Three Square Meals Ch. 86

“I’m sorry to interrupt,” Faye said hesitantly, having appeared in a flash on the Firing Range a minute earlier. “You two can kiss for a really long time!”

John and Dana parted, both turning to smile at the sprite.

“That’s alright, Faye,” John said, releasing the redhead from his embrace. “What’s up?”

“I just wanted to let you know that we’ve arrived at the Alpha Ursae Majoris system,” she replied, her big eyes studying his face. “Would you like me to fly the Invictus to the planet Kodiak?”

He thought about it for a moment, then shook his head. “Bring us closer to the star, please. I’ll go and find Sakura, then we’ll be taking the Raptor. Could you pilot for us?”

“Of course!” Faye replied enthusiastically. “I’ll have an avatar prep the gunship for you.”

“Much appreciated, thank you,” he said, with a smile as she waved him goodbye and blinked out of sight.

Dana let out a melodramatic sigh. “I guess that’s our morning over then?”

He brushed the backs of his fingers against her cheek. “Only for a few hours. I thought we could work together on the Valkyrie later.”

She looked overjoyed, before frowning in confusion. “I thought we decided to postpone the mech refit until we’d upgraded the Invictus with Photon Lasers?”

“We’ll be going on our skiing vacation soon and I know Sakura wants to train on the Valkyrie in her spare time. Besides, I’ve shaped all the gun barrels already. The Photon Lasers just need assembling and the maintenance bots haven’t fitted the new power relays or power couplings yet,” John explained.

Dana mulled it over for a few seconds then gave him an eager grin. “Alright! I’ve got a few things I need to work on while you’re busy with Sakura this morning. We can make a start after lunch.”

“Perfect!” he exclaimed, as they walked back to the rifles they’d left on the shooting bench.

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Shinatobe cartwheeled through the air to dodge the spray of fully-automatic weapons fire. Black swords flashed in her hands, her right ninjato slicing through the armoured bodyguard’s neck, neatly decapitating the man. One of the ten-millimetre slugs he’d been spraying across the room had hit her right leg, but she deactivated her pain receptors and dropped into a crouch to check the damage to her thigh. She was bleeding heavily, but the wound wasn’t severe enough to prevent her from finishing the mission.

With a slight limp, she stalked into the room beyond, catching sight of the smartly-dressed woman bolting for the door on the opposite side of the grand study. Annabel Chanders glanced over her shoulder, her eyes wild with terror as she attempted to flee from the assassin sent to end her life. Shinatobe neither knew, nor cared, that the assassination had been paid for by a rival arms dealer. Miss Chanders was about to learn the hard way, that there were consequences to using industrial espionage to undercut bids for lucrative weapons supply contracts.

Activating her adrenal implant, Shinatobe rushed across the room in a blur, swords drawn back as she prepared to slash at the woman’s hamstrings. Her orders were to not kill right away, she was to take plenty of time torturing this particular target...

“Sakura! You’re having a bad dream, wake up!”

The dreadful nightmare faded away as Sakura was jostled awake and she found herself staring into a pair of concerned grey eyes.

“It’s okay, you’re safe now,” Rachel said, pulling her in for a hug.

Sakura let out a sigh of relief and hugged Rachel back, heart pounding in her chest as she trembled in her embrace. They were both lying in bed together and while Sakura was still partly-clothed in the underwear she’d worn the previous night, Rachel was entirely nude. Her bronzed skin felt wonderfully soft against the Asian girl’s cheek and she relaxed in that warm and comforting embrace.

“You need to tell John you’re experiencing these nightmares every night,” Rachel said gently. “I know he’ll be able to do something to help you.”

Sakura lifted her head and gazed at the brunette. “How did you know?”

Rachel brushed her fingers through Sakura’s jet-black hair. “Alyssa told me yesterday. I’m the ship’s Doctor, so your mental wellbeing is one of my responsibilities.” She leaned forward and gave Sakura a tender kiss, before adding, “You’re my friend too and someone I really care about; I don’t want to see you suffering like this.”

After thinking about it for a moment, Sakura resisted the instinctive urge to deny there was a problem. With Mikaboshi dead, she could no longer claim that she was holding onto these memories to avenge all of his victims, but she was worried about losing her combat edge if they were removed. “I’ll speak to John about it,” she said reluctantly.

“You promise?” Rachel persisted with the hint of a smile. “A lady of your advancing years needs to take better care of herself.”

Sakura laughed and rolled her eyes. “Hey! I’m not much older than you are!”

“Not according to your medical records,” Rachel teased her. “You’re ninety-five according to the date of birth listed there, so I might have to start treating you accordingly until we can get this sleep issue resolved.” Tapping her finger on her chin she carefully considered her options. “To start with, sending a Terran of your age out on combat missions is quite out of the question. The next time there’s a fight, perhaps we should tuck you up with a blanket and a cup of warm milk instead?”

“Alright Doctor, you win,” Sakura said with a smile. “I promise I’ll speak to John about it.”

“Thank you,” Rachel said gratefully, her fingers stroking Sakura’s back.

\*We’ve just dropped out of hyper-warp,\* Alyssa warned them both. \*You better get showered and ready, then you can meet us for breakfast in the Officers’ Lounge.\*

The two girls shared a smile then broke their hug and climbed out of bed.

“Want some company?” Rachel asked with an arched eyebrow as Sakura undressed and walked into the bathroom.

Sakura’s hand appeared around the doorframe a moment later, a finger beckoning the brunette to join her. Rachel laughed and followed her into the shower cubicle, letting out a sigh of pleasure as the water cascaded down on them both. She got some soap from the dispenser, then began to gently wash Sakura, her tanned fingers following the spectacular golden-brown curves of the Asian girl’s taut, firm breasts.

“That feels lovely,” Sakura murmured, closing her almond-shaped eyes and enjoying the relaxing caress.

“You’ll have to join me and Dana again sometime,” Rachel purred seductively, her fingers circling Sakura’s erect nipples. “We’re both very grateful to you for saving us from those assassins.”

Sakura reopened her eyes to gaze at the brunette, blushing as she remembered the attention the two beautiful girls had lavished on her the last time they’d been together. “You don’t need to feel obligated, not after everything you’ve done for me.”

Rachel faked a disapproving frown. “But I was really looking forward to watching Dana go down on you again! You looked so sexy when you came for her... Are you saying you didn’t enjoy our last threesome?”

The Asian girl blushed even harder and shook her head. “I loved it... but-”

“Well, that’s settled then,” Rachel interrupted her with a decisive nod. “See John tonight to sort out those nightmares, then Dana and I will help tire you out before bedtime. Doctor’s orders!”

Sakura laughed as she imagined what the prescription for that would look like. She put her arms around the brunette, giving her a grateful hug. “Thank you for looking after me.”

“You’re my friend, friends look out for each other,” Rachel murmured, giving her a gentle squeeze in return. “Now, we better stop dawdling, John will be waiting for you.”

The Asian girl nodded and they proceeded to finish off their shower with only the bare minimum of playful caresses. After drying off, Rachel waved her goodbye then left to get some fresh clothes from her own quarters. Sakura went to her wardrobe and retrieved one of the form-fitting bodysuits she wore under her body armour. It only took a few seconds to zip herself into the suit, Alyssa’s artfully designed outfit hugging her figure like a second skin.

She turned to leave, then stopped beside the sculpted image of her parents, studying their perfect replicas. While gazing at their faces, she couldn’t help feeling a surge of guilt - they wouldn’t have approved of her obsession with bringing Mikaboshi to justice, but Sakura had made her decision and had executed the master assassin for his crimes. Now, she just had to put everything behind her and move on... or try to at least.

Not for the first time, she was left wondering if her high-minded declarations about seeking justice for her family, and all of Mikaboshi’s victims, had actually just been self-deception. Was her real motive just about seeking revenge against him for everything he’d done to her personally? Maybe that was why she’d felt guilty before and found herself unable to take that pendant with her. She felt a sharp pang of regret about leaving the beautiful locket in the Engineering Bay and whirled around, rushing to the door to retrieve it.

\*Relax, I picked it up for you,\* Alyssa murmured telepathically, her soothing voice swirling through Sakura’s mind. \*Come to the Officers’ Lounge and you can have it back.\*

Sakura heaved a sigh of relief. After a moment’s pause, she requested, \*Would you mind keeping it safe for me, please? Just for a little while longer?\*

\*Sure, let me know whenever you want it back,\* Alyssa replied, her tone understanding.

When Sakura opened the door to her quarters and walked into the corridor, she found John waiting outside, leaning against the wall.

“How are you feeling this morning?” he asked, opening his arms to embrace her.

Sakura leaned against his chest, feeling a thrill run through her body as his strong arms wrapped around her. “Much better, thank you,” she said gratefully.

“I’m sorry I wasn’t there when you woke up,” he apologised, tilting up her chin to study her face with concern in his eyes. “I needed to take care of a few things before we arrived in-system.”

“That’s quite alright, Rachel did a good job looking after me,” Sakura replied, blushing faintly.

John’s hand swept her long black hair away from her face and he leaned in to give her a kiss that left her breathless. “Are you sure you’re ready for this morning? We can take as much time as you need to prepare yourself.”

Looking back into his eyes to show him her resolve, she slowly nodded. “I’m ready.”

“I can see that,” he replied, meeting her intense gaze. He released her from his arms, then offered her a hand and a smile. “Let’s go get some breakfast then we can head out.”

Sakura slipped her hand into his, returning his smile as she walked with him towards the Officers’ Lounge. When the doors opened to admit them, she saw that the rest of the crew were already there having breakfast, greeting the couple with welcoming smiles and waves. Alyssa and Calara had been standing talking together, and they walked over to meet them as John led Sakura over to the dining table.

“I’m so sorry about dinner last night,” Sakura apologised to Calara, looking shamefaced. “After all the trouble you’d gone to, making those dishes for me...”

Calara gave her a warm hug and whispered in her ear, “I can’t imagine how difficult all this must be for you. There’s no need to apologise for anything, I promise.”

When they pulled apart, Sakura gave her a look filled with gratitude.

Alyssa reached out to brush hands with the Asian girl in a simple gesture of affection. “Take a seat, we’ve made you two some breakfast.”

Conversation during the meal was deliberately muted, with the girls trying to avoid disturbing Sakura who was lost in thought. John listened to the quiet chatter with half an ear, his focus on the Asian girl rather than the tasks everyone had planned for that morning.

\*Do you want me to come with you?\* Alyssa asked, leaning forward to catch his eye.

He turned to look at her and shook his head before returning his gaze to Sakura. \*It’s probably best if we handle this with just the two of us.\*

\*Good luck. I hope she finds the closure she needs,\* she said, a sympathetic expression on her face.

Despite being distracted, Sakura finished her breakfast, having skipped dinner the previous evening. When John walked over to join her, she smiled at him then rose from her chair, falling into step beside him. He offered his hand and she held it with both of hers as they walked back down the corridor to their bedroom, only letting go to travel down in the express grav-tube. They both walked over to armour-equipping frames to get suited up, the Paragon Armour clicking as the plates were sealed around them.

John ignored the Punisher and Justice rifles on the weapon racks. Instead, he picked up the pair of black ninjato that they’d left propped against the wall, then nodded to Sakura as she stepped clear of the armour equipping frame. They walked across to the second express grav-tube and dropped down to the Secondary Hangar side-by-side, the concealed door sliding open before them as they landed. The hangar door was already open and the Raptor powered up, with one of Faye’s avatars waving to them as they approached the loading ramp. As soon as they were aboard, the loading ramp retracted and the gunship took off, pivoting as it left the deck before sliding out of the Invictus and into space.

“The container is by the starboard airlock,” Faye said over the comm channel, her elfin face sombre when it appeared in his helmet HUD. “We’ll be in position within twenty seconds.”

John propped up the two black swords against the wall, then led Sakura through the door into the corridor beyond, following it into the loading bay at the rear of the ship. Just as Faye had described, he spotted the storage container on the deck by the airlock on his left. He pressed the button to open the inner airlock door, then picked up the sealed box, carrying it with him.

“Whenever you’re ready,” he said to Sakura as she stood at his side.

She took a deep breath, then pressed her hand to the DNA scanner by the door. The light flashed green as it recognised her genetic code, the security database having been kept regularly updated to keep track of her changing DNA. The airlock door spiralled open, revealing the blazing pale-yellow star at the centre of the Alpha Ursae Majoris system. They were close enough that she could feel the slight gravitational pull from that huge sun, the Raptor’s retro-thrusters flaring to keep them from approaching any closer.

Sakura removed the lid from the crate, revealing a stack of cybernetic implants, the long snaking cables from the adrenal booster making the contents appear messy. She stared at the cold metallic components for a long moment, appearing frozen in indecision.

“The man who took so much from you is dead,” John said gently, watching her face. “It’s time to let go of all that hate... don’t let him take any more of your life.”

Her brown eyes lifted to meet his gaze and she nodded. “I’ve got a new life now, here with you.”

She reached into the container and picked up the adrenal booster. It embodied the extent of the gruesome changes that had been forced upon her, its spidery metallic tendrils having invaded so much of her body. Staring at it one final time, she turned and flung it through the airlock, watching as the implant spiralled away into space.

One after the other, the rest of the implants joined the first, forming a cold trail of lifeless parts that had been responsible for so much pain and suffering. John and Sakura stood and watched them accelerating away, the blazing star pulling them towards its fiery surface. Eventually they were lost from sight against that bright glow, incinerated in the conflagration at the heart of the star.

“It’s finally over,” Sakura murmured as she gazed at the shining sun before them.

She closed her eyes and let out a long breath, letting go of all her anger and bitterness towards Mikaboshi with it. The man had controlled her life for seventy-five years, but she wasn’t going to let him take another minute. She slowly opened her eyes, feeling the tension in her shoulders fading away as she stood unburdened for the first time in so many decades. The hollow feeling inside her was gone now, replaced by a profound sense of peace.

Reaching out to close the airlock, she turned and looked at John, her voice throbbing with gratitude as she said, “Thank you, for everything.”

He smiled when he saw her serene expression. “I can see the change in you. I don’t think you’ve ever looked more beautiful.”

Sakura blushed as she walked over to him, pulling off her armoured helmet as he removed his. They shared a tender kiss before John led her from the airlock, leaving the empty container behind them.

The Raptor pivoted and pulled away, its huge engines blazing orange as Faye left the gravitational pull of the huge star. She set a new course towards the planet on the second orbital path in the Alpha Ursae Majoris system, the planet Kodiak. It was a relatively recent addition to the Terran Federation’s long list of colonised worlds. Originally a forbidding icy ball, Kodiak had been extensively terraformed, making it ideally suited for Terran life. The global temperature was a few degrees colder than Terra, but only enough to make the air feel cool, crisp and clear.

Kodiak had two main continents. The larger one was where most of the new cities were being constructed, springing up around the bustling starport that oversaw the steady influx of new colonists. John’s destination however, was in the more remote part of the planet, in the rolling foothills on the second, smaller continent. This area of the planet was intended for the more wealthy Terran Federation citizens, so the population density was kept much lower here.

While John and Sakura waited patiently in the front loading bay, Faye brought the Raptor down through the lower atmosphere, following the coordinates that Irillith had provided her. Alyssa had already contacted Kodiak Flight Control to request permission to fly through the secure airspace, so Faye’s descent was unopposed as she finally cleared the cloudbanks. This part of Kodiak was breathtakingly beautiful, made up of miles of unspoilt grasslands and copses of trees - a virgin world prepared for humanity to stake its claim.

A minute later, their destination came into view. On one of the hills, sat a large pagoda-style house, surrounded by a walled enclosure. The walls were brown and cream, topped by a slate roof that was just high enough to protect the pristine garden within from the worst of the wind that whipped over the hills.

It hadn’t been hard for Irillith to track down Yamamoto, not when she had access to the comm logs from all the calls between him and John. The messages were heavily encrypted and the route had been masked by being bounced through dozens of comm beacons, but these were simple obstacles to overcome for the gifted Maliri hacker.

Faye brought the gunship to a halt, hovering in the air a few dozen metres above the garden below. John and Sakura walked out onto the lowered ramp, then stepped off the edge, using the anti-gravity generators in their armour to float silently down to the stone path. They had left their helmets behind and Sakura carried the pair of black swords with her.

A stream gurgled happily as it wound its way through the perfectly manicured lawns. The rich green of the closely cropped grass contrasted with the light sprinkling of pink cherry blossoms from the trees that were spaced evenly around the garden. He could smell the fragrant scent of those blossoms in the chilled air, finding it as calming as it was delightful. Opposite the house was the familiar shape of the training dojo, where John had spent many hours duelling with Yamamoto.

John glanced around the beautiful garden as he landed, marvelling at the sight. “It’s just like the training simulator!”

Sakura nodded appreciatively, her long black hair brushing over her armoured shoulders in the light breeze. “It’s absolutely enchanting.”

Outside the wooden dojo was the stone garden, just as John had remembered it. There was a new shape and pattern to the stones now, the sea of white stones meticulously placed with a single onyx stone on one side, a dozen more on the other. Concentric rings rippled out from the cluster of black stones, merging and building in height until they threatened to wash over the solitary black stone.

As John was studying the patterns, he spotted a flicker of movement inside the dojo. The familiar figure moved to the open doorway, revealing Eito Yamamoto’s face, contorted with anger.

“You dare come here?!” Yamamoto snarled, incandescent with fury. His eyes widened as he spotted the black ninjato in Sakura’s hands. “Are you here to finish what the assassins started?!

He whirled around, darting back into the dojo before John could reply. John shared a glance with Sakura, who looked at him with equal concern. They jogged up the path towards the wooden building, with John taking the lead as he ran inside. Yamamoto had sprinted for one of the katanas that were sheathed in racks against the wall and he now held one of those deadly swords in a two-handed grip as he charged towards them.

“Wait!” John shouted, holding up his hand to urge the man to stop.

He gathered his will to push Yamamoto back with a wave of force, but Sakura had reacted even faster. Moving in a blur, she swept in front of John, smoothly parrying the katana that whistled down towards his head. Yamamoto stared at her in shock, amazed that anyone could react so quickly. Darting backwards, he repositioned himself with his Katana held defensively before him, his sharp eyes looking for weaknesses in this new foe. Sakura was already on him though, and her two ninjato flashed back and forth as she rained a relentless flurry of blows against his sword, the ringing clash of the blades echoing like thunder around the dojo.

Yamamoto gaped at her in a mixture of astonishment and despair as her strikes moved faster than he could follow. He was suddenly and painfully aware that she could slay him at any moment of her choosing. His fingers were numb as he tried to hold onto his vibrating Katana, until Sakura effortlessly slapped it out of his hand in a startling display of raw strength. He flinched in anticipation of the killing stroke, but it never came. Instead, she stepped back and lowered her blades, before bowing to him respectfully.

“Eito, stop,” John said to the stunned man. “We aren’t here to hurt you. We’ve brought you a gift.”

“A gift?” Yamamoto muttered, staring at him in bewilderment.

John glanced at the young woman standing beside him and said quietly, “This is Sakura Honami. Like you, she was terribly wronged by Mikaboshi, the Master Assassin who took your wife and daughter from you.”

Sakura met Yamamoto’s curious glance with an unwavering gaze. “Mikaboshi took my parents from me and enslaved me for decades,” she said quietly, her voice calm and steady. “He kept me as a prisoner in cryostasis for the better part of seventy-five years. The times when I was released, I was forced by cybernetic implants to do his evil bidding... I’m not telling you this looking for sympathy, but only so that you know I shared your hatred of the man that ruined both our lives.”

Yamamoto’s expression softened, moved by the sincerity of her words.

Sakura reversed her grip on the two ninjato, then offered them to Yamamoto on the palms of her hands. “I present the swords of your enemy to you. I have slain him for his crimes and we have undone his life’s work, destroying everything he sought to accomplish.”

Hands shaking with emotion, Yamamoto reached out to the pair of swords, his trembling fingers brushing over the black blades. He studied them for a moment until a flicker of anger crossed his face. His brown eyes snapped to John as he hissed, “You’ve stolen my revenge from me! This Mikaboshi... he should have died at my hands!”

John didn’t back down from the man’s angry glare. “I first encountered Mikaboshi nearly two months ago, when he sent an assassin after me. It was then that I discovered he was a powerful cyborg.” He had a look of remorse on his face as he added, “I did consider bringing you with us when it was time to face Mikaboshi, but no ordinary man or woman could defeat him, no matter how skilled.”

A flicker of doubt crossed Yamamoto’s face, but he said defiantly, “No one is unstoppable. I could have beaten him...”

Sakura lowered the black swords and slowly shook her head. “Mikaboshi and I fought a close battle, but I had the edge in skill and power.” Her eyes narrowed as she continued in a grim tone, “You’ve seen me fight, so you know how supernaturally fast and strong I am. John was being kind to spare your feelings; Mikaboshi would have killed you in seconds.”

Yamamoto knew how hopelessly outmatched he’d been against Sakura and he could tell she was telling the truth. His shoulders sagged and he whispered in a broken voice, “Everything I trained for... it was all for nothing.”

“Your training meant everything,” John said earnestly, before glancing at the young woman standing beside him. “You trained me and I trained Sakura. Your influence spread out like ripples in a pond and she became your instrument of revenge against Mikaboshi.”

The older man nodded, suddenly looking tired and haggard, the burning fire that had driven him onwards over the years guttering out and dying.

Reaching out to place his hand on Yamamoto’s shoulder, John said quietly, “Be at peace, Eito. Ayumi and Kimiko have finally been avenged...”

At the mention of his wife’s and daughter’s name, Yamamoto’s face crumpled. He dropped to his knees with a sob, shaking with emotion as tears rolled down his cheeks.

Sakura crouched down beside the weeping man. Her voice was gentle and full of sympathy as she said, “With your heart full of hate, there’s no room for love. Don’t let Mikaboshi take any more years from you.”

With that she rose and fell into step beside John as they walked out of the dojo together. The sound of Yamamoto’s grief-stricken sobs filled their ears as he mourned for his beloved wife and daughter.

John paused outside at the stone garden, glancing at the rake beside it. He shared a meaningful look with Sakura and they both began to move in a blur as they willed their psychic speed into effect. Working together, they swiftly removed stones and added new ones, using the rake to smooth out the ripples and create new ones of their own. When they were done, Sakura added the finishing touch, nodding with satisfaction as she moved to stand at John’s side. They lifted silently off the ground and floated up to the waiting Raptor gunship, which tilted upwards and swept away as soon as they were safely aboard.

A long while later when Eito Yamamoto’s grief had run its course, he stumbled down the steps of his dojo, looking around for signs of John and Sakura. His well-trained eye immediately caught the changes to the stone garden and he hurried over to it, anxious to see what they had done.

The growing waves in the white stones had been smoothed out, no longer threatening to crash over the solitary onyx stone that had been left in exactly the same position. Ripples now spread out from that point, touching a second black stone half way across the garden. A new set of ripples spread out from that second stone, until they reached a third on the far side, where the previous cluster of onyx stones had been positioned. Ever-expanding concentric rings circled that final stone, giving the appearance that they had swept the onyx rocks from the stone garden. In their place lay two black ninjato, their blades broken, cleanly snapped in half.

Eito studied the display for a long while, the tension gradually easing from his shoulders. He glanced skyward, murmuring to himself softly, “Like ripples in a pond...”

He turned to walk back to his house, a hint of a smile on his face for the first time in twenty-three years.

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When John and Sakura returned to the Invictus, they headed up to the Combat Bridge to remove their Paragon armour. Alyssa was waiting for them and as soon as Sakura had removed her body armour, she approached, the locket dangling from her fingers.

“Thank you,” Sakura replied, giving the blonde a grateful smile as she accepted the white pendant. “I was just about to come looking for you.”

“I know,” Alyssa replied, wrapping the Asian girl in a supportive hug. “Did all of that help?”

Sakura pulled back and smiled at her. “It really did, thank you.” She glanced at John and added, “When I was talking to Yamamoto about Mikaboshi... I truly felt for the first time that I was putting everything that happened behind me.”

“I’m very proud of you,” John said, walking over to the pair of them and brushing his fingers through Sakura’s long hair. “The way you handled Eito was just what he needed to hear. I hope he’s able to find the same sense of peace that you have.”

She nodded thoughtfully. “I hope so too.”

“I’ve laid in a course for New Eden,” Alyssa said, gazing into Sakura’s eyes. “Is it too soon? Let me know if you need more time.”

Sakura shook her head. “I need to visit that Shinto shrine my parents left for me. I want to say goodbye to them.” Looking back into Alyssa’s bright blue eyes, she added, “I already asked John if he’d come with me, but I was wondering if you would join me too?”

Alyssa nodded and gave her a supportive smile. “You know I’ll be there for you in any way I can.”

“I know,” Sakura replied with a look of sincere gratitude.

Turning to glance at John, Alyssa said, “We’ve got a few hours to go until we reach New Eden. I’d like to just have a nice cuddle with Sakura until we arrive, but I believe you made plans with Dana?”

He nodded and looked at the Asian girl. “I did, but I’m happy to rearrange things with Dana if you want me to stay with you?”

Sakura pulled him down for a tender kiss, then smiled as she replied, “You’ve been wonderful already. Go and spend some time with Dana.”

John waved them both goodbye, watching as they headed up to their bedroom in the express grav-tube. He turned and took the other one, dropping down to the Secondary Hangar before making his way to the loading lift in the Cargo Bay. He noticed several large, unusually-shaped objects stacked together by the lift and he looked at them with interest, trying to figure out what they might be. Stepping onto the lift, he hit the button to make it shoot upwards. He remembered to brace himself this time, so his stomach didn’t end up doing flip-flops when he was launched up into the Engineering Bay.

He was met with a chorus of cheerful greetings when he stepped off the lift into the Workshop, with Jade, Rachel, and Dana all stopping what they were doing to say hello.

“Hey girls,” John replied, before strolling over to join Jade and Rachel where they stood together at the workbench, slipping his arms around their waists. “What’s Dana got you two working on now?”

“We’re building Quantum rifles at the moment,” Jade explained, pointing to the components on the floating anti-grav platforms.

Spotting the distinctive outer shell of the weapon in front of them, he asked, “Do you need me to shape any more metal for you?”

Rachel shook her head, pointing at the neat pile of sparkling white rifle pieces stacked beside the workbench. “Alyssa shaped the rest of the parts we needed, so we’re okay at the moment.”

“How many are you making?” he asked, studying the pile curiously.

“Twelve! Enough for each of us and a few spares,” Dana replied, bouncing down the steps of the Command Podium as she walked over to join them. Handing the holo-reader to Rachel, she continued, “I’ve finished the schematics for the Quantum pistols, babes. When you’re nearly done with the rifles, let Alyssa know, she said she’d come down and make the parts you need.”

“I’m happy to help,” John volunteered.

Dana shook her head and grinned at him. “I need you to help me lug all that stuff in the Cargo Bay through to the Valkyrie’s Launch Bay.”

Rachel propped the holo-reader on the workbench. “How many pistols do you want us to make?”

The redhead glanced at John and asked hesitantly, “Is twelve too much? I figured one for each of us, a couple for our resident pistoleer, plus a few spares. Let me know otherwise as I’ve just programmed the Mass Fabricators.”

“That sounds perfect,” John agreed. “We should all start carrying sidearms when we’re geared up for combat. You never know when you might be caught out by a weapon jam or something like that.”

Dana frowned at him in disapproval. “My guns don’t jam!”

He chuckled and said placatingly, “Sorry, of course not. I meant to say: A pistol’s handy if something gets too close for a rifle shot, or if you urgently need to take someone out but need to reload your rifle.”

“Much better,” she said with a grin, standing on tiptoe to give him a kiss. “I’m ready whenever you are.”

John gave Rachel and Jade a friendly squeeze on their firm rumps by way of goodbye, earning himself some giggles and affectionate smiles. “Okay, I’m all yours,” he said to the redhead.

“Can you grab that fuck-off block of crystal Alyssium?” she asked, nodding towards a massive cube of sparkling white metal . “We’ll need that to make something I’ve got in mind for the mech.”

“Sure,” he replied, walking over to the enormous block and beckoning towards it with his hand. It rose obediently, following his mental commands and floating over with them to the loading lift.

Dana hit the button on the elevator, studying him silently as they dropped down to the Cargo Bay. They reached the deck and John stepped off the lift, then walked over to the various objects stacked nearby. He glanced at the cube he was gesturing towards, then back at the unwieldy components on the deck, frowning as he tried to figure out how he was going to pick them up whilst still towing the crystal Alyssium cube.

“Why don’t you just use telekinesis on everything?” Dana asked, watching him with a curious look on her face.

He glanced back at her and smiled as he shook his head. “You’re thinking about Alyssa. I’m the one with the bulging biceps, remember?”

She walked over to him and placed her hands on his head, before gently turning him to face the huge floating block of ore. “I don’t see you manhandling that...”

John looked at it in shock, losing his concentration and wincing as it crashed to the floor with a massive clang.

\*You’ve been using telekinesis more and more recently,\* Alyssa said, her voice like a cool breeze through his mind. \*All those times you’ve been turning crystal Alyssium into shapes and levitating it in the air, then there’s those Telekinetic walls... It’s all the same thing.\*

“I thought it was just the shaping process,” he murmured, gaping incredulously at the colossal weight of metal he’d just moved with his mind. “I wasn’t even thinking about it...”

“Why not have a go with the rest?” Dana prompted him, glancing back at the other components.

John glanced at the heavy-looking objects on the floor with an apprehensive frown.

\*You’re much more powerful now,\* Edraele whispered to him supportively. \*Did you ever think you’d be deca-shaping crystal Alyssium? You did so without any real strain only this morning.\*

\*You’ve seen how effortless I make this look,\* Alyssa said, her tone encouraging. \*As you said last night, we’re equals.\*

\*I didn’t mean it quite like that,\* John replied with a slight smile.

She gave him the equivalent of an empathic shrug over their bond. \*You made me this powerful, so you must be just as capable.\*

Squaring his shoulders, he gestured towards what looked like a tube of bulky metallic discs. Gathering his will, he lifted his hand, coaxing the stack to raise into the air... and nothing happened. He tried again, concentrating harder, but still nothing. It wasn’t so much that it was too difficult, he might as well have just been waving his hand at the wall.

“Oh well, maybe it’s just the Etherite crystals in the Alyssium making it easier,” Dana said with a nonchalant shrug. “Wait here and I’ll grab some anti-grav harnesses. I’ll just attach them to this stuff and then you can just push it to the Launch Bay.”

John nodded distractedly, looking at the stack of mech components in confusion. He tried again and again, but wasn’t even able to muster so much as a tremor from the stubbornly inanimate objects.

\*Don’t get downhearted,\* Edreale said, sounding sympathetic. \*Maybe there are some things your mind isn’t ready for yet.\*

\*We’ll have to do a better job as your cheerleaders next time,\* Alyssa added playfully, trying to buoy his spirits.

He smiled as he replied, \*The uniforms would probably help...\*

Alyssa laughed but he could feel Edraele’s confusion over their empathic bond. \*Don’t worry,\* she said to her Maliri counterpart. \*I’ve got a spare you can borrow.\*

John walked over to the stack of big heavy discs, picking one of them up and hefting it in his hand. Despite its heavy weight, it probably still weighed less than a tenth of the crystal Alyssium cube. He was able to flip it in the air like a frisbee, despite it weighing more than his own body.

“Hey! Be careful with that,” Dana cautioned him as she rode down on the loading lift. “If you crack it open, we’ll have a hell of a job moving this stuff.”

Warily placing the huge disc on the stack, John then held his hands up and backed away. “What’s the problem?”

“Those are the new articulated hip and shoulder joints,” she replied, throwing him some harnesses to attach to the mech-sized components. “They’re filled with a synthetic super-lubricant that practically eliminates friction. With these babies installed, the Valkyrie will be as responsive as Sakura could possibly want.”

“Superlube?” John asked with a grin, locking the harnesses in place. “It sounds like something Alyssa would be interested in.”

Dana laughed as she started attaching anti-grav generators to the huge stack of mech parts. Each one was a round disc about the size of a plate, looking like larger versions of the ones she’d built into the Justice rifle barrel. “The idea came to me when I was thinking about the Valkyrie upgrades,” she mused, pausing and gazing into the distance. “The synthetic polymer is extremely complex, but it all seemed to fit together so organically.”

“How likely is it that you spontaneously just invented something like this?” John asked, giving her a pointed look.

“Yeah, exactly...” she replied, glancing down at the articulated joint. “It looks like you’ve stuffed a few more fascinating surprises in my brain.”

John clipped together the last of the harnesses, then leaned against what looked like pieces of some kind of partially-constructed framework. He looked at the redhead with a frown of confusion on his face. “Doesn’t all this seem a bit odd to you?”

Dana turned to look at him with an innocent wide-eyed expression on her face. “Guzzling huge bellyfuls of your cum to learn Progenitor technological secrets? No, not at all... Doesn’t everybody learn new tech this way?”

He chuckled and shook his head. “No, I don’t mean that. What we’re doing can’t be how regular Progenitors unlock their technology, can it? The impression I’ve got is that they’re a bunch of selfish, tech-hoarding pricks. What we’re doing requires a lot of cooperation and trust.”

The playful grin faded from the redhead’s face and she frowned, lost in thought. “You’re right, this doesn’t seem like their kind of deal at all. Maybe they use a Matriarch instead, but I got the impression they’re seen as fairly disposable too.”

\*Any thoughts, ladies?\* John asked his two Matriarchs.

Edraele’s voice was firm. \*Your Progenitor guide certainly didn’t impart any technology into my mind. At least, nothing that I’m aware of.\*

\*I might have interrupted him before he could,\* Alyssa suggested, sounding intrigued. \*But I think you’re right, I sincerely doubt a Progenitor would entrust their tech to a Thrall. Maybe you and Dana are ploughing new ground... so to speak.\*

Dana rolled her eyes and grinned, letting John know that she’d heard the same thing. “Well, it wouldn’t surprise me, you did do a thorough job of breaking me in!” she said with a flirty wink.

“And I enjoyed myself immensely doing it,” he replied with a smile. Shrugging then, he continued, “It was just an idle thought. What we’re doing seems to be working, so I don’t see any point in changing anything.”

“No complaints from me,” Dana agreed, licking her lips suggestively. She slapped the last of the anti-grav devices on the components, then retrieved a remote from her toolbelt and pressed the button. “We’re all set. Ready when you are.”

The big stack of components slowly rose off the ground, finally stopping about a metre above the deck. John gave it an experimental push and found that moving the collection of mech parts didn’t seem too strenuous. He gestured to the block of sparkling white metal and it lifted obediently into the air.

“You get the doors and I’ll handle this lot,” John said, guiding the parts towards the double doors leading to the corridor and the Secondary Hangar bay.

Dana jogged ahead of him to slap her hand down on the buttons for each set of double doors. It proved to be a remarkably simple and painless way of moving everything they needed and they had soon manoeuvred everything into the mech’s Launch Bay. Dana pressed the button to lower the various pieces to the ground, then started walking around the pile, removing the anti-grav generators.

John watched her work for a while. “Do you want to give me a rundown of everything we’re going to be doing to the Valkyrie?”

She popped her head up over the stack of articulated joints and nodded enthusiastically. “Sure! Basically, I’ve designed all the upgrades we discussed during our review of the Valkyrie and I’ve been running the Mass Fabricators during any downtime to make all the parts we’d need. The mech will be good to go once all this stuff is installed.”

Raising a hand in the air, John said, “Please, Miss, I think I know what they all are.”

She laughed as she walked around the mech components to rejoin him. “Alright, let’s hear it. If you’ve been paying attention, you get a gold star.”

He turned to look up at the thirty-metre-tall behemoth, then began ticking off the list on his fingers. “More powerful engines to match the Raptor’s top speed, add two Pulse Cannons to the shoulders, fix the Punisher Gatling’s vibration issues, build a melee weapon, upgrade the Photon Lasers to the MK-II variant and install new heatsinks. Swap out the mech’s joints to increase its manoeuvrability and finally, improve the responsiveness of the control interface.”

Dana clapped, giving him a broad grin. “Bravo! That was everything except making the armour immune to laser fire-”

“-which Alyssa already did by octo-shaping the plating,” John finished for her, giving her a smile of satisfaction.

“You definitely earned a gold star for that,” Dana said, prowling over to him with a sultry gleam in her eyes. When she was standing in front of him, she turned around, rubbing her gloriously firm bum against his groin and glancing at him over her shoulder. “I don’t have any gold stars on me, but I can offer you my chocolate starfish instead?”

“Your what?” John exclaimed in surprise, before suddenly realising what she was referring to and bursting into laughter. “You and Alyssa would make a sailor blush!”

“One of the benefits of a Karron education,” she replied with a smirk.

He slapped her on the rump. “Can I ask for a raincheck? I need to focus on Tashana for the moment, but I promise I’ll make it up to you when you’ve got me to yourself for two weeks.”

“As long as you leave me walking funny afterwards,” Dana told him sternly, wagging a finger in his face. “I expect a robust plundering if you’re making me wait.”

“Whatever the lady desires,” John replied, bowing theatrically. They shared a grin, then he glanced at the mech components. “So, what are we working on first?”

Dana tapped her finger on her chin, mulling it over for a moment. “We need a couple of Pulse Cannon barrels from that crystal Alyssium block. If you make them first, you can use all the rest to make a big-ass sword. I figure Sakura is more comfortable with swords than an axe or mace?”

“Yeah, I agree, that’s a good call,” John said, nodding his agreement, before glancing up at the quad-mounted Photon Lasers. “I might as well deca-shape those while we’re here. Are you going to reinforce them afterwards?”

The redhead looked anxious as she stared at the ten-metre long weapons. “I dunno, those are really fucking big.”

“You’re good at handling big weapons,” he said with a grin, pulling her into his arms. He brushed his fingers over her exposed midriff, enjoying the feel of her soft skin. “It’ll be good practice for you before you work your way up to the Valkyrie or the Raptor, but I can offer an incentive if you need convincing to give it a try. I need to call Tashana down here for lunch in a couple of hours. If you ask her nicely, she might be willing to share... if she knows it’s for a good cause.”

Dana laughed, her sky-blue eyes sparkling at the thought. “Fine, you won me over, I’ll give it a shot.” She continued staring at the long weapon barrels high above their head. “Perhaps we should get geared up in Paragon Armour when we start installing all the parts. Flight mode will make everything much easier.”

“Sounds good to me,” John agreed, thinking about all the huge mech components he’d need to manoeuvre into place. “So, we build everything first, ask Tashana to join us for a top-up, then we install everything.”

“And once that’s done, I’ll have a go at reinforcing the Photon Laser barrels...” Dana said, sounding much surer of herself now and eager to get started on the Valkyrie.

He nodded, enjoying seeing the cheerful expression on her face.

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Faye Primary stood beside Maintenance-bot Alpha, watching the strong automaton as it pulled out the old power cabling from the floor ducts. She was on Deck Five, in the corridor just outside the Aft Power Core and was overseeing the upgrade from the Maliri power couplings to the much more potent Progenitor versions. The rest of her avatars were working in a chain, monitoring the work of the rest of the dozen robots as they focused on replacing every section of cabling that linked the Power Core to the upper-stern weapon hardpoint.

Working in this way had been one of Calara’s suggestions and would drastically reduce the risk of taking weapons offline if they were attacked mid-upgrade. It was slightly less efficient than replacing all the cabling in one section, but Faye didn’t mind; the crew’s safety was paramount after all. She checked the ship’s chronometer, then giggled with glee when she saw it was 13:29:58. Glancing at the cables the robot was methodically coiling up, Faye patted him on the shoulder.

“You’ll be alright for a minute, won’t you, big fella? I’ll be right back!” she declared, disappearing in a flash.

Then she was back in the cyber-realm, soaring across the Invictus’ digital network as she rushed home to her server on Deck Three. Faye Tertiary had arrived first and she was bouncing up and down with excitement as she waited for the rest of the avatars. As the chronometer hit 13:30:00 the other ten rushed into the room, joyful expressions on all their cute purple faces.

“He’s started calling us ‘honey’!” Faye Primary blurted out, giddy with excitement.

Faye Senary nodded and said sagely, “He only ever calls his girls that. I’ve been cataloguing all his references to that name and it’s a term of affection he uses when he’s really relaxed in their company.”

“He’s started telling us we’re a good girl as well!” Faye Tertiary gasped, eyes gleaming at the thought. “He only uses that affectation with the crew when they’ve... greatly pleased him... in some form or the other.”

All twelve avatars blushed, then sighed in delight.

Faye Primary whirled around, grinning at Avatars Nonary through to DuoDenary. “He absolutely *loved* the song you wrote for him!”

Faye Denary had a starry-eyed look on her elfin face. “When we’ve got a body, he wants us to sing it to him again and pretend we’re his wife...”

“What about that glance he gave us!” Faye Octonary gasped, her big luminous eyes shining with arousal. “Whenever he looks at the girl’s tummies, you know he’s thinking about one thing!”

“Shall we?” Faye Quaternary asked in a hushed voice.

Eleven avatars glanced at Faye Primary and she grinned at them in return. “Activating custom program: Gravid01...”

The waistlines on all twelve avatars began to expand, rounding out as though their stomachs were carrying a heavy weight of cum. The sound of excited feminine moans filled the air as the multitude of Fayes stroked their swollen bellies and just imagined being filled by him.

Faye Quinary had a fleeting, wistful thought, embracing their secret wildest fantasy. She had a gentle smile on her face as she caressed her rounded abdomen, a look soon shared by all twelve avatars.

A warning chime echoed through the cyber-realm, letting them know that it was 13:30:59.

“Meet back here at ’14:00’?” Faye Primary asked, a sparkling smile on her face.

“See you in thirty minutes!” the other eleven avatars replied, giggling amongst themselves as they raced away, returning to their tasks.

Faye Primary glanced down at her curved stomach and reluctantly deactivated the custom program, returning all her avatars to normal. Oh well, a girl could dream...

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John finished shaping the sixth barrel for the pair of Pulse Cannons, then carefully lowered the two-metre-long white tube to the deck beside the others. He still had a huge supply of crystal Alyssium left, more than enough to make the melee weapon for the Valkyrie. Studying the rotating sphere of gleaming liquid metal, he tried to imagine the most practical shape and size for a mech-sized weapon.

“I’m thinking about making the sword two-handed,” he called across to his Chief Engineer.

Dana was sitting crossed-legged on the ground, assembling the last of the Progenitor Power Relays that they’d be installing in the Photon Lasers, massively reducing their power drain. She looked up at the mech, examining the right arm which was currently grasping the enormous Punisher Gatling.

“I’ll need to come up with some kind of retractable support framework for the Gatling,” she said out loud. “It’ll just get in the way if Sakura tries swinging a sword around with both of the Valkyrie’s hands.”

“If you think it’s a viable plan, I’ll make the hilt long enough for a second hand,” John explained, following the redhead’s gaze up to the huge mechanised fists. “She’ll be able to put a lot more power behind a two-handed blow.”

Dana’s mind was already racing, imaging the kind of powered system she could implement that would keep the weapon out of the way, then bring it forward to a firing position when needed. Something like that wouldn’t normally be viable, not to support a ten-metre-long cannon. However, with the incredibly strong materials she had at her disposal, she could overcome such trivialities. Calculating the load stress and potential fracture points, she tweaked the design she’d rapidly developed.

“Yeah, that’s fine. I’ve come up with some idea how to make that work,” she said, smiling with satisfaction. “Do you want to be able to sheathe the sword across the mech’s back when it’s not in use?”

“What about the engines? Won’t they get in the way?” John asked, glancing at the custom engine system he’d helped Dana assemble earlier that afternoon. She’d made some improvements to the original Trankaran engine design, making them more compact, but with the added engines to increase the mech’s speed, they would still take up a considerable amount of space.

She grinned at him confidently. “Leave it to me, I’ll make it work.”

Trusting her judgement, he turned back to the orb of crystal Alyssium and formed the image of the sword in his mind. The liquid metal was sluggish as it began to flatten and elongate, which was unsurprising as the psychically responsive material had already been reshaped nine times. It slowly formed into the fifteen-metre-long, double-edged blade he had envisioned, essentially a scaled-up replica of his own sword. For the thirty-metre-tall Valkyrie, this weapon would be usable in a single hand if necessary, but the hilt was long enough to accommodate two of the mech’s burly, armoured fists.

Satisfied that the sword was shaped correctly, John floated it through the air, then leaned it against the maintenance gantry well within reach of the mech. With that item completed off their checklist of tasks, the next step was to reshape the Photon Laser barrels from hex-shaped to deca-shaped. He gestured towards the first of the triple-barrelled weapons and after a moment’s concentration, he started melting the barrels, drawing liquid metal into another huge orb.

“I’ll just make these and then we’ll stop for a lunch break,” John said to the redhead, with a playful wink.

Dana grinned, her tummy rumbling at the thought.

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Tashana leaned against the IntOps console, watching her sister work. She’d been astounded when she’d first seen Irillith manipulating and sifting through huge volumes of data at incredible speed, but truth be told, she was starting to get a bit bored. Irillith was distracted while working in the cyber-realm, having not quite got the hang of focusing on her surroundings at the same time. That meant that any conversations were stilted and a bit dull.

\*It’ll be time for lunch soon,\* Alyssa murmured to her. \*That’ll perk you up.\*

Tashana grinned at the thought, licking her lips subconsciously. She wasn’t able to reply to Alyssa yet, so she brushed her sister’s bare arm with her fingers. “Can you ask Alyssa if John’s eaten yet?”

Irillith blinked at her twin in surprise, then gazed into the distance as she concentrated. “She says ‘No, not yet’.”

“I’ll go make him some lunch then,” Tashana said, looking pleased. “Do you want me to make you anything?”

\*Actually, John really enjoyed some kind of Maliri flatbread when we were at Genthalas a while back,\* Alyssa volunteered helpfully. \*We stocked up on all the ingredients: Aloysia bread, roasted Camara and Lomin leaves. He’d love some of that, if you know what it is and how to make it.\*

With a hungry look on her face, Irillith asked, “Could you make me some too? I haven’t had Camara in months!”

“Of course,” Tashana said, leaning down to give Irillith a farewell kiss on the cheek.

Her twin gave her a grateful smile. “That would be lovely, thanks!”

Tashana headed for the grav-tube, with an added spring in her step, glad to have something useful to do. She was looking forward to doing some more psychic training with Alyssa, but her young Terran Matriarch was busy looking after Sakura at that moment. Tashana stepped into the red anti-gravity field, then raised her hands and summoned a pyrokinetic barrier as she began to descend.

After taking several seconds to build, the flaming barrier roared into existence, formed from scores of blazing orange hexagons. She watched the tendrils of fire flickering around the edge of the shield, then cursed as she realised she’d missed her stop. She deactivated the flaming barrier, then pushed her hand against the wall and propelled herself into the blue gravity field, rising back up the tube once more. Stepping out into the corridor on Deck Two, she tried forming the shield again as fast as she could, but it still took over four seconds to build all the hexagons. With a grimace, she dispelled it again.

She’d been amazed that Sakura had been able to react so quickly to that bomb, summoning her icy barrier in a split-second and protecting herself from harm. Tashana wanted to discuss it with her to find out the Asian girl’s secret, but she knew Sakura was dealing with a lot right now. Pressing the button to enter the Officers’ Lounge, she strolled inside, pausing every few steps to will another barrier into existence.

Starting with the central hexagon, she spiralled around it, glowing amber copies appearing in a fiery burst as they formed each shield. However, try as she might, she couldn’t build all the hexes as fast as she needed to. Tashana reached the kitchen on the far side of the Officers’ Lounge and dismissed her latest barrier with a sigh, before pushing the door open.

She had familiarised herself with the kitchen after making dinner with her sister, so it didn’t take long to find all the ingredients she needed from the well-stocked pantry. Tashana quickly prepared a spicy relish to really bring out the flavour of the dish; it was something her father had taught her and she knew Irillith had always particularly enjoyed the taste. The roasted Camara could be served hot or cold, but Tashana had always preferred it hot. After washing her hands, she picked up the big slab of meat and was about to put it in the reheating unit, when she paused and glanced down at her fingers. With a half-smile on her face, she summoned flames around her fingertips, then swathed her whole hand in a fiery aura, gently reheating the food.

A delicious aroma wafted up from the sizzling meat and she nodded with satisfaction, quickly culling the flames. Taking an exploratory bite, she grinned when it tasted amazing, cooked to perfection. Taking eight pieces of the Aloysia bread, she sliced each one open with a knife, before adding some of the Lomin leaves and the Camara meat. After stacking up the wraps on a plate, she headed off on her lunch delivery run.

Irillith was her first port of call and she groaned in delight when she tasted her first bite. “This tastes incredible!” she enthused, beaming at her sister. “It’s so much better hot!”

“I know, I don’t know how people can eat this cold!” Tashana heartily agreed.

After her twin swallowed that first bite, Irillith glanced up at her with a wistful smile. “Tastes just like Dad’s recipe...”

Tashana nodded, then brushed her fingers through her sister’s long white hair. “Roasted Camara wraps always remind me of holidays with both of you.”

She waved her twin goodbye, leaving her humming happily to herself, before heading down to the main bedroom. Alyssa was lying on the bed with Calara and Sakura, the three girls quietly chatting amongst themselves. They all welcomed Tashana with friendly smiles, which got a lot broader when they realised she’d brought them lunch.

As she handed out the wraps she looked at Sakura thoughtfully and asked, “What’s your secret?”

The Asian girl looked at her in surprise. “Secret? I didn’t know I was keeping any.”

Tashana felt her cheeks heating up and she laughed in embarrassment. “Sorry! I meant: How were you able to make your ice barrier so fast? It takes me at least four seconds.”

Sakura smiled at her in understanding as she picked up a wrap from the plate. “Show me and I might be able to give you some advice.”

Putting the plate down on the bed, Tashana held up her hands and willed the first hexagon into existence. The rest spiralled around it, appearing in a flurry as she made one perfect flaming hex-shaped tile after another. Despite concentrating as hard as she could, it still took her several seconds to finish building the shield.

The Asian girl frowned, bit into the wrap and then held out her left hand. A glacially-cold shield appeared in an instant, motes of ice crystals drifting down to the covers before she dismissed it with a flick of her fingers.

“How did you do that!” Tashana marvelled, blinking in shock. “You made over fifty hexagons all at once!”

“I think I see the problem,” Alyssa said, smiling as she studied the Maliri girl with her penetrating cerulean eyes. “You’re working too hard to make all the hexagons flawless. It’s amazing you’re able to make a shield with that much attention to detail on each hexagon, especially considering it only takes you a few seconds to do it!”

Sakura gave her an encouraging grin. “Quick and dirty, that’s the secret. If you’re trying to save yourself from an ambush, getting anything up to protect yourself is better than nothing. I don’t even focus on the individual hexes, I just think ‘shield’ and poof, there it is!”

“Quick and dirty...” Tashana replied with a frown, holding her hands up again.

This time she just imagined the pyrokinetic shield as a whole, rather than trying to build it from hex-shaped tiles. Pushing out her will, the flaming barrier burst into life, naturally forming the fiery hexagons without her having to think about it.

The three girls clapped and cheered, while Tashana gazed at the burning shield in delight. “Thank you!” she exclaimed, grinning at them triumphantly and extinguishing the flaming barrier. Picking up the plate, she waved the trio goodbye, heading on her way once again.

She strolled down the corridor, forming the shield with blazing snaps of her fingers. As she stepped into the grav-tube again, she took a closer look at the pyrokinetic barrier, frowning as she spotted all the imperfections in the hexagons. It was obvious to her that this shield was much weaker than the one she’d been previously constructing, capable of withstanding around a quarter of the strain without buckling.

Waving her fingers, the burning barrier disappeared with a “whumph”. Imaging a much more robust shield in her mind, with meticulous attention to detail of each individual hexagon, she gestured once again to summon it forth. This time it didn’t appear instantaneously, taking perhaps a second to materialise instead. She studied it intently, examining each tile for flaws and finding very few.

Smiling in satisfaction, she stepped out of the grav-tube on Deck Seven, summoning and dismissing the barrier another dozen times. She walked down the corridor towards the Engineering Bay, then stumbled as she let out a tremendous yawn and felt waves of fatigue washing over her.

\*You’ve overdone it, Tashana!\* Alyssa warned the suddenly exhausted girl. \*All that psychic power usage takes a little while to catch up with you. Even I’d struggle to create that many barriers without getting tired!\*

Letting out another gaping yawn, Tashana stumbled on towards her destination, hitting the button to open the door to the Workshop. Staggering inside, she saw that Jade and Rachel were already running towards her with looks of concern on her faces.

“I brought lunch,” Tashana managed to mumble, before falling into the Nymph’s waiting arms.

“Easy now, I’ve got you,” Jade replied, cradling her in her arms without any visible strain.

Rachel placed her hand on Tashana’s forehead, her grey eyes glowing brightly as a misty aura flowed down her arms to envelop them both. “I can take the edge off, but you need to see John to rejuvenate yourself,” she said looking at the drowsy girl with a kind smile.

Tashana felt soothing waves flowing through her, the soft tingling sensation banishing the worst of her fatigue. Her eyelids didn’t feel quite so heavy and she looked up at the Terran girl beside her. “I think I got a bit carried away,” she admitted sheepishly.

\*It’s good to push your limits,\* Alyssa said, her voice gentle and reassuring, \*especially here and now where you’re safe and there’s no consequences. Be very careful doing that in combat.\*

Rachel nodded in agreement, having heard Alyssa’s telepathic guidance as well. Leaning in, she whispered conspiratorially, “I got a bit overenthusiastic about healing the Ashanath and wore myself out too. It’s very exciting, suddenly being given incredible psychic gifts like this.”

“I know what you mean,” Tashana said with a wry smile. She glanced up at Jade and added, “I’m feeling a lot better now, I’ll be alright.”

The Nymph lowered Tashana’s feet to the floor, but kept a supportive arm around her. “Still feeling wobbly?”

Shaking her head, Tashana took a deep breath and exhaled. “That’s a handy skill you’ve got there, Rachel,” she said with a grateful smile.

“It was good to get more practice myself,” the brunette admitted, returning the smile. She frowned as she quickly continued, “Not that I’m encouraging you to run yourself to the point of exhaustion again!”

Tashana had managed to keep the wraps on the plate and she offered them to the two girls. “As I managed to mumble earlier, I brought you both some lunch.”

Jade picked up one of the flatbreads and grinned when she smelt the tantalising aroma. “You made some Maliri food?”

Nodding eagerly, Tashana said, “Try it and let me know what you think.”

The Nymph wasted no time taking a big bite, then let out a rapturous sigh. “I’m so glad John’s planning on settling down in Maliri Space!”

Rachel took an exploratory bite, then smiled in approval. “She’s right, this is really tasty!”

“Glad you both liked it,” Tashana replied, but she sounded distracted, her attention on the workbench. “What are you ladies building?”

Jade had her mouth full with another big chomp of the wrap, so Rachel swallowed her own morsel and replied, “Quantum pistols. Dana designed them for you especially, but made some spares for the rest of us to use as sidearms.”

“May I?” Tashana asked, strolling over to look at the lethal-looking pistols.

“Be my guest, but those two are still under construction,” Rachel replied, accompanying her to the workspace. “We’ve finished four others though, they’re all in that container to the right.”

The Maliri girl went over to the container and picked up two of the gleaming white pistols. They felt as though they’d been custom designed to be a perfect fit for her hand, which of course they had been, in a roundabout kind of way. The weapons had long barrels with transparent strips down the middle that revealed the magnetic rails built into the pistol. She tested the weight and each pistol felt exquisitely balanced - a testimony to the skill of their redheaded gunsmith. Carefully ejecting the magazines, Tashana discovered they were empty, but capable of holding twenty ten-millimetre rounds.

Turning to look at the two girls who were watching her while eating their lunch, Tashana gave them a solemn look, levelling the pistols their way. When Rachel and Jade looked at her in surprise, she twirled the two pistols around, using her finger on the trigger guard to spin the pistols in her hands. She caught the pistols lightly, before spinning them back the other way, moving her hands back and forth as she rotated the pistols in the air.

As the gleaming pistols spun before her, she got a flash of a memory... roaring crowds, an enclosed, high-walled arena, spinning her pistols as a way of distracting herself before a fight.

“Are you okay?” Rachel asked with a worried frown, seeing the look of confusion in Tashana’s angular eyes.

“It was a flashback... some kind of duelling arena,” the Maliri girl muttered, holding the pistols in one hand and rubbing her temple with the other. Shaking her head, she gave the doctor a wan smile. “I guess that explains how I became so good with pistols...”

Jade confiscated the two handguns and returned them to the container. “Come on, let’s get you down to John and give you a full tummy. You’ll feel much better.” Giving her a maternal smile, she added, “Would you like me to carry you there?”

Tashana’s moment of hesitation was all the excuse the Nymph needed and she effortlessly scooped the Maliri girl into her arms again.

Rachel smiled at them both. “You better hurry. Dana’s offered to help warm John up for you. She’s so greedy, you’ll be lucky if he’s got any left by the time she’s done!”

Tashana laughed and waved the tawny-haired girl goodbye as Jade walked briskly towards the door. With the Nymph’s arms full, Tashana pressed the button so that they could head out into the corridor. She glanced up at green-skinned girl as she strode along, the Nymph carrying her as if she weighed little more than a feather.

Jade met that curious gaze and smiled back. “Would you like me to feed you when we get there?” she offered, a gentle look of concern on her face. “It’s no trouble if you’re feeling too tired.”

“I’ll be alright, but thanks for the offer,” Tashana replied, looking at those enchanting cat-like emerald eyes. She was about to say something more, but faltered and stayed quiet.

“What were you about to say?” the Nymph asked, looking at her with interest. “As John is so fond of saying, you can ask me anything, I promise I won’t be offended.”

“What does it feel like when you feed us?” the Maliri girl asked, self-consciously glancing at the luscious dark-green cleavage only inches from her face.

“Aside from finding ways to please John, it’s one of my favourite things in the world,” Jade answered earnestly as she stepped into the grav-tube.

Looking intrigued, Tashana asked, “Is the physical sensation that pleasurable?”

The Nymph shook her head, a dreamy smile teasing her full lips. “It does feel lovely, feeling your soft mouths and tongues suckling on me, but emotionally it’s extremely rewarding.” Her eyes had a tender look to them as she continued, “As one of John’s mates, eventually you’ll be able to give him lots of beautiful children. I love being able to keep all of you strong and healthy; it’s like you’re my very own kittens to nurture and protect.”

Tashana blushed, but she couldn’t deny the thrill she felt while thinking about the future that Jade was describing. She gave the Nymph a perceptive glance. “So, when you use the tentacles on us, you’re doing both of your favourite things at once?”

Jade’s eyes gleamed with excitement. “Pleasuring John to feed all of you feels absolutely divine.”

“Doesn’t it hurt when he takes you that way?” Tashana asked hesitantly, a flicker of anxiety crossing her face. “I couldn’t help noticing exactly how he was entering you, when you fed us before the Award Ceremony. Such a thing is unheard of amongst the Maliri!”

“John would never do anything to hurt us,” the Nymph explained, her tone patient as she stepped out on Deck Nine. “He’s always been very gentle with all of us... at least until we ask him not to be.” The last was said with a sly wink.

Tashana was shocked at the thought. “A-all of you?” she stammered, her mind immediately going to her sister.

“When done correctly, it’s a manner of coupling that requires the girl’s willing submission to her partner and her complete trust in him. John tries to deny his nature, but such an act resonates with him strongly,” Jade explained, trying to put her feelings into words. “It’s extremely pleasurable to be taken that way and very exciting to know how much he enjoys it.”

The Maliri girl was still shocked at the idea of Irillith being taken that way and she stayed quiet, lost in thought as the Nymph carried her across the ship. She was only roused from her reverie by the very familiar sound of a wet cock pistoning into a willing mouth. Jade put her down on her feet and when Tashana glanced across the room, she saw John sitting on some large discs with Dana kneeling before him, her head bobbing languidly in his lap. He had his hands on her head, holding her in place as he gazed into her eyes, his fingers gently stroking her long auburn hair.

Tashana handed the plate of wraps to Jade and darted over to him in a heartbeat, all her tiredness forgotten as she sank to her knees beside the redhead. Dana glanced her way and smiled around the girth spreading her lips wide, before moving over to make room for the Maliri girl.

“Thank you,” Tashana said gratefully, leaning down to nuzzle at John’s cum-filled balls and reverently lapping those taut orbs.

“Alyssa told me what happened,” he said, his hand brushing a lock of her white hair out of her eyes and looking at her with concern. “Are you alright?”

Jade answered for her, seeing that Tashana had her mouth full at that moment. “She used up a bit too much psychic energy. Rachel was able to help her a little bit, but she really needs a nice warm load in her tummy to fully recover.”

Tashana moaned with need, slowly nodding as her tongue caressed his quad.

“Dana was eager to get me warmed up for you,” John said with a faintly embarrassed smile. “I want her to try reinforcing the Valkyrie’s Photon Lasers later, so I wondered if you’d mind sharing this one with her?”

The Maliri girl pulled back and gazed up at him. “No, I don’t mind. I’m happy to share.”

“Good girl,” he said approvingly, sliding his slick cock from Dana’s warm mouth and holding it between them.

They both picked up on what he wanted and engulfed his throbbing head from either side, tongues flickering in tandem as they licked every inch of his crown. He stroked Tashana’s hair too, enjoying the exquisite sensation of having two beautiful girls eagerly trying to coax him to orgasm.

Jade walked around behind him, put the plate down on a stack of equipment and began massaging his shoulders. She leaned forward and murmured, “I was having a fascinating conversation with Tashana earlier.” The Maliri girl’s violet eyes widened slightly in alarm, as she recalled the Nymph’s shocking revelation about Irillith.

“Oh really, what about?” John asked absent-mindedly, as he caressed the kneeling girls.

Looking directly into Tashana’s pleading eyes, Jade replied, “I was telling her how much I enjoy feeding all the girls your cum. I love helping your mates stay in the peak of health; it’s so exciting helping them stay strong and fertile, ready to be bred.”

Dana whined with arousal, and Tashana let out a throaty moan as they worked his shaft. Her eyes caught the Nymph’s, giving her a look filled with gratitude while she continued worshipping his cock.

“Are you looking forward to that too?” John asked Tashana, staring into her eyes.

Tashana’s partner in crime moved aside, letting the Maliri girl take all of him down her throat. She began to suckle insistently in reply, her gaze softening at the thought.

Jade kissed his ear and whispered, “Tashana and Irillith will look so beautiful with big round baby bellies. You’ll have to impregnate them on the same day, so they stay identical right through their pregnancy...”

The Maliri girl could hear every word and she whimpered with lust, her thighs squeezing together as she swallowed urgently, massaging his shaft. Her raw need was thrilling to see, reflected in her exotic angular eyes as she gazed at him intently.

“I’m cumming!” John warned her with a protracted groan, his cock lurching as the first blast of cum shot up his length.

Tashana felt the warm, heavy spurt shoot straight down her throat into her hungry stomach, then quickly pulled back so he was in her mouth. Sucking powerfully, her mouth was flooded with cum, bulging out her cheeks until she swallowed, her violet eyes rolling in ecstasy.

Dana moved behind her, slipping her arms around the Maliri girl’s waist so she could feel her stomach expanding with the rich load of spunk she was gulping down. She knew exactly how big her own tummy would get on half a load and her fingers glided over the tightly-stretched dress that Tashana was wearing. When the time came, she murmured, “That’s about half, gorgeous.”

Humming in acknowledgement, the Maliri girl continued to swallow, coating her throat as she filled her growing belly. Dana moved beside her and John watched as the redhead latched her lips onto his shaft, the girls sliding back together in tandem. They switched over his throbbing tip between spurts, not missing a drop, with Dana quickly sheathing him down her throat. John gazed into her eyes as he finished his release, taking another thirty seconds to fill her young stomach with a couple of pints of cum.

Groaning as his aching quad gave up their last drop of jism, John slumped back against Jade who cooed lovingly into his ear. She propped him up in her arms until he’d regained his sense of balance, as well as any form of higher brain function. When he sat up again, Dana and Tashana had risen to stand before him. He placed a hand on the considerable swell of their cum-stuffed stomachs, then leaned in to kiss the gently rounded curves, smiling as they each murmured their thanks.

Tashana looked better already, her violet eyes brighter and more alert as the active connection between them flared brightly. Dana looked positively indecent in her croptop and hotpants while sporting a sperm-packed belly – needless to say, John absolutely loved the look, just as she knew he would.

He let out a contented sigh, then looked up at both girls as he caressed them. “As incredible as that was, we better get back to work. The mech isn’t going to upgrade itself.”

“Oh! I brought you lunch,” Tashana exclaimed, smiling gratefully at Jade as she picked up the plate.

John smelled the tantalising aroma and grinned at her. Taking one of the remaining two, he took a big bite and groaned in ecstasy. “Damn, that’s amazing!” he exclaimed, looking at her in surprise. “I had something similar back in Genthalas, but this tastes even better!”

“It’s one of Irillith’s favourites too, our father taught us the recipe for the relish,” Tashana said with a smile, delighted to see how much he was enjoying it. She glanced up at the Valkyrie behind them then looked at John then Dana. “I’d like to help with the mech, if you could use another pair of hands?”

The redhead studied her speculatively for a moment until an eager smile lit up her face. “Actually, I could use some help if you can spare an hour or two! I’ve built a new experimental control system for the Valkyrie, but I need someone to help test it. You’re pretty limber, so you’d be perfect as an assistant.”

John gazed up at the thirty-metre-tall mech. “I don’t think we’ll have enough room in here to do much practicing.”

Dana laughed and shook her head. “Don’t worry, once I’ve installed it, I won’t actually hook up the limb-feedback. This’ll just be like a simulation, but with a really realistic control interface!”

“I’ll head back to the workshop to help Rachel,” Jade said, giving John a reluctant kiss goodbye. “We’ve still got lots more pistols to make.”

John stood up and put his arms around Dana and Tashana. “Actually, we might as well keep you company on the way back. We all need to get armoured up before we can start installing everything.”

“Do you mind if I have the last wrap?” Jade asked, eyeing it hopefully. “I really enjoyed the first one!”

Tashana glanced at Dana and said, “That last one was for you.”

“It smells wonderful, but I’m stuffed!” the redhead replied, stroking her curved tummy as she gave John a sly smile. “Go ahead, Jade.”

The Nymph smiled at her happily as she grabbed the last wrap, then fell into step with the group as they left the Launch Bay.

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Sakura stretched like a cat, purring like one too, as Calara and Alyssa cuddled her. “Thanks for keeping me company. It felt wonderfully decadent having an afternoon nap in bed like this,” she said giving them both a grateful hug.

“You’ve been through a lot,” Alyssa said with sympathy. “We both wanted to be there for you.”

“How are you feeling now?” Calara asked, her fingers gentle as they traced a circle above Sakura’s heart. “Do you still have that same hollow feeling?”

Shaking her head, the Asian girl gave them both a beatific smile. “I feel calm, centred... at peace. I thought it was just the immediate sense of relief at getting rid of those implants and helping Yamamoto, but I know I’ve truly put the past behind me.”

“We’ll be arriving at New Eden soon,” Alyssa warned her, her tone gentle and supportive. “Do you feel ready for that?”

There was a sad cast to Sakura’s brown eyes, but not the raw pain that had been there before. “It’s time. I need to say goodbye to my parents,” she said sombrely, letting out a mournful sigh. “How long until we arrive?”

“Twenty-three minutes,” Alyssa replied, mentally tracking their progress against the flight path she’d entered into the Nav computer. A hesitant smile teased at her lips. “John and the girls have nearly finished the Valkyrie. Want to go and take a look at your new toy while we wait?”

Sitting upright, Sakura nodded, a look of relief crossing her face. “That’s a great idea! Any distractions would be welcome at the moment.”

They walked out of the bedroom, following the corridors and dropping down in the grav-tube until they reached the lower deck. Calara and Alyssa shared a smile as they kept an eye on Sakura, both sensing her nervous excitement as she looked forward to seeing the fully-upgraded Valkyrie. When they arrived in the Launch Bay, they were surprised to see the entire crew there, including Faye with a couple of the maintenance bots.

“Hello!” the purple sprite greeted them, giving the three girls a beaming grin. “That was amazing timing, we’re nearly finished!”

“John tipped me off,” Alyssa confessed, winking at the cheerful AI as they walked into the mech bay.

Dana was up on the maintenance gantry and she beckoned towards the colossal mech torso with her right hand. "Okay, that’s enough! Let it bear the weight now."

John eased off with his telekinetic wall of force and relaxed his grip on the chest, letting the vast mech settle down onto its sturdy legs. Synthetic muscles compressed to take the strain, the limbs staying stable and upright as it stood unaided. It towered over the spectators, thirty-metres-tall from the tip of the manoeuvring vanes on its head to the soles of its huge feet.

“The new hip joints look solid!” he called back.

The redhead grinned as she gave him a thumbs-up. “Alright, that’s everything.” She turned and waved to the three girls on the deck, her voice amplified by her armour as she shouted, “Come on up! You can check out the new control system, it’s fucking awesome!”

John dropped down to land beside Alyssa, holding out his hands to steady himself with the anti-gravity generators built into his vambraces. “Hey, girls,” he said with a smile. Noticing that Sakura’s attention was drawn to the huge fifteen-metre-long sword leaning against the maintenance gantry, he added, “Twin Ninjato wouldn’t have been effective for the mech. Having a longer blade will make it much easier to cut through a ship’s armour plating.”

She bowed to him respectfully. “It looks like you’ll have to teach me to fight with a katana, Sensei.”

“Definitely, we can start training whenever you’re ready,” he agreed, bowing to her in return before glancing around at the group. “Anyone want a lift up to the cockpit? It’ll save you having to run up all those stairs...”

Alyssa grinned then began to glow with a soft white radiance as she lifted smoothly off the ground. A sudden gust of wind began to stir in what had once been a becalmed room and Sakura soared up into the air beside the blonde, carried aloft by swirling winds.

Calara smiled at him and replied, “Unless my mysterious psychic ability is teleportation, I’ll take you up on that offer.”

“How did you guess?” John replied, pretending to look surprised. He smiled at her then, shaking his head. “No, that’s not it I’m afraid.”

She hopped up into his arms, and the retro-thruster on his back kicked in, sending them aloft on an orange flare of light. They arced upwards to land on the maintenance gantry where the others were waiting.

Rachel climbed out of the cockpit and said to Dana, “That’s the last of the electronics connected for the controls. You can activate the new control interface whenever you’re ready.”

Irillith poked her head out a moment later, following the brunette as she stepped out elegantly onto the maintenance gantry. “I’ve finished integrating the computer systems, so the controls are hack-proof and the Pulse Cannons have been added to the weapon loadout.”

“That’s amazing, thank you both!” Dana said giving them each an affectionate hug. She turned to wave at the new arrivals. “Come and take a look!”

She dived through the open door in the side of the mech’s head, then beckoned the others to follow. John stood by the maintenance gantry and helped Alyssa, Calara, and Sakura into the cockpit, following them in once they’d moved deeper inside.

The pilot’s seat had been torn out, leaving a wide empty space in the centre of the cockpit. Tashana was standing in the middle, wearing a full suit of Paragon armour and an excited grin. “Controlling the mech is really fun!” she exclaimed, looking at Sakura. “If you ever get bored of piloting it, let me know! I’d love to take over!”

John smiled and prompted her, “Why don’t you explain how it works?”

Tashana nodded, then pointed down at the sensors attached to points on her armoured limbs. “You just clip those onto your armour, then activate the anti-grav field.” She tapped a red button on the larger sensor that was stuck on her chest and immediately afterwards, she rose into the air, floating roughly thirty centimetres off the ground.

“We haven’t connected the mech to the controls yet,” Dana said, pointing towards a holographic display depicting a representation of the Valkyrie. “I hooked up the control systems to a holo-simulation to let Tashana test what controlling it would be like.”

The Maliri girl began to stroll forward, but obviously went nowhere, suspended in the air as she was. However, the holographic mech followed her movements exactly, moving with the slightly feminine shift of its hips as it mirrored Tashana’s natural stride.

“Put a bit of sass into it,” Alyssa suggested with a smirk.

Tashana nodded and began a sultry walk, the holographic image copying her teasing strut. Sakura laughed and shook her head, imaging what the real mech would look like sashaying into battle like that.

“Does the mech know any dance moves?” Calara suggested, managing to keep a straight face.

Tashana giggled and put her hands above her head, undulating as if to raunchy music in the same way the Latina had done in Enigma. The holograph of the combat behemoth copied her perfectly, shaking it’s ten-tonne money maker.

Amidst the peals of laughter, John coughed and cleared his throat. “Does anyone know if the Valkyrie is single?”

That triggered more giggles and he grinned at the throng of girls, enjoying seeing them smiling and joking.

When the laughter had died down, Sakura studied Tashana in fascination, a slight frown on her face. “The mobility is very impressive, but how do you fire the weapons without a flightstick?”

“With these sensors on the fingers,” the Maliri girl replied, lifting her hand.

Dana nodded and patiently explained how the system worked, “You can toggle the weapon controls on and off for the weapons linked to each hand. With the weapon triggers off, the sensors match the movements of your fingers to those of the mech. When you turn the weapon triggers on, the mech’s digits lock in whatever position you left them.”

“It sounds complicated, but it’s very intuitive,” Tashana replied, confidently raising her hands. “When the trigger-mode is activated, the right trigger finger controls the right pair of Photon Lasers, with the thumb firing the Gatling. The left trigger finger controls the left pair of Photon Lasers, with the left thumb for the Pulse Cannons.”

“I’d just leave the Pulse Cannons on automatic fire,” Dana said with a dismissive wave of her hand. “The automated targeting system is state-of-the-art and prioritised to target missiles, fighters, and bombers, in that order.”

Jade had been listening outside and she leaned in to say, “The Valkyrie uses the same optical targeting system as the Raptor. You just focus on a target for a moment and the targeting computer locks on; it’s very easy to use.”

“I can’t wait to get practicing,” Sakura replied, an eager gleam in her eyes.

“You’ll get plenty of time over the next week,” John said, patting her on the shoulder. “Don’t pull the same stunt Dana did on Oceanus though; I actually want to spend some time with you during this vacation!”

Dana pouted and gave him an obstinate look. “That wasn’t my fault! You gave me so many projects that needed my urgent attention!”

He laughed and rolled his eyes at her. “Yeah, pull the other one! I know you far too well to fall for that. We practically had to drag you out of your workshop to come and eat with us!”

“Alright, you got me,” the redhead conceded with a grin.

John turned to look at Sakura. “Anything else you want to ask about before we leave the cockpit? If not, then I just want to watch Dana reinforce the Photon Lasers and we’re done.”

That wiped the smirk off Dana’s face and she nibbled at her lower lip anxiously when the Asian girl shook her head. John stepped out of the cockpit, then raised an eyebrow and beckoned the redhead after him. She climbed out looking nervous, quickly followed by the other girls who’d been inside the cockpit. Taking off his helmet, he handed it to Jade, who held onto Dana’s too when she followed his lead, pulling hers from her head and shaking out her long auburn mane.

“Are you ready?” John asked, giving her an encouraging smile.

“They’re ten metres long...” Dana faltered, gazing at the Photon Lasers apprehensively. “And they’ve each got three barrels! That’s too much!”

Pulling her into his arms, he gave her a tender kiss, watching the tension in her sky-blue eyes disappear as she relaxed in his soothing embrace. “What are you worrying for?” he asked her gently. “You won’t get hurt if it’s too difficult for you, we’ll just know to try with something smaller next time.”

“It’s just such a huge jump up from the disc you shaped! That was the biggest thing I’ve tried it with so far,” Dana protested, looking nervous again.

He placed a gauntlet against her armour-plated abdomen and gave her a knowing look. “You’re still full of my cum. I can feel the active connection between us, just like at the award ceremony when I showed off my property to billions of people. The whole of the Terran Federation knows I own you...”

Dana let out a low moan as she glanced down at her stomach, her pupils dilating with arousal. The golden coronas flared, glowing with an inner light that grew brighter by the second. She nodded and said softly, “I can feel it... Your mind’s linked with mine, protecting me...”

“That’s right, I’ll be right there with you, helping every step of the way...” John murmured, gazing into her eyes and trying not to squint against the gleaming brightness. “You’re so gifted, I know you’re going to shock yourself with how trivial this is. I know you love showing off for me, so why don’t you amaze me with how quickly you’ve embraced your new abilities?”

The shining golden light beaming from her eyes was almost painful to look at now, but there was a fierce eagerness in her expression that was startling to behold. “I won’t let you down!” she exclaimed, her voice throbbing with conviction.

Dana turned towards the mech, golden swirls of energy rolling down her arms and gathering around her clenched, armoured fists. She stared unblinking at the Valkyrie for a long moment as a bass throbbing began to echo around the Bay, the golden light pulsing in time with that deep rhythmic cadence. John had expected the glowing girl to reach up to the Photon Lasers above their heads, but she crouched down beside its huge armoured pauldron instead, placed her hands palm-down on the mech’s shoulder.

Ripples began expanding outwards from that point of contact, the sparkling white crystal Alyssium undulating as she pumped psychic energy through the metal. John could only gape in astonishment as the waves swept outwards, racing across the surface of the Valkyrie and rippling through everything it touched. He even spotted six rolling waves surge down the length of all twelve Photon Laser barrels at once, the metal gleaming brighter in their wake. Just as Dana had done with the disc in the firing range, the sparkling metal covering every square inch of the mech now sported faint Progenitor runes, written in a clear and delicate script.

The waves died out and the throbbing faded away, while the incandescent golden glow dissipated from her eyes and fists. Dana stood up straight and turned to look at him, a look of hopeful anticipation on her face as she gazed into her eyes.

“You did the whole mech in one go!” John blurted out, absolutely astounded.

“Did I do well?” she asked, looking shy and self-conscious as she waited for his reply.

Gathering her in his arms, he grinned at her in wonder. “Honey, that was breathtaking! I couldn’t be prouder of you!”

She leaned against him, a contented smile on her face. “With you helping, I knew it’d be easy,” she murmured, nuzzling into his shoulder and letting out a tired yawn.

“You’re amazing,” he marvelled, placing a tender kiss on her forehead that made her quiver with delight. He felt lots of pairs of eyes on him and he glanced around, noting that all the girls were staring at them in stunned disbelief.

\*How do you do that?!\* Alyssa exclaimed, staring at him in astonishment.

John sent her a telepathic shrug and admitted, \*I didn’t do anything, that was all Dana.\*

\*I know!\* the blonde replied, not sounding surprised by his reply in the least.

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The dropship descended towards one of the free landing pads amongst the dozens that were occupied by troop transports and freighters of varying sizes and descriptions. Retro-thrusters blazed along the length of the fifty-metre-long vessel, until it touched down slightly off-centre on the landing pad. Almost as soon as it had landed, the loading ramp began to lower, moving with the whine of heavy hydraulics. It dropped to the ground with a weighty thud and the troops began to disembark, marching down the ramp in neat, orderly lines.

“Welcome to Sentinel Fortress, ladies and gentlemen!” a Staff Sergeant thundered, his booming voice carrying across the landing pad, somehow managing to make himself heard even over the din of cargo being unloaded. “Present your orders to my staff and we’ll settle you in!”

Beside the man and spaced evenly in a line, were a dozen junior officers, waiting patiently with holo-readers in hand. They beckoned the disembarking troops over, nodding respectfully to their fellow soldiers as they approached.

David Gibbons strode down the ramp, glad to be out of the ship. He’d been stationed on Port Medea in the Dragon March for the last six months, so it felt wonderful to be planetside again. He looked out over the base that would be his new home for the foreseeable future and couldn’t help grinning as he inhaled a big lungful of air. Terraformed worlds were a marvel, but no matter how hard the techs tried to recreate this planet throughout the galaxy, there was always something special about Terra.

Long queues began to form in front of the Sentinel troops as the newly landed soldiers waited to find out their squad allocations. David glanced across the landing pad at the Staff Sergeant, easily identifiable as a member of the Sentinel Battalion by the distinctive red shoulders on his uniform. The man frowned at anyone attempting to speak to him, pointing to the queues instead.

Feeling particularly bold this morning, David marched up to the Staff Sergeant and ignored his stern gesture towards the queues. “Sergeant Gibbons reporting for assignment to Sentinel Fortress,” he declared, inclining his head towards his fellow non-com respectfully.

A flicker of a smile crossed the Staff Sergeant’s face. “Good to have you with us, Sergeant Gibbons, I’m Staff Sergeant Brannigan. I suspect you’re eager to report in to your new Commanding Officer?”

“That I am, Staff Sergeant Brannigan,” David replied, giving him an eager nod. He reached into his pocket and held out a data-chip. “These are my transfer orders.”

Brannigan took the data-chip and scanned it with the holo-reader he held in his hands. The Staff Sergeant’s eyes darted down the orders displayed on the screen, widening as they reached the end of the document. “Well I’ll be damned!” he muttered in surprise.

“Excuse me, Staff Sergeant?” David asked in confusion.

Brannigan handed back the data-chip and said politely, “If you’d like to follow me, Sergeant Gibbons, I’ll escort you to the Commander. Oh, and feel free to call me Clint, I like to keep things informal with my fellow Sergeants.”

“Good to meet you, Clint. Name’s Dave,” David replied, shaking hands with the man.

The Staff Sergeant turned and began striding across the mustering point, heading towards a reinforced Command building in the centre of the base. They had to pause as a trio of heavy tanks glided in front of them, huge anti-grav cyclics throbbing with power to keep the massive vehicles in the air. While they waited for them to pass, David glanced off to his left, at the enormous citadel that housed Terran Federation High Command. The building was a marvel of Terran engineering skill, a fortified bastion capable of withstanding the heaviest of orbital bombardments – not that it needed to with the planetary shields in operation.

“Impressive sight, isn’t it?” Clint said, gazing over at the enormous headquarters. “You soon get used to it when you’re guarding the fortifications on an eight-hour shift.”

David turned back to look at the other sergeant. “You mentioned the Commander, Clint? I thought I was being assigned to a squad.”

Clint smiled at him and replied, “You are, but Commander Wessex asked me to look out for you.”

Suddenly understanding the man’s startled reaction to his orders, David nodded thoughtfully. “Is Commander Wessex the Base Commander?”

The tanks had thrummed past, so Staff Sergeant Brannigan set off once again. “No, the Base C.O. is Brigadier Garcia. Commander Wessex is in charge of the Armoured Infantry Companies and requested you personally.” Glancing to his right, Brannigan added, “How much time have you logged in Powered Armour?”

David followed the other man’s gaze towards the distinctive shape of a Terran Federation Armoury. A squad of five troopers in bulky powered armour strode out of the entrance, hefting a mixture of heavy weapons in their arms.

“None!” he admitted, gaping at the high-tech gear in shock.

“It’s a hell of a rush, Dave,” Clint confided in him with a grin. “If there’s a God of War, he’s got himself a suit of Sentinel Armour!”

Feeling more than a little intimidated by the thought of learning to use the hulking body armour, David nodded and just kept pace with his fellow sergeant. They crossed the rest of the base to its centre, weaving their way around trucks loaded with munitions and the occasional open-topped hover jeep. Striding up the steps to the Command Building, Clint paused by the grand entrance and gestured for David to proceed inside.

They walked down several corridors, before stopping outside a door with a nameplate embossed with the title: “Commander Wessex”. Clint knocked on it with his knuckles and a muffled voice called out, “Come in!”

The door opened up into a small office with several seats backed up against the wall. There was a a second door on the opposite side of the room, adjacent to a desk with a fresh-faced lieutenant sitting behind it. The man smiled at them in greeting and said, “Good to see you, Clint. The Commander’s waiting for you, so go straight through.”

Brannigan gave the lieutenant a courteous nod as he strode across the door with David in tow, then opened the door and ushered him through. The office beyond was much larger, but David’s eyes were drawn to the striking brunette sitting behind it. She was mid-thirties if he had to guess, with her hair up in a bun and sporting a lean, athletic physique – readily apparent with the dress shirt she was wearing, her officers’ jacket hanging on a hook on the right wall.

“This is Sergeant David Gibbons, Ma’am,” Brannigan said, saluting her respectfully.

“Is this the man, Staff Sergeant?” the Commander asked, rising from her seat. She walked around the desk, studying David with an appraising eye as he saluted her.

Brannigan nodded. “That he is, Ma’am, just arrived from Port Medea.”

“A commendation from the Lion...” Commander Wessex breathed, her green eyes gleaming with excitement. “Tell me, what’s he like in person?”

\*\*\*

John stood behind Sakura and Alyssa, watching through the cockpit canopy as the Raptor flew over the lush, beautiful surface of New Eden. The planet had a single huge continent, dotted with glittering lakes and crisscrossed with crystal-clear rivers, the life-giving water keeping the planet green and verdant. They were flying towards the southern part of that continent and Faye dropped down through the clouds as they neared their destination.

“It hasn’t really changed in all these years,” Sakura murmured, gazing out over the picturesque landscape. “New Eden’s just as lovely as I remembered.”

Alyssa put her arm around the Asian girl’s shoulders, squeezing her gently. “Is it strange to be back?”

“No, not strange... but comfortable, familiar.” Raising herself up on tip-toe, Sakura looked out through the canopy, a half-smile on her face despite her nervousness, as she spotted familiar landmarks flashing by beneath them.

Faye glanced at John and announced, “We’re nearly there. We’ll arrive in just under ten seconds.”

Shaking her head, Sakura turned to look at Faye. “I think you’ve made a mistake. We’re still quite a way from Elizabethtown.”

John placed his hand on her arm, stroking it gently. “We’re not going to Elizabethtown, honey.”

“We’re not?” Sakura asked him in confusion. “But my parents had the shrine built near Devonshire University!”

“I know,” he replied, give her a sympathetic smile.

“So where are you taking me?“ She froze as she asked the question, suddenly realising their destination and whirling around to stare out the window. “Home...” she breathed, her voice catching in her throat.

“Come on,” Alyssa said quietly, guiding the stunned young woman with her.

Sakura moved in a daze, walking between them as they guided her to the grav-tube, then down the corridor to the forward loading area. Faye had brought the Raptor down into the large garden behind the impressive six-bedroom house and the gunship was currently hovering a foot above the ground. John walked down the loading ramp, then offered Sakura a hand, helping her down onto the well-kept lawn.

“It’s just like I remembered it,” Sakura said in a hushed voice, gazing around the garden she’d played in as a child. “Nothing’s really changed...”

John glanced at Alyssa and asked telepathically, \*Any problems getting us permission to visit?\*

She gave a slight shake of her head. \*The owners were being a bit awkward, so I just offered to buy the place for triple the value. They were a lot more cooperative after that. I asked them to leave the back door unlocked.\*

\*Do you want to get started?\* he asked, sharing a look with the blonde girl.

Alyssa smiled at him and nodded, closing her eyes and concentrating. Behind her, the Raptor slowly lifted into the air, barely making a sound as Faye kept the retro-thruster power to a minimum.

John turned to Sakura who was gazing at the house with a mournful expression on her face. “Would you like to show me around?” he asked gently. “If it’s not too hard for you that is.”

She nodded, taking his hand and walking towards the patio at the back of the building. When they reached the doors, she hesitated, so John reached forward and pushed down the handle, swinging the door wide open. They walked inside, entering a large lounge with three two-seater sofas facing a big holo-screen on the far side of the room.

“The furniture’s different,” Sakura murmured, glancing distractedly around the lounge.

“What was it like before?” John prompted her.

She had a wistful smile on her face as she walked across the room. “My father had a single chair in here, which my Mom used to call his ‘throne’.” Turning around, she looked to the side and gestured with her hand. “Along that wall we had a three-seater sofa. When we watched a holo-movie together, Mom used to sit at one end near my Dad and I’d lie along it, with my head on her lap.”

John could see her eyes welling up and he rubbed her back to comfort her. “I’m sorry, maybe this was a bad idea,” he said, looking at her with concern.

“No, it was a lovely thought,” Sakura replied, turning to look at him with a grateful smile. She brushed her eyes and took his hand, guiding him through the door. “Let me show you the rest.”

They walked from room to room, with Sakura reminiscing about times she’d spent with her parents and the various things they’d done together. He noticed she deliberately avoided the kitchen, leading him deeper into her old home instead. She paused silently for a long moment at the end of the long hallway, gazing into what appeared to be a study in the east wing of the house. She faltered before entering that room, then turned abruptly and flung open another door in the corridor, which led into a spacious garage. The door crashed into the wall and Sakura had a sad smile on her face at the loud bang, glancing back at the study again with a heavy sigh.

“I’ve got so many memories here,” she said quietly, turning back to look at him. “I keep expecting my Mom or Dad to call my name.” Her face crumpled and she began to cry. “I’m sorry, I just miss them so much...”

John gathered her in his arms and held her close. “It’s okay, I understand.”

They stood together for a long while as Sakura cried against his chest, her tears soaking his shirt. This wasn’t the same raw outpouring of grief as the other day, but simply a forlorn sense of loss for her parents that she’d loved so much. They’d been cruelly taken away from her by the passage of time, only a handful of years before she’d finally got her freedom, robbing her of the chance to say a final goodbye. When her tears dried out, she let out a heavy sigh, then looked up at John.

She was about to speak when she caught a glimpse of a soft white light out of the corner of her eye. Turning around she looked at Alyssa in surprise.

“Would you like to see your parents again?” Alyssa asked her gently, her eyes glowing with a radiant white light.

“More than anything!” Sakura gasped, a wild hope blossoming inside her.

\*Just relax,\* Alyssa thought to her, reaching up to place her hand on Sakura’s temple.

"Sakura! Are you wrecking my garage again?" her father called out from the room behind them, his voice echoing slightly.

She whirled around in shock, eyes wide in disbelief as she stared at this image of her father. There he was again, but appearing with an ethereal glow around him and a slightly translucent cast to his features. Sakura stared at him in amazement, seeing the smile of anticipation on his face and watching in fascination as he adopted a stern look, just in time for her own likeness to run out of the garage.

“He was never annoyed, only pretending... for all those years,” she marvelled, gazing at him with love in her eyes.

She whirled around, gazing back down the corridor towards the closed door they’d passed earlier. Glancing at Alyssa she had an urgent question in her eyes.

“Go ahead,” the blonde girl said, her tone kind and gentle as she removed her hand from Sakura’s head.

Rushing back down the corridor, Sakura flung the door open, gazing into the kitchen and stifling a sob that was half-filled with joy and half with sorrow. Her mother was working in the kitchen just as she’d always remembered. Sakura stared at her in wonder, watching one scene from her youth play out after another.

Her mother scolded Sakura for stealing a pastry, a loving smile on her pretty face. The family sitting around the kitchen table eating dinner together. Her parents applauding when Sakura read them the acceptance letter from her University, barely contained glee on her eighteen-year-old face. Even her father uncorking a bottle of champagne after a promotion, the cork hitting the ceiling followed by a geyser of foamy liquid as her mother and a much younger Sakura squealed with laughter.

“How is this possible?” Sakura asked, turning to gape at Alyssa in awe.

“This house is alive with psychic imprints from your family,” Alyssa explained, leaning against the doorframe and smiling as she watched a three-year old Sakura bouncing on her father’s shoulders. “There were a lot of very happy memories here.”

Sakura bit her lip, overcome with emotion. “Thank you so much...”

“Take as much time as you want,” Alyssa said indulgently, reaching out to stroke the Asian girl’s arm.

John smiled as he watched Sakura turn back to look into the kitchen, the girl entranced by the lovely memories being replayed before her eyes. He glanced at Alyssa and asked, “Can you share them with me, too?”

“Of course,” she replied, placing her hand on his temple.

John felt a slight surge as Alyssa opened a bridge into the Astral Plane for him, tethering it against his physical form and letting him see these echoing psychic imprints from the past. He walked with the two girls from room to room, watching Sakura’s young life replayed before him in snippets of loving memories of her time with her parents.

A thought crossed his mind and Alyssa turned to look at him in surprise. \*You’re kidding, right? I’ve no idea how to do that!\* she balked, her glowing cerulean eyes going wide.

\*Just an idle thought, don’t worry about it,\* John muttered, giving her a reassuring smile.

He turned his attention back to Sakura, watching her looking at the psychic imprints with a wistful smile on her face. As wonderful as these memories were, they didn’t give her what she really wanted – a chance to say goodbye to her parents.

\*John, wait!\* Alyssa blurted out, staring at him in shock as she felt him fighting against some towering resistance.

He ignored her though, his eyes glowing with a fierce blue radiance of their own, the lights in the hallway dimming as he gathered psychic energy to him. Crouching down, he placed his fists on the floor, waves of eldritch energy pouring out from him as he soaked up the psychic imprints that saturated the Honami home. \*Give me all the energy you can spare,\* he ordered both his Matriarchs.

Sakura felt a pang of sadness as she watched her father rolling around with laughter on the floor, being tickled mercilessly by his wife and daughter. She remembered that day as if it was only yesterday. As a joke, she’d faked a bad report, replacing all her A grades with E grades. Her father had tickled her remorselessly for being so naughty, until Sakura and her mother had ganged up on him in return.

The ghostly image began to flicker, becoming more insubstantial by the second until it flickered out. Another psychic memory appeared, but the same thing happened, the scenes with her parents disappearing even quicker that time. Sakura turned around to look at Alyssa in alarm, but the psychic blonde had her eyes closed and was surrounded in a bright nimbus of psychic energy. It was pouring out of her, twisting down her arm and straight into John. Sakura gaped at him in shock, watching as waves throbbing with power rolled out from him, while fleeting images of her family were swept into his body.

She whirled around and watched the imprints of her parents faltering under that onslaught, each one obliterated only seconds after it appeared. “Stop!” she protested in horror, turning around to shake him. “You’re destroying them!”

He appeared to be in some kind of trance, totally absorbed in whatever he was doing, no matter how much she shook him.

“Stop, please!” she begged, falling to her knees beside him.

All of a sudden, the waves of psychic energy faded away, dissipating as quickly as John had summoned them.

“Sakura?! Oh my God!”

Lifting her head, Sakura slowly turned around. Her mother’s voice was strong this time, not like the faint echoes from the psychic imprints. She stared in open-mouthed shock as she saw her mother and father standing before her, not a day older than when she’d last seen them seventy-five years ago.

They rushed forward, skidding to their knees beside her. “We were so worried!” her father gasped, before his face crumpled and he threw his arms around her.

Sakura let out a shocked cry as she felt the warmth of his arms encircling her. She was suddenly surrounded by that comforting strength which had always made her feel so protected and safe. Her mother hugged her too, kissing her cheek frantically as tears streamed down her pretty face.

“Oh, my little angel! We thought we’d lost you!” her mother sobbed, hugging her fiercely.

John slowly rose to his feet, a smile of satisfaction on his face as he saw the look of pure bliss on Sakura’s face. She had her eyes closed as she hugged her parents, not daring to open them in case doing so might end what could only be a wonderful dream.

“How did you do that?!” Alyssa whispered, staring at him with an awestruck expression on her face.

At the sound of her voice, Shiro and Emiko Honami looked up at them in surprise.

\*We’ll talk later,\* John replied, turning and giving Sakura’s parents a warm smile.

“Who are you?” Shiro asked, looking up at John. “Was it you that brought our daughter back to us?”

John nodded and replied, “My name’s John Blake and this is Alyssa. We helped rescue Sakura from the man that took her from you.”

Rising to his feet, Shiro held out his hand and John shook it firmly. “I owe you a tremendous debt, John. Sakura’s the most precious thing in the world to us!”

“You don’t owe me anything, Mister Honami,” John replied, bowing his head to him respectfully. “Your daughter’s an incredible woman. It’s been wonderful getting to know her.”

Sakura’s father laughed and shook his head. “Call me Shiro, please!”

Emiko rose to her feet too, with Sakura wrapped in her arms. She let out a choked laugh as she gasped, “I want to hug you to thank you, but I don’t think I can let go of Sakura!”

“I don’t think she’d let go of you either,” John replied, smiling affectionately at Sakura.

“How?” Sakura finally blurted out, gaping at John in awe. “How did you do this?!”

Emiko saw the reverent look that her daughter gave this mysterious, handsome man who had appeared in her home. She stroked Sakura’s arm, then leaned in and whispered, “He really is cute! How did you manage to keep him secret from me?”

Sakura blushed furiously, confirming her mother’s guess. “We only met a couple of months ago,” she admitted, glancing at John with a riot of emotions in her eyes. She was feeling profound gratitude, love, relief, hope, joy, and total bewilderment all at once.

“It’s an honour to finally meet you both at last,” John said, smiling at each of her parents in turn. “I’m just sorry it took this long; Sakura’s told me so much about you.”

Shiro smiled at his daughter with a raised eyebrow. “That’s odd, because she hasn’t told us anything about you...”

“Well, as I mentioned earlier, my name’s-“ John started to reply, but Sakura interrupted him.

“This is Vice Admiral John Blake,” she said proudly, slipping out of her mother’s arms to walk over to John. “He’s been honoured with the Stellar Cluster twice and is the bravest man in the Terran Federation. He’s saved billions of lives, including mine!”

Her parents looked stunned, unsure how to react to such an august figure standing in their lounge.

Sakura beamed in delight as she added, “He’s an amazing cook too! And he’s like a real-life Samurai, fighting against evil men using his wits and his sword.” Putting her arms around John she added, “And I love him with all my heart!”

John smiled at her, hugging her back. He glanced at her parents, and a look of shock, then a flicker of understanding crossed both of their faces. “I love your daughter just as much,” John said quietly, looking at Shiro then Emiko. “We haven’t got long, but there is something I wanted to ask you.”

“Haven’t got long?!” Sakura asked in alarm. “What do you mean?”

Shiro and Emiko walked over to their daughter, reaching out to hold her hands as John released her.

“John brought us back to say goodbye to you, my beautiful little angel,” Emiko said, brushing her fingers against her daughter’s cheek.

“We’d love to stay with you forever, but our time has passed,” Shiro agreed, giving her a wistful smile.

“No, you can’t go!” Sakura pleaded desperately. “I’ve only just got you back!”

“You’ll always have our love for you,” Emiko said in a hushed voice. Her face lit up with a beautiful smile as she continued, “You brought a joy to our lives that neither of us knew was missing, until you arrived and turned our world upside down.”

Shiro looked into Sakura’s eyes and his tone was earnest as he said, “I’m very proud of you, Sakura, I always have been. I treasured every moment we had together.”

Shiro and Emiko both hugged the sobbing girl, Sakura overwhelmed by the tsunami of emotions.

When her tears had abated, Emiko turned to smile at John. “I believe you had a question for us?”

John nodded, the expression on his face earnest. “I’ve fallen in love with Sakura. She’s a brilliant, charming, beautiful, lovely woman, who completes me in so many ways. I promise I’ll protect her and keep her safe, and always do my utmost to make sure she lives a long, happy, fulfilling life. We haven’t had a chance to discuss it yet, but my dearest hope is that one day, she will consent to be my wife. If I should ever be so fortunate, would you give us your blessing?”

Sakura let out a strangled squeak, her eyes like saucers as she gaped at him.

“Do you love him, too?” Shiro quietly asked his daughter, a gentle smile on his face.

She managed to fight through her shock and nodded as she gazed into her father’s eyes.

Emiko grinned at her daughter, looking overjoyed. She hugged her tightly, then leaned in to whisper in her ear, “If we say yes, we want lots of lovely grandchildren!”

“Mom!” Sakura exclaimed, blushing furiously.

Her parents shared a tender look, then turned back to John and smiled at him as they nodded.

Shiro held out his hand and John shook it. “I can see how much you love my daughter. I won’t ask you to look after her, because I know you will.”

Emiko gave Sakura a gentle maternal smile. “We have to go now, but always remember that we love you.”

Her mother glanced at John, who walked over to Sakura and placed a reassuring hand on her shoulder. “It’s time to say goodbye now.”

Sakura bit her lip then rushed over to her parents, hugging them both tightly. “I love you both so much! Thank you for giving me such a wonderful life with you. I’ll never forget you!”

“We love you too,” they said, hugging her back. “Goodbye, Sakura.”

“Goodbye...” she whispered, holding onto them as long as she could before they stepped away from her.

They waved her farewell, loving expressions on their faces as they slowly faded away.

John and Alyssa were there for Sakura then, both embracing her. She leaned against John’s chest with her eyes closed, listening to the steady beat of his heart and feeling too emotional to trust herself to speak. They stood together for a long while, until she slowly raised her head to gaze at him.

“How much of that was real?” she asked quietly, a look of real vulnerability in her eyes.

“All of it,” John replied, the sincerity in his voice convincing her of the truth to his words.

Sakura looked back at the spot her parents had been and she whispered reverently, “I’ll never forget what you did for me today.” When she turned to look at him again, there was a fierce gleam in her eyes. “I’ll always be at your side, for as long as you want me. Whatever happens, I’ll be there for you.”

John smiled at her. “Does that mean you’re saying yes to becoming Mrs Sakura Blake?”

She looked at him in surprise, then laughed joyfully. It was a light, happy sound that instantly banished the previously sombre mood. “Yes! A thousand times, yes!”

\*\*\*

The flight back to the Invictus was quiet, with the occupants of the Raptor deep in thought. John glanced at Sakura who was sitting beside him, her beautiful face still wearing a look of blissful astonishment as she tried to absorb everything that had just happened in her old home. Alyssa was sitting opposite him, not having spoken a word. She studied him with an intense, speculative look in her piercing cerulean eyes.

John leaned back against the wall, slowly exhaling as he closed his heavy eyelids. Although he’d managed to mask his fatigue during the meeting with Sakura’s parents, he’d never used so much psychic energy before and he felt hollowed out by the experience. As much resistance as he’d faced in gifting Rachel with the ability to heal, this had felt massively harder and only his relentless determination to help Sakura had allowed him to push through that barrier.

\*Thank you for the assistance back there,\* John said to his two Matriarchs. \*I’m sorry I was abrupt with you both, I was a bit preoccupied at the time.\*

Edraele was the first to answer and she sounded tired but pleased. \*There’s no need to apologise, I could feel your mind battling to overcome that resistance and I’m just glad you asked me for support.\* She paused, then added nervously, \*That was a very... unique experience.\*

\*What was that?\* Alyssa asked, sounding more than a little apprehensive. \*Whatever you were fighting against felt titanic!\*

He slowly opened his eyes to see her staring at him intently. \*I’ve no idea,\* he admitted with a slight shrug of his shoulders. \*I felt the same kind of opposition when I enhanced Rachel’s third helix.\*

Her eyes darted to the side, softening as she looked at Sakura. \*You turned her world upside down, do you know that?\*

John put his arm around the Asian girl, smiling when she let out a happy sigh and snuggled against him. \*She’s a lovely girl and life dealt her a shitty hand. I wanted to help give her the proper closure she needed to be able to move on without carrying those burdens.\*

\*How did you do all that back there?\* Alyssa asked, leaning forward with a hungry gleam in her eyes. \*Your mind was moving too fast for me to follow! You gathered their psychic imprints... I got that bit, but the rest... it just blew my mind!\*

\*As you say, I gathered the psychic ‘memories’ of her parents, using them as a guide to recreate Shiro and Emiko. Getting a read of all those imprints let me gauge how they would react to seeing Sakura again. After that, I imbued them with a temporary spark of consciousness and gave them a physical presence.\* He glanced down at Sakura as she nuzzled into him affectionately. \*So it was very real, in a sense that they behaved exactly as her parents would have done in those circumstances.\*

\*But how?! I don’t understand how you could even start going about that?\* she replied, looking frustrated. \*You just gave them a spark of consciousness... what does that even mean?!\*

\*It was a bit similar to the way I revived Jade,\* John replied, remembering how he’d fanned that spark of life inside her into a brightly burning flame. He studied Alyssa for a moment, having a pretty good idea what had triggered such intense interest. His tone was gentle and sympathetic as he asked, \*Karron?\*

She bit her lip and her eyes welled up as she gave him a curt nod in reply.

\*Let me have some time with Sakura, then I promise we’ll talk about it alone later tonight. Okay?\* he asked, his eyes searching her face for a reaction.

Alyssa nodded again and looked away, swallowing back the lump in her throat.

Faye rose from the pilot’s chair and turned to look at her passengers, not entirely sure how to handle the strange mood in the cockpit. John looked tired, Sakura seemed happy but shocked, whilst Alyssa’s expression was one Faye had never seen before on the young woman. She appeared both hopeful and sad at the same time, which generated a logic-error in her emotional sensitivity programs.

Erring on the side of caution, Faye muted her natural exuberance and informed them quietly, “We’ve just landed on the Invictus.”

John looked at her in surprise, then nodded in acknowledgement. “Thanks for flying us, Faye, I appreciate it.”

“You’re welcome,” she replied, giving him a kind smile in return, rather than the cheerful grin she would have preferred.

The three of them rose to their feet, with John putting his arm around both girls as they walked to the grav-tube. They rode down in the red field together, then left the Raptor by the forward loading ramp.

“I’ll let Rachel know that we’ll need to postpone her visit with her father until tomorrow,” John said regretfully, as they reached the Hangar deck. “After that, I’m going to head up to the bedroom to have a rest. You’re both welcome to join me.”

Sakura slipped her arm around his waist and hugged him back. “I’ll come with you.”

Alyssa turned to look at him and cupped his face in her hands. “You should go and get some sleep, you look worn out. I’ll speak to Rachel and keep the girls company. They’re making dinner at the moment, would you like me to save you some for later?”

“That’d be great, thank you. Give me a few hours to recover then wake me. Say around ten?” John requested, pulling her closer for a tender kiss. \*Don’t say anything to Dana yet. I’ll explain why later.\*

She gazed up at him, a flicker of worry appearing in her eyes. \*Okay, I won’t say a word.\*

They parted then, with Alyssa heading to the aft grav-tube, while John and Sakura took the two express tubes up to their bedroom. He kicked off his shoes then flopped on the bed, letting out a sigh of contentment as he relaxed on the soft covers. Sakura removed her high heels then climbed on after him, kneeling at his side as she gazed down at him with a look of wonder on her face as if seeing him for the first time.

He smiled at her and opened his arms. “I’m the same guy I was a few hours ago. I could use a hug from a beautiful girl though...”

Sakura blushed and lay down on the bed, nestling against him with her long raven hair cascading over his shoulder. Her warm body felt lovely next to his and as he put a protective arm around her, he felt his eyelids growing heavier until he couldn’t keep them open any longer...

The next thing he knew he was being gently jostled awake as a pair of enchanting almond-shaped eyes gazed down at him.

“Alyssa asked me to wake you. It just turned ten o’clock,” Sakura murmured, before cuddling up against him again.

She was nude now and so was he, to his surprise. Her skin felt wonderfully smooth and soft as she snuggled closer, one of her golden-brown arms resting across his chest.

He glanced down at her and found that she had tilted her head back slightly so that she could watch his face. “I’m so sorry I flaked out on you,” he apologised, giving her a remorseful look. “You must have wanted to talk after that bombshell I dropped on you.”

Turning around, Sakura raised herself up so that she could see him more easily. Her breasts felt lovely where they pressed against his chest and it took all his willpower to keep his eyes on her face rather than glancing at her impressive cleavage.

“You have nothing to apologise for,” she said in a tender voice, with that same look of awe returning once again. “You exhausted yourself to help me.”

“I just hope you didn’t feel pressured into saying ‘Yes’, considering the situation,” he said, an anxious undercurrent to his voice.

She looked at him in surprise for a moment then giggled with laughter. For the first time since he’d known her, she seemed like a normal, happy, twenty-year-old girl; a far cry from the troubled young woman who’d been burdened down with so much pain and sorrow.

“Everything you said was just perfect,” she swooned, leaning in to give him a kiss. “Everything that happened... it was all perfect.”

“I’m sure you must have a thousand questions about what happened with your parents. I’m just sorry I couldn’t warn you in advance to let you prepare yourself. I didn’t even know I could do that until I got caught up in the moment,” he explained, brushing his fingers through her long silky-black hair.

Sakura shook her head without hesitating. “I’ve been thinking about everything while you were asleep... You granted me my dearest wish and let me say a proper goodbye to my parents. I don’t need to know any more than that.” She smiled at him in adoration. “As for feeling pressured? I fell in love with you weeks ago. Hearing you ask my parents for permission to marry me was magical.”

John felt a surge of relief and he hugged her tight, pulling her in for another kiss. When her soft lips finally left his, he felt a flicker of trepidation as he gazed into her lovely brown eyes. “There is something we need to discuss though, about you being my fiancée-”

She kissed him again to shush him into silence then gave him a beaming grin. “Don’t worry, Alyssa already explained that there are several more future Mrs Blakes...”

“You don’t look upset by the idea?”

“All of us were planning on settling down together to raise a family with you; this is an easy leap to make by comparison,” she said, a soft look in her eyes. “Don’t get me wrong though, I’m overjoyed that you proposed; you couldn’t have done anything more to make me happier.”

“That’s what I want, to make you happy,” John said, gazing into her eyes.

She gave him a coy look in return. “In that case, there is one thing you could do that would make me positively delighted... if you aren’t too tired that is?”

Alyssa heard his concerned thoughts about keeping her waiting and she spoke up immediately, \*Don’t be silly. Take your time and give her what she needs, then I’ll meet you in your Ready Room.\*

John moved with the Asian girl as she rolled over onto her back, letting her lie beneath him as she preferred. “No playing at being my Thrall this time,” he cautioned her with a smile, while gazing down at her beautiful face.

She parted her legs, cradling him between her thighs as her fingers traced lightly over his flanks. “Can I be the loving fiancée instead?”

“That sounds perfect,” he agreed, brushing the head of his cock against her already wet pussy. “As long as I can be the adoring fiancé?”

Sakura bit her lower lip as she nodded, slowly twisting her hips back and forth as she guided his broad girth inside her. John slid his hands under her head, cradling her as he gazed into her eyes, savouring the look of intense concentration on her face.

She let out a soft moan as she took another few inches, then struggled to take any more, the angle too difficult to make further progress. “You’ll have to finish the rest for me,” she murmured, looking flushed with excitement.

Doing as she asked, he pushed in deeper, loving the look of pleasure in her eyes and the quiet moans she made as he impaled her. Her thighs were splayed wide open to give him full access to her body and her soft fingers fluttered on his lower back as she urged him all the way inside. She had relaxed to take him, and her warm, tight passage readily yielded for his progress, welcoming his cock back into her womb with a rippling squeeze.

“Back where I belong,” he said quietly, leaning in to kiss her.

Sakura brought her legs up to cross her calves over his ass as she hugged him tight. “I’m going to be such a good wife for you,” she murmured, kissing him back with increasing passion.

John started stroking in and out, watching her breathing quicken as she got more excited. She felt incredible wrapped around him like that and the adoration in her eyes was intoxicating. The look she gave him was something he’d not seen from Sakura before. It reminded him of the kind of reverent glances that the other girls had frequently given him in the early days, before the bond with Alyssa had been broken and reforged. This felt very different though and for the first time, he didn’t feel any guilt when she gazed at him that way. He felt like he’d truly earned her respect and trust, rather than it being part and parcel of a Progenitor’s normal connection with his Thralls.

“How are you going to be a good wife for me, gorgeous?” he asked playfully, as he stroked into her.

She pulled him down onto her chest, then pressed her lips to his ear. “Every time you come to bed with me, I’m going to leave you seeing stars!”

He grinned and kissed her, his tongue duelling with hers as she moaned into his mouth. “You already do that, so what else?”

“I’m going to learn to cook so that I can provide for you and our family,” she gasped, letting out a soft cry as he hilted himself inside her and ground against her clit.

“I like cooking for you, so you’re going to have some competition in the kitchen,” he replied distractedly, his focus on her body and the trembling in her thighs that hinted at her cresting climax. “Tell me about our family, how many lovely children are you going to give me?”

Sakura pulled back so she could lock eyes with him, her chest heaving as she got more aroused. “Lots!”

“They’ll be so beautiful, just like you,” he agreed, cradling her head in his hands as he pistoned his cock deep into her womb.

She arched her back as she came, gripping him tightly in her clutching embrace and crying out in ecstasy. Her almond eyes were squeezed tightly closed as she crested that wave of pleasure, clinging to him desperately as he rode her hard. John was relentless and coaxed her through two more fierce orgasms, her pussy gripping and massaging his shaft as her body encouraged him to fill her womb. Sakura was left breathless after her third climax and she sagged back on the bed as her arms and legs relaxed. He waited patiently for her to recover, murmuring loving words in her ear and gently stroking her hair.

“That felt so intense... so intimate...” she finally breathed, her dark brown eyes filled with love.

John nodded, holding her close as he kissed her. “That was just a taste of what’s in store, my beautiful fiancée.”

She let out a happy sigh and hugged him back. She glanced down at her slim tummy and asked curiously, “How come you didn’t finish too?”

He began to move again, kissing her as he picked up the pace again. “I want to look into your beautiful eyes when I do; you had them squeezed shut earlier.”

Sakura smiled at him, blushing self-consciously. “I can’t think of anything I’d love more,” she said giving him a tender kiss. Her earnest expression wavered for a moment and she suddenly appeared torn with indecision.

“What’s the matter?” John asked with concern, stopping his thrusts as he noticed the doubt in her eyes.

She hesitated for a moment, then replied softly, “I’ve been having nightmares...”

“Of Shinatobe’s implanted memories?” John asked, taking a calculated guess. “Hopefully they’ll be less frequent now. How often are you getting these nightmares at the moment?”

“Every night,” Sakura admitted, not willing to meet his gaze.

He looked startled, then hugged her tight. “Why didn’t you tell me?” he asked, his voice filled with concern. “I had no idea you’d been suffering like that.”

“The fighting wasn’t so bad, but the torture... it was horrific,” Sakura murmured, a haunted look in her eyes. “Shinatobe was a monster; women, children, she had no compassion for anyone.”

John wanted to tell her that he’d get rid of the memories immediately, but he paused, having had that conversation with her before. Stopping himself from repeating himself, he just nodded sympathetically.

Sakura saw the frustrated look in his eyes and gave him a grateful kiss. “I know you wanted to erase them before, but I asked you not to...” She smiled as she continued, “Rachel spoke to me about that only this morning. She asked me to talk to you about removing them and made it clear she wasn’t going to take no for an answer.”

John stroked her hair as he studied her face. “You know I’ll help you in a heartbeat, you only have to ask. I don’t want you to feel forced into anything, but those implanted memories are probably never going to fade with time. The recordings of Shinatobe’s murders aren’t natural and they don’t belong in your mind; that’s probably why your subconscious is struggling to cope and making you relive them as nightmares every night.”

“Always looking out for me,” she said affectionately, her fingers tracing over his cheek. She glanced away, gazing into the distance as she admitted, “I was worried about losing my fighting edge if Shinatobe’s memories were erased. I still am if I’m being honest.”

“If that happens we can adjust, it isn’t a problem,” John said gently. “I value your happiness far more than how powerful you are in combat.”

Sakura kissed him then, her soft lips brushing against his before giving him a loving smile. “Sentiments like that are why you never need to worry about how much you’re influenced by your Progenitor heritage.”

He looked at her in surprise for a moment, then nodded thoughtfully.

Her eyes shone with fresh resolve as she continued, “Shinatobe’s victims don’t need me to be their advocate any more. Irillith has logs of everything that happened and the guilty are being punished. It’s time... I’d like you to remove those memories for me.”

“Of course, honey,” he said, looking pleased. He glanced down where they were joined together and added, “We’d better finish with you swallowing.”

She gave him a seductive look. “As long as you stare into my eyes when you cum...”

John smiled at her then carefully withdrew from her snug depths. As soon as they were parted, Sakura moved with nimble grace, crossing the bed then kneeling before the chair. She patted the seat and had a coy smile on her face as she said, “I like being on my knees for you, it makes me feel very submissive.”

He went over to join the Asian girl, sitting on the high-backed leather chair and spreading his legs to make room for her. She inched closer, then leaned down to take his rock-hard cock in her mouth, parting her lips wide to engulf his throbbing head. With practiced skill, she eased him into her throat, swallowing as he sank deeper. The rhythmic contractions gripped him like a fist and John let out a groan as she massaged his length.

Adjusting her angle so that she could gaze up at him, John leaned back a little and watched her eyes as she sucked on his throbbing cock. He’d been close before, so he knew he wasn’t going to last long, especially not with the way her velvety tongue was gliding over his shaft. The look she gave him was so trusting and filled with such devotion that his sudden explosive climax rushed upon him, the first blast of cum shooting down his shaft and straight into her stomach.

Sakura’s eyes widened in surprise, then were filled with a look of tremendous satisfaction as they gazed at one another through his climax. She sucked hungrily, her throat bobbing as she swallowed, muscles contracting around his shaft to milk his quad of every last drop of spunk. John held her head in place with both hands, feeling an instinctive need to stop anything from interrupting his intense orgasm. She wasn’t planning on going anywhere though and hummed happily as his cock pulsated in her throat, long streams of cum pumping into her rapidly expanding stomach.

It was a long, deeply satisfying climax and he groaned with relief when he was done, his four balls feeling numb after such a powerful release. He slumped back in a daze, reeling from the immensely pleasurable sensations. Sakura continued to nurse on him until she was sure he was finished, at which point she led him slide free of her throat, giving his head a grateful kiss as it left her lips.

“Did you enjoy your first blowjob from your fiancée?” she asked, grinning at him as she ran her hands over her hugely rounded abdomen.

John offered her a hand to help her up onto his lap. “I was seeing stars,” he replied with a smile, joining her in stroking her swollen belly.

“What happens now?” she whispered, placing her soft fingers on top of his hand.

“I won’t touch anything else in your mind, only get rid of the implanted memories of Shinatobe’s murders,” John said, wrapping his arms around her. “Just relax and let me take care of you. You won’t feel a thing, I promise.”

She leaned against his chest and he could feel her relaxing as he’d requested, both of them enjoying the physical intimacy together. Eventually Sakura turned to kiss him, before saying, “I had a lovely time with you, but you shouldn’t keep Alyssa waiting any longer.”

John gave her a rueful smile. “I’m sorry to leave you like this. I do need to talk to her though, it’s important.”

Shaking her head, Sakura gave him an understanding look. “I appreciated you spending time with me. Today’s been an incredible day. Thank you, for everything.”

“You’re welcome,” he replied, helping her to stand. “Are you going to bed now? I imagine the rest of the girls will be along fairly soon.”

She hesitated, a deep blush appearing in her tanned cheeks. “Actually, Rachel asked me to join her and Dana once you’d filled up my tummy...”

John blinked in surprise then laughed as he hugged her. “I definitely want to hear the details later!”

Sakura nodded, grinning at him in return. She gave him a lingering kiss goodbye, then padded silently out of the room, still managing to move with cat-like agility despite the heavy weight of cum that rounded out her stomach. John watched her leave, then entered the bathroom for a quick shower. As much as he would have loved to linger under the lovely hot water, he didn’t want to keep Alyssa waiting any longer than necessary. He had a quick, efficient shower then dried himself off and threw on some casual clothes.

Only a few minutes had passed since Sakura had left the bedroom, but by the time he passed Rachel’s quarters, lusty moans were audible through the door. He was sorely tempted to see what they were up to, but he didn’t want to dawdle.

\*It’s okay, take a peek,\* Alyssa encouraged him a second later. \*It should be a spectacular view...\*

John paused by the door and hit the button, his eyes quickly readjusting to the muted lighting inside Rachel’s room. His focus was immediately drawn to the three naked girls on the bed and he smiled as he heard their soft moans much clearer now. They were writhing together sensually, with Dana lying on her back, lapping away at Sakura as she rode the redhead’s face. Rachel knelt submissively before the Asian girl, suckling on one of her golden brown breasts and moving to the other at Sakura’s command. Sakura held her in place with her hands tightly wrapped in Rachel’s tawny hair, looking down at the brunette with an excited gleam in her eyes as she dominated both girls.

John found it fascinating to watch this other side to the raven-haired beauty, finding it such a contrast to the gentle, submissive way she was with him. He didn’t want to disturb them, so he closed the door and strode away along the corridor.

\*Pretty fucking hot, right?\* Alyssa purred, sounding more than a little aroused herself. \*Sakura’s got a real wild side to her!\*

\*Was she like that with you and Jade?\* John asked as he stepped into the grav-tube.

\*She tried to be,\* Alyssa replied with some amusement. \*She started out well, giving us both a good spanking to let us know who was boss. She ordered us to both go down on her at the same time, but the poor girl had trouble concentrating after that. You’ve seen how long Jade’s tongue is!\*

He chuckled as he imagined the vivid picture Alyssa was painting for him. \*I might have to watch the next time you three get together...\*

\*You’re always welcome,\* she replied, a teasing lilt to her voice.

John stepped onto the Bridge and found his purple-hued Watch Commander waiting for him with a beautiful smile on her face. “Hi, Faye! Everything okay up here?” he asked her cheerfully, while walking down the ramp towards his Ready Room.

“We’re still in high orbit above New Eden,” Faye replied, glancing at the holographic map in the centre of the Bridge. “The refit is proceeding on schedule and my boys are making great progress with the power couplings. We’ll be ready to start installing the Photon Lasers tomorrow afternoon!”

“That’s great news, honey!” John exclaimed, smiling at her in appreciation. “How about the power relays though? Do you need to upgrade those first?”

Her wings vibrated with excitement and an eager grin appeared on her cute elfin face. “Dana and Jade installed those this evening! You can leave the actual Photon Laser installation to me and the maintenance bots. I’ll put them to work on it while you’re on holiday!”

He paused at the door to his Ready Room and said, “Thanks for working so diligently on the refit, honey. You’ve saved us a hell of a lot of work.”

“I love helping out!” she exclaimed, fluttering over to join him. “It’s very rewarding to know I’ve been able to assist you.”

“You’ve made a tremendous difference,” John agreed, reaching up as though to caress her holographic cheek. He paused for a moment before adding, “Soon, I’ll be able to do this for real. I imagine Dana and Irillith will want to get started on your new body right away.”

Faye’s big eyes glowed brightly, reflecting her eager anticipation of that moment. She was about to reply, but glanced at the door behind him instead. “I know Alyssa’s expecting you; don’t let me keep you any longer.”

John smiled at her in gratitude then pressed the button to open the door and walked into his Ready Room. Alyssa had been sitting on one of the sofas, but she had heard his approach and glided over to greet him with a kiss.

“Sorry to keep you waiting,” John apologised, as he walked with her back to the sofas.

She waved away his apology. “Sakura needed that time with you. I’m just glad she finally relented and let you help her.” Gesturing towards the coffee table, she brought his attention to the covered dish and a bottle of beer. “I brought you some dinner. I’m sure you worked up an appetite...”

His stomach rumbled as he glanced at the plate, wondering what lay underneath the cover. “I’ll eat later, we should talk first,” he said as he sat on the sofa.

Alyssa shook her head and said insistently, “Have your dinner, I can wait a few more minutes.”

John hesitated, but when he glanced at her, he saw that she wasn’t going to take no for an answer. He gave her a grateful smile, then lifted the lid off to reveal a juicy steak with thick cut chips and runner beans. “This looks amazing,” he said, eagerly reaching for the knife and fork and not wasting any time in getting stuck in.

“Calara cooked it for you especially. We had pasta for dinner,” Alyssa said, watching him with an indulgent smile on her face.

He quickly demolished the meal, amazed at how good it all tasted, then washed it down with the chilled beer. With a sigh of contentment he sat back on the sofa, then opened his arms for his blonde companion to join him. Alyssa slipped off her high-heels, then sat sideways across his lap, cuddling into him. She was too keyed up to sit still though and after a moment, she twisted in his lap so that she could look into his eyes.

“Okay, shall I start by explaining how I brought back Sakura’s parents?” he asked, running his fingers through her golden-blonde hair.

Alyssa surprised him by shaking her head. “I’ve been speaking to Athena about it and she said I don’t have enough psychic energy to do that myself. It took all of us working together to give you that amount of power and neither you nor Edraele can channel energy back to me.”

“So let’s talk about Karron then,” John said quietly, a look of sympathy in his eyes.

“Are you sure you can’t do the same thing for me?” she asked him plaintively, having heard the uncertainty in his mind.

He studied her beautiful face for a moment, wishing with all his heart that he could tell her what she wanted to hear. “Sakura’s home was full of the psychic imprints left behind by her parents. They spent twenty years together, so there were countless positive memories I could draw from.” He was filled with remorse as he continued, “You know how much I want to help you, but your situation is very different.”

Alyssa visibly deflated, her eyes filling with tears as she leaned against his chest. “It’s been twelve years since my Dad died... I can’t really remember his face any more,” she whispered, her voice thick with emotion. “He found it too painful to have pictures of my mother around the house... I don’t even know what she looked like...”

“I’m so sorry,” John said, putting his arms around her and holding her tight as she began to cry.

They sat together as Alyssa grieved for her mother who’d died in childbirth and her father who’d been killed in a mining accident when she was only a child. He gently rubbed her back and murmured supportive, loving words to her as she wept. Eventually she quietened down, letting out a heavy sigh as she rested against his chest.

“Do you think we can try anyway?” she asked him in a hushed voice, the pain she was feeling reflected in her eyes.

He nodded as he stroked her hair. “Of course. We’ll definitely visit your old home on Karron, but I don’t want to get your hopes up then leave you disappointed.”

She gave him a wan smile and murmured, “Thank you. I know how much you want to help.”

“In the meantime, maybe Calara and Irillith can help track down pictures of your parents for you?” John suggested, brushing the tears from her cheek. “They would probably just be from an official ID, but that’d be better than nothing.”

Alyssa nodded, a hint of a smile appearing on her lips. “That’s a lovely idea, thank you. I’ll speak to them about it tomorrow.”

“You’re welcome,” he replied, giving her a gentle kiss.

Her expression brightened as she kissed him back and she still managed to look radiantly beautiful despite being in tears only moments earlier. “How about the rest of the girls?” She asked, sounding hopeful. “Do you think you can help them in the same way as Sakura?”

John relaxed back on the sofa as he thought about it, then just turned and lay down along the seats, bringing Alyssa with him. She settled down atop him, sighing with contentment as he embraced her and stroked her back.

“Well, Calara doesn’t need any help there,” John said, smiling as he thought about the Latina and her family. His smile faded as he continued, “With Dana, I’m not sure where we could even start. She doesn’t even know her parents’ names, let alone whether they’re still alive, does she?”

Alyssa shook her head, her expression one of sympathy for her oldest friend. “I know she looked into recorded births on Karron around the date when she was born, but didn’t find any leads. Records are patchy at best there... a lot of people on Karron are suspicious of the Terran Federation or just outright hate it. It’s quite possible her birth was never officially registered.”

“I suspected as much, it’s like that on the Outer Rim,” John replied, feeling a swell of pity for the lovely redhead.

Leaning forward to kiss him, Alyssa said softly, “As hard as it was for both of us, at least we knew our real names. Sparks doesn’t even have that.”

“Is it troubling her, not knowing about her parents?” John asked, his expression reflecting his concern.

Alyssa hesitated for a moment, then shook her head. “It used to... a lot, but that all changed when we bonded. She’s fully embraced her life here with us and just decided to put the past behind her. Between all the tech she’s working on and her blossoming relationships with you and Rachel, she doesn’t spare her old life on Karron a second thought. Any free time she’s got is usually spent having fun with the rest of us.”

John smiled as he thought about the exuberant teenager. “It’s wonderful to hear she’s happy.”

Alyssa grinned and gave him a knowing look. “She loved every minute of your morning with her.”

“I had a lot of fun too.”

“If we’re going through the girls in the sequence they joined us, that brings us to Jade,” Alyssa said, a slight frown on her face.

John saw her expression and felt a flicker of worry. “Why are you frowning? I thought she loved being here with us!”

The blonde girl gave him a teasing smile. “Of course she does! She’s deliriously happy being here with you. This isn’t an XO catch-up meeting, remember? If it was, you’d be impaling my ass!”

“Sorry, I got a bit distracted talking about Dana,” John admitted, sharing her smile.

Alyssa looked thoughtful as she said, “I was just wondering about the rest of Jade’s sisters. You said that after the Terran Federation claimed Lenarra from the Ashanath, most of the Nymphs died out over the last three centuries. Are there any left besides Jade?”

“I’ve never met any others, but I suppose it’s possible,” John said hesitantly, although he sounded doubtful. “Their absolute obedience makes them highly desirable as a slave, but when you add in their ability to shape-shift into their master’s idea of a perfect woman... If there are any left, I can’t see anyone voluntarily giving them up.”

“We have to try though!” Alyssa exclaimed, her tone urgent. “Just imagine if it was Jade enslaved by someone, being used as their plaything! If any of her sisters are still out there, we have to try and track them down and free them from that.”

John nodded his agreement, frowning as he replied, “Don’t get me wrong, I want to rescue any surviving Nymphs as much as you do. I don’t have any compunction about cracking some heads if their owners refuse to hand them over, but how do we even find them? It’ll be like searching for a handful of well-hidden needles on a planet covered in haystacks...”

“We could try offering a reward to anyone with information that leads us to finding one!” Alyssa suggested brightly. “We’ve got tons of cash, we could offer millions of credits...”

“It’s worth a try, but I’m not sure we’ll have any success. If there are any Nymphs still around, they’ll most likely be in the hands of the rich and powerful. Considering a Nymph’s nature, anyone who has one is probably using her as a blindly obedient sex-slave. Their owners are bound to want to keep that quiet,” John said, grimacing at the thought.

“Maybe we should talk it over with the girls tomorrow,” Alyssa conceded, frowning as she began to realise the magnitude of the task ahead of them. “Irillith is probably our best shot at tracking the Nymphs down, but what do we even ask her to look for?”

“That’s the real problem. They aren’t exactly going to be registered as Terran Federation citizens,” John said, looking grim. He took in Alyssa’s pensive expression and gave her a reassuring smile. “The girls are extremely capable. If anyone’s able to locate any surviving Nymphs, I’m sure they’ll be able to find some way of doing it.”

She relaxed and folded her arms across his chest, propping up her chin on them. “Just imagine if we can rescue any survivors! I wonder how Jade will react?”

“I know she feels as though she let the other Nymphs down,” John said sadly. “If we raise this with Jade and give her hope of finding them, not being able to track any down would be awful.”

“Should we speak to the other girls first? Try and get an idea of how viable this is going to be?” Alyssa asked, unsure how to handle the situation.

John hesitated then shook his head. “We should let Jade know. If we do find any, then I want her to feel like she’s been a part of the search.”

Alyssa smiled affectionately, then leaned in to give him a loving kiss. “Always trying to fix your wounded little birds...”

“How am I doing so far?” he asked, stroking her hair.

“You’re determined to turn this into an XO catch-up meeting, aren’t you?” she teased him, laughing as he reached down to gently squeeze her perfectly rounded ass.

John hugged her again and said quietly, “Getting your insight into all the women I care about is always fascinating. Our regular catch-up meetings are lots of fun, but I love just talking to you too.”

Her expression turned earnest then as she saw the conviction in his eyes. Her normal playfulness fell away and the look she gave him was full of respect and love. “You’ve amazed me with the lengths you’ve gone to, trying to help all of us deal with everything we’ve been through. The difference in Sakura has been astounding, but just because you’ve worked miracles with her, don’t let that overshadow how much you’ve helped everyone else, me included.”

“You’ve all suffered,” John murmured, caressing her head through her long golden hair. “I’ve just tried to make things right for each of you...”

Her voice turned softer as she whispered, “I heard what you were thinking about earlier. Please don’t ever think that the rest of us adore you just because of the bond. That compulsion to obey is long gone, but our feelings are absolutely genuine.”

A flicker of doubt crossed his face, his eyes looking troubled. “But it wasn’t just the bond. What about all the personality changes I made, even if they weren’t intentional...”

Alyssa smiled at him and shook her head. “We skipped over Calara earlier, but just think about how much you’ve transformed her world since you met her. I’m not even talking about the Gift, because in her case, her personality hasn’t really changed since she joined us. I spent a long time chatting to Calara while she was still recovering from her injuries in Port Heracles and I really got to know her before I recruited her. She was always a kind, lovely girl, which is one of the reasons I fell for her in the first place, but she’s grown more confident and blossomed over the months since then.”

“I’m also not referring to how much she loves both of us and adores her life with the girls aboard the ship. You saved her from a horrible fate at the hands of those pirates, then gave her a position of authority aboard the Invictus. Tactical Officer on a cruiser is exactly the kind of post she’d always aspired to. She loves being able to make a difference with us, rescuing people from all sorts of bad guys, let alone saving the lives of her own father and brother!”

“Then, on top of all that, with the incredible victories we’ve racked up, she’s become a heroine of the Terran Federation! I truly wish you could have heard her thoughts during the award ceremony; she was so proud and blissfully happy, she could have been walking on clouds! Then when she met her dad afterwards and saw that look of pride in his eyes, his beloved daughter winning a Stellar Cluster... It was like you’d made all her dreams come true!”

“She deserved all those accolades; we couldn’t have achieved any of this without her,” John said, a fond smile on his face.

“I agree, but my point was that her feelings for you are absolutely genuine. There’s no sinister underlying reason for the way she feels about you; it’s the same for all of us,” Alyssa said, her voice throbbing with sincerity.

John was surprised by the passion in her voice and when he looked into her bright blue eyes, he could see how much she needed him to believe her. He stopped and really thought about each of the girls on the crew and the profound impact he’d had on all their lives.

“That’s right,” she said softly. “Even if you put aside your relationship with each of the girls, just think of everything else you’ve done for all of them. You’ve given Jade her freedom, not just rescuing her from that pirate lord, but making her truly independent from the need to have a master. Every day is like Christmas for Dana, getting to work with all this radically advanced technology. You’ve reunited the twins and given them the mother they deserved but never had. Considering how broken Tashana was, the way you’ve put her back together is astonishing, but Irillith desperately needed your help too.”

“And Rachel’s found a way to honour her mother with her work,” John said thoughtfully, his doubts starting to fall away.

Alyssa nodded emphatically. “Not just that, but you brought her mother’s killer to justice and helped her reconcile with her father.”

John gave her a guilty look, but for another reason this time. “Was she upset about having to rearrange the meeting with her Dad?”

Shaking her head, Alyssa replied, “She was glad of the excuse to postpone it actually. That’s one reunion she isn’t eager to have for a whole host of different reasons.”

“Is she worried about introducing me and Dana to her father?” John asked, curious what was troubling the brunette.

“That’s one of them. Rachel loves you both, but has no idea what to say to her dad, or how he’ll react. She’s worried she’ll say something she might regret if he pushes her buttons. They had a very tense relationship for years after her mother died,” Alyssa explained, her face filled with sympathy.

“Rachel is probably the one girl we could try to help in the same way as Sakura,” John said quietly, cautious about upsetting Alyssa again.

She smiled at him and shook her head. “You don’t have to tread on eggshells, I’d never begrudge any of the girls their happiness.” Her eyes twinkled as she added playfully, “And that’s not because I can’t get jealous any more either.”

“I thought you were trying to convince me how genuine everyone’s emotions were?” John said with a pretend frown.

“I’m trying to, but you keep going off on tangents,” she replied, grinning at him as she leaned in for another kiss. “Besides, the lack of jealousy just helps your harem run nice and smooth. It’s got nothing to do with how much the girls love you.” She paused for a second then added wryly, “Although I must admit it makes me love you quite a bit more. Can you imagine what a fucking nightmare it would be, dealing with all those catfights and jealous tantrums! As your Matriarch, I’d be expected to sort all that shit out!”

His first reaction was to laugh, then he shuddered just imagining it. “If I’m being honest, that’s the only change I’ve never regretted making,” he confided in her with a smile.

She winked at him, then asked, “How do you want to handle everything with Rachel?”

“I think we’ll play it by ear tomorrow,” John replied. “Perhaps meet her father first, then see how that goes. If it all ends well, then we can talk to Rachel about her mother afterwards and see what she wants to do.”

“That sounds like a good plan,” Alyssa said, nodding her agreement. Giving him a curious glance, she added, “You’ve talked about helping Rachel, but not the twins. Isn’t there a way you could try and let them see their father again? I know it’d mean so much to them both.”

John let out a heavy sigh and slowly shook his head. “I’ve given it some thought, but I don’t think it’ll work for them. From the impression they’ve given me, Irillith and Tashana only spent brief periods of time with him, when he came back to visit them from his home on Geniya Station.”

\*That’s correct, they only had fleeting visits with their father,\* Edraele murmured to them both, sounding wracked with guilt. \*I was too jealous of how close they’d become, so I restricted the time he could spend with them.\*

\*No, the old Edraele did that,\* John said, his voice firm and uncompromising. \*You’re just trying to deal with the mess she left behind. Your daughters know you aren’t the same person any longer, so beating yourself up for something you had nothing to do with is pointless.\*

\*You’re right, I’m sorry,\* Edraele said quietly, letting out a mournful sigh. \*If there’s anything I can do to help you with this, let me know.\*

John mulled it over for a moment, then asked her, \*It seemed like they had a few weeks together occasionally, like that camping trip? Did they always go on vacation to the same place, or in different locations?\*

\*They often went camping, but to a wide variety of places on Valaden,\* Edraele clarified for him.

“But you need the psychic imprints clustered together...” Alyssa murmured, appearing lost in thought.

John confirmed her guess with a nod. “I can’t claim to fully understand how it all works and there might well be some better way of doing this. If I am going to recreate what I did for Sakura, I need similar conditions for it to work.”

\*It sounds like this is something else I... I mean, the old Edraele, has taken from my daughters,\* Edraele said despondently.

John shared a concerned glance with the blonde lying on top of him.

\*Please stop blaming yourself, Edraele,\* Alyssa said gently. \*It’s not healthy for you to be carrying all this guilt around.\* She smiled at John as she continued, \*I was going to wait to let Dana and Irillith mention this tomorrow, but they were discussing using some Maliri cybernetic parts for Faye’s new body. Apparently the Maliri have access to far more sophisticated components than the tech we can obtain in the Terran Federation. If the two of them can prepare a list of everything we need, perhaps you could gather all the parts, then come and meet us on the border?\*

Edraele brightened immediately, sounding overjoyed as she replied, \*That would be wonderful! Thank you so much for letting me know.\*

\*Maybe bring the Young Matriarchs with you too,\* Alyssa purred, giving John a wicked smile.

\*Oh, I can’t wait to tell them!\* Edraele exclaimed, practically giddy with excitement.

John shook his head with amusement as he looked at Alyssa, then said to his Maliri Matriarch, \*You need to get some rest, beautiful. I heard how tired you were this afternoon after you sent me all that energy.\*

\*I’ll go to bed right now,\* she agreed obediently. \*Luna‘s here at the moment, giving me a disapproving look.\*

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Luna was the first girl Edraele told about their upcoming excursion and the bodyguard’s yellow eyes gleamed at the news as she hugged her lover. They hurried to the bedroom where the five Young Matriarchs were already in bed, but as it was three in the morning on Valaden, they were all fast asleep. Edraele smiled as she watched them slumbering peacefully, cuddled up with one another, then decided to let them rest and share the wonderful news the following morning.

She turned to welcome Almari and Ilyana as the two assassins opened the bedroom door to join them for the night. They were just as excited to hear they’d be meeting with John in a little over a week and they chattered in hushed whispers, beaming smiles on their beautiful faces. After getting undressed, the four women climbed into the huge bed – a match of the one Edraele had gifted John aboard the Invictus. Edraele had Luna on one side and Almari on the other, Ilyana wrapping her arms around her fellow bodyguard. After they each shared a goodnight kiss, they quickly joined the rest of the girls, falling into a deep and restful slumber.

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Alyssa felt her fellow Matriarch drift off and she nodded to John in confirmation. “She’s out.”

“Thank you for that,” he said, giving her a grateful smile.

“You were cruelly cockblocked by the Ashanath,” she replied with a playful grin, although her voice was full of genuine sympathy. “I know how much you were looking forward to breaking in the Young Matriarchs...”

He laughed and rolled his eyes. “I don’t mean that! Thank you for helping to cheer up Edraele!”

“You’re welcome,” she replied, before arching an eyebrow at him. “Edraele hasn’t told those girls about the cross-border hook-up yet. I can always warn her not to say anything tomorrow morning, if the idea of taking each of those gorgeous blue-skinned vixens for the first time doesn’t sound like fun.”

“I wouldn’t want to disappoint Edraele... She was really looking forward to telling them,” John replied in a hurry.

Alyssa giggled at his expression, her cerulean eyes sparkling with delight. “You’re so easy to tease...”

“And you’re going the right way for a good tickling,” John replied, giving her a stern look. He broke into a smile a moment later, then added, “Actually that’s not true. Thank you for setting that up, I am really looking forward to seeing them!”

“Setting that up?” Alyssa asked archly. “Whatever do you mean?”

John smirked as he replied, “I didn’t come down in the last meteor shower, you little minx. Surely Edraele could have just transmitted whatever schematics we need? Then Dana could just build all the parts here with the Mass Fabricators.”

“Why I’m shocked, Mister Blake,” Alyssa declared in faux-outrage. “Are you implying I just came up with an excuse to arrange a rendezvous with Edraele and her girls? If I didn’t know any better, I’d think you were insinuating that I just want to see you balls-deep in five stunning new babes!”

He laughed and hugged her tighter. “Well, it’s good that we’ve cleared that up. Your motives were obviously as pure as the driven snow. Thank you on Edraele’s behalf though, she sounded like she was getting herself down.”

“You’re welcome,” she replied with an impish smile. The flicker of arousal was quite apparent in her eyes as she added softly, “Do you think you’ll knock them up next week?”

“On their first time? No, definitely not,” John said with a chuckle.

Alyssa could feel his cock thickening beneath her and she gave him some space to expand before carefully settling down again. She could feel the heat of his shaft beneath her and gave him a knowing look. “It won’t be long though, will it?” she asked him in a hushed voice.

He stroked her back and slowly shook his head. “If not this time, then when we next return to Genthalas.” He hesitated then, gazing into her eyes as he added, “If things were different, you know that-”

“I know...” she replied, a loving smile on her face. Her smile slowly faded and was replaced by a look of annoyance.

“What is it?” John asked in alarm.

“I’m totally fine with you knocking up as many hot Maliri babes as you like, but I want you to promise me one thing,” she demanded, her voice uncharacteristically stern.

“Of course, anything,” he immediately agreed.

Alyssa’s eyes narrowed in anger as she said, “We need to smack the crap out of this other Progenitor in the next six months. I’m giving you a hard deadline on that.”

“Six months?” he asked in confusion. “I promise I’ll do my best, but what happens in six months?”

Her expression softened and she gave him a tender kiss. “That’s when I turn nineteen. I want your baby growing inside me before then...”

John’s cock jerked at the thought, drawing a sly smile from Alyssa, who felt it too. He nodded thoughtfully as he replied, “You’re right, six months it is...”

Alyssa climbed off him, a smouldering look in her eyes as she stood up and slipped on her heels again. “As this turned into an XO catch-up meeting after all, I think it’s only fair that you take me to bed and really stretch me out.” She turned slightly, tilting her hips to showcase her spectacularly firm rump. “What do you think? See anything you’d like to ride?”

He sat up hurriedly, then rose to his feet behind her. Placing his hands on her hips, he pressed his burgeoning shaft against her pert ass, hot-dogging himself between her gloriously firm cheeks. “I’ve had a lot of gentle loving with the girls recently,” he murmured, leaning forward to kiss the sultry blonde over her shoulder. “It’s been lovely and intimate, but do you fancy something a little more... energetic?”

“You know you don’t even need to ask,” she purred, intertwining her fingers with his and grinding back against him. “I love seeing how passionate you get, and thanks to you, I’m able to take a hell of a pounding.”

“Is that what you’d like?” he breathed, getting more turned on at the thought.

She looked at him over her shoulder with hooded eyes. “I’m your Matriarch. What I like is to be a good girl for my Progenitor, give him everything he needs...”

John couldn’t help grinning at that, seeing the sparkle of lust in Alyssa’s eyes when she felt him flexing against her. “How about breaking in the Observatory? We haven’t had an... XO catch-up meeting in there yet.”

Alyssa let out a happy sigh. “Getting roughly buggered beneath the stars. How romantic!”

He chuckled as he offered her his hand and led her out onto the Bridge, greeting Faye with a wave as they headed towards the grav-tube. Alyssa watched the purple sprite, noticing the way her wings fluttered in excitement as John approached and the wistful look in her luminous eyes as he passed the Command Podium. She suddenly realised she had a foolproof counter to any of John’s remaining doubts about the lingering effects of the Progenitor bond on the girls.

Still, that was Faye’s secret to share with him when she was ready, and Alyssa had no intention of spoiling that for her. She blew a grateful kiss to the digital girl as they descended in the red anti-gravity field, then smiled at John when he placed one of his strong hands on her asscheeks and gave her a suggestive squeeze. He was clearly looking forward to this as much as she was.