the Dojo, Alyssa opened the door into the Armoury, then led Irillith through to the sparring area.

When they walked out onto the mats, Irillith turned to face her. “Sakura spent decades being used as Mikaboshi’s pawn and it’s affected her whole outlook. After having endured years of being a helpless victim, she craves a sense of control. That’s why she trains so intensively on her fighting techniques as well as her psychic abilities. She sees them as tools that need to be rigorously honed to deadly perfection... just as she was all those years ago.”

“Very good,” Alyssa replied, nodding in approval. “And what about your sister?”

Irillith let out a heavy sigh. “Tashana was betrayed by everyone she loved and spent years suffering unspeakable horrors. The endless torture drove her to the brink of madness... and in her desperation, she awoke something primal deep inside. She sees her psychic abilities as her salvation, and she’s embraced that inner fire with passionate intensity.”

Her matriarch nodded, her face uncharacteristically solemn. “Ice and fire... cold discipline versus raging passion. Which is the better approach to harnessing psychic abilities?”

The Maliri compared the two potent psychics, but couldn’t decide which was the most powerful. Each Lioness was a formidable adversary in her own right, and the way they’d harnessed their abilities worked exceptionally well for each of them. In a moment of clarity, she suddenly realised the answer to Alyssa’s question.

“Both are equally as effective... because they seamlessly blend with their personalities.”

“Exactly,” Alyssa replied, nodding with satisfaction. “Alright, show me what you’ve learned.”

A hex shield popped into existence around the blonde and she waited patiently for Irillith to attack.

Concentrating on what Sakura had taught her, Irillith focused her will and projected a violet-hued hex barrier, the globe completely covering her body. She then carefully maintained the protective shield and lashed out with a flick of her hand towards Alyssa. A jagged spark of electricity arced from her fingertips towards the white hexagons protecting the blonde, and energy crackled over the surface, trying to zap its way through.

Alyssa watched her with a neutral expression on her face and didn’t say a word. The Maliri jolted her barrier several more times, without managing to crack one of her hexagons.

Deflating when she realised her ineffective her attacks were, Irillith’s shoulders slumped in defeat. “You’re so much more powerful than me. I’m going to have to train hard for weeks to even scratch your hex barrier!”

Dismissing her shield, Alyssa walked over to her student. “Do you know why you found it so hard?”

“I’ve been neglecting my abilities for a long time,” Irillith admitted. “It’s very different using psychic powers in the real world compared to the Cyber-Realm.”

“Nope,” Alyssa replied, shaking her head. “The problem is that you’re using techniques you learned from Sakura and Tashana... but you’re quite different from both of them.”

Irillith frowned in frustration. “So why did you suggest I train with them if their techniques are useless to me.”

“I’d make some glib quip about it being the journey, not the destination that’s important, but I’m sure you’ve seen that cliche too many times in all those holo-movies you watched with your sister.”

The Maliri laughed and nodded, her tension easing. “You’re right. We’d just need a training montage and this could easily be a holo-movie.”

“Alright, let me lead you in another direction before your epic moment of epiphany,” Alyssa said with a wry smile. “What motivates John? What’s his trigger that drives him to push his limits to breaking point?”

Irillith knew the answer immediately. “It’s his love for us. When we’re threatened, he’ll move mountains to protect us from harm.”

“That’s right. It’s saved us many times in the past.”

Alyssa walked closer, then circled around the Maliri with a playful smile. She slipped her arms around Irillith’s waist and gently stroked her curved stomach.

“And what motivates you, Irillith?” she purred in her ear. “What trigger changed the course of your life and drove you into John’s arms?”

Irillith stared at Alyssa over her shoulder, her eyes as wide as saucers as the answer came unbidden into her mind. “But... that’s different. Just because I’m submissive with him doesn’t mean anything.”

“No?” Alyssa asked innocently. “Which sister braved her tyrannical mother’s ire and spent years pursuing research that made her an outcast? And which sister stayed at home and tried so hard to win her domineering mother’s approval by being the dutiful daughter?”

Irillith sucked in her breath to blurt out a denial, but the words wouldn’t pass her lips. She stood rigid in shock, stunned by the blonde’s insight into her personality.

Alyssa nuzzled into her and kissed her earlobe. “You’re such a good girl, Irillith. So bright and gifted... and so wonderfully obedient.”

She gently locked Irillith’s collar into place, the ominous click sending a shiver running down her spine.

“Now close your eyes and focus your will inwards, just like you’re about to venture into the Cyber-Realm,” Alyssa whispered in her ear.

Irillith did as she asked, feeling like she was floating in limbo as she followed her matriarch’s instructions.

“Can you feel that power deep inside you, just waiting to be unleashed? It’s there inside all of us. Don’t try to fight it... just let it come to you... then give yourself to it, Irillith.”

She really could feel that latent energy welling up inside her, like a gathering storm rumbling on the horizon. It rolled onwards, and seemed to be everywhere at once, suffusing her body with untapped power until she teetered on the brink of terror.

“Submit, Irillith...” Alyssa urged her, with no hint of doubt in her firm command.

Irillith stopped resisting, and shuddered as she let that power wash over her. The feeling was intoxicating as she relinquished all control, and yet... just like the games she played with John, it was she who held the real power in their special relationship. She set the limitations of her submission... and like any good dominant, John respected those clearly defined boundaries.

Raising her slender hand, Irillith shivered as power surged down her arm to her fingertips, shrouding her hand in a dazzling orb of crackling electricity. She let it flow through her, acting as a willing conduit to the raging storm aching to be unleashed. A jagged lightning bolt roared across the Dojo, the massive blast of electricity punching a glowing hole through the armour plating and overloading all the holo-emitters in the room. It was followed by a deafening boom of thunder that shook both girls to the core.

“Enlightenment achieved, neophyte,” Alyssa said with a satisfied smile.