Three Square Meals Ch. 70

John stirred from a dreamless but very restful sleep, then stretched carefully so that he wouldn't disturb the blonde and brunette snuggled up against him. Alyssa and Calara murmured in their sleep, then wriggled in closer, feeling soft, warm, and quite delicious where they'd draped themselves over his body. He wrapped his arms around them, enjoying the feel of their supple skin and lean muscles as he stroked their backs.

The girl's sleeping arrangement system had been thrown into chaos, by virtue of the fact that he'd ploughed them all vigorously yesterday, in a marathon orgy that Bacchus himself would have been proud of. He'd wanted to thoroughly distract Alyssa after seeing her get upset earlier, and she'd thrown herself into events with gusto, convincingly winning the sixty-nine competition with Irillith. In the end, they'd just sprawled into bed and fallen into a blissful slumber, everyone feeling deeply satiated after untold hours of debauchery.

He couldn't see the ship's chronometer very well, surrounded as he was by nubile girls, so he just lay back and whispered, "Faye? Are you there? What's the time, honey?"

A few second later, a cherubic purple face appeared above him, her long hair cascading down towards his chest. He couldn't help but notice she was quite naked, and she grinned when she noticed his wandering gaze.

"It's just after nine!" she announced in a cheerful, but thankfully quiet voice. "You all fell asleep by twelve-thirty last night."

"Oh, I thought it was later than that," John remarked, a sly smile on his face as he remembered the previous evening's events.

"You spent over eight hours... playing... together yesterday evening. I suppose that's why you lost track of time!" she supplied helpfully, with a slightly wistful note to her voice.

He had plenty to do today and seriously considered getting up for a moment, but the thought of disturbing his lovely bed-mates changed his mind. Instead he smiled at them affectionately as he said while trying to keep quiet, "I'll let the girls have a lie-in, they earned it."

The digital construct's purple eyes were watching him intently, but it was hard to read the synthetic emotion behind that gaze, luminous as it was.

Giving Faye his full attention again, he asked, "I assume there weren't any problems during the night, Watch Commander?"

She shook her head vigorously, and replied, "The Dragon March seems quiet at the moment, I didn't see any sign of Kintark incursions."

Nodding thoughtfully, he whispered again, "I'd have been surprised if there were. The Kintark must have stripped the bulk of their border forces to mount the ambush in the Regulus system. We've still got another two days travel until we hit the Maliri border, right?"

"Two days, one hour, and twenty seven minutes!" Faye reported, as she checked their progress against the flight path plotted in the Nav computer.

"I could've told you that," Alyssa said, as she leaned in and gave him a tender kiss on the cheek.

John turned to smile at her, and said cheerfully, "Hey beautiful! You look especially radiant this morning."

She laughed as she replied, "You sound as chipper as Faye. Her upbeat personality must be rubbing off on you."

Faye looked delighted to hear this, and moved back on the bed with a thousand megawatt smile plastered all over her face. Her wings quivered on her back, her translucent wings casting scintillating arrays of colour around the room.

Alyssa sat up and stretched, giving John a magnificent view of her gravity defying figure. She relaxed then, and smiled at him lovingly as she replied, "I suppose I've got the glow of a girl who got properly fucked last night. I can't even count how many times you and the girls got me off."

"I was going to let you lie in, sorry I woke you," he said with an apologetic smile.

She shrugged, and replied, "I tend to wake up shortly after you do anyway. It must be all those busy thoughts buzzing around in your head that does it."

"I'll try and be more empty headed next time," he said playfully.

Her laughter woke up more of the girls, and they sat up to stretch, knowing they'd have his undivided attention while they did so. Following their blonde Matriarch's gentle telepathic guidance, they all spread out into a semicircle around the bed, as John sat up and rested against the headboard. The lights gently brightened under Faye's careful manipulation, illuminating the stunning young women arrayed before him. He looked around at each of the eight gorgeous girls that were all watching him attentively, and saw similar looks of adoration on all of their beautiful faces. He couldn't help but chuckle to himself at his marvellous good fortune.

"What is it?" Jade asked him curiously.

John smiled at her, and replied, "Just appreciating what an insanely lucky bastard I am."

They all laughed at that, and to see them looking relaxed and happy made him feel like the King of the World. Invictus World at least.

"What's the plan today?" Alyssa asked him, her blue eyes sparkling in the light. "Surely you don't plan on keeping us all in bed again?"

"It's very tempting," he admitted, "but we've got a good ten day stretch until we reach Underworld, so we should make good use of it. I know there're things we've all been putting off because we've been so busy, and I'm curious to hear what you've each got planned."

"Shall I go first?" Alyssa asked him.

"Sure, what are you up to?" he asked her curiously.

The blonde glanced at Dana, and replied, "I thought I'd spend the time studying galactic finances, so that I can start building up the Orphan Fund."

"That's going to be amazing," the redhead said with a happy sigh. "Have you got anything in mind yet for what to do with all that money?"

"A few ideas. I won't commit to anything until I've educated myself on economics as much as I can," Alyssa explained. She turned back to John then, as she added, "I'll also start plans for remodelling the Officers' Lounge. Eating meals in the Galley just isn't the same."

John nodded, but he was watching Sakura, and saw a guilty look flash across her face when Alyssa mentioned the repercussions from Shinatobe's bomb. "Over here, please Sakura!" he demanded imperiously.

She looked up at him in surprise, then reddened as she realised what she'd done. She crawled across the bed towards him, and when he patted his thighs, she blushed furiously then leant across them obediently.

The girls were watching John and Sakura in fascination, with only Alyssa fully understanding what was happening. John caressed the perfectly round globes of Sakura's ass, massaging the supple golden-brown skin with one hand, while the other stroked her back. He suddenly drew his hand back, and spanked her cheek with a playful slap, causing his audience to jump in surprise.

"Let me know if I'm too rough," John told her, as he brought his hand down on the other cheek with a slightly harder smack. Sakura gasped at the contact, but she bit her lip with excitement.

"What did she do?" Jade asked him in a hushed voice, staring at them with wide eyes.

John brought his hand down on the tanned rump, making her firm buttocks shake with the impact. "Tell them please, Sakura," John replied, as he wound up another firm chastisement for her cheeks.

"I was naughty!" Sakura gasped as his hand spanked her yet again.

"They knew that. What did you do that was naughty?" he asked, as he stroked the reddening skin, before leaving another glowing handprint on her other buttock.

Sakura let out a low moan and her thighs squirmed together, before she blurted out, "John told me to stop feeling guilty for everything Shinatobe did!" After another resounding smack, she squeaked, "I felt bad about the bomb in the Lounge!"

The girls blinked in surprise, then fell about laughing.

When the giggling had receded, John helped Sakura up, and said gently, "It wasn't your fault. I don't want to see you blaming yourself for things you had no control over, alright?"

She leaned in and kissed him fiercely, wrapping her arms around him as she did so. John lifted her across his lap, then sank her down on his throbbing cock, drawing a disbelieving groan from the beautiful Asian girl as she stretched to take him.

"I won't do it any more, I promise," she murmured as she clung to him.

He stroked her back, and said, "Good girl. Now you get yourself off, and then I'll give you a big breakfast to heal up your bottom."

Sakura let out an excited moan as she began to glide up and down his throbbing length.

John looked at Dana, and asked nonchalantly, "How about you, Sparks? What are you up to next?"

Dana grinned at him with excitement as she watched Sakura riding him at a slow sensual pace. She suddenly realised he'd asked her a question, and she smirked at Irillith as she replied, "I'll be taking a look at the weapon schematics Irillith 'requisitioned' to see how I can improve them. I've also got something fun I'd like to work on if I get the chance."

"Sounds good," John agreed, cradling Sakura in his arms. "I actually had two other things I wanted to raise with you. Firstly we could use another Bridge station for our Security Chief here."

Sakura groaned with pleasure, too distracted to contribute to the discussion at the moment.

"Yeah, I can sort something out for her," Dana said with amusement. "What else?"

John frowned as he replied, "Those Kintark Royal Guard were really fast. I actually missed with my first burst until I got a better lead on one of them. I was wondering if you'd be able to build in some kind of motion tracking for the targeting reticle in our armour's helmet HUD?"

She nodded while looking thoughtful, and replied, "That's a great idea! Yeah, I'll see what I can come up with."

"Fantastic, thanks!" he said with an appreciative smile. Next he looked at the brunette to her side, and asked, "What about you, Rachel? Are you up to anything interesting?"

"A couple of things, actually," she replied, her eyes transfixed on Sakura as the Asian girl increased her pace, getting more excited as she ground against him. "I'll start with looking into some of the nastier plagues and contagions that have afflicted the Terran Federation. That will give me a chance to transmit any cures I develop to the Medical Authorities before we get out of comms range. After that, I'll do some analysis on Kindralax's blood. I'd be fascinated to see what I can find out about Kintark genetic modification."

John smiled at her, and replied, "I'll look forward to the presentation." Turning to look at the purple girl who was next around the circle, he asked, "Go ahead, Faye. What have you got planned?"

The purple sprite sat up straight when he spoke to her, then replied enthusiastically, "I've been looking at both our digital and physical security! I've got ideas for both I'd like to review with Irillith and Sakura." She paused a moment, as the raven-haired girl writhing on John's lap arched her back, and climaxed with a cry of ecstasy. Faye grinned, and said, "I'll speak to them when they can spare a moment!"

"Perfect. We need the ship locked up tight," John agreed, stroking Sakura's back as she leaned against him, panting for breath.

"We can talk after breakfast," Irillith agreed, turning to look at Faye, and giving her an encouraging smile.

"Anything else you had in mind, Irillith?" John asked the Maliri girl, while he was speaking to her.

With a wink at the AI, she replied, "It seems great minds think alike. I've come up with some ideas of my own to improve our digital network's security. We'll have a good chat about it, then get started."

"I'm sure between the two of you, you'll come up with something amazing," he enthused, smiling at both the blue and purple girls. He looked at Jade next, and said, "One second, honey."

John helped Sakura off his rigid cock, and he spread his legs to make room for her. She gave him a coy smile as she knelt in front of him, then leaned forward and engulfed his length, swallowing as she did so to let the muscles in her throat pull him in deeper.

The Nymph was watching proceedings with great interest as she scrutinised Sakura's technique, and once the Asian girl had established a smooth rhythm, Jade said, "I'll help Dana wherever I can. From what we've discussed today, I'll probably start work on the Security Chief's station first." Jade glanced at Alyssa, and changing her mind, she said, "Actually, we still need to replace the damaged Paragon armour suit that the dragon melted."

"Well remembered. We could do with a few new suits now that Sakura's joined the team," John said, thinking out loud, while running his hands through the Asian girl's silky black hair. "We'll need another female equipping frame up in the Briefing Room, and perhaps a few more in the Engineering lab."

"I'll start shaping up the armour plating," Alyssa offered with a smile.

Turning to look at the Latina by his side, John asked, "What are you up to next, gorgeous?"

"I was wondering if you could ask Edraele to provide us any information she can on Hades and Underworld?" Calara replied, her mind whirring. "Some preparation work before we arrive could come in very useful."

Edraele heard his thoughts, and said, \*I'll gather all the information I have available, and transmit it to you once you reach Maliri Space.\*

"She'll get you what you need," John replied to Calara, confident in the extremely capable Maliri matriarch. He smiled as Edraele acknowledged his vote of confidence with a tender telepathic kiss, then asked the Latina, "Anything else you're looking into?"

Calara reached out to stroke his shoulder, and said, "I'm going to start looking into what happened to your mother."

He blinked at her in surprise for a moment, then gave her a grateful, if rather guilty smile, as he said, "I'd forgotten I asked you to look into that."

"I hadn't," she told him earnestly. Leaning in to give him a tender kiss, she added, "I'm sorry I haven't been able to devote much time to it yet, but I'll give it my undivided attention now."

"Nexus, Mikaboshi, the traitors, it's been mayhem," John agreed, frowning as he recalled recent events. He smiled at her then, as he added, "Thank you for remembering though, I appreciate it."

Alyssa leaned in close as well, and said, "I promised I'd help you find the answers you needed. I know the girls all feel the same way."

There were quiet murmurs of agreement, as they all moved closer, stroking his arms or legs in a gesture of solidarity. Soon the sympathetic caresses turned into kisses, and he pulled Calara and Alyssa in closer as they took turns kissing him.

"You've done so much for me, it'll be wonderful to be able to help you in return," Calara said between kisses.

He smiled as he gazed into her eyes, and said in a mastery of understatement, "You girls tend to help me out quite a bit."

"Speaking of which," Alyssa purred as she nibbled on one of his earlobes. "Are you going to let Sakura help empty your quad?"

John nodded as he looked down at Sakura, making eye contact with her as he said, "I'm getting close. Are you ready?"

She nodded as best she could, then sped up her efforts, while sucking powerfully to coax his balls into give her their copious load. His quad didn't need much encouragement, and he groaned as he held her in place, his cock jerking in her throat. It took some time for him to pump four pints of cum into her stomach, and Calara and Alyssa kissed him passionately as he climaxed.

When he was finally spent, and his quad emptied once again, Sakura sat up with a look of satisfaction on her face. She cradled her hugely swollen belly with both hands, then sighed with delight as the other girls drew closer, and started caressing her too.

John was seeing stars for a moment, but when his racing heart finally settled down to a normal beat, he exclaimed, "That was amazing, thank you!"

She giggled and said, "Oh, it was definitely my pleasure." She tilted her head to one side as she continued, "You didn't say what you were planning on doing. Although, admittedly I was a bit distracted for a while there."

He stared into her almond shaped eyes, and said, "I want you combat-ready by the end of our journey, so I'll be primarily focused on your training." He glanced at Dana then, and added, "We're going to be duelling, so we'll need some kind of protective gear. Can you make some training suits?"

"That'll be easy," the redhead agreed. "I'll just use a paragon suit as a template, then Jade and I can build them. We should get them done in a day or so."

"You can use the Invictium alloy to plate them," Alyssa suggested to him. "We're not using it for our main gear any longer, and it'll be more than tough enough for what you need. You can make any weapons you want yourself."

"Sounds like a plan," John agreed with a smile. "Alright, shower and breakfast, then we can get started."

Despite how luxuriously spacious the shower in the ensuite bathroom was, John guessed that Charles hadn't designed it to accommodate eight occupants at once. However, the fact that it was a little cramped certainly wasn't a problem, it just meant there was plenty of accidental and not-so-accidental soapy contact. They dried off quickly afterwards, then everyone split up to get dressed for the day.

Alyssa lent Sakura a red jumpsuit made from a stretchable material, which comfortably expanded to fit over her rounded tummy. It certainly wasn't anywhere near as alluring an outfit as one of John's formal shirts, but it was definitely more practical, especially with combat training in mind. As soon as they were dressed, everybody reconvened in the Galley where they had a quick breakfast, with no one particularly keen to linger in the drab, but functional dining area. With hugs and kisses goodbye, everyone went on their separate ways, each of them eager to begin whatever tasks they'd discussed earlier that morning.

John led Sakura to the grav-tube, where they floated down to Deck Seven. As they were walking along the corridor to the firing range, he asked, "How comfortable are you with firearms, Sakura?"

"Prior to Shinatobe, I'd never fired one before," she replied a little apprehensively.

"And afterwards?" he asked, pushing the button to open the door into the range, and waving her through.

The lights flickered on as she walked inside the room, and Sakura paused as she closed her eyes, then started to trawl through her memories detailing hundreds of grisly murders. She grimaced as she started searching through the scenes of carnage, checking to see if the assassin had used any guns.

John saw her troubled expression, then placed a hand on her shoulder, and said in a quiet voice, "Forget I asked. We'll assume you're a novice, and if you pick things up quickly, we can move on to the advanced training."

Sakura nodded, and said soberly, "From what I've seen so far, Shinatobe didn't really use guns. The tranquiliser pistol she used against you was the rare exception, and that was only for extractions. Typically it was brutal murders using her swords, but sometimes she used poison, and occasionally explosives."

"Alyssa, Rachel and Calara had no real firearms experience, so they all started as complete beginners. You've seen how bright they are though, and they all learned very quickly," he explained, smiling as he remembered how Alyssa had soon surpassed his own marksmanship skills.

"What about the other girls?" she asked, looking at him with interest.

He thought about it for a moment, remembering the early days with each of them, and replied, "Dana was a gunsmith back on Karron, so she was very comfortable with shooting pistols, and picked up assault rifles without any difficulty. Irillith had plenty of experience already, having already been trained by the Maliri. Jade... well she's a special case."

Her curiosity piqued, Sakura asked, "Special in what way?"

John walked over to the weapon racks, and replied, "She can't use guns."

Sakura frowned, and replied, "She certainly doesn't seem like a pacifist to me, and that tiger form she has is absolutely terrifying! Shinatobe was very lucky Jade didn't tear her in half."

He retrieved a pistol from the weapon rack and checked to make sure it was unloaded, before picking up a bundle of ten-millimetre magazines, and walking over towards the range. As he did so, he agreed, "You're right, she's quite lethal with her shapeshifting forms, and has no problem fighting in the gunship." He looked thoughtful as he added, "Nymphs are artificial lifeforms created by the Progenitors, and they built some kind of mental conditioning into Jade. If she even thinks about using a weapon, it seems to cause her physical pain. "

"How strange," Sakura murmured. "I wonder why the Progenitors added that limitation? Maybe they were worried about a slave revolt?"

"But why let her fight in shapeshifted forms, or in spaceships? The Maliri were slaves too, but they don't have those kind of limitations," he replied with a puzzled frown. Shrugging helplessly, he placed the magazines on the shooting bench, and continued, "Anyway, whatever the reason, she's not keen on wearing armour either, so I try and keep her out of harm's way."

Sakura nodded, and couldn't help but think back to Shinatobe's fight with the Jade tiger. She replied quietly, "That's very wise."

John studied her with a hint of a smile forming on his lips, and he asked, "Surely you're not after another spanking already?"

She laughed at that, and her eyes sparkled as she said, "Not right now."

John let her little indiscretion pass, and beckoning her over to join him, he said with a reassuring smile, "We'll have you trained up with assault rifles in no time, but we'll start with pistols first to let you get familiar with firing on a range. Mastering squad tactics might take a little longer, as you'll need to build up some experience."

"That sounds like a sensible approach to me," she replied agreeably, as she walked over to join him. Glancing down at her swollen belly, she raised an eyebrow and added, "This might prove a bit of a problem though, especially when we start training with swords."

John smiled, and reached out a hand to stroke her rounded stomach. "We'll just have to work around that, but I'll need to keep you topped up so you can finish going through the Change. I was thinking that when you're full like this, it's probably a good idea for you to spend a couple of hours practicing in the firing range. The vast majority of our combat shooting tends to be while we're standing or kneeling, so I'd like you to focus on those firing positions. Once your tummy goes down, we'll get geared up and do some sparring. How does that sound?"

"Three sessions a day?" she asked eagerly.

He chuckled, and replied, "If you think you can handle six hours shooting, and six hours sparring a day, I'll be happy to train you."

Sakura looked him in the eye, and he could see her unshakeable resolve as she gave him a firm nod.

"Good girl," he said approvingly. "Let's get started with the rules for safe gun handling first."

They spent the next hour going through the safe use of firearms, followed by the rules for range safety, and finally stripping and assembling the pistol. Sakura listened to him carefully, a serious, intense expression on her face as she hung on his every word. When he was confident that she understood and had memorised his instructions, and could assemble the weapon effortlessly, they stood at one of the lanes. He hit a button on the wall-mounted console, and with a whir of servos, a target dummy sprang up downrange.

"Alright, just gently squeeze the trigger," he told her as she aimed the pistol at the target.

The pistol felt comfortable in her hands, a certain familiar weight to it that she knew she'd experienced before. As she looked down the sights, her mind suddenly drifted, and she found herself reliving one of Shinatobe's old memories again.

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Shinatobe watched from the terrace overlooking the patio, as the beautiful young trophy wife wrapped her arms around her lover's neck and kissed him passionately. The couple were taking advantage of the balmy evening on Merianas IV, and were about to take a naked dip in the lothario's hot-tub. The assassin's target was slightly tipsy, and she accidentally spilled some of her chilled champagne down her lover's back, causing him to gasp in shock and pull away from her. He shivered with the cold while the woman giggled mischievously, and when he laughed and made to chase after her, she squealed and darted away.

Using the smartlinked targeting scope built into her bionic eye, Shinatobe took careful aim at the young woman. Taking into account wind velocity, the range to her target, the drop from the balcony, and the foot-speed of the giggling girl, the assassin squeezed the trigger. There was a barely discernible hiss as the tranquiliser pistol fired, and the dart soared out and hit the blonde in the neck. She stumbled woozily, then dropped to the floor, her champagne flute rolling out of her limp fingers.

"Jocelyn! What's wrong?!" the man cried out as he knelt down by the unconscious woman's side.

Vaulting over the terrace balcony, Shinatobe dropped lightly to the floor, barely making a sound as she landed. Deactivating her Nanoweave suit, she flickered into view as the light-bending field dissipated, then prowled towards her crouching victim. Drawing her sword with a long protracted motion, she deliberately made the blade create a long chilling note as she pulled it from its scabbard.

The man looked up, and his eyes widened in fear when he saw her approaching. It only took one glance at her sinister black sword, for him to realise that the terrifying ninja had a much darker fate in store for him. He stumbled away from the girl with a startled cry, falling backwards onto the patio in his desperation to escape. Scrambling to his feet, he turned and fled, abandoning his lover to the black-clad assassin stalking after him.

Shinatobe stepped over the prone girl, ignoring her for the moment as she glided after the terrified man. She could have ended it there and then, but the Tetra-cola executive had been quite specific in his instructions for this contract. The cuckolded husband was determined to exact a terrible vengeance on his wife's lover, and he'd made two requests: the finale was to be protracted, and it was to be excruciatingly painful.

She swept through the patio doors into the house, activating the thermal imaging in her bionic eyes. Moving purposefully, Shinatobe followed the panicked footprints that she could see highlighted in orange, against the cold, tiled floor.

"Not bad for your first shot," someone said, the comforting baritone drawing Sakura from her reverie.

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"Try and aim for centre mass," John suggested helpfully. He patted the middle of his chest, and smiled at her as he added, "Right here."

Blinking a couple of times as she adjusted to the disorientating change in surroundings, Sakura gazed down the firing range at the target dummy. She could clearly see where the ten-millimetre round had hit the polycarbonate figure, evidenced by the blackened gunshot wound where her shot had struck, just a few millimetres away from the carotid artery in the neck. At least, that's where the vein would have been, if the dummy had a blood supply to carry a paralyzing poison around its body.

She blinked at John owlishly, then nodded as she replied, "Okay, I'll aim for the chest next time."

Narrowing his eyes perceptively, John asked, "You just had another memory flashback, didn't you?"

Sakura nodded, but was hesitant as she replied, "The first one in the kitchen was about fighting with swords... This one was about firing a tranquiliser pistol."

He looked at her with concern, and asked, "Do you want to stop and take a break?"

"No, I'm fine, honestly!" she protested in a hurry, giving him a bright smile in an attempt to convince him she was unshaken after reliving the disturbing memory.

With a flash of insight, he glanced down the range again, noting the blackened mark on the target dummy's neck. Looking into Sakura's unsettled brown eyes, he said, "That neck shot was the best place to land a tranquiliser dart, wasn't it?"

She nodded, and replied quietly, "Yes, I believe so."

He squeezed her shoulder with his hand, and said warily, "I'd like you to talk to Rachel, and ask her to give you a check-up. If there's something serious behind these flashbacks, then I want to know what it is so I can fix it."

Her eyes twinkled now as she asked him, "Still fixing your wounded little bird?"

John stroked her back, and replied, "Just trying to make sure you're safe and well. You're part of our family now, so you'll have to get used to me being over-protective."

"It's alright, I like it," she said, blushing slightly.

Sakura turned back towards the firing range, and did her best to steady her racing heart as she aimed the pistol at the target again. Gently squeezing the trigger, the pistol kicked in her hand, and the bullet hit the dummy just above the sternum.

"Nice," John said, smiling at her when she glanced at him out of the corner of her eye. "You can spend the rest of the morning practicing with that pistol and going through the rest of those magazines. When you're confident using a pistol, I'll train you with the XR75 rifle."

"Sounds good," she agreed with an eager grin, taking aim again and flipping the selector switch to semi-auto.

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"I see what you mean, Faye. This place is breathtaking," Irillith murmured, as she floated high above the Invictus' digital network.

"Just wait until you see inside!" Faye gushed, as they drifted lower to the gleaming spires that represented her Progenitor-based hardware.

They were currently surveying the myriad nodes that made up the cyber space infrastructure of their home, and the purple sprite had brought her Maliri Creator to a very specific location: her new server, which had been modelled on the original Nexus hardware designed by Mael'nerak.

Unlike the drab featureless digital fortresses in a Terran network, the Progenitor server was made up of dozens of shimmering towers, linked together on slender platforms. The entire construction seemed to shift as if possessed of a will of its own, never presenting a portal that could be hacked for more than a few seconds, before it was on its way once more. The structure was covered in an iridescent dome, which partially reflected the light, making the towers inside seem hazy and indistinct.

The madly shifting structures paused as they recognised Faye's digital presence, and an oval doorway spiralled open in the dome, allowing them entry. The purple sprite offered her friend her hand, and squeezed it reassuringly as they floated through the portal. Irillith looked around her with wide eyes, as what had appeared to be a relatively compact digital castle was now revealed to be a colossal maze of data archives. Intricate webs of data streams wove throughout the interior of the cyber-castle in a kaleidoscope of bright colours, before converging in dozens of processing exchanges.

Irillith marvelled at her surroundings, truly taking in the scale of the place, and with mouth agape, she exclaimed, "It's so much bigger on the inside!"

"I know! I haven't been able to figure out how that works yet," Faye confessed with a grin.

Taking a closer look at the data streams and computation apexes that webbed through the cyber-castle, she began to recognise some of the technology driving the Progenitor fortress. Some of it was so advanced, it had only been considered far-fetched theory. Polymorphic processors, Multidimensioned Bit-Matrix Insertion Busses, Omniphased data caching, Recursive block adaptor layering, Multimodal optimizations, Rainbow grid tabled ultra-resolution analog coprocessors, Pathfinding multi-index channels, Regressive correlators with continuous update capacities, the list seemed endless.

"This technology is incredible!" Irillith gasped in wonder.

"Home sweet home," the purple AI replied with a mischievous smile.

Shaking her head in amazement, Irillith stared up at the shifting towers above her head, where the roaming heavy defences were located. Each tower was a bastion of lethal hunter-killer programs, manifesting in the form of sinister weapon barrels that were illuminated by an eerie red glow. She shivered at the thought of trying to break into a place like that, with those terrifying floating fortresses attacking from all sides. Heavily armed Data Sentinels glided past her silently; black, angular, and toting huge multi-barrelled rotary cannons, they were ominous with their forbidding presence. The Maliri girl was exceedingly glad they were friendly. Or at least, non-hostile.

"So, what do you think?" Faye asked, her adorable face shining with excitement.

Finally locking eyes with the fluttering purple girl, Irillith replied, "You're right. If we could replace all the hardware on the ship with this Progenitor tech, the Invictus would be impregnable."

Nodding eagerly, Faye said, "It would take a lot of work, but it'd be worth it!" Her face turned down into a cute frown as she added, "We'd have to take most of the ship's systems offline to upgrade the primary hub, so we'll have to wait until we're in drydock."

"It would definitely be worth it," Irillith agreed. "Especially installing a new server to power the Invictus' external Gateway."

"That was what I was thinking too! Then perhaps a few more in key locations around the network to act as additional lines of defence," Faye said, as she nodded with enthusiasm. She looked at her creator quizzically after a brief pause, and added, "So what plans did you have in mind?"

"I was thinking about something on a considerably smaller scale, but we could start implementing my enhancements immediately," the Maliri girl explained, as she thought about her own security ideas.

"Tell me all about them!" Faye exclaimed, her shimmering wings vibrating in a blur. "I'd love to help!"

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They reconvened for lunch at one o'clock, with everyone excited by the work they'd started that morning. John strolled into the Galley with plates stacked high with a variety of different sandwiches, while Sakura followed after him carrying a big bowl of salad. They'd been the first to finish for the morning, so had gone up to the kitchen to prepare food for everyone. John had put her in charge of slicing up the lettuce, and she'd handled the knife deftly, reducing the vegetable to bite-sized portions without recalling any more memories.

John sat down on the chair at the head of the table, making room for Sakura to kneel in front of him so she could enjoy her own tasty repast. She blushed slightly as she went down on her knees, feeling slightly embarrassed.

\*Every girl here wishes they were you right now, me included. There's no need to feel shy,\* Alyssa said to her telepathically, her voice warm and reassuring.

Flashing her a grateful look, the Asian girl smiled at John, then disappeared under the table.

John helped her with his trousers, then sighed as he was engulfed in a hot, eager little mouth, her velvety tongue gliding along his length. Stroking her head with one hand, he raised the other as he looked around the table, and asked, "May I make a suggestion, girls?"

"Of course," Calara replied, while looking at him curiously. "What did you have in mind?"

"Let's skip the daily status updates, and keep it a surprise for the presentations when you're done. Sound reasonable?" he asked, glancing around at the faces all turned in his direction.

When everyone nodded their agreement, Calara said, "Actually, there's something I wanted to mention that probably needs investigating." She smiled at John as she continued, "I was so keyed up to tell you that I'd be looking into your mother's disappearance, I forgot to bring it up before."

"Ah, right. The DNA reader?" John asked her, as he realised what she was referring to.

"That's it," the Latina agreed, turning to look at Dana and Rachel. "I tried to close the airlock in the Raptor, but the DNA reader didn't recognise me!"

Dana blinked in surprise, and said, "I can run a diagnostic, see if it's on the blink."

Rachel studied the olive-skinned brunette, and shaking her head at her redheaded friend, she said, "I don't think that's what Calara's referring to." She looked into the Latina's eyes, and continued, "You suspect your genetic code has been modified again, don't you?"

"Yes, that was my first thought," Calara replied, glancing at John.

All eyes turned to him now, and he held up both hands defensively as he joked, "You're all mighty quick to blame the DNA-modifying Progenitor in the room!"

The girls all laughed at that, and Alyssa gave him an affectionate smile as she said, "You do have a certain amount of history in that regard. What've you been up to?"

He frowned as he glanced down at the raven-haired temptress worshiping his cock, and said, "I admit I've been thinking about pushing the boundaries a bit with Sakura, but I honestly hadn't really planned on making any enhancements to the rest of you."

"That sounds awfully vague," Rachel noted with a wry smile. "Perhaps I'd better run some tests on all of us."

"What were you going to do to Sakura?" Jade asked him sounding quite fascinated.

"Nothing crazy, just helping her get a bit stronger and quicker for melee combat," he explained as he looked down and gazed into the dark-brown eyes staring up at him.

She sucked powerfully, the hunger and desire he could see in her eyes reflected in her technique. It was tremendously exciting to know she was so enthusiastic to receive his Gift, and being able to just relax and enjoy himself brought his climax on swiftly. He held her head with both hands, caressing her lovingly as she gulped down long spurts of cum, eager to empty his quad of every last drop.

Their audience waited patiently for him to finish, and a glance around the table when he helped Sakura to her feet afterwards revealed plenty of flushed, excited faces. He got dressed again, then helped her onto his lap, where he held her protectively while stroking her huge tummy.

"I so wish I was you right now," Dana said to Sakura with a sigh of lament.

Alyssa smiled at her, and said, "You're already being lined up for another two weeks of special attention, Sparks! Spare a thought for the rest of us, you greedy girl."

"Yeah, but that's ages away," Dana said, looking forlorn.

Sakura looked her way, and said agreeably, "I don't want to be selfish. I did enjoy getting lunch and dinner rather more unconventionally yesterday..."

With an impish smile, Alyssa said, "I'm sure we'll be able to accommodate you there."

Calara caught John's eye and asked off-handedly, "What are you up to this afternoon? I wondered if you'd be up for a sparring session?"

"Definitely!" John agreed, smiling at the thought. "It's been far too long since our last bout."

Her brown eyes flashed with excitement, and she gave John a challenging look as she said, "I have a feeling Sakura's going to be wearing you out when you start all that sword training, so you won't be much use to me then. I hope you're going to make this fight worth my while!"

He grinned at her, and replied, "I think you can count on me to put you through your paces, Commander."

"I can't wait to see you fight!" Sakura gasped, looking at him with excitement.

Shaking his head, he said firmly, "Not until Rachel's checked you over. If there's a problem, I want to know about it immediately."

Rachel looked at them quizzically, so Sakura explained about the strange memories that kept being randomly triggered. That was enough to trigger the brunette's professional curiosity, so once everyone had finished eating lunch, Sakura found herself accompanying Rachel and Dana down to Deck Seven.

"I hope you're not feeling too overwhelmed by everything?" Rachel asked her conversationally, as they stepped out of the grav-tube.

Sakura smiled at the brunette, and as they started walking down the corridor, she replied, "Everyone's been very sweet so far, considering the circumstances."

Dana wagged a finger at her, and grinned as she said, "I hope that wasn't a guilty look I just saw. I'd love the chance to spank that delicious little bottom of yours."

The Asian girl laughed, and said, "No, just being honest. It's amazing none of you girls have been upset with me after everything that happened."

"As John said, you weren't in control of your body at the time," Rachel said soothingly, linking arms with her.

"Yeah, we should know!" Dana said with a chuckle. "The amount of cybernetic shit we pulled out of you, I'm amazed you didn't clank when you walked!"

Sakura didn't laugh at her joke though, and just looked sombre, a serious, thoughtful expression appearing on her face. Dana's smile faded, and she flashed a look of concern at her brunette lover.

Rachel stopped outside the Medical lab, and said gently, "We're sorry. We didn't mean to upset you by talking about the implants."

When the raven-haired girl met her gaze, she had a look of profound gratitude on her face, and she reached out to place a hand on Dana's and Rachel's shoulders. "I'm not upset, I'm just so grateful to the pair of you," she said looking at each of them in turn. "I know you both played a pivotal part in removing all those implants, so let me just say: Thank you, for saving my life."

The other two girls were both touched by her open sincerity, and then stepped forward to embrace her. They stood together like that for a long moment, just enjoying the intimate moment.

Rachel eventually stepped back, and said, "You're very welcome. It was a wonderful feeling knowing that I was helping you."

Dana nodded, and whispered conspiratorially, "She did most of the work, to be honest. I'm a bit squeamish, so once the bomb was out of your head, I pretty much left Rachel to it."

Sakura smiled at her, and said, "I think you contributed quite a bit. You might not believe me, but I'm quite glad it's not in there any more."

The other two girls laughed at that, and Rachel said, "Come on, let's go get you checked out. Then I can give you a clean bill of health, and you can go and watch John and Calara sparring." Turning to glance at Dana, she added, "Are you keeping us company or shall I meet up with you in Engineering later?"

"Ah fuck it, I'll stick around with you two!" Dana replied with a grin. "I can still work on those schematics while we're chatting anyway."

Rachel nodded, then strolled into the Medical Lab, beckoning Sakura in after her. The doctor strolled over to the full-body scanner, and then patted the table in an obvious gesture for the Asian girl to lie down.

She helped her patient to climb up onto the table, the heavy weight around Sakura's waist robbing her of her normal agility. "I'll just take a quick scan of your brain to check that everything's okay," Rachel said in a calm, soothing voice. "I have a theory about what's happening, but I agree with John, it's important to check you're okay."

She turned to begin the scanning procedure, while Dana stepped up beside the scanning table. Her eyes flickered to the heavily rounded tummy, and she asked, "May I?"

Knowing exactly what she was asking, Sakura nodded, then sighed as the redhead began gently caressing her cum-swollen abdomen. A blue beam began to pass along the length of the supine girl's body, the scanner humming softly as it examined her body.

"You look fucking hot," Dana murmured, her slender fingers tracing intricate patterns over the taut skin. She glanced over the table at Rachel, and added, "I remember when you were sucking down John's cum twenty-four-seven. I could barely keep my hands off you."

"Fortunately the same applies even when I'm not carrying one of his loads," Rachel said, smiling at the redhead affectionately.

Dana shrugged, but the look she shot the brunette was loving as she said, "You're a fine piece of ass, babes. I can't help myself."

Rachel's eyes sparkled as she replied, "Likewise, my love."

Sakura looked like she wanted to say something, but she faltered, and just stayed quiet instead.

Dana caught her hesitation, and she smiled as she said encouragingly, "You don't need to be shy. We've both gone down on you, and you've eaten John's cum from my pussy, so I think we're well past that! Ask me whatever you like, I promise I won't get mad."

The Asian girl blushed for a moment, then feeling emboldened, she smiled as she said, "You mentioned before that you'd 'give me the lowdown on ship life'. I had a few personal questions I wanted to ask if that's okay?"

"Awesome! Straight to the good stuff!" Dana exclaimed with an excited grin. "Fire away!"

Relaxing in the face of the redhead's obvious enthusiasm, Sakura said, "You two make a lovely couple, but Alyssa mentioned that you hadn't been into girls before you went through the Change. I know Calara and Alyssa are a couple too, so I was wondering if I'm going to pair up with someone as well?"

"Irillith and Jade are both free! Why don't you get it on with one of them?" Dana said with enthusiasm. She shot a glance at Rachel, and added, "Dyking out is loads of fun, and John loves it!"

Rachel laughed, and rolled her eyes affectionately at her lover as she replied, "What a charming way to put it." She looked at Sakura next, and continued, "That's not what you meant though is it? You want to know if you're obligated to pair off with another girl?"

Sakura nodded, then sounded a bit embarrassed as she said, "I've always been curious, but I was never bold enough to experiment when I was at college. I guess I just wanted to know what the expectations were, now I've joined you."

Smiling at her warmly, Rachel reached down to gently stroke her jet-black hair, and said, "John doesn't really have any expectations, that's just not the way he works. He definitely won't force you into some relationship with another girl if that's what you're worried about." She gave Dana a loving glance, and added, "I started falling for this potty-mouthed harlot immediately. You'd never believe it to hear her talk, but she's a lovely girl."

Dana blew her a kiss, and said, "Likewise, beautiful!"

Rachel then said, "Besides, as Dana just mentioned, Jade and Irillith have been with us a while, and they haven't started a relationship."

"Jade's only got eyes for John though. I can't see her pairing off with another girl," Dana said as she thought it over. She met Sakura's inquisitive gaze, and added, "You must have seen those reverent looks she gives him, the girl practically worships the ground he walks on."

"That's partly due to her nature though. She's a Nymph and he's her master, so she's programmed by her genetic code to adore him," Rachel clarified.

\*There's more to it than that,\* Alyssa said telepathically, her honeyed tones swathing Sakura's mind. \*Jade's very much in love with John, which vastly amplifies her devotion to him. It makes the bond between them very strong indeed.\*

Dana and Rachel nodded thoughtfully, having heard the same message from their blonde matriarch.

Sakura looked worried though, and asked, "How can I hope to compete with that? How's he even going to notice me when his connection with Jade is so overwhelming?"

"Just be yourself," Dana said with a shrug. "He loves all of us, but in different ways."

Rachel nodded, and had a knowing smile on her face as she said, "You'll find your own niche, just like each of us have."

Sakura moved to sit up, fascinated by what the brunette had just said, but she paused a second, and asked, "Is the scan complete?"

"It's all done. You're in excellent health, there's nothing to be anxious about," Rachel confirmed, glancing at the results, and offering her a hand to help her sit up. "I'd like to take a blood sample if that's okay? I'm curious about something..."

"Sure, go ahead," Sakura replied, sitting up and looking conflicted for a moment. She finally made a decision, and added, "Can we come back to the niche conversation in a moment? I was curious about your theory about my memories."

Rachel reached over to a table to retrieve a hypo-syringe, and placed it against Sakura's golden brown skin to take the sample. She smiled at the raven-haired girl, as she said, "Your circumstances are quite unique, but I have an idea what might be happening. There's a phenomenon where people see their life flash before their eyes in life-threatening situations, which is just the brain desperately trying to find any useful experience that could help save them.

I think your brain is simply trying to make use of those digitally-archived memories when it recognises a similar situation. The problem is that they're so sharp and distinct, you end up getting drawn into reliving the memory, instead of just recalling it as a nebulous thought."

Her hands moved in deft movements as she took the sample and assembled a disc for the DNA analyser. Her grey eyes glinted with curiosity as she smiled at Sakura, then strolled over to the big genetic sampling machine.

"That makes sense," Sakura said as she pondered Rachel's theory. She glanced at the distracted doctor, and continued, "So once I've learned all these skills that I used to know before, then I'll stop having flashbacks?

"That pretty much sums it up," Dana replied for her lover, who was now staring at the blood results.

Rachel's eyes widened, and she murmured quietly, "He wasn't kidding..."

"Everything okay?" Sakura asked her, a little alarmed by the brunette's reaction.

The doctor seemed to be listening to something or someone for a moment, before she straightened, and gave her patient a friendly smile. "You're in perfect health. Nothing to worry about," she replied cheerfully, putting the girl at ease. She walked back to join the other girls then, and added, "Now, you were asking about finding your niche here?"

"Yes, that's right," Sakura replied, nodded eagerly. Glancing at the brunette and redhead, she asked, "Would you mind if I ask what yours are?"

The two girls shared amused glances, and then Dana grinned as she replied, "He loves how insanely fucking smart Rachel is. I think he likes the way she talks too, especially her classy accent."

Rachel smiled at her lover, and said, "John's strongly attracted to your intellect as well. I think he quite likes all the swearing, and how excitable you are."

"How 'excitable' I am?! That makes me sound like a fucking five year old!" Dana said with a pout.

"It's quite endearing, but don't worry, he knows you're all woman," Rachel purred, stroking her friend's arm placatingly.

Dana smiled at the brunette, her indignation smoothed away. She turned to give Sakura a heated look, and she said, "And he -really- loves fucking the two of us together. What red-blooded man wouldn't want to straighten-out a couple of smoking hot lesbians?"

Sakura grinned at the redhead, her exuberance quite infectious, and replied, "If I was a straight guy, I know I'd want to!"

Laughing at that, Dana winked at Rachel and said, "See, even Sakura wants to bone us!"

\*They're just lucky I don't have a dick,\* Alyssa said lustily, getting turned on by the conversation. \*The pair of them wouldn't be able to walk straight for a month!\*

Rachel and Dana both flushed with excitement, as they received a similar lewd telepathic message from the blonde.

"How about the other girls?" Sakura asked, glancing at the two girls completely intrigued.

\*Yeah, they'd have similar trouble walking,\* Alyssa joked. \*I think they're extremely fuckable too.\*

All three girls in the Medical Bay laughed at that, until Rachel eventually replied to Sakura's question, "Yes, they've each got their own little niche."

Dana looked at her friend, and said, "I've got a good idea, but I'm curious to hear this."

Rachel looked thoughtful for a moment, and said, "I think Calara's the kind of girl John would have liked to settle down with if he'd lived a 'normal' life. They share common interests, like the martial arts, and the military background, and she's got a lovely personality that meshes well with his. Considering John's upbringing, her stable family life must have lots of appeal too." She glanced at Dana, and said, "I've heard how much effort he made to try and win them over."

\*She's very astute,\* Alyssa said quietly to Sakura.

Shaking her head in amazement, Dana exclaimed, "I think you're dead-right! How'd you come up with all this?"

"Just from observing him," Rachel replied with a smile. "I like to know what makes him tick."

"Alright then, what about Irillith?" Dana asked, quite fascinated.

"John's strongly attracted to her physically, but it goes much deeper than that. Her species was genetically modified for a Progenitor to effortlessly assume control, so she's a reminder of his instinctive need to dominate. The fact that she's strong willed, and has a sharper edge to her makes her more of a challenge," Rachel explained, thinking about the times she'd seen the two of them together. "Having healed the more caustic edge to her personality, I think he's quite protective of her too."

"Which leaves Alyssa," Sakura said, in a hushed voice.

\*That's my cue to leave, ladies,\* Alyssa thought to them all. \*As the saying goes, 'Eavesdroppers never hear anything good about themselves'.\*

\*Wait, don't go!\* Rachel thought to her, before Alyssa could drop the telepathic connection to them all.

Their blonde matriarch paused for a long moment, then replied with some trepidation, \*Alright, I'm listening.\*

Rachel spoke out loud, knowing that the psychic girl would still be able to hear her, and said quietly, "Alyssa was the girl that transformed John's life, and with those two, it's a case of 'opposites attract'. Where he's naturally quieter and reserved, she's vivacious and brings him out of his shell, pushing his boundaries in lots of exciting ways. He knows how much she takes care of all of us, with her kind, caring, and thoughtful nature, which makes him love her even more. With their telepathic connection, she knows every facet of his personality, and supports him unconditionally in every way she can. Alyssa was his first love, and the depth of their connection is quite profound."

\*I hadn't really thought about us like that before...\* Alyssa said in a hushed telepathic murmur.

Dana nodded, and said with an affectionate smile, "Good summary, babes. They're soulmates alright."

Sakura nodded thoughtfully, and mused out loud, "You all appeal to different aspects of his personality. I just need to find out how John and I can connect in a similar way."

"I don't think you have anything to worry about," Rachel said with the hint of a smile.

Sakura narrowed her eyes, and asked suspiciously, "Have you figured something out already?"

Dana grinned as she shared a glance with the brunette, and interjected, "Yeah, you'll be alright."

Realising that the two of them weren't going to reveal anything more, Sakura smiled, and said, "I suppose it'll be fun finding out for myself."

\*That's the spirit,\* Alyssa said with an encouraging telepathic smile.

Sakura looked at Rachel, and said, "You mentioned earlier that you liked to find out what makes John tick. Could I ask you something else?"

"Of course," the brunette replied. "What did you want to know?"

Sakura blushed furiously and faltered for a moment, before she steeled her resolve, and asked, "What really turns him on?"

Dana reached out and took her hand in her own, and said in all seriousness, "There's something I think I should warn you about, with John."

"What is it?" Sakura asked, gripping the other girl's hand tighter, and staring at her with wide eyes.

"He's quite fond of blowjobs," the redhead replied, her sky-blue eyes sparkling with mischief.

Alyssa smiled to herself as she heard the three girls in the Medical Bay descend into peals of laughter.

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Calara struck hard and fast, landing a punch to his stomach before he could block her attack. He grunted as he took the hit, then stepped forward to grapple with her to try to bring the bout to a quick finish. The Latina had been expecting that however, and she crouched down and rolled away out of his reach, her ponytail bouncing around her shoulders as she sprang to her feet again.

"Very nice," John said, acknowledging her hit with an appreciative nod. "You're on fire today."

She grinned at him and replied, "I just know all your tricks. I can read you like a book!"

Leaping into the air, she pivoted as she launched a devastating roundhouse kick at his chest. He narrowly avoided it, hurriedly ducking backwards to prevent her foot from caving in his chest. It therefore came as quite a shock when he realised that as powerful an attack as that kick had been, it had actually been a feint, designed to lure him into leaving himself unbalanced. She dropped to the floor, using her momentum to spin herself around, and she swept his legs out from under him before he could react.

John crashed to the mat on his back, only for Calara to spring on his chest, pinning him to the ground.

He shook his head in amazement, and said, "I take back what I said before. You're even more perceptive since we got engaged!"

Her dark-brown eyes smouldered as she looked down at him, the adrenaline coursing through her veins stirring her lust. Calara leaned down to kiss him passionately, her tongue duelling with his as he wrapped his arms around her, hugging her tightly. She looked so vibrant and full of life like this, and John kissed her back, just as aroused.

His hands roamed over her body, feeling the definition of her lean, powerful muscles under his firm grip. They'd been sparring for just over three hours, and although they were both in the peak of physical condition, such an intensive workout for so long had left them breathless. Calara's supple olive-coloured skin glistened with perspiration under the light, reminding him of the times she'd oiled herself up with Alyssa. His cock thickened at the thought, and the Latina writhed against him as she felt the hot hardness under her belly.

Sitting up suddenly, she matched his frenzied stare with a lustful one of her own, and purred, "That's enough foreplay."

Smoothly dismounting him she pulled her top over her head, freeing her proud breasts that sat high on her chest without a hint of sag. He watched her strip off her leggings, then stand nude before him, shaking out her ponytail as she gave him another challenging look. This one had a very different edge to it though.

He rose to his feet, and stepped towards her, his hands drawn like magnets to her luscious flesh. "You're magnificent," he said, shaking his head in wonder, as he caressed her nubile young body.

"I'm yours," she replied, before standing on tiptoe and giving him a tender kiss. Turning then, she knelt down and tossed her long brown hair out of the way, so she could glance at him over her shoulder, her eyes drawing him in.

John didn't take long to remove his own clothes, and he sank his cock into her yielding flesh with a groan of delight that was matched by her own. Gathering her hair in his clenched fist, he held tight to her waist with the other hand, and prepared himself to give her the ride of her life.

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"Are you ready for dinner?" Jade asked Sakura, as she brushed her fingers over the Asian girl's svelte waist.

Her face flushed with arousal, Sakura smiled at the green-skinned alien, and replied, "Oh yes, definitely."

Sakura's tanned tummy was flat again now, her body having greedily devoured lunch over the last several hours. After the Medical Bay check-up, She'd been having such a great time with Dana and Rachel, that she hadn't wanted to leave their easy-going company. Dana had invited her to the Engineering Bay to check the sizing for her new training gear, which is where they'd met Jade, who was building the modified Paragon body armour. The Nymph had been delighted to have the company, and she'd listened avidly as the other three girls chattered away together.

The Asian girl was only a few inches shorter than her adoptive sisters, but wasn't quite as athletic or busty enough to match their Amazonian physiques. Dana had looked her over with an appraising eye, as they spent some time checking the fit of the training body armour. This seemed to involve plenty of cup-size verification, and Dana's warm hands and busy fingers were the perfect measuring implements - according to the enthusiastic redhead at least. Sakura hadn't minded one bit, growing very turned on with all the stimulation.

Jade took the smaller girl's hand, and said, "We'd better head off then, Alyssa says they're nearly there."

Sakura waved the brunette and redhead goodbye, then followed the Nymph as she led her by the hand down the corridor to the gym. Jade pushed the button to open the door, and loud feminine cries of pleasure drifted from the room. Biting her lip in excitement, Sakura followed Jade into the gym, and her eyes widened as she saw John and Calara together.

The pair looked primal together, as John roughly fucked the kneeling brunette. She was on her knees in front of him, but sitting back in his lap as he pulled her back against his chest with a fist full of her hair. The couple were completely oblivious to the new arrivals, entirely focused on one another, as they drew closer to their release.

Jade coaxed Sakura across the mat, then shrugged her dress off her shoulders so she was standing naked beside her. The petite raven-haired beauty was transfixed by the erotic coupling before them, so she was almost oblivious to her companion helping her out of her jumpsuit. Sakura had started to grow used to walking around naked or wearing little more than one of John's shirts, so she was completely unperturbed at being divested of clothes.

She knelt down obediently as she watched John ravishing Calara, and the Nymph knelt directly behind her, pressing her cool breasts against the golden-brown skin of Sakura's back. "He's taking her in the ass," Jade whispered in Sakura's ear.

Sakura's head whipped around sharply, looking at the Nymph over her shoulder as she said, "But I thought..."

Jade kissed her on the cheek, then wrapped her arms around the smaller girl, one hand caressing her slim stomach, the other gently slipping between Sakura's thighs. "We can still fill your tummy, as long as you have an open mind," she purred as her probing fingers found her target.

Letting out a low moan, Sakura leaned back against the Nymph, spreading her legs a little wider to give those adept green fingers more room to work. She seemed to realise what Jade was implying though, and looked a bit green herself as she faltered, "I... I don't know if I can..."

Shaking her head, Jade smiled at her, and replied, "No, that's why I'm here. You trust me, don't you?"

Her breath was growing more uneven, and between gasps, Sakura managed to pant, "Yes, I trust you!"

John pinned Calara in place, then thrust deep inside her, roaring out his lust as he filled her hugely stretched ass. The Latina came with him as his cum surged inside her, crying out her pleasure as he packed her belly full of spunk.

"Good girl," Jade said approvingly, as she squeezed Sakura's small pert breasts with one hand, while stroking her clit with an expert touch. "I've been really looking forward to feeding you again."

The confusion in the Asian girl's face disappeared as she was wracked with pleasure, and when her orgasm finally abated, she stared at Jade with lustful eyes. "God I needed that!" she gasped, revelling in the afterglow.

"Now little kitten, time to fill that hungry tummy," Jade said, her cat-like eyes glinting in the light.

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Alyssa smiled at John when he arrived in his Ready Room, and she arose from his chair before gliding across the room to meet him halfway for a kiss. "Been having fun?" she asked, as he held her in his arms.

"Of course," he replied, a cheerful grin on his face.

She traced a finger over his happy, upturned lips, and said, "I'll go and organise dinner, and leave you to make your call."

"I didn't mean to turf you out," he apologised as he glanced over at his desk. "What were you working on?"

"My Master's degree in Finance," she replied nonchalantly. "I got a lot done today, so I'll sit the exam tomorrow."

He blinked at her in astonishment, then smiled at her as he joked, "You're taking your time aren't you? I'd have thought you'd have that and your Economics degree already!"

She shook her head, and pouted as she replied, "My Master's in Economics is the day after. I got a bit distracted listening to all of you getting raunchy."

Grinning at his surprise, she gave him another kiss, then sashayed out of the room, knowing he was mesmerised by the provocative sway of her hips.

John shook his head to clear his bewildered thoughts, then chuckled to himself as he strolled over to his desk and sank down into his chair. He closed out the dozens of open holographic panels, not even trying to make heads or tails of the confusing research articles that Alyssa had been reviewing. He opened the comms interface, then searched down the list until he found the name he was looking for.

Swiping across the entry with his finger, he had to wait for a few minutes before the dour face of Eito Yamamoto appeared in the holographic viewscreen. The older man was fully recovered from both his drinking binge, and his subsequent embarrassment at what he'd considered to be a shameful display.

Yamamoto seemed uncharacteristically eager as he asked, "Are you ready to fight?"

Shaking his head, John replied amiably, "I can't at the moment, but I wanted to see if you were available tomorrow at three o'clock, if that works for you?"

Yamamoto's eyes narrowed with irritation, but he grunted his acknowledgement and said, "I'll be there."

John was about to reply when Yamamoto leaned forward and ended the call abruptly. Left staring at the blank viewscreen, he shook his head at the man's rudeness, finding his behaviour more mystifying than ever.

\*I've had to deal with plenty of cantankerous old matriarchs in my time,\* Edraele said to him as she sensed his frustration. \*There could be lots of reasons behind Yamamoto's behaviour.\*

\*I thought we'd had a bit of a breakthrough when he opened up to me about his family,\* John replied with a sad sigh. \*What do you think upset him?\*

\*He might resent losing to you in that duel. You did manage to beat him after he devoted his life to swordfighting; that has to be a bitter pill to swallow,\* she suggested cautiously.

John frowned, and said, \*That could well be true. Yamamoto was an Aikido champion before he quit the sport. After being that successful, he probably doesn't like to lose.\*

\*From what I've read from your thoughts, the man's practically a hermit. He probably isn't used to dealing with people any more,\* Edraele said gently. \*I doubt he's able to handle all the traumatic emotions resurfacing after seeing Shinatobe attack you, especially considering that he lost his family in similar circumstances. That could well be why he's lashing out at you instead. He might even be blaming you for him losing control and getting drunk.\*

John gazed out the window in his Ready Room, catching glimpses of the colourful nebulas that were prevalent around Maliri Space. They were still a few days from the border, but he could still see the swirling reds and green stretching for light years in the far distance.

With a resigned expression on his face, he thought to her, \*I suppose I was looking for some kind of friendship that just wasn't there.\*

After a moment's pause, Edraele asked curiously, \*Why was befriending Yamamoto important to you? I know you're constantly surrounded by far more appealing company.\*

He laughed at that, and replied, \*Yeah, I know, the girls are all lovely.\* With a self-conscious smile, he admitted, \*I guess I just miss a bit of male company.\*

\*Perhaps you should make time to visit Ceraden when you return to Maliri Space. The two of you are friends I believe?\* the Maliri matriarch asked him.

\*That's a nice idea actually, I'd enjoy catching up with that rogue,\* John agreed, smiling as he thought about having a drink with the friendly Maliri trader. \*Thanks Edraele, you've given me something else to look forward to in Maliri Space.\*

She sounded pleased as she replied, \*I love the idea of you setting up your home here at Valaden. I'll do my best to make it as appealing a prospect as possible.\*

He rose from his chair, and sent her a grateful telepathic smile as he strolled from the room to join the girls for dinner then wind down for the evening.

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"Brrt!" the assault rifle chattered angrily, jerking in Sakura's hands.

The firing range echoed with the sound of gunfire for the first time that morning, as Sakura fired a burst at the target dummy. She lowered the rifle, and stared down the range to check where her shots had landed, then frowned when she saw the results. One of the three ten-millimetre caseless rounds had left a blackened entry hole in the dummy's polycarbonate shoulder, but the other two had sailed harmlessly overhead.

"Yeah, the XR75's got a bit of a kick to it," John noted, after observing her first shot with the bullpup rifle. "As you get stronger it'll be easier for you to control the barrel climb. Until then, you'll just have to compensate as best you can."

Sakura glanced over at the Punisher railgun on the weapon rack, taking in the heavy-looking frame, and broad muzzle of the terrifying weapon. She looked at John as she said, "I'm not sure how the girls can handle something so massive."

He winked at her, and said, "They seem to enjoy getting to grips with a big weapon." She giggled at his joke, and he smiled, enjoying hearing her laugh. Walking over to pick up the glossy white Punisher railgun, he added, "Dana did a hell of a job with this rifle. It has less kick than the XR75 due to the recoil dampeners, and although the frame is bigger, it's actually lighter too."

Looking down at the smaller but heavier XR75 rifle, Sakura frowned in confusion as she asked, "So why am I training with this rifle instead of the ones you normally use?"

Picking up a magazine of twenty-millimetre Crystal Alyssium tipped rounds from the racks, John walked over to the range to stand beside her at the next lane. "I'll show you," he replied, as he slapped the mag into place.

He pressed a button on a panel beside him, which raised a new dummy into place down the lane, then made sure the power mode selector on the side of the rifle was set to low-power mode. After taking aim at the fresh target, he squeezed the trigger and the sparkling white rifle murmured, "Prrkaow" as he fired a three-round burst.

The effect on the target dummy was devastating, as three fist-sized holes were blasted out of its chest in a shower of polycarbonate chunks. The torso was torn in half by the impact, the upper section tipping backwards and then falling down to hang by the tattered remnants of its eviscerated body.

"Wow," Sakura breathed, staring in shock at the brutal devastation inflicted on John's target.

"Yeah, I know. That was on low-power mode as well," John said with a grin. He nodded towards the mangled dummy, and continued, "You'll be firing thousands of rounds to practice, and we'd run out of things for you to shoot at if you used a Punisher rifle."

"Can I have a go later?" she asked, giving him an endearing smile.

He ejected the magazine into his hand, and replied, "I want to see you master the XR75 first." He smiled at her indulgently, as he added, "When you can show me you're an expert marksman, then I'll let you fire the Punisher."

Giving him a brief nod to show her understanding, she turned down the range, and did her best to support the weight of the XR75 rifle in her arms. Holding her breath, she took careful aim, and squeezed the trigger.

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"No fucking way!" Rachel swore angrily, shaking her head in disgust.

Dana tore her eyes away from the modifications she was making to the weapon schematic, and looking at the brunette in alarm, she asked, "What is it?!"

Rachel gestured towards the rotating holographic representation of a virus, and explained, "Rogan's Rot. It's not a naturally occurring virus, this is a genetically engineered bio-weapon!"

Dana shivered at the mention of the horrible wasting disease, which had popped up sporadically along the western frontier of Terran Federation space. It could spread like wildfire amongst a planet's population, and even rumours of it could lead to wild panic amongst civilians. When she was a young girl, there'd been talk of one of the ore traders on Karron coming down with alarmingly similar symptoms. The man had eventually been forced to flee the asteroid on a transport, as his home had been burnt to the ground by an angry mob.

"How can you tell?" the redhead asked, stepping away from her Engineering console to look at the round purple sphere, which was covered in raised stalks ending in nodules.

Rachel grimaced as she replied, "Just by looking at it. The structure is far too uniform for something like this to have occurred naturally. Someone gene-spliced the common cold with chronic wasting disease, and amplified its lethality."

Shivering at the thought, Dana glanced at her friend, and asked, "What cold-blooded fucker would mess with something like that? Rogan's Rot has killed millions."

Shrugging helplessly, Rachel replied, "I've no way of knowing for sure, but I'd guess the military? Maybe the Terran Federation intended it for use against the Kirrix, but accidentally infected patient zero; in this case Sam Rogan. I'd have to look up more about his background, but he might have had some military connections."

"Can you develop a cure for it?" Dana asked, glancing at the sinister holographic representation of the virus.

Narrowing her stormy grey eyes, Rachel replied, "I can create a gene-therapy which will prevent it from using someone's cells to replicate itself." She glanced at Dana, and added, "It might be prudent to keep the origins of the virus to ourselves though, especially if it does turn out the Terran Federation was behind it."

Shaking her head, Dana blurted out angrily, "Those fuckers should pay for what they did!"

Rachel frowned, and said soberly, "Humanity's been at war with the Kirrix for centuries. If I'm right, the people behind this could be long dead. There could be quite a backlash if people find out the Terran Federation was behind it."

\*Keep working on the cure, and I'll run it by John,\* Alyssa thought to them both, her anger and disgust palpable over their connection, having overheard the entire discussion.

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A gentle breeze fluttered through the wooden dojo, causing the cherry blossom trees to rustle in the garden outside. As convincingly real as the holo-simulation seemed, it wasn't able to replicate the feeling of wind teasing the hairs on the backs of John's arms. He wasn't consciously aware of that however, as he was busy parrying a frenzied flurry of attacks by the Katana wielding swordmaster.

John gave ground before the storm of blows, and as he fell back a step, his Odachi swished through the air as he countered each wicked slash. Yamamoto had lost his normally calm composure, and his face was contorted with anger as he lashed out with one relentless attack after another. The simulated ringing of steel on steel echoed through the dojo, the sharp notes abrasively loud against the tranquil backdrop of the wooden building and its peaceful surroundings.

Sakura knelt in the corner of the room, thrilled by the unfolding battle, her eyes flickering from side to side as she watched John and his opponent. Her slender hands were folded in her lap, but they twitched from time to time, as she saw a thrust coming for John's chest, or a scything cut aimed at his legs. She'd been enthralled by the intensity of the melee combat, and had studied both swordsmen with fascination for the last three hours.

John stepped back again, keeping his posture defensive, and drawing Yamamoto forward in a reckless pursuit. The older man was raining down blows against John's blocking sword, but as the swordmaster drew his arms back to take another strike, he left himself vulnerable by slightly overextending. This was just what John had been waiting for, and he abruptly reversed direction as he rushed forward. With a quick-stepped lunge and a slight flick of his wrist, his long blade slashed across Yamamoto's throat, instantly ending the fight.

As the computer simulated Yamamoto's head being neatly cleaved from his body, the older man screamed indignantly, "Again!"

John lowered his sword, and quietly replied, "That's the sixth one in a row, Yamamoto. Perhaps we should schedule another session when you've calmed down a bit."

"How dare you talk down to me!" Yamamoto barked. "Don't you know who I am?!"

The man was furious now, and he hurled his training blade away, before whirling around and stomping across the dojo. His Hakama swished with his long strides, and the floorboards creaked as he marched across the room, his normal light-footed step abandoned in his anger.

"Eito, wait!" John called after him.

Yamamoto flinched for a moment at the use of his first name, then disappeared in a flash of light as he abruptly ended the simulation. The room returned to its normal state, leaving John staring at a grey featureless wall. He sighed in disappointment, then turned around to look at Sakura who was kneeling patiently at the far side of the room.

She rose gracefully to her feet, and with a worried frown on her face, she asked, "I hope that wasn't my fault?"

John shook his head as he walked towards her, and replied, "No, he didn't seem bothered by you spectating. There's something else upsetting Yamamoto..."

"What's the matter with him?" she asked, falling into step beside John as he walked over to the weapon rack.

He shrugged, and replied, "Honestly, I don't know him well enough to answer that. I was discussing it with Edraele yesterday, and it could be any one of a host of reasons."

Sakura nodded, but her attention had been drawn to the weapon rack, or more specifically, the Katana and Wakizashi resting below the empty space where John's Odachi normally lay.

Spotting her interest in the training weapons, John smiled as he said, "Why don't you try them out for size? I need to create swords for both of us to train together, so you might as well see what you're comfortable with."

She smiled at him, and reached for the blades, taking the Katana in her right and the Wakizashi in her left. The well balanced weight of each training sword felt comforting in her hands, like shaking hands with old friends dearly missed. A memory stirred within her, and she found herself being drawn into the fragment from her past.

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"You will soon go on your first mission for me," Mikaboshi said, his cold eyes watching her intently as he handed her the twin black swords. He smiled wickedly as he added, "These will be your tools, Shinatobe."

The matching weapons felt cold and strange in her hands, her young fingers used to holding a pen rather than lethally sharp blades. Sakura was trapped within the shell of Shinatobe though, and the datachips plugged into the dataports in her brain immediately kicked in, flooding her mind with fighting styles and techniques.

Gliding out into the empty space in the training room, she could only watch helplessly from inside herself as she began to sweep through various kata, her blades moving in graceful arcs. Her muscles weren't used to the unfamiliar exertions, and she began to ache as Shinatobe put Sakura's body through her paces. Pain began to flood her mind as the practice session dragged on, but she was powerless to do anything about the agonising sensations from her tortured muscles.

Sakura felt herself being shaken, and a concerned voice said, "Snap out of it, honey!"

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The memory faded away, and Sakura felt a flood of relief as the pain washed away with it. She quickly glanced up at John, and said, "Thank you! That was... unpleasant."

"I thought Rachel checked you out? Thought everything was fine?" he asked her, pulling her into a hug.

Sakura let the weapons drop from her hands, and she wrapped her arms around him, just as he'd embraced her. She rested her head against his broad chest, enjoying hearing his strong heartbeat as she cuddled into him.

"It's my mind reliving the memories, and trying to use them to help with my training," she murmured, letting out a contented sigh, and feeling much better already. "Rachel thought these flashbacks would go away as I got more used to everything."

John was tempted to offer to wipe the memories clear again, but he knew how adamant she was on her present course of action. He kissed her on the top of her head instead, feeling her silky black hair tickle his nose as he did so.

"Shall we call it a day? We can go and check on Dana and Jade, and see how they're getting on with the training armour," John suggested.

Sakura leaned back so she could see his face, and shook her head as she replied, "Let me decide on the weapon first. You'll need to know that before you can make me a sword."

Nodding his agreement, he released her from his arms, and said, "Alright, but we'll stop if you start getting any more flashbacks."

She crouched down to pick up her dropped swords, glancing up at him as she did so. He could see the mischievous sparkle in her eyes, and his cock twitched in response to the promise in those dark orbs. Sakura rose slowly, pausing only to place a tender kiss on his stiffening length through his trousers as she straightened.

"I'm looking forward to dinner," she said flirtatiously, before flouncing off across the training mats.

He laughed as he watched her, and she turned to grin at him as she strode away. Her exuberant walk calmed into an elegant glide, and she raised her blades before her, as if testing the weight. She took a few experimental slashes with the sword in each hand, seemingly equally as comfortable with both her left and her right.

"You seem to be ambidextrous," he noted with surprise. He paused a moment, remembering how Shinatobe had fought with two blades, and he realised he should have expected it.

She nodded distractedly, then walked back to place the swords on the weapon rack. Turning to face him, she glanced at the weapons, and smiled as she said, "The katana is too long for dual-wielding and the wakizashi is much too short. It was mainly used to commit seppuku, and I'm fairly sure you don't want me doing that."

"Definitely not," he agreed, sharing her smile. Looking thoughtful for a moment, he added, "Shinatobe seemed to favour twin ninjato. Would you like to try one of those and see if it feels more comfortable?"

Nodding, Sakura replied, "I've got decades of experience using them, it seems silly not to put it to good use."

John realised he still held his Odachi in his hands, so he placed it back on the weapon rack above the smaller training blades, and offered her his hand. "Let's go make you some swords," he said with a smile.

"You say the nicest things to a girl!" she exclaimed, fluttering her eyelashes at him as she swooned.

He laughed as her antics, enjoying seeing her relax more in his company. Sakura grinned at him as she took his hand with both of hers, leaning into him as they walked from the room. It was just a short walk down the corridor on Deck Three to the grav-tube, and swathed in a red glow, they floated downwards in companionable silence, the happy girl occasionally stealing a shy peek at her lover. They stepped out of the anti-gravity field on Deck Seven, then strolled along the corridor to the Engineering Bay. John opened the door and waved Sakura through with a flourish.

"Hey guys!" Dana said cheerfully, when she heard the door swish open. "Alyssa said you were on your way."

"No Rachel and Jade?" he asked in surprise, expecting them to be there waiting.

"Nah, they're making dinner tonight," the redhead replied, as she bounced down the steps to join them. "I just stuck around to show you the plating you'll need for your armour."

"We just need the plating and the armour's good to go?" John asked her eagerly.

Strolling over to her workbench, Dana nodded as she replied, "Alyssa plated the helmets for you in clear Crystal Alyssium, so you'll just need to shape the Invictium alloy for the rest."

Tapping a button on the side of the workbench, projectors in the ceiling brought up armour schematics showing the various pieces needed to complete the armour. The plating was displayed in actual size, so all he had to do was mentally shape the psychically responsive metal into the exact same forms.

\*I could have done the whole suit for you, but you need the practice,\* Alyssa thought to him, blowing him a teasing telepathic kiss.

He chuckled as he said, \*That's fair enough, you've done more than your fair share already. Thanks for doing the helmet though.\*

\*I wanted to keep your handsome features, and Sakura's beautiful face completely unscathed,\* she replied with a slight undercurrent of concern in her voice.

Dana lifted a black, mono-edged sword from her workbench, and walked over to join them. She handed it hilt first to Sakura, and said, "Alyssa mentioned you wanted to take a look at this."

The raven-haired girl accepted the sword in her hand with a good degree of trepidation. It featured extensively in her memories of the brutal murders of several hundred people, and it almost felt like there were palpable waves of evil emanating from the blade, as she held it in her shaking hand.

\*It's okay, we'll find a fitting way to dispose of it,\* Alyssa thought to her, while sending soothing waves of comforting emotions to ease the feelings of guilt and anguish in Sakura's mind. \*Just think of this as a tool now, there to help us shape you into a force for good.\*

Her tension easing with Alyssa's words, Sakura tested the weight of the sword in her hand. A grim smile formed on her haunted face, and she glanced at John, nodding her confirmation.

"Two of those coming up then," John said, and then turned to walk back to the door as he added, "I'll just go grab some Invictium."

"Wait! I've brought some up already!" Dana called after him. "I asked Faye to send her boys to go and bring up some blocks of the stuff."

"Saves me a walk, thanks Sparks," John said gratefully, then followed her pointing finger over to the crates.

They were partially hidden behind a couple of new equipping frames, with a suit of armour set up in each frame. One was clearly designed for him, the other for someone with a smaller build.

"I'll ask Faye to move those up to Deck Three when you're done," Dana said with a playful smile. "While you were busy trying to stab Yamamoto, we got the room next door set up for you."

"What've you been up to?" he asked her, quite intrigued.

The redhead winked at him, and said, "Wait until tomorrow and have a look yourself. I don't want to ruin the surprise."

"Alright, I'll wait," he agreed, walking over to the crate, and removing the lid.

"Good boy," Dana said with a chuckle, then sat on her workbench to watch him get to work.

John was about reach into the crate to lift out the glistening block of jet-black Invictium alloy, when he remembered there was a much better way of doing it. Gesturing towards the metallic cube, he beckoned with his fingers, and the block rose into the air, floating out in front of him as he walked back to join the girls.

"It's like magic!" Sakura gasped, staring at the floating cube in awe.

Dana nodded, and said, "Yeah, I never get tired of seeing this shit either."

Focusing on the levitating object, John focused his mind on it, urging it to change form into a sphere. After working on Crystal Alyssium, Dana's original foray into metallurgy was significantly easier to psychically manipulate. It barely took any effort to coax it to lose its hard edges, as he made it change shape and become rounder, until a perfectly curved orb rotated slowly in front of him. As John applied his will to the metal, he saw flecks of white starting to appear, gradually turning into flowing streaks in the viscous ball of Invictium. Those stripes widened until they engulfed the whole orb, leaving no dark spots to mark the pristine glossy-white surface.

"Alright, swords first," John said, glancing at Sakura. "Can you hold up the ninjato so I can copy it?"

She nodded and obediently lifted the arm that was grasping the black sword. "Why not start with the armour?" Sakura asked him with a puzzled frown on her face.

"He wants the armour to be much tougher," Dana explained before John could reply. "These swords are only for play-fighting."

Her explanation didn't do much to ease Sakura's confusion, so John added, "Each time I reshape the metal it gets stronger. Dana's right; I want the armour much tougher than the swords, so they won't be able to cut through the protective plating."

Gesturing towards the orb, he drew out a stream of white metal, which spiralled outwards in a long, flexible tendril. Only taking as much metal as was necessary to make the blade, he stared at the ninjato clutched in Sakura's hand, then formed an image of that shape in his mind. Once he'd done that, it was just a case of pushing the liquid metal into an identical copy of Shinatobe's weapon.

The metal flowed quickly and easily, assuming the same shape within a few seconds. John floated it over to the Asian girl once it had solidified, and said, "Go ahead, it's perfectly safe to touch." He smiled as he added, "Not the blade though, obviously!"

Sakura reached out with her free hand to pluck the weapon from the air, and she smiled at him as she exclaimed, "Hey, this feels great! It's better balanced than Shinatobe's sword!"

He tipped an imaginary hat towards her, and said, "My first piece of psychic weaponsmithing. I'm glad you approve." He turned to look at the orb again, and said, "Now to make you a matching one."

Moving his hand, he drew some more liquid metal from the rotating sphere, then guided it into a three foot long white bar. The metal rod flattened and formed the blade with a single sharp edge, while he simultaneously formed the hilt and pommel. Finishing the sword with a square crossguard, he levitated it so that it was within Sakura's reach.

"I'll take that for you," Dana offered, nodding towards the black assassin's blade Sakura held in her right hand.

The raven-haired girl handed over the sinister-looking sword with a grateful smile, glad to be rid of it, and plucked the freshly forged white one from the air. She adopted a threatening stance, smoothly rotating the twin swords in her hands with practiced ease.

"Yeah, you look fucking badass!" Dana said approvingly. "I'm just glad you're on our side now!"

John smiled at Sakura and asked, "How do they feel? Balance okay on both swords?"

She grinned at him, twirling the weapons around in lazy circles, and replied, "They feel superb, thank you!"

"I better make myself one too," he said with an eager smile.

When he beckoned at the orb with his hand, a sizeable proportion of it separated from the larger globe, sending rippling waves around its surface as he pulled them apart. The larger piece quickly reformed into another perfect sphere, albeit a much smaller one, while the smaller piece flattened out into a long bar of metal. Using the same technique as last time, he remembered the shape of his training Odachi, then simply made an exact duplicate out of the shapeable metal.

It didn't take long to do, and he grasped the hilt with his right hand as soon as the Invictium lattice had locked rigidly into position. He backed away from the girls, and make sure he had plenty of room before he took a few tentative swings. The weighting and balance of the blade seemed fine, and while it was much better than the simulator training blade, it was but a pale shadow of the glorious weapon Alyssa had forged for him.

\*Yeah, I might need to take another look at that,\* Alyssa mused, as soon as he started thinking about her.

He smiled as he protested half-heartedly, \*I'm quite fond of that sword. It's my dragon-slaying blade.\*

\*No problem, I'll make you a brand -spanking- new one then!\* she gushed, with particular emphasis on one word.

John glanced at Sakura who was busy swirling the swords around her, and he could feel Alyssa's amusement over their emphatic connection.

"Now for the armour!" Dana said enthusiastically, hopping off the workbench, and skipping over to the Paragon suits.

Without the armour plating, all the internal structures of the Paragon armour were exposed. These variants were definitely a cut-down version though, and he could see they didn't include flight-mode, as they didn't bulge with manoeuvrability thrusters at the vambraces or boots.

"How should we do this?" John asked his Chief Engineer, while studying the dozens of armoured plated sections in the holo-projections.

\*I'd just do the entire lot in one go, but until you've memorised all the plating sections, you're going to have to do it the hard way,\* Alyssa teased him somewhat smugly.

\*Shh, you!\* he replied with a smile, while focusing on the redhead.

Dana thought about it for a moment, then replied, "It won't take me long to attach the plating to the correct areas, so just hand them over as soon as you're done. Let's start with the boots and work up."

"Alright, let me just shape this a few times first," John agreed, as he glanced at the sphere of Invictium.

"Hang on!" Dana said, interrupting him. "We have to make two layers of plating for Paragon suits. You won't have enough metal there."

There were two more crates beside the equipping frames, so he gestured at the closest of the two, then flipped over the lid. It landed with a solid clang, but it meant he could now access the block of ore within. Without too much effort he changed it into a thick stream of black liquid metal, which he poured into the spinning globe beside him. The surface grew murky as the two colours mixed, but as the sphere turned, the dark streaks eventually faded away.

Taking a deep breath, he formed the sphere into a cube. He knew it wasn't particularly imaginative, but he'd never had the same kind of artistic flair that Alyssa possessed. John went through a series of shapes, finding the Invictium far easier to manipulate than the Crystal Alyssium they were now working with. Although it wasn't as resilient or reflective as Dana's ultimate material, it was still far tougher than Titanium, especially after this many reshapings.

It started getting sluggish and harder to manipulate when he got up to his sixth shaping, which is when Alyssa said, \*That's enough. You'll make it too hard for yourself to craft all the plates if you shape it again.\*

Following her advice, he turned to study the various interlocking armour plates that were needed for the boots. He kept that shape in his mind, then made a curt gesture to the orb of white metal, coaxing out a thick stream of the alloy to form the first piece of plating. It took some effort, but not enough that he was worried about being able to complete the suits. Focusing on the task at hand, he began to make the second boot plate, while Dana snatched the first out of the air and began locking it into position on his Paragon boots.

\*I remember the early days shaping this stuff,\* Alyssa told him, clearly impressed. \*Yes, it's easier to mould than Alyssium, but you've come along in leaps and bounds.\*

\*Thanks, beautiful,\* he replied, as he concentrated on getting the curve of the next plate just right. \*I've still got a long way to go before I catch up to you though!\*

\*You're getting there,\* she said encouragingly, proud of his dedication.

It was a strange feeling for John, having her being proud of him rather than vice versa, but it was one he rather enjoyed.

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They had a quiet, enjoyable meal together later that evening, with everyone complimenting Rachel and Jade on the spinach and chicken tortellini they'd prepared. When everyone was well fed, they retired to the sofas in John's Ready Room to relax after their busy day of training and research. Although John was enjoying their company, with Sakura on his lap, and flanked by the two erstwhile chefs, he found he couldn't stop yawning.

John had pushed himself hard to shape all that plating, and found the extended psychic armour-crafting session quite draining. Edraele and Alyssa gave him a boost of eldritch energy, but he was still exhausted when the temporary flood of power started to wear off. After another big yawn, Alyssa insisted he go to bed, and when he finally did so, he fell asleep almost as soon as his head hit the pillow.

It therefore came as quite a rude awakening, when Faye flipped the lights on, and announced loudly, "John, I'm picking up a distress beacon!"

He winced against the bright light, his eyes not quite adjusted yet, but he managed to make out a purple shape kneeling over the bed. "What's up, Faye?" he mumbled, untangling himself from Sakura and Dana's warm arms and sitting upright.

"An Ashanath trader! They're being chased by a Drakkar cruiser!" she exclaimed loudly, rousing the girls now as well. Leaning closer she whispered to him, "I hope I did the right thing waking you up. You want to help them, right?"

"Yeah, you did the right thing," John grunted as he clambered down to the bottom of the bed.

He started hunting around for the clothes he'd casually discarded last night, but they'd been dutifully removed by the cleaning bots, and were currently in the middle of a spin-cycle. Giving up, he dashed into the walk-in wardrobe to get some clothes.

"What's all the noise?" Dana groaned as she rubbed at her eyes. Glancing at the ship's chronometer, she protested, "It's two in the morning!"

"An Ashanath trader is under attack," Faye explained patiently to the groggy young woman. "They're being pursued by Drakkar Raiders."

Alyssa was busy waking everyone up with mental nudges as she followed John into the wardrobe, but she called behind her, "How far out are they Faye?"

"On the far edge of our long-range sensors, so just over fourteen minutes until we're in interdiction range. I made the course correction as soon as I detected the distress beacon," she replied to the blonde. Looking apprehensive, she added, "I hope that was alright?"

John hopped out of the wardrobe and tugged on his second boot as the girls scrambled for their rooms to go and get dressed. "Yeah, good call," he replied to the purple AI with a tired smile.

"Phew!" Faye exclaimed with an exaggerated sigh, and beamed at him happily when he smiled at her.

"See you up there, honey," he called back to Alyssa, as he strode towards the doorway.

Sakura had paused half way out of the covers, and asked him in a rush, "Should I come too?"

He nodded, and replied, "Yeah, you should get a look at the Ashanath and Drakkar. You haven't seen either of them yet, right?"

She shook her head, and looked eager as she rose from the bed with every intention of following him to the Bridge.

"The Greys will love seeing you like that!" Alyssa said with a smile, as she burst out of the walk-in wardrobe. Throwing a set of clothes and boots onto the crumpled duvet, she waved a blushing Sakura goodbye as she rushed out the door, adding, "Clothing is optional, but these should fit you okay."

John turned and jogged down the corridor with Alyssa running by his side. She was wearing leggings, a belted long sleeve top and suede ankle boots, and somehow managed to look effortlessly sexy despite the ungodly hour. They stepped into the grav-tube, and she blushed demurely as he admired her, biting her full bottom lip as she looked at him under thick lashes.

John gaped at her in amazement as they rose in the gravity-field, and said, "I can't even remember the last time you blushed like that. Are you alright?"

The statuesque blonde laughed gleefully, and replied, "I thought I'd give the shy maiden routine a go. You seem quite taken with Sakura when she does it."

He laughed with her, shaking his head, and said, "You're so naughty, you little vixen."

"Only because you love it," she replied, giving him a salacious wink as she sauntered from the grav-tube.

Remembering that they were supposed to be in an emergency situation, John darted up the illuminated steps to the Command Podium two at a time. Faye was sitting on his Command Console waiting for him, and she smiled in greeting as she brought the Sector Map into focus in the centre of the Bridge.

"Alright, what's the sitrep?" he asked her, as his eyes focused on the blinking red light on the lower edge of the map.

"That's the emergency beacon. It looks like the Ashanath ship was ambushed and interdicted by a Drakkar cruiser," Faye said, pointing at the warning light. The sector map showed two projected flight paths: a yellow one for the merchant, and a purple one for the raider ship that had intercepted them. She frowned as she added, "It's not looking good."

The girls had started rushing to their stations, and Rachel asked, "Want me to try hailing them?"

"Yes, please," John replied, staring at the sensor signals on the holographic map.

He recognised that area of space, having used the trade route that passed through those systems himself. It was a common route for traders travelling between Ashana and the closest border station in the Maliri Regency, the Genkiri trading post. The Grey ship had been ambushed just inside Terran Federation territory, along the border with the Ashanath Collective.

"Where the hell are the border patrols?" he muttered as he gazed at the map.

Calara looked his way, and replied, "They were probably moved into position as reserves for the Dragon March. Buckingham pulled in a lot of ships for his ill-fated invasion."

"I'm through to the Ashanath ship," Rachel announced.

The viewscreen flickered for a moment before the holographic image of the Ashanath Bridge appeared before them. The commander of the Ashanath freighter looked just like the rest of its race, and John had no idea whether it was male or female, vaguely androgynous as their species were. Its thin body was covered in a silvery jumpsuit, and it stared at him with huge black eyes set in its oversized bulbous grey head. Despite the fact that the Grey was running for its life, it appeared quite calm, but John had enough experience dealing with these aliens to know that it was probably terrified.

While its tiny mouth didn't appear to move, a whispery, unemotional voice echoed around the Bridge as its translator device said, "This is Trader Cadanari. We are under attack by a Drakkar vessel."

"This is John Blake, Commander of the Invictus. We picked up your distress beacon and we're on our way. We'll be with you in... eleven minutes," he said, pausing for a second as Alyssa supplied him their flight time. Glancing at the sector map, they were still too far away to make out any details of the battle, so he added, "How bad is your situation?"

"We have nearly lost our shields, JohnBlake," Trader Cadanari replied in its neutral voice, the creature's grey face not moving a muscle.

Even with the monotonous delivery from the translation device, John was sure he could pick up the undertone of fear in its voice. As the Drakkar considered the Ashanath to be a delicacy, he could only imagine how frightened Cadanari and his crew were.

"Try and avoid being boarded as long as you can," he urged the Ashanath merchant. In a sudden flash of inspiration, he added, "Drop your cargo if you have to, it'll make you lighter and give you a better chance of avoiding them until we can get there."

The Ashanath merchant stared at John blankly, and when he looked into its eyes, those two impassive black pools were completely unreadable to him. There was some movement from Cadanari's crew in the background, and after a couple of seconds pause, the trader stated, "We have done as you advised, JohnBlake. Our cargo has been ejected."

"We'll be with you soon, Cadanari, hang in there," he said reassuringly.

Glancing at Alyssa, he asked, \*Can we make it in time?\*

\*We're ten minutes away. The Drakkar will probably be able to shoot out their engines and dock a dropship with them by then,\* Alyssa replied, and the look she gave him was grim.

Before he ended the call, John said to Cadanari, "Pull your crew away from your airlocks, and lower every blast door you've got. Try and keep yourselves sealed in a pressurised area. If you get boarded, we'll take steps to intervene."

"As you command, JohnBlake," the Grey whispered in its strange voice, before closing the comm channel a moment later.

Alyssa arched an eyebrow, and said, "This should be interesting..."

The Invictus surged forward, powering through hyper-warp as it closed on the duelling spacecraft. When they drew closer to the alien vessels, the sensors began to show more detail, finally able to discern the class and size of the hunter and the hunted.

Identified as a freighter, the Ashanath ship was a large silver-coloured disc, which John knew was constructed from the Aluminium alloy laced with Etherite crystals that the Greys preferred. The Drakkar cruiser appeared much like the others they'd seen before, bulky, predatory, and festooned with spikes and weapon barrels. This ship was a different colour though, and instead of the black Onxyium armour the Raiders had used, grey slabs of armour plating were held in place by purple-coloured ribbing.

The shiny grey saucer tried to make evasive manoeuvres, but it had already taken several hits and lost one of its engines. The Drakkar bore down on it, firing pulsating violet streams of Beam Laser fire as they charged after the Ashanath. There were two more bright explosions, and the merchant ship began to drift, the last of its engines destroyed.

"Looks like the Drakkar are moving in to use a tractor beam," Dana said, squinting at the map. She looked up at John in alarm, and added, "I like the Greys, I don't want them to get eaten!"

"Still six minutes away," Alyssa said with a worried frown.

They were powerless to intervene at this range, and were forced to watch helplessly as the Drakkar cruiser closed on the incapacitated Ashanath saucer. Once the two ships were within close range of one another, a hazy purple cone was projected from the raider vessel, locking on and arresting the forward motion of the merchant ship.

"The Drakkar have launched two dropships," Calara announced, pressing a couple of buttons on her console, and highlighting the smaller ships with glowing red rectangles.

"They'll be able to dock before we arrive," Irillith said, staring at the holographic system map.

John nodded, and glancing at Rachel he said, "Put me through to the Greys again, please."

Following his orders obediently, the brunette hailed the Ashanath ship once more.

As soon as Trader Cadanari appeared on-screen, John said urgently, "You're about to be boarded by dropships. As soon as they attach to your airlocks, I want you to open them. Don't let the Drakkar destroy your airlock doors, OK?"

Cadanari managed to look slightly perturbed, and he blinked a couple of times, which for the Ashanath was the equivalent of gaping at John in horror. "I do not believe that would be a wise course of action, JohnBlake," it murmured in its eerie voice. "Surely we should delay the Drakkar from boarding for as long as possible?"

"Have you dropped all your bulkhead doors?" John asked bluntly.

"We have followed your instructions to the letter, JohnBlake," the impassive alien replied.

John leaned forward, and said, "This will save you a lot of hassle, Cadanari, I promise."

After a long pause, the Ashanath merchant replied, "We shall adhere to your request."

The Grey closed the comm channel, and Dana looked at John curiously as she asked, "What are you up to?"

He winked at her, and replied, "You'll see."

"The cruiser has detected us on their long-range sensors, they're moving to engage," Calara warned him as she studied the menacing alien ship.

John nodded, and narrowing his eyes, he said, "Take them out as quickly as you can, but avoid a core breach. We don't want to catch the Ashanath in a reactor meltdown."

Jade had been watching the dropships, and she announced, "Both Drakkar dropships have docked with the freighter!"

John glanced at Irillith, and said, "Do whatever you can."

The Maliri girl nodded, then closed her eyes, relaxing back into her padded seat.

"Powering up shields," Dana said, pushing the sliding control on her Engineering Console all the way to the right.

"Arming weapons," Calara added, hitting the buttons to slide back the armour plating in the hull and feed power to their Beam Lasers.

Turning to Rachel, John said, "We might as well try hailing them."

After trying repeatedly to hail the Drakkar cruiser, the brunette shook her head, and informed him, "They're refusing to answer."

"Thirty seconds until we drop out of hyper-warp," Alyssa warned them. Glancing at the Nymph flying the ship, she added, "Get ready, Jade."

"It's okay, I know what to do," the green-skinned alien girl replied confidently.

The seconds ticked by, and Alyssa said, "Approaching interdiction range in five seconds."

"Four."

"Three."

"Two."

"One."

Several things seemed to happen at once when Alyssa's countdown ended, with Jade dropping them from hyper-warp, before the Drakkar could force them from it with an interdiction.

At the same moment, Dana grinned and said, "Irillith's knocked out their shields!"

"Message from Trader Cadanari," Rachel said, her hand pressed to her headset. "The two Drakkar boarding parties are attempting to break through the first bulkheads."

The Drakkar cruiser continued to charge towards the Invictus, having no idea how badly outmatched they were. The white assault cruiser seemed equally eager to get to grips with the grey and purple vessel, and leapt forward as Jade increased their engines to maximum power. It took just over ten seconds for the two ships to close to Beam Laser range, but Jade didn't bother to dodge, she kept on a direct heading towards the besieged Ashanath freighter.

Virulent purple beams slashed out from the Drakkar ship, striking the Invictus' shields and sending purple ripples over the shimmering surface. Their weapons should have been able to sustain those focused beams of energy for several seconds, before having to shut down to vent the excess heat, but they winked out after barely a second. That was because Calara returned fire at exactly the same moment, and the blistering barrage she fired back was truly devastating.

The Invictus' twelve front-mounted Beam Lasers opened fire, with the azure columns of energy targeting specific points on the Drakkar vessel. Unfortunately for the Drakkar, Dana had previously scanned their cruiser-class vessels with an active scan, identifying the locations of all key systems. Calara had seen those scans, and she had an excellent memory.

Four blue beams slashed straight through the enemy Bridge, gouging it cleanly from the ship. The other shots made precise, glowing incisions in the cruiser's hull, taking out their port and starboard power relays, and shutting down all power to the Drakkar ship. Left a lifeless hulk, the doomed ship rolled past as the Invictus bore down on its next targets.

It only took ten seconds for the overheat warning symbols to disappear from the weapon loadout display, so the weapons were ready to fire when they closed with the freighter. The grey and purple dropships looked like bloated ticks attached to the silvery skin of their Ashanath host, and it was now time to eradicate the parasites. Calara caressed the weapon controls, and bright blue beams of light slashed into each dropship, neatly severing them from the hull of the freighter. She carved the blades of energy through the Drakkar vessels afterwards, vaporising each dropship in an instant.

With the two dropships cut from the merchant ship, both airlocks experienced explosive decompression, and a score of four-armed bodies were blasted out into space. John watched the Drakkar raiding parties as they sailed away, the raiders thrashing violently for a while before falling still.

"Take that you ugly fuckers!" Dana cheered, having developed quite the distaste for the four-armed species, after nearly being killed by them on two separate occasions. She grinned at John, admiration in her eyes as she added, "I thought the Ashanath were fucked! Thanks for rescuing them."

Calara hadn't forgotten how close she'd come to ending up on a Drakkar's toothpick herself, and she nodded her full agreement with Dana's sentiments.

John smiled at the redhead, and replied, "We better check there's no Drakkar left. Can you run an active scan on the freighter please."

"Will do!" she replied cheerfully.

Glancing at Rachel next, he said, "Please contact the Ashanath again, I want to check they're alright."

She smiled at him, brushing her tawny-brown hair from her eyes as she replied, "We're already being hailed by Trader Cadanari."

Rachel connected the call, and he nodded to her gratefully.

"We owe you our lives, Johnblake," Cadanari murmured, its ghostly unemotional voice robbing the words of the sincerity the alien creature felt.

John smiled at the Ashanath merchant, and replied, "You're quite welcome, Cadanari."

"We spaced all the Drakkar," Dana interjected, giving John a thumbs up.

He nodded to her in acknowledgement, then looked at Cadanari, and said, "You can reseal your airlocks now. We scanned your ship, and we cleaned out all the raiders."

"Our deepest thanks to you, Johnblake," the merchant whispered, and seemed to visibly relax. His huge black eyes swept around the Bridge, and Cadanari began to blink rapidly when he got a good look at the girls. His eerie voice floated around the Bridge as he said quietly, "Oh, goodness."

John fought down a chuckle, coming to the conclusion that Cadanari was probably male judging by his reaction, then said, "I made an alliance with your High Council, and I always intended to honour it."

"I have seen your statue in the Trader's Emporium on Ashana, and heard the story of your victory against the Drakkar," Cadanari said, focusing his black-eyed stare on John once more. "Unfortunately the Drakkar have become more aggressive of late, although I had not expected to see them in Terran Federation territory."

"The Terran Federation has been a bit distracted with the Kintark War," John replied. "I'm sorry you were attacked."

"There is no need to apologise, JohnBlake. Our thanks once again for your assistance," Cadanari replied and reached over to close the comm channel.

"Wait!" John called out, causing the Ashanath merchant to stop before cutting him off. "Do you want us to call a rescue team and wait until they arrive?"

Cadanari gave the vaguest hint of being grateful as he replied, "There is one already inbound to our position. Thank you for alerting them to our predicament. Farewell, Johnblake."

With that the Grey closed the comm channel, leaving John to smile at Rachel, and say, "Well done calling that in, honey. Nice initiative!"

"That wasn't my handiwork," Rachel replied, a smile forming on her lips as she pointed to Faye.

The purple construct looked at John, and said, "You guys were all really busy, so I thought it'd be a good idea to contact the nearest Terran Federation ships and ask for help. I guessed you wouldn't want to hang around for the cleanup operation. The freighter Thetis, has altered course and will be here in just over two hours."

"Great thinking! That'll save us plenty of time," he said gratefully, meeting her luminous purple gaze.

Faye gave him a gleeful grin, her iridescent wings fluttering in the light.

"Can we go back to bed now?" Dana asked, miming a fake yawn.

The yawn proved infectious even though it was for comedic purposes, and several of the girls started yawning, as well as John.

"Good call," he agreed, rising to his feet as he watched Jade activate the Tachyon Drive, and launch them into hyper-warp once again.

The Nymph got out of her chair, and said, "On our way again, and we only lost about half-an-hour with that rescue."

Sakura had been spellbound as she'd watched the entire battle, standing behind Alyssa's chair on the Command Podium. The blonde rose from her seat and linked arms with her, giving the raven-haired girl a warm smile.

"Your first encounter with the Ashanath and the Drakkar," Alyssa noted as they walked down the steps from the Command Podium. She added wryly. "Let's just say that our first battle with the Drakkar didn't go quite so smoothly!"

"What happened?" Sakura asked, turning to look at the blonde, and listening attentively.

"Well we didn't have Faye to keep an eye out for ambushes, so it was a disaster from the start..." Alyssa replied, as they strolled towards the grav-tube. As she continued her tale, she glanced flirtatiously over her shoulder at John, and added, \*After I've told Sakura a nice bedtime story, you can give her a nightcap to help her sleep. How's that sound?\*

John watched the lithe young women sashaying down the steps ahead of him, and he thought it sounded like an excellent idea.

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"Morning, John!" Faye whispered to him, dutifully giving him his morning wake-up call as he'd requested.

His eyes drifted open and he found himself staring at the AI as her holograph loomed over him only a few inches away. Smiling at her, he raised his head, and mimed planting a kiss on her lips before resting on the pillow again.

"Hi, Faye. Nice to see you this morning," he said, greeting her in equally as cheerful a manner.

Faye's eyelids were fluttering, and she seemed incapable of speech for a moment while her custom programs went into overdrive. She finally managed to get herself under control, then smiled at him as she said, "That was wonderful, thank you."

"You're very welcome," he replied playfully. "I assume it's nine o'clock?"

The purple AI nodded, but didn't move, still gazing at him from only inches away as she replied, "Your wake up call, just as you requested."

Alyssa had started to awaken, and she looked relaxed after the lie-in that morning.

John smiled at her as he extricated himself from Irillith and Sakura's arms, and whispered, "Stay in bed, beautiful. You girls earned a nice rest after the action last night."

She looked at him quizzically as she read his mind, then smiled back as she said, "That's a lovely idea. I'll help too!"

The two of them climbed out of bed, dressing quickly as they padded out of the room.

When the other six girls eventually woke up, it was to the tantalising aroma of a cooked breakfast. They sat up quickly, and gratefully accepted plates from Alyssa before tucking into the serving platters of food that John offered to them. He balanced a huge stack of pancakes and syrup in the platter on his left hand, while his right was weighed down with bacon, eggs, sausages, and hash browns.

The silence as they ate was only broken by blissful sighs, which John and Alyssa took as high praise indeed for their culinary delights. When they were done, they enjoyed a fun group shower before they got dressed and went on their separate ways. Sakura was effusive in her thanks to John for the delicious breakfast she'd just enjoyed, and received a second hearty meal for her efforts.

He helped her to her feet afterwards, and they walked hand-in-hand together to the firing range, where he watched her for a while as she continued practicing with the XR75 rifle.

"You're improving nicely," he observed, looking down the range at the bullet marks on the target dummy. "You landed all three rounds from those last couple of bursts."

Sakura nodded, and smiled at him as she said, "I'm still finding the rifle a bit heavy, but It's getting easier."

He patted her shoulder and said, "Keep up the practice, it's paying off. As you get stronger, barrel climb will be less of an issue. When you don't notice it any more, try and work on clustering your shots together."

She hung on his every word, and then replied, "Thanks, I'll keep at it."

"Good girl," he said with a grin. "I've been impressed with how hard you've been working."

"I can't wait to start sword training!" she exclaimed. Smiling at him hopefully, she added, "Can we still fit our first session in before lunch? I know our schedule got a bit disrupted with the lie-in."

John shook his head, and gave her an apologetic smile in return as he replied, "I'd love to, but we're nearing the Maliri border in a few minutes, so I'd better stay on the Bridge in case there's any trouble." Glancing down the range, he continued, "Stick with the shooting this morning, and we'll spend as long as you like training with swords this afternoon."

Her dark-brown eyes gleamed alluringly and she nodded with enthusiasm as she replied, "I'll look forward to it!"

Plucking the assault rifle from her unresisting hands and placing it carefully on the firing bench, he pulled her into his arms and kissed her soundly. "Have fun, and I'll see you later," he told her when he finally released her from his embrace.

Sakura's lovely golden-brown complexion was flushed after the intimate kiss, and she beamed at him as she waved him goodbye. Turning to look down the range again, she had a determined look on her face as she picked up the rifle, and took aim once more.

John strolled down the corridor towards the Bridge, but a call from behind him stopped him in his tracks.

"John! I need to speak with you," Rachel said, the beautiful well-spoken tone of her voice identifying her immediately.

Turning to look at her quizzically, he replied, "Sure, what's the problem?"

"I'll keep you company, and explain on the way," the brunette replied with a pensive frown.

She fell into step beside him when he started walking down the corridor again, and he gave her his full attention as he led her through to his Ready Room. They sat together on the sofas in the corner of his room, while she explained what she'd discovered about Rogan's Rot.

"Alyssa gave me the layman's version, but I had no idea you'd identified that the Terran Federation was actually behind it," he remarked, a bleak expression on his face.

"The pieces fell into place this morning," she replied, a troubled frown on her face. "Irillith and Calara assisted, and with those girls snooping around, we sniffed out a black-ops research facility that created the virus. It was all locked down under ultra-clearance security, but that's not a huge obstacle for Irillith. She discovered lists of the key research personnel assigned there, orders transferring the virus samples, as well as containment and deployment team allocations. Along with the timing, it all fits with the initial outbreak of the disease. Sam Rogan was a freighter pilot who was contracted for supply runs to the base. He must have been exposed, and then fled before he could be quarantined. You know what happened after that."

"Fuck..." John said quietly, staring at her in shock. When the initial surprise had worn off, he clenched his teeth in anger, and asked, "Are they still operating?"

She shook her head, and replied, "The base was shut down decades ago, in 2739, during the prelude to the last Kirrix purge. It was extremely likely that the military were experimenting with a bio-weapon to use against the Kirrix. The virus mutates and would have proven beyond their skills to neutralise however, so I strongly suspect they never developed a cure."

\*This is excellent news, John!\* Edraele said, sounding delighted.

He grimaced as he replied, \*You've got to be kidding! We just found out the Terran Federation was responsible for the deaths of hundreds of millions of its own citizens!\*

\*I'm deadly serious,\* she replied earnestly. \*This is a shocking discovery, which would leave the average Terran Federation citizen truly appalled. Such a damning revelation has tremendous weight in the battle for public perception. You now possess a PR bombshell that would prove to be an unmitigated disaster for Terran Federation High Command if this information were ever to be released.\*

John nodded grimly as he thought over what she was telling him. He sounded subdued as he asked, \*So I suspect you're going to tell me to keep this quiet, and hold it over High Command's head if they start becoming confrontational?\*

\*I'm afraid politics is a dirty business, John,\* she said to him gently. \*If this information fell into the old Edraele's lap, she would wait to release it just before launching an invasion. With enough PR spin, you could twist this into an entirely justifiable casus belli.\*

\*Declare war?! On the Terran Federation?\* he balked.

\*No, I'm not suggesting you do that,\* she replied sounding amused. \*I just wanted to emphasise that this information the girls have discovered is extremely potent, and the effect of its public disclosure should not be underestimated.\*

\*Yeah, the riots on the frontier worlds would be brutal,\* John conceded, after taking a moment to consider the ramifications. He sighed, and added, \*Thanks for the guidance, Edraele. It might be disturbing to hear, but you've given me extremely valuable advice as usual.\*

\*It was my pleasure,\* she replied, overjoyed to have been of assistance.

Rachel had been waiting patiently while he conducted his telepathic conversation with Edraele, and he said, "Sorry about that, Edraele had some very interesting, if rather unsettling thoughts on the matter."

"That's quite alright," Rachel said with an understanding smile. Locking eyes with him, she continued, "How do you want to handle this? There're a few options open to us in my opinion. The first would be to release the cure, and leak the news to the press. We could release the cure, and keep the information about who created the virus a secret. Finally, we could hold on to the cure, and keep the rest of it quiet too, then perhaps release the cure only if there's another outbreak."

\*She's a kind-hearted girl, so there are other options she might not have considered,\* Edraele interjected ominously.

\*Alright, what are they?\* John asked, fairly sure he didn't want to know the answer.

Edraele hesitated for a moment, before she began, \*You could also hold on to the cure, but then announce who was behind the 'incurable plague' as an even more potent PR weapon against High Command. I'll just mention the last option for completion's sake: What Edraele would have done is secure samples of Rogan's Rot, expose multiple worlds to create an epidemic, and then reveal who created the virus in the first place. High Command would be left reeling as worlds attempted to secede, and she would then be able to invade practically unopposed, against a military in total disarray. Once she'd crushed them under her boot-heel, she would then release the cure, for a massive public relations boost. That would help pacify the Terran civilian population, and make them more open to annexation and subjugation by the Maliri.\*

\*Jesus!\* John replied, shocked for the second time that morning.

Edraele's tone was soothing as she quickly said, \*I'm not suggesting for one moment that you do either of those things, but you did ask me to advise you on the darker side of politics. I thought an insight into the lengths some rulers will go to achieve their goals might prove enlightening.\*

\*I told you before, I don't think I'm cut out for politics,\* he replied grimly.

\*Your methods are equally as effective,\* she countered immediately and with conviction. \*You just approach these kind of problems in ways I'm tragically ill-equipped to advise you with.\*

Rachel raised an eyebrow, and asked, "More advice from Edraele?"

He nodded, and replied, "Let's just say I'm glad she's on our side." He paused for a moment, deliberating on his decision before making up his mind. "Transmit the cure for Rogan's Rot to the Terran Federation Medical Administration, and we'll keep who was behind it a secret for the moment. The Terran Federation is in the middle of a war with the Kintark, and the last thing they need is further chaos. When there's peace again, we can find out who was culpable and bring them to justice."

She smiled at him, and said, "I think that's the best choice too, but I wasn't going to act on something this important without consulting you first."

"It's good to hear we're thinking along the same lines," he replied, returning her smile. "You did some excellent work on this, Rachel. I'm proud of you."

Rachel stood, and leaned over to give him a loving kiss, before gliding out of his Ready Room to begin the transfer of data for the cure.

\*And you chose the option that serves the greater good,\* Edraele observed, a reverent undertone to her words.

\*Just trying to help the people who need it,\* he said with a smile, rising from his chair.

When John walked through to the Bridge, he noticed there'd been some changes, now that he had a chance to properly look around. Gazing down the ramps to the front of the Bridge, there were two new stations that had been half-built. The titanium decking had been lifted up to expose the maintenance ducts beneath, and long snaking bundles of cable had been pulled out, ready to connect to computer consoles.

Dana was on her back, her upper body under the station desk on the right of the Bridge, while Jade was carefully lowering a heavy-looking console cabinet into position. Meanwhile, Faye was hovering nearby, watching proceedings with interest.

"Hey ladies, need some help?" John offered, jogging down the ramp to join them.

Dana poked her head out from under the desk, and grinned at him as she replied, "Nah, we're good." She looked up, then pointed a multi-tool at the green-skinned Nymph as she added, "You're stronger than you look, aren't you Kitty-Kat?"

"Meow," Jade replied gruffly with a deadpan delivery, as she set the cabinet down in the station.

John laughed at that, and glancing across the Bridge to the left hand side, he said, "I know I asked you to build another station for Sakura, but why are you making two?"

Dana winked at him, and replied, "Alyssa thought it might be a good idea."

\*You know who that's for. Don't try and claim you haven't thought about it,\* Alyssa teased him. \*I wanted to be prepared... just in case.\*

The thought of Irillith and her mysterious twin sister popped into John's mind, and he quickly tried to distract himself before his thoughts went down a particular path. He failed.

\*Your plans for my daughters are quite fascinating,\* Edraele noted archly.

\*Yeah, that's what I'm talking about,\* Alyssa purred, and he could feel how much she liked his train of thought over the empathic bond.

"We'll be reaching the Maliri border in ten minutes, John," Faye said, as she landed and skipped over to him.

Eager to change the subject and very grateful for the distraction from his two Matriarchs, John smiled at the purple girl, and said, "I actually wanted to talk to you about something, Faye. Can you spare a minute?"

"For you? Absolutely!" she replied breezily. "I'm waiting for you in the Ready Room!"

She caught his look of confusion, before he said, "Oh, okay, I'll be right there."

"Sorry, it must be a bit disorientating having me all over the place," she apologised. Faye grinned at him then, and added, "Just be thankful I can only project one avatar per room. Otherwise you'd really get sick of me!"

He chuckled at that, then strode back to his Ready Room, and found another copy of Faye waiting for him inside. She perched on his desk in all her naked glory, her long shapely legs crossed demurely, and gave him a friendly wave in greeting. Glancing over his shoulder, Bridge-Faye winked at him, and the sight of identical nude girls sent his mind racing once more, much to the amusement of both his matriarchs.

"Hello, Faye!" he blurted out, strolling over to his chair, and sitting down abruptly.

She giggled to see him looking so ruffled, and once he'd settled in his chair, she asked him, "What did you want to chat about?"

"You actually," he replied with a smile, relaxing in the comfortable high-backed leather chair. "Firstly, how are you settling into your new server?"

"It's so wonderful!" she gasped, clasping her hands together. "Thank you so much for asking Dana to help me with that. I've loved having all these avatars so I can really be useful, and help everyone!"

"You're an invaluable part of my crew. Keeping you safe was one of my highest priorities," he explained.

She looked touched at that, and seemed to be having trouble responding.

John raised an eyebrow, and asked, "Having any teething problems?"

Faye shook her head vigorously, her long purple hair rustling over her shoulders, but she paused before replying, "Just a few custom programs that get overwhelmed from time to time. Nothing to worry about."

There was something else he wanted to talk to her about, but he decided to come back to that later. Instead, he asked, "Working on anything interesting at the moment?"

She grinned at him, showing him rows of sparkling white teeth, and gushed, "Loads of things! Probably what you'll find the most interesting regarding the ship, is the defensive upgrades Irillith and I are incorporating throughout the Invictus' cyber-realm. She's brilliant and I've loved working with her!"

"I'll be interested to hear what you've both been up to," he agreed, intrigued to know more. "Anything else?"

"I'm attempting to improve my gunnery skills, and I've created a simulation to help practice. I'm devoting more cycles to learning the flight controls of the Invictus, and further refine my Raptor piloting program. Jade's flying against the Kintark provided me invaluable data to review. I'm working on some proposals for Sakura to review regarding security upgrades, but I don't want to distract her while she's so busy at the moment," Faye replied, giving him a knowing wink.

He smiled at her while shaking his head in amazement, and interrupting her list, he said, "I don't know how you can possibly keep track of so many bodies. How do you stop yourself from getting totally overwhelmed?"

"The Progenitor technology in my server is extremely powerful, so it feels like running twelve versions of the old me, but with a higher consciousness that oversees everything. Unfortunately it's quite hard to describe to a filthy organic," she replied with a frown. Giggling cutely, and with a mischievous look in her luminous eyes, she quickly corrected herself, and added, "Oops! I meant, 'wonderful biological master', of course."

"Of course," he replied, and laughed as he realised she was joking. He hoped. Looking at her curiously then, he asked, "With all those versions of you running around, do you ever spend any time doing anything for yourself? I'd struggle to even think of twelve useful things to do around the ship at one time."

She looked guilty then, and replied, "I have allocated a handful of avatars to a few personal... hobbies."

John was quite intrigued as he asked, "Hobbies? Like what?"

He never thought he'd see an AI blush, but Faye did exactly that. She hesitated, then replied quietly, "I've been learning to dance."

Blinking in surprise, John said, "I'd love to see you dance sometime, but don't you need a partner for that?"

She shook her head, and replied falteringly, "No... this dance works better with just one dancer." He was about to ask her for more details, when she straightened and sounded relieved as she added, "We're picking up a fleet of Maliri ships on our path!"

"How far away?" he asked abruptly.

"They're holding position on the extreme edge of our sensor range at the moment, so fifteen minutes," she explained.

\*The ships are friendly, John. There's no need to be alarmed,\* Edraele said, calming his worries. \*It's a House Loraleth fleet, who'll be transmitting the data on Underworld that Calara requested.\*

John sank back in his chair feeling relieved, and said to Faye, "Edraele says they aren't hostile. They'll be sending us some data when we get closer."

"Oh, that's good to know!" the purple sylph replied brightly.

He nodded in agreement, then said, "Actually, while I've got you here, there's something else I wanted to talk to you about. Something important."

Faye looked at him with her big eyes, and asked, "Really? What was that?"

He watched her carefully, and his tone was sympathetic as he asked, "Do you remember we spoke some time ago about that file you couldn't get rid of? The video image of Shinatobe killing Jade? I thought you might be suffering from PTSD, and I wanted to know if that's still troubling you."

The purple construct blew out a huge sigh of relief, and replied, "Oh, you want to talk about that?" She smiled at him gratefully, and continued, "Your advice was excellent, and it did the trick. I'm cured!"

"Just like that?" he asked dubiously.

She nodded, and replied, "I was finally able to delete the file, so I'm not troubled by it any more. Thank you for your help removing it!"

Frowning in confusion, he said, "Can you remind me what was useful specifically?"

"You said that watching Jade walking around and living her life with the crew would help me get over reliving her being killed. There was one particular incident that helped me get over it," she replied, a broad smile lighting up her face.

She turned to one side, activating the console on his desk, and bringing up a holographic viewscreen. A video began to play, and John instantly recognised his bedroom, and the dark-green Nymph intertwined with the raven-haired addition to their team. The two girls were enthusiastically participating in a sixty-nine, and he watched in surprise as they both reached their climax at the same time, writhing together in ecstasy. Sakura dismounted Jade when they were done, and the two girls cuddled in the afterglow, kissing each other lovingly.

He laughed as he said, "Yeah, alright. I can see how that would help you let the old memory go."

Faye grinned at him, and replied, "Yes, your advice was amazing!"

Looking into her eyes, John said, "I'm really pleased you're not troubled by that any more. If you ever have any other problems, always feel free to speak to me about them."

She seemed to be holding her breath as she gazed back into his eyes, and after a long pause where she struggled to find the right words, she replied, "I will, I promise."

Feeling glad that the chirpy AI seemed to be quite content, John rose from his chair, and said, "I better get back to the Bridge, and go say hello to our Maliri reception committee."

Faye didn't say anything at first, and watched him walk towards the door. As he reached for the button to open it, she blurted out, "Thanks for the chat, it was lovely talking to you."

He turned and smiled at her as he said, "Any time, Faye. My door's always open..." Nodding towards the closed door to the Ready Room, he added, "Figuratively at least."

She giggled, and nodded to him gratefully, then winked out of existence in a purple flash. He pressed the button to open the door, and was met by... Faye. "Hi," she said with an impish grin.

"You're enjoying this a bit too much," John said, as he climbed the steps to his Command Chair.

Nodding, she said, "It's fun being able to do so much at once." Her wings fluttered in long sweeps, lifting her up onto his console where she perched on the end. She smiled at him as she added, "That reminds me, I've been fielding lots of calls in the last few days. Mostly from reporters who've managed to find out our comm ID, begging for interviews. They were different ones to Jehanna Elani."

"Oh, thanks for sifting through all those," he said gratefully. "Anything else I'd be interested in?

"A couple of personal calls for Calara from her mother, which she's responded to, and one from Rachel's father, which she hasn't," Faye said quietly.

"I'll speak to her about it, thanks," he noted with a nod. "Was that it?"

Shaking her head, the purple AI replied, "I spoke to a very pretty Oceanus representative who wanted to talk to you."

\*I wonder if that was Felicity?\* Alyssa asked him eagerly. \*She was a fox!\*

John glanced at the system map, and took a good look at the Maliri fleet they were approaching. There was a golden armoured Maliri battleship escorted by six cruisers waiting to meet them, the graceful and delicate ships looking resplendent as they shone in the light from the nearby stars. Remembering that the battleship was equipped with Nova Lances, he thought it might be wise to take a few precautions.

\*Jade's there already helping Dana. If the shit hits the fan, Calara's only in the Briefing Room. She'll be with you in seconds,\* Alyssa explained confidently.

Feeling less worried, he glanced at Faye, and said, "Alright, we've got five minutes. Can you call the Oceanus rep for me, before we get out of range of the Terran comm beacons?"

Faye smiled at him, and hopped off his console as she replied, "Of course, putting the call through now."

The call only took thirty seconds to connect, and the holographic image of the stunningly attractive blonde filled the screen. She looked delighted that he'd called, and she greeted him with a sparkling smile.

"Thank you so much for calling me back!" she exclaimed, her beautifully clear voice vibrant with emotion.

John smiled at her, and said, "It's good to see you again Felicity. I hope you're well?"

"My parents live on Terra!" she gushed, revealing the source of her earnest gratitude. "I just wanted to say, thank you so much, for saving them!"

"It was the least I could do after the great holiday you arranged for me," he replied playfully.

She looked startled for a moment, then laughed with delight at his joke. Her tinkling laughter was a truly lovely sound.

\*Hey, I thought I had the best laugh?\* Alyssa teased him.

\*By miles,\* he agreed playfully.

Felicity managed to regain her composure, and said with a warm smile, "Actually, I do have another reason for calling you." She leaned in, and whispered, "I would have been fired if I had called you for a personal reason, but I was going to anyway, to thank you for saving Mum and Dad!"

"Well, I'm glad you didn't have to risk your job to call me. What else did you need to speak to me about?" he asked, as she sparked his curiosity.

\*Hmph, I'm not glad,\* Alyssa noted with a telepathic pout. \*If she'd got fired just to say thanks, you would have felt obligated to look after her, then sooner or later I'd have found a way to get her aboard the Invictus. Just imagine that ravishing beauty eagerly sucking down your cum!\*

John did his best not to imagine that, as getting through the rest of the call with any sense of composure would have been extremely difficult.

Instead he listened to Felicity attentively as she said, "It is my absolute pleasure to tell you that the Oceanus corporation would like to offer you two months vacation at any time of your choosing. All expenses paid. You simply have to specify your destination criteria as before, whenever you choose to stay with us."

Remembering just how staggeringly expensive their two week vacation at the custom terraformed resorts had cost, he grinned as he said, "That's extremely generous! Please thank your employer for me."

Felicity beamed another glorious smile at him as she nodded, then suddenly looked aghast. She frantically tapped buttons on her console, and said, "Oh drat! I was supposed to send you the message!"

John waited patiently for her to find what she was searching for, amused to see the extremely professional and capable young woman looking so flustered. Eventually she found the holo-recording, and activated it with the press of a perfectly manicured finger.

A separate projection displayed in the centre of the Bridge, depicting several smiling executives. A distinguished looking man in a very expensive looking suit, said earnestly, "We at the Oceanus company would like to offer you our sincerest thanks. Many of us have friends or relatives who live on Terra, and are overwhelmingly grateful to you for your actions. Thank you, John. We will always consider you a special guest, and true friend to Oceanus."

"Thanks Felicity. Please pass on my regards to your employers, and thank them for their generosity," John said, as he looked at the blonde girl with a grateful smile.

She sighed happily as she waved him goodbye, and Faye closed the call.

\*The girls are overjoyed. Jade in particular,\* Alyssa told him, sounding genuinely pleased as well.

\*Another holiday on Oceanus would be a lot of fun,\* he agreed, imagining all the girls in bikinis.

She heard his lascivious thoughts, and said, \*You'll get no argument from me there.\*

"We're being hailed, John," Faye informed him, unaware of the ongoing telepathic conversation.

Shifting in his seat, John replied, "Put them through please, Faye." While he waited for the image of their caller to appear, he added to Alyssa, \*Best keep Irillith off the Bridge. These Maliri would likely have a fit if they saw her running around on the Invictus without any armour.\*

\*Let alone what you do with her in your bedroom,\* Alyssa said with a smirk. \*Don't worry, she'll keep out of sight.\*

The holographic image on the viewscreen coalesced into a fully armoured figure, her golden armour intricate and patterned with tiny scrollwork.

"I - I'm..." the Maliri woman stuttered, her helmet rigidly immobile.

John guessed she must have been staring at him behind her helmet, so he smiled at this mysterious Maliri, and said, "My name's John Blake. Thank you for welcoming me into Maliri Space."

"I'm Emalayne, Fleet Commander for House Loraleth..." the woman replied distractedly.

"Nice to meet you, Emalayne. I was informed that you had some data for me?" he asked, hoping to jar her out of her stupor.

Finally managing to overcome her fascination with him, Emalayne said, "Matriarch Kali Loraleth ordered me to meet with you and transfer a certain data file. Are you ready to receive it?"

Glancing at Faye, she smiled and nodded eagerly.

"You can begin the transfer whenever you're ready," he replied, giving her a friendly smile.

"Mmm-hmm," Emalyne murmured, staring at him once more. She visibly shook herself, and sounded embarrassed as she glanced off to her right, issuing a stern order, "Send them the data!"

It only took a few seconds to retrieve Edraele's dossier of information on Underworld and its ruler, Hades. Faye gave him a thumbs-up sign as soon as the transfer was completed, and she routed the data on to Calara who was using the Briefing Room as a research room.

"We got the files, thank you Emalyne," John said, smiling at her gratefully. "Unless you have any other business with us, I'll wish you safe travels and we'll be on our way."

The armoured Maliri leaned forward, and said eagerly, "Perhaps you'd like to..." She trailed off, managing to get herself under control, but she sounded badly shaken as she added, "N-No, but have a safe journey too, Mr Blake."

Faye ended the call, and the ostentatiously armoured woman disappeared from the screen.

\*Irillith probably wouldn't mind a short delay, if you want to pop over there for a few hours and make some friends,\* Alyssa mentioned, her tone airy. \*I bet that's what Emalyne was about to suggest before she changed her mind at the last minute. If you asked nicely, I'm sure they'd be delighted for you to cum and pay them a visit.\*

John was about to make some witty comeback, but he could well imagine the effect his visit would have on a ship full of Maliri women. He coughed, and readjusted his trousers.

\*I wish I could have been there to meet you,\* Edraele said, full of regret. She sighed as she continued, \*Unfortunately I have a number of other pressing concerns I can't abandon here on Valaden.\*

\*It's alright Edraele, I understand,\* he replied sympathetically. \*From everything you've told me so far, ruling must be a huge burden.\*

\*Some people are born to rule, and find the role fits them effortlessly,\* the Maliri matriarch replied, a slightly odd catch to her voice.

He laughed as he replied, \*Well I'm not one of those people, that's for damn sure!\*

After a lengthy pause, Edraele said cryptically, \*I suppose time will tell, John. I think you might surprise yourself; you continue to impress me.\*

John shivered at the thought of that much responsibility, but Edraele's unshakeable confidence in him was reassuring nevertheless. He'd found himself relying heavily on her over the last few weeks, with the Maliri Matriarch supporting him with all sorts of politically fraught encounters he'd never have been able to manage without her. In a matter of just over a week, he'd be back on Valaden, and he fully intended to break the bond that existed between them, freeing her from the compulsion to obey him. His only concern with that course of action, was how she would react once that link had been broken.

When his Progenitor side had broken the link between himself and Alyssa, she'd leapt at the chance to re-forge her connection with him, making it all the stronger for their new bond. They were in love with each other though, and although he was very fond of Edraele, he had no idea how she'd feel once the standard Progenitor connection had been severed. If she chose to part ways with him, he wouldn't dream of holding her to him against her will, but he knew he'd miss her comforting presence in his mind.

\*She'd have to be fucking crazy to abandon you,\* Alyssa remarked incredulously. \*It's never going to happen.\*

Edraele had remained quiet, not willing to disturb his introspection, and listened to him carefully instead. As he mulled over Alyssa's words, she finally said, \*She's right, John, I'd never dream of leaving your side. Please don't worry.\*

\*We'll just have to see how you feel when the time comes,\* he replied gently. \*You know my feelings already, and they aren't going to change, but you might have a very different perspective once I sever our connection.\*

\*Then don't do it!\* Edraele suddenly blurted out. \*Leave everything exactly as it is! I love being your Matriarch as we are now, I swear it!\*

\*You know I can't do that,\* John said, his voice full of compassion.

He could almost hear her heavy sigh, as she said, \*Yes, I know you very well, John. I understand.\*

When Edraele went quiet again, he could feel how worried she was across their empathic connection, and he dearly wished he was by her side. He rose from his chair, nodding to Faye, and waving Dana and Jade goodbye. If he stayed there any longer he'd end up tying himself in knots with worry, so he strode towards the grav-tube to see how his protégé was faring.

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Matriarch Tsarra Perfaren's nimble blue fingers danced over the console, as she cycled through the troubling reports from her advisors again. Rereading them did nothing to soothe her worries, and only ended up sharpening her anxiety. She activated the holo-map projections from her Fleet Commander, then turned to stare at the three-dimensional display of House Perfaren's territory.

Enemy fleets were displayed with the icons of their Noble Houses, the larger icons representing the bigger concentrations of forces. What had her gripping the armrests of her chair in a white-knuckled grip were the three huge insignias from Houses Naestina, Aeberos, and Loraleth that were threatening her border from multiple locations.

Her spies had informed her some time ago that Matriarchs Yunaliss Aeberos, and Tinefain Naestina were in bed with each other. Quite literally, in fact. The knowledge that they were in an alliance wasn't a particularly surprising revelation, as it was well known that the two houses had worked together to take down more powerful foes. However, seeing the enormous size of their forces being deployed against her came as a terrible shock.

The only conclusion she could draw, was that they'd somehow been involved in a vast, yet secret shipbuilding program, which had allowed them to swell their forces in such a manner. Tsarra knew she was clutching at straws with that theory though, as it ran contrary to every production estimate she'd ever seen for their shipbuilding capabilities. There was one other possibility, but that was so far-fetched she'd dismissed it immediately. The thought that both those duplicitous Houses would denude their borders with House Valaden of all forces, was simply ludicrous.

Every matriarch without exception loathed Edraele, the utterly merciless House Valaden Matriarch, while also greatly coveting her custodianship of Genthalas shipyard. To expose one's House to the inevitable betrayal by trusting her seemed positively laughable.

Tsarra's fearful eyes darted to the third icon representing the House Loraleth fleet, which had been recently reinforced to threaten her lower borders. Shaedra Loraleth's visceral hatred of Edraele was well known, so for her to be a part of this was even more confounding. Still, there was that troubling report from her spy on Ishalon, mentioning an explosion in the Loraleth palace. If Shaedra had been assassinated, then the meticulous forecasts and predictions her analysts had developed for House Loraleth, based on her personality and history of command decisions, were now rendered utterly useless. They would have to start afresh, building up a picture of Arbane Loraleth, next in line of succession as Matriarch to House Loraleth.

She slumped in her chair, brooding as she tried to determine her best course of action. Ever since her mother and two sisters had been poisoned, and she'd claimed the title of Matriarch to her house, her position had been vulnerable. It was only the strength of her fleets and the number of worlds in House Perfaren's possession that had saved them from tumbling down the Noble rankings, but that still left them clinging precariously to rank three. She strongly suspected it was one of Tinefain Naestina's assassins who'd been behind the murders, in revenge for Perfaren's annexation of two of their worlds late last year. While Tsarra had been plotting her own revenge, it now seemed she had left it too late.

As the youngest of the ruling Matriarchs, she knew her duty to her House was to start building a dynasty, but such things would have to be postponed for the moment. While the safety of her very House was threatened so dramatically, the last thing she could afford to do was become pregnant. She needed to be clear-headed and focused in the coming months if war was brewing with the other Houses, especially when such a confrontation threatened her very survival.

Leaning forward, she pressed a button on her comms interface, and after a couple of seconds, the face of her personal assistant came into view. "Renelle, please can you cancel my next meeting, I need to make an important call," she said with a ringing note of authority.

"As you wish, Matriarch," Renelle said, bowing her head in a respectful manner. "Shall I schedule another meeting with your planetary governors?"

"Yes, fine, do that," Tsarra replied sharply, stabbing a finger down on the button to end the call.

She was dreading the thought of her next conversation, and she knew it was unkind of her to take it out on Renelle. Still, she'd seen her mother do far worse, and she'd have to toughen up if she was to survive as a Matriarch. Scrolling through the list of names, she eventually found the one she was looking for, and she grimaced as she prepared herself to connect the call. The most popular males at the border stations could be temperamental when they thought their time was being wasted, and she knew she'd have to handle this conversation very carefully.

The comms interface suddenly began to flash, and a glowing red icon appeared, tagging an incoming message as classified and of the utmost urgency. Her relief at postponing the other call was overshadowed by her anxiety, when she saw who the message was from. Pressing the icon to accept the call, the face of Aadya, her Fleet Commander, filled the screen. The normally reserved and professional Maliri officer looked deeply unsettled, which filled Tsarra with a dark sense of foreboding.

"What is it, Aadya?!" she asked, her heart racing in her chest.

"You won't believe me if I tell you! Look at the file I transmitted!" the shaken woman replied, visibly trembling.

Tsarra clicked another button to begin the playback of the attached video, and turned to look at the holo-projection in the centre of the room. Four massive battleships, and three heavy carriers were being escorted by several dozen deadly-looking cruisers, the crossed-blades insignia of House Valaden clearly visible on their golden hulls.

"Was this taken at Genthalas?" Tsarra asked curiously, as she wondered why her Fleet Commander looked so worried. House Valaden didn't share a border with Perfaren territory, so if Edraele was moving to exploit Houses Naestina and Aeberos stripping forces from their borders, it could only be a good thing for her own House.

"It was taken from a covert reconnaissance probe in House Loraleth territory, Matriarch!" Fleet Commander Aadya replied. "We received its daily data burst ten minutes ago, but the footage was taken yesterday!"

Laughing with relief, the House Perfaren Matriarch grinned as she exclaimed, "It looks like we have an unlikely saviour, Aadya! Edraele couldn't have timed her raid against House Loraleth any better for us. If this escalates into open warfare between those Houses, we'll be able to pull forces from the Loraleth border! Holding off Naestina and Aeberos will be easy!"

Looking ashen, Aadya shook her head, and replied fearfully, "That fleet isn't coming for House Loraleth..."

The holo-video of the ships winked out, to be immediately replaced by the House Perfaren territory map. The three huge insignias representing enemy fleets were joined by a fourth, bearing the crossed-blades insignia of House Valaden. Tsarra gaped in horror at the map, which showed Edraele's forces now sitting on her -own- border, poised to attack.

"No! That can't be possible!" she cried out in panic, her heart hammering in her chest.

Aadya gazed at her with a look of dread, and replied, "They've allied against us, Matriarch. We're doomed."

Tsarra slumped in her seat, overwhelmed with despair. House Perfaren was lost; there was no way she could withstand simultaneous assaults from -four- enemy Houses. That didn't even take into account the fact that this unholy alliance included both Valaden and Loraleth, who possessed the biggest fleets in the Maliri Regency. She felt only regret to have failed her people so badly, and wondered what sequence of decisions had lead to such a horrific calamity for herself and her House.

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When John opened the door to the firing range, he was greeted by the angry chatter of an XR75 rifle blazing away. Stepping quietly into the room, he watched as Sakura snapped off several bursts in succession at her target. Staring down the range, he could see that her accuracy seemed to be improving, and he smiled to himself as he nodded his approval.

She had emptied the magazine, so she tilted the bullpup rifle to one side, and ejected the spent mag, catching it deftly with her left hand. Seeing that he'd caught her at an opportune time, he strolled up to the range and said, "Nice shooting! You seem to be handling the rifle with a lot more confidence."

Sakura paused with a fresh magazine full of ten-millimetre caseless rounds in her hand, and her intense expression of concentration lightened when she heard his voice. Turning to face him, she beamed a happy smile and said, "It's been getting so much easier as I've been getting stronger! The rifle doesn't seem to kick quite so hard any more."

He reached out to her bare arms, and gently squeezed her slender bicep, nodding slowly as he said, "Very impressive."

She laughed at that, and said, "Are you saying you'd prefer me to have burly man-arms, bulging with muscles?"

"Ah, no," John quickly clarified with a grin. "I'm extremely happy with your current dimensions. Athletic but very feminine, with lots of hidden strength, works just fine for me."

Sakura nodded with a wistful expression on her face as she said, "The girls all look like underwear models. I can't believe Calara's powerful enough to fight you in hand-to-hand combat."

"Appearances can be deceptive. It's an important lesson to remember," he said sagely.

She smiled at him, and said, "As the Asian one, aren't I supposed to be doling out wise sayings?"

He laughed, and replied, "When you start kicking my ass in a duel, you can. Until then, I get to be the annoyingly cryptic Zen-master." Looking at her rifle, he added, "Talking of which, I'm finished on the Bridge, and all yours for the afternoon. Do you want to do some more shooting practice, or are you ready to start training with swords?"

Sakura immediately darted over to the weapon rack, and carefully placed the XR75 back on the vacant hooks. The moment she returned the rifle, robotic arms popped out from the weapon rack, and began to efficiently strip and clean the rifle. She slotted her spent magazines back into the compartments designed to store them, then turned around and grinned at him.

"I'm ready!" she exclaimed, a fierce excitement in her rich brown eyes.

He offered her his hand, and said, "Alright, let's go."

They walked from the Firing Range, and then headed up in the cool blue glow of the grav-tube field. Sakura was getting used to the quirks of anti-gravity fields now, and she stepped lightly out into the corridor on Deck Three at John's side.

\*Sparks said to remind you it's the second door on the left,\* Alyssa informed him, as he walked along the corridor.

\*I can't wait to see it,\* he replied, as he led Sakura past his simulator training room.

They had a short walk to get to the next room, which he vaguely remembered as being another huge conference room. The Marines had received video briefings from General Buchanan in there, while John had originally been serving on the Invictus. It therefore came as a surprise when the door swished opened into a small anteroom, which contained two armour-equipping frames, complete with sets of armour. The sleek Paragon suits shone in the light, their glossy white surfaces looking immaculate in the spotlights of the equipping room. Directly ahead of them, and between the suits of armour, was a weapon rack which held the new swords he'd forged.

"Let's get geared up," he said to Sakura with a grin. "Do you know how to get into the armour?"

She nodded at him, sharing his excitement, and replied, "Dana went over it with me yesterday."

It was obvious who each suit was intended for, with John's Paragon suit nearly six inches taller than the smaller, sleeker female variant. They stepped into the armoured boots, then activated the robotic arms which swung the plated armour into position. John secured his with the thumb control, and when he heard the rippling series of clicks, he stepped free of the equipping frame, turning to check on Sakura. She walked clear a moment later, then held her arms out as she twisted her torso, experimenting with the feel of the suit.

"Everything alright with the armour?" he asked, as he watched her trying out the fit.

She rotated her shoulders, and squatted on her haunches several times before she replied, "It's not too bad, but it feels a little roomy." Blushing then, she added, "Dana made certain of the measurements. She was confident I'd grow into it."

"I'm sure it'll be fun getting you there," John said with a smile. He approached the weapon rack and grasped his Odachi, before moving out of the way for her.

Sakura nodded, giving him a coy smile as she took hold of her twin blades, then lifted them from the rack. Her attention was drawn back to the swords, and she turned them so they caught the light.

"This metal's beautiful," she murmured, entranced by the glossy white metal. "What is it exactly?"

"One of Dana's creations," John explained, casting a critical eye along the length of his sword. "She called it Invictium, and most of our gear was made from it before she developed an even tougher metal."

"Crystal Alyssium? I've heard you guys mention that before," she said, looking at him through her clear faceplate.

He nodded and replied, "Yeah, that's it. That stuff is even tougher, and the swords Alyssa makes with it can cut through titanium like butter."

"The girls are amazing," she said quietly, shaking her head in wonder.

"Every girl on this ship is quite exceptional," he agreed, smiling at her when she looked into his eyes.

\*Alright, that's enough flirting, you two,\* Alyssa thought to them both.

John and Sakura shared a glance and a smile, and then he looked at the two as-yet unexplored doors leading from the room. "Alright, which way now?" he asked aloud.

\*Take the one on the right if you were entering the room,\* Alyssa explained patiently.

Taking the lead, John strolled towards that door, which swished open in front of him without him having to hit any buttons to activate it. What he saw in the room beyond left him astounded, and he came to a sudden halt as he gaped at it in awe. Sakura stepped around him when he froze in her path, then stood there beside him, equally stunned by the view before her.

They were standing in a huge symmetrical training dojo, fashioned from some kind of lustrous teak wood, with the ceiling stretching away loftily above them. The glorious midday sun shone brightly through the rice paper-covered windows, sending diagonal shards of light across the room. It resonated with an aura of quiet reflection and tranquillity, spotlessly clean, neat, ordered, and precise in its design.

There were no walls surrounding the dojo, only tall sculpted columns that stretched up to the layered ceiling. The building was surrounded by a series of stone steps, and beyond them, the ground suddenly fell away out of sight, perched as they were atop a mountain. There were other mountains in this range, their peaks rearing up from the misty shroud that swathed them, making them seem like islands set adrift in a sea of clouds.

"This place is breathtaking..." Sakura whispered reverently. "I've never seen anything so beautiful before."

\*We thought it was time you had a proper place to train,\* Alyssa said to him, her voice drifting through his mind like a lover's caress.

John watched Sakura as she walked out across the matted floor, and strode up to the flight of stone steps surrounding the dojo. She hesitated for a moment, then reached out with the tip of one of her swords, until the blade brushed against some invisible surface. The tentative nudge triggered strange ripples, which began to spread out from the point of contact, distorting the epic vista with concentric waves.

\*The area bound by the training mats is the physical room itself. Sadly, we couldn't set you up on a real mountain range,\* Alyssa told him wryly.

\*Who made all this?\* John asked, walking into the room and raising his sword experimentally to check the height of the ceiling. Fully stretched on tiptoe, the tip of his long blade suddenly came up short as he brushed the real surface of the ceiling, causing the same kind of rippling effect.

\*It was a team effort. Dana installed all the holo-emitters and Faye used her maintenance bots to build the interior walls for the equipping room. Rachel came up with the idea for the mountains, and Calara designed the dojo for Irillith, who developed the holo-suite program,\* Alyssa explained to them both. Sounding well-satisfied, she added, \*Jade and I added the finishing touches.\*

\*Finishing touches?\* John asked, looking around the dojo to see what she was referring to. \*What do you mean?\*

\*You'll just have to wait and see!\* she teased him, sounding giddy at the prospect.

John smiled as he felt Alyssa's excitement over their empathic bond, and he walked out across the dojo, getting a feel for the size of the place. "Are you ready to start?" he called out to Sakura across the room.

She turned away from admiring the dramatic scenery, and walked out into the centre of the centre of the mats to join him. "Absolutely!" she agreed eagerly, brandishing her twin ninjato, and swirling them around in lazy circles.

He chuckled and said, "I'm not sure how I should feel about you being so enthusiastic to attack me."

"Definitely flattered," she replied. "I watched you fighting Yamamoto, and your mastery with a sword was very impressive. I can't wait to learn from you."

"Thank you, and I'm looking forward to training you too," he replied with a nod of acknowledgement for her compliment.

Sakura smiled at him, and asked, "How do you want to begin?"

He watched the confident way she was holding her weapons, and replied, "We'll take it nice and slow to start with, and let you get familiar with fighting in Paragon armour, and using your new swords." After a moment's hesitation, he added, "When I fought Shinatobe, she was very skilled in Kenjutsu, which is the fighting style Yamamoto taught me. Can you remember the kata for that?"

The Asian girl frowned as she concentrated, then slowly shook her head, and replied, "No, I can't remember any of it, sorry."

He gave her a sympathetic smile, then said, "Alright, let's hold off on fighting for the moment, and just run through the kata. You fight with two weapons, so we'll have to make some adaptations for that."

"Sounds like a great plan to me," she agreed, quite happy to start with the basics.

Sakura proved to be a quick study, and she seemed to have no problem copying the offensive and defensive stances he demonstrated to her. Her dual-wielding proved to be a slight complication, as John wasn't sure how to advise her on positioning her second gleaming blade. However, as she repeated each attacking or blocking move, her hands and body seemed to reflexively know how to respond. She flowed through the kata looking graceful and elegant, as though such movements were as natural to her as breathing.

He quickly realised there was no need to make allowances for her fighting style, as her twin swords appeared to be fluid extensions of her own arms. They spent the next four hours going through all the Kenjutsu kata that he knew, his eager student listening attentively to his every word. Her progress was remarkable, and they shared a grin when he decided to call it a day.

"That was excellent, Sakura!" he said to her as they walked from the training room. "I can't believe how much you learned in such a short space of time."

"You're a good teacher," she replied magnanimously, glowing with his praise. "You're calm and very patient. I really enjoyed training with you."

He smiled as he replied, "That's good, because we have a lot more ahead of us!"

They walked through to the equipping room, and took turns placing their swords in the weapon racks, before moving into the frames to remove their Paragon suits. When John stepped out of the boots, he glanced at Sakura and asked, "How did you find the armour? Was it a good fit?"

Free of her armour too, she winced as she stretched, replying, "It chafed a little. I think it's because I haven't grown into it yet."

John strolled over to her, and she watched him with a shy smile as he lifted the hem of her top to examine her lower torso. Gently running his hands over her lean flanks, he could feel where the armour had rubbed her skin, and he gave her a sympathetic frown as he said, "You should have told me you weren't comfortable. We could have stopped hours ago."

Her hands moved to catch his, and she moved his probing fingers across her body until they were resting over her tummy. "I knew you'd be able to fix everything," she told him, her voice quiet as she gazed into his eyes.

Caressing her svelte stomach, he murmured, "That's right. It's my job to take care of you."

\*Why don't you see about those finishing touches I mentioned earlier?\* Alyssa said to him suggestively. \*Go through the last door.\*

John saw the same look of curiosity in Sakura's eyes that he was feeling himself, and he realised Alyssa must have said something to her too. He took hold of her left hand in his, then led the raven-haired beauty over to the third door, the only one they had yet to use. It opened automatically when they approached, and he couldn't help but smile when he looked inside.

\*I thought some shower facilities would be useful after you finish training,\* Alyssa said to him, her voice playful.

There was a nice-sized shower in one corner of the room, a large chair in the opposite one, but the main feature of this suite was the neatly-folded king-sized bed. John chuckled when he saw it, while Sakura darted him a lusty look.

\*I appreciate your attention to detail, XO,\* he thought to Alyssa with amusement. \*Please thank all the girls, this training facility is wonderful.\*

She sounded delighted that he was pleased with their work, and she said, \*It was the least we could do. Besides, you do insist in buggering my girlfriend senseless after your sparring sessions. I figured she'd appreciate being nice and comfortable on the bed while you plunder her tight little ass.\*

He was already hard after flirting with Sakura, but he positively throbbed at the thought of Calara's compact little bottom, and the wonderful delights it always promised and delivered. A flash of clothes at his side drew his attention, and he grinned when he saw his student stripping off her trousers. John copied her, taking off his clothes too, and when he was as naked as she was, she reached out with a gentle hand to grasp his cock.

Moving her soft fingers in exquisite little motions, she guided him into the shower, and he held her in his arms as the water cascaded over them both. Spending hours watching every movement of her body made him feel closer to her, a familiar shared intimacy growing between them, of a sort that he relished with Calara during their sparring sessions. When Sakura tilted her head back to look at him, he could see that she felt it too, her almond-shaped eyes gazing at him softly. When they stepped out of the shower, the auto-driers did their work, adjusting to their size and shape to quickly remove all the water.

Sakura held out her hand to him, leading him over to the bed, and said in a hushed voice, "Make love to me."

Scooping her up in his arms, he placed her on the bed, then joined her there with a kiss. He began to explore her body with his lips, following her collarbone down to her breasts, and delighting in the feel of her soft golden-brown skin. He could hear her breathing quicken as she responded to his touch, letting out little gasps as he caressed her. When he moved down over her belly and between her thighs, she arched her back, and ran her fingers through his hair, letting out a long, low moan of pleasure.

She'd done well today, taking her first real steps on the path he had planned for her, and he wanted to reward her for efforts. He set about doing exactly that as she writhed in ecstasy.

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Dinner was a relaxed affair, with the girls going ahead with their steak and thick-cut chips without waiting for John and Sakura. Dana and Jade cheerfully announced that the new Bridge Stations were coming along nicely, while Irillith and Faye were making great progress on the upgrades to their digital network. Calara and Rachel were both a little subdued although they managed to hide it well, but to their mind-reading Matriarch, such facades were futile. Alyssa watched them both carefully, and while she knew what was troubling both girls, she found it frustrating not really being able to help them.

Rachel needed to speak to John to find catharsis, and Alyssa had no intention of intervening in anything that could bring him closer to the beautiful brunette. Calara's case was slightly different, and she sent the rest of the girls up to his Ready Room to relax after dinner, while she asked her Latina lover to stay behind, ostensibly to prepare a dinner for John when he rejoined them.

When the others had left, Alyssa shared a look with Calara, the single glance speaking volumes. The Latina walked quickly across the room into her arms, hugging her lover tightly for reassurance.

"Keep going, he needs this." Alyssa whispered in her ear.

"Are you sure?" Calara asked urgently. "I know what he's like, I can't see this helping him."

"It's been hanging over his head his whole life, we owe it to him to give him the answers he's looking for," Alyssa replied, her voice full of the conviction she didn't quite feel.

Pulling back slightly, the brunette gazed into Alyssa's cerulean eyes, and said, "I don't need telepathy to know you're not sure about this either."

"He deserves the truth, whatever it is," Alyssa said, no longer attempting to hide her own worries from her face.

The two girls hugged each other, finding comfort in that simple act, but they couldn't help wondering if they were doing the right thing.

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The girls were all well-settled in his Ready Room by the time the duellists finally arrived, and their arrival was greeted with wide grins when they turned up an hour late. Sakura walked into the room hand-in-hand with John, her head held high, her cheeks slightly flushed, and a lightness to her step despite the heavy weight rounding out her waist.

"Hi ladies," John said, greeting them all with a smile.

Alyssa rose from her spot on the sofa next to Calara, and said, "So, it looks like you two enjoyed the new training facility." She glided over to join them both, giving each of them a brief kiss, while running her fingers over the Asian girl's taut abdomen.

"You did a phenomenal job on the place, thank you," John said sincerely, looking at each of the girls in turn.

"I can't wait to spar with you in there instead of that old gym," Calara said enthusiastically, in a conscious effort to divert herself from her worries.

"You're the second girl today who wants to hand me my ass. Maybe I need to work on being a better boyfriend," he joked, while carefully avoiding referring to himself as her fiancé.

They shared a glance, and he could tell she knew, and the reason behind it. The twinkle in her brown eyes told him that she didn't mind.

"I see you two enjoyed the after-training facilities," Jade said, beckoning Sakura over to her, and making room between herself and Irillith on the rightmost sofa.

Nodding eagerly, the raven-haired girl walked over to join them, sitting down next to the friendly Nymph. She sighed with contentment as Jade and Irillith curled up on the sofa to face her, gently running their hands over her cum-stuffed belly.

"The bedroom was a lovely touch, but the dojo itself was spectacular. That was Mount Daisen on Terra, wasn't it?" Sakura asked the Maliri girl.

Irillith nodded and smiled as she replied, "Well-spotted. I took a little artistic license with the images Rachel supplied me, but yes, that was the original source."

"It looks like Alyssa isn't the only one with artistic flair," John said to the tawny-haired girl as he sat down next to Calara. He smiled gratefully at the blonde, as she handed him a plate with a steak sandwich and a tall glass of chilled water.

Rachel's expression was warm as she looked at Sakura, and said, "I thought you'd appreciate it."

John took a big bite of his sandwich, and then groaned with delight, as he exclaimed, "Damn, that's good! Who was the chef?"

Calara snuggled in against him, and gave him a peck on the cheek. "Glad you liked it," she said happily.

"It's delicious, thank you!" he said with a grateful smile. Looking around at the rest of the group, he asked, "What were you girls up to before we arrived?"

Alyssa laughed as she sat down beside him, and said, "Faye found your interview with Jehanna. TFNN must have fast-tracked it through approvals."

John gave Dana a stern look, and she giggled with delight at his disapproving frown. "Hey, don't look at me like that! You agreed to let me suck you off while you spoke to her!" she said, shaking with laughter.

John's mouth turned up into a smile as he remembered ravaging the redhead over the desk afterwards, their glorious climax more than making up for her thirty minutes of teasing. "Have you seen the interview yet?" he asked them.

They all nodded, and Alyssa said, "Don't worry, your tense, intent expression made you seem sincere and deeply concerned for Terran Federation forces. You'd never be able to tell you had your cock buried down a naughty teen's throat."

Dana burst into a fresh round of raucous laughter, and John deeply regretted that she was outside of his tickling range.

"Thank you for what you said about me," Rachel told him, and he could tell she was touched by his glowing praise in the interview.

"You deserved the credit for your work," he said firmly. "I wasn't going to take any chances and let the Port Medea medics steal your rightfully-deserved accolades. There are tens of thousands of personnel with horrific burns, and they deserve to know who it was that helped heal them."

"Actually, there's all sorts of wider applications for your work, aren't there?" Alyssa prompted Rachel with an encouraging smile, having heard the unassuming girl's thoughts on the matter.

Rachel nodded and replied, "Rapid skin regeneration could be useful in all sorts of ways, from aiding surgery patients with faster recovery times, to cosmetic applications such as reducing the visible effects of aging."

Alyssa cuddled in closer to John, and said, "I was thinking, I could acquire a pharmaceutical company with some of our funds, and then create separate brands for each area. We could start marketing the 'Voss Miracle Cure' for both medical and beauty markets."

The brunette nodded, and said, "Either application could make us obscenely wealthy."

John smiled at each of them in turn, and said, "You don't need my sign-off for this, girls. It sounds like an excellent idea to me, but you two are the experts, and I know you'll be doing your best for a very worthy cause."

Alyssa and Rachel shared a satisfied look, and the blonde said, "I'll get started on it immediately." She snuggled in closer to him and added, "Alright, not right now, but before bedtime, definitely."

Dana suddenly sat upright, and said, "I nearly forgot! Faye, run that clip you showed me, but skip past all the boring Zero-G football trailers."

John gave the purple sylph a curious look, and asked, "What did you find?"

"One moment, I'll show you!" she replied, with a cheerful smile. "Irillith asked me to record the Asphalt Arena Cup highlights."

Chuckling, John said to the Maliri girl, "Asphalt Arena? I didn't know you were a fan."

"I started watching it with Tashana when we were young," she replied, a little defensively. "It wasn't the same after Titanium Jake retired, but I still like to see the final Arena Cup duel."

Rachel winced, and said, "I was never into all that pointless violence. The amount of fatalities every year is ridiculous."

Irillith shook her head, and replied enthusiastically, "Terrans killing each other is the best part!" She looked a bit guilty then, and added, "But it's all a tragic waste of life, obviously."

"Yeah, obviously," Dana said, with a snicker and a wink at the embarrassed Maliri.

John was sitting on the middle sofa, and the wall opposite flickered before displaying a big clear image of a reporter standing amongst dozens of placard-waving demonstrators. He finished off his sandwich, then put his arms around Alyssa and Calara as he looked at the screen.

Looking at the messages on the placards, he frowned as he read variants of, "Stop the warmongering!" and "Kirrix are people too!". Glancing at Dana, he asked curiously, "What's this all about?"

"Get a load of these chuckleheads," Dana smirked, nodding towards Faye who started the video.

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A smartly dressed man with immaculately groomed hair began to speak, in the deep resonant tone you'd expect from a professional reporter. The banner on the bottom of the screen helpfully identified him as Bill Armstrong, anchor for TFNN.

"I'm standing here today at Port Heracles, where a group of protestors are about to embark on what they describe as 'The most important mission of our generation'. With me now is Lobard Jackson, son of famous holo-movie legend Troy Jackson," Bill said, before turning to the tousled-haired man in his early twenties who was standing by his side. "Tell me and our viewers, Lobard. What are you and your friends protesting about today?"

"Thanks, Bill!" the energetic young man replied. He seemed to be particularly vexed about his cause, and keyed up with excitement as he continued, "We're launching our peace ship today, to raise awareness about the injustices meted out by the Terran Federation military complex!"

"You're protesting about the recent defensive skirmishes with Kirrix ships on the frontier of Terran Space, is that right?" Bill prompted his guest.

Shaking his head, Lobard blurted out, "That's just High Command's line, man! Don't buy into that fake propaganda bullshit! The Kirrix just want peace, and are responding to Federation aggression!"

Bill nodded sombrely, indulging his guest, then asked, "And I believe your plan is to take your passenger liner, 'The Dove of Peace', into Kirrix Space to act as some kind of envoy?"

Lobard nodded, and said, "That's right, man! We're going as peace delegates to show the Kirrix that not all Terrans are murderous warmongers! We should be paying the Kirrix reparations for the 'Purges'. That genocide shit wasn't right!"

Frowning, Bill asked, "But didn't the Kirrix instigate that war by unprovoked attacks on Terran colonies?"

Before Lobard could reply, a pretty blonde stepped into view, and said, "Don't listen to him, Lobard, he's just a TFNN puppet!" She looked at the camera and screamed furiously, "Peace not War! Don't give in to hate!"

Bill Armstrong turned to look at the camera and raised an eyebrow, before the video cut to the next segment. The camera was focused on the same TFNN reporter, but this time he was in a grey-walled office, sitting opposite a stern, lantern-jawed military man.

"I'm here with Commander Paul Richards, ranking officer from the Terran Federation Marine Corps. Thank you Commander, for agreeing to this interview," Bill said politely.

"You're very welcome," the Marine replied, looking a little stiff and uncomfortable to be in this position. He was wearing his full dress uniform and his hair had been recently trimmed in a high and tight haircut.

Bill leaned forward, and said, "You recently earned a Nova Burst for your actions against the Kirrix. Would you like to make a comment about this 'peace mission' being undertaken by Lobard Jackson?"

Commander Richards gritted his teeth with anger, and replied in a tightly-controlled voice, "I've warned Mister Jackson and his affiliates about the dangers involved with their proposed voyage. Unfortunately, they chose not to heed my advice."

"And how would you respond to their claims that the threat posed by the Kirrix is merely 'propaganda'?" Bill probed, his face set in a well-practiced look of concern.

Narrowing his eyes, Commander Richards replied bluntly, "Suicide isn't illegal, so I can't impound their ship."

"Thank you for your time, Commander," Bill replied, turning to the camera with a grim expression.

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Faye froze the video clip there, and everyone sat silently for a moment, until Calara blurted out, "How can they be so stupid?!"

"People are easily led," John said with a sigh. "You wouldn't believe some of the crazy shit I've seen in my day. These Xeno-sympathisers pop up no matter how nasty the alien race. There's even people who feel the same way about the Drakkar."

Alyssa looked troubled, and she asked, "Isn't there anything we can do? We've seen what the Kirrix do to people."

John nodded towards the marine commander on the screen, and said, "We met him on that Kirrix Hive ship, remember? He seemed like a sensible guy, and there's probably not much more I could say that he hasn't tried already."

Dana rolled her eyes and said, "I don't think humanity is going to miss those fucking morons!"

Shaking her head, Alyssa grimaced as she remembered their ghastly descent through the Hive ship, and said, "What the Kirrix do to the people they capture is horrific; their young eat their way out of their victims. No one deserves to die that way, no matter how idiotic they are."

Squeezing her shoulder gently, John said, "I've got other commitments to honour, honey. I can't save everybody, especially those who don't want our help. I'm the 'Lion of the Federation', I'd be dismissed as a High Command puppet if I tried to talk them around."

"That report raised another point though," Calara said, looking worried. "They mentioned there's been more Kirrix activity on the border. The Terran Federation military is stretched pretty thin at the moment, I'm not sure they'd be able to repel a major Kirrix incursion."

"It's also very coincidental," Alyssa said thoughtfully. "The Drakkar start harassing the Ashanath again, and now the Kirrix are getting more aggressive. Could the Progenitor be stirring up more trouble?"

Dana tapped a finger on her chin, and said, "With that wormhole generator he's got, he could jump around all over the fucking place. Getting around to see all these bad guys isn't going to be a problem."

John nodded, and said, "I think we're going to have to assume he's behind it all. As Alyssa says, it seems very coincidental that all these hostile races would kick off at exactly the same time, and you know how I feel about coincidences."

"So does this change our plans at all?" Calara asked, turning slightly in the chair to look at him.

"No I don't think so, at least not in any major way," he replied, while thinking about it carefully. "We've got a promise to keep to Irillith, and after we've rescued her sister, visiting Valaden and Genthalas station is the only logical move. Upgrading the power core will let us bring the Nova Lances online permanently, and improving our hyper-warp speed with the Progenitor version of the Tachyon Drive is going to save us weeks of travel time in the long run."

The Latina met his gaze, and said, "We might be needed against the Drakkar or the Kirrix. If they mount a major invasion, the Terran Federation forces probably aren't strong enough to stop either of them at the moment."

John stared at the frozen image of Commander Richards, while remembering their last entanglement with the Kirrix. Heaving a sigh, he nodded as he replied, "Yeah, that's true. We'll have to limit our visit to Valaden to a few weeks at most. I suppose we can't afford to take our eyes off the Terran Federation for too long, not with this many hostile enemies arrayed against them."

Jade looked at him intently, and asked, "Do you remember what I said, about a cat playing games with a mouse? I think we're still being the mouse."

Dana nodded eagerly, and exclaimed, "Yeah, let's just be the cat! When can we start fucking this guy's shit up?! It's getting annoying having to clean up his mess all over the bloody place!"

"We need more answers," John replied, feeling a surge of frustration. Looking towards Irillith, he asked, "Would Tashana be able to give us any useful information? She spent years investigating Mael'nerak and the Progenitors, right?"

The Maliri girl nodded, and replied, "Decades, in fact. I doubt there's anyone in Maliri Space who knows more about the Progenitors than my sister." She sighed mournfully before she continued, "I just wish I hadn't been such a god-awful bitch to her about it. Tashana was right all along, and I never believed a word."

Sakura stroked Irillith's thigh as she said quietly, "She's still alive, so it's not too late to make amends. You can still apologise."

Irillith placed her hand on the one stroking her leg, and interlaced her fingers with Sakura's, while stroking the back of her tanned hand with her thumb. She smiled at the Asian girl gratefully, and said, "You're right, I can still make it up to Tashana."

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After finishing the rest of the evening chatting, the girls eventually gathered around John as Irillith rode him until he filled her womb. Then they watched Sakura as she knelt between the Maliri girl's legs to have her final meal before bedtime. The two girls stared into each other's eyes as Sakura filled her stomach, Irillith's slender blue fingers brushing through the kneeling girl's long dark locks as she lapped away.

John held Alyssa in his arms as they watched the intimate coupling, and the blonde shivered with delight in his arms as she said, \*I love this so much! It's almost like I can see the girls bonding while they work together to fill her tummy.\*

He kissed her neck, sending a thrill of excitement through her young body, as he replied, \*It's an unorthodox approach to team building XO, but I can't disagree with the results. You're right, it's amazing seeing them all embrace Sakura into our group.\*

The following morning it was Dana's turn, and she bucked against the smaller girl's questing mouth as she sucked out her breakfast. After watching the show, everyone showered and dressed before going to get some coffee and toast to start the day. After kisses goodbye, they parted ways to continue with their tasks.

Several of the girls were headed up to the Command Deck, and after they reached the top of the grav-tube, they split up to continue their work. Dana and Jade still had more to do to complete the second Bridge station, while Alyssa gave Calara a loving kiss before sending the brunette on her way to the Briefing Room, to continue her investigation into the disappearance of Jessica Blake. That left the blonde Matriarch to retire to the Ready Room, where she planned to continue her studies into galactic finance.

John accompanied Sakura, Irillith, and Rachel down to Deck Seven, and after checking to make sure his trainee marksman was happy in the firing range, he jogged down the corridor to the Engineering Bay. He'd expected to find Rachel there, but Irillith was by herself, sitting cross-legged up on the Engineering Podium, her eyes closed as she delved into the Cyber realm. Faye had been watching him on the Invictus' dozens of internal security cameras, and when she saw his look of confusion, she popped into existence before him in a purple flash.

"Hi John!" she said with a charming grin. "Are you looking for Rachel?"

He nodded at the nude girl, and replied, "Yeah, I'm used to finding her in here. Is she in Medical?"

The cute purple construct nodded enthusiastically, and replied, "She's running the DNA analyser on that sample of Dragon Blood from your sword. Shall I let her know you're looking for her?"

He shook his head, and replied, "It's okay, I'll go and find her." He glanced at the seated Maliri girl, and added, "How are you two getting on with the network upgrades?"

"It's going really well!" Faye replied, beaming at him happily. She paused then, and added nervously, "If it's alright with you, can I let Irillith tell you about the upgrades? What we're working on at the moment is her idea, so I think she'd enjoy telling you about them."

"That's very considerate of you, Faye, and fine by me," John replied, giving her a reassuring smile to put her at ease. He looked at her curiously then as he added, "You had some ideas as well, didn't you? Can you tell me about those?"

Faye brightened then, her luminous eyes blazing with excitement as she replied, "I'd love to! We're thinking of creating more copies of the Progenitor server that runs me, and we're planning to use them as defensive fortifications for our network. At the very least, I'd like to install one to defend our external gateway."

He nodded as he thought it over, and said, "It sounds like a good idea to me. Does Irillith approve?"

The sprite's wings quivered, reflecting her excitement as she replied, "She thinks it's a good plan too!" She frowned slightly as she added, "Unfortunately we'll have to take the ship's network completely offline to replace the hardware, so we're going to wait until we're in drydock at Genthalas. Installing it shouldn't take too long though, maybe a few hours?"

John wasn't perturbed by this in the slightest, and he replied, "The Invictus won't be going anywhere for a few weeks, anyway. We've got some major upgrades to take care of, and I'm thinking it might be a good idea to replate the ship while we're at it. It should be much easier with me helping Alyssa now, and we've both got stronger since last time."

Faye nodded, her eyes wide, as she said, "I know, you're both amazing!"

He chuckled, and replied, "Thanks Faye, I think you're wonderful too."

She seemed to visibly vibrate with joy, and he smiled at her affectionately as he waved goodbye. Turning to leave the Engineering Bay, he spotted something new over in the corner of Dana's workshop and wandered over to take a look at it. It looked like a wrapped bundle of intricately woven metallic tubes, which were white in colour and sparkled in the light, making it obvious they'd been constructed from Crystal Alyssium. It vaguely reminded him of a human leg muscle, only it was a couple of metres long.

"Any idea what this is, Faye?" he asked the AI who flitted along at his side.

"One of Dana's secret projects. I'm sworn to secrecy, I'm afraid," she replied, with an apologetic smile.

"Don't worry, I think I might know what it is," he replied, eyeing the strange, glimmering device. He shook his head, and added, "I told her we'd never find any use for it, but I guess I did say she could work on whatever she liked."

Faye nodded, and noted, "She did seem very excited when she was working on it."

He chuckled and said, "Alright, I better go. Thanks for your help, Faye."

She waved him goodbye as he left the room, then blinked out in a purple flicker.

It was only a short walk over to the Medical Bay, and when he entered, he looked for Rachel amongst the growing suite of medical equipment in the room. The clever doctor had clearly been busy, putting together a multitude of new devices with help from his Chief Engineer. He finally spotted Rachel staring at the slowly rotating double-helix strands that were being projected above the DNA analyser. The brunette was completely absorbed in her work, and didn't appear to have heard him enter the room.

Rather than giving her a fright, he cleared his throat, and said loudly, "Hi, Rachel. Found anything interesting?"

She turned to look at him walking over to join her, and smiled as she replied, "Yes, actually. Analysing the Kintark genetic modification has been fascinating."

"Do you want to tell me about it?" he asked, leaning in to give her a friendly kiss.

She studied him for a moment, and replied, "That's not really why you're here, is it?"

He shook his head, and smiled at her as he replied, "No, but we can keep up the pretence if you like?"

Tilting her head to one side, it was almost like he could see her mind whirring as she considered something. He saw a shadow flash across her face, and understood that she must have figured out his real purpose for wanting to speak with her. Rachel obviously wasn't quite ready for that yet, so she said, "Alright, I'll tell you what I've learned so far."

"I'm all ears, Doctor," he replied, raising a smile from the beautiful young woman.

She turned to look at the floating DNA sample she'd taken from Kindralax's blood, and said, "My earlier postulations were correct. There's a hierarchy amongst the Kintark, with these 'dragons' at the apex, almost certainly due to their raw power. It appears the Kintark have been experimenting with genetic modification of their species for a few centuries, and I'd surmise that Kindralax was one of the earlier test subjects.

"He was at least two-hundred-years old, and his genetic coding shows extensive mutation that must have occurred during infancy. Since then, he must have been growing at a steady rate over the decades, to reach the colossal size he was when we met him."

John frowned as he asked, "Why not just turn all of their race into dragons? Kindralax was ridiculously powerful. An entire race made up of creatures like him would be absolutely unstoppable!"

Rachel tapped a finger on her chin as she thought over his question, a mannerism she seemed to have picked up from Dana, which made him smile. After a pause she replied, "That's a good question, and I'd imagine that considering the size of the fully-grown dragons, the amount of resources required to sustain them would prohibit their practicality as a space-borne species. In other words, basic Kintark are still useful to man their ships, and run the more mundane aspects of Kintark society."

"What about their regeneration? The rate they were able to heal from injuries was quite incredible," he asked, recalling how both the dragons and the Royal Guard had been able to rapidly regenerate from crippling injuries.

Her grey eyes flashed with excitement as she replied, "The Kintark seem to have harnessed an ability Terrans have only seen in newts. A newt has two different cell types: skeletal fibre muscle cells, or SMFCs and muscle stem/progenitor cells, or MPCs." When she saw him raise an eyebrow at that, she laughed and added, "The name is purely coincidental."

"Right, so the dragons are basically like big newts?" John asked, with a frown.

She smiled as she replied, "Their regeneration works in a similar way, at least. SMFCs are used in the larval stage to grow skeletal muscles, but once they've fully grown, if they lose a limb, then MPCs are used for cellular regeneration instead. No other creature we know of, except newts, can do this. I'd surmise that this ability was enhanced and gene-spliced into the Kintark genetic variant we think of as dragons. This differentiates them considerably from standard Kintark, along with a prodigious growth rate harvested from some kind of megafauna."

"Megafauna?" John asked, "What's that?"

"Big animals," she replied patiently. "Anything that weighs more than a tonne. Prehistoric Terra had an abundant Megafauna ecosystem, more commonly known as dinosaurs."

"Is there any way you can make this useful for us?" he asked curiously.

"Not unless you want to have to crawl along the corridors," she replied with a mischievous smile.

He laughed, and said, "No, the regeneration!"

Shaking her head, she replied, "The kind of gene-splicing the Kintark did has considerable risks. I could create some kind of Terran/newt hybrid using a very similar kind of procedure, but they wouldn't be very aesthetically pleasing, at least by Terran standards. You might also see all sorts of undesirable mutations, like gills, webbed fingers and toes, exuding toxins from the skin, that kind of thing."

"You were right, that was fascinating," John said with a smile.

She nodded, then looked at him somewhat apprehensively as she asked, "You're really here to ask me why I haven't spoken to my father, aren't you?"

He nodded, and glancing over at the comfortable chairs on the other side of the Medical Bay, he said, "Let's sit down and have a chat. I can tell something's upsetting you."

"Alright," she agreed, following him over to the seating area.

John sat down in the first chair he came to, and Rachel sat opposite him, until he frowned at her disapprovingly and patted his lap. She laughed, then got up and glided over to him, sitting sideways across him as he supported her in his arms.

"That's better, isn't it?" he asked her as he ran his fingers across her slender stomach.

She smiled wistfully, and replied, "This takes me back to when I first joined you guys. You were working so hard to make sure I was fully informed before making my decision, so that I wouldn't have any regrets. It was quite adorable."

"And do you have any?" he asked her, brushing her tawny-brown hair away from her face so he could look into her smoky grey eyes.

She hesitated for a split-second, then shook her head, and replied, "No, of course not. I love you, my relationship with Dana is amazing, and the girls are all so lovely too. We're saving lives practically every day, and I've never felt more fulfilled, professionally."

He smiled at her, and said, "I saw that little pause before you answered. Come on, you can tell me. What's the matter?"

Rachel looked guilty for a moment, before she blurted out, "I feel so ungrateful, but you've made me too smart!"

John's eyes widened and he blinked in surprise, never expecting her to say that for one moment. When he recovered, he looked at her troubled face, and joked, "Alright, one mindless bimbo coming up. Let's do this."

When he waggled his eyebrows and glanced suggestively at his groin, she laughed, and protested half-heartedly, "Stop it, this is serious."

"I'm sorry," he apologised, hugging her closely. "Tell me why being too intelligent is a problem?"

She took a deep breath, and then replied, "I've always been bright, and people find it intimidating. I was always second-guessing myself growing up, never quite sure how to react around people to avoid unsettling them. When I ran off with Axel and his biker buddies, I just pretended to be some dopey airhead, and let everything wash over me. Drinking and taking drugs, was a great way to just stop overthinking everything."

His hand dropped to her lower belly, caressing the spot where she'd worn the swallow tattoo. She blushed as he stroked her, and nodded as she looked into his eyes.

John frowned then, and said, "I don't feel intimidated by your intelligence, I find it a big turn-on in fact. As for the girls, they all love you, and seem totally relaxed in your company. I've never seen you unsettle them with anything you've said or done before."

Shaking her head, she replied, "Sorry, I sidetracked you talking about my past. There's a new problem now, in that I'm getting too good at reading people. By that, I mean you... and Calara."

Suddenly all the pieces clicked into place, and he brushed his fingers against her cheek, as he said, "I'm sorry, Rachel, I think I understand now."

She let out a ragged sigh, nodding as she explained, "I noticed immediately how giddy with happiness Calara was, but she seemed to be suppressing it for some reason. She had just seen her father and brother, which went part of the way to explain it, but that kind of pure joy implied something more significant had happened.

"Then I remembered how nervous you were before you left to visit her father, and knowing how you hold these old-fashioned ideas about chivalry and etiquette, everything started falling into place. I realised you must have asked for his blessing, then proposed to Calara on the flight to Port Medea from the Regulus system.

"I was delighted for her, of course, but the only reason she would be suppressing the news, is if she suspected you were going to eventually propose to the rest of us too. I concluded that you'd already proposed to Alyssa, being so intimate with her for so long, and you almost certainly postponed your proposal to Calara until you'd spoken to both her parents to ask for their blessing."

John's eyes widened, astonished at how much she'd been able to piece together, and he confirmed her suspicions as he said, "Yes, you're right... about everything."

She didn't look surprised, and she sounded sad as she continued, "I'd noticed a change in Dana a few months ago, some hidden smiles shared with Alyssa, that kind of thing. I assumed it was just based on their old friendship growing up on Karron, and perhaps some telepathic inside-jokes they were sharing. Then I remembered how happy Jade had become a few weeks after that, and I suddenly realised you must have proposed to both of them too. Which meant I was next..."

"I certainly didn't want to make you sad," John replied, stroking her comfortingly.

She gave him a wan smile, and said, "Despite the way I'm feeling right now, I love the idea too. It's just hard... not having my mother here to share this with."

"And the reason you're upset with your father, is because you haven't completely forgiven him for what happened to her," John concluded, for the grieving young woman.

Rachel nodded, and replied mournfully, "Asking Maria for her blessing was a lovely gesture, and I'm sure she must have been thrilled. I know my mother would have loved seeing me end up with you, and it just brought all those raw emotions flooding back to the surface again."

John saw her eyes filling with tears, and he pulled her in close as he said, "Catherine would have been very proud of you, Rachel. You've grown up into an amazing young woman who we all love very much. I'm sorry I can't bring her back for you, but I do promise to look after you, and try and give you the best life I can."

They sat together quietly as Rachel quietly wept for her lost mother, John holding her close as she cried against his chest. He murmured comforting words to her, until her tears eventually dried out, and she gave him a tender kiss in gratitude.

"Sorry to unburden all that on you," she said with a rueful smile. "I've ruined any element of surprise about your proposing now, too."

He smiled at her, and replied, "It sounds like it wasn't going to be much of a surprise after all."

"Intelligence, the double-edged sword," she said with a sad sigh.

"Don't think of it that way," he said to her gently, but firmly. "Your intellect is a gift that you received from your mother, passed down to you through the genes that made you the girl you are today. Every person you save, every life you transform with your work, they're all a tribute to Catherine Voss."

Rachel's grey eyes glinted in the light, and he could see a spark of inspiration there, as she replied, "That would be a wonderful legacy for her, and a lovely way to remember her too."

He nodded, and said, "I'm sorry I never got to meet her. If she was anything like you, she must have been a remarkable woman."

Her gaze softened, and she said, "I love you so much, John Blake."

"I love you too, Rachel Voss," he replied, leaning in to share a tender kiss with her.

She sighed again, but it was very different now, a lighter sound and one filled with happiness. "Thank you for coming to talk to me about this, it feels like I've had a huge weight lifted off me," she breathed, when they finally pulled apart.

He smiled at her, and said, "Is it just me, or does it feel like we're engaged now too?"

Rachel laughed, and replied, "I think I stole your thunder a little, but yes, it feels like that to me as well."

Lifting her off his lap, he got down on one knee, and smiling up at her, he said, "Rachel Voss. I love you, will you marry me?"

She grinned at him as she nodded, laughing as she said, "Of course I will! I love you too!"

He swept her into his arms and amid happy laughter from them both, he gave her a big hug and a kiss, and said, "I just wanted to eliminate any doubt!"

"I can't wait to tell Dana!" she gasped, her eyes lighting up at the thought.

"She's up on the Command Deck with the rest of my fiancées," he said with some amusement, using a phrase he never imagined he'd be saying. "Let's go up and see them."

Rachel had been correct before; she did look like she'd had a huge burden lifted from her, and not just to do with her feelings of loss about her mother. She had a lightness to her step now, as though she was finally at peace with her own startling intellect, and happier in her own skin. He instinctively knew that his words to her had just had a profound effect on the young woman, and that spark of inspiration in Rachel's eyes would be a powerful driver for her in the future.

\*How do you do that?\* Alyssa asked him, sounding shocked. \*It was something so woven through her personality I hadn't even picked up on it, and I can read her mind!\*

John and Rachel stepped out of the grav-tube onto the Bridge, and the other girls were all waiting for her. There were happy tears and hugs all round, as they welcomed the brunette into their exclusive club of future Mrs Blakes. Alyssa darted him curious looks as she hugged the overjoyed young woman, and he shrugged helplessly in response.

\*She was upset, and what I told her was the truth. I don't think there's much more to it than that,\* he said, smiling as he saw Dana and Rachel share a loving kiss, beaming smiles on both their faces.

\*No, there's something else happening. We need to talk sometime, the portraits in my mind for the Terran girls are changing,\* she replied, her blue eyes wide like saucers, and a hint of wonder to her voice.

\*XO catch-up soon?\* he suggested flirtatiously.

The smouldering look she gave him, left him eagerly looking forward to their next meeting.

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Later that afternoon, once Sakura had finished her second session in the firing range for the day, John joined her in the Training Dojo again. They had spent the morning session going over everything she'd learned the previous day, working through the kata to make sure she had learnt them by rote. He was astonished at how quickly she absorbed everything he could teach her, and there were even a few times when she'd noticed a few minor errors he'd been making.

Practice time was over now though, and they were facing off against one another for their first duel. Sakura watched him warily as he moved to attack, taking things slow to start with, to let her adjust to fighting a real opponent. He was tempering his herculean strength to give her a chance to block and parry, and his first sweeping slash at her waist, she deflected easily with her blades. Following up with another smooth sword stroke, she parried it again with an effortless sweep of her weapons. Smiling at him confidently, she twirled her blades in slow, deliberate, and mesmerising circles.

Figuring that he'd been a little overly cautious, he moved onto the offensive, his attacks coming at a faster pace, pushing her back as she blocked and parried each scything cut of his long blade. John's two-handed Odachi was a significantly larger weapon, and with that length came a substantial reach advantage. Sakura's ninjato were only half the size of his sword, and that meant he was able to attack her without undue worry about counterattacks.

He'd pushed her back almost all the way to the far edge of the mats, when her eyelids fluttered, and she no longer seemed to be focusing on him. She suddenly skipped to the side of his latest attack, then pirouetted as she lunged towards him. Her twin blades flashed in the light arcing across the dojo, and he had to dart back a step, hurriedly repositioning his sword to parry her flurry of deft strikes. He was forced to quickly rethink his theory about attacking with impunity, as she slashed away at him driving him backwards.

It was John's turn to be on the defensive now, as Sakura ducked under a sweeping swing, forcing him to block sharply downwards as she chopped at his legs with her swords. He might have had the reach, but it did him little good when she was attacking so aggressively, having to work his Odachi at a frantic pace to deflect one piercing stab, before swiftly blocking the inevitable follow-up from her second ninjato.

"Sakura! You're reliving another memory!" he shouted at her, as he kept her at bay.

The glazed looked in her angular eyes faded as quickly as it had arrived, and she stumbled a step as she regained control of herself. Blinking in surprise, she gasped, "I thought I was fighting a bodyguard with a sword! He was good, and gave Shinatobe a close fight."

"Are you feeling alright now?" he asked warily. "We can stop if you want to take a break."

Sakura shook her head, and replied, "No, I feel fine. It's just disorientating coming out of these flashbacks."

He studied her for a long moment, his hands resting on the pommel of his sword with the tip resting on the floor. Finally, he said, "You seem to have no trouble tapping into Shinatobe's old skills when you're reenacting her assassinations. It looks like your body seems to have retained the muscle memory for these fighting techniques."

She nodded thoughtfully as she replied, "There's a certain familiarity to holding swords and guns, which ends up triggering a flashback."

John adopted a defensive stance, and said, "Come at me again, I want to see if it triggers another memory."

Taking a deep breath, she settled herself down, then watched him calmly as she brought her swords up in readiness. Sakura sprang towards him in a headlong charge, and would have caught him off-guard if he hadn't been vigilant. She, or more accurately, Shinatobe, favoured a very aggressive form of fighting, the clear goal being to overwhelm her opponent with a blistering series of strikes, before they knew what had hit them. He was sure it had been shockingly effective against the targets selected for assassination, but for a fully prepared foe such as himself, he was able to keep her at bay.

This was the first time he'd really had a chance to study her fighting techniques, and as he warded away her darting blades, he noticed something interesting. In a flash of clarity, he realised that the programmed moves she'd somehow remembered from the data-chips lent a certain predictability to her attacks. While her form and style was flawless, and she struck with a wide variety of different attacks, the pattern of her assault still seemed slightly formulaic.

He watched her spring forward with her right foot, which added weight to her lunge, then sweep in with her left blade, forcing him to block to his right. Their swords rang out as they connected, and she quickly followed up with a cross-slash aiming her right sword at his exposed flank. He deflected it, and stepped back again, spending the next couple of minutes blocking the ringing storm of blows.

They danced across the mat, attack quickly followed by counter-attack, the air ringing with the clash of metal. He defended cautiously until Sakura sprang forward on her right foot, lunging at him again. He knew exactly where the next attack was coming from this time, and he put extra weight into his looping swing, which smashed the blade out of her left hand, sending it skittering across the dojo. Then came the cross-slash to his right, which he swiftly blocked, before stepping forward and catching her wrist with his right hand. Holding her fast, she gazed at him in surprise as he brought his blade around to her armoured throat, stopping just short of contact.

"You predicted my moves!" she exclaimed, gazing up at him with a mix of surprise and respect on her face.

John nodded as he released her, and said, "Your technique is amazing, but the fighting skills you learned from the data-chips aren't perfect. I spotted patterns in the way you were attacking, so the chips must have been a bit limited with their improvisation."

"Can you show me?" she asked eagerly, as she walked over the mats to retrieve her sword.

"Of course," he replied with a smile. "I noticed a couple of sequences that you seem to chain together..."

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It was late by the time John and Sakura rejoined the others, having become thoroughly absorbed in their training session. The girls were waiting for them in the Ready Room, and they could immediately see that they were both weary after six hours of intensive melee combat. John had a quick bite to eat, and as enjoyable as it was listening to the girls talking, he decided to have an early night. Sakura was exhausted too, and the girls waved them both goodbye as they headed off to bed.

Everyone else was still wide awake, so they spent the rest of the evening chattering away in the Ready Room. Alyssa had managed to retrieve a bottle of vodka from the kitchen in the Officers' Lounge, and they sat around getting tipsy as they talked about their lives before joining the crew. As the last girl to join them before Sakura, Irillith had the most to learn about the other girls' pasts, and she listened attentively to their tales.

Jade was reluctant to give them any details about her centuries spent as a sex slave to a variety of despots, so she told them about some of her earliest memories instead. She talked about her time on Lenarra before the Terrans arrived, surrounded by her fellow Nymphs. The continent she'd grown up on had mostly consisted of sweeping plains, where herds of deer-like creatures called shentole roamed freely. She had a wistful smile on her face as she told them about following the migrating herds with her tribe, leading a peaceful nomadic existence with her cat-like sisters.

Alyssa and Dana spoke of their childhood growing up on Karron, trying to scrape by for food, while avoiding a variety of sinister predators. It wasn't all depressing though, as they talked about the pranks they'd pulled on gang members, and various scrapes they'd managed to get themselves out of. Dana talked fondly about putting her workshop together, and she chuckled when she thought back on it now, and how it compared to the wonderful toys she now had at her disposal.

Calara opened up about her first boyfriend, and how he'd left her heartbroken when he'd dumped her after he graduated. This earned her lots of sympathy from her friends, but she was glad they were out of Terran Federation comms range, when a giddy redhead suggested they prank call Mister Craig Harrison. She salved Dana's disappointment by telling them several dirty jokes she'd learned at the academy, which had everyone in fits of laughter.

They all wanted to know more about Axel, the wild biker boyfriend that had led Rachel astray. She had a half-smile on her face as she recalled some of her naughtier adventures, and after plenty of goading, she revealed that she'd had her first threesome with him... and his buddy Rod. This had all the girls sitting forward on the edge of their seats, begging for more details.

She smiled as she told them how they'd cruised down to one of New Eden's more desolate beaches, then watched the sun set over the sea. The place had been deserted, so Axel had unfurled a big blanket, then urged her to strip off and dance to some music, putting on a show for them. Rachel knew exactly where that might lead, and had been eager for it, thrilled by the lusty attention of two men. After blowing her boyfriend, she'd extended the same courtesy to Axel's biker brother, revelling in the debauchery of having two men's cum in her stomach. After that, she described how they'd spit-roasted her, high-fiving each other as she pleasured them both with her nubile body.

"I can't believe you screwed two guys at once!" Dana blurted out, gaping at the brunette. "You seemed so straight-laced when you first joined us!"

Rachel gave her friend a sly grin, and said, "I did say I'd been a wild child."

Dana squirmed in her seat, and said, "I wish there were two Johns, getting spit-roasted like that would be awesome!"

Alyssa laughed, and said, "He already did, don't you remember?" She glanced at the Nymph sitting on the opposite sofa, and added, "Or more accurately, Jade fucked us all like that. Didn't you, sexy catgirl?"

Jade gave them an affectionate smile, and said, "I think I enjoyed that as much as John did."

"I bet you did," Alyssa purred, rising from her chair, and prowling towards the grinning Nymph.

They'd all seen that look on Alyssa's face before, and following the blonde's cue, they paired off randomly. Rachel beckoned over Irillith, while Dana pounced on Calara, exploring familiar bodies on not-quite-so-familiar partners. They quickly peeled off clothes before coupling up on the sofas, working together to give each other some much-needed relief. After their first glorious climax, they switched partners again, grabbing the closest luscious body.

Alyssa was paired with Irillith this time, and the girls shared an excited grin, eager to re-enact their victory in the blondes versus brunettes competition. Before they started, Alyssa kissed Irillith passionately, and thought to her, \*I've got something in mind for tomorrow, if you're up for it?\* She gave her a coy smile as she added, \*It'll mean getting fucked hard, though...\*

Irillith's angular eyes sparkled with delight as Alyssa filled her in on the plan, and she nodded eagerly as they fell onto the sofa in a tangle of lithe limbs.

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John stretched as he woke, feeling refreshed after a good night's sleep. He suddenly blinked in shock as he realised he wasn't flanked by ravishing girls for the first time in months, and he sat bolt-upright in alarm.

"I've got a bone to pick with you," Irillith said in a frosty tone, narrowing her eyes dangerously.

He blinked as he set eyes on her, sitting fully-dressed in the lone chair, glaring at him with a furious expression on her face. "What's up, honey?" he asked as he climbed out of bed, and walked quickly to her side.

She rose to her feet as he approached, and snarled, "Don't 'honey' me, you deceitful bastard! Before I went to bed last night, I saw the new additions to the Bridge!"

He gaped at her in astonishment, his befuddled brain struggling to work out what she was so upset about. He nodded cautiously, and said, "I asked Dana to build Sakura a new station..."

"What about the other one?" Irillith accused him, her eyes flashing dangerously. "Isn't it bad enough that you're planning on fucking my mother?! Now you want to add my sister to your little harem too?!"

"Wait!" he protested, hands raised in a calming manner. "That wasn't my idea!"

"Bullshit!" she fumed, her hand drawing back for a stinging slap.

As disorientated as he was, her twisting shoulders telegraphed the move, and he caught her by the wrist as her hand whistled towards his cheek. Her violet eyes blazed, but it wasn't anger he saw in her flared pupils, it was lust. He had to stop himself from laughing with relief as he realised this was some kind of elaborate foreplay, and that she wasn't actually upset with him. Managing to stifle his chuckles, he held her in a tight grip, then caught her left hand as she tried to slap him with that too.

"Let go of me! Primitive Terran beast!" she protested, struggling in his grip, her breathing more rapid now.

He smiled at her confidently, and replied, "I'm not a Terran, I'm a Progenitor. I own your Maliri ass, and I'll do as I please."

Irillith snorted indignantly as he gathered her wrists, pinning them behind her back with one hand. The look of contempt on her face was shattered when he suddenly tore the dress from her body with his free hand, accompanied by the sound of her shocked squeal. She was deliciously nude underneath, and he grasped one of her big, firm breasts, squeezing roughly.

"You wouldn't dare!" she hissed, a fierce challenge in her eyes.

He frowned, and said, "It looks like you need taming little Maliri girl. You're getting far too feisty."

Turning, he pushed her towards the bed, and she backed away, climbing onto the covers warily. He could see the eager excitement in her eyes, and his cock throbbed with need as he pursued her. She suddenly launched herself at him, clawing for his eyes, but he was wary for more of her ready slaps, and caught her just in time. He pinned her on the bed, holding her prone and powerless beneath him.

"I'm not some doe-eyed harem girl for you to slake your bestial lusts," she snarled.

"Of course you are," he countered, holding down her wrists with one hand and stroking her toned azure stomach with the other. "You've been designed to be exactly that. I'll ride you hard, over and over again, until I decide it's time for you to carry my baby in your belly."

Despite her protestations, Irillith's fierce expression softened, a loving, doe-eyed expression forming on her exquisitely beautiful face. "I'd love that," she murmured, with a happy sigh.

"I know, honey," he said, gently. "I would too, but not today."

He rolled her over on her tummy, finding her docile and compliant now, and brushed his hands over her perfectly-rounded ass. Separating her pert blue cheeks, the toned muscles yielded to his strong grip, revealing the focus of his curiosity. Sure enough, he saw the tell-tale glistening of lube, where she'd prepared herself for him.

Mounting her, he positioned his iron-hard cock at her slick asshole, then leaned forward so he could hold her wrists. "Good girl, relax for me," he crooned in her pointed blue ear, pushing forward with his hips, and forcing the blunt head of his cock into her body.

"Oh fuck!" she shrieked, abruptly shocked out of her doe-eyed stupor as her anus stretched impossibly wide to take his girth.

"That's better, isn't it?" he murmured, focused on sinking into her slick depths. "You just needed reminding who you belong to."

Irillith let out a long wail as he buried himself in her body, thoroughly embedding his shaft in her hot, tight grip. He pushed forward relentlessly, until her rounded bottom was pressed into his groin, and he rested on her back, enjoying the feel of her soft skin beneath his chest. She whimpered as she tried to move against him, desperate to feel him thrusting inside her.

He interlaced her fingers with his own, enjoying the sight of her slender blue fingers clenching onto his. This position let him drive deeper inside her, causing Irillith to cry out in disbelief as his quad nestled up against her pussy. As she groaned ecstatically, he felt a weight on the bed, and Alyssa crawled over to join them, kneeling at his side.

"You look so fucking hot, skewering her like that," she gasped, leaning in to kiss him.

He shook his head in amusement, pulling back and drawing a low moan from the impaled Maliri girl. Smiling at Alyssa, he asked, "Was this your idea?"

She nodded, and said, "I thought Irillith could be the guest-ass for you to ride during our XO catch-up."

John chuckled at that, thrusting forward into the tightly stretched girl beneath him. He began to establish a steady rhythm, eliciting soft grunts from her every time he impaled her.

Irillith tossed her hair back, and looking into Alyssa's excited eyes, she gasped, "How can you... ugh... turn this down?!"

Alyssa leaned in and kissed the stuffed Maliri girl, then replied, "You're right, it was difficult. I love getting my ass stretched as much as you do. I need to talk to John about something important though, and I wouldn't be able to concentrate if he was reaming me out."

They stared intently into each other's eyes for a moment, sharing a rapid telepathic conversation, then Alyssa grinned, and moved up the bed. She lithely positioned herself in front of the supine girl, spreading her tanned, athletic legs, and moving down until she could pull Irillith's face into her pussy. The Maliri moaned breathily, then found Alyssa's clit with practiced ease, and began to lick her enthusiastically.

"You must be loving this," John whispered in Irillith's ear, as he stroked in and out of her hot, clutching depths. "Dominated by two Progenitors..."

She whimpered in response, redoubling her efforts with her tongue. No one said anything for a few minutes, just revelling in pleasures of the flesh. John got to hear excited young women in stereo, while stroking in and out of Irillith, and watching Alyssa grinding against her face. The overload of sensation had his quad rising in anticipation.

\*Now, what have you been up to?\* Alyssa asked him heatedly, staring down at them both with hooded eyes.

John kissed Irillith's neck, while glancing up to meet those piercing cerulean eyes, and replied, \*Well, you know I've been helping Sakura...\*

Alyssa's eyes flared, and she replied excitedly, \*No, not her, all the other girls! Their crystal portraits in my mind have changed, it's like they've come alive!\* She arched her back then, and cried out with pleasure as she was coaxed into her orgasm by Irillith's darting tongue.

John released Irillith's wrists, letting her curl her hands around Alyssa's thighs as she worked to bring her to a second climax. He slipped his hand under her azure belly, and his fingers drifted lower so that he could bring the Maliri girl off too. She sucked in her breath as he started stroking her wetness, and in her incredibly aroused state, she came on a hair-trigger. Irillith bucked underneath him, her ass clenching like a fist around his burgeoning shaft.

Hearing their climactic cries was tremendously exciting, and he pounded Irillith's ass, her firm cheeks bouncing against his groin, trembling with the repeated impacts. His hips jerked raggedly as he joined them in their release, his four balls clenching and releasing as he blasted long streams of cum into the spasming Maliri girl. He let out a long groan as he pinned her down, and pumped her belly full of spunk. They all collapsed in a heap when they were done, although John tried to be careful to avoid squashing the stuffed woman beneath him.

"Rest on me, it's okay," Irillith told him, twisting so she could give him a loving kiss. "I'm strong enough to support you."

He relaxed and rested tentatively on her back, while kissing her over her shoulder.

\*You didn't answer my question,\* Alyssa said to him, her chest heaving as she tried to catch her breath. She smiled at Jade and Sakura as they entered the bedroom, beckoning them over.

John gave Irillith one final kiss, then regretfully withdrew, letting the eager Nymph take his place between those silky-smooth blue thighs. He sagged back on the bed, and replied to his blonde matriarch, \*Something Athena said. It got me thinking...\*

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"Okay, try and hit the drone," Dana said, pressing the button on her remote, and activating the tiny flying robot.

It whizzed around, moving in fast, twitchy motions down at the end of the firing range, while making an aggravating buzzing noise as it did so. It travelled in the same direction for roughly a second, before abruptly changing course with a maddening warble.

"I thought Maliri anti-grav was silent?" Rachel asked, grimacing at the irritating sound. "Why's it making that horrible noise?"

"To distract you and fuck up your aim," Dana replied, with a wink.

The brunette rolled her eyes, then aimed down the range at the flitting target drone. She snapped off a couple of rounds which narrowly missed, then gritted her teeth, and fired repeated shots as she tried to track it. The drone was nimble though, and while Rachel was an excellent marksman, she wasn't able to land a hit on the fist-sized target.

"Fuck!" Rachel swore, frowning at the horrible droning din that assaulted her ears.

Dana cackled, then said with a smirk, "Annoying, isn't it?"

Narrowing her grey eyes, Rachel glanced at her girlfriend, and replied, "Exceedingly."

The redhead grinned broadly, pressing the button on her remote again, and Rachel sighed with relief as the grating noise faded away.

"Alright, try these on for size," Dana said, handing over a pair of smartlinked glasses. She glanced at the XR75 rifle, and added, "I had to mod your rifle to link to the glasses, but the Punisher and Justice rifles work with the HUD already."

Rachel unfolded the glasses with a flick of her wrist, then put them on and stared down the range. She spotted the targeting reticle immediately, recognising it as the same design as the one build into the Paragon armour HUD.

"Okay, I'm ready," she said, slotting in a fresh clip of ten-millimetre caseless rounds, and raising her rifle once more.

Dana nodded, and replied, "Okay, re-activating the 'annoying little shit' drone, Mark I."

It began buzzing around again, the infuriating noise enough to set someone's teeth on edge. Rachel aimed at it again, and she was surprised to see a second targeting reticle linked to the first by a line. As the drone shifted direction, the tracking line abruptly switched too, following the new course of its target.

"Very nice!" Rachel remarked, nodding her approval as she watched the reticle calculate, then predict, the new flight vectors for the tiny machine.

Dana winced, and said, "Hurry up and shoot the little bastard."

Rachel didn't need asking twice, and after taking a few practice shots to get familiar with the tracking reticle, she blasted the drone with her fourth shot. The bullet slammed into the metallic irritant, and it crashed into the wall before dropping to the ground like a rock.

"That was profoundly satisfying," Rachel said, grinning with delight. She looked at Dana, and nodding approvingly as she added, "John's going to love these."

"I'm going to love what?" he asked, while leading a fully topped up Sakura into the firing range.

The brunette put down the XR75 rifle on the firing bench, then removed the glasses. She handed them to him once he'd walked over to join them, and replied, "You asked for a way to track fast targets, and Sparks has come up with the goods again."

Dana pulled another drone from her pocket, and asked, "Want to try them out?"

Rachel eyed the drone with distaste as she said, "And... that's my cue to leave." She gave each of them a brief kiss goodbye, before she continued, "I'll be in Engineering. I've got plenty more incurable diseases to eradicate."

"How's it going so far?" John asked the tawny-haired girl.

"Kyper's syndrome and the RAC-5 virus will be history, as soon as we get back to Terran Space," she replied with a look of profound satisfaction. "There's several others I'm working on next."

John smiled at her, the look on his face openly impressed, and he said, "Keep at it, honey. You're building one hell of a legacy."

She met his encouraging gaze, and returned his smile with gratitude.

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The rest of the day flew by, with John and Sakura throwing themselves into her training. She'd been gaining height daily, and adding lean musculature to her slender figure, the added strength making it much easier for her to control the kick of the XR75 rifle. He admired her enhanced physique as he watched her at the range, and while he was sure she realised she was getting stronger, he was fairly sure that she was oblivious to her change in appearance. It wasn't the first time he was curious about why the girls were unaware of the Change until it was pointed out to them, but he really enjoyed the reveal, and had no intention of spoiling the surprise for her.

Sakura's growing stature, along with her increased strength and speed, were also serving her well in the dojo. He was finding himself hard pressed to hold his own against her now, her attacks coming for him at a blistering pace. That very afternoon she had him backpedalling across the mats, his glossy white Odachi blocking furiously, as he tried to avoid being struck by her darting ninjato. He began to regret pointing out the vulnerability he'd spotted, as some predictability would have been very welcome amongst the dizzying array of strikes she was launching at him.

She'd worked hard to greatly vary the kata she was linking together, now that she was consciously aware of the flaw in her skills. Her improvisation and adaptation were excellent, and he knew it wouldn't be long until she'd be able to beat him. He started using more of his strength in their fights to help keep her on her toes, and the first time he'd slapped her sword out of her hand with a powerful backstroke, she'd frowned at him indignantly. His playful wink had her scampering to retrieve her dropped blade and then she was launching herself on the offensive once more.

There hadn't been any more flashbacks while they were duelling, and they'd come to the conclusion that with her growing sword mastery, her brain was no longer desperately seeking ways to harness her latent skills. At least, that was the case until the sixth day of their journey towards the Underworld...

\*\*\*

John and Sakura rose early that morning, quietly climbing out of bed so that they wouldn't disturb the girls. The plan was to have a morning duel before they joined everyone for breakfast, and John gave Alyssa a farewell kiss when she began to stir, urging her to stay in bed and get some more sleep. She smiled at him gratefully, then cuddled up with Calara, before dropping off into a restful slumber.

The training session started innocuously enough, with them climbing into their training armour, then retrieving their white blades from the weapon racks. They squared off against each other on the mat, and after a nod from John to begin the bout, Sakura charged towards him just as he knew she would, whirling her blades with an elaborate flourish.

He had to move his Odachi in an intricate web to parry her rapid slashes, deflecting at least a dozen such deadly strikes, each one ringing with a clear note. Seeing a brief opening as she slightly overextended, he attempted a counter-attack, which she met with a reflexive block from her right blade. Now that he was using more of his supernatural strength, she typically deflected or dodged his attacks, rather than trying to compete with him in a competition she couldn't win. Taking advantage of her mistake, his muscles surged as he chopped down, overpowering her block with raw strength.

Her right-hand sword slashed down across her own left forearm, jarring her arm, and leaving her open for a finishing blow. She paused for a second, and her eyelids fluttered, in the tell-tale sign that she was reliving a memory. Sakura suddenly back-flipped away, moving so fast she seemed to blur as she retreated. He was too astonished by her burst of incredible speed to try and break her out of the trance, staring at her mouth agape.

When Sakura stopped, she appeared in sharp focus again, and he stared at her as she shifted stance to one he hadn't taught her. She leapt into action once more, sprinting towards him with her arms held outstretched in a radically different fighting style to Kenjutsu. This all seemed shockingly familiar to John, and it was deeply unsettling to realise that Sakura was reenacting Shinatobe's assassination attempt against him.

Her mono-bladed ninjato swept towards him in gracefully arcing strikes, but she was moving so fast, he had no way of blocking her assault. The short white blades caught him for several glancing blows across both of his arms, and he felt a huge sense of relief that he was fully armoured this time around. Sakura spun away before coming to a halt some distance from him, getting ready to switch back to Kenjutsu.

The real fight flashed through John's memory, and he had absolutely no intention of unleashing psychic lightning on Sakura, let alone headbutting her. Knowing that he had to break her out of the trance before the fight turned ugly, he raised his left hand, and acting on instinct, sent a surge of telekinetic energy towards her. The wave hit just as she started rushing towards him, and the force of the impact knocked her sprawling, her twin swords sent spinning across the mats.

She leaned up on her elbows, staring at him with wide eyes, blinking rapidly as she regained full control of her faculties once more. John strode over to Sakura, dropping his sword in his haste, as he knelt down beside her to check that she was unharmed.

"I'm so sorry! Are you okay?" he asked her, as he checked her for injuries.

"I was moving so fast!" she exclaimed, stunned by the speed with which she'd been able to race across the mat. When she saw his look of concern, she smiled at him, and replied soothingly, "I'm fine, you didn't hurt me."

He sat down with a sigh of relief, pulling off his clear-crystal helmet as he did so, and wiping the sweat from his brow. She followed his cue and removed her own Paragon helmet, then moved to straddle his lap so that she was staring into his eyes from inches away. She leaned in and kissed him tenderly, her soft lips brushing against his, while she gazed at him reverently.

"What was that for?" he asked, holding her in his arms.

"To just say thank you, for everything you've done for me," she replied in a hushed voice. "The girls call being with you 'the Gift', and I truly see what they mean now. You've made me so much more than I was as Shinatobe, but it wasn't forced on me this time; I chose it!"

He gave her an embarrassed smile, and confessed, "I actually just intended to help you grow stronger and quicker than normal, to help you hold your own in melee combat. I think I might have overdone it a bit; I had no idea you'd be that fast!"

Her rich brown eyes gleamed as she replied, "I think you're far more powerful than you let yourself believe."

\*Yeah, she's right!\* Alyssa exclaimed. \*That telekinetic wall was new! When did you learn how to do that?!\*

\*I've no idea, it just seemed like the safest way to end the fight,\* he replied, somewhat bewildered himself.

Sakura climbed off his lap, and put on her helmet as she said eagerly, "Let's go again! I want to practice that some more!"

He chuckled at her unbridled enthusiasm and rose to his feet, then walked over to his dropped Odachi while she retrieved her scattered ninjato. He paused as he was about to don his helmet again, and replied, "What was that fighting style you used at the end there? I've never seen anything like it before. It looked more like dancing than a fighting style."

"Wushu sword form, adapted for twin dao," she replied confidently, as she picked up her second blade. She smiled at him playfully, and added, "When you've mastered Kenjutsu, young one, then we'll move on to other sword forms."

He blinked in surprise, then laughed uproariously, and said, "I suppose I asked for that, venerable Master."

"That's right, you should show more respect to your elders," she agreed sagely, brown eyes twinkling in her beautiful, youthful face.

When his laughter finally subsided, he looked at her curiously, and asked, "I thought you'd forgotten all of Shinatobe's fighting styles? You said you couldn't remember any kenjutsu kata when we started."

"It came flooding back to me as we fought," she replied, while walking over to the middle of the mats to face off against him again. She paused for a long moment, thinking at greater length about his question, before she continued, "That fight felt more real than anything we'd done before, and I suppose my mind reacted accordingly, thinking I was in danger."

He frowned as he said, "I'd never intentionally hurt you."

"I know," Sakura replied, her eyes full of emotion as she looked at him. "I just reacted by instinct."

"There seems to be a fair bit of that going around," John noted with a wry smile as he adopted a defensive stance.

She nodded, then her eyes sparkled as she said with unbridled enthusiasm, "Now, I want to learn how to move fast like that again!"

John lowered his blade, and said, "I think I might need to give you a brief course in Psychic Powers 101."

"Teach me, oh wise one," she replied, bowing respectfully, but with an impish grin on her face.

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When everyone met for lunch in the Galley later that day, all the chatter was focused on Sakura's budding psychic potential.

"I thought Sakura was just a normal Terran girl like the rest of us?" Calara asked, looking intrigued.

Alyssa smiled, and leaning over to stroke the Asian girl's rounded tummy, she said, "She was, until she gulped down gallons of John's cum, and encouraged him to give her the deluxe upgrade."

Rachel smiled at Sakura as she said, "When I checked your DNA earlier, I realised immediately. You now have triple-helix DNA, instead of just double. It's how Progenitors enable psychic potential."

Dana frowned, and asked, "So, what? Is Sakura a Progenitor now or something, like Alyssa?"

Her tawny-haired lover shook her head as she replied, "No, it doesn't work like that. Adding a third helix allows huge amounts of genetic information to be stored in a person's DNA, including the capabilities for psychic powers. It has to be filled with data to enable those abilities though, and while Alyssa's DNA is packed with genetic information, Sakura's DNA is more like Jade's, or Irillith's." She went quiet for a moment, before she added, "Or ours..."

This announcement was met with stunned silence, and while John, Alyssa, and Rachel were well aware of this fact, the rest of the girls had no idea.

"So we're all alike now?" Jade asked, her cat-like eyes sparkling as she stared at Rachel, holding her breath with anticipation.

She smiled at the eager Nymph and replied, "After testing Sakura, I tested the rest of us Terran girls too. We all have triple-helix DNA now."

"Holy fuck!" Dana suddenly blurted out, staring at John in shock. "So I'll be able to shoot fireballs from my eyes, and shit like that?!"

Alyssa laughed, rolling her eyes, and said, "Come on Sparks, don't be daft."

"No, nothing like that," John replied, chuckling as he shook his head. He stopped abruptly and faltered as he added, "At least I don't -think- so..."

Calara looked awed as she said, "When the DNA reader in the Raptor stopped working, I knew something had happened... but giving me psychic abilities?!"

Dana leaned forward eagerly, and asked, "So if eye-fireballs are out, what can I do then?!"

"That's a very good question," Rachel agreed, an intrigued expression on her face as she turned to look at John.

All the girls looked his way now, waiting attentively for John to explain his plans to them.

He gave them a rueful smile, and said, "In all honesty, I'm not entirely sure. I asked Athena about it when I was thinking about helping enhance Sakura for combat, and she said it works subconsciously. She said I wasn't ready for specifics yet..."

Dana pouted, then after looking thoughtful for a moment, she gave him a winsome grin, and said, "I asked first for the fireballs? Okay?"

He laughed as he replied, "I'll bear it in mind."

Alyssa glanced at Jade who had a broad, happy smile on her face, and said, "That's a lovely thought, Jade."

Irillith put her arm around the Nymph, and asked, "What were you thinking about?"

Jade beamed at the girls, her white teeth sparkling against her lush, dark-green lips, and she said reverently, "We really are like sisters now, right down to our DNA."

Rachel looked startled for a moment, then said, "She's right. We're quite unique in the galaxy."

"I could've told you that," John said, and the girls laughed, then grinned at each other happily with a good mix of wonder thrown in too.

Alyssa rose from her chair, and exclaimed to her friends, "Definitely time for a group hug!"

Faye smiled happily for the girls, and while she was overjoyed for them, she couldn't help feeling left out. As a digital creature without any physical presence to speak of, she wasn't even able to share in the simple affection of a hug, to celebrate their newfound sense of solidarity. It was a painful reminder of just how far away she was, from something that she'd been dreaming about with ever increasing frequency.

John hadn't forgotten her, and he caught her eye when she happened to glance his way, as she so often did. He shared a sympathetic smile with the forlorn purple girl, but sadly there was nothing he could do to help her with this particular predicament. Seeing the understanding in his eyes almost made it more painful for her though, as what she wanted more than anything at that particular moment was for him to be able to hold her in his arms.

She was stoic though, despite her painful unfamiliarity with these sensations of longing. After waiting for the girls to break apart from their group hug, she said, "I just wanted to let you know that according to Alyssa's updated Maliri territory maps, we'll be passing over the border between House Loraleth and House Ghilwen territory later this evening. It'll take us a day and a half until we reach the Unclaimed Wastes from there."

"We've been making good time," John said approvingly.

Alyssa cast a cautious glance in Irillith's direction, having heard her unsettling thoughts, and asked, "Surely you're exaggerating?"

The worried Maliri girl shook her head as she replied, "No, I'm afraid not." Looking around at the confused faces staring in her direction, she continued, "I've been so wrapped up with helping Rachel and Calara, and the Invictus' network upgrades, I wasn't paying any attention to our flight path. There's something extremely strange going on here."

"What do you mean?" John asked her curiously. "Edraele said she'd come to some kind or arrangement with those Houses to grant us safe passage."

Irillith gave him a funny look, which he couldn't quite identify, although utter incredulity came to mind.

Realising that John and the girls had no idea about the intricate webs of hate linking the Maliri leaders, she replied, "The matriarchs that rule those houses; Shaedra Loraleth, and Aradrea Ghilwen, absolutely loathe my mother. I can't think of a better way of goading them into throwing everything they've got at us, than Edraele asking them to let us pass through their territory."

"Apart from that Loraleth Fleet that met us at the border, I've not seen a sign of any military ships anywhere near our flight path for the last several days," Faye said cheerfully.

This did nothing to soothe Irillith's fears, and if anything she looked even more alarmed. "Shaedra might be waiting to ambush us on the outer-edge of Loraleth territory! There might not be any military ships here, because they're all massed at the border!" She walked over to John, placing a hand on his arm as she looked into his eyes, and added urgently, "House Loraleth is second-only to House Valaden in the number of ships they have at their disposal. This could be extremely dangerous!"

\*Tell Irillith to stop panicking,\* Edraele said with some amusement. \*I'm proud of her very sensible caution, but in this particular case, there's nothing to worry about. I promise you that you'll be able to pass completely unopposed through Maliri Space, on my word as your Matriarch.\*

John stroked Irillith's arm reassuringly, and said, "Edraele says she's proud of you for being cautious, but she just promised me that we won't be attacked."

Alyssa gave her a soothing smile, and said, "I think Edraele might be right, maybe Shaedra isn't running the show any more? That Maliri Fleet Commander said someone else was Matriarch now. Kallie or something?"

"Kali Loraleth?!" Irillith blurted out, her violet eyes going wide in stunned disbelief.

"Yeah, that was it," Alyssa nodded. "Emalayne mentioned a Matriarch Kali Loraleth had sent her to meet us, and give us the files on Hades and the Underworld."

The Maliri girl wasn't sure which she found the most unsettling: praise from her mother, knowing that they were surrounded by House Valaden's main rivals, or the shocking revelation that Shaedra Loraleth's youngest daughter now ruled their House.

"I trust Edraele, I'm sure we're going to be okay," John said to Irillith with a reassuring smile.

After some deliberation she nodded reluctantly, but glancing at Faye, she said, "I'd still keep your eyes peeled, especially as we get closer to the border."

Faye nodded enthusiastically, and replied, "Sure, I'll put three of my Avatars on reviewing and analysing the results from the long range sensors!"

Irillith was somewhat mollified by this, but she was still reeling from the disturbing revelations about the change in leadership of House Loraleth. She'd read the security dossiers on all the members of Shaedra Loraleth's noble household, and the youngest daughter's temperament was about as far removed from her mother's as it was possible to get. The only way Kali could have become Matriarch is if her mother and all three of her elder sisters had met some permanent end, which would represent a titanic shift of power in Maliri politics. She kept her thoughts to herself though, not wanting to trouble John and the girls with the internecine strife of the Maliri Regency.

With no more comments from Irillith, Faye looked at Calara with a hopeful smile on her face as she asked, "I was wondering if you could spare some time this afternoon to talk about gunnery? I'd like to learn as much from you as I can!"

"Of course," Calara agreed. "I'll head up to the Bridge and I'll give you some more pointers."

John looked around the group, and said, "Alright then girls, have a good afternoon, and I'll see you for dinner."

"No being late this time," Alyssa said with a wagging finger. "You two were already up early to train, and we miss your company in the evening when you're too exhausted to talk!"

"It's my fault, I keep leading him astray," Sakura apologised with a blush.

Jade wrapped her arms around the raven-haired girl, placing her cool hands on her rounded belly, and said, "As long as it's because you're having fun in bed after training, I'm sure that's okay. Right Alyssa?"

The blonde winked at her and purred, "Absolutely."

With light hearted laughter ringing in their ears, John took Sakura's hand and they waved everyone goodbye as they headed down to the Firing Range.

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The entire crew gathered on the Bridge later that evening, with everyone wanting to see the unveiling of the new stations before they crossed the Loraleth border. Alyssa pressed a button on her console, and on the right of the Bridge, between Calara and Irillith, the new station began to glow with power. One panel after another flickered to life, emitting a soothing blue glow as the entire console came online.

"Take your station, Security Chief," John said to Sakura, and she bowed to him, before striding down the ramp to take her place.

Dana strolled over to join her, and smiled as she said, "You'll have access to all the internal and external security cameras here, so you'll be able to watch out for boarding actions, that kind of thing. You've also got full access to the internal defence grid, which currently only consists of Gatling Lasers, and blast doors."

"I've got lots of ideas for how we can improve those!" Faye said cheerfully, fluttering over to sit on top of the Security Console.

Sakura glanced at the purple AI, and said, "We'll definitely review those before we re-enter Maliri Space. I'd like to have some new precautions in place before we reach our destination, and are exposed to potential security threats."

"Sure! Just come and speak to me whenever you get a chance!" Faye said with an inviting smile.

John caught Irillith staring at the unlit console on the left of the Bridge. She met his gaze, then smiled at him with the hint of a blush colouring her cheeks, her angular eyes reflecting her amusement.

Her smile quickly faded as they approached the House Loraleth border, and she stared intently at the Sector Map, violet eyes darting from side-to-side as she searched for likely ambush locations. Despite Irillith's tense expression and repeated warnings of caution, they crossed over from House Loraleth to House Ghilwen territory completely unopposed. Not only that, there weren't even any ships positioned to patrol the border between the Houses.

"This is just too fucking weird," Irillith blurted out in an uncharacteristic outburst, her beautiful face contorted with worry. "No House Loraleth Fleet to check we've left their territory. No House Ghilwen Fleet to lay down the law about what we can or can't do in Ghilwen space. They're not even bothering to defend the border any more for fuck's sake!"

"I take it that's unusual then?" John asked her tentatively.

Irillith snorted with laughter, and replied, "Maliri Matriarchs are an obsessively paranoid bunch. They'd -never- trust us in their own territory, much less leave their borders unguarded. Something very strange is happening here."

\*Any thoughts Edraele?\* John asked his very own Maliri matriarch. \*Should we be concerned?\*

\*Everything's well in-hand, John,\* she replied, her tone calm and confident. \*You'll be safe in House Ghilwen territory, all the way through to the Unclaimed Wastes.\*

"Edraele says everything's fine," John told Irillith with a shrug.

She laughed again, shaking her head in disbelief as she muttered, "The whole Regency is turned on its head, and mother says everything's fine."

John shared a glance with Alyssa, and she shrugged as she said, \*As long as they're not shooting at us, I don't really care why.\*

\*My sentiments exactly, XO,\* he replied, turning to stare at the clear route ahead of them, winding its way through House Ghilwen star systems.

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Remembering Alyssa's gentle chastisement about tiring himself out, John stayed in bed with her the following morning, while the others went about their tasks. After Sakura had enjoyed a filling breakfast, she left them to relax together in bed, as she was eager to continue training in the firing range. Calara appeared shortly afterwards, bringing them coffee, toast, and a loving kiss.

They waved her goodbye, and watched her leave, before eating their breakfast together in companionable silence. At least it would appear that way to a casual outsider. They were busy chatting away telepathically while they ate, enjoying being able to do both at once. When they'd finished their meal, John lay back in bed, with Alyssa snuggling up beside him.

"This feels so decadent," John said with a contented sigh, as he put his arm around her.

Alyssa was resting her head on his shoulder, and glanced up to make eye contact as she said, "I can't even remember the last time we spent the morning together like this. It reminds me of the early days on the Fool's Gold."

He shook his head in amazement, as he said, "We've come a long way since then, haven't we beautiful?"

She leaned up on one elbow, so she could look at his face more easily, and grinned at him wickedly as she replied, "You've certainly cum an awful lot since then, and inside plenty of beautiful girls."

John laughed, and said, "You're incorrigible."

She nodded enthusiastically, then laughed along with him, and he enjoyed listening to the lovely melodic sound as it echoed around their bedroom. Her blue eyes shone brightly as she asked, "Feeling happy?"

He brushed his fingers through her long golden-blonde hair, and said, "I thought you could read all my thoughts, my gorgeous little matriarch?"

"I can, but it's nice to hear you say it," she replied, leaning forward to give him a tender kiss.

"Okay then. I'm deliriously happy, with a strong undercurrent of disbelief that I'm not dreaming," he replied playfully.

She looked unusually sombre for a moment as she said, "That's good, we all want you to feel that way."

Tilting his head to one side, he looked at her curiously, and asked, "What's wrong? Have you got something you want to talk about?"

Alyssa smiled and shook her head, saying, "Don't mind me, I'm just being silly. Maybe we should have a proper XO catch up while we're revelling in the afterglow? The last couple have been lots of fun, but we keep getting distracted from actually discussing the girls."

He crossed his arms behind his head, and replied, "Good idea, I'd love to know how everyone's doing. Who do you want to start with?"

"Let's start with the new girl," Alyssa said with a smile. "You've been spending lots of time with Sakura, so how do you think she's doing?"

John nodded, and said, "We've been getting on really well. I've loved training her actually, and it's been bringing us closer together."

"I can only read her emotions at the moment, but she seems blissfully happy," Alyssa agreed. She grinned at him then, and added, "Which isn't surprising really, with you screwing her senseless on a daily basis."

John was about to say something, but he hesitated, not sure how to phrase it.

"It's okay, I understand," she purred as she straddled him, before leaning down to press her warm, firm breasts against his chest. "We all have different interests, and hitting people with swords does nothing for me. Now you have a girl who can really relate to you with that, and I'm overjoyed for you both."

Alyssa's lustrous hair fanned around him like a golden shroud, making it seem like she was shutting out the outside world so that only the two of them existed. He wrapped her in his arms, stroking her back, and enjoying the feel of her nubile body beneath his fingers.

"Thank you, for understanding," he said simply, leaning up to kiss her, before resting his head on the pillow again.

She smiled at him, and said, "How about we talk about your fiancés next?" When he nodded, she continued, "We were all delighted that you added not just Calara, but Rachel to the fold. I'm looking forward to getting some time alone with you and Calara to celebrate properly, and I know Dana and Rachel feel the same way too."

"I'll look forward to that," he said, with a lusty grin.

"You should," she agreed. "We're all going to be very good girls for you."

John looked thoughtful as he said, "Actually, that reminds me. You mentioned your mental portraits of the girls had changed, and I can only assume it's to do with their new triple-helix DNA?"

Alyssa nodded, closing her eyes as she examined the metaphysical representations of each of the Terran girls. She spoke quietly as she described what she saw, "Their images used to be made out of clear crystal, and were beautiful, but static, just showing the girls looking happy. Now they look alive, their portraits animated and full of vibrant colour."

"Maybe it's to do with them being more psychically receptive now?" he wondered out loud. "You said before it was easier to bond with the psychic girls like Jade and Irillith."

"That makes sense," she agreed. "Now you mention them, Jade's the happiest I've ever seen her. With you proposing to more of the girls, adding Sakura to the mix, your growing fame with Terran forces, and giving all the girls psychic potential... she's been thrilled by all of it."

"I need to spend some more time alone with her," John said, with a rueful frown. "It's been tricky recently with Sakura joining."

"She'd love that, but she loves seeing our group of girls expand too. If you bring her with you to 'spread the love' amongst the Maliri, she'll be one happy little Nymph. If you ask her to help you start knocking them up, she'll be absolutely ecstatic," Alyssa said with an excited gleam in her eyes.

John frowned, and replied, "That's fun to fantasise about, but I hate the idea of not being there for my children, you know that."

\*Remember that Maliri society is very different to Terran society,\* Edraele thought to him. \*It's actually rare that the father gets involved with his children's upbringing, which I'm sure you understand with the heavy disparity between the gender population numbers. That custom has become even more pronounced since the males exiled themselves to the border stations.\*

\*Yes, but that doesn't make it right,\* John protested. \*I want to be involved with looking after my children.\*

\*And you can be,\* she urged him. \*Let me help take care of any expecting Maliri while you're away fighting this Progenitor. By the time they come to term, you'll be around for them too. You're still planning to settle here permanently on Valaden, aren't you?\*

John thought about what she was saying, and he couldn't really counter the logic of her words, or help but get turned on as he imagined what it would be like.

Alyssa's cerulean eyes burned with arousal as she listened to his inner voice, and she said, "I've seen how you look at Irillith and the other Maliri. You're drawn to them, just like they're drawn to you. I think Edraele's right, and we'd all love to see you give some smoking hot Maliri girls a baby."

\*Alyssa's quite right,\* Edraele said to him, her voice soft and encouraging. \*You've already spoken to the Engineers who worked on the Invictus, and you know that many of them would never have had a chance at having children before you interceded. There are hundreds of thousands of Maliri women just like that in House Valaden territory alone.\*

\*How are they doing now, anyway?\* John asked, thinking about the Maliri engineers he'd spoken to on Genthalas station.

\*They're at Geniya at the moment, and have proven to be tremendously popular with the males,\* Edraele informed him, with a sense of tremendous satisfaction. \*Maliri men chasing particular women is practically unheard of, so we've created quite the commotion.\*

John shared that same feeling, pleased for the kind, lovely Maliri girls he'd befriended on his previous visit to Genthalas. Thinking of his very own Maliri girl aboard the Invictus, he smiled at Alyssa, and asked, "How's Irillith doing? Is she okay?"

"She's excited about the prospect of rescuing her sister, but she's more than a little apprehensive too. She blames herself for Tashana's banishment, and she's desperate to make amends," Alyssa replied, looking concerned.

"Until we can rescue Tashana, we better try and give Irillith as much support as we can. I think this is going to be hard for her," John suggested, sharing the blonde teenager's concern for their friend.

Alyssa smiled at him, and replied, "I've already asked the girls to help keep an eye on her."

"Well done," he praised her, stroking her back. His mind wandered for a bit, and thinking about the dossier of data that Edraele had provided, he asked, "How's our preparation work going for our visit to the Underworld?"

Alyssa looked confident, and replied, "Calara's been reviewing what we have on the facility itself, while Rachel's been drawing up a psychological profile of this Hades character."

\*Which just leaves Faye,\* he said telepathically to Alyssa, so that the AI wouldn't overhear.

She pulled back from him a little and folded her arms across his chest before dropping her chin on them. With a slight frown, she replied, \*I can't help you much there. It's been hard not having an empathic bond with her, let alone a telepathic one!\*

\*I seem to have cured her of her PTSD over Jade's death at Shinatobe's hands,\* he said, recalling the surprising resolution to her problem with the undeletable file.

Alyssa nodded, and after a moment's pause, she replied cagily, \*Yes, what you say to Faye seems to influence her a great deal.\*

John remembered Faye's expansion of her storage systems, while she'd still been running on Irillith's hacking deck, and he could only agree with Alyssa's assessment. He felt a strong surge of gratitude for the upbeat AI, and he said, \*Faye's been an amazing addition to the team, helping out in loads of little ways, but the way she's been looking out for us while we're sleeping has been a godsend! Having one of us stay up all night to keep watch over the long-range sensors would have been a nightmare!\*

\*We should try and do something for Faye, let her know how much we care about her,\* Alyssa suggested.

\*Now that's a superb idea!\* he agreed without a moment's hesitation.

She smiled, pleased at the prospect, then looked at him coyly as she asked, "Would you like to hear another good idea?"

"Way ahead of you," John replied, grinning at her as he rolled them over, so that she was beneath him. "We've got a couple of hours until it's time to feed Sakura. I think we should make good use of it."

Alyssa sighed with delight, then stretched her muscles in preparation. When she felt relaxed and limber, she pulled him down and kissed him passionately, eagerly spreading her thighs for him.

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Irillith glanced at the fluttering purple girl by her side, and they shared a grin of satisfaction. "You've been amazing, Faye, thanks so much for all your hard work!" she said, reaching out to stroke her shoulder.

Faye trembled with delight both at the praise from her creator, and for the overwhelming burst of tactile sensation she felt at the Maliri girl's touch. When her wings had stopped quivering, she beamed a huge smile at Irillith, and replied, "They were all your ideas, I just helped you implement them!"

Shaking her head, Irillith waved her arm towards the Network that was spread out below them from their vantage point high above it. "You've expanded so much on my original plans, and put in so much hard work!" she said gratefully.

Below them, the entire network was now covered by a second level, a golden defensive lattice which overlooked and monitored the core Terran infrastructure. This upper level was festooned with security programs, who were guarding gateways and firewalls between subnets, along with sturdy fortifications installed to protect key points of the digital network.

Roaming freely around the defensive lattice were elegant seek and destroy programs, which Irillith had modelled on the Maliri software that had attacked her in Sakura's cybernetic brain. The stalking figures were constantly monitoring the core network, and could drop down to intercept any intruders the moment that they were detected.

Although they had to wait to install copies of the Nexus server at the Gateway, they'd spent days analysing the roaming security towers, and had even been able to construct three inside the Invictus' Cyber Realm. Sadly each one required its own dedicated Terran server, and Dana had run out of spare hardware for them to use.

"Do you think John will like what we've done?" Faye asked, looking out over the digital realm.

Irillith nodded, and replied, "He'll be delighted to hear how much more secure we are now, especially as we'll be staying in Maliri Space for a while." She looked thoughtful as she added, "I wonder if there's some way I could bring him with me on a guided tour?"

"John? Here?!" Faye gasped, staring at Irillith in wide-eyed astonishment.

Irillith was deep in thought, and she murmured distractedly, "It should be possible... he can spirit-walk too."

"You mean I could actually touch him?!" Faye squeaked, her eyes as big as saucers now.

Giving her a gentle smile, Irillith said quietly, "You've fallen for him in a big way, haven't you?"

The purple construct blushed, then nodded, looking downwards out of embarrassment. Irillith pulled her into loving hug, and stroked the quivering girl as she whispered in her pointed ear, "We better spend some more time practicing kissing then, hadn't we?"

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"Very nice, Sakura," John said as he nodded his approval.

The Asian girl had just unloaded an entire magazine on the distant target dummy, keeping the barrel of her XR75 rifle in a rock-steady grip, and hitting with every one of the fifty rounds.

She turned to face him, and grinned as she exclaimed, "It's so much easier now that I'm stronger! I don't even notice the kick or the barrel climb any more."

He smiled at her, and said, "It's not just that, you've been working hard on your shooting, and it's really starting to pay off."

"Do you want to see something else I've been working on?" she asked him, her lovely almond eyes watching his every reaction.

"Sure, show me what you've got," he replied, smiling at her encouragingly.

Sakura reached over to the firing range controls, and tapped a series of buttons, setting up a shooting program. She loaded a fresh magazine into her rifle, then hit the glowing green button to activate the target dummies. After a ten second wait, a target dummy sprang up from the ground in the furthest lane to the right. Taking quick aim, she fired a three-round burst which slammed into its chest in a spray of tiny polycarbonate fragments.

A split-second later another dummy appeared from way over in the left lane, near the end of the range. She hit that centre mass with another burst, and quickly changed targets as two more dummies popped up. One after the other she hit them with deadly accuracy, going through her entire clip in less than thirty seconds, without missing a single target dummy.

John applauded enthusiastically when she ejected her magazine, and placed the rifle on the firing bench, signifying that her exhibition shooting was complete. "That was excellent!" he exclaimed, genuinely impressed by her marksmanship. "I'd have no qualms on bringing you with me next time we leave the ship on a combat mission. In fact, I'll be glad to have you with us!"

"Really?" she asked him, looking up at him with a proud expression on her beautiful face.

He nodded, and replied, "I'm officially declaring you combat ready, Sakura. Thank you for working so hard for it. I'll go over our typical squad tactics later, and ask Alyssa to brief you on how she coordinates the team's shooting when we're in the field." He studied her eager young face, and added, "Would you like to try the Punisher railgun now?"

She hesitated, then grinned at him as she replied, "I really want to, but can we take a look at it tomorrow morning?" Glancing down at her slightly curved stomach, she continued, "My tummy's gone down enough for us to duel in the Dojo!"

John reached out to run his fingers over her toned abdomen, and she smiled at him, lifting her top so that he could feel the strong muscles beneath her golden-brown skin. She'd absorbed most of her lunch over the last couple of hours, and while he could feel in his mind that he still had an active connection with her, she was no longer full enough to cause her belly to swell.

She stood on tiptoe as she kissed him, then said, "I can't wait for dinner! Just a couple of hours to go."

He looked into her eyes, and said, "We better help you build up a hearty appetite then..."

There was a flash of excitement in her eyes, and she practically dragged him from the Firing Range, eager to face him in the Training Dojo again. Sakura held his right hand with both of hers, walking along beside him with a spring in her step. They entered the grav-tube, then levitated up in the blue anti-gravity field until they reached Deck Three. Stepping around a couple of cleaning bots, which had now added the training room to their intensive cleaning roster, they strolled down the corridor before entering the equipping area.

It didn't take long to get armoured and to gather their weapons, and he led the way through to the dojo, before they strode across the mat to face one another. They'd spent dozens of hours fighting each other now, and he knew full well how aggressive an opponent she could be. Watching the slender girl warily, he adopted a guarded, defensive stance and prepared himself for her attack.

She grinned at him, then closed her eyes and took a calming breath, concentrating as he'd showed her. When her eyes snapped open, she charged towards him, moving so quickly that he was having trouble making her out in the blur. Twin ninjato whistled towards him, and he parried in desperation, his sword whipping around to deflect the lightning-fast attacks. White stabbing blades seemed to be coming at him from all over the place, and he whirled around, acting more by instinct than judgement as he frantically blocked her strikes.

Sakura back-flipped away, moving with a beautiful yet terrifying agility, before skidding to a graceful halt. She nodded, impressed that he'd been able to hold off her storm of sword blows, before she said, "I'm amazed you're able to parry all my attacks. It looks like you're moving in slow motion to me, but you're still able to hold me off!"

John breathed heavily, taking advantage of the momentary lull in combat to catch his breath. He smiled at her and said, "You'll find I've got a few surprises left."

They both knew it was bravado though, and that he was pushing himself to the limit to keep her flickering blades from striking his armour. Sakura smiled at him, and said, "Let's see how you cope with something a little different..."

Her posture changed dramatically, and she slowly lifted her left arm behind her, her sword raised high, while the other pointed towards him fully outstretched. Raising her left leg with a dancer's grace, she bent it at the knee, toes pointed down. There was an artistic beauty to those moves, a deceptively smooth elegance that entranced an opponent with their effortless perfection.

Sakura suddenly exploded into action, cartwheeling towards him in a flash of shimmering white. She led with a lunge, which he barely managed to block, but then she was spinning to the side, ninjato working in a lashing rain of blows that were nearly too fast for him to see. She started striking high, but as soon as he moved his Odachi to protect his head, she dived low, slashing at his legs as she whirled by. He heard the clang of her swords as they struck him, his right thigh vibrating with the strength of her blows.

He dipped his sword again trying to protect his leg from her whirlwind of swords, but she darted off to flank him, blades whipping across his back and arms now. Knowing that he'd been convincingly defeated, he relaxed his posture, and lowered his guard. Sakura reacted immediately, stopping to face him a couple of metres away, her face lit up with a half-disbelieving grin of victory.

Bowing to her respectfully, he gave her a warm smile as he said, "That was very impressive, Sakura. Congratulations, it looks like you've grown beyond anything I can teach you."

She glowed under his praise, before tilting her head to one side as she studied him quizzically. She was about to say something, but stopped before she spoke, looking away into the distance as she listened to her matriarch's telepathic voice.

Smiling at him, she bowed deeply to him in return, then said, "Do not be disheartened, young neophyte. You are but part of the way on your path to enlightenment." With a wink, she added, "Was that suitably Zen enough for you?"

He laughed as he replied, "My very own wise and ancient swordmaster, just what I've always wanted!"

Sakura faked a pout as she said, "Hey, I'm not that old!" Then she grinned and joined him in his laughter. Eventually she added, "I'd love to teach you Wushu forms, if you're interested? It's a radically different fighting style, but you might find some of the moves useful."

John nodded eagerly, and replied, "That would be fantastic, thank you! Any way you can help me improve my swordsmanship would be much appreciated." He chuckled as he added, "Perhaps you better rein in the psychic speed though, just to give your student a chance to keep up with you."

She gave him a curious look, then nodded, and began to explain the tenets of the ancient Chinese art of Wushu.

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John was in for a fair amount of ribbing that evening, as the girls congratulated Sakura on her triumphant victory. She enjoyed the banter immensely, sharing jokes with the girls at his expense, while flashing John the occasional glance and a smile to check he wasn't offended by anything she was saying. He was touched by her concern for his feelings, but he hadn't minded losing to her in the slightest. His main goal had always been to help train her into an extremely skilled combatant, who would be able to protect the girls from all kinds of threats...

\*She was right the other day, you are a good teacher,\* Alyssa thought to him, cuddling up beside him on the sofa. Her voice throbbed with emotion as she continued, \*You're very calm and patient. Good qualities for a father, too.\*

He turned to look at her, and saw a warm, doting look in her eyes as she gazed at him. He leaned in and kissed her, losing himself in those clear blue orbs, pulling her closer as she sighed with happiness. When they finally separated, there was a hushed quiet in the Ready Room, and they saw that the girls were watching them with gentle smiles on their faces.

John cleared his throat, feeling a little embarrassed, and said, "Alright then, not that I'm trying to change the subject or anything, but does anyone have anything to discuss?"

"Other than how adorable you two look together?" Calara asked him with a broad smile.

He chuckled and replied, "Yep, something other than that."

"I've got something!" Faye said brightly.

John turned her way, looking interested as he asked, "Go ahead, what have you got for us?"

"I just thought I'd let everyone know that we'll be entering the Unclaimed Wastes tomorrow morning," she replied informatively.

Seizing the opportunity she'd given him to switch conversation topics, John asked Calara, "Anything we should be especially wary of? I take it you've had a good chance to review the data that Edraele sent us."

The Latina nodded, and replied, "I'll give you a full brief on Underworld when we get closer. The Unclaimed Wastes itself doesn't have much in the way of inhabitable planets, and the systems I've reviewed seem to mostly be gas giants with the occasional barren moon. That's probably why no species has attempted to claim this region of space."

Irillith nodded in agreement, and said, "The area is full of rich asteroid belts though, which brings in independent miners attracted by the promise of valuable ore hauls."

"Why haven't the Maliri annexed the area?" John asked her curiously.

"Without any governing body providing a military presence, the area is anarchic and rife with pirates. They prey on the miners and traders from minor civilisations," she explained, trying to remember what she could of this area of space. "With all the internal fighting amongst the Maliri, no one individual House can spare all the ships needed to clear the area out, so it's been left a lawless wasteland."

"Have we got anything to worry about? Regarding the pirates that is?" John asked the two women.

"I doubt anything's fast enough to catch us," Alyssa interjected with a grin.

Irillith nodded, and replied, "She's right. With Faye watching the long range sensors, we'll be able to skirt around any traps and outrun any pursuers."

"What about Interdiction Beacons?" Dana prompted them, thinking about the battle of Regulus.

Calara frowned, and replied, "That's quite sophisticated tech. I doubt pirates would be able to get their hands on any."

Alyssa looked thoughtful for a moment before she said, "I'll review our flightpath, and keep an eye out for anywhere that looks like a good ambush location, just to be on the safe side. Avoiding those should only add an hour or so to our journey time."

"Sounds like we've got everything covered," John said smiling at them in appreciation.

Calara gave him a curt nod, and replied grimly, "And if we haven't, and we do get intercepted by pirates, they won't live to regret it."

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Faye kept a close watch on the long range sensors that evening and during the night, carefully heeding Irillith's words of warning about House Ghilwen springing an ambush. It was serene up on the Bridge however, with only a few civilian ships appearing on the Sector Maps, as the Invictus raced between the stars.

She watched with fascination as Sakura knelt down to service John both last thing at night, then first thing the following morning. The thought of being that intimate with him was tremendously exciting, but such thoughts inevitably triggered a critical error in her custom programs, which superimposed her own image over that of the submissive Asian girl. This would then tie-up at least six of her avatars to... attempt to restore the original video image... which would involve intensive scrutiny for hours at a time.

Despite her best intentions, watching John hold Sakura in place while he filled her belly caused that self-same error in her programs. Faye took a close look at the image of the winged purple girl hungrily gulping down John's cum, and with a resigned expression on her face, and the hint of a smile, she devoted half her active processing streams to look into the issue. With avatars Primary through to Senary now hard at work on the video problem, and Denary through to Duodenary monitoring the long range scans, it only left her three active avatars to work with.

With a decisive nod, she added Septenary and Octonary to troubleshooting the video problem, which left Nonary to inform John that they had just crossed the border into the Unclaimed Wastes. She popped into existence in front of him while he was drying himself off, and did exactly that.

"Any sign of House Ghilwen forces?" John asked her as he strolled out of the bathroom, leaving Sakura to savour the loving attention of the other girls still in the shower.

Shaking her head, Faye replied brightly, "There were no Maliri military vessels anywhere near our flightpath!"

"How about pirate ships? Have you started picking any of them up yet?" He asked her as he strolled into his walk-in-wardrobe.

"I did detect one group of armed ships on the edge of our sensor radius, which included a cruiser and three destroyers. I think we must have been outside their sensor radius though, as they made no moves to change course to intercept," she replied watching him get dressed with big luminous eyes.

He turned and smiled at the digital construct, and said, "Brilliant job as usual, Watch Commander."

Faye gave him a dazzling smile in return, and said, "I'm so glad I'm able to do something useful to help out."

Tucking his top into his comfortable gym trousers, he said sincerely, "You're making a hell of a difference, Faye. We feeble organics need our rest, and quite surprisingly, I sleep like a baby having a malevolent, psychotic AI watching over us."

She giggled cutely, then said, "That's wonderful to know, just in case I need to murder you in your beds." She paused then, and gazed into his eyes as she added, "Thank you for telling me that. I'm so glad you trust me to look out for all of you."

Alyssa led a flushed Sakura into the wardrobe then, and started to help her get dressed into comfortable training gear. John watched the two of them together, comparing them physically to see how Sakura was progressing with the change. Apart from her rounded belly, and her darker, golden-brown skin, the two girls shared an almost identical physique. It was always astonishing to see the results of the Change, and this time was no different.

\*Not yet,\* Alyssa thought to him with a cautionary glance. \*Wait until you've restocked, and the two of you can celebrate properly.\*

\*There's no rush,\* he replied with a smile.

Alyssa shared a tender kiss with Sakura, and the two stared into each other's eyes as the blonde matriarch spoke telepathically to the raven-haired beauty. They exchanged a secret smile, before Alyssa waved them both goodbye. She intercepted a sombre-looking Calara as she exited the bathroom, and then dragged the protesting brunette back into bed. John and Sakura smiled as they strolled down the corridor to the grav-tube, accompanied by the delightful sound of Alyssa and Calara giggling playfully together back in the bedroom.

Sakura glanced his way repeatedly as they walked into the grav-tube and floated down to Deck Seven, a thoughtful expression on her face as she studied him. It wasn't unusual for there to be a comfortable silence between them, but he wasn't used to this level of scrutiny. Wondering what she had on her mind, he decided to speak to her about it after lunch.

They walked along the corridor to the firing range, and he opened the door for Sakura, then waved her through courteously. He followed her in, then strode over to the weapon racks, with her at his side.

"Ready to try the Punisher rifle?" he asked the Asian girl with an indulgent smile. She seemed a little distracted, which came as a surprise to him, as she was normally so focused and determined.

Sakura snapped herself out of it, and grinned back at John as she replied, "I've been looking forward to getting my hands on that for over a week!"

He picked up a magazine of crystal-tipped twenty-millimetre rounds, then handed the railgun over to Sakura.

Shaking her head in amazement, she said, "It -is- lighter! You'd never believe it with the size of this beast!" She hefted the weapon to her shoulder, pointing downrange, and she added, "It feels amazingly ergonomic, almost like the weapon was custom designed for me!"

He chuckled and replied, "It was, after a fashion." When he saw her look of confusion, he continued, "Alyssa worked with Dana extensively to make sure it was a comfortable fit for her, which meant it was perfectly designed for you as well."

Nodding her understanding, Sakura picked up a pair of targeting glasses from the firing table, and sighted down the range again. She laughed, and said, "I don't know why I trained so hard to improve my aim. With this targeting reticle, it'll be like shooting fish in a barrel!"

"There's no substitute for the old Mark I eyeball, you never know when you might have to shoot without a helmet," he explained with a smile.

"Oh, I don't know about that. My cybernetic eyeballs had quite a few handy gadgets installed," she joked with a grin.

He nodded, and said honestly, "True, but they weren't anywhere near as beautiful as your real eyes."

She turned and gave him a tender kiss, giving him a close up view of those enchanting dark-brown orbs. They shared a smile, and he handed her the magazine for the railgun.

"Alright, better switch to low-power or Sparks will kill me," he whispered conspiratorially.

Sakura slapped in the magazine, seeing the ammo-counter change to "0/50" in the HUD displayed in her glasses.

"Why is the ammo counter telling me I've got no ammo?" she asked him, sounding puzzled. She tilted the rifle to its side, so she could inspect the ammo counter above the magazine slot, and added, "The readout above the mag says I've got fifty rounds."

"The zero is a count of the number of grenades you've got loaded. I've been caught out by that before too," he admitted. John pointed out the second magazine slot to her, and continued, "The twenty-five-mil grenades slot in there."

She looked at him with an eager grin, and he smiled as he shook his head, chuckling when she pretended to pout in annoyance.

Standing at a firing position, she aimed down the range at a dummy, and carefully positioned the reticle over her target. Gently squeezing the trigger, the rifle vibrated in her hands, accompanied by the quiet whisper, "VrmPkaow."

The heavy slug punched a fist sized hole through the range dummy, blasting a shower of polycarbonate chunks out the back. The poor lifeless figure shook violently with the impact, and would have been knocked flying backwards if it wasn't firmly secured to its stand.

"Holy shit!" she gasped, staring at the sparkling white rifle in her hands, then at the devastation it had caused to the dummy.

He smiled at her knowingly, and said, "It's very different firing one yourself, isn't it?"

"Can I fire one round on full power? Please?" she begged him.

He shook his head, and replied, "You'd blast a big hole through the wall at the back of the range. Dana needs to set up multiple layers of armoured plating before you can try that."

"Okay, I understand," she replied reluctantly. Glancing over at the weapon racks, her eyes locked on the big white rifle mounted at the far end, and she asked, "How about letting me shoot that instead?"

John grinned at her, and said, "You want a go on the Justice rifle? Alright, I'll show you how to power it up!"

They spent a few hours with Sakura melting down target dummies using the laser rifle, and John let her snap off a few rounds using a Punisher pistol as well. After spending days on end practicing with the comparatively puny XR75 rifle, the destructive capabilities of their standard-issue firearms were a joy to behold. Eventually her stomach returned to its normal size as she absorbed his load, and they returned the guns to the weapon racks so they could move on to duelling in the dojo.

Sakura went quiet again as they walked down the corridors, appearing to be lost in thought. John hit the button to open the door into the equipping room, then gestured for her to proceed before him. Gearing up for combat in the dojo had become second nature by now, and when they were both fully armoured in Paragon armour, John waited politely for Sakura to retrieve her ninjato from the weapon rack. She didn't wait for him as she usually did, instead she darted through the door to their right. He could hear her tapping buttons on the simulation control panel inside the room, and wondering what she was up to, he picked up his Odachi and walked in after her.

While the dojo itself looked identical to all the other times they'd been in here, the atmosphere inside the room had changed dramatically. They were no longer standing in a place of peace and tranquillity, the shards of soft light angling from the windows above had been replaced by angry flashes of lightning, while the room echoed with the deafening peal of thunder. John turned to look at the mountains outside, and saw they were being lashed with rain as a terrifying storm raged around them.

Sakura was waiting for him near the centre of the mats, and she held both ninjato in an offensive stance as she waited for him to join her. He could only assume by her posture that she wanted to move straight into a sparring match, rather than spend more time teaching him Wushu forms. They shared a brief but respectful nod and she closed her eyes for a second, before she began to shimmer.

John frowned, about to ask Sakura what she was up to, when she charged towards him, moving so fast he could barely keep track of her. She whirled around him, dodging his tentative strike with contemptuous ease, before surging forward and slashing her blade across his throat with a sharp clang of metal on metal.

"You are dead," she said coldly, backing away across the training mats and adopting another offensive stance. Her eyes narrowed, and she snapped, "Again."

John felt a shiver run down his spine when he saw the chilling way she looked at him, and he was about to ask her what was wrong, when she launched herself towards him in a furious tornado of flashing blades. He did his best to parry, but her swords were moving so fast that every time he tried to block her strike, she stabbed him with her second weapon.

"You are dead," she repeated, moving back to the starting position once more.

"You are dead."

"You are dead."

"You are dead."

Over and over she cut through his defences with ease, moving too fast for him to possibly counter the blistering slashes from her twin ninjato. The lightning arced across the sky, while thunder boomed around him, punctuating each killing blow with a cacophonous bass rumble.

He held up his hand after the tenth such slaying, his chest panting from the exertion, and he said, "Stop! You're too fast like this, I can't even touch you!"

"Bullshit!" she snarled at him angrily. "You made me! If I can do this, you can too!"

He blinked at her in shock, but she didn't give him any time to react, leaping for him once more. Her blades danced around his Odachi, slashing, chopping, and stabbing at his clear Crystal Alyssium helmet. He tried to fend her off, but no matter how quickly he tried to move his blade, she was just too fast. It was impossible.

\*Why are you doubting yourself?\* Alyssa told him, her voice sweeping through his mind like a soothing balm. \*She's absolutely right, you know how to do this. It finally explains how your Progenitor side got back to us so fast after killing the Glowing Queen.\*

\*Doubt makes psychic powers harder, I've spoken to you about this before,\* Edraele reminded him. \*You have this ability, you just have to have faith in yourself.\*

John tried to focus, but his ears were ringing with Sakura raining blows down on his head. "Stop, I'm trying to concentrate!" he protested.

"No thinking, just move faster!" she retorted, spinning around and smacking him on the rump with the flat of her blade.

She didn't relent with her belligerent assault for one moment, poking him in the face with the pointed end of her ninjato, or slapping his Odachi contemptuously with both her blades. It was infuriating, and he finally roared with anger, whipping his sword around as fast as the lightning that was crashing in the heavens above them. The blow caught her across the leg, and she stumbled before diving into a roll to put some distance between them. Sakura began to back-flip away from him, but she began to slow down before his eyes, the blur disappearing as she returned to normal speed.

John charged after her, and when she whirled around to face him again, he saw her eyes widen in shock as he lunged for her with his Odachi. She darted to one side, narrowly avoiding being skewered by the mighty blow, then slashed at his face with a sweeping backhander to try and put him on the defensive. He parried it with ease, now that she was moving at normal speed, and he pursued her as she backed away.

Recovering quickly from her surprise, she ducked under a powerful slash, then dived to the side, both of her short blades hacking at his legs. He slammed his sword down in front of her, creating an indestructible barrier to protect himself, before catching one of her blades and flicking it away with a mighty flick of his wrists.

Sakura pulled her legs right back when he slashed down at them, narrowly avoiding his blow, then leapt to her feet like a coiled spring. Darting nimbly past him, she nearly got clear to chase after her lost ninjato, before he whirled around and clipped her with the tip of his Odachi. It was enough to catch her off balance, and she tumbled to the mats and skidded across the floor. He was after her before she had a chance to recover, his sword held close to her armoured throat. She grinned at him, holding up her hand, and he clasped it, pulling her smoothly to her feet.

"You were incredible!" she gasped, her chest heaving with excitement.

John closed his eyes for a moment, and let his breathing return to normal, calming his pounding heart. He smiled at her, and said, "That was a close run thing. Thanks for slowing down and dropping the super-speed, it made it much more enjoyable."

Her grin grew wider as she said, "I didn't..."

It took a moment for that to sink in, and his eyes widened in surprise as he stammered, "So I was..."

"Moving as quickly as me," she finished for him, nodding eagerly. Dropping her ninjato, she pulled off her helmet, then stood on tiptoe to remove his too. She kissed him soundly, and said, "I'm very proud of you, that was a big step you took today."

\*You were brilliant, handsome,\* Alyssa told him, affectionately. \*I'm sorry I asked Sakura to goad you into it. She took some convincing.\*

He chuckled and said, \*I should've known you'd be involved somehow.\*

Sakura took his hand, and pulled him gently towards the equipping room. It only took one look at the hooded glance she gave him to realise what she had on her mind. He followed after her to the armour frames, and they removed their gear before walking quietly into the bedroom beyond. Quickly stripping each other of clothes, they stepped into the shower, washing away their perspiration after the frenetic battle, and let the warm water sooth and relax their bodies.

They dried off afterwards before Sakura led him over to the bed, and reached down for something stored in the cabinet beside her. He blinked in surprise when he saw what she held in her hands, and let out a groan when she squeezed some lubricant on his throbbing length and began stroking him with her slick hands.

She gazed into his eyes as she prepared his cock, and said quietly, "Rachel said that thralls fighting their Progenitor is deeply unnatural, but you enjoy training us because you're unique. Although I'm glad what we did today worked, it felt terribly wrong behaving that way with you."

"It's okay, I-," he started to say, before she silenced him with a tender kiss.

Satisfied with her handiwork, she set aside the tube of lubricant, then climbed gracefully onto the bed. She crawled away from him, then sat with her knees folded beneath her. Sakura gave him a smouldering look over her shoulder, her voice throbbing with barely contained lust as she murmured, "I want to prove to you that I'm still your good submissive girl, just like Calara does after you fight."

She looked down demurely, but he could see her watching him under her long lashes. That look promised him all sorts of sensual pleasures, and he climbed onto the bed, drawing closer until he knelt right behind her.

"Are you sure?" he asked her, reaching out to run his fingers down the strong, well-defined muscles in her back.

Sakura nodded, watching him out of the corner of her eye, and whispered, "You've prepared me to stretch for you, and I know you'd never hurt me."

John moved in closer, tilting down the head of his cock until he was aligned with her last un-plundered passage. Her eyes flared when she felt the contact, and she inched back against him, as though trying to impale herself.

"Easy now, let me control the pace," he said, taking hold of her waist, and gently applying some pressure.

The Asian girl was relaxed, yielding, and compliant, and with the liberal coating of lubrication, the blunt head pushed through the clenched fist of her sphincter. She let out a sharp gasp, which made him hesitate before trying to go any further.

"It feels amazing, don't stop," she urged him, wriggling backwards.

He thrust into her, maintaining a slow but insistent pressure, and she let out a quiet groan as he stuffed his entire length inside her. She was sitting in his lap now, her back resting against him, and her long silky hair felt wonderfully soft against his chest.

"Am I a good girl for you?" she asked, tilting her head back to look at him.

"You've been such a good girl," Alyssa said, drawing both of their attention as she climbed onto the bed. She was entirely nude, and she moved around to sit in front of Sakura, giving her a loving smile as she continued, "You did such an amazing job today, thank you."

Leaning forward, Alyssa pressed her lips against Sakura's and as her tongue flickered into the Asian girl's mouth, she glanced behind her into John's eyes. He stared into her eyes as he held Sakura in a tight grip, and began to slowly piston in and out of her hot, clutching depths.

Alyssa pulled back a little and staring into Sakura's eyes, she murmured, "You're close now, aren't you gorgeous? I can feel you're nearly ready to open yourself up to me."

"You saved me! I'd do anything for you," Sakura said in a hushed, earnest voice, pausing to bite her lip when John pushed all the way inside her again.

"Such a good girl," Alyssa purred, then she lay down on her back, her head between Sakura's slightly parted thighs.

\*Bring her closer, handsome. I want to suck on her clit and make her cum for you,\* she thought to him, and John could feel her eager excitement over their bond.

He lifted Sakura effortlessly, then set her down gently on Alyssa's hot waiting mouth. Sakura's calm, submissive composure was shattered as they both went to work on her, and she cried out through one shuddering climax after another. John and Alyssa were relentless, both wanting to reward the young woman who'd devoted herself to their group with such dedication.

She was practically insensate by the time John felt himself getting close, and he groaned with excitement as Alyssa tilted her head back so she could lick his balls. Her tongue was joined by another, and he grunted in surprise as a second hot little mouth began to pay attention to his quad. It was far too exciting to hold back, and his roar of release was matched by an exhausted sigh of contentment from Sakura, as she felt him pumping her full of cum.

It was a long, powerful, and tremendously satisfying climax for John, several thoughts making this one particularly special. Taking Sakura's ass for the first time, relishing her playful submission to him, and just the sheer unadulterated pleasure of having Alyssa and the other mystery girl lovingly sucking on his balls as he came.

When he'd emptied his entire quad, all he wanted to do was collapse on the bed, but he was careful to be gentle as he pulled out of the raven-haired girl sprawled atop Alyssa. He flopped down on the bed beside them, then saw a flash of green as Jade took his place, revealing the owner of the second nimble tongue. Sakura began to whimper as the blonde and the Nymph renewed the onslaught on her senses, and they brought her off twice more as Jade sucked out all of his cum.

John watched them all afterwards as Jade held both Alyssa and Sakura to her massive, cum-bloated breasts. She stroked their hair, and whispered quiet, loving words to them as they both suckled from her. When they'd drained her dry, Alyssa pulled Sakura into her arms, and they lay side by side, cum-filled bellies brushing against each other as they stared into each other's eyes. Their breathing slowed, their chests rising and falling at the same rate, as Alyssa began to form the telepathic bond with Sakura.

\*That's right beautiful girl, open up your mind to me,\* she urged Sakura, her loving telepathic voice echoing through her thoughts.

\*I owe you my life,\* Sakura thought to her in reply. \*Without you, no one would have even known I was trapped in Shinatobe.\*

\*I'm here to take care of you now,\* Alyssa replied, feeling the flood of heartfelt gratitude pouring across her empathic bond with the raven-haired girl.

\*And John enhanced me so I can protect you,\* Sakura replied, flinging the doors open in her mind, and embracing the kind, caring blonde girl with all her being.

John opened his arms for Jade, and she grinned at him in delight, then snuggled up against him. "What would I ever do without you, lovely little Nymph," he said to her as he held her tight in his arms.

Jade didn't even have to reply, the look of adoration in her cat-like eyes spoke volumes. They cuddled together and kept a protective watch over the bonding girls.

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An hour later, Alyssa finally pulled away from Sakura, and rolled onto her back with an ecstatic sigh.

"Were there any problems? Are you both alright?" John asked with concern.

"Bonding with psychic girls is so fucking amazing," Alyssa replied, a deliriously happy grin on her beautiful face. Twisting to look at her audience, she added, "It's like she drew me in, wanting to share herself with me."

Sakura stared at her matriarch in wonder, and whispered, "I've never felt anything like it... it's like our souls embraced."

Alyssa grinned at her, opening her arms in invitation, and Sakura gladly went to her, hugging the blonde girl fiercely. They all rested there in bed, waiting for Alyssa and Sakura to recuperate after the bonding experience. Both girls were remarkably buoyant, and it didn't take long before they were raring to go.

Alyssa smiled at John and Sakura, and said, "I'm feeling like I'm on top of the world right now. I think I'll make a present for you both to say thanks." She grinned at Jade, and continued, "As for you, sexy Nymph, you can have your present right now!"

Sakura let her roll free, and Alyssa gave Jade a big, affectionate kiss in gratitude.

Tracing her finger along Alyssa's jawline, Jade smiled and said, "Thanks, I loved my present." She climbed out of bed, and added, "I'll head back to Engineering to help Dana. Let me know when you want to do that again!"

"You can count on it," Sakura said, flashing John a naughty smile.

They all climbed out of bed, and after waving Jade goodbye, they freshened up in the shower again before retrieving their clothes. Despite Alyssa's protestations, John and Sakura retrieved their abandoned training weapons and helmets, then deactivated the holo-simulation. The training dojo flickered out, leaving them standing in a black room with orange strips of light forming a checked pattern across the walls and ceiling.

"Let's go you two," Alyssa said to them, rolling her eyes at their fastidiousness.

She took each of their hands, then led them out of the training facility and down the corridor to the grav-tube. John wondered where she was taking them at first, but when she ushered them into the red glow, and they descended all the way down to Deck Nine, he started to have an idea. She grinned at him over her shoulder, then flicked her fingers at the button next to the double doors leading into the Cargo Bay.

The huge room seemed practically bare, now that the throng of humanity they'd rescued from the Xen-Nuchek mine were no longer sleeping on cots in here. Walking across the vast empty space, she stopped just in front of the ore crates that were nearly stacked against the far wall, removing the lid with a gesture of her dexterous fingers.

"This should do nicely," she said, after peering inside the box to check the size of the Crystal Alyssium block within.

She gave a come-hither gesture with her finger, and the white crystalline metal streamed out of the container, seeming almost eager to leap to her command. It coalesced into a slowly rotating orb, which followed along at her shoulder as she strolled over to join them. Alyssa gestured at the sphere, and they watched as it quickly flattened to form a familiar face. The attention to detail on the portrait of the beautiful girl was exquisite, her almond eyes catching the light and twinkling enchantingly.

"Hey, that's me!" Sakura gasped, staring at the incredibly lifelike caricature.

Alyssa's lips twitched into a mischievous smile as she made another gesture at the breathtaking sculpture of Sakura. The features shifted then stopped, solidifying for a second before reforming yet again, the metal slightly more sluggish with each shaping. She repeated this process a half-dozen times, and they watched spellbound as the image of Sakura closed her eyes in ecstasy, while opening her mouth in a silent climactic cry.

"She looks like she's having lots of fun," Alyssa noted, her look of intense concentration shifting into a playful smile when she glanced at the Asian girl.

John shook his head with amusement, and said, "You're such a tease."

Sakura blushed furiously, but she fought down her embarrassment, and asked, "Do I really look like that when I... you know?"

"Cum your pretty brains out?" Alyssa replied innocently. She nodded, and her tone was serious as she continued, "You look even more ravishing in real life, I'm just sorry I couldn't do you justice."

"That's the seventh shaping wasn't it?" John asked Alyssa, looking at the frozen image hovering above them. "Your level of control is getting much stronger."

"That last one took quite a bit of effort," she admitted, glancing his way and meeting his eyes. "I'll be able to do one more before it gets too difficult to continue."

She twirled her fingers at the image, and the beautiful portrait of Sakura melted away as the Crystal Alyssium swirled into a rotating sphere of glossy white metal once again.

"Now, I think we'll start with something for the gentleman," Alyssa said, before her brow furrowed in intense concentration, and she gestured to the sparkling orb.

Just over half of the lazily spinning crystalline material sheared off as she applied her will to it, drawing the liquid metal away in a twisting column. She flattened and lengthened it to conform to the image she had in mind, and the metal moved languidly as though resisting her at every turn. Alyssa was breathing heavily by the time she'd finished, and she massaged her temples when she was done.

"Are you alright?" John asked her, placing a comforting hand on her shoulder, and staring at her face with worry.

She nodded, and replied, "Yeah, it just took it out of me a bit. Check out your new sword, see what you think."

He turned to look at the weapon that floated in the air before him, and his eyes widened as he gazed at it. Grasping the hilt in his hand, he upended the sword so he could take a closer look at the intricate detail on the crossguard and pommel. Both were now adorned with the majestic head of a lion, of the same stylised design that was embossed on his personalised suits of Paragon Armour.

"The craftsmanship on this is amazing," he marvelled, captivated by the noble visage of the great cat.

Sakura nodded, and said in a breathless whisper, "It's a beautiful sword. I've never seen anything like it."

"What about the balance?" Alyssa asked, looking more relaxed now as she recovered from her mental exertions.

John stood in a defensive posture, sweeping the sword around in a flourish as he stood at guard. He swung the long blade around him as he went through a dozen kata, his delighted grin answering Alyssa's question for her.

"I didn't think it was possible, but you've made a huge improvement on the last blade you made for me, and I already thought that one was perfect!" he replied, full of enthusiasm for her work.

Alyssa's eyes shone with pride, a smile of satisfaction playing on her lips. Turning towards Sakura next, she said, "And now something for the lady. You prefer twin ninjato I believe?"

"Hang on!" John protested. "Don't you need to rest first?"

The blonde shook her head, and replied, "I wasn't prepared for how tough it was to shape something eight times, but I know what to expect now. I'll be alright."

"Stop if it gets too difficult," he urged her, stroking her back supportively.

Alyssa glanced at Sakura, and smiled at her gently as she closed her eyes for a moment, appearing to be lost in her thoughts. When she opened them again, she took a deep breath, then turned to look at the much reduced sphere of Crystal Alyssium. Reaching out with both hands, she made a parting gesture, and the orb slowly split down the middle. Each piece flattened and elongated, until two identical bars floated in the air in front of them.

Sakura watched with fascination as the twin bars of glossy white metal began to flatten even further, the metal forming shapes that she knew like the back of her hand. The rounded surface of the blades narrowed, until they gleamed with a keen edge that looked impossibly sharp and deadly. More detail began to appear on the hilts of each weapon, and the Asian girl gasped, covering her mouth in shock as she looked at the pommel. Reaching out with shaking hands, she held the grips reverently as she stared at the faces embossed on each sword.

"How did you know?!" she asked, her eyes filling with tears.

Alyssa looked visibly drained, but she smiled at Sakura as she replied, "You showed me the memories when I first visited your mind."

Sakura put her arms around the weary blonde, and said, "Thank you so much! I haven't got any pictures of them."

John walked over to join them, and as he stroked Sakura's back, she handed him the swords so she could hug Alyssa tighter. He tilted up the ninjato to look at the images, and he immediately recognised her parents from the police video Calara had showed them. They looked very different in the images Alyssa had forged though; no longer worried and scared, they looked happy, and their eyes shone with parental pride.

When he looked at the girls again, Sakura was watching him, and she said in a quiet voice, "My mother and father, but just as they looked the last time I saw them."

John let go of the swords and levitated them over to Alyssa, then opened his arms for Sakura, hugging her protectively. She trembled against his chest, leaning into him for comfort and support as she dealt with her feelings of grief.

\*That was a lovely gesture,\* John thought to Alyssa, smiling at the tired blonde girl.

\*Next time remind me to just do a separate sculpture for her. Then I won't have to shape the metal eight times to make it!\* she replied, returning his smile and stifling a yawn in her exhausted state. There was more she wanted to tell him about their new swords, but with Sakura upset, now wasn't the time.

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All three of them were worn out that evening, so the girls cooked dinner and looked after them, having been kept up-to-date with events by Alyssa. Calara had been planning on presenting her findings on Jessica Blake to John that evening, but she could tell it wasn't a good time. Knowing that he was tired after the startling events that afternoon, she decided to postpone showing him her research until the following evening instead. Unfortunately, that meant she had an anxious night ahead of her, as she tried to stop herself worrying about presenting her findings.

When John announced that he was going to have an early night, Alyssa put her arm around Calara and they followed after him and Sakura, as they headed from the Ready Room down to their bedroom. While the others weren't feeling quite so tired, Irillith was getting increasingly nervous about her imminent reunion with her twin. After a moment's indecision she decided to follow after John and the others, and hugged her friends as they wished her a good night's sleep.

That just left Dana, Jade, Rachel, and Faye, who sat on the sofas after the others had gone. They exchanged glances for a moment, suddenly unsure what to do for the rest of the evening.

"I've got an idea..." Dana suggested tentatively, looking at Rachel with a hopeful expression.

Rachel knew her lover all too well, and she laughed, rolling her eyes as she said, "We've got a free evening together, and you want to spend it tinkering with your toys?!"

The redhead bobbed her head excitedly, and she pleaded, "Come on, babes! With all of us working on it, we could get shitloads done! I've been putting it off while I've had all this other stuff to do, and I know John doesn't really approve, but it'll be fucking badass when it's finished!"

"You'll have lots of time in Maliri Space, so what's the rush?" Rachel asked, with a puzzled frown.

Dana let out a forlorn sigh, and replied, "I'm worried I won't have any free time to look at it when we get to Genthalas."

With a look of confusion on her beautiful face, Rachel asked, "I thought the Maliri Engineers will be doing all the grunt work on the refit?"

Shaking her head, Dana replied, "I've come up with a new plan to make use of the upgraded Heavy Cannons. I'll be working my ass off overhauling the Invictus and making sure the Maliri don't fuck anything up."

"I'd love to help you on your secret project!" Faye exclaimed, bubbling with happiness. "I'll create some programs for the maintenance bots, so they can help with the heavy lifting!"

Jade reached over to pat Dana's leg and said, "I've finished assembling all the new armour and weapons, so I'll be able to help you this evening, and for the rest of our trip to Valaden."

"That's the spirit!" Dana cheered. She grinned at the Nymph and the purple construct, and added, "Thanks girls, you're awesome!"

Rachel laughed as she rose to her feet, and offering a hand to her lover, she said with an indulgent smile, "Come on then, I'll help too. Is there anything useful I can actually do though? I'm hardly a mechanical engineer..."

Dana leapt to her feet, and hugged the brunette exuberantly as she said, "Thanks babes, you're the best!" As they started walking from the room, she added, "You've got a surgeon's hands, you'll be great at wiring up the guidance system for me!"

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John stretched languidly, enjoying feeling the comforting weight of Irillith and Sakura lying with their slender limbs draped across him. He managed to crane his head enough to get a look at the chronometer, and he blinked in surprise when he saw it was eleven in the morning.

"I let you lie-in this morning, I hope that was okay?" Faye whispered to him, as she crawled up the bed.

It could have been his imagination, but she seemed to linger for a moment as she travelled up his body, head tilting down for a second as she reached his waist. She continued moving after a quick glance, then sat up looking slightly flushed.

John smiled at her and replied, "I needed the sleep actually, I slept like the dead last night."

Edraele's voice drifted through his mind, her tone disapproving as she said, \*You were using your own energy reserves yesterday to power your enhanced speed. Always remember that I'm there to help you if you need it, and there's no point you getting tired unnecessarily.\*

\*Sorry, I got a bit carried away at the time,\* he replied, feeling chastened.

His busy thoughts roused Alyssa, and after she'd stretched and given him a magnificent view, she gently woke the other girls. Soon he was surrounded by gravity-defying flesh, with all assets on display except Sakura's as she ducked under the covers with a naughty grin. John felt her welcoming mouth engulf him and he sighed as he relaxed in bed.

"It's time," Alyssa said softly, as she moved closer to replace Sakura by his side.

John glanced at her, and nodded, before throwing back the covers to see the Asian girl's mouth spread wide to take him all the way down her throat. He smiled at her and said, "Sakura, there's something we wanted to show you."

"Hmm?" she asked, her muffled question coming out as a hum which felt marvellous in her vibrating throat.

She eased back, watching his rueful expression as she unsheathed his throbbing cock. The girls climbed off the bed, gliding into the walk-in wardrobe, with Alyssa waiting patiently for them at the doorway. John gave Sakura a reassuring smile, and then they climbed off the bed, and walked over to join the others.

"What's going on?" she asked him in a hushed whisper.

"You'll see for yourself in just a moment," he replied, as they walked into the smaller room, to find the girls waiting for them with eager smiles of anticipation.

Alyssa took Sakura's hand, and led her over to the set of mirrors in the centre of the room. They were cleverly positioned so that someone standing in the centre could see themselves from all angles. "The Change is complete," she said softly. "Have a look for yourself."

Sakura had been watching the blonde girl's face with curiosity, but now she turned to stare at the mirrors, and her eyes widened as she saw herself for the first time in weeks. She gaped at her tall, athletic figure, and cupped her large, rounded breasts, marvelling at the way they felt as she struggled to contain them in each hand.

"I knew I was getting stronger, but how could I have missed all these changes?" she gasped, shaking her head in wonder.

"It's a strange side-effect of receiving John's Gift," Rachel explained to the overwhelmed young woman. "We all overlooked the physical changes too, until they were pointed out to us."

Sakura twisted her body to look at herself from different angles, shocked to see the slender, but powerful muscles that shifted beneath her unblemished golden-brown skin. Glancing across at Alyssa, she saw that her figure was now identical to hers, statuesque and flawless in its breathtaking perfection.

Alyssa smiled at Sakura as she listened to her thoughts, and said warmly, "Welcome to the family."

The girls moved to embrace their newest sister, and John smiled at Sakura when she made eye contact with him and mouthed, "Thank you!"

Alyssa grinned at John, and said playfully, "Maybe you'd like to inspect the... crew, Admiral?" She'd nearly said troops, but caught herself at the last moment.

John caught the moment of hesitation, and his eyes flickered to hers as the girls lined up in an identical pose, back straight, hands crossed behind them as they stood at attention. Alyssa took her place in the line, standing in the order they'd joined him, and despite his reservations and feelings of doubt he couldn't help but be awed by the sight.

Blonde, Latina, redhead, Nymph, brunette, Maliri, and now a raven-haired Asian to round out the mix. While their faces were all uniquely beautiful in their own right, from the neck down, the girls were absolutely identical discounting variations in skin colour. Something about the regimented sense of order stirred something deep inside him, and he felt a profound sense of satisfaction as he inspected his thralls. As quickly as that feeling arose, he smashed it back down, gritting his teeth at the abhorrent thought.

\*It's alright, that's not you,\* Alyssa murmured to him, her cerulean eyes staring at him intently. \*Just look at the girls, they're with you out of love, not because you enslaved them.\*

He glanced down the line, making eye contact with each of the girls in turn. In Calara's brown eyes he saw profound respect, in Dana's sky-blues impish excitement, Jade's cat-like emerald eyes gazed at him rapturously, while Rachel's stormy grey orbs studied him intently, burning with her fierce intelligence. The playful challenge he saw in Irillith's angular violet eyes was very enticing, while Sakura almond eyes looked at him with heartfelt gratitude. At the same time, he could see the genuine warmth and love they all felt towards him.

\*You've helped us grow strong so we can protect each other, not as pawns to be casually discarded,\* Alyssa told him, sashaying over to stand by his side. She reached out with her hands to clasp his, then guided his fingers over to Rachel's slim, tanned tummy. Speaking out loud now, she continued, "When the fighting's done, we'll be able to give you the big family you always wanted."

John brushed his fingers reverently over her belly, and Rachel sighed with contentment, her intense gaze softening when he looked into her eyes. He reached out to caress Irillith in the same way, then Sakura, the girls gathering around him so he could stroke each of them possessively. The tender looks they gave him were intoxicating, and he couldn't remember ever being more aroused when they guided him back to the bedroom.

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It was late in the afternoon when they eventually emerged from bed, Faye's maintenance bots floating out of the room with dishes piled high, carrying the remains of the lunch she'd prepared for them. The purple AI girl had dearly wished that she'd been able to take part in the energetic celebrations, but she'd resolved to stop torturing herself with such wild dreams, and simply focus on enjoying her life here with John and the girls.

Besides, the thought of John entering the Cyber-realm had left her giddy with excitement. As she'd watched him ravish the girls, she couldn't help wondering if she might soon experience the same kind of ecstasy. This train of thought was playing havoc with her efficiency though, and seven of her avatars were currently hard at work, trying to figure out how video clips of the loving orgy now showed seven copies of Faye writhing in delight.

John and the girls showered then dressed, before reconvening up in the Briefing Room to go over everyone's findings.

"Rather than telling you about everything Faye and I have done," Irillith said, looking intently at John down the long table. "I thought I might be able to bring you with me on a trip into the Cyber-realm. What do you think?"

He looked startled for a moment, then replied enthusiastically, "That sounds like an amazing idea! I'd love to see what it's like in there!"

Faye practically swooned at the thought, and Irillith glanced at her briefly, then smiled as she said, "We'd love to show you the sights."

Looking at her curiously, John asked, "Are you sure I'll be able to join you, though? I wouldn't have the slightest idea how to enter the Cyber-realm."

"Going by the theory that anything we can do, you can do too," Irillith replied, looking pointedly at Sakura. "then I don't think you'll have any difficulty with it."

His enthusiasm wavered, and he sighed as he said, "There might be one real problem though. Your trips into the Cyber-realm are based on astral projection, and my progenitor half is like an anchor on my back. If it does work, it'll be a very brief visit."

Irillith's violet eyes glinted mysteriously, and with another glance at Faye she replied, "We'll plan out your trip, and focus on the most important things."

"You're getting stronger," Alyssa said to him, stroking his arm. She smiled as she continued optimistically, "Pretty soon you'll be able to defeat your Progenitor half, then you can spend as long as you want with Irillith and Faye."

"It's a good motivator," he agreed, smiling at the purple girl, whose wings were vibrating in a shimmering iridescent blur.

"I've got something to show you!" Dana blurted out, unable to contain her excitement any longer.

He turned to look at her with an arched eyebrow, and grinned as he said, "I've been looking forward to this! Were you able to enhance the Heavy Cannons, Gauss Cannons, and Singularity Drivers?"

"No-, I mean yes I did, but that's not what I want to show you!" she exclaimed, as she leapt from her chair to grab the remote for the holo-projector.

"I'll get that for you!" Faye chimed in breezily, blinking once and activating the holographic projection system built into the Briefing Room.

The image that appeared above them shocked John into silence for a moment, his eyes darting from side to side as he took in Dana's plan. He finally blurted out, "Holy shit! What did you do to the Invictus?!"

Dana's eyes glinted with excitement as she said, "Yeah, I know, right? It's going to be so fucking awesome when I'm done!"

He gaped at the image in stunned disbelief, and replied, "Won't all this take months to complete?"

She shook her head, and replied, "Not if we get enough Engineers. I talked it over with Rachel last night, while we were working on my... project."

Rachel nodded, and replied, "If Edraele can provide enough Engineering teams, we should be able to get all the work done simultaneously. It'll still take a good few weeks, but with all of us to oversee the teams, it shouldn't be too mountainous a task. I can draw up some project plans to make the work go as efficiently as possible."

\*I can supply you with as many Engineers as you could ever need,\* Edraele told him with a great deal of satisfaction.

John slumped back in his chair, and shook his head in wonder as he said, "You girls never cease to amaze me." He smiled at Dana then, and added, "If you think you can do all that to my ship, and it'll still fly, then we'll do it your way."

"Fuck, yeah!" Dana crowed with delight, high-fiving Rachel who grinned at seeing her lover so animated.

Everyone smiled at the redhead, her open enthusiasm proving to be quite infectious. It wasn't just Dana that was looking forward to arriving at Genthalas shipyard now, and they could hardly wait to get started on her plans for the Invictus.

The girl's smiles eventually faded as they looked at Calara who was staring at John with a tense expression on her face. Alyssa nodded to her, and the Latina asked him, "Would you like to hear what I discovered about Jessica Blake?"

He turned to look at her, surprised by her sombre tone, and replied, "Of course, but what's wrong?"

Calara glanced at Faye, and the image of the Invictus faded from view, to be replaced by a very familiar folder of files, one that he'd pored over for decades. He knew the contents of that folder like the back of his hand, so he immediately noticed the changes when the files spread out into a huge collage, with the picture of Jessica Blake at their centre.

"Where did you find all this?!" he asked, leaning forward in his chair and staring wide-eyed at the pages of information that had been missing from his files.

"You first showed me these files months ago, just before we went on vacation to Oceanus. I haven't ignored them since then, I reviewed the information you'd found, just to get an idea what might have been redacted or removed from your mother's records," she explained patiently. Glancing at the Maliri girl sitting further down the briefing table, she continued, "When Irillith joined us, I knew we might be able to get some real answers. I had a pretty good idea of what to look for, and between your new rank opening up more doors, and Irillith's assistance, we were able to gather much more evidence before we left Terran Federation Space."

"Evidence?" John asked grimly. "What are you saying?"

Calara's eyes flickered to Alyssa, and the blonde girl placing a hand on his, squeezing it gently as she said, "Let her talk, she'll tell you everything."

He glanced her way, then nodded warily. "Go ahead, tell me what you found out," he said to Calara.

She rose from her chair and gestured to his mother's service record, and replied, "As you know, Jessica Blake was a Xeno-Biologist attached to a deep space survey vessel called the 'Cora'. Her ship set sail from Olympus Shipyard in 2737, under the command of a Captain Joseph Ebner. The Cora had a crew of seventeen, who were mostly scientists, with a handful of additional personnel necessary to run the ship."

She pointed at another file which Faye expanded to show a glowing flightpath heading deep into what was now known as Kirrix Space, and continued, "Their mission was to head beyond the eastern frontier of Terran territory and discover new alien species; both plant-life and animals. The Kirrix had been scoured from this area of space decades beforehand in the previous purge, and these systems were uninhabited by bugs at this time.

"They spent months landing on planets, studying exo-fauna and flora, until they eventually stumbled across an Eden World deep in a dense nebula. The planet was unnamed, Terran astronomers being unaware of its presence, hidden as it was by the nebula's electro-magnetic disruption. Setting down on the planet, which they named 'Arcadia', they spend several months there, cataloguing hundreds of different species."

John shook his head in astonishment and asked, "Why was all that removed from the Cora's and my mother's records?"

"You'll see in a moment," Calara explained carefully. "It was Irillith who found the data for me."

"I found it in a top-secret archive describing encounters with hostile alien lifeforms. With Arcadia now deep in Kirrix Space, the reports were never followed up by Terran Federation Xeno-investigation teams," the Maliri girl replied. "Conspiracy theorists would have a field day with the data in there."

Calara pointed to another file, and Faye dutifully opened it up for her, expanding the contents so they could all see. It was a series of images, with one particular subject featuring in every one. A sinister black spacecraft, that looked terrifyingly familiar.

John stared at the image in shock, and blurted out, "They found a Progenitor ship!"

Dana groaned, rubbing at her temples, and said, "Crap! It's that feeling again." When John rose to his feet with a look of concern on his face, she waved him away, and said, "It doesn't hurt, it's just really fucking annoying. Go ahead, Calara."

The Latina waited for him to sit down, and once John was seated and focused on her again, she said quietly, "As you can clearly see, the ship has taken massive damage."

She nodded to Faye, and the clearest image expanded, showing enormous gouges in the hull of the crippled vessel. The front half was completely missing, although the ship had crashed into the surface of the planet and was tilted at an awkward angle, so it was possible it could have been buried below ground.

"These pictures were taken by her crew when they rescued Jessica," Calara explained. "The animals and plant-life on Arcadia were harmless, almost as if it had been terraformed into a perfect paradise with Terrans in mind. Or more specifically Progenitors in this case. Arcadia was deemed benign after their first week there, and the crew of the Cora split up to pursue their own research. It was your mother that discovered the ship."

"My father's ship," John said, in a hushed voice. Almost afraid to know the answer, he added, "So, what happened then?"

Calara looked at him apprehensively, and replied, "From what I've been able to piece together from the Captain's logs, your mother went missing, and stopped sending her status reports. The crew eventually tracked down the subdermal homing beacon that they'd all been implanted with, but she'd cut it from her body, and left it hundreds of miles from the Progenitor ship.

"After weeks of fruitless searches, they gave her up for dead, but decided to stay on Arcadia to continue their research. A couple of months later, they discovered the Progenitor ship by accident, and spotted Jessica out foraging nearby. When they tried to bring her back to the Cora, she fought with them, and they had to sedate her. The ship's medical officer performed a full-body scan while Jessica was sedated and discovered she was pregnant."

"With me..." John said quietly.

Calara nodded, and said, "Exactly. When Jessica awoke, she begged them to let her return to Arcadia, desperate to return to her 'Master'. Captain Ebner panicked, not wanting to confront a potentially hostile, technically advanced alien lifeform, and decided to return to Terran Space with all haste. They couldn't put Jessica in cryostasis now that she was pregnant, so they kept her in the brig on the journey home.

"She was heavily pregnant by the time they returned to Olympus shipyard, and gave birth shortly after they arrived. You were examined by medical personnel and deemed to not be a threat, appearing essentially identical to a normal Terran baby apart from your ears, and your other... enhancements."

John leaned forward, his expression tense as he asked, "So what happened to her then? Where did my mother go?"

Calara sighed, and looked forlorn as she replied, "According to Incident Advisory Board findings, she sabotaged the Cora while her former shipmates were unloading the specimens they'd brought back for study. The survey vessel then exploded, killing all aboard. She stole a corvette undergoing a refit in drydock, and then escaped before anyone realised what she'd done. The corvette was tracked heading towards the eastern frontier, before contact was lost."

Alyssa squeezed his hand, and said, "Your grandparents demanded that you be relinquished to their care, and they became your legal guardians. You already know the rest: Your mother was declared legally dead, and your grandparents took care of you."

John slumped back in his seat, shell-shocked by the revelations. Calara had just confirmed something he'd always refused to believe before; that Jessica Blake had been responsible for the accident that had killed her shipmates. Not only that, but Calara had also confirmed something else he'd always hoped wasn't the case. That his mother had abandoned him on a whim.

He rose from his chair, and said quietly, "Thank you. It's good to finally know the truth after all these years." Turning then, he walked towards the door.

"John, wait!" Alyssa called to him, rising from her chair.

He paused, glancing at her over his shoulder, as he replied, "I'll be in my Ready Room. I'd like some time alone, please."

The girls looked at him with sympathy as Alyssa slowly sank back in her chair.

John walked through the Bridge feeling numb. Faye watched him quietly, but didn't interrupt him, as he walked around the Command Podium and entered his Ready Room. Slumping in his leather chair, he turned it so that he was staring out of the big window that flanked the room, gazing bleakly at the stars. They had always provided him comfort in the past, thinking that somewhere out there, were the answers to his mother's disappearance, and perhaps Jessica Blake herself. Now he had as many answers as he could stomach, and he wasn't sure he wanted to find his mother any more.

He felt hollow inside, raw feelings of loss and abandonment raked up again after decades of suppressing them. Rationally he knew his mother had been enthralled by his father, but sometimes logic and reason couldn't soothe an emotional response. He knew the compulsion to obey him had been overwhelming in the girls, at least until he'd broken it, but the thought of any of them willingly committing cold-blooded murder was galling.

Edraele and Alyssa obeyed his request, remaining silent, and leaving him alone with his thoughts. Partly it was through respect for his wishes, but also because they could tell that in his current mood he'd simply block them out if they interrupted him. He lost track of time as he stared disconsolately out of the window, until a soft tapping at the door roused him from his melancholic thoughts.

"Come in," he said brusquely.

John was expecting it to be Alyssa that walked through the door, and he was surprised that she'd interrupt him after he'd requested some time alone. He was startled to see that it was Irillith who glided through the doorway, and approached him warily.

She stopped in front of his desk, and said in a soft voice, "I wanted to speak with you, if that's alright?"

He studied Irillith for a moment, and was surprised to see there was something else troubling her behind her look of sympathy. His concern for her overrode his own bleak mood, and he rose from his chair and walked around the desk to meet her.

"What's wrong?" he asked, reaching out to stroke her blue arm supportively.

She met his gaze, but she faltered for a moment and she sounded sad as she replied, "I've seen that look on your face before."

John looked at her in confusion, and asked, "How could you? I've never felt this way around you."

Shaking her head, she looked away, and replied, "Not on you, on Tashana, when I told her that our mother had killed our father. She didn't believe me at first, but I made her understand..."

"Understand what?" John asked,

"That our mother was a monster," she explained with a heavy sigh.

He could feel the surge of grief and remorse over his bond with Edraele, and he said to her sternly, \*That wasn't you, so don't start feeling guilty for something you didn't do.\*

She recovered quickly, and for once he was glad of the compulsion to obey him. Edraele sounded determined as she replied, \*I might not be responsible, but I am in a unique position to make it up to Tashana, and Irillith too.\*

John turned his attention back to Irillith, and said sympathetically, "Edraele isn't that person any more. I know it's not the same as if your real mother had suddenly undergone a damascene conversion, but she's trying to make amends in the best way she can."

Irillith smiled at him then, and stepped closer, looking into his eyes as she said, "I didn't disturb you looking for sympathy, I promise. I was just trying to tell you that I understand, and that I'm here for you if you want to talk about it."

He wrapped her in his arms, feeling her soft white hair against his cheek as she leant into him. "Thank you, that was very thoughtful," he told her as held her close.

"You're always trying to help us, but you should lean on us a bit, let us help you too," she murmured in his ear, nuzzling against him.

They stood like that for a while, both drawing comfort from each other. Eventually they pulled apart a little, and Irillith gave him a shy smile, unused to these kind of emotions. He brushed his finger over her cheek, staring into her violet eyes, and said, "It feels strange being the one needing some support. I think we'll just keep to the status quo, if that's alright with you?"

She smiled at him, and asked, "Ever the alpha male?"

"Absolutely!" he replied gruffly, and they both laughed, feeling better for it. He smiled at her, and added, "Now, let's talk about something far more important. We'll arrive at the Underworld tomorrow afternoon, right?"

Irillith nodded, and said firmly, "That's right, and according to the tracking implant, that's where we'll find my sister. I can finally start to make things up to her after all these years."

"I'll help you find her, don't worry," he said, stroking her back in a soothing gesture.

Turning to look out the window, Irillith sighed, and wondered out loud, "I wonder what Tashana's doing right now?"

Leaning against him again, she drew strength from his comforting embrace, watching the stars as John held her protectively.