Three Square Meals Ch. 67

With the muted flare of silenced retro thrusters, the sleek black shuttle touched down in the centre of the glowing orange landing pad. Amatsu Mikaboshi powered down the engines, then flipped a switch on the black console in front of him, which opened the airlock door. He rose from the Pilot's Chair, and stalked from the tiny infiltration vessel without a backward glance. Movement to his right drew his attention, as a huge set of reinforced doors dropped down into position, concealing the entrance to the hangar bay. His hidden fortress, Yomi-no-kuni, was built into a remote mountain range, obscured from detection by the cunning use of technology.

It had taken a couple of days to pilot the freighter he'd hijacked back to his home system, where he'd promptly abandoned the 'Scamander' at the local starport. Flying from there to his citadel in Shinatobe's shuttle had taken a few additional hours, but he had no intention of landing the cumbersome stolen freighter in his base of operations. He had already taken a risk using the Scamander to fly back to this planet, but in his battered condition, he had rather limited options.

Now that he was safely back in his stronghold, he felt a surge of relief; yet another long forgotten emotion he was experiencing again, courtesy of John Blake. Thoughts of the man that Mikaboshi was fast coming to think of as his nemesis, filled him with a blinding rage, and he struggled to bring himself under control as he strode across the dimly lit hangar. What made the events that had transpired all the more galling, was that he'd had John Blake at his mercy, and could have ended it all with a single gunshot. By indulging himself, and taking his time, he'd ended up losing so much...

A door opened before him, and Servant Kagawa, his major-domo stepped through, walking with the small quick steps he favoured. "Welcome home, Idaina-sha," Kagawa greeted him with an obsequious bow.

Mikaboshi normally enjoyed the man's servile disposition, viewing it as treating him with the respect he deserved. Today however, it irritated him immensely, and he had to strongly rein in his fury before he throttled the man. He breezed past him instead and snapped, "What news of Shinatobe? Did she escape? Has she made contact?"

Kagawa shook his head, his head bowing low as he fell into step beside Mikaboshi, and replied, "No, Idaina-sha. We have received no word from her since the incident on the Amaterasu."

The mention of his flagship caused Mikaboshi to grind his teeth in anger, difficult though that was, with his jaw broken in three places. He'd successfully escaped the stricken battlecruiser in Shinatobe's shuttle, then activated stealth mode as he'd put some distance between himself and the compromised ship. Until he'd repaired his mangled body, he had no intention of confronting John Blake, or the boarding party that had slaughtered his soldiers with such contemptuous ease.

When John Blake disembarked the Amaterasu in his evil-looking gunship, Mikaboshi's plan had been to return to his ship and regroup with the survivors. Moments later however, the Invictus had dropped out of hyper-warp, and hanging there in the blackness of space, he'd been forced to watch helplessly as the white-hulled cruiser had engaged the Amaterasu. He still struggled to find words to describe the level of destructive power that ship had brought to bear on his battlecruiser. He'd been shocked and appalled as his flagship that he'd meticulously upgraded and maintained over decades, was utterly obliterated in less than a minute.

Still, when he had his revenge, and John Blake had been slain, he could always seize the Invictus for himself. He wasn't going to take any chances this time however. John Blake had threatened to come looking for him, so Mikaboshi planned to oppose him with such overwhelming force, the result of the impending battle would be a foregone conclusion. That thought brought a smile to his twisted lips, and he walked back to his quarters with an added spring to his step.

Not bothering to look at the man walking by his side, Mikaboshi strode down the bleak stone corridor, and announced imperiously, "Order the immediate recall of all my agents, with no exceptions."

Kagawa gasped in shock, and forgetting his place, he blurted out, "But that would mean abandoning dozens of contracts! The loss of face will be catastrophic!"

Mikaboshi paused as he reached his destination, and pushed the button to open the heavy black door. Turning to glare at Kagawa with his mangled face, he said in a low voice, "Question my orders again, Servant Kagawa, and you will end up begging me to end your torment."

"Hai, Idaina-sha, I meant no disrespect," Kagawa replied, bowing impressively low. "I will order the recall at once."

His major-domo scurried away, and Mikaboshi entered the darkened room, illuminated only by red lighting built into the floor. It cast a ghoulish crimson light over the dozens of cybernetic limbs hanging on the walls, giving the room the appearance of a horrifying slaughterhouse. He stopped in front of one of the left arms, carefully removing it from the rack with his right hand.

John Blake had ripped his old arm away at the shoulder, but by luck, the torso mount itself was undamaged. He activated the command to detach the remnants of his dismembered limb from his body, and the ravaged shoulder joint detached with a soft click, before falling to the floor with a metallic clang. Aligning his new arm into the correct position took only a moment, and he locked it into place, then smoothed over the synthi-skin to conceal the joint.

His limb restored, Mikaboshi turned now towards the opposite wall, where a score of disembodied heads were neatly arranged in rows, staring back at him with cold, dead eyes. He strolled over to the first of those, lifting it from the shelf and checking the state of the connections. It had been many years since he'd had to make such significant repairs to his body, and it was one more thing he intended to make John Blake pay for, along with the loss of both the Amaterasu, and his beloved Shinatobe...

\*\*\*

"There's a good girl," Alyssa purred, planting a loving kiss on the big bulge in Sakura's slender neck.

The ravishing blonde Matriarch was lying on her back with the latest addition to their crew lying on top of her, their firm breasts squashed together. John knelt in front of Sakura with his cock buried down her throat, and he was stroking back and forth at a gentle pace that he knew she was comfortable with. They'd let the Asian girl sleep for several hours, lying peacefully between them as she absorbed the rich, heavy meal in her belly. Her stomach was flat and toned again now though, her growing body having voraciously consumed his load, and she needed feeding again to maintain the Change.

"Swallow now, sexy, it makes the muscles in your throat massage his cock," Alyssa said encouragingly, watching with lustful eyes as John thrust in and out of Sakura's mouth.

Sakura was watching John carefully, doing her best to learn from the blonde girl's expert advice, and she smiled around the girth spreading her mouth wide as she saw his breathing quicken. Her lips reached his groin, the full length of his shaft encased in the tight embrace of her throat, and she paused for a moment, swallowing again to heighten the sensation for him. It still astonished her that she could take John like that, but there was no discomfort in having his burgeoning length impaling her; on the contrary, she found it tremendously satisfying. She made eye contact with him, and took control over their coupling, maintaining a smooth, sensual rhythm as she bobbed up and down.

Now that they'd made love, the nature of their relationship had shifted up a gear, greatly intensifying the connection between them. It still felt like a dream to her, how this incredible man had swept into her life, rescuing her from the horrific mental prison of her own cybernetic body - the psychotic Shinatobe persona enforced upon her by the Master Assassin Mikaboshi. Not surprisingly, her feelings towards John were overwhelming in their intensity, but their nature had subtly shifted, changing from earnest gratitude to lustful desire, and to something much more permanent.

Her mind had wandered for a moment, but she'd been subconsciously following Alyssa's instructions, moving in fluid strokes accompanied by wet "shlocking" sounds as he pistoned in and out of her throat. All that stimulation soon had the desired effect, and John cried out in ecstasy as he came, running his fingers through her hair and gently holding her in place. This was another of those moments which made Sakura feel so submissive, but so empowered at the same time, and she whimpered with delight as she brought him to orgasm.

His huge cock began to throb in her throat, and she swallowed to help milk his length. She couldn't taste his cum like this, as he was shooting his sperm directly into her stomach, but being carefully held in place while he packed her belly full of spunk was an indescribable feeling. Sakura felt a soft pair of female lips sucking on her nipples, while nimble, clever fingers began to stroke her clit in time to the throbbing pulses of John's cock. She squealed as she joined him in orgasm, unable to maintain the eye contact any longer as her eyes rolled back in bliss. By the time she regained her senses, John was nearly done, and her abdomen was stuffed full of his heavy load, resting as it was on Alyssa's toned body.

"Mmm, you did such a good job," Alyssa said approvingly, as those slender hands cupped and stroked the enormous tanned tummy pinning her to the bed.

John nodded, smiling down at Sakura as he said, "She's right, you were such a good girl. That felt incredible!"

Sakura's heart lifted with joy to hear them both praise her, the feelings of happiness wrapping her in a warm emotional blanket that nearly compensated for John easing his cock out of her throat. She felt strangely bereft now that she was no longer wrapped around him, but having a belly swollen with his cum was fine compensation.

He helped her lift her rotund weight off the beautiful blonde beneath her, and Sakura lay back on the bed with a deep sigh of satisfaction. John and Alyssa flanked her immediately afterwards, and they both began to caress the taut skin of her engorged stomach, which felt absolutely wonderful. The serene moment was abruptly interrupted by a loud rumble from John's stomach, voicing its displeasure at having to wait for dinner. Sakura smiled at him, and he looked a bit embarrassed, which she found quite adorable.

"We better get some dinner inside you," Alyssa said to him, her tone caring and full of love.

It still seemed a little strange to Sakura that Alyssa would so willingly share the man that she was obviously head-over-heels in love with. It wasn't just Sakura that the blonde was being so selfless with, as there were five other stunningly attractive girls in this group all of whom were fully intimate with John. They were all so beautiful, it was more than a little intimidating being around them; but at the same time, they'd all been nothing but friendly and welcoming with her.

Sakura had liked Calara immediately, the warm, friendly girl putting her at ease straight away. There was a hidden harder edge to the gorgeous Latina though, and it had been a shock to see her ruthlessly dispatch that Kintark battleship. By contrast, Irillith had seemed scary at first, a little aloof and with a slightly sarcastic edge to some of her observations, but she'd been very helpful and supportive with her up on the Bridge during the battle. Sakura found that beneath that elegant, poised and occasionally sharp exterior, the Maliri girl was gentle and caring too.

She hadn't made her mind up about Rachel and Dana yet, with the brunette quiet and reserved, and the redhead brash and exuberant. It was astonishing to think that Dana had developed all the gear that John's crew had at their disposal, including all the enhancements to their remarkable ship, the Invictus. While Rachel, as the ship's Doctor, had been directly responsible for removing all the cybernetic implants from Sakura's body, saving her from that living nightmare. Both girls had been friendly though, in their own unique ways, and she was looking forward to getting to know them better.

Then there was Jade, the exotic, green-skinned alien girl. The Nymph seemed to be eager to put their past behind her, and had been nothing but open and welcoming. Still, every time Sakura looked into those enchanting emerald eyes, she saw the face of that ferocious tiger, the huge beast sprawled on the floor where she'd been felled by Shinatobe. She knew that Jade had been killed in that fight, then somehow miraculously restored to life by John's phenomenal powers, and she hoped she could somehow make amends with the gentle Nymph.

That just left the blonde goddess that was currently cuddled up with her in bed. Alyssa was breathtakingly beautiful, but there was much more to her than that, and Sakura had found her to be incredibly compassionate, supportive, and caring. Despite all that, it was difficult to forget that the psychic blonde had beaten Shinatobe unconscious using just her mind. Sakura had been on the receiving end of those telekinetic backhanders too, and she had no intention of ever making the mistake of upsetting John's Matriarch. Still, she had to admit that staring into those enchanting blue eyes while Alyssa licked her to some blindingly intense climaxes, had done wonders to help her get over her fears.

"Hey Sakura, what do you want to do?" Alyssa asked again, nudging Sakura with a playful push. "Do you want to come and help us make dinner, or rest here?"

Sakura blushed, realising she'd been so wrapped up in her thoughts that she'd accidentally tuned Alyssa out. It was something her parents used to complain about when she had her head in one of her books, and wouldn't hear her mother calling her for supper. Thoughts of her parents brought that rising tide of grief with it again, and she desperately fled from that horrible tsunami of loss, tinged as it was with sharp feelings of guilt.

"I'm sorry, I was miles away," she apologised to the blonde girl. Seeking any form of distraction, she added, "I'd love to come with you, if that's okay?"

Alyssa nodded eagerly, and replied, "Sure! We'd love to have you come with us, right John?"

He smiled at Sakura, which made her heart skip a beat, and replied, "Definitely. Do you know how to cook, Sakura?"

She shook her head, and replied, "My mother was wonderful at cooking, and I always told her I'd let her teach me someday. I kept putting it off, because studying for law school was too important..."

That wave of guilt and grief crashed down on her now, and she felt like she was drowning under a sea of regret. If only she'd been a better daughter, and spent more time with her mother... what use was all that studying, now that she'd abandoned law school? If only she'd taken the hover-bus to university instead of convincing her parents that she was responsible enough to have her own bike. If only she hadn't been so damned naive and trusting, she'd never have been kidnapped, and wouldn't have put her parents through decades of grief. If only...

Tears were streaming down her face, making John's chest damp where she was leaning into him. She'd started sobbing at some point, and John had wrapped her in his arms as she poured out her grief.

"It's okay, let it all out," he told her, his baritone voice safe and soothing as he rubbed her back.

Alyssa was gently stroking Sakura's hair, and her tone was soft and caring as she said, "You poor girl, you've had to deal with so much."

Sakura cried her heart out, mourning her parents, and the life that had been taken from her. Her world contracted until it solely consisted of her sobbing, her grief, her sense of guilt, and all those regrets. When her tears finally dried up, she just felt a dull ache in her chest, rather than the sharp pang of loss. Taking a big breath, she pulled away from John to brush her arm across her eyes, and she flushed when she saw his tear-soaked chest.

"I'm sorry," she apologised, feeling self-conscious.

He shook his head, and replied, "Don't be. You've been through a lot, and it'll take time to come to terms with your loss. We're all here for you, so let any of us know if you need to talk, alright?"

She felt a bit better already, and she smiled at them both bravely.

Alyssa returned the smile, then said, "Why don't we all get a shower?" She nodded towards John's damp chest, and grinned as she added, "You made a good start on him, but I don't think he's completely clean yet."

Sakura laughed at her joke, the laughter feeling strange and awkward after all her weeping. John joined in too, and then he and Alyssa offered her a hand as they got out of bed. She'd forgotten about the heavy weight around her midriff, and the sight of her rounded belly brought a faint smile to her lips. Taking their offered hands, she let them help her out of bed, and she wobbled a bit at first before finding her balance. They all walked into the bathroom together, then through to the huge shower, and John held the cubicle door open for the girls to enter first.

The warm water felt amazing, and her two lovers stroked her tummy as she soaked under the soothing jets of water. She let out a happy sigh at the blissful sensation of their touch, then felt ashamed that she could feel so good after being overcome with grief only a few minutes earlier. It almost felt like she was forgetting about her parents, and she worried that John and Alyssa might think she was callous.

Alyssa had been watching her expressions, and reading her rapidly changing emotions, so she smiled reassuringly as she said, "You're responding to the physical changes to your body. It's alright that it feels good, and it doesn't in any way reflect on the love you felt for your parents, or how much you miss them."

John nodded, and said, "No one's going to judge you, Sakura. You can come to terms with your loss in your own way, and we're just here to support you."

She looked at each of them in turn, touched by their kind words, and she pulled them both into a hug as she said, "Thank you so much. For everything..."

John and Alyssa shared a glance, and he replied, "We can both empathise with what you're going through. Take as much time as you need, there's no rush."

Nodding her head, Sakura replied earnestly, "I'm so glad I made the choice to join you. I've never felt like I belonged somewhere quite so much before." She flushed then, nervous that they might not feel the same way.

She needn't have worried though, as Alyssa wrapped her in her arms, and said, "You're a perfect fit for our group. I'm in charge of recruitment, and I take my job very seriously!"

John laughed, and said, "Yeah, my XO has a real eye for talent."

Sakura got the impression she was missing something, so they explained the joke while they soaped each other down. When they were done and had dried off, they returned to the bedroom, where a zealous and industrious cleaning robot had changed the bed, and was exiting the room with a hamper full of sheets on its back. They went into the huge walk-in wardrobe next, and Alyssa handed her another of John's shirts with a friendly wink.

Sakura carefully put on the neatly pressed shirt, which was much too large for her, sized as it was for his brawny frame. However, with her enormously rounded tummy, the cotton brushed lightly over her taut skin, feeling soft and comforting. Even though it was freshly cleaned, she was sure she could sense his distinctive smell on it, and she inhaled deeply with a wistful smile on her face.

\*It's like being constantly wrapped in his arms, isn't it?\* Alyssa thought to her, while giving her a knowing smile.

Sakura wasn't used to these telepathic intrusions yet, but Alyssa's thoughts were always welcome, kind-hearted and well-intentioned as they were. It was just one more thing to adjust to in this bewildering new life, but like everything else, she found it a pleasant adjustment to make.

She glanced over at John, and found him watching her with a strange smile on his lips that she couldn't quite place. It seemed full of longing somehow, while protective, and possessive at the same time. Whatever the intent behind his expression, it made her flush with excitement, her skin prickling with goosebumps as she made eye contact with him.

John walked over to her, and placed his strong hand over her rounded belly, stroking her suggestively through the soft cotton, and reminding her just what she was carrying in her stomach. He leaned in to give her a kiss, before saying, "You look gorgeous. I like you wearing my shirts."

She swooned in his arms, until Alyssa cuddled up behind her, and said, "Come on you two, enough flirting! I'm starving, which means you must be famished, John."

He nodded grudgingly, and they left the bedroom and headed down the corridor to the grav-tube. John was about to stroll up to the double doors at the end, which led into the now-demolished Officers' Lounge, but he remembered just in time, and came to an abrupt halt. He turned towards the two girls, and said, "Sorry, force of habit."

"I should be the one apologising," Sakura mumbled with a guilty glance towards the Lounge that Shinatobe had blown to bits with her bombs.

Alyssa hooked an arm through hers, and she said with a bright smile, "Don't worry about it! The decor in that place was hideous before! It's given me a great excuse to give the Lounge a makeover."

John smiled at the blonde, and as they stepped into the grav-tube, he replied, "It's true, I would've struggled with letting her turn the Officers' Lounge upside down, but I've got no excuses now."

They stepped out on Deck Four, and strolled down the corridor, past dozens of doors leading to the quarters on that deck. The Galley was at the end of the corridor, and they walked past the long tables and benches before entering the large functional kitchen beyond. John tapped a finger on his chin while looking thoughtful, then disappeared through the swishing automatic double doors into the hermetically sealed pantry.

As soon as he was gone, Alyssa pulled Sakura into a hug, and asked, "How are you coping with everything, are you doing okay?"

Sakura nodded, enjoying feeling the reassurance of the other girl's arms around her. She brushed Alyssa's golden blonde hair away from her delicate ear, and whispered, "I feel like I've woken from a horrible nightmare into some blissful dream. Nothing feels real at the moment."

"We've all been through that, believe me," Alyssa replied in a hushed voice, and hugging her tighter. Sakura could hear the happiness in her voice as she continued, "It only gets better from here on out, but you'll get used to everything soon enough, don't worry about that."

John strolled back into the kitchen, arms piled high with a wide variety of ingredients. Sakura pulled away from Alyssa, then relaxed when she saw the happy expression on his face. "What's for dinner?" she asked him curiously.

"Homemade ravioli with three types of mushrooms and garlic. Should be very tasty," he said with an enthusiastic grin.

Alyssa smiled at him, and asked, "What do you want me to do? Shall I chop vegetables?"

"Nope, you'll be making the pasta!" John replied encouragingly. "I'll be giving Sakura some lessons on preparing the vegetables."

The blonde laughed, and said, "I'm not sure that's a good idea, but I'm sure I spotted a bag of chips in the pantry if I balls this up!"

"You helped defeat a dragon, I think you can handle some pasta," he said with a chuckle. Throwing her a glance, he added, \*Don't worry, I'll guide you through it.\*

Sakura was watching his face, and noticed one of the silent exchanges between John and Alyssa. It was fascinating to think that they could hold entire conversations by thought alone, and she found herself wishing she could hear what John was thinking. He turned back to face her, and gestured towards the worktop area where a knife block and chopping board were located.

He washed the vegetables and stacked them up beside the chopping board, then took a long sharp knife from the block. "This is a chef's knife," he said to her, holding the six-inch blade with practiced familiarity. "It's got a slight curve to the edge for rocking back and forth to cut meat or vegetables."

Taking the knife, he held it as if shaking hands, placing his hand on top of the single-edged blade. Choosing an onion from the pile of vegetables, he neatly divested it of its outer skins, and sliced it up into smaller sections. He placed it on the chopping board, and with a quick, rolling motion of the blade, chopped it up into tiny pieces.

"Want to have a go?" he asked her with a smile.

Sakura nodded, carefully taking the knife he handed to her, and holding it gingerly. John stepped behind her, and her breath caught as he wrapped his arms around hers, gently taking hold of her hands. He repositioned her fingers slightly on both the knife and the quartered onion, then guided her through the rocking movement of the blade. Sakura forced herself to concentrate intently on the task at hand, and tried to ignore his distracting presence. She surprised herself by chopping up the vegetable with dexterous motions of her hands, the blade feeling natural in her fingers.

"Nicely done!" he praised her, placing his hands on her hips, then leaning in to give her a peck on the cheek. "Can I leave you to prepare the rest? I'll go and tackle the mushrooms!"

She laughed and nodded, her heart lifting with the simple domestic pleasure of preparing food. "You can count on me," she replied with confidence.

"Good girl," he said, then moved along the counter to begin preparing the mushrooms.

Sakura smiled to herself, as she started working through the vegetables, slicing them into small, manageable pieces as he'd instructed. It felt bizarre to be involved in such an enjoyable if mundane activity, when only a few hours earlier, she'd witnessed a dramatic space battle involving kilometre-long ships duelling each other, with thousands of lives hanging in the balance. She tried to forget about that for the moment though, and put aside her knife, before picking up a peeler to skin the carrots. She dragged the peeler down the orange vegetable, neatly divesting it of its skin in a long, satisfyingly unbroken strip of peel.

Now that the carrots were ready to be sliced, she picked up the chef's knife to continue her preparations. By reflex she picked up the long knife in an entirely different grip, one that felt much more familiar, and was intended for an altogether more sinister purpose. Her mind drifted, and she was suddenly reliving a sharply distinct memory from her past.

\*\*\*

The wind whistled past her cheeks as she clung to the top of the hover train. Thick smoke was billowing from the first class carriage ahead of her, a gaping hole blown in the roof by the explosives she'd just set and triggered. Her artificial lung would provide her with fifteen minutes of clean air before those acrid fumes became a problem, but she wouldn't need anywhere near that amount of time. The sparkling lights of San Moriyah flashed beneath her, the patrons of the bustling pleasure city blissfully unaware of the dramatic events unfolding in the sky-lane above their heads.

A hover car beeped its horn and flashed its lights, the young man behind the controls having spotted her as she made her way across the roof of the train. If looks could kill, the one she flashed him with her cold, dead eyes would have eviscerated him in an instant. As non-lethal as that glance was, It still scared the man enough for him to turn tail with his hover-car, and race off on a side lane like a scared rabbit.

She crouched as she clambered along the rooftop, with one hand clutching her sword, the other steadying her with her razor-sharp ceramic nails digging into the steel skin of the train. When she reached the savage rent in the roof of the first carriage, she activated her adrenal booster, which flooded her system with adrenaline, massively boosting her speed and reflexes.

Diving through the serrated hole, she rolled to her feet as she landed, and drew the second of her mono-edged black swords. Her bionic eyes analysed the darkened shapes inside the carriage, then locked onto her petrified target and his three bodyguards. She could taste the fear in the air as she advanced, her senses heightened as she got ready to spring to the attack.

"Sakura? What's wrong, honey?" someone asked her, the voice sounding faint and distant, but distracting enough to snap her from the disturbing memory.

\*\*\*

"Sakura, are you okay?" John asked her, his tone wary.

"Sure, I'm fine," she replied, shaking her head to clear her mind of the disturbing memories.

Aware of her surroundings again, she was shocked to see that she held not one but two blades now, having pulled a second from the chopping block. She brandished one in each hand, in a relaxed, easy grip, and she stood in a balanced stance, her posture poised in readiness to attack. Looking at John in alarm, she let go of the blades, and they dropped from her hands with a loud clatter as they landed on the floor.

"What happened?" John asked her, holding his arms open for the frightened young woman.

Sakura rushed over, clinging to him as she gasped, "It was just like I was there! I was reliving one of Shinatobe's memories, but it wasn't like I normally remember. It was -me- hunting her target, I wasn't just some helpless spectator!"

John's arms felt warm and safe as he held her, and his voice was soothing as he said, "It's alright, you're back with us now."

She felt her heart hammering in her chest, but it gradually slowed as she relaxed in that comforting embrace. It didn't take long for her to feel normal again, and she looked up at him and gave him a grateful smile. Alyssa picked up the two knives from the floor, then washed them in the sink before drying them off. The quiet sound of the drier made Sakura glance behind her, where the blonde girl was watching her with a curious expression on her face as she returned the knives to the block.

"Maybe you should stick to stirring the saucepan for the moment?" Alyssa suggested with a smile, producing a wooden spoon with a flourish.

\*\*\*

When dinner was ready, the rest of the crew assembled in the Galley at Alyssa's telepathic behest, with one diminutive exception. Faye was up on the Bridge in her role of Watch Commander, keeping an eye out for marauding Kintark forces, as they raced back towards the Dragon March. Jade had plotted a circuitous but clever flight path through Kintark Space, designed to minimise the likelihood of running into hostile forces, but they still didn't want to take any chances.

John frowned as he brought out the big serving platter full of steaming hot ravioli, and said, "I hate how Faye has to miss out on everything. She's a valuable part of our crew, and it feels unfair that she can't be here as well."

Dana beamed at him, and said, "I'll be expecting a big grateful kiss, then! I've finished the project I've been working on for her!"

John grinned at her, and said, "That's great news! Have you activated it yet?"

Shaking her head, she picked up a plate and began to serve herself as she replied, "No, I thought you might like to be around for that."

"Definitely," he agreed as he strolled back into the kitchen. Calling back over his shoulder, he asked, "How are our guests settling in?"

Calara and Rachel shared a look, before Calara gestured for the tawny-haired girl to answer. Rachel smiled at the Latina, then replied, "I've spent the last four hours treating anyone suffering from sulphur-dioxide poisoning with my stem cell inhalant. Initial results are very positive, and I'm really pleased with how my patients have been responding to treatment."

Dana laughed, and said, "Babes, there's no need to undersell yourself." When John walked back into the Galley with a big dish of vegetables, the redhead continued, "There's no known treatment for the level of lung damage some of those poor bastards have, but she fucking aced it! I've seen the results myself, the damaged bits in their lungs have started growing back!"

"Is that true?" John asked Rachel curiously, as he placed the dish on the table beside her.

She smiled at him, and said, "Rates of cellular regeneration -have- been remarkable. I'm delighted with the - mmmph!"

The last was cut off as he leaned her backwards on the bench, and gave her a passionate kiss. Rachel melted into his arms with a happy sigh, kissing him back as he held her. "I bet it feels good, saving all those people?" he asked her, a proud smile on his face.

She gazed into his eyes, and nodded as she replied, "We prevented the deaths of billions on Terra, but this felt different, more personal somehow." She shrugged, and added, "I suppose saving lives one way or the other is all the same, really."

"None of the rest of us could have helped them though, that's the difference," he said as he leaned in and gave her an affectionate peck on the lips. "This was all down to you, and you did a great job."

John helped her sit upright, then walked around to the head of the table, which consisted of a spare chair butted up against the end of the long Galley table. The girls were all taking their seats on the benches now, but they abandoned the normal seating arrangements, letting Sakura sit on John's left.

Rachel was looking dazed, having been thoroughly kissed to distraction, so Calara spoke up, saying, "With Faye's help reprogramming the maintenance bots, we distributed water and food to all the personnel down in the Cargo Bay. A lot of them were suffering from heat exhaustion, so most of them are sleeping now."

"How's Mateo?" John asked, looking at her with concern.

Calara looked immensely relieved as she replied, "He'll be fine. He wasn't on Xen-Nucheck long enough to suffer any long-term effects. My brother's still drowsy from the draconic pheromones, but Rachel seems convinced they'll wear off in a day or so."

Hearing her name, Rachel nodded as she said, "I could develop a cure, but it seems that Tamolith was telling the truth about her pheromones. The serotonin levels in the freed prisoners are gradually declining, and if this rate of reduction continues, they'll be back to normal by midday tomorrow."

"That's great news," John said, pleased to hear that Tamolith's mind control would be wearing off soon. He smiled at the girls, and said, "Tuck in ladies, I hope you enjoy it."

Everyone started on dinner, making appreciative sounds as they tasted the ravioli. The girls chattered together as they savoured their freshly cooked dinner, laughing at each other's good-natured jokes. Sakura couldn't help but be reminded of meal times with her own family, and smiled at the happy memory. She exchanged a look of satisfaction with John when she saw everyone enjoying the food she'd helped prepare, and he knew she'd be eager to help in the kitchen again.

"This is very tasty," Jade said, smiling at Sakura before spearing some of the vegetables on her fork. "Was the Ravioli your idea?"

The Asian girl smiled at the Nymph, realising that Jade was trying to include her in the conversation, and replied, "Actually it was John's idea, and Alyssa made the pasta. I didn't do much really, but I'd like to learn more."

Alyssa winked at her, and said, "Oh, I wouldn't say that. You did a good job of assassinating the carrots."

Sakura blushed, and the girls smiled at the newest addition to their group, having already heard what had happened in the kitchen. She explained in a rush, "I'm not sure what happened exactly, but I promise I'm not a danger to any of you!"

Calara waved a hand dismissively, and said, "None of us are worried, Alyssa's just teasing you. You get used to it eventually."

John reached over to squeeze Sakura's shoulder, and said, "If she gets really annoying, let me know, and we'll team up to give her a good tickling."

Everyone laughed, except Alyssa, who faked a petulant pout for comedic effect. She could sense from the new bundle of emotions in her mind, that Sakura was still feeling a little overawed by her new crewmates, and Alyssa was determined to help her overcome it. Laughing with the others had helped, but the Asian girl was still taking shy, covert glances at each of them in wonder.

Looking at Sakura out of the corner of her eye, Alyssa thought to her, \*There's no need to be intimidated by them. They're good girls, and just want you to feel like a part of the group.\*

Sakura was startled for a moment as the thoughts drifted through her mind, then she met her Matriarch's bright blue gaze and nodded her understanding.

John was oblivious to Alyssa's telepathic nurturing of the new girl, so he looked around the group, and said, "Things were pretty hectic after we left Xen-Nuchek, but we need to have a quick debrief on the battle." He smiled at Dana, and added, "I'd consider that a superb field test of the Justice Laser rifle."

The redhead grinned at him, and exclaimed, "It was awesome not having to bother with ammo!"

Rachel smiled as she said, "Instantly cauterising wounds was very useful against those Royal Guard. It seemed to prevent their rapid regeneration."

John nodded thoughtfully, and replied, "We should definitely bring more Justice rifles if we face the Kintark again, especially with Kindralax being shielded. Watching my railgun rounds being harmlessly deflected was a nasty surprise."

"I had no way of hurting it for most of the fight, until you took his shield out," Rachel agreed.

Recalling the brutal damage the girls had eventually done to the dragon with railgun slugs, John noted, "The Punisher rifles were absolutely devastating when you could bring them to bear, they really swung that fight." He glanced at Dana and added, "Is there any way you could upgrade the Justice rifles with the Progenitor Power Core tech? If they hit even harder, we wouldn't need the Punisher rifles any more."

Dana frowned, and replied, "Unfortunately it's heat dissipation that's the real problem there. I've been thinking about upgrades already, and miniaturising the Progenitor tech to power the rifles would be relatively easy, now I have the schematics. Unless we can get our hands on even better heat sinks though, the barrels will overheat too much."

Alyssa smiled at the redhead and offered, "I could have a go at shaping the barrels a few more times, to make them even more resilient."

"That would help, but we'll need both upgrades to really make use of all that power," Dana said with a longing look in her eyes.

Alyssa grinned as she said, "Portable Beam Lasers here we come!"

When the laughter had died down, Dana let out a rueful sigh and said, "Unfortunately the Phalanx Armour got totally fucked up by plasma. Until I can come up with a solution for that, we don't want to get into a heavy firefight with Kintark troops using plasma weapons."

John frowned as he said, "Actually, that reminds me about something important." Looking around the table, making eye contact with each of the girls, he continued, "I want you all to be very careful about target fixation. If Alyssa hadn't intervened, we would have lost Sparks to Plasma Cannon fire. Your safety is always the number one priority, so try to never lose awareness of your surroundings in a firefight, OK?"

They all promised that they'd be careful, and Dana gave him an apologetic smile as she replied, "Sorry John, I got a bit caught up in the moment."

He gave her an affectionate smile, and looking embarrassed, he admitted, "It's easy to do. That's how I picked up my first combat injury."

"What happened?!" Dana asked him, looking intrigued.

He laughed, and waving her away, he replied, "That's a story for another day."

"Boo!" she pouted playfully.

He smiled at her pouting expression, and said, "The last thing I wanted to note, is what an excellent job you girls on the fireteam did with squad formations and positioning. I've been with Special Ops forces who weren't that disciplined, and it was really impressive to see."

Rachel rewarded him a broad smile for his praise, and she glanced at Alyssa as she said, "Actually, it's pretty easy with a certain someone giving you a relentless stream of orders."

Dana laughed, and grinning at Alyssa, she said, "She's right, you get really bossy in combat!"

The blonde's musical laughter filled the room, and glancing at John she replied, "I learnt from the best."

Not breaking her beaming smile for an instant, Dana looked at Calara and said, "Talking of impressive, you should have seen John slugging it out with a dragon in hand-to-hand combat. It would've fuelled your white knight fantasies for years!"

Calara blushed and looked at John with a starry-eyed gaze as she said, "I wish I'd been there to help."

He smiled at her, and said in a conciliatory tone, "I heard you did one hell of a job commanding the Invictus. You took out both a Kintark and traitorous Terran fleet single-handed, right?"

The Latina glowed at the compliment, but she smiled at Irillith, and said, "I think most of the credit for that one goes to our devious Maliri IntOps Officer." Turning to look at Jade she added, "With honourable mention going to our gifted Pilot, of course!"

Irillith and Jade both smiled at her in gratitude, then at John as he said, "Bravo girls, the three of you make a phenomenal Bridge Crew." Turning to look at the wider group, he asked, "Does anyone have anything else interesting to report?"

Dana nodded, and replied, "While I was waiting for the schematics for Rachel's respirators, I built the projector that'll let us view the Nexus Unity files."

In his surprise, John dropped his fork with a clatter, and exclaimed, "So we can watch video clips of the Mael'nerak?!"

Dana gestured towards Irillith with a flourish, and John's intense stare switched to the Maliri girl. Now that he was focusing his full attention on her, he noticed that Irillith was looking a bit wide-eyed, as if what she'd seen that afternoon had shocked her to the core. She met his penetrating gaze, and said, "I've been going through the files. It's crazy stuff, John..."

He grinned at her in delight until a sudden thought crossed his mind, and he asked curiously, "How did you go through the files so quickly? You've only had a few hours to review what must be days of footage?"

"Time moves much faster in the cyber realm. I projected myself into our digital network as soon as the codecs for the new projector were in place, and I viewed the files virtually," she explained with a patient smile.

John was itching to abandon dinner now, like his recently dropped fork, and go racing to wherever the girls had set up the new projector. He realised he needed to keep his strength up though, as he was using plenty of energy enhancing Sakura, so he retrieved his cutlery and began to wolf down the rest of his dinner.

Alyssa smiled at him, and said, "Take it easy, handsome. We'll go straight there after you've eaten, there's no need to give yourself indigestion."

He took a big breath, and forced himself to slow down, taking a long drink of water before finishing off his dinner at a measured pace. The girls were finishing up too, and as soon as they were all done, John glanced at Irillith with a raised eyebrow, and asked her eagerly, "Are the Unity files ready for us to view?"

She gave him a hesitant smile, and said, "I've set up the Projector in a spare room on Deck Three. You'll see why when we start viewing the files."

John nodded, then got up off his chair, offering a hand to Sakura and Alyssa who were sitting next to him. The girls were as curious to see what the files contained as he was, and by unspoken agreement, they abandoned the dishes for later. Irillith took the lead, and the eight of them walked down the corridor to the grav-tube, before stepping into the soft blue of the upward-flowing gravity field.

They stepped out of the grav-field onto Deck Three, and walked past the Tactical Simulator Room on their right, then John's sparring room on the left. He glanced at it as he walked past, his mind going to Yamamoto, and the distraught state the normally taciturn man had been in on their last phone call. He resolved to try calling him after viewing the Unity files, to check that he was alright, assuming they were close enough to the Alliance comms beacons for the call to go through.

Dana was walking behind him, and she mistook the quick glance he threw at the door. Thinking that he was wondering about the state of the training room, she said, "The cleaning bots have tidied up the mess in there. I found your broken training blade, so I've fixed that, and repaired the holo-simulation device as well. I haven't tested it yet, but it should work fine."

John looked back over his shoulder with a grateful smile, and said, "Thanks Sparks, I appreciate it. I was planning on giving Yamamoto a call, but he might be up for a sparring match too."

Irillith stopped at the next door on their left, and pressed the button to open it. The room beyond was large and empty, completely devoid of furniture of any kind. Built into the wall beside the door was a panel with an unusual looking device slotted into the centre. It was jet-black and had a series of glowing red buttons down the right hand edge.

"How does the projector work?" John asked. "Does it need a screen or anything like that?"

Shaking her head, Irillith replied, "Dana installed dozens of holo-projectors in the ceiling. The effect is quite... convincing." She turned towards the panel, and pressed several buttons, which highlighted a disc edged in green on the previously blank section on the left side of the device. Looking at her audience, she asked, "Are you ready?"

When everyone nodded their readiness, she hit the button, and suddenly their surroundings swirled as the projectors activated.

\*\*\*

They were in some kind of dimly-lit control room with bizarre, unfamiliarly shaped equipment spaced evenly around. It seemed to be some kind of lab, with snaking cables linked to a blocky, hexagonal shaped object about four feet high in the centre. The holographic image was incredibly sharp, and the multitude of projectors made the three-dimensional hologram disturbingly realistic.

John had to keep reminding himself that he wasn't in the room, and he glanced around, taking in the sights. He was going to ask Irillith for the year this footage was taken, when a man strolled past him to the right, appearing through a door that opened before him.

Irillith paused the playback and Jade gasped, "I know him!"

John turned to look at her in surprise, and said, "You knew the Mael'nerak?"

She scrunched up her features as she tried to remember, but she gave him a helpless shrug, and said, "Sorry, I can't give you more details than that, but I'm sure I've seen him before."

He turned back to the image, and said, "He reminds me of Nexus."

The ancient Progenitor had pointed ears just like John, but his stern features were dominated by an aquiline nose, and a cropped goatee. He was dressed in immaculate, perfectly-pressed white robes, which emphasised the blackness of his neatly trimmed hair.

"He probably made Nexus in his own image," Irillith said, staring intently at the serious-looking man. She smiled and added, "Also, I don't think he was called, 'the Mael'nerak'."

"What do you mean?" John asked her, turning to look at the Maliri girl.

She had an ambivalent expression on her face as she gazed at the mysterious figure, and said, "You'll see shortly." Irillith had unclipped a remote from the projector, and she pressed a button that resumed the video.

The Progenitor walked over to a peculiar looking console, and pressed a few buttons, before turning a dial. All the machinery surrounding the hexagonal object began to throb with power, devices lighting up as they surged with energy. That power flowed out of the machines down the cabling, blue-white light shrouding each section of cable at a glacial pace. Eventually the noise reached a crescendo as the power touched the object at the centre, and hundreds of lights flickered over the surface of the blocky, six-sided shape.

A deep, resonant voice filled the room, and it said haltingly, "We are... alive. Are you... our Creator?"

Turning to face the hexagonal object, the Progenitor strolled over to it, then looked down with a haughty expression on his cruel face. "You are to be called Nexus, and I created you to assist me with my experiments. My name is Mael'nerak, but you are to address me as 'Master'. Is that understood?"

"Yes Master, we will obey," Nexus replied dutifully.

"Excellent," Mael'nerak said, his eyes narrowing, and his mouth twisting up into a cheerless smile.

Irillith paused the footage again, and said, "Over the millennia the Maliri must have mixed up his name with a title."

"How old is this footage?" John asked, staring in fascination at the Progenitor.

"Just over sixty-two thousand years old. I incorporated a translator so that you could understand what they were saying, as they were originally speaking the Progenitor language. It sounds like an archaic form of Maliri, so it was easy for me to learn and translate," she replied, sounding wistful. When he looked at her with an arched eyebrow, she explained, "Tashana would have loved to have seen this. To actually be able to see the fabled Mael'nerak with her own eyes..."

John smiled at her, and said confidently, "You'll be able to show her yourself, soon."

She returned his smile, her heart lifting with hope, then glanced back at the frozen image, and said, "There's weeks' more footage of testing and calibration where Mael'nerak programs and configures Nexus. I'll spare you that, and just skip to the next section." She eyed the ancient Progenitor with what looked like grudging respect, as she added, "The man certainly was a genius. I tried to translate and follow his work, but the extent of his knowledge on Artificial Intelligence was astonishing, and far beyond my own understanding."

"What was he experimenting on?" Rachel asked, her curiosity piqued.

"Creating life," Irillith said, staring at the stern-faced man before them.

She pressed a button on the remote, and the image of the lab slowly faded away, as if someone had turned down the lights. The room went pitch-black for a moment, then began to lighten as a new scene appeared before them. They were in a new location now, and no longer in the lab that had been used to create Nexus.

"This next file was recorded ten years later," Irillith explained. "It seems like a lot of these records have been purged, and only the most momentous events saved for posterity. You'll see what I mean in a minute."

It seemed like they were in some kind of tower, which had spectacular views overlooking a lush paradise world. The large room had Nexus' hexagonal server located in one corner, and all about the room were numerous eight-foot-tall cylinders, filled with blocky-shaped humanoids. Mael'nerak strode into the laboratory accompanied by an entourage of several blue-skinned women.

"Holy shit! Pause it a sec!" Dana called out in shock.

Irillith did so, and said wryly, "Yes, our first glimpse of the ancient Maliri." Her expression was unreadable as she added, "They appear in a large number of the remaining videos, all fitting the standard template like modern Maliri."

Dana shook her head, and replied, "No, not that..." She turned to look at John, and continued, "Doesn't this remind you of something?"

John was completely spellbound as he stared at the images, and he muttered, "The Ashanath monoliths..."

She nodded exuberantly, and said, "Yeah, exactly! That last set of stone tablets the leader guy showed us."

"Councillor Talari," Alyssa interjected, recalling the helpful leader of the Ashanath Collective's Security Division, who was the member of the High Council that had pushed for the offer of alliance.

Dana smiled at her, and said, "That's the one."

Calara frowned and asked, "So who made the stone monoliths then? I can't imagine it was Mael'nerak, and the Ashanath wouldn't have been able to find them if it was one of the Maliri, as they wouldn't have been allowed to enter Maliri territory."

Irillith gave her a maddening smile, and said, "You'll find out the answer to that fairly soon, too."

Calara laughed, and said, "It's a good job I love you like a sister, you're treading on dangerous ground, Irillith."

The Maliri girl looked touched by the Latina's words, and she smiled at her fondly, then raised the remote to continue the playback of the recording.

Mael'nerak strolled over to a nearby console, which displayed a vast array of intriguing dials and instruments, and snapped over his shoulder, "Nexus, is the maturation process complete?"

"Incubation to full adulthood has been successfully completed, Master," Nexus replied, sounding pleased.

"Excellent," Mael'nerak said with a wolfish grin. He glanced over at his Maliri entourage, and said in a curt voice, "I'll begin with pod one. Assist the first specimen as it awakens."

"Yes, Master," they chorused obediently, then moved to stand by the first of the tall opaque crystal cylinders.

The Progenitor began to tap commands into the alien-looking console, and power began to creep along cables towards the tube as it had with Nexus. When it reached the top of the cylinder, the device began to shine with an eerie ethereal glow, which gradually brightened in its intensity. They could see slight twitches of movement from inside the tube, and as the light abruptly diminished, a panel slid back to reveal the figure within.

"I was right!" Rachel gasped triumphantly, delighted to have one of her theories proven correct. "Mael'nerak created the Trankarans!"

"I never doubted you for a minute!" Dana exclaimed, hugging the brunette and relishing the sight of her beautiful lover's face lighting up in joy.

As John stared at the image, he watched the four Maliri women help the tall, stocky humanoid out of the cylinder. Those blocky features were unmistakeable on the incredibly muscular eight-foot-tall creature, whose bald head and dark-grey skin clearly identified him as a Trankaran male.

"What do you wish to name this species, Master?" Nexus asked Mael'nerak politely.

The Ancient Progenitor sneered as he replied, "What about 'slave'?"

Nexus was tactful as he replied, "Perhaps something a little more distinct to help separate the slave species from one another?"

Mael'nerak shrugged, and replied, "Call them 'miner' for all I care, that's what I made them for."

"As you command, Master. 'Trankaran' it is then," Nexus said, as the forefather of the galactic species took his first tentative steps, supported by the four Maliri girls.

Irillith paused the footage, and she smiled as she said, "I left the original Progenitor term in there, so you could understand where the name is derived from. I'm sure Chancellor Niskera might have a few choice things to say about that." She turned to look at Sakura, and gave her an apologetic smile as she explained, "Chancellor Niskera is the leader of the Trankaran Republic."

Sakura had stayed quiet through the footage, and she sounded stunned as she asked in an awed voice, "Did we really just witness the birth of the Trankaran species?"

John nodded, and said, "Mael'nerak was the Progenitor who ruled this section of the galaxy tens of thousands of years ago. Rachel had already discovered his 'fingerprints' all over the Trankaran genetic code from some samples she took, but this just confirmed he created that species beyond all doubt."

"They aren't the only ones," Irillith murmured, looking pointedly at the screen again.

She cycled onto the next scene that she'd selected for them to view, and the holo-recording faded away, before reappearing again with some subtle changes. The room was the same, but the vegetation looked different in the view from the tower, the planet considerably more developed. The lab equipment was there too, but while the basic setup was the same, the console had been replaced, and the design of the incubation cylinders was now more intricate and complex.

"This was recorded just over two hundred years later," Irillith explained, as Mael'nerak suddenly appeared by the console.

The Progenitor's appearance had changed now, and his goatee had been grown out into a Van Dyke. His hair was longer too, and while he still wore white robes, they were a different style, which seemed more relaxed and flowing. A dozen Maliri girls were moving between the incubation pods, checking readings and observing the small humanoid occupants inside.

"Power up the first of the pods, Nexus," Mael'nerak commanded in an imperious voice, throwing an excited glance towards the opaque-crystal cylinders.

Nexus replied without pause, and said, "Beginning the animation process, Master."

Power crept along the cabling to the first of the tall crystal chambers, shrouding it in a brilliant light before it ebbed away. The doors opened as before, but instead of an huge hulking Trankaran, a slight, diminutive figure stepped out, aided by the Maliri. It looked around the room with unblinking black eyes set into its huge bulbous head.

"Fuck me! He created the Ashanath too?!" Dana gasped, staring at the image in amazement.

Irillith nodded, and pausing the video, she replied, "It certainly seems so."

"Shit! They lied to us!" Dana blurted out, as she looked at John and the girls with wide eyes. "I'd bet serious money that the ancient Ashanath created those monoliths!"

John blinked as he thought about it, and said, "Yeah, that fits. They were there to witness the Mael'nerak creating life, even their own species, so they knew what the inside of his lab looked like."

"That set of stone pictographs was in considerably better condition than all the others," Jade noted, thinking back to the battered state of the other monoliths. "I wonder if they treasured and revered them as showing the creation of their species?"

Alyssa gave John a wry smile, and said, "It seems our allies were holding out on us."

He nodded, and said, "It's got to be worth paying them another visit to hear their side of the story. If we show them this video, I bet they'll be far more likely to tell us the truth." Turning to Irillith, he asked, "Does Mael'nerak explain why he created them, like he did with the Trankarans?"

The Maliri girl shook her head, and replied, "I've scanned through all the accompanying footage. The Ashanath only appear briefly, and Mael'nerak doesn't discuss them with anyone."

"I'd love to examine their DNA," Rachel said with a sigh of longing. "I'm sure it'd be fascinating."

"Their homeworld, Ashana, is amazing," Dana said as she recalled the vast floating platforms, levitating in the air with the Ashanath's anti-gravity tech. She smiled at the tawny-haired girl and added, "You'll love seeing that too."

"Really? Why's that?" Rachel asked with interest.

Dana glanced at John, and grinned at him as she replied, "You'll just have to wait and see!"

He chuckled as he remembered teasing Dana, Alyssa, and Calara in just the same way before their first visit to Ashana. The girls had been dying to find out more about the first alien homeworld they were planning to visit, but he'd made them wait, so they could witness the spectacular sights for themselves.

Alyssa was listening to his thoughts of course, and she sounded wistful as she said to him, \*We've all been through so much since then.\*

He met her penetrating gaze, and nodded as he said, \*It's been a wild ride, hasn't it? I'd never have made it this far without you. Thanks, beautiful.\*

\*For the wild rides? You're quite welcome,\* she replied with a mischievous grin.

Stifling his laughter, he turned to Irillith, and intrigued to know what other secrets the Nexus Unity files might contain, he asked, "Alright, what's next?"

Irillith gave him a smile as she said, "Something a little closer to home, for a few of us..."

Picking up on her cryptic tone, he looked at her curiously, but she gave him an enigmatic smile in return. Lifting the hand that held the remote, she pressed the button to show the next section of footage. Their surroundings faded away into darkness, only to return a moment later as the room was displayed before them. It was the same lab again, but showing significant signs of wear and tear. All the equipment had been replaced at some point in the past, and the view behind them showed a sprawling metropolis, with neat tree-lined boulevards all that remained of the jungle.

"This footage was taken nearly forty-thousand years ago," Irillith informed them, as they stared at the images.

Mael'nerak strolled into view followed by a cluster of Maliri, and it seemed that the planet and the lab weren't the only things that had changed. The Progenitor now sported a full beard, and had grown his glossy-black hair long. He still wore robes, but they looked a little dishevelled now, giving the impression that he no longer cared so much about his appearance.

"Greetings, Master," Nexus said obsequiously. "The latest experiment is nearly complete."

"Good. I need something to stave off the boredom," Mael'nerak drawled. "Did you follow my instructions to the letter?"

"Yes, Master," Nexus replied, sounding slightly offended. "Your servants were sent to the seed world, and gathered a significant number of specimens. Their development has been accelerated and enhanced to fit the standard template thusly."

A detailed hologram appeared, projected by the hexagonal server in front of Mael'nerak. It showed the unmistakeable stooped posture, heavy brow and sloped forehead of a Neanderthal man. As John and the girls watched in shocked disbelief, Nexus displayed a number of images showing the gradual progression to Homo Sapiens.

"Pause it!" several of them said at once, causing Irillith to smile.

"No wonder we share trace elements of Neanderthal DNA!" Rachel gasped in excitement. "Our species was directly modified from theirs!"

The other Terran girls looked equally stunned, and they shared shocked looks with one another.

"I guess I already knew Mael'nerak created our species," Alyssa said, reeling with the revelation. She glanced at Rachel as she said, "You confirmed it for us before, but seeing it like this is just..."

"A total mindfuck?" Dana offered helpfully.

The blonde laughed, and said, "Yeah, that about sums it up."

There was silence in the room as they stared at the startling images, and with no questions forthcoming, Irillith resumed the holo-video playback.

Mael'nerak waved a dismissive hand at the images, and snapped, "Alright, get on with it then. Begin the reanimation sequence."

"At once, Master," Nexus replied, as it began to power up the first several cylinders, the glow illuminating the figures in the opaque tubes.

The Maliri girls walked over to the cylinders, and once the glow receded and the doors opened, they helped the people inside out of the tubes. The first two out were a man and a woman, and they looked largely indistinguishable from modern day Terrans.

"I guess that makes them Adam and Eve," Calara observed in a hushed voice, smiling to herself as the origins of creation were played out before her eyes.

"Excellent work, Nexus," Mael'nerak replied with a look of intense curiosity on his face. "I plan to explore mutation of the generic template, and we need to have a little chat about who's going to oversee my experiment for me."

"Of course, Master," Nexus replied. The Artificial Intelligence paused for a moment before he asked, "Who did you have in mind?"

Mael'Nerak raised a hand for Nexus to wait, and then yelled to someone through the open doorway, "Valada! Fetch me a drink!" Turning to the hexagonal server, he muttered, "Damnable girl... that's the last time I pick a new Matriarch for her looks."

After a brief wait, they could hear hurried footsteps approaching, and a beautiful young Maliri woman rushed through the doorway. She looked uncannily familiar, and there was no mistaking Irillith's ancient forebear. Carrying a decanter full of some kind of beverage in one hand, she held a tall crystal glass in the other, and she moved quickly to heed the Progenitor's command.

Valada darted over to Mael'nerak and poured him a glass as she said, "Your drink, Master." She stared at him adoringly as he sipped from the glass, then gave her a brief nod.

Pausing the playback, Irillith stared at the holographic image of the lovely young girl in silence, a troubled look shadowing her stunning features.

John stood beside her, and placed a comforting arm around her shoulders as he said, "The women in your family have strong genes. You can see where you get your beautiful looks from."

Rachel looked thoughtful as she said, "I suspected that your ancestor might have been Mael'nerak's Matriarch. It certainly explains how Valada received the third helix inserted into her DNA, which she eventually passed on to you." She paused for a moment, then continued, "Although we still don't know how your genes became corrupted to give you more psychic abilities, as well as the potentially fatal tumour."

Irillith nodded, and she sounded sad as she replied, "It all fits, it's just unpleasant to realise I'm related to Mael'nerak. From everything we've seen, he seems like a monster. I just feel sorry for Valada; she would have had no choice in her enslavement."

Alyssa flanked the forlorn Maliri girl, slipping her arm around her waist to give her a reassuring squeeze, and said, "You didn't have much choice either, remember?"

Rachel nodded as she said, "Once you stepped foot on the Invictus, your fate was sealed. It's amazing you were able to resist the behavioural modification for as long as you did."

"True, but I don't regret what happened for a moment," Irillith said passionately, resting her head on John's shoulder.

He leaned down and kissed the top of her head, her soft white hair tickling his nose. He glanced at the hologram of Valada, who was staring reverently at Mael'nerak, and said, "It looks like she felt the same way too."

Irillith looked at them in turn before her eyes came to rest on John, then smiled as she said, "I appreciate you trying to make me feel better, but it's not the same thing. You're a good man, whereas he... wasn't." She pointed at the paused image of the cold, arrogant Progenitor who had been barking harsh orders at his scurrying minions between draughts of his chalice.

John had no counter to that, largely agreeing with the Maliri girl. He wasn't quite so sure about her assessment of himself as a good man though, when he couldn't bring himself to feel any regret over the way things had worked out between them. His feelings for Irillith had grown into love over the months he'd known her, and he couldn't imagine her not being part of his life any longer.

She turned to face him, her angular violet eyes brimming with emotion as she gazed into his. It was almost as if she'd read his mind, and a glance at Alyssa's smiling face explained that she had, in a roundabout sort of a way. He pulled Irillith into his arms, and gave her a tender and loving kiss, trying to show her physically how much he cared for her. The passionate exchange left them both breathless, and she flushed a delightful dark-blue as she threw him a lusty look.

Dana grinned at the pair of them, and said, "Before you two jump each other's bones, I just wanted to check if that was it? If we've covered everything useful in the Unity files, we still have Faye's surprise to activate."

John and Irillith shared a smouldering glance before he forced himself to focus on the redhead. As her words penetrated his lust-fogged mind, he blinked before he replied, "Yes of course, we need to get to that as soon as possible, as long as that was everything you discovered, Irillith?"

She nodded as she replied, "There are a few more Unity files, but nothing particularly interesting. After this one, the rest were pretty tedious to plough through."

He smiled at the Maliri girl in his arms, and said, "That was incredible, thank you for going through all those files."

Irillith gave him a squeeze, and smiled at Dana as she said, "It was a team effort, I can't claim all the credit."

John laughed, then looked at the redhead, and asked, "Hug and a kiss now or later?"

Dana appeared to give it serious consideration for a moment, then grinned at him as she replied, "Later. I think you'll be really happy with me when you see what I've been up to. Who knows what kind of reward I'll get then!"

They all laughed at that, and John said, "Lead on then, Sparks."

Irillith shut down the holo-projectors leaving the room blank and featureless once more, and they filed out of the room, following after the redhead who skipped ahead of them. John noticed that Sakura seemed a bit bewildered, so he fell into step beside her and gave her a supportive smile when she glanced up at him.

"Are you okay?" he asked her. "You look a little unsettled."

She let out a dry chuckle and shook her head in amusement as she replied, "You've just shown me a video of creation. To say that it came as a bit of a shock seems like a breathtaking understatement."

He put his arm around her, and he smiled as he said, "You're coping very well. Did it live up to your expectations, or were you expecting a white-bearded man sitting on clouds?"

Sakura laughed, then shook her head as she replied, "My family followed a religion called Shinto, which has quite a different creation story. I was never as devout as my parents were, I was always too busy studying. I certainly never imagined I'd end up seeing the very first Terrans, though."

"Yeah, it was a lot to take in," John agreed, as they walked to the grav-tube.

Dana had entered the red anti-gravity field, dropping down to Deck Four, and they all followed after her, as she led them to her workshop. It had been a while since John had been in the Engineering Bay, and a previously empty area of the huge room was now dominated by a hexagonal-shaped object.

"This looks disturbingly familiar," John said, throwing Dana a disapproving glance as they gathered around the server. "Are you sure rebuilding Nexus is a good plan?"

Dana was up on the Engineering Podium, her hands moving independently of each other as she worked on two separate consoles at once. She turned to look at him over her shoulder, and grinned as she replied, "Don't worry, this isn't Nexus. I just swiped some of the hardware schematics the Mael'nerak used to create the server. Progenitor tech is vastly more sophisticated than our own, so it seemed daft not to take advantage of it."

Irillith also gave him a reassuring smile, and said, "Nexus became corrupted after being dismantled by Terran scientists, then incorrectly rebuilt. The behavioural inhibitors are all software-related anyway, not hardware, so the platform we install Faye on shouldn't make any difference."

He nodded his understanding, then asked, "And this is going to be much safer for her, right? Once she's been transferred to the new server, we won't have to worry about your old hacking deck and that portal from getting disconnected."

"Absolutely," Irillith replied with confidence. "Once we've transferred her to the new platform, there's all sorts of redundancies and backup power supplies to make sure she won't be accidentally shut down. Even if she is, the new system can reboot her easily."

Dana bounced down the steps to join them and said, "I'll move her server to one of the spare rooms on Deck Three, and Alyssa's offered to encase it in a protective Crystal-Alyssium coating. Even if the Invictus takes severe damage, she'll be safe and sound in there."

"Sounds like you've thought of everything. Well done girls," he said to them both. They looked delighted at his heartfelt praise, and he smiled at them as he added, "Are we all set?"

"Yep, but we need to talk to Faye first," Dana said, sharing a pointed look with Irillith. She gave him a rueful smile as she admitted, "What we're about to do is risky..."

John gave her a concerned look, and asked, "Risky? That sounds ominous. What's the problem exactly?"

Irillith placed a calming hand on his arm, and said, "Let us explain it to her, and you'll see what Dana's referring to."

He gave her a reluctant nod, and Dana called over to the comm interface built into one of her consoles, "Contact the Bridge."

Faye answered straight away, and her tiny face appeared in the comm interface as she replied brightly, "Hey Dana! How's it going?"

"Hi Faye! Could you come down to Engineering, please? We've got a surprise for you," Dana replied with a smile.

"On my way!" the purple AI replied, closing the internal comm channel, then reappearing above the Engineering console in a purple flash. She looked startled to see the entire crew gathered in Engineering, but gave them a friendly wave as she asked, "What's all this about a surprise?!"

John smiled at her, and said, "I've been worried about how vulnerable your current setup is. If the hacking deck and portal were to ever be disconnected, then we'd have no way of bringing you back."

Faye fluttered over to them, and she looked upset as she said, "I'm sorry I broke the hacking deck. When you suggested making more room to let me grow, I deleted data from the only area that wasn't currently in use."

He waved away her apology, and said, "I'm delighted with the way you've grown, Faye. There's no need to apologise." He glanced over at the redhead and Maliri girl, and continued, "I asked Dana and Irillith to start work on a project a while ago, to come up with a solution to make sure we'd never run the risk of accidentally losing you. Dana, do you want to explain?"

"We've built you a new server, Faye!" Dana told the astonished sprite with a beaming smile. She patted the big, hexagonal object, and continued, "Once we transfer your consciousness here, you'll never need to worry about storage space again. I've also placed the new holo-projectors we got from the Nexus files all over the ship, so you can join us, whatever room we're in."

The AI looked absolutely stunned, and she squeaked, "You did all this for me?!"

Dana nodded, and replied, "I was as worried about you as John, so when he suggested improving your hardware, I leapt at the chance."

Faye's tiny eyes welled up with emotion, and when she looked at John, he smiled at her and said, "You're part of the crew. It's my job to keep you safe, just like the rest of my girls."

The AI had been rendered speechless, but her answering smile spoke volumes about the strength of her gratitude.

Dana cleared her throat, and said, "There's one problem though, Faye. I'll need to shut you down to transfer all your programs over to the new hardware. The hacking deck was never intended to run you permanently, so some of your core functionality is stored in temporary memory." A flash of worry crossed her face as she added, "I'll only get one shot at this, and if it goes wrong, we'll lose you forever."

"No way!" John exclaimed in alarm. "That's far too dangerous, we can't take that kind of risk!"

"We've got no other option!" Dana protested to John. "Her existing hardware was never meant to work this way. Whatever solution we come up with is going to run into the same problem!"

Irillith nodded, and she gently squeezed John's arm, as she said firmly, "Dana's right. We've spent days looking into this, and there's no other solution."

"I'll do it..." Faye said, interrupting in a soft whisper, her face lighting up with hope.

"But.." John started to object again, only to be cut off by Faye.

"I need this," the tiny AI told him, her voice louder now. She smiled wistfully as she added, "The new storage area I annexed and overwrote isn't big enough. I've been learning so much, at my current rate of growth I'm going to run out of space in a few months."

"What happens then?" John asked, certain by her tone that the answer wouldn't be good.

She looked forlorn as she replied, "When I run out of storage capacity, the hacking deck will crash and need to be rebooted. I've been deleting non-critical information where I can, to try and extend my runtime. I love my life here with you, and I wanted it to last as long as possible."

John looked alarmed as he asked her, "Why didn't you say anything?"

"I didn't want you to worry. I didn't think there was anything you'd be able to do to save me," she admitted. Looking around at the shocked crew, she gave them an apologetic smile as she added, "I underestimated all of you, and I'm sorry."

He reached out to touch her in a supportive gesture, remembering at the last moment that Faye was a hologram, and had no physical presence. She looked delighted that he'd forgotten though, as it was a testimony to how convincingly real she seemed to him.

"What do you want to do?" he asked her, before glancing down at the server. "You still have a few months left. We could spend some more time trying to come up with a less risky solution."

Faye glanced at Dana and Irillith, and replied, "It's not necessary. I trust these girls with my system..." She paused then, before correcting herself, "No, with my life! And I know I'll be fine."

He nodded, and said, "We'll respect your wishes." Turning to Dana, he continued, "Alright, let's do this."

Dana walked over to the far side of the Engineering Bay, and retrieved the reinforced container which held the hardware that was powering Faye. She carried it over to the server before setting it down and removing the lid. They could see Irillith's old hacking deck and the hacking portal connected together inside, the flimsy cabling linking the two reminding them just how precarious the AI's current hardware setup was.

Reaching across to the server, Dana flipped open a panel and pulled out a long, snaking cable that she carefully fed into the box. There was a strange connector on the end, of a type which John had never seen before, and his Chief Engineer connected it to a port next to the data jacks. She looked around at all the pensive faces watching her, and then locked eyes with Faye.

"All we have to do now is bring the new server online, then shut down the hacking deck. As soon as you're deactivated, I'll start the data transfer, which should take no more than a minute. After that, I can boot you up, and you'll be ready to go!" she said cheerfully, but they could all see the worry in her eyes.

"I'm ready," Faye replied, her little face set in a determined expression, and she landed on the server before sitting down cross-legged.

Dana ran up the steps to her Engineering consoles, and began entering a complicated sequence of commands. There was a bass hum as the new server powered up, and lights began to flicker on around the six sides of the robust device. "The new hardware's ready to go," she called out to Irillith.

The Maliri girl crouched down next to the container storing the hacking deck, and she smiled warmly at Faye as she said, "This is your last chance to change your mind, Faye. After I shut down the deck, it's all down to Dana's data transfer."

Faye's tiny face lit up with a brave smile, and she replied, "I trust you both, I know I'm in safe hands." She turned to look at the rest of the crew, before her gaze settled on John, and she said, "If anything should go wrong, please don't be sad. My existence has been down to a series of fortunate circumstances, and my good luck can't last forever. Thank you for showing me how fun life can be."

With a final nod from Faye, Irillith flipped the switch on her hacking deck, and the digital sprite winked out of sight. Irillith slowly stood, a mixture of worry and regret flickering across her face as she darted an anxious look at Dana. John put his arm around her, and they all joined Irillith in watching the redhead, who was focused intently on her work.

The hacking deck was a highly advanced piece of equipment, and by Terran standards, it had incredible amounts of storage capacity and processing power. However, compared to the new Progenitor server, it was like a child's toy. The data transfer rates supported by the hardware were astronomical, and the entirety of Faye's personality was successfully copied across to her new home in forty-three seconds. However to the nervously awaiting spectators, those seconds seemed to last an eternity.

Dana looked over the console at the worried faces staring at her, and said, "Everything's been transferred. I just need to power her up."

Her right hand trembled as it hovered over the glowing green button, which would activate Faye's startup routine that she'd worked with Irillith on for weeks. Her audience couldn't see her crossed fingers on her carefully concealed left hand, and she pressed down with her right, firing up the software.

The lights on the server flashed for a moment, and the lighting in an area near their group dimmed, creating a darkened oval on the floor beside them. There was a gentle pulse of purple light in the centre of that area, which reminding John of a heartbeat, and it began to expand with every throb. Faye had only been four inches tall, but the light grew beyond that, getting larger with each rhythmic beat. A shape began to form in the light, and he stared at it with wide eyes as more detail was layered on the distinctly humanoid form.

Faye's body had always been fairly androgynous, with only her cute face and long purple hair giving any clue to her randomly assigned gender. That certainly wasn't the case with this new form, and the pulsating violet shape coalesced into a very feminine five-foot girl, with long lustrous hair cascading down her back. The figure tilted her head back, as Faye's pretty features appeared in sharply-focused detail on her new avatar.

Faye gasped in wonder, and exclaimed, "The power... It's overwhelming!"

Her shapely form lifted off the floor, shrouded in a soft violet glow, and her large luminous eyes opened wide, shining with a blazing purple light. She turned slowly in the air, her expression one of blissful rapture as she gazed at sights known only to her. Her rotations eventually ceased, and she sank to the floor, landing lightly on her delicate feet.

"Oh, thank you for this gift!" she gasped, overwhelmed with gratitude. "I had no idea how confined I was before, the possibilities feel... limitless!"

John closed his mouth, and marvelled at the beautiful purple girl standing before him, who looked as convincingly real as any of the girls surrounding her. Shrugging off his stunned amazement a moment before the others, he exclaimed, "I'm so glad you're safe, Faye!"

She grinned at him in delight, then looked around at Dana and Irillith, and said, "You've done an incredible job! Thank you so much! My mind feels sharper, and I have so much room to grow. It's so liberating!"

Dana let out a huge sigh of relief, and she blurted out, "I was so worried. Thank God you're okay!"

John shook his head in amusement, and asked, "I thought you were feeling confident?"

The redhead at least had the good grace to look bashful, as she flashed Faye a happy grin. The others gathered around the AI now, desperate to give her a welcoming hug, but having to settle for earnest words of relief that she was safe. Amongst the chatter, there were lots of compliments on her beautiful new form, and the purple AI beamed at them with delight.

Irillith suddenly grinned, and rushed over to the closest engineering console. She closed her eyes, as she began to pull her spirit form from her body.

"What're you up to?" Dana asked her in surprise.

"I'm going to welcome Faye back properly!" Irillith replied with a smile.

John darted up the steps to join her, saying, "Hold on!"

Irillith stopped what she was doing, then turned to look at him with a quizzical expression on her beautiful blue-toned face.

He caught her by surprise when he planted a big kiss on her lips, and squeezed her tightly in a hug as he said, "You can pass that on from me!"

The Maliri girl grinned at him, and flashed the wide-eyed digital construct a playful look as she replied, "I can do that..."

\*\*\*

Irillith focused on her Astral Projection once more, and pulled herself from her body, so that she was standing as an ethereal presence by the console. The room was full of a riot of bright lights, as long flows of data swirled through the air, before sinking into consoles and servers. Along with the Bridge, the Engineering Bay was the most active part of the Invictus' digital network, forming the central hub of their defensive grid.

She poured her consciousness into the data port on the nearest console, and just like that, she had entered the cyber realm. It took a moment for her to adjust to the shift in her surroundings, and she was standing on a silvery platform with a swirling green portal behind her. She had helped write the firewalls protecting the network, so she was able to stride straight through the barriers and into the inner segment of the Engineering Console.

Faye was waiting for her of course, and when Irillith gave her an affectionate smile and opened her arms, the shorter girl ran into them hugging her fiercely. Faye pulled back almost straight away, a look of shock on her face as she stared at her arms in amazement.

"What's wrong?" Irillith asked the purple sylph with a concerned look.

Meeting her gaze, Faye replied, "It feels so different! Before, there was just a boolean state of contact or not-contact, but now my skin feels like it's tingling when I touch you!"

The Maliri girl had a playful smile on her face as she brushed her hands along Faye's bare arms, and watched her big purple eyes grow even wider. "How's that feel?" she asked, while having a good guess at the answer.

"Oh goodness! That feels incredible!" the digital creature panted, her circuits overloaded with sensation.

Pulling Faye into a warm embrace, Irillith said in a seductive purr, "Let me know what you think of this, then. John asked me to pass it on to you..."

She leaned down, and pressed her luscious lips against Faye's cupid bow ones, giving the stunned AI her first kiss. The astonished AI was paralysed by the huge volume of sensory data, and she stared at Irillith in utter disbelief.

Irillith pulled back, then let out a light laugh at the shocked expression on Faye's face. She stroked her back, and said, "You have to loosen up a little to really enjoy it."

Faye's eyelids fluttered rapidly, and she gaped at the Maliri girl as she replied, "No wonder you spend so much time doing that! That was the most indescribable thing I've ever experienced!" She looked at Irillith with longing, and added, "Could we do that again, please?"

"Of course," the Maliri girl replied, leaning in for another kiss, which Faye responded to enthusiastically.

\*\*\*

John felt Irillith twitch in his arms, what seemed like only thirty seconds after he'd drawn her in for a hug. She had poured her astral presence back into her body, and slowly opened her eyes, a languid smile on her beautiful features.

"That was quick," he replied in surprise.

Irillith gave him a coy smile as she replied, "Time works very differently in the cyber realm, remember?" She glanced at Faye's avatar in the Engineering Bay, and replied, "I gave her a very warm welcome back."

Faye blushed a dark purple as she met Irillith's gaze, and she blurted out, "I like kissing very much!"

When the laughter had died down, Jade eventually said, "I better get back to the Bridge while Faye finds her feet. We need to keep an eye out for Kintark ships."

Faye smiled at her and said, "Don't worry, I've got that covered. I have a presence on the Bridge."

"A presence?" John asked her curiously. "What does that mean?"

"I'm not restricted to a single holographic representation any longer!" she explained with a glorious smile. "The hardware driving my core functionality is so powerful, I'm able to operate over a dozen avatars simultaneously. I'll always be present on the bridge, keeping watch for trouble, but now I can assist you with other tasks wherever I'm needed."

John looked at Irillith with an arched eyebrow, and asked, "I thought Faye's hardware shouldn't make a difference?"

The Maliri girl smiled at the digital construct, and replied, "It seems I was wrong..."

Alyssa was busy studying the bright-eyed purple girl in their midst, and she asked, "What happened to your wings, Faye? Did you outgrow them?"

Faye returned the smile, and confessed, "They were just for appearances, really. I'm a hologram, so they didn't actually do anything practical."

Jade shook her head, and replied, "They were really pretty, I think you should keep them."

Alyssa nodded, and said, "Definitely, they were very you."

Closing her eyes for a moment, Faye appeared to be concentrating hard, and a pair of shimmering iridescent wings gradually manifested on her back. The delicate structures fluttered in the air, as if stirred by a light breeze, and the girls gushed their approval at their spectacular appearance.

"Too much?" she asked self-consciously, throwing a furtive glance at John.

He shook his head, and said indulgently, "No, they look great. Very in-keeping with your beautiful new form."

Faye looked positively delighted at his compliments, and she swooned happily. Alyssa watched her in fascination, immediately recognising the telltale look of joy on the digital construct's face. While Faye had been a tiny, four-inch-tall sprite, it was easy to miss the look of longing in her luminous eyes, but now it was a dead giveaway, at least for a Matriarch who was constantly keeping a watchful eye on her charges. She smiled knowingly, but stayed quiet, not revealing Faye's secret.

John was unaware of course, and he had a warm smile on his face, relieved and delighted with everything that had transpired. He glanced at his watch, and seeing that it was nearly ten, he said, "Ladies, I'm going to make a call, then it's time for bed. We'll be arriving at the Dragon March at about seven in the morning, so we should get an early night."

"Maybe not that early," Alyssa said with a wicked grin.

He laughed, but the look he shot the girls had them squirming with arousal. As his eyes drifted from girl to girl, they fell on the box containing the now-dormant hacking deck, and glancing at Dana he asked, "What're you planning to do with this, Dana? Is it possible to fix it?"

Dana shook her head, and replied, "Rewriting the deleted AI generation software is way beyond me." She turned to look at Irillith and asked, "Any chance you could fix it?"

The Maliri girl let out a sad sigh, and replied, "No, it's beyond my abilities too. You might as well use it as a backup server, it still has lots of storage capacity."

"Sure, I can always use more storage space," Dana replied with a shrug. She gave Faye's server a thoughtful glance, and tidied away that thought for later when she had some spare time.

John waved them goodbye, and said, "I won't be gone long."

"We'll be waiting!" Alyssa called after him as he headed for the door.

He'd nearly reached the grav-tube when he heard the sound of bare feet running along the corridor, and he smiled when he realised who was hurrying after him. He turned to her, opening his arms, and Sakura ran into them automatically, giggling with delight as he whirled her in the air before setting her down.

"Hello gorgeous," he said, giving her a friendly smile. "Didn't fancy waiting with the others?"

She shook her head, and replied, "I thought I'd tag along with you, if that's okay? I asked Alyssa and she said it'd be fine."

He offered her his arm, and they stepped into the blue glow of the grav-tube, as he replied, "Of course, I'd love the company."

They arrived at the top level, their ascent gently slowed as they reached the Command Deck. John walked out onto the Bridge, where a nude purple Faye was sitting demurely on his console. He did a double take when he saw the beautiful girl, wondering how she got past him, then rolled his eyes as he remembered her holographic state.

"Hello again, Faye," he called out to her, as he strolled down the ramp towards his Ready Room.

She grinned at him, giving him a friendly wave as she replied, "Hi John, hey Sakura! Nothing to report up here, there hasn't been much sign of Kintark ships on the way back."

"That's a relief," he replied. "I just want to get all our guests safely back home and avoid any fights if we can."

Faye smiled and said, "I've got my boys keeping an eye on them. Nearly all of them are sleeping now, and Rachel said they're fine, just suffering from heat exhaustion."

"You did a great job helping out," he said gratefully to the digital girl. "Sorry I forgot to thank you earlier. With all the excitement of the Nexus files, then your new server, it slipped my mind. I really appreciate it though."

"It was a pleasure to help you," she said, and her affectionate smile told him she wasn't upset with him.

He hit the button to open the door to his Ready Room, then gestured for Sakura to proceed before waving Faye goodbye. He followed the Asian girl into the Commander's personal office, and missed the look of longing that the AI sent his way.

John strolled over to his desk, and sat down in his comfortable leather seat. Sakura had followed him over, but she waited hesitantly on the other side of the desk until he grinned at her, and patted his knee. She gave him a broad smile in return, then darted around the desk and sat in his lap, cuddling up against him. He deliberately unbuttoned two of the buttons of her shirt, then slipped his hand inside, so he could brush his fingers over her slim stomach, drawing forth a gasp from the excited girl. Her tummy was flat once more, her body having absorbed the last load he'd fed her nearly four hours ago.

"I'll have to give you a nightcap later," he informed her boldly.

She leaned in and gave him a gentle kiss, the yearning look in her soft, dark-brown eyes telling him she was thinking the very same thing.

They cuddled together for a while, both enjoying the physical closeness, until John glanced at the chronometer built into his console, and let out a sigh. "I should give Yamamoto a call before we go to bed."

"Who is he?" Sakura asked, curious why John was so reluctant to call him.

He looked away thoughtfully, and replied, "He taught me to fight with a sword. I'd just beaten him for the first time when Shinatobe interrupted."

"Ah, I see," she replied, looked remorseful.

Leaning in to give her a kiss, he smiled at her playfully as he said, "I'm going to start giving you a spanking every time you look guilty for something Shinatobe did. You were trapped in your own body by those implants. No one blames you for anything that happened, alright? You're one of my girls now, and that's all that matters."

She hugged him fiercely, and said, "Thank you so much for everything, you've been amazing."

He laughed and said, "Don't make me instigate the 'no excessive thanking rule' as well."

Sakura laughed too, feeling giddy with happiness. For a moment she felt a pang of guilt for feeling that way, worried that she should be mourning her lost parents. However, in a moment of epiphany, she realised that they wouldn't want her lost in grief, and would want her to move on with her life. It was a strangely sobering and uplifting moment, which felt like a heavy burden had been lifted from her shoulders.

John buttoned up her shirt again, then reached across to the console built into the desk. He pressed a button to activate the comm interface, then scrolled down through the list of contacts until he found the name 'Eito Yamamoto'. Just as he was about to swipe across the name to call the taciturn swordmaster, he glanced down at Sakura who was watching his every move.

"It's lovely having you here on my lap, but you better stay out of sight while I call Yamamoto. He can be a bit grumpy," he explained somewhat reluctantly.

"Sure, I don't mind," she agreed, just thankful that she was able to stay in his company. She had an impish grin on her face as she asked, "Should I wait under your desk?"

John laughed heartily at that, just imagining calling Yamamoto while this beautiful girl went down on him. Considering the topic of his last conversation with the grief-stricken man, he was forced to conclude it was wildly inappropriate, and replied, "I can't believe I'll have to decline, but can I ask for a raincheck?"

Sakura blushed furiously, amazed at herself for being so brazen. Her embarrassment warred with her delight at having made him laugh, but seeing his relaxed grin, her embarrassment suffered a crushing defeat. "Just let me know when!" she replied, hopping off his lap, and walking around to the other side of the desk.

He swiped his hand across Yamamoto's name, and said, "Thanks honey, I'll explain why after the call."

The call rang unanswered for several minutes, until the stern face of Eito Yamamoto appeared in the viewscreen. The man's image coalesced over the heavy desk, and John could tell by his expression that Yamamoto seemed reluctant to talk. John strongly suspected that the delay hadn't been a test of patience this time, and Yamamoto had probably just been too embarrassed to answer the call.

"I wanted to check on you, Yamamoto, make sure you were okay," John said to the swordmaster.

"I'm fine," Yamamoto said, with one of his usual abrupt responses.

John hesitated for a moment before saying, "When we spoke before, you'd been drinking. I don't know how much you remember?"

His expression hardening, Yamamoto replied, "It was an unforgivable lapse, I do not wish to speak of it further." There was a slight edge to his voice, and his cheeks flushed a little, and John suddenly understood that his dour trainer was deeply ashamed by his loss of control.

Realising he was unlikely to draw the man out for the moment, John nodded, and said, "I just wanted to tell you that I'll be hunting down the Master Assassin responsible for the assassination attempt on me." His eyes flashed to Sakura, as he continued, "It won't be for some time, but I have a very reliable source who's offered to assist."

Yamamoto looked unsettled to hear that, and it was clear he didn't remember everything from the drunken conversation after all. The taciturn man locked eyes with him, and said, "These are dangerous opponents. Make sure you are ready before you face them."

John nodded, and asked, "Would you like to continue our training sessions?"

The older man gave him a curt nod in response, and replied, "I would."

Finding himself growing frustrated at the uncommunicative replies, John reached over to the comm interface to end the call, and said, "It's late now, but I'll call you again and we can arrange a time."

Yamamoto looked like he was about to say something before the call ended, but his eyes narrowed instead, and he just nodded silently. John ended the call, then slumped back in his chair with an exasperated sigh.

"What's wrong?" Sakura asked him, as she sidled around the desk and glanced at his lap with a questioning eye.

John smiled at her, and opened his arms, welcoming her back again. When she was comfortably settled, he replied, "Eito Yamamoto lost his family to some of Mikaboshi's assassins. He intervened and prevented the assassination of one of their targets, so they came after him instead."

She was quiet for a moment, her face twisting with remorse as she flashed through her memories, but she looked relieved when she finally said, "Shinatobe wasn't involved."

"That's good to know," John said, certain that the earnest young woman would have tortured herself with guilt if her cyborg persona had taken part in the attack on Yamamoto. He looked down at her and continued, "Losing his wife and daughter destroyed him. His desire for revenge drove him into an obsession with killing, and he dropped his mastery of Kendo to take up Kenjutsu instead."

Sakura was startled by his reply, and when she looked up at John, she saw he was watching her response carefully. "That's why you tried to dissuade me from hunting Mikaboshi, wasn't it?" she asked, gazing into his eyes. "You were worried that I'd end up like Yamamoto."

He nodded, and said, "He's practically a recluse now, and you just saw what it's like, trying to talk to him." Giving her a gentle smile he added, "I didn't go to all the trouble of saving you, only for you to throw your life away."

She nodded soberly, then smiled back at him as she said, "You don't have to worry. I've got a new life here with you now, and besides, I don't think Alyssa would allow me to turn into a recluse!"

He chuckled, and said, "No, I don't think she would either."

\*You're far too lovely to end up like that,\* Alyssa thought to Sakura, her warm voice pouring through her mind like liquid honey. \*I'm afraid, you're stuck with all of us looking out for you now, sorry.\*

Sakura suspected that Alyssa wasn't particularly sincere with her apology, but she felt comforted by her telepathic voice, and found she didn't mind one bit. She snuggled into John's chest, feeling his strong arms surrounding her, and let out a contented sigh. He rested his chin on her silky black hair, and they sat there quietly, watching the stars drift by in the long window flanking the Ready Room.

After relishing the tranquil moment together, John reluctantly said, "We better head off to bed."

Sakura sat up in surprise, and asked, "Haven't you got all the girls waiting for you? You don't sound like a man about to enjoy the loving attention of his harem!"

He nodded, and replied, "It's not just them waiting for me. I need to speak to Athena, and I'm praying she's come up with a plan."

"Athena?" Sakura asked him with a puzzled frown. "I don't think I've met her yet. Who is she?"

John was about to help her off his lap, so that he could get up, but he sank back in his chair instead and replied, "We only found out about her recently. Before I talk about her, it's probably better if I start by explaining about the nightmares, and what triggers them..."

\*\*\*

They arrived in the bedroom with Sakura still reeling from the thought that there was an Astral Plane, and that it was populated by horrible creatures capable of slaying them. Alyssa saw the look of shock on the young woman's face, one that Sakura had worn with distressing frequency over the last couple of days. The other girls were also there waiting for them, so when Alyssa gracefully climbed off the huge bed to go and comfort the Asian girl, Calara went with her to help.

They helped her shrug out of her clothes and join the others on the bed, while Dana and Rachel rushed to assist John in stripping off too. He was about to follow the redhead and brunette over to the bed, when a flash of purple caught his eye, and he spotted Faye sitting cross-legged on the big leather chair in the bedroom. She was still just as gloriously nude as before, and when he saw the acres of luscious purple flesh on display, he sorely wished she wasn't just a hologram. Faye caught his admiring glance, and she blushed furiously before flashing him a shy smile and sitting straighter, giving him a better view of her spectacular pixels.

He winked at her, then sat near the foot of the bed, facing Alyssa with the rest of the girls fanned out around him. He looked at each of them, and asked, "I'm sure Alyssa's filled you in on what we might be facing tonight?"

They all nodded, sombre expressions on their beautiful faces, and Jade asked him, "Are you really in danger from this nightmare creature?"

He hesitated, then replied, "The last time I got pulled into the dreamworld, Alyssa was sucked in with me, and we barely escaped with our lives. I'm just hoping that Athena has come up with some kind of plan..."

The Nymph didn't look particularly reassured, and with a worried frown on her face, she persisted, "What happens if she doesn't have any ideas?"

He smiled at her, and said with a confidence that he didn't feel, "That's when we get creative!"

Turning to face Alyssa, who was cuddled up with Sakura and Calara, he gave her a brief nod as they shared a meaningful look. He closed his eyes, then tried to blot out any distractions, focusing intently on drawing out his spirit form from his body. He still had to fight hard to separate himself from his physical form, but he was in no mood for delays, and the process of Astral Projection seemed a little easier this time. When he opened his eyes again, he was facing the radiant copy of Alyssa known as Athena, who gave him a warm smile in greeting.

"You look happy to see me," he noted, returning her smile. "Does that mean you have some good news?"

Athena's smile wavered, and she replied, "Sorry John, I was just glad to see you again. I'm afraid I don't have anything definitive for you yet."

John felt a heavy weight sink in his chest, and he said despondently, "Alyssa and I were practically helpless there last time, and we only just escaped with our lives because you intervened. I hate not knowing what the hell I'm doing!"

Athena approached him with her arms open, and her embrace felt comforting, soothing the fear and doubts in his mind. He could feel her lips brushing his ear as she whispered, "I only helped ward you from the debilitating fear the creature radiates. You were the one who saved us, pulling us from the Astral Plane."

He pulled back a little, but not enough to break her embrace. He stared into her glowing eyes only inches away from his, and said, "We can't just wing this, though. It's far too dangerous to just hope I'll know how to protect us by instinct alone."

She nodded, and said, "I know, I agree with you completely." She gave him one of her enigmatic smiles as she continued, "I only said that I had nothing definitive for you, but that doesn't mean I've been idle."

"What do you mean?" he asked her succinctly, his patience for her cryptic answers frayed by his fear for their safety.

Athena pulled away from him now, and gestured around her at the girls on the bed, who were frozen in a semicircle around him. "I suggest you harness their power," she said, her piercing gaze feeling like it was reading his soul. "I've been considering this at length, and I believe you can use them to become much stronger."

John frowned, his mouth twisting with distaste, and replied, "I don't like the sound of that. I love those girls, I don't want to use them."

She smiled at him, and said patiently, "Don't you see? That's what makes you so unique. A normal Progenitor gathers legions of female slaves and treats them like disposable tools, but you've focused on an elite group who you've nurtured and cared for. The closer their relationship with you, the more powerful the psychic connection you build with them, which in turn makes you both stronger. Progenitors are parasitical by nature, but you've twisted this process, and developed a symbiotic relationship with these girls instead."

John closed his eyes for a moment, viewing the compartments in his mind. Just as Athena had described, the eldritch power lines connecting the girls to Alyssa were surging with power, each one a blazing cable of light. The psychic connection between Alyssa and Sakura was the only exception, being considerably weaker than those from the other girls he'd known for months. He fully expected that, however, as the Asian girl was still new to their group, and hadn't yet "bonded" with Alyssa.

When he glanced at the compartments for the dozens of Maliri linked to Edraele, the connections from the eighty engineers appeared feeble by comparison. Those faint lines seemed pitifully frail even when compared against Sakura's link to Alyssa. There were three significant exceptions, the assassins whose fertility he'd restored, but even then, the connection with them was still weak.

"Given time, and enough care and attention, they could be equally powerful allies," Athena said to him, sharing Alyssa's telepathic ability and reading his thoughts. "They won't be able to assist you here though, you'll need to work with the girls on your ship."

"Work with them, how?" John asked her, feeling particularly obtuse. "What have you got in mind?"

Athena brushed her fingers across his chest, and replied, "Your psychic strength is fundamentally sexual by nature. Love those girls, and it will encourage them to open up to you even further, enhancing the strength of the eldritch power you can draw from them. Then have Jade assist you in feeding them all to create an active connection. I know you've seen the glow from them when they're open to your psychic manipulation."

He laughed, and shaking his head in disbelief, he said, "So you basically want me to have an orgy?"

"Yes, exactly," Athena replied, her tone deadly serious. "Once you've established an active connection with all of these women, we can attempt to create a ward."

"A ward? What's that?" he asked her curiously.

She shook her head, and replied, "We'll discuss it again later when you're ready. For now just concentrate on the task at hand."

He paused for a moment, before looking into her eyes again, and saying, "I still don't like the idea of 'using' the girls like this, it feels wrong."

Athena smiled at him, and said, "If you weren't in any danger tonight, what would you have done before going to sleep? Please be honest, this isn't a trick question."

John thought about it for a moment, then admitted, "At the very least, I'd have made love to Irillith and Dana, to show them how much I appreciate everything they've done for Faye. Calara's wanted to thank me for saving her brother, so almost certainly her too. Rachel looked like she was in the mood to celebrate being right about the Trankarans, and then Alyssa..." He trailed off, then smiled as he continued, "Alright, I get your point. The only real difference in what you're asking is that the girls 'share the load' so to speak, instead of filling up Sakura."

Athena nodded, and said, "She's developing nicely, but missing out on one session won't make any difference. This is far more important."

Remembering how much weaker Sakura's psychic link was, he asked, "Do we leave her out of this completely, then?"

"No, we need all the help we can get," Athena replied looking thoughtful. "Have Jade fill her stomach with your cum too."

"Alright, so we've got a plan," John agreed. "Shall I Spirit-Walk again later, so we can discuss this 'ward' idea?"

She shook her head, and replied, "No, I'll contact you, I don't want you wasting any more psychic energy than necessary."

He nodded, and said, "Alright, I'll head back to my body."

Athena looked pleased, and she replied, "Have fun, and I'll speak to you soon."

John was about to return to his physical presence, but he smiled instead, pulling Athena into his arms. "There's one other beautiful girl I know of aboard the Invictus. Is there anything I can do to strengthen her connection to me?" he asked her playfully.

She looked flustered for the first time since he'd known her, and when he saw the flicker of curiosity in her eyes, he leaned in and gave her a tender kiss. Athena moaned softly into his mouth, clinging to him as she returned his kiss with feeling. They'd kissed once before, when he'd saved Jade, but this was very different.

Athena looked just like Alyssa, although she glowed with a bright inner radiance, and his lips tingled where they met hers, feeling like a surge of electricity was passing between them. The ethereal guide was very new to kissing though, thus ending the similarities between her and her blonde counterpart, who had a wealth of experience in that regard.

When he finally pulled away from her, Athena stared at him in bewilderment, and she lifted her hand to gently brush against her lips.

"I'll speak to you later," he said with a smile, enjoying the look of amazement on her face.

When he stopped fighting the pull from his astral cord, he was snapped back into his body, and he steadied himself on the bed as he readjusted to the sudden swirling change in his surroundings. He glanced around, and saw that seven girls - eight, if you included Faye - were watching him intently. They hadn't moved position since he started his Spirit-Walk, reminding him of the time dilation effect on the Astral Plane.

"So what's the verdict?" Alyssa asked him, as soon as he was stable again.

He was about to open his mouth to explain Athena's plan, but Alyssa read his mind before he could say anything. She sat up, clapping her hands in delight, an excited gleam in her eyes. "Oh, this is going to be fun!" she squealed happily.

The other girls all moved off the bed, moving with disconcerting synchronicity as they sashayed into the walk-in wardrobe, with Alyssa following behind them. She looked over her shoulder at John and Sakura, who were watching the beautiful girls with bemusement, and flashed them a mischievous grin.

Sakura crawled over the bed to join him, and whispered "What's happening? Where are they going?"

He smiled at her and replied, "I've learnt to just go with it. Whatever Alyssa's planning is bound to be lots of fun, so just relax and enjoy yourself, okay?"

She giggled nervously, so he put his arm around her and gave her a reassuring kiss. She responded by kissing him back, and it was only when they heard the sound of clicking heels that they pulled away from each other to look back across the room. While they'd been distracted, someone had lowered the lighting, creating a sensual ambience in the bedroom. Alyssa and the girls paraded out wearing nothing but four-inch stiletto heels, which emphasised the lean muscles in their long athletic legs, and added extra lift to the compact roundness of their toned cheeks.

This reminded John of their trip to Oceanus, and Alyssa presenting the girls as enticing flavours for Rachel to try. He wasn't certain, but knowing Alyssa as he did, he was fairly sure this little scenario was intended for Sakura's benefit.

\*Mmm, very good, handsome,\* she purred to him, her bright blue eyes catching the light. \*It looks like I'll have to work harder to surprise you...\*

Turning to Sakura, Alyssa gave her a warm smile, and said, "I told all my sisters how good you taste, and they all begged me for a chance to go down on you. So it's up to you, gorgeous, take your pick. Who's the lucky girl?"

John chuckled at the bug-eyed expression of utter disbelief on the Sakura's face, and putting his arm around her shoulder he murmured, "Don't feel pressured. You don't have to do anything you don't feel comfortable with." He saw the flicker of desire in her dark-brown eyes, and he grinned at her when he realised she could hardly believe her luck, not that she objected to the idea.

Sakura gazed at the six stunning Amazons arrayed before her, and she couldn't help but feel intimidated by how astonishingly beautiful they were. Each girl had the body of an athlete in the peak of physical condition, but with full gravity-defying breasts, uncommon in professional athletes.

The high heels, and subtle application of makeup emphasised their incredible natural allure, making them by far the most beautiful girls Sakura had ever seen. She couldn't help but feel shy around them however, so she was tempted to pick Alyssa, who she was far more familiar with than the others. The blonde met her gaze, and correctly guessed what Sakura was thinking.

\*I'd love to have you writhing on my tongue again, but why not pick someone else and let them enjoy you too?\* she urged, giving her an affectionate smile.

Looking at each of the other girls in turn, Sakura's eyes eventually settled on the coffee-coloured Latina, and mustering up her courage, she asked in a faint voice, "Calara?"

A radiant smile lit up Calara's tanned face, and she stepped out of her high heels, then glided over to Sakura, before leaning in to give her a gentle kiss on the lips. "Thank you for choosing me, you won't regret it," she replied, with a lustful look in her sultry brown eyes.

"Damn! I was hoping she'd choose me," Dana pouted, as she watched Calara climb lithely onto the bed.

Rachel laughed and said, "You probably scared her off by swearing like a drunken sailor."

The redhead grinned, and replied, "It didn't put you off though, did it? Or is that because you're a well bred lady, who likes her bit of rough?" The two lovers shared a heated look, their pulses quickening with lust.

Alyssa shook her head, and sauntered over to join her girlfriend, then brushed her hand along the Latina's leg as she purred, "Calara's just irresistible, aren't you baby?"

Calara blew her a seductive kiss, then lay down on the bed, and gave Sakura a come-hither look. When Alyssa saw the confusion on the Asian girl's face, she beckoned her over, and said, "She wants you to sit on her face..."

Sakura's eyes looked like they were about to roll out of her head as Alyssa helped her swing a leg over the supine girl, but those eyes snapped shut, and she let out a low moan as she settled over Calara's mouth. "Oh my God!" she gasped, as she felt the wet, flickering touch of a hot tongue on her pussy.

John grinned at the lustful sounds filling his ears, and turning his gaze back to the lined up girls, he said, "Looks like you'll have to settle with me then, Red."

"Oh fuck yeah!" Dana crowed with delight, and she kicked off her heels, and dashed over to the bed in her haste.

John caught the excited girl mid-leap in his arms, then winked at Rachel and asked, "Could you warm Irillith up for me, please? She's next, then I plan to ravish you."

The smouldering look she shot him left him in no doubt that the tawny-haired girl would be a handful when it was her turn. He saw Jade move to couple with Alyssa, and he turned his attention back to Dana, laying her back on the bed. "It feels like ages since we've been together," he said, his tone apologetic.

She smiled at him, and said, "A new girl to enhance, and plenty of injuries to heal. Who's dipshit idea was it to link all that to your cum?"

He laughed as he leaned over her, then moved in for a passionate kiss, running his hands through her dark auburn hair. She gasped with excitement as he ran his hands over her body, taking his time to feel the firmness of her breasts, and the taut leanness of her toned belly. "You're a smoking hot piece of ass, you know that?" he said to the lusty redhead.

This close to her face, he could see the golden coronas flare around her pupils as they expanded with arousal, and she growled, "Fuck me hard, you big-dicked bastard."

His fingers dipped lower, moving between her thighs, and he shoved them apart roughly, making her gasp. He was gentle when he brushed his fingers over her pussy lips though, and found her soaking wet for him already. Not wasting any time, he covered her with his body, then pushed his way into her glistening channel, relishing the sound of her girlish whimpers as her pussy wrapped around his huge shaft. He knew by now that she'd easily stretch to take him, and he forced his way up to the hilt inside her. Her cheeks were flushed as she gazed at him, and she clung to him with her legs and arms, in anticipation of the pounding she'd demanded.

"Not yet, beautiful," he whispered to her, as he began to stroke inside her at a languid, torturous pace. "We need to talk first."

Dana groaned in frustration, but he could see the eager look of anticipation on her face as she asked, "About what?"

"A couple of things," he said in a lazy drawl, as he took his time enjoying her tight young body. He glanced over at Faye, who was watching the debauchery with eyes as round as saucers. "Firstly, thanks for what you did for her. You're such an amazing girl, you never let me down." He punctuated his compliment by fully sheathing himself inside her, and leaning in to give her a tender kiss.

Dana was touched by the sincerity of his words, while she trembled at being stuffed full of his cock. She glanced over at the purple AI, who was watching the sensual scenes on the bed with fascination, and said, "I was so happy to help Faye, she's such an awesome girl." She smiled at him and added, "I love helping you too. It's always so rewarding, and you make me feel wonderful."

"I love you, I always want you to be happy," he replied, cradling her head in his hands as he gave her another kiss.

She sighed in delight as she kissed him back, and when he pulled away from her flushed lips, she asked, "You said 'firstly', was there something else?"

He nodded, and said, "Just one more thing, then I'm going to ride you hard until you cum for me, alright?"

She grinned at him, nodding eagerly as she replied, "I want it so bad!"

He smiled at her enthusiasm, and he gently stroked her head as he continued, "I've been thinking about the Progenitor schematics I locked away in your wonderful mind. Feeding you girls my cum seems to be the catalyst for all sorts of dramatic things, so I was thinking that after Sakura's been through the change, you might be up for getting some special attention?"

"Are you saying what I think you're saying?" she asked him, her eyes widening in disbelief.

John nodded, and said, "I plan to have you on your knees, morning, noon, and night, packing your belly full, while we see what other secrets we can unlock in that beautiful brain of yours." He grinned, knowing how much she longed for this, as he added, "You'll be living solely off my cum for a few weeks. Would that be alright with you?"

She kissed him frantically as she said, "Oh my fucking God! I love you so much! Yes, of course!"

He laughed happily, then said, "Alright, it's decided then. Hold on tight, I plan to fuck you senseless."

It didn't take long, fired up as Dana was. He thrust away at her, sinking up to the quad every time in her heavenly depths. She screamed out her climax less than a minute later, and he rode her through one orgasm, then brought her off with a second almost immediately afterwards. She flopped on the bed when she was done, giving him a dopey grin as he gave her a loving kiss.

John stayed inside Dana, enjoying feeling the rhythmic squeezes of her post-orgasmic contractions, and raised himself up on his arms as he looked for the Maliri girl he planned to take next. Irillith was still intertwined with Rachel, the two girls lapping away noisily in an energetic sixty-nine. Prompted by Alyssa who was monitoring events, the blue-skinned beauty lifted her flushed face from between the brunette's thighs, then carefully dismounted the Terran girl.

The fiery look she shot him made his cock twitch in anticipation, drawing another moan from Dana, who was still impaled beneath him. He looked down at her, and smiled as he said, "Sorry honey, another girl awaits."

She giggled, and said, "Go get some blue pussy, stud. If you ring her bell like you just did mine, she's going to be one happy little Maliri!"

They shared a quick, affectionate kiss before he pulled out of her, with Calara moving over to take his place in Dana's arms. He looked over at Sakura with interest, and saw she was now astride Rachel, running her hands through the grey-eyed girl's brown hair, while she rode her questing tongue. She was flushed with arousal, her compact breasts heaving as the experienced brunette focused on bringing the petite girl to her second orgasm of the night.

Irillith was already on her back when he joined her, and she gave him an inviting smile as she spread her thighs for him. They were both well-lubricated already, and she let out a low moan as he slid into her depths in one long, relentless thrust. He held her in his arms, and stared into her angular eyes as he rested his weight on her luscious blue body.

"I promised you a night to remember, didn't I?" she asked him playfully, as her hands traced mysterious shapes on his back.

John glanced around the room at the writhing girls locked together in various states of arousal, and said, "Perhaps we should postpone that for when I can give you my undivided attention?"

"It's yours to cash in whenever you choose," she replied with a smile. Pulling him towards her, she pressed her cheek to his, so her flushed lips were against his ear. Her soft breath made him shiver with sensation as she murmured, "That rose you gave me was exquisite. I always felt like a bit of an outsider before, but now that I know you love me, I don't any longer. Does that seem silly?"

He shook his head, and replied, "No, it's not silly at all, I'm just sorry you felt that way."

She smiled at him, and said, "It's not your fault, you've been nothing but loving and welcoming. I guess it's the fact that I tried to kill you a couple of times before I joined you that made me feel awkward."

He laughed, and asked, "You're over that now?"

"Forgive and forget, that's what I say," she replied, joining him in his laughter. He started moving inside her, and she let out a contented sigh as she added, "All joking aside, I do feel different now. I know I'm part of your group, and no one holds any grudges for what happened in the past."

He nodded, and said, "Aside from my personal feelings towards you, you've been an incredible addition to our group. Thank you for everything you did for Faye, and for all those fleet battles you've massively tipped in our favour. We would've been totally screwed without you."

He emphasised his point by making a corkscrew motion with his hips, one that stretched her in new and interesting ways, and made her laugh again. He never got tired of hearing her musical laughter, something that he knew was novel for her, having lived a grim, humourless life of scheming and betrayals prior to joining them.

Irillith grinned, and said, "Make love to me, and tell me more about your 'personal feelings' towards me. They sound very interesting."

He nodded, wrapping her in his arms as he began to stroke in and out of her. He pressed his lips to her ear and began to murmur gentle, loving endearments, which made her sigh with happiness. He had wanted to discuss Tashana with her, and reassure her that they'd be seeking out and rescuing her twin sister the first chance he had. He decided against it however, as he knew that thinking about the sister she had betrayed, would ruin her happy mood.

She was an exotically beautiful girl, and when she was happy, her gleaming smile lit up her azure face like a brilliant jewel. He had no intention of depriving himself of her divine smile, and he described how much he loved it to her, as he rode her toned, blue flesh. Somewhere between thanking her for being so kind to Sakura, and telling her how proud he was of her for growing into such a lovely girl, she arched her back and came.

He gazed into her angular violet eyes as she climaxed for him, and the loving look they shared seemed to intensify her pleasure. Once she'd ridden out the waves of ecstasy, she sagged in his arms, gazing at him with a look of rapture. She looked magnificent, and he had to work hard to stave off the desire to lose himself in her delicious embrace.

A loud climactic cry drew his attention to the other side of the bed, where Sakura was thrashing on top of Dana, the redhead taking full advantage of finally getting her turn. John was suddenly aware of Rachel at his side, and he realised she'd been watching them for some time, patiently waiting for him to finish with Irillith.

"Don't keep her waiting," the Maliri girl whispered to him. Her smile was coy as she continued, "Not after the lovely orgasm she gave me earlier."

He leaned in to give Irillith a farewell kiss, then gently pulled out of her indigo depths as he said, "I'll look forward to cashing in my night to remember."

The heated look she gave him made him sure she was going to live up to her promise, and he was very turned on as he pulled Rachel into his arms for a kiss. She was just as eager as he was, and she took him by surprise when she pushed him backwards, then straddled his hips, sinking down on his slick length. When she bottomed out on him, she placed her hands on his muscular chest, and began to rock back and forth with a purposeful rhythmic motion.

"I've seen what you're up to with the other girls, but I'm too horny for that!" she gasped as she rode him hard.

He grinned at her, and said appreciatively, "This is a new side to you, I like it!"

She stared down at him with her stormy-grey eyes, and with a fierce shake of her head, she replied, "No, this is an old side of me. I was a wild child, remember?"

He palmed her breasts in his hands, squeezing her nipples and massaging the pert flesh with a rhythm that matched the tempo she was setting. Rachel groaned lustily as she used his broad girth to stretch herself wide, then ground her clit against him when he was fully sheathed inside her.

John moved his hands down her body so he had a firm hold of her waist, then he jack-hammered into her, and this time it was Rachel who was caught by surprise. She shrieked with delight as he fucked her mercilessly, her swollen pussy lips and throbbing clit smashing against him with each pounding thrust. When she climaxed, her body froze, and he could feel her gripping him like a fist as he plunged in and out of her. Her thighs were trembling as she came, her mouth open in a silent scream as her body was wracked with pleasure. When she was finally done, she collapsed on top of him, her chest heaving as she gasped for breath.

He laughed as he wrapped his arms around her, brushing her chestnut hair from her face so he could look at her. "More of that please, wild child," he teased her with a grin.

Her breathing quickly returned to normal, her athletic body designed to rapidly recover from all forms of exertion. She gave him a wry smile as she said, "Don't get me wrong, the sex with you has been incredible, but you're always so gentle and loving with me. I think you're scared of breaking one of your geniuses, but you don't have to worry, you designed me to take a pounding."

"So you want me to love you for your body, not just your mind?" he asked her with another chuckle.

"Absolutely," she agreed. Her grey eyes twinkled as she added, "I like it rough..."

She looked so uninhibited and free like this, he desperately wanted to ride the surprising girl hard, and take full advantage of her offer. Rachel could see him struggling to maintain control, so she leaned in and gave him a gentle kiss, then whispered, "I watched you with the other girls. You seem like you're trying to reinforce your connection with each of us. Why is that?"

He shook his head in wry amusement, and brushed his fingers through her long hair as he observed, "Not much gets past you, does it smarty pants?"

She shook her head, then glanced down where he was still buried inside her, and said, "Not that I'm actually wearing any at the moment."

John smiled at her joke, then pulled her down so he could whisper in her ear. He briefly explained Athena's plan, and Rachel looked overjoyed when she heard he'd be feeding her his cum later.

It was almost like he could see the gears whirring in her mind as she said, "Telling Dana about your plan to give her another honeymoon, sorry, I mean Change, was inspired." She rolled her eyes, and smiled fondly as she said, "She's so greedy for your cum, she goes on about it all the time. You couldn't have said anything better to make her happier."

"You two make such a cute couple," he said with a chuckle. He looked thoughtful as he added, "Although I didn't tell Dana that because of Athena's plan. Arranging another feeding session with her was something that just seemed to make sense, after what happened with the Progenitor table of elements, and then those schematics."

Rachel seemed distracted now as her formidable intellect pondered some intriguing thought, and she murmured, "Yeah, you love her too much to manipulate her." She suddenly blinked in surprise, and exclaimed, "I just thought of something! Maybe Dana's so greedy for your cum -because- she's trying to instinctively unlock more schematics for you!"

John thought it over, and he grinned as he joked, "I know you want me to love you for your body, baby, but your mind is just so hot, I can't get enough of it!"

She laughed happily at that, then crossed her arms over his chest, and stared into his eyes. Her tone turned serious as she said, "Choosing to join you and the girls was the best decision I've ever made. I've got lots of friends here, an amazing relationship with Dana and you, I've never felt more fulfilled professionally, and you even helped me reconcile with my Dad." She let out a happy sigh, and added simply, "Life is good."

He grinned at her, and said, "I just thought of something that's going to make you even happier. We got so caught up with rushing to rescue Mateo and the prisoners, we forgot to get you samples from Kindralax for you to analyse. My sword was dripping in his blood though, so you could get a great DNA sample from there!"

Rachel looked delighted, and she gasped, "Oh, that's wonderful! I can't wait to get started!" She sat up and gave the door a longing glance, her expression conflicted.

John sat up too, then said in a conspiratorial whisper, "You can go ahead and grab a sample, I'll cover for you. Make sure you come straight back though, I need to fill your tummy soon." He brushed his hand over her lower belly where the swallow tattoo had once been located, before it had been wiped clean when he gave her the Gift.

She leaned in and gave him a fierce kiss as she said, "I fucking love you! I wouldn't miss the big finale for anything!"

He chuckled, and said, "I think Sparks is a bad influence, you're starting to sound like her."

Rachel nodded, and said soberly, "I'll have to watch my diet. I've been eating too much redhead."

He laughed uproariously at that, then helped the grinning girl off his rampant cock. It throbbed with annoyance at being removed from the beguiling girl, having thoroughly enjoyed being encased in her tight little body. Giving Rachel a playful smack on the rump as she darted off the bed, he turned to see who he could ravish next.

The girls were switching partners again, so he caught Calara's eye and beckoned her over. She gave him a sparkling smile before rushing over to join him, like the good obedient girl that she was. The Latina was as turned on as he was, and they wasted no time in making sure every inch of his cock was plunged deep within her receptive womb.

"I need to cum, then we can talk," she pleaded with him, and he could see how much she wanted that release.

As he began to stroke in and out of her ripe, pliant young body, he largely ignored her instructions to talk later. He whispered in her ear how much he loved her, and that she was a wonderful girl who'd transformed his and Alyssa's lives in so many ways. Her breathing quickened as his deep baritone voice enveloped her in loving words, and she was powerless to resist his onslaught of adoration. He gazed into those liquid brown eyes, losing himself in their soulful depths as she came for him.

It took her some time to recover from such an explosive orgasm, and when she'd finally regained the ability to speak, she gasped, "That was absolutely incredible!" Her eyes were awestruck as she added, "How can you keep making it even better over and over again?!"

He smiled as he kissed her, then replied, "You deserve nothing less, gorgeous girl."

She let out a disbelieving laugh, and they lay together quietly for a few minutes to let her recover.

Calara eventually lifted her head, and planted a grateful kiss on his lips, before she lay back down and said, "Thank you for everything you've done for me and my family. I was so worried about Mateo, and then you literally descended into the dragon's lair to bring him home safely."

There were things John wanted to say to her, which he knew she'd truly love to hear. However, he had long term plans for the future with the stunning Latina, and he had no intention of disrupting them, an eldritch behemoth from another dimension be damned.

Instead he smiled at her and said, "I know how much your family means to you, and I'd never let them come to any harm." He paused for a moment, and let out a sombre sigh before he continued, "I really loved my grandparents; they were kind, generous people who took me in when my mother abandoned me. I'm sure I sound terribly ungrateful, but despite everything they did for me, I always wanted to be part of a big family like yours. I promise you, I'll always drop whatever I'm doing to help you protect them."

Calara looked deeply touched by his heartfelt words, and she stared into his eyes as she said earnestly, "You will be part of a big family, but you'll be at its head, and we'll have as many children as you want."

It was his turn to be moved, not so much by her words, as they'd discussed their future together before, but by the absolute devotion in her eyes, and the pure, honest sincerity in her voice. It was so easy to imagine the picture she painted for him; the two of them in a big house, surrounded by excited, happy children. He suddenly remembered the other half-dozen girls sharing his bed, and the house got a lot bigger, the horde of children vastly larger. It was a picture that made him smile wistfully.

Her fingers began to glide over his biceps, her fingertips feeling the strength in his arms. He could feel her urge to move underneath him, powerfully aroused as she was, and the desire in her eyes gave him all the encouragement he needed. Neither of them spoke this time, communicating physically instead, with each of them knowing the other's body so well after the hundreds of hours spent sparring together.

He brought her to another blinding orgasm, and was barely able to hold back from joining her. Nothing would have pleased him more than to fill her womb full of cum, a trial run for when he started breeding the ravishing young woman beneath him. Instead, he satisfied himself with feeling her pulsating inner walls contracting around him as she came, consoling himself that he'd soon be filling her toned stomach with his spunk.

Alyssa had been watching them together, her heart lifting to see her two lovers sharing such an intimate moment. She was currently helping a rather shaky Sakura to mount Jade's face, the Asian girl too dazed to feel intimidated or guilty with the green-skinned alien. Once the Nymph had stabilised her in a supportive hold, the blonde bounded over the bed to join John and Calara.

They both looked up at her, and Calara smiled at Alyssa as she said, "We're very lucky girls, did you know that?"

Alyssa nodded, flashing John a beautiful smile. Calara gave him a parting kiss, and then they separated so she could join Irillith, who was waiting for her with a lusty look in her violet eyes. That left John kneeling there watching the statuesque blonde, so she straddled his thighs, then sank down on his length so they were facing one another.

\*Hello, handsome!\* she purred with delight. \*Been having a good time with the girls?\*

He smiled as he replied, \*Actually I've been having a great time! My XO carefully recruited the best girls in the galaxy, and I love them all to bits.\*

His arms wrapped around her automatically, and began helping her slowly move up and down on his throbbing shaft. She closed her eyes to savour the sensation of being stuffed full of cock, and she placed a slender hand on her belly to feel him moving beneath her skin.

When she opened her eyes again, her piercing cerulean eyes stared into his as she said, \*You deserve to have some fun. I worry that you're so busy trying to look after all of us, you don't get time to really indulge yourself.\*

\*Is that what this is? An opportunity to indulge myself?\* he asked her with a smile.

Shaking her head, Alyssa replied, \*No, this was a way to let Sakura get familiar with the girls.\*

John laughed as he asked, \*So this was another team building exercise? I thought your theory was that there's no better way of building trust between the girls, than them sucking my cum out of each other.\*

She winked at him, and said, \*That -cums- later.\*

\*Very droll, XO,\* he replied, smiling at her pun.

\*I do my best Rear Admiral,\* she countered with a grin.

He looked at her curiously then, studying her beautiful face as she rode him with an unhurried rhythm. He finally said, \*You know Athena's plan, you read it in my mind. I'm sure it applies to you too, so is there anything I can do to make you happier?\*

Her expression softened, and she leaned in to give him a gentle kiss as she replied, \*I don't think I could get much happier than this. Honestly John, my life here with you is amazing.\*

He kissed her back as he replied thoughtfully, \*The problem is your telepathy. You read my thoughts before I'm even aware of them, so I can't really surprise you with anything.\* His eyes widened with inspiration, and he let his mind run wild with a variety of romantic gestures that he knew she'd adore. To see her mouth open in surprise and delight, while her eyes widened with joy, was wonderful to behold, and he grinned as she planted a flurry of kisses on him.

\*Oh she's going to love that! They all will!\* she gasped in amazement. Her eyes welled up with tears as she added, \*I can't believe you'd do that for me, though. I love you so much!\*

He wrapped her in his arms, and gently lay her on her back, savouring the outpouring of emotion he could see in her enchanting blue eyes. \*I love you too, my beautiful girl,\* he replied, as their lips moved together in a soul-searing kiss.

They began to move as one, slowly at first, and then with more urgency, as her glorious body responded to his expert attention. She was soon clawing at his back as he drove her through a rapturous climax, and she cried out his name as her body clamped down on him. Her vice-like grip was a tremendous challenge to his willpower, as every fibre of his being wanted to fill her fertile womb with every ounce of cum he could muster. Taking a shuddering breath, he managed to keep himself under control, but he had to cease moving inside her or he would've been lost.

Alyssa's breathing calmed as the waves of pleasure receded, and she looked at him under long lashes with heavy-lidded eyes. \*You were wrong before, you never cease to surprise me,\* she said to him, as she studied his face as though committing every detail to memory.

\*You too, beautiful, you too,\* he said with a smile, lifting himself up so he could admire her exquisite face.

Her expression turned playful once more, and she said with a sympathetic note to her voice, \*Just Jade to go now, and you can fill us all up. Your poor quad must be aching for release.\*

\*What about Sakura?\* he asked, looking across the bed for the newest addition to their group, and trying not to think about his aching balls.

He spotted Sakura's golden-brown body curled up in a foetal position, with Jade wrapped around the Asian girl, watching over her with a maternal eye. Her long black hair fell over her face like a shroud, and from this angle he couldn't tell if she was asleep, or simply resting.

Alyssa sounded amused but very pleased with herself as she replied, \*She's just cum five times in a row. You won't be able to get anything coherent out of her for a while, and besides, she's already grown in leaps and bounds this evening.\*

John closed his eyes to check Sakura's connection in his mental compartments, and he was astonished to see how much her link to Alyssa had strengthened in the space of the last couple of hours. He realised with a start that it wasn't just the connection with him that empowered these girls, but also with the beautiful Progenitor he had as his Matriarch.

When he looked down and caught her eye, she nodded and said, \*The more the girls trust me, the stronger our psychic connections. When they reach a certain point, where they trust me enough to open their minds to me, we can bond with each other. After that, we can use the telepathic connection both ways.\*

\*Is that how it's been with all of the girls so far?\* he asked curiously.

She nodded as she replied, \*They've all followed the same pattern. It's been easier to actually create the bond with Jade, and Irillith, as they're inherently psychic. Getting to that point is about nurturing our relationship first, though.\*

John found it fascinating to find out more about the connections between the girls, but the dull ache in his balls was getting worse. He winced then gave her an apologetic smile, and said, "Sorry to cut our conversation short, but we need to wrap this up, I've been on the edge for ages."

Her smile was genuinely sympathetic this time, and she said, "I understand, your poor quad needs emptying." Her eyes twinkled as she added, "You aren't a Maliri, blue balls can't be good."

He laughed as he lifted himself off her, and there was a flurry of movement as the girls moved around him. Jade approached him with a look of concern creasing her dark-green brow, and she murmured, "Don't worry, I'm here to make you feel all better."

"I wanted to spend some time catching up with you, my sexy little Nymph, but I won't last long enough inside you for that," he apologised with a frown.

"Don't worry about that, I'm deliriously happy anyway," she replied with a grin, her sparkling white teeth gleaming against her flushed green lips.

John saw the rest of the girls were now kneeling in an arc around the foot of the bed, their lust filled faces looking to him with hungry anticipation. They looked so wanton, yet submissive like that, and his quad spasmed with need, desperate to fill the receptive girls before him. Alyssa and Calara had helped Sakura join them too, and the prospect of a stomach full of sweet-tasting cum had roused her from her stupor. He had a sudden brainwave, and turned towards Jade with an urgent expression on his face.

"Your Master needs your help, Nymph," he said to her firmly, as he stared into her cat-like eyes. "I want you to help me feed all these girls, can you do that for me?"

The vertical pupils in her emerald eyes widened as she was filled with lust, and she nodded eagerly as she replied, "I know just what to do, Master!"

"Good girl," he praised her, moving to the end of the bed, and having a pretty good idea what she had in mind.

Jade swung a limber leg over him, while gently resting her hands on his shoulders to support herself. She pressed her firm breasts against his chest, and her normally cool skin was now warm to the touch, as aroused as she was. Reaching behind her to grasp his cock, she stared into his eyes from only inches away as she positioned him at her ass, and then sank down, smoothly taking him into her hot depths right up to the quad.

"I'll take care of you now, Master," she purred to him, and he felt her anus constrict tightly around the base of his cock. He'd been having a hard time holding back from unloading in her velvety smooth body, but now she held him immobile, barely able to pulse inside her as she gripped him like a clenched fist. Her eyes gleamed, with only a fine sliver of green visible now around the black pools at their centre, and she continued, "Let me be the conduit for your pleasure."

She took a deep breath, and tentacles emerged from her back, undulating lazily in the air as they drifted over to each of the kneeling girls. John watched as the tips of those long appendages rippled in a verdant haze, shifting into replicas of his own cock. He'd seen her do this numerous times before, when they fed dozens of the Maliri engineers on Genthalas station, and he smiled at her as he prepared himself for the rippling sensation he knew she'd soon lavish on him.

He watched over her shoulder as those dark-green cocks approached his girls, wavering before six sets of soft lips. Alyssa was the first to open her mouth in invitation, and Jade guided the broad head unerringly into that hot little hole. John groaned as he felt the sensation reproduced exactly around his actual cock, everything from the slight pursing of her lips as she shuffled down his length, to the way she lightly swirled her tongue along his shaft as she took him deeper.

Dana was next, then Irillith, and one by one, he felt each girl sliding his cock into her tight mouth, until only Sakura was left. She'd watched the other girls in amazement, but after everything she'd seen and experienced today, she was feeling exceptionally open-minded. She met John's gaze, then opened her mouth for him too, and as the throbbing head of Jade's tentacle cock spread her lips wider, John's accompanying groan of delight was ample reward for her boldness.

The tactile feedback that Jade was faithfully reproducing was indescribable, and he clutched at her waist as he stared at her in shock. They'd done this several times before, with the Maliri engineers on Genthalas station, and while there were twenty girls in each batch, it just wasn't the same. The Maliri had been seduced by the behavioural modification in their genes, and as it was the first time with him for all of them, they'd all taken his cock with the same mechanical reflexive motions.

This certainly wasn't the case with the girls kneeling before him now, each of whom was a delightfully skilled fellatrix in her own right. He was completely overwhelmed by sensation as he grabbed hold of Jade, his body trembling as he clearly felt six distinctive blowjobs at the same time.

"Holy fuck!" he cried out, rendered monosyllabic. "Fuck me!"

She gave him a coy smile, and said, "I'm more powerful now, Master. I can make it even better for you."

He stared at her in shock, as another batch of tentacles snaked out from her torso, slithering over to the girls before him. These ones went lower though, brushing past silky thighs then seeking the hot, tight pussies he'd already plundered that evening. Arching his back, he gasped in astonishment as Jade copied the sensation of sliding his cock into each of the compliant girls. He desperately wanted to pound into her, his body crying out for release, but she held his base in a unrelenting grip, leaving him powerless to do anything except savour the deliciously slow penetrations.

What made it even more intense was the reactions each girl had to being spit-roasted by those dark-green cocks. He could feel Calara moan with desire, vibrations in her throat trembling along his shaft, while Dana sucked hungrily, trying to take even more of him inside her. Rachel let out a lusty groan, her tongue lathering his tip, while Sakura quivered with nervous anticipation swallowing around him as she'd been trained to do. Irillith was panting with lust, while Alyssa's widely spread lips were curving into a smile.

Jade leaned forward so her lips brushed his pointed ear, and she whispered, "We'll save triple penetration until you've fully explored Sakura's body. I'm sure you'll want to savour that experience with her first, Master."

He let out a strangled disbelieving laugh, and all at once, Jade released her tight grip, freeing him to seek his release. She mewled with delight as he impaled her frantically, the urge to fuck this loving, teasing girl and unload his balls undeniable now. The Nymph faithfully transferred his pistoning thrusts to the girls, muting his ferocity for Sakura, but letting the others delight in his lusty rampage. The room was filled with wet pistoning sounds, soft gasps, and muffled feminine cries, as he double-penetrated the six girls simultaneously.

No man could possibly hold out against such stimulation, and as remarkable as John was, he was no exception. He lasted less than thirty seconds, but the heightened debauchery of the act was still enough to tip Dana and Rachel into orgasm, joining him as he unloaded his balls with shuddering blasts.

The Nymph carefully funnelled his cum down six slender throats, the girls swallowing repeatedly as John filled their stomachs. She saved some for herself, just as Alyssa had instructed, and she let out a happy sigh as she redirected the last portion into her own belly. As Jade began to absorb his cum, those familiar circles of green light pulsed out over her flesh, her body growing incrementally stronger in response.

John toppled backwards in a daze, having never felt anything like that before. He was seeing stars after climaxing so hard, the suction on his cock making it seem like his quad was going to be turned inside out. He felt numb after his release, nothing but a dull throbbing ache in his balls, now that their entire contents had been blasted into the waiting girls.

Trying to chuckle but not having the air in his lungs to do so, he panted between gasping breaths, "Are you... trying... to kill... me?"

Jade let his wilting cock slide from her body, and now that she was no longer coupled with him, the dozen tentacles slowly merged with their mistress again. "No, Master," she replied with a smile. "Just trying to give you the pleasure you deserve."

He wanted to make a witty comeback, but he could only pant breathlessly.

Alyssa joined them and smiled as she said, "He doesn't think he's done anything to deserve that."

The rest of the girls climbed onto the bed too, watching John with amusement as he recovered from his mind-shattering orgasm. He finally sat up, and shaking his head in amazement, he said, "Well, that was fun."

The girls laughed at his ridiculous understatement, and he grinned at them in return. He opened his arms for Sakura, and she moved to him eagerly, giving him a warm hug.

"That's about as crazy as it gets around here," he confided in her. "If that hasn't scared you off, you'll be alright."

She giggled, and flashing a grateful smile at Jade, she said, "I'm not going anywhere."

"Good girl," he replied, looking around at all the happy, smiling faces surrounding him.

For a few seconds he forgot about all the impending danger, the titanic struggles with mysterious progenitors, errant alien empires, and lurking astral terrors. It was just him and his girls, happy and content with each other. He savoured the moment of sublime tranquillity, and marvelled at the thought that maybe, sometime in the future, all his days could be like this.

As the moment passed, Alyssa's gentle voice filled his mind as she said, \*It's not like you to be so introspective. It was a lovely thought though.\*

\*Having my balls emptied like that probably helped,\* he replied with a telepathic chuckle. He smiled at her as he added, \*Although I don't expect we'll be doing that every day!\*

She met his gaze, and arched an eyebrow as she replied, \*If you enjoyed it, why not?\*

He blinked at her, startled by her response, then thought to himself, \*Why not, indeed!\*

All of a sudden, Alyssa's eyes began to glow with a soft white radiance, the light getting stronger with every moment. There was a shocked silence as they all gaped at her, and soon her eyes were filled with the same fierce glow that had appeared the last time Athena had made her presence felt.

"Hello, John," she greeted him, her voice resonating with an uncanny echo, as if there were two people speaking at once.

The other girls were staring at her with wide eyes, not sure what to make of this strange persona that had just taken over their friend. John had spent considerably more time in Athena's company though, and he'd half-expected her to appear in such a manner.

He sat up again, staring at the brilliant light shining from her eyes. Smiling at her, he said, "Hello, Athena. Is everything alright?"

She studied him for a moment, and then nodded slowly, a smile forming on her face as she said, "You did well. Can you feel the difference?"

His first instinct was to reply in the negative, but he paused before he spoke, the goosebumps on his skin telling him not to be so hasty. Now that he was looking for a sign of anything out of the ordinary, he felt a strange tickling sensation in his mind. It was as though something was flowing just out of sight, a soft aura that he couldn't see directly, but that he was picking up in his peripheral vision. He closed his eyes to rest them before trying again, and on a whim he checked the mental compartments in his mind, now that he was free of distractions.

He was shocked at the changes he found within. The mind-map portraying Alyssa, and all the girls linked to her, was glowing with a bright inner radiance. He'd never really studied the connecting lines just after the girls had swallowed his cum, but having reviewed those links only a short while earlier, the radical change was unmissable. Either due to the close moments he'd just shared with each of them, or because he now had an active psychic connection with each girl, the eldritch lay-lines were blazing with a shining white light.

He opened his eyes to look at Athena, and she looked pleased when she saw the understanding in his eyes. "We're ready to proceed," she said in her disconcerting, echoing voice.

"What's this 'ward' idea then?" he asked her curiously. "Will it stop us from getting pulled into the dreamworld?"

Athena's confident smile flickered for a moment, and he could see the doubt and worry that was plaguing her, reflected in her expression during that momentary lapse. He suddenly realised she was maintaining a bold facade to avoid scaring the girls, and him as well, to some extent.

Her gaze met his, and she replied, "With all of you linked like this, we'll try to build a kind of psychic shield, through which I'll attempt to anchor you to the Material Plane. This should prevent you from being drawn into the Astral Plane against your will."

Rachel's grey eyes narrowed with suspicion, and she noted quietly, "That's an awful lot of caveats, Athena. Have you ever done anything like this before?"

Athena turned to look at the brunette, and she hesitated for a moment before she replied, "I've created numerous variations along a similar theme."

That sounded like a resounding 'no' to the brilliant doctor, but a cautionary glance from John warned her not to push further. As shaky as this plan seemed to Rachel, the look on his face made her realise they had no other options. She gave a slight nod of her head, then stayed quiet.

When Athena turned to look at him again, John asked her, "So how does this work exactly? What do we need to do?"

She met his curious stare with her unwavering gaze and replied, "We'll provide the power, but you'll need to shape the shield around us. I'll explain how when the moment arrives."

"Alright, I'm ready," he told her, figuring that there was no point delaying things when he had no way of preparing in advance.

Looking around at the girls again, Athena said, "Each of you will need to close your eyes to help avoid distractions, and keep yourselves focused." She smiled at them in encouragement as she continued, "Just think about your relationship with John and Alyssa, it'll make it easier for me to integrate you into the psychic lattice."

The girls shared bemused looks with one another, but they each began to close their eyes, following Athena's instructions. Soon all six girls were sitting there patiently, their beguiling eyes firmly shut and hidden behind long lashes.

"That's excellent, Calara, well done!" Athena remarked a few seconds later, sounding startled.

These kind of focusing exercises were second nature to the Latina, having spent countless sessions with John mastering just this kind of meditation technique. She was a trusting girl, and she threw herself into this exercise with her typical dedication, knowing that John needed her help. Surprisingly Sakura followed shortly afterwards, which Athena acknowledged with an approving smile. One by one each girl fell deeper into the trance, their psychic mentor nodding with satisfaction until there was just a single person left.

"I'm sorry," Rachel whimpered, a troubled frown on her face. "I'm trying, but I find it too hard to let go. My mind's too busy!"

Athena looked alarmed, and she glanced at John as she thought to him, \*She's strong, John. We need her for this.\*

\*Don't worry, let me handle it,\* he replied, giving her a confident smile, and moving across the bed until he was behind the kneeling brunette. He glanced at the other girls to check on them, but they were all immersed in the trance now, oblivious to this interruption.

Rachel's eyelids flickered open, and she twisted to glance at him over her shoulder, as she murmured in a hushed voice, "I can't help it! I loathe these kind of spiritualistic rituals, they fly in the face of reason. I'm so sorry that I'm letting you down!"

He leaned in to give her a comforting kiss, then shuffled in closer, wrapping his arms around her. "Shh, everything's going to be okay," he murmured in her ear, his deep voice sending shivers down her spine. Pulling her back against him, he placed one hand on her abdomen, and the other on her chest, and whispered, "Just relax and breathe with me. Use the movements of my chest as a guide."

She gave him one last dubious glance, then did as he asked, closing her eyes once more. He felt her inhaling and exhaling as she leant against him, their chests moving in perfect synchronisation.

"Like this?" she asked, her voice calmer now as his soothing presence relaxed her.

"You're doing wonderfully," he praised her. His right hand was across her stomach, and he gently stroked her lower belly where her swallow tattoo had been.

"That feels lovely," Rachel whispered, relaxing against him.

He nodded as he kissed her bare shoulder, and said, "We've only just started to explore how my abilities work. Psychic powers aren't magical, the Progenitors just tapped into a form of science we don't understand yet."

She smiled as she murmured, "Any sufficiently advanced technology..."

"That's right," he said in a hushed voice, nodding as he held her. "Just think of this as a science experiment."

"With a proven protocol that just hasn't been fully documented?" she asked, sounding eager now.

He nodded, and said, "Exactly. So just relax, and follow Athena's protocol. Focus on me and my voice, it'll help make you more responsive for this experiment."

The brunette nodded slowly, listening to him as he whispered gentle, encouraging words in her ear.

It took less than ten seconds for Athena to announce, "She's immersed now, John. That was excellent, well done!"

John smiled at her praise, then moved to join her in the centre of the bed, kneeling in front of Athena. He was surprised to see her whole body shrouded in a white glow now, the radiance no longer shining from just her eyes.

Looking at her in alarm, he asked, "Are you alright? Your whole body is glowing!"

Athena held her arms out in front of her, the light pouring from her being, a wild grin shattering her normally calm and composed demeanour. She laughed in delight, and sounded full of admiration as she exclaimed, "The amount of power they're channelling to me is staggering! These links were never meant to work this way, John..."

"What do I do now?" he asked, eyeing her with a worried frown.

She placed her hand on his shoulder, then gracefully straddled him, reminiscent of his joining with Alyssa only a short while ago. Her face was only inches from his as she stared into his eyes, and urged him, "Use the power I give to you, and shape it into a shield! I'll guide the function, but you have to provide the form."

He nodded hesitantly, watching the unpredictable girl in front of him, unsure what she was going to do next. Catching him by surprise, she leaned in and kissed him passionately, flooding him with Eldritch energy.

"Holy fuck!" he blurted out, muffled by her eager lips, as he felt a pulsating surge of power swelling within him, making his hair stand on end.

Working by instinct, John held out his hands behind Athena, and imagined that wellspring of psychic energy pouring along his arms and then out from his fingertips. He wasn't exactly sure what she'd meant by 'shield', but he wanted it to encompass all of them, so he formed a large dome in his mind, big enough to arc over the bed. He was surprised when blue-tinted semi-transparent hexagons began to form out of thin air, slotting together and forming the base of the dome he was building. He could picture the precise shape he wanted, and tile by tile, he filled every inch of that curved surface.

Athena was still clinging to him when he was done, planting tender kisses on his lips, and gazing at him lovingly. He kissed her back, then smiled at her, and asked, "How did I do?"

She blushed furiously, and he strongly suspected she'd got far more carried away with the kissing than was actually necessary. She looked up at the blue-tinted dome, and her eyes widened in surprise as she gasped, "That's brilliant, John!"

Dismounting him with his assistance, she stood on the bed, and stretched out her arms so that she could place her fingertips against the glowing curved surface of his shield. She closed her eyes, and her hands began to move as if she was probing the dome for weaknesses. Finally reopening her eyes again, she met his expectant gaze, and nodded her approval.

"That's it then? We're safe?" he asked, his relief quite apparent in his tone.

Athena sank to her knees beside him, and with newfound respect in her eyes, she replied, "Your shield exceeded my original design, by layering additional protective wards into the lattice. We've done everything we can."

"So what happens now? Do I just go to sleep?" he asked, feeling more confident now, and pleased that he'd exceeded her expectations.

The reverberation in her voice seemed more apparent as she replied, "I'll relinquish all control to Alyssa, then yes, you just fall asleep. If all goes according to plan, you'll wake up tomorrow morning, and you can carry on unmolested."

With a grateful smile on his face, he said, "Thank you for all your help, Athena." He hesitated for a moment, before he blurted out, "I'm going to try and find a way to help you! I don't want you to be absorbed and destroyed."

Reaching out her hand, she brushed it against his cheek, and said wistfully, "I wish things could be different, but my fate is already sealed. When Alyssa's ready, I'll merge with her."

He gave her a confident grin, and said, "Don't worry, we'll come up with something, we always do!"

She gave him a sad smile, and replied, "I know you'll try your hardest. Thank you..."

Closing her eyes, she slowly exhaled, the light no longer shining out from under her lashes. Alyssa drew in her breath sharply, her blue eyes snapping open, and she looked around, trying to get her bearings.

John pulled the confused girl into his arms, and said, "Welcome back, beautiful. Let me bring you up to speed..."

\*\*\*

The girls had been roused from the trance as soon as Athena had departed, and they looked up in wonder at the blue hexagonal dome that John had created to protect them. He briefly explained what had happened while they'd been in their deep meditative state, and they were relieved to hear that Athena was confident in the protective nature of the shield he'd constructed.

There was a brief telepathic conversation between the girls while the sleeping arrangements were discussed, as John had broken their carefully planned system, by feeding all of them an equal amount after the orgy. While they made their mind up, John decided to make a trip to the bathroom, and after hesitantly waving his hand at the dome, he was relieved to find that he could pass harmlessly through the shield.

The girls followed him to finish their night-time routine, with Alyssa and Sakura the first to join him back in bed a minute later. He welcomed the blonde and the raven-haired girl with open arms, and they snuggled up to him while the others adopted their normal hierarchy in the bed.

"Thanks for an amazing evening, ladies," he said to them all, glancing both ways.

After a chorus of "You're welcome!" and plenty of giggling, there was a brief bout of quiet chatter amongst the girls. The conversation eventually faded out as everyone got drowsy, and they all settled down for the night.

"Good night everyone," John murmured, his eyelids growing heavy as he finally drifted off to sleep.

\*\*\*

John felt the welcome oblivion of sleep fading away, and the featureless darkness began to form vague, grey nebulous shapes as his surroundings lightened. He shook off his disorientation in alarm, recognising the swirling ethereal mists that preceded a visit to the dream world. Although he couldn't see more than a few metres in every direction, it was enough to make out the edges of the dome he'd created, the precise geometry of the hexagonal tiles preventing the astral fog from swirling around his feet.

With the mists held at bay, he was able to study the ground for the first time, but it was simply a featureless black surface that made him dizzy to look at it. It felt like he was walking across an inverted night's sky, and that strong sense of agoraphobia assailed him as before. He purposefully turned away from staring at the floor, and looked around him at the rest of his surroundings.

For some reason the mists hadn't disappeared in a flash like they normally did, which usually happened moments before being plunged into some kind of terrifying nightmare. As it was, he was left standing there with an rising sense of foreboding, as he wondered what was going to happen next.

He couldn't see past the ethereal mists, but he -knew- there was something lurking out there, just out of sight. A deep bellow thundered out of the fog, confirming his worries in a terrifying instant; the ponderous sound brimming over with pure frustration and rage that left him quaking in fear. The sonorous cry could have come from any direction in the unbroken banks of fog, which pressed up oppressively against his warding dome.

Suddenly he wasn't alone in the protective confines of the shield, and a girl snapped into existence at his side. "Oh fuck! Not again!" Alyssa cried out in alarm. She spotted him and rushing into his arms, she gasped, "John! What's happening?"

The indignant roar echoed around him again, sounding closer this time, and deafeningly loud. Alyssa quaked in his arms, her blue eyes wide with terror. The noise didn't end, but just reverberated around them, growing louder and quieter in cresting waves.

"I've got no idea!" he replied, just as scared as she was. "The shield was supposed to stop this, but we're stuck in this astral fog!"

Something massive clomped down in the mists what seemed like only a few dozen metres away, causing the floor to tremble with the impact.

"Get us out of here!" Alyssa screamed, her breathing coming in short gasps.

John flogged his brain in desperation, trying to recall how he'd yanked them out of the Astral Plane the last time they'd been attacked. Gathering his will, he held on to her tightly, then attempted to jerk them out of this limbo state and back to their bodies. His heart surged with relief as he felt a trembling shift, and he knew he was on the right track, but something immense seemed to interpose itself between them and his target destination.

"I can't! I'm being blocked!" he exclaimed in dread.

She was about to reply when a gigantic shape coagulated above them out of the mists, crashing down on the shield with a cacophonous impact. They dropped to their knees, with Alyssa screaming in fear as they stared at the titanic limb in abject horror.

The end of a vast tentacle had smashed into the dome, black and viscous, and dripping with all sorts of foul corruption. Centred in the limb was a gaping maw, with endless circles of razor-sharp teeth flexing and convulsing with a dreadful hunger. They dug into the shield, scratching and tearing as they tried to chew their way through, but finding no obvious break in the arcing surface. The limb swung back, leaving eddies in the fog as it disappeared from view as quickly as it had arrived.

"John...!" Alyssa moaned in fear, clinging to him as if her very life depended on it.

Then the tentacle was back, hammering at the shield with unspeakable force. There were tendrils embedded with multi-barbed claws surrounding the limb, and they flailed at the surface as it tried to rip through. The slavering mouth was biting and chomping as it ravaged the dome, the rows of teeth circling like a fanged whirlpool.

Alyssa's screams of fear suddenly intensified into a shrill chorus, and John realised that the other girls were here too. Even though they had just appeared, they seemed fully aware of the abyssal terror that was trying to sunder their protective haven, and with a start, he suddenly realised they'd been here all along, merely obscured from his senses. With low cries of relief, the girls seemed to see him too, and crawled across the onyx floor, reaching out to John and Alyssa in their terror. He gathered them to him as best he could, surrounded now by whimpering girls as the ancient eldritch behemoth continued its relentless assault.

Another tentacle joined the first, vast and sickening as it loomed out of the fog. This one was covered in a nauseating multitude of eyes, each one surrounded by uneven, bloody teeth. It studied them in its unblinking gaze, and to be the focus of such a hideous ancient intellect filled John with a paralysing terror.

The loathsome eyes seemed to all focus on a single point in the shield, and from high up above them, a distorted cackle of vile laughter seemed to seep through to his bones. The clawed and fanged limb slithered across the curve of the dome, and seemed to be feeling for some kind of vulnerable location. It battered that same spot with a resounding smash, causing a splintered fracture in one of the tiles, before rearing back for a mightier blow. The ragged screaming from the girls intensified, their terror sharpening as their sanity trembled on a knife edge.

Flickering runes appeared in the tiled surface of the dome, and John blinked in shock as he recognised the language of the Progenitors in that glowing script. Heedless of the doom that approached them, he stared at the writing in wonder, its meaning becoming clear to him as though another form of fog was lifted from his mind. The wards described the structure of the shield, and he understood that the strange runes linked the protective dome to the girls that had provided him the power to construct it.

As the newest member of their group, Sakura was their weakest link, having been with them for only a matter of days. He knew now that Athena had made a terrible mistake adding her to this ritual, but there was no time for recriminations or to bemoan the unfortunate error in judgement. The sharp clarity of this moment let him shrug off the feeling of all-pervading terror, and he rose from the cowering group of girls, stepping clear as they shrieked for him to return to them.

Placing his hands on the dome he focused his will, shoring up and strengthening the weak point, the wards flaring as he bolstered them. The edges of the fracture melted together, reinforced and impenetrable once more.

The rent was resealed with seconds to spare, as the staggering immensity of that clawed limb raced out of the swirling mists, and smashed into the shield with enough force to make the ground quake. The hideous assembly of eyes reared above them once more, the gloating laughter echoing around them as it viewed the focal point for its assault. The stomach-churning laughter was cut off with a sound like a limb being torn from a body, and an incandescent howl of anger boomed around them.

It was John's turn to laugh now, and the girls gaped at him as if he'd gone insane.

"Your eyes, they're glowing!" Alyssa gasped, her fear forgotten for a second as she stared at him in amazement.

Further discussion was cut off as Jade cried out, "It's trying to tunnel under the wall!"

John whirled around and immediately saw what the Nymph had spotted behind them. A third tentacle had appeared, identical to the first, and the serrated teeth in that ravenous mouth were whirring against the floor, sounding like some kind of drill. Black chips were spattering off the dome as tiny fragments were broken loose, which then hit the shield and oozed down to the ground. The barbed tendrils adorning the tentacle lashed with a repulsive eagerness, as if hungry to tear into their flesh.

John sorely wished he had his gear with him, but here he was naked and unarmed, with seven vulnerable girls to protect. That thought triggered a blistering, terrible anger, drawing up from deep inside him. Here in the Astral Plane, such intensity of emotion had a power of its own, and his rage manifested before him into something tangible that he could use. A blackened blade over six feet long appeared, dreadful red runes glowing in the surface as it floated in the air.

Seizing the weapon with both hands, he rushed forward, surging through the protective dome as though it were just an insubstantial illusion. He used his momentum and his two-handed grip, to deliver a devastating scything cut to the tentacle's flank, gouging a four-foot-deep furrow through the grotesque, crawling flesh. Black ichor spurted out in a fountain, and from some unseen orifice high above, the stygian monstrosity let loose a disbelieving howl at his effrontery. John dived back into his warded sanctuary, narrowly avoiding the ripping hooks that sought him out, which rebounded harmlessly from the wall of hexagons.

"How did you do that?" Alyssa asked, as she gaped at him in astonishment.

"Your mind has power here," he said, struggling to put his epiphany into words. "That thing isn't invulnerable, we can hurt it..."

He glanced up at the innumerable baleful eyes, which glared at them, full of hate. Several more gigantic tentacles lurched out of the billowing fogbanks, cutting into the ground around them as the fearful abomination tired of their impudence.

"Hurt it..." Alyssa mumbled while quaking with fear. She tried to wrap her brain around the concept of challenging this terrifying enormity, a twisted titanic monster the likes of which she could scarcely begin to comprehend.

John let go of his sword and left it to float in the air, as he took hold of her shoulders with both hands and stared into her frightened eyes. He reached out to her telepathically to try and shake her out of her terror stricken stupor, and yelled, \*We need to distract it! Hurt it badly enough, so I can tear us free from the Astral Plane!\*

\*It's fucking huge...\* she stammered, staring back at him in disbelief. \*You barely scratched it with that sword!\*

\*I know, but my mind works differently to yours!\* he growled in frustration. \*I've given you all my other powers, there must be something you can do!\*

She gaped at him as she tried to grasp what he was saying.

More screams reached their ears, tinged with pain this time, and Irillith shrieked in terror, "John! It's nearly through!"

He glanced behind him, and saw that the tunnelling maws had burrowed several pits in the onyx around them. Wickedly hooked tendrils were wriggling under the small holes appearing around the base of the dome, and one of them had slashed Irillith's leg with a cruel talon. He seized his sword again, and began frenziedly hacking any barbed appendage that tried to snake its way through.

Calara grabbed the paralysed blonde, and hugged her fiercely. "I love you," she whimpered, knowing that they had only seconds left before the unspeakable horror would be upon them. She pressed her lips against Alyssa's giving her one final kiss goodbye.

A Progenitor derives their power from the women in their thrall, and as wondrously unique as Alyssa was, a female Progenitor was no different. Calara's loving kiss roused Alyssa from her daze, and her pupils flared as she sucked in a breath. Her mind felt clear and sharp once more, the debilitating aura of fear no longer clogging her mind and leaving her helpless.

"... Something you can do..." John's desperate plea echoed around Alyssa's mind, until her eyes suddenly narrowed in fury. She turned to look at him, and yelled, \*I know what to do! Drop the shield on my command!\*

\*Drop the shield?!\* he balked, but the look she shot him left him in no doubt of her sincerity.

"Stand clear," she warned Calara, who backed away from her in shock.

Alyssa began gathering her will, and a shrieking, howling wind tore around the dome, with her at the epicentre of the vortex. Eldritch energy surged towards her, swathing her body in glowing white light that cascaded down her arms to gather at her hands. Raising her fists towards the gigantic terror, she cried out to John, \*Drop it now!!!\*

The hundreds of eyes embedded in the creature's grotesque otherworldly limb all stared at the glowing girl in shock. Square, vertical, and round pupils all widened in disbelief, the leviathan experiencing fear for the first time.

John was about to let the dome harmlessly dissipate, but at the last moment, he changed his mind. He channelled the huge amounts of eldritch power across the bond with his Matriarch, pouring vast streams of psychic energy back into her glowing body.

Alyssa let loose a wordless scream as she blazed brighter than a supernova, and an incandescent beam blasted out of her to hit the limb square-on. The searing white light incinerated tar-like flesh by the tonne, obliterating those disgusting eyes in one awe-inspiring moment of raw power. The hideous nightmare gurgled in agony and terror, its remaining half-dozen limbs flailing away into the fog as it toppled backwards.

Flinging his sword away, John dove into the group of girls, gathering them to him just as he gathered his will. He focused on their bedroom back on the Invictus, filled with desperation to escape this state of limbo they currently found themselves trapped in. The Astral Plane seemed to rip away as he unleashed the pent-up energy, and they were thrown back into the real world in a shocking instant.

They all lurched upright, panting for breath, hearts hammering in their chest. Gasping sobs filled the room as they clung to each other, overwhelmed with relief to have survived the terrifying nightmare.

"I'm never fucking sleeping again!" Dana swore vehemently as she hugged Rachel, their faces wet with tears.