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John and Dana followed the two Maliri males as they led them away from the auditorium and through an adjoining door in the corridor just outside. This room was much smaller, with six ornate chairs placed around a gilded table. Kaedos and Laedrallas remained silent as the others entered, then Laedrallas sealed the door behind them, while Kaedos activated a device on his wrist.

“We apologise for being so secretive,” Laedrallas said as he joined his colleague at the table. “The leaders of our guilds have kept this information hidden from the matriarchs for many centuries.”

Dana bounced up and down with glee. “Is this about the trade stations being secret fortresses?!”

The two Maliri males stared at her in dumbfounded astonishment.

“I knew it!” the redhead squealed, grinning in delight.

“B-but... how did you...?!” Kaedos stammered, struggling to string a coherent sentence together.

John placed a reassuring hand on his shoulder. “Don’t worry, your secret’s still safe. Edraele told us about the history of these trade stations a while ago. She said that they were originally defensive stations that are thousands of years old. All the rest were decommissioned, but four were repurposed into trade hubs. We also recently discovered a network of advanced gun emplacements that date back at least nine millennia, so Dana just put two-and-two together.”

The two men looked greatly relieved and the tension eased from them both.

“The Valaden Matriarch was partly correct,” Kaedos clarified. “There are eleven defensive stations located around the periphery of Maliri territory. All of them were decommissioned many thousands of years ago, as our civilisation continued to face no external threats and looked ever inwards. The matriarchs, in their infinite wisdom, believed that crewing the stations was a waste of valuable personnel and abandoned them.”

He shook his head in disapproval, then continued, “When our alien neighbours began to venture into the stars and made first contact with the Maliri, our ancestors volunteered to reactivate the most conveniently positioned stations as trade hubs. By channelling all the trade traffic to those key locations, it would blunt alien curiosity about our people, and reduce the number of border incursions. Over the centuries, more males came to live on these stations, as they proved to be a safe refuge from the madness on the homeworlds. Geniya, Genirath, Genwynn, and Genkiri stations have since been greatly expanded, increasing their capacity for onboard personnel.”

“To accommodate all the males who left the homeworlds,” John said, nodding in understanding. “And if there are now millions of Maliri living here, the additional facilities must be substantial.”

“That is correct, Lord Baen’thelas,” Kaedos said sombrely.

Dana placed her hands on the table and leaned in excitedly. “So, basically what you’re saying, is that there’s some super badass spacestation buried underneath a bunch of houses and shit? Is that the schematics there? Can I take a peek?”

Deflating slightly, Kaedos sighed. “Yes, that is what I was trying to explain. And yes, I was about to show you the schematics.”

“Awesome!” Dana gushed, watching him with breathless anticipation.

He removed the device from his wrist and placed it on the centre of the table, then activated the holo-projector. The glowing blueprints for the original starbase floated before them, and John could immediately see the similarities between its construction and the gun emplacements located around Kythshara.

“Holy shit...” Dana muttered, as her eyes darted back and forth across the schematic, committing everything to memory.

“Are those Quantum Flux Cannons?” John asked, recognising the distinctive shape of the weapons built into huge turrets.

He counted twenty of the massive guns, as well as scores of Tachyon Lance batteries placed in areas where their firing arcs would provide a lethal crossfire.

“Yep! Mael’nerak loaded this place up for bear!” the redhead replied, before blinking and turning away from the schematic. “Thanks for showing me that, Kaedos.”

The Maliri structural engineer could only stare at them both in open-mouthed amazement.

“It appears our greatest kept secrets are like an open book to you both,” Laedrallas murmured, shaking his head in disbelief.

“I still have a few questions,” John said, his gaze still locked on the starbase. “If those weapons are as powerful as the ones we discovered, then they were better than anything the Maliri fleets were equipped with. Why didn’t the matriarchs strip these stations of all their weapons before they were decommissioned?”

“That’s an excellent question, my Lord,” Laedrallas replied, perking up. “You are quite correct. The weapons on these defensive installations are very powerful, but we are unable to replicate them ourselves, or the necessary devices to support them. I imagine that reduced interest in them considerably. In addition, these guns would be extremely difficult to remove from the station. The armour in the sealed turrets is practically indestructible, and impervious to our most potent cutting beams.”

“After not being fired in anger for thousands of years, the matriarchs likely forgot about those weapons,” Kaedos interjected. “But we continued to perform regular maintenance.”

“This is excellent news. Thank you for trusting me with this information,” John said gratefully. “If we can reactivate all these defensive starbases, they’ll be incredibly useful for defending our territory.”

Kaedos and Laedrallas shared a pensive frown.

“Umm, that might be a problem,” Dana said hesitantly. “We won’t be able to use the station’s defensive capabilities until we detach all the additional crap that’s been stacked on top of it. I’m sure Calara could blast it all clear in a few minutes using the Invictus guns, but I’m guessing you probably want to evacuate the trade stations first?”

“That might be sensible,” John said with a wry smile.

She tapped a finger on her chin. “Well, at least we can bring the other seven stations back online without having to worry about trashing anything.”

John turned to the two Maliri. “Can you tell us where they’re located?”

“They’ve been abandoned for thousands of years, so pinpointing their precise location will prove to be challenging,” Kaedos explained. “We can make an educated guess as to their most probable location, but there is an additional complication...”

“There usually is,” Dana said with a groan. “What’s the problem?”

“Each station is concealed by a powerful cloaking device, rendering sensor sweeps useless for tracking them down,” Laedrallas regretfully informed them.

John grimaced as he imagined how difficult it would be to find them. “Are you sure they’re cloaked?”

“Yeah, they totally are,” Dana interjected with a frustrated sigh. “Geniya’s equipped with a massive cloaking device; I can see it on the schematic. The rest are bound to have the same capabilities.”

“Could we hide Geniya using the cloak?” John asked hopefully.

“Nah, the cloaking field is nowhere near big enough,” Dana replied, shaking her head. “Before you ask me if we can boost the range, Geniya is at least ten times bigger now than the original space station. There’s no chance in hell we can cloak anything that size.”

“Ah well, it was just an idea,” he replied with a shrug. Turning to the two Maliri, John continued, “Could you forward that location data to the Invictus please? We’ll do our best to track down the deactivated starbases as soon as we get a chance.”

“We shall do so at once,” Kaedos readily agreed.

“This was all incredibly helpful, thank you,” John said with gratitude.

“I’m glad that we were able to contribute towards our defences,” Laedrallas said, sharing a broad smile with his colleague. “When Geniya has been evacuated, we will guide you through activating the station’s defensive capabilities.”

“I can’t wait!” Dana gushed.

They filed out of the meeting room, then said their final goodbyes to the two Maliri leaders. When John and Dana returned to the debating chamber, John could tell by the elated grin on Calara’s face that Alyssa had been keeping her informed during the entire discussion.

“Well, that was quite the lucky break,” John said, as he joined the girls.

“I don’t know why I didn’t think of it before,” Calara said, unable to stop grinning. “Edraele told us how old these trade stations are, and even that they used to be defensive starbases.”

“I must admit, I never thought twice about it,” John said, nodding in agreement. “Geniya’s architecture looks identical to their ships and cities, so it’s not that surprising that we assumed that’s all there was to them.”

“I never suspected the truth either,” Edraele admitted with a troubled frown. “As Kaedos said, the matriarchs were obsessed with internal House conflicts. I never paid any real attention to the border stations or the males’ activities here.”

John gave her a supportive hug. “That’s a probably a good thing.”

She broke into a rueful smile. “Very true.”

“Alright, ladies, put your helmets back on, it’s time to head back to the Invictus,” John said, before turning to Ceraden. “Have you and your girls made a decision about leaving?”

“We’re coming with you, my friend.”

“Great. I’ll see you back at the ship then,” John said with relief.

He looked at the Trade Guild leader and was about to thank him for his help, when he noticed that the old Maliri was inhaling and exhaling deeply.

“Are you alright, Natharion?” he asked with concern.

The sparkle had definitely returned to the Maliri male’s eyes and he vigorously shook John’s hand. “These young ladies are marvellous, simply marvellous!”

“You’ll get no argument from me there,” John said, startled by just how spry the older Maliri seemed to be.

“My cough’s completely gone! I haven’t been able to breathe like this in years!” Natharion exclaimed, beaming at him in delight. “Thank you for everything, dear boy!”

\*Rachel gave him a healthcheck,\* Alyssa informed him, winking at John before she pulled on her helmet.

“You’re welcome, Natharion,” John said, patting his arm. “The best thing you can do to repay us, is keep everyone focused on evacuating the station. Don’t let the males forget what’s at stake here.”

“I don’t think anyone could forget what happened here today,” Natharion said with a chuckle. “We’ll be ready to leave as soon as the fleets arrive, I’ll make sure of it.”

They parted company and the girls fell into formation around John as they left the auditorium. He was quietly reflective as they walked back through the station to the Invictus, thinking about everything that had transpired in the meeting with the guild leaders. While he was elated that the males had almost unanimously agreed to return to the homeworlds, the trade stations were still in considerable danger. Genwynn station was at particular risk, as it lay perilously close to the invasion path Calara had pre-selected for the Galkirans.

The fact that the trade stations might have substantial defensive potential was also a huge boon, but that only increased the pressure on him to ensure the males were evacuated as quickly as possible. The sheer number of ships they’d need to transport that many people was a daunting prospect, let alone the logistical nightmare of ensuring the civilians were adequately provisioned for the journey home. He suddenly felt gauntleted fingers clasping his hand, and when he glanced to the Lioness on his right, Edraele’s soothing voice drifted through his mind.

\*Don’t fret over the details, John,\* she said softly. \*Your role here was to galvanise the males into action, and your performance was a spectacular success. Leave the logistical planning to your exceptionally gifted girls; they’ll let you know if and when they need your assistance.\*

He considered that for a moment, then realised that Edraele made a very good point. Letting the tension ease from his shoulders, he flashed her a grateful smile. \*You’re right. Thank you.\*

She gave his hand a gentle squeeze, and John simply enjoyed her company for the rest of the walk back to the Invictus. They all trooped back into the battlecruiser, then John followed the girls into the express grav-tubes, where they ascended to the Armoury to stow away their gear.

Jehanna was the first to remove her Paragon suit, and as soon as the robotic arms lifted away, she ran into John’s open arms. “We did it!” she gushed, her dark eyes shining with delight.

He twirled her around before setting her back down on the deck. “The message from the matriarchs blew their minds! You did an incredible job, honey!”

She giggled with glee. “I told you it was going to be a huge hit! I was watching the audience at the part where all the matriarchs gathered around your throne. You should’ve seen their faces! They all loved you being the man in charge!”

Rachel smiled as she joined them. “I never doubted you for a moment. I mean... how could a plan like that fail? We told a bunch of horny guys, that if they went back home, we’d set them up with a harem of adoring babes. I’m just surprised the decision wasn’t completely unanimous!”

Dana bounded over, a big grin on her pretty face. “She does make a good point. Those poor guys were going through an epic dry spell! I mean, they’ve all literally got blue balls!”

The girls all giggled and laughed, and even Edraele’s lips twitched into a smile of amusement.

The only exception was Irillith, who slowly shook her head.

John saw the movement and looked at her with concern. “Is something wrong, Irillith?”

“I know Rachel was only joking, but I don’t think we should downplay what a daunting task this actually was. Most of the males on the border stations *loathed* the females on the homeworlds. Even if they hadn’t personally suffered at the hands of the matriarchs, many of those men will have lost daughters to the political infighting. I’ve never felt more universally despised in my life, than during my time associating with the males on Geniya.”

After releasing Jehanna, John pulled Irillith into a hug. “I’m sorry, honey. I never even thought that this might stir up some bad memories for you.”

She hugged him back tighter. “Don’t feel sorry for me, I didn’t mention this in a bid for sympathy. I deserved their hatred back then; I was exactly the same kind of narcissistic monster that drove those males away from their homes to the border stations. I just wanted to make you understand how difficult a feat this actually was, and what an incredible thing you’ve done for the Maliri.”

“Irillith’s absolutely right,” Edraele agreed, looking at her daughter with newfound admiration. “This was a huge accomplishment, Baen’thelas. You’ve just set in motion the reunification of our species and encouraged a massive population boom that will supercharge the birth rate. The effect this will have on the homeworlds can’t be understated.”

“It was a team effort,” John said magnanimously, looking around at each of the girls in turn. “Not just with the contributions you made to the meeting today, but we’ve been working towards this for months. Even befriending the Maliri engineers, and giving them a wonderful example of cooperation and teamwork all helped. You all heard the impact those girls have made on Ceraden’s life, and the positive influence of all the others will have rippled out through Geniya. I’m very proud of all of you.”

“Have we got time for a celebratory orgy?” Alyssa asked, an excited gleam in her eyes.

John glanced at the chronometer on the wall and smiled when he saw that it was four in the afternoon. “We’ve got a few hours to kill until the Wormhole Generator is fully charged... and I feel like a good celebration is in order.”

The girls cheered, and rushed to the xpress grav-tube, eager to get naked in the Observatory.

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Jade sat in the Command Chair on the Bridge, wearing her master’s peaked hat at a jaunty angle, and feeling quite flustered. She’d carefully listened to John work his magic on the Maliri males, and now he was working a very different kind of magic on his mates. The Nymph had been expecting John and the girls to embark on a wild orgy, but her master had caught her by surprise.

She’d underestimated the impact the quiet moment of intimacy with Myriana had on John, and he wasn’t in the mood for pounding his Lionesses senseless. Instead he’d been sensuously making love to each of the girls in turn... and they’d all absolutely adored it.

\*Jade, are you sure you don’t want to join us?\* John asked his Nymph matriarch. \*It’s Helene’s turn next...\*

She was greatly tempted to rush down there, but Jade had been planning her own night of debauchery with John and her fellow Nymphs. \*I don’t want to be greedy, Master. I have lots of exciting plans for you and my sisters.\*

\*I don’t think anyone would object to you being at both,\* he said in amusement.

Betrixa skipped up the steps to the Command Podium, then the cheetah catgirl deftly plucked the officer’s hat from her matriarch’s head.

“I’m in charge now!” she declared, striking an imperious pose. “I order you to go and get laid!”

Jade leapt to her feet and tried to snatch the hat back. “This is mutiny, Betrixa! I’ll have you spanked the length of the ship for this!”

The tawny catgirl giggled and landed a hefty smack on Jade’s taut rump. “It’s Captain Betrixa now! Move your sexy ass, Jade!”

Neysa smiled as she watched her mischievous sister’s antics. “We’re fine here, Jade. Go and have some fun with Master.”

Jade only hesitated for a moment longer, then she bounded down the steps towards the grav-tube. “I’ll bring you back a party snack!”

The Nymphs all licked their lips and purred at the thought, then they overheard each other and broke into laughter.

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