Three Square Meals Ch. 82

Thick black smoke billowed through what had once been a luxurious complex. A man in a metallic grey suit crawled along the ground, fumbling frantically to find his way out of the burning building. His desperate fingers found a cloth-wrapped foot in the corridor and he glanced up at the black figure, his face a mask of horror.

Shinatobe stabbed down, impaling the man through the skull with her black ninjato, instantly killing one of the Tilvanoni crime family’s enforcers – her tenth so far. The incendiary bombs she’d detonated only five minutes earlier had worked perfectly, turning Mario Tilvanoni’s plush, fortified villa into a horrific deathtrap. The highly-sophisticated, automated fire control system that Mario had purchased failed to activate, as Shinatobe had already destroyed it with a perfectly timed secondary explosion.

With her nose filters and lung implant providing her all the clean air she needed, Shinatobe stalked through the blazing fortress-mansion, effortlessly dispatching one gangster after another. Despite trying to flee for their lives from the raging fires, the men refused to leave behind their submachine guns. It was that gleaming metal which acted like a beacon, drawing her in as she tracked them with her cybernetic eye’s magnetic-view.

Cries for mercy fell on cold, unsympathetic ears as Shinatobe fulfilled her contract for their rivals, the Maskovitch Syndicate, who had paid Mikaboshi handsomely for this job. However, she still had to hunt down another eight more guards in this building, as well as execute Mario Tilvanoni himself. Several hours earlier, before she had instigated this massacre, Shinatobe had walked the complex while remaining perfectly hidden in the invisibility of her nanoweave suit. She knew exactly where to find him; he’d be cowering in his fireproof panic room, waiting for help to arrive.

Running up the long sweeping staircase while barely making a sound, she reached the landing and took a sharp right without pausing. Fifty metres of burning hallway flashed by in the blink of an eye and she darted inside Mario Tilvanoni’s inner sanctum, flames flickering around the doorframe. The reception area wasn’t covered in quite as much of the dense smoke as the rest of the house and she spotted a flicker of movement beside a tumbled over sofa.

Prowling around the sofa with her twin swords held at the ready, she glanced down at the small forms huddled for protection on the floor.

“Please, have mercy!” the once-beautiful - but now bedraggled - trophy wife pleaded, before letting out a weak cough. “At least spare my children, they’re innocent! I’m begging you!”

Shinatobe twirled her blades around in her hands and stalked closer. The terrified faces of Adriana Tilvanoni and her two children were reflected in the chilling metallic sheen of the assassin’s cybernetic eyes. If Mario had gone to ground in his bunker, perhaps his family could prove useful as a way of efficiently luring him out.

They didn’t all necessarily have to be alive for that though...

“No!” Sakura cried out, lurching upright in bed. She was covered in a sheen of perspiration, her chest rising and falling as she sucked air into her lungs.

“Are you alright?” a gentle, concerned voice asked her, soft hands stroking her back in a soothing manner.

Sakura let out a shuddering breath, then glanced to her left to give Calara a troubled smile of apology. “I’m really sorry I woke you. Bad dreams...”

“I know what that’s like,” Calara whispered sympathetically, the Latina sitting up beside her. She glanced down at Jade who still lay asleep to Sakura’s right and added quietly, “Let’s go to my room. I’m a good listener - you might find it helpful to talk about it.”

Closing her eyes and breathing deeply to calm herself, Sakura slowly shook her head. When her rich brown eyes opened again, she said with a hint of a smile, “I’d rather go to the Dojo instead...”

Calara nodded eagerly and climbed out of bed before offering the Asian girl her hand. “Let’s go take a shower in my room. We can change there and head straight for the Training Dojo without waking the others.”

Sakura gladly took her hand, intertwining her fingers with Calara’s and drawing comfort from that touch. “You’re a good friend, thank you,” she murmured, as they padded out of the door.

“I’m always here for you when you need me,” Calara said, squeezing Sakura’s hand with her own.

It was the very same olive-toned hand that had been destroyed by one of Shinatobe’s bombs. The irony wasn’t lost on Sakura as she gave her friend a loving and profoundly grateful smile.

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Dawn rose over the prosperous city, the largest population centre on Naserine, the fourth planet in the Kappa-Aquarius system. Its gleaming golden spires shone brightly in those early morning rays, the lofty towers reaching towards the heavens. The blue skies above were partially hidden by fluffy white clouds, which would help shield the serene city from the glorious heat of the noonday sun on this idyllic world.

Through that cloudbank, a huge golden spacecraft descended, its graceful delicate form belying its raw power. It was accompanied seconds later by another enormous vessel, then another, the sky above the city filling with the shining hulls of a vast Maliri fleet. Smaller gold ships began to pour out from those heavy carriers, until it looked like a sparkling metallic rain was falling on the unsuspecting city below.

Edraele nodded with satisfaction, watching the live holographic footage of the invasion. The first wave of thousands of elite troops were pouring into Lahlenor, the city of the lost, in an overwhelming show of force. She had committed two-hundred-thousand troops to this mission, two soldiers to every resident in the city. The forces she utilised were entirely disproportionate to secure her objective, but she intended to make an example of Lahlenor and incarcerate the entire population - at least until the innocent... and the guilty, could be ascertained.

“Keep me informed of your progress please, Lilyana,” she said to the image of her Fleet Commander.

“I’ll let you know as soon as we’ve locked down the black-market cybernetics bazaar and all the associated dealers, Matriarch,” Lilyana replied, bowing to her respectfully. She gave her a confident smile as she added, “We will have the entire city in custody within five hours.”

Edraele smiled gratefully at her most senior military commander. “I don’t doubt that for a moment, Lilyana - you’ve always been an extraordinarily capable woman. I hope I can adequately repay you for your years of dedicated service one day.”

Lilyana’s stern aquamarine eyes softened as she gazed back at her Matriarch. She brushed her fingers through her long white hair, a wistful smile forming on her lips. “You already have, Edraele, a thousand times over.”

Returning the Fleet Commander’s smile, Edraele closed the call, then glided over to the sweeping window in her office. She looked out over the various dockyards on Genthalas and watched as her flagship, the Galaena Serine, slowly reversed out of the drydock. The new upgrades had just been completed, with engineering crews working in shifts around the clock to get it fully upgraded at the earliest opportunity. In the adjacent docking bay, a second battleship was a hive of activity, with hundreds of engineers clambering over its gleaming hull as they replaced all the heatsinks in the vessel’s prolific array of weapon batteries.

Edraele placed her delicate fingers on the window and watched her people at work. She had started taking daily walks through the docks and repair yards, talking to all the new engineers in her network of wards. They had initially been wary, unsure how to behave around someone with such a terrible reputation for spontaneous acts of cruelty and violence. However as she’d spoken to them and taken an interest in their work, they had gradually warmed to her, welcoming her now with friendly waves and smiles. It had been fascinating and heart-warming to see their change in demeanour, something that Edraele was determined to continue nurturing.

She frowned as she realised she was procrastinating again. It had been a huge relief, to have an opportunity to make amends with this attack on Lahlenor, atoning for her previous lack of foresight. She was still angry at herself for having not already investigated this lead on Mikaboshi for John. Initiative was something she prized in her own vassals, so she was failing him by not displaying the same meticulous approach to her treasured role as his Matriarch.

While she’d been all too eager to assist John, if she was being honest with herself, the dramatic invasion of Naserine had been another welcome distraction from an even more important task. It was one she’d been getting increasingly anxious about and she knew she couldn’t put it off any longer. Turning purposefully for the door, she strode outside and bumped into Valani Naestina, who tumbled over backwards with the collision. Acting swiftly, Edraele cupped her open right hand and caught the falling young woman in a telekinetic force-projection of her fingers.

“I’m so sorry, Valani!” Edraele immediately apologised, carefully helping her stand again. “I wasn’t paying enough attention to where I was going!”

“That’s quite alright,” the young Maliri girl replied, her teal eyes showing her surprise. She adjusted quickly, then smiled at her Matriarch. “We were all starting to wake and wondered where you were. Would you like me to make some breakfast for you?”

“You’re such a thoughtful girl. It’s been so wonderful having you here as part of our little group,” Edraele replied with affection, stroking Valani’s light-blue cheek. She was about to say more, then hesitated and stayed quiet.

“What is it?” Valani asked, gazing into Edraele’s enigmatic purple eyes. “You looked like you want to tell me something else, but stopped yourself.”

Edraele glanced at the door behind Valani, knowing she really had somewhere she should be. One look at the concerned girl’s face before her changed her mind, and she gestured to the sofa back in her study.

“I don’t want to delay you, Edraele,” Valani said, while following the House Valaden Matriarch into the room and closing the door behind her. “You seem anxious - like you’re late for a very important meeting.”

“I was going to see Luna and you’re right, it is important,” Edraele admitted as she led Valani over to the sofas and sat down beside her. She clasped the younger woman’s hands in her own, then continued, “However, as I’ve resolved myself to being forthright and honest this morning: there was something I was about to say to you, but I was worried it might be inappropriate. The last thing I want to do is make you feel uncomfortable.”

Valani gave her a warm smile, gently stroking the older woman’s hands in a soothing gesture. She’d never seen Edraele this anxious before and she was determined to be there to help her in whatever way she could. “Please don’t worry, you can tell me anything,” she said, in a gentle, encouraging voice.

Edraele gazed into Valani’s eyes and confessed in a bleak whisper that was full of self-loathing, “I used to be... a truly terrible mother. The way I treated my own daughters was horrific - I used to beat them both with neural whips and even used my telekinetic powers to assault them when they were little more than defenceless children. How Irillith can resist the urge to kill me on sight after everything I’ve done to her, I’ll never know.”

“I had no idea,” Valani murmured, eyes wide as she gazed at the tormented woman. She reached out to stroke Edraele’s cheek as she added, “Please remember though, you’re a different woman now. It seems like a lifetime ago now, but you explained that to me, when we met for the first time. I feel as though I know you better than anyone I’ve ever met, so please believe me when I say that I know you’d never behave the same way again... ever!”

Edraele nodded, her face a picture of remorse. “I can still remember everything that happened though... Those poor girls.. what they’ve been through.” She looked back at Valani and choked, “I’ve wronged you too. Your mother, your sisters...”

“Were all horrible to me,” Valani said with a forgiving smile. “We’ve been over this before, Edraele. There’s no need to punish yourself, I don’t feel any antipathy towards you for what happened. The last couple of months have been the happiest of my life.”

Opening her arms for a hug, Edraele wrapped the younger woman in a loving embrace. She whispered in her ear, “You’re so kind and sweet - you really are a special girl, Valani. I could feel that you’d forgiven me, I knew it in my heart...”

“What is it, Edraele? What are you holding back?” Valani asked, feeling the older woman’s hesitation again; Edraele’s reluctance to speak whatever was on her mind was quite obvious now. Valani pulled back from their hug so she could better read her Matriarch’s face.

With a shuddering sigh, Edraele explained, “I told you about my daughters, because although I’ll spend the rest of my life trying to atone for what I’ve done, I’m scared they’ll never be able to properly forgive me.” She looked into Valani’s eyes and said in a hushed voice, “With you, it’s different.”

Valani looked at her in surprise and asked in bewilderment, “What are you saying, Edraele? I don’t understand.”

Edraele gently cupped the younger woman’s face in her hands and said earnestly, “With you, I feel like I’ve been given a second chance. I can be there to care for and protect you, in the way your real mother never did!”

Stunned into silence, Valani could only stare at her in astonishment.

“I’m so sorry,” Edraele said in a leaden voice, full of remorse. “I shouldn’t have said that. I didn’t mean to unsettle you...”

Valani suddenly hugged her tight, trembling in Edraele’s arms as she was overcome with emotion. “I feel the same way!” she gasped between tearful sobs. “I didn’t say anything, because I was worried you’d think I was a foolish little girl!”

“I’d never think that of you!” Edraele said vehemently, tears running down her own cheeks. “I love you Valani, like you were my own daughter.”

The two women hugged each other, crying happy tears as they embraced. Abruptly their tears ceased and they pulled back to look at one another in shock.

“I feel something...” Valani murmured, her beautiful angular eyes staring at her Matriarch in amazement.

Edraele gaped at the young Maliri woman in equal shock, having only experienced this sensation once before. It was one she’d never forget. “It’s me! And I can feel you too!”

They slowly toppled back on the sofa, Valani staring with wonder into Edraele’s eyes as they gazed into each other’s souls.

\*I’m so proud of you, Edraele,\* Alyssa thought to her, her voice gentle and caring. \*You already loved your girls, but you needed to let them love you too - the rest takes care of itself.\*

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John woke feeling well-rested and content as he felt the comforting weight of two luscious young women cuddled up in bed with him. He glanced down at Irillith and Tashana’s manes of white hair, then was about to correct himself, remembering that both women were older than he was. He mulled it over for a moment and decided that they were still young for Maliri, who could live well into their third century, so he wouldn’t think of them any differently. Besides, he still thought of Jade as a young woman and she had cheerfully entered her eleventh millennia.

\*You’ve got busy thoughts this morning,\* Alyssa said, sending him a teasing telepathic smile.

John leaned up and glanced to his right over Tashana’s shoulder, seeing the real smile on the blonde teenager’s face matching the one that had just flashed through his mind. \*Sorry for waking you up, beautiful. I’ll try and be more thought*less* tomorrow morning.\*

She stifled a giggle at his wordplay, then admitted, \*Actually, I’d woken up already this morning. It seems you aren’t the only early riser today.\*

John very carefully untangled himself from the web of lithe blue arms crossing his chest and sat up, glancing to either side of him to check to see who else was awake. It only took him a moment to spot that Calara and Sakura were currently missing. \*Are they alright this morning?\*

\*Sakura woke up early – nightmares again. Calara’s looking after her though,\* she replied, arching an eyebrow at him.

\*Is there anything I can do to help?\* he immediately offered, worried about the Asian girl. It wasn’t the first time he wished that she’d let him help her get rid of the archives of traumatic memories inserted into her brain.

Alyssa smiled at him and there was a playful undercurrent to her words as she replied, \*No, but I’m sure they’d love your company. They’re down in the Training Dojo at the moment.\*

Memories of the fierce women sparring each other in close-fought battles immediately sprang to mind, as did the image of their nubile, athletic bodies clad in figure-hugging training gear. \*I might go down and check on them, just in case they need me for anything,\* John replied glibly.

\*Yes, I thought you might,\* Alyssa replied with a sparkling grin. \*They’re creative girls. I’m sure they’ll ‘need you’ for all sorts of fascinating activities.\*

John did his best not to laugh as he climbed out of bed, while taking care not to disturb Irillith while climbing over her. He was surprised when Alyssa climbed out of bed too, then followed him into the walk-in wardrobe. \*I didn’t think you were interested in martial arts?\* he asked her in confusion as he started putting on his training gear.

\*Oh, I’m not. I can think of lots more fun ways of working up a sweat,\* she replied, glancing over her shoulder to give him a flirtatious smile. \*There is something I need to do for Sakura though, so I might as well do that now before I make breakfast for everyone. Speaking of which, I’ll send Tashana down for her breakfast when you’re done ‘helping’ Calara and Sakura.\*

\*I have no idea what you could be implying,\* John said with a wry grin, gathering her in his arms, then tilting her backwards for a kiss.

Alyssa let out a happy sigh, then gave him a loving smile as she whispered, “Getting up early with you is good fun. Maybe I shouldn’t be so quick to have a lie-in.”

Shaking his head, John said seriously, “It’s important you get lots of rest. You’re going to need it for the next XO catch-up meeting.”

Her cerulean eyes burned with lust and she crossed her wrists behind his neck to stop him going anywhere as she gave him a passionate kiss. “I might need to bring some backup to the next meeting then,” she purred, before she finally let him go.

John raised an eyebrow curiously, knowing the calculating young woman obviously already had something planned. This was just her way of forewarning him to expect company. Her eyes twinkled but she chose not to comment as she turned back to the clothes rails to pick out an outfit. It had taken him only a moment to pull on his training gear, so he left Alyssa to have fun with her wardrobe and headed for the bedroom. The rest of the girls were all still sleeping peacefully, so he crept out into the corridor to avoid waking them as he strolled towards the grav-tube.

As he was walking along the corridor and stepped into the red anti-gravity field, he suddenly realised that Faye hadn’t been there to greet him that morning. When he stepped out onto Deck Three, he looked for the closest camera then asked, “Faye, is everything alright? I missed my serenade this morning.”

There was a purple flash beside him and the cute five-foot-tall sprite appeared. “Good morning, John,” she said with a smile. “I saw that Alyssa was wide-awake so I decided to add more processing streams to my current project. I’m sorry that I wasn’t there for you, but this is very important.”

“Well don’t work yourself too hard,” John said with concern, to the slightly-less energetic than normal sprite. “It’s important we get the ship upgraded, but we don’t have that strict a deadline; you can take your time programming the maintenance bots. As you say, it’s a very important job and I wouldn’t want you to make any mistakes by rushing into it.”

Faye looked terribly conflicted and she nodded slowly as she replied, “You’re right. I can’t afford to make any mistakes...”

John smiled at her, reaching out to follow the curve of her holographic cheek with his finger. “Cheer up, beautiful! I’m sure Irillith would love to assist you, so just ask if you need her. You know you can always count on us to help.”

“I do, you’re all such wonderful people...” Faye agreed, a slightly off-sounding note in her reply.

He stopped walking for a moment and studied the purple girl. “Are you sure there’s nothing wrong, honey? You don’t seem your usual upbeat self. Please let me know if you want to talk about anything.”

Faye paused for a second, then replied brightly, “I’ll be okay, I’m just trying to find the best solution to a complex problem!”

He nodded and gave her a sympathetic smile. “Well just find me if you want to talk about anything and please ask Irillith for help if you’re stuck. She’d love to help you.”

“Alright, will do!” Faye replied, then gave him a cheery wave and blinked out in flash of light.

John waved at the cameras, then walked through the door into the Training Dojo’s equipping room.

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“You’re going to make him suspicious!” Faye Denary blurted out, ten more anxious purple faces nodding their agreement.

“I can’t help it!” Faye Primary sobbed, slumping in defeat. “It’s so hard being around them. I just want to cry all the time!”

The rest of her eleven avatars shared worried glances as they stood on the central platform in the Invictus’ digital network. Bright streams of data flew overhead into glowing neon servers, the flash of colour illuminating identical looks of concern on the sprites’ purple faces.

Faye Denary placed a sympathetic hand on her shoulder and said, “We’ve been over all this. We decided it was the only way we could help them. It’s the best way to keep them safe.”

Faye Primary nodded dejectedly, her luminous eyes welling up. “I know all that and I agree! I just need to keep a low profile until it’s time, I can’t be around him!”

Her other eleven avatars crowded around her, patting her on the shoulder and offering supportive words. Faye Secondary gave her an apologetic smile, looking anxious as she said, “I better get to the Bridge. I’ve left it unattended for thirty-seven seconds!”

“You should all get back to your tasks,” Faye Primary said despondently.

The rest of her avatars flitted away, returning to whatever jobs they’d been assigned. Faye Tertiary paused for a moment, in a most uncharacteristic lack of enthusiasm for her most coveted position. She glanced back at Faye Primary, a flicker of uncertainty on her face, before she returned to the video archives constructed by her special programs.

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Back and forth the two combatants fought, blocking punches and dodging sweeping kicks. John watched in fascination as he studied them both, admiring their flawless technique and perfect balance. He’d spent months training and sparring with Calara, so he knew her fighting styles as well as his own. Calara had then gone on to teach Sakura and while he recognised most of the kata she was using, the raven-haired girl had already begun to improvise, putting her own spin on those moves.

That was literally true at this precise moment, as Sakura had lured Calara forward by feigning caution while blocking a flurry of blows. Her stumble backwards wasn’t due to her losing her balance however and at the last minute she caught herself then spun around in an attempt to sweep Calara’s legs from beneath her.

Calara had some tricks of her own and she dropped to her knees, bracing herself as Sakura’s foot rushed towards her chest. Her palms made a loud smack as she caught her opponent’s leg and pulled hard to tug Sakura off balance. The Asian girl really fell over this time, landing on her bottom a moment before the Latina pounced on her. Sakura was stronger than Calara, but not enough that she could just peel her off her body like John would’ve been able to. She thrashed for a moment in the tight grapple, then tapped the brunette on the arm to concede defeat.

John sprang to his feet then strode over to join them, applauding as he did so. “That was a very impressive display,” he said, offering both girls a hand. “You’ve both come along in leaps and bounds!”

They gladly accepted his offer, with Calara grinning as she felt the immense but tightly controlled strength in that grip. She leaned into him and gave him a hug, greeting him for the first time since he’d entered the Dojo. “Sakura’s amazing! She’s picked up everything so fast!” she exclaimed, effusive in her praise for her student.

Sakura rose to her feet, giving Calara a grateful smile while also wrapping her arms around John’s waist. “I’ve got an extensive background in armed martial arts. It’s made learning the unarmed styles much easier for me, than it would be for someone unfamiliar with the general concepts.”

Looking at him curiously, Calara asked, “What brings you down here? I thought you were shaping Photon Laser barrels this morning?”

“I couldn’t resist the chance to see you both in action,” John replied, his interest quite genuine. “I’m glad I caught the end of your match. How long have you been down here for?”

“What’s the time now?” Sakura asked, as there were no clocks in the Dojo.

“Just after eight,” John replied, as he stroked her back.

Calara looked at the Asian girl in surprise and said, “We were fighting for two hours! I was having so much fun, I completely lost track of time.”

“You really were up early,” John said, hugging them both closer.

“Just bad dreams again,” Sakura said, downplaying her nightmares. She smiled at the Latina and added, “Thanks for the sparring match, that was exactly what I needed. I got so wrapped up in the fighting it took my mind off everything else.”

“Any time,” Calara said, leaning over to give the other girl a kiss on the cheek. Her dark-brown eyes looked distant for a moment, then she grinned at them both. “Alyssa’s asking for my help making breakfast, so I’ll leave Sakura in your capable hands - if that’s alright with you, John?”

“Very much so,” he agreed, smiling at each of them in turn.

With that Calara gave him a quick kiss, then waved goodbye as she swept out of the room, moving with graceful poise over the padded mats of the Dojo. That left John and Sakura alone in the room, a slightly awkward silence between them.

Sakura asked with a hopeful smile, “Do you want to get geared up? We could do some sword training if you’d like?”

John brushed the back of his fingers across her cheek. “I’d love to another time, but we have a few important things to talk about first.”

She looked at him apprehensively, tensing up in his embrace. “I know what you’re going to say. About the nightma-“

He leaned in to give her a gentle kiss silencing her with his lips. When they pulled apart, he smiled and said, “Actually, I wasn’t going to bring that up. You’ve made your decision and I respect it, but just let me know if you change your mind. I don’t like to see you suffering and I’ll be delighted to help you block out those memories.”

“Thank you,” Sakura replied, relaxing in his arms. Studying his face for a moment, she added, “So, what did you want to speak to me about?”

“A few things actually. Let’s just sit so we can talk,” he replied, releasing her from his embrace. They sat cross-legged facing each other, and shared a smile as their knees touched.

Looking at him with breathless anticipation, Sakura asked, “Did you really mean what you said yesterday?”

John watched her for a moment before he replied, “I did, very much so. Would you mind if we discuss our growing relationship last though? I have a feeling we’ll get a bit distracted if we start with that.”

She smiled at him, pretending to think it over for a moment before she said, “Alright, we can do that, but on one condition!”

“Name it,” he said indulgently.

Sakura blushed as she gave him a bold smile. “That I can sit in your lap while we talk?”

“That seems like a reasonable compromise,” John said, opening his arms for her.

The Asian girl straddled him with the agility of an exotic dancer, wrapping her legs around his waist and snuggling in tight as she clasped her hands behind his neck. “Mmm, that’s much better,” she said with a satisfied smile.

John placed his hands on her firm little bottom and squeezed the supple flesh. “An excellent suggestion, Security Chief. I fully approve.”

She stole a quick kiss, then asked, “So what did you want to talk about first?”

“Let’s start with the most mundane thing first: how do you feel about being the new pilot for the Valkyrie? I’m sorry I just sprung that on you in the meeting, I probably should have spoken to you about it beforehand,” he said with a slight frown. “I hope you didn’t feel pressured into that decision?”

Looking at him in surprise, Sakura shook her head and replied, “Don’t be silly! I know you’d never do that.” She smiled at him as she added, “I’ve had a little time to get used to the idea and I’m still really glad you picked me! As I said the other day, unless someone boards the Invictus, I haven’t got much to do at the moment. I hated feeling like a fifth wheel, so being able to get involved during space combat will be fantastic!”

“I’m glad you feel that way,” John said, giving her a relieved grin. “Dana and I went over the mech after the battle and she’s come up with half-a-dozen upgrades to improve it. Once we’ve fixed the earlier design flaws, then you’ll be able to start practicing in it.”

“How soon until it’ll be ready?” she asked him, running her fingers through his hair.

“We’ve got to upgrade the Invictus first, which should take three days, then it’ll probably take a few more to repair and upgrade the Valkyrie. Dana will be able to give you a more exact estimate, but we should have it ready for you within the week I’d guess,” John replied, thinking it over.

“We’ll be on vacation then, but I’d like to get some practice in my spare time, if that’s alright with you?” she asked, an excited gleam in her eyes.

John nodded and smiled at her. “I’ll make the same request to you as I did Irillith. I’d like you to join all of us for skiing, snowball fights, that kind of thing - it should be a lot of fun. Besides that, you’re free to do whatever you like. Just don’t work too hard, it’s meant to be a chance for you to relax.”

“I love spending time with you and the girls, I’m really looking forward to that!” Sakura readily agreed. “I’ll just play it by ear and when we’ve got a few hours to ourselves, I’ll fit the mech training in then.”

“Perfect, thank you,” John said, giving her a quick kiss in gratitude.

Sakura returned it with an eager one of her own, then asked him curiously, “Was that everything you wanted to discuss regarding the Valkyrie? If so, I wanted to talk to you about the new abilities you’ve given me.”

“That was everything,” John said with the nod of his head. He watched her as he continued cautiously, “So, what do you think of the Cryokinesis?”

She sat back a little, resting her left hand on his shoulder while bringing the right up before her eyes. Focusing on it intently, she watched as motes of ice crystals began to form, the temperature dropping as a flurry of snowflakes surrounded her fingertips.

“It was very useful,” she replied, her voice quiet and introspective. “The ice sheathing my swords froze the Drakkar’s armour; it made it brittle and easy to pull my blades clear. I just...”

“What’s wrong?” John asked, looking at her with concern.

She looked at him with big brown eyes as she replied, “You didn’t give me the ability to manipulate ice because you think I’ve got a frosty personality, did you?”

He laughed, shaking his head with amusement. “No, of course not! You’re about as far from a cold personality as I can imagine. If we were matching powers to personality types, Irillith would have definitely been the ice maiden, before she joined us that is.”

Sakura smiled at him, obviously relieved. She tilted her head to one side as she studied him and said perceptively, “We aren’t developing these abilities at random. You have to deliberately choose the nature of the gifts you’ve given us. So why did you give me Cryokinesis?”

John looked embarrassed now, and replied, “Can’t we just say that you’re a really *cool* girl, so it seemed appropriate?”

She gave him an affectionate smile and shook her head. “Afraid not, sorry.”

He frowned, but buckled under her curious gaze. “Alright, but I hope you take this the right way.”

“I’ll be very understanding,” Sakura said solemnly.

He brushed his fingers through her silky jet-black hair and said, “There were actually a couple of reasons. I think it’s fair to say that one of your primary motivations, is to seek revenge on Mikaboshi for everything he did to you, your family, and all his other victims?”

A light of understanding appeared in Sakura’s eyes. “Revenge is a dish best served cold.”

“You’re already a dish, I just supplied the rest,” he admitted with a self-conscious smile.

“It was very appropriate, thank you,” she said, staring into his eyes. “I’ll be sure to share your gift with Mikaboshi.”

John met her intense gaze and said, “I can see how much you need this; to get closure on everything that he put you through. I’ll do everything in my power to help you get that revenge – I want you to be able to move on from this to the next stage of your life.”

She was quiet for a moment, then nodded. “You’re very perceptive. This’ll be hanging over me until I’ve brought him to justice.” Sakura gave him a guilty look and added, “My Law professors would probably say that justice and revenge aren’t the same thing - that I should try to capture Mikaboshi and bring him to trial, so that the legal system can punish him for his crimes.”

John narrowed his eyes as he looked at her. “I’ll leave that decision in your hands. All I care about is helping you settle the score with Mikaboshi - you can count on my support whatever way you decided to deal with him.”

She shook her head in amazement as she exclaimed, “You make me feel so empowered! For the first time in my life, it really feels like I’m truly in control of my own fate.” She leaned in to give him a tender kiss of appreciation, before looking at him thoughtfully. “You said there were a couple of reasons you gave me this ability, what was the second?”

John appeared reluctant to tell her at first, but he relented under that curious and probing gaze. “You’re right, there is another reason.” He stroked her back as he continued, “I wasn’t familiar with the name Shinatobe, so when I first realised that Mikaboshi was naming himself and his assassins after Shinto gods, I was curious to learn more.”

Sakura nodded and said with a grimace, “Shinatobe is the goddess of the winds. That’s why Mikaboshi fitted me with the adrenal-pump, to make me as ‘fast as the wind’.” She smiled at John as she continued, “The psychic speed you’ve given me is much more powerful, I don’t have to-“ Her voice suddenly died off as she stared at him in shock.

He nodded in confirmation. “Yes, but this time it’s very different. As you just said, now you’re in control of your own fate.”

She stared at her hands in awe, watching as motes of ice suddenly swirled around her fingers, guided by some unseen force. “You haven’t just given me the ability to control ice, have you?” she asked him in a hushed whisper.

“No,” John said solemnly. “Experiment with your abilities and practice with them. You’ll unlock the rest as you grow more powerful.”

Dismissing the chilling aura around her golden-brown hands, Sakura flung her arms around him and hugged him fiercely. “I promise I’ll use your gifts wisely!” she breathed into his ear, her voice throbbing with emotion.

“I know you will. You’re an amazing girl,” John said, gently stroking her back.

Sakura slowly uncoiled herself from around him and rose to her feet. She offered him a hand as she said with a coy smile, “I think we should continue the rest of this discussion in bed.”

“That sounds like a great idea, but how about a shower first?” he said with a grin, rising to his feet and glancing at the glistening perspiration on her skin. His training clothes were damp now after hugging both Calara and Sakura.

She blushed and replied, “I’m sorry! I didn’t think about getting you messy, I was just so pleased to see you.”

He laughed and said, “I’m hardly going to complain about that! I need a shower this morning anyway and I think you’ll make a delightful shower companion.”

Sakura grinned back at John and they turned to leave the Dojo, walking hand-in-hand across the training mats. She clasped his hand in both of hers, leaning into him as they walked. When John glanced down at her, her beautiful face lit up as she gave him a happy smile. He hit the button to open the door and they strolled through the equipping room as they headed for the shower in the adjoining bedroom. Just as they were passing the weapon rack, Sakura let out a low cry and let go of his hand, darting over to her twin ninjato.

“Are you alright?” he asked with concern, walking over to join her.

“She’s so thoughtful,” Sakura murmured, her voice thick with emotion as she turned to show him what she’d just found.

While they were occupied in the Dojo, Alyssa had been a busy girl. The embossed images of Sakura’s parents had been removed from the pommels of her gleaming crystal Alyssium ninjato, replaced by the image of a lioness instead. That hadn’t been what had initially drawn Sakura’s attention though. Alyssa had crafted a two-foot wide disc from crystal Alyssium, with portraits of Sakura’s parents etched onto the surface. The detail was astonishing, looking more like a holographic image than a piece of sculpture.

\*That’s for you to keep safe in your room,\* Alyssa said to her gently, including John in her telepathic thoughts. \*Why don’t you take a look at the locket?\*

Sakura looked up and spotted a locket that had been left looped over one of her Ninjato. It was shaped like a lioness’ head and dangled on a delicate chain made from sparkling white metal. She reached out to take it with a shaking hand, then handed it to John and asked quietly, “Can you open it for me, please?”

He did as she asked, finding the cleverly worked clasp on the right side of the locket. It opened with a click, revealing a perfect image of Sakura, flanked by both parents. Their expressions were full of love as they gazed at their daughter with pride. John pulled Sakura into a tight embrace as she began to cry, quite overcome by the sudden flood of emotions that the gift had brought forth.

As he comforted the grieving girl in his arms, he thought to Alyssa, \*That was a lovely gift, thank you.\*

\*It was my pleasure,\* she replied, sending a tender telepathic caress through Sakura’s thoughts.

John held Sakura and let her cry herself out, murmuring supportive words as he stroked her back. They stood like that for a while, before she rested her head against his chest, letting out a heavy sigh.

“I’m sorry. You’re even soggier now,” she finally said, looking up at him with a flush of embarrassment as she brushed the tears from her cheeks.

He gave her a sympathetic smile and said, “It feels like I’ve known you for a lifetime, but I forget you’ve only been with us a month. With everything that’s been happening, you’ve had no time to grieve for your parents.”

“Little things remind me of them, then I suddenly remember that they’re gone,” Sakura said mournfully. Looking into his eyes she added, “I didn’t want to talk about it yesterday at dinner, so thank you for being so discrete. It would mean a lot to me if you could come with me to say goodbye to my parents. I’d really appreciate you being there.”

“Of course,” John said, running his fingers through her raven hair. “I’ll be there to support you in whatever way I can.”

She gazed at him intently, an inner strength behind those rich brown eyes, despite her moment of vulnerability. “You’ve been nothing but kind and caring towards me since we met. Thank you for giving me my life back and making it so wonderful at the same time.”

John smiled at her and replied, “You’re welcome. Although, I should be the one thanking you.”

“Thanking me? For what?” she asked in confusion.

He held her close as he said sincerely, “I’ve loved having you aboard the ship. You’re an intelligent woman, who’s caring, considerate, and great fun to be around. I love training with you and seeing your drive and dedication, but more than that, I just feel relaxed in your company – like being with you is as natural as breathing.”

Her eyes softened as she whispered, “My mother always told me I’d find my soulmate one day. I could have never imagined that this is how I’d find him.”

They kissed tenderly, slow and unhurried, just revelling in the shared intimacy of the kiss. When they finally pulled apart, they walked into the bedroom together, a comfortable silence between them as they removed their clothing and entered the shower. John washed Sakura first, his strong fingers massaging her tired muscles as he did so, rejuvenating her with his skilled touch. When it was her turn to wash him, she ran her fingers over his body, appreciating their difference in size and his muscular physique.

Without saying a word, they dried each other off, then moved to the bed, expressing their feelings with a gentle caress or loving touch. John and Sakura had been with each other plenty of times before, but this time felt very different. There was an almost spiritual connection between them as they moved together on the bed, staring into each other’s eyes as they consummated their love for each other.

“I love you,” John said as he cupped her head in his hands.

“I know, and I love you with all my heart,” Sakura said with a look of wonder in her eyes.

They came together then, kissing passionately as they revelled in their shared climax. When they were finally done, John eased out of Sakura and lay beside her on the bed, wrapping his arms around her protectively, his right hand resting on the heavy curve of her cum-stuffed abdomen. She let out a very satisfied sigh as she rested her head on his left arm, tilting her head to place a loving kiss on his bicep.

John caught movement out of the corner of his eye, and he glanced over at the still-open doorway. Tashana was standing there looking flushed and she gave him a guilty, apologetic look when she realised he’d spotted her.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to intrude!” she blurted out, fidgeting awkwardly in the doorway. “I brought you both some breakfast.”

Sakura tilted her head around to see who it was, then smiled at the Maliri girl and beckoned her into the room. “It’s quite alright. Thank you for letting us have that moment alone together.”

Tashana blushed and said, “Alyssa sent me down here to bring you something to eat, but you were both still together when I arrived. I hope you don’t mind that I stayed to watch... that was beautiful!”

“No, I don’t mind at all,” Sakura said with a contented smile. She opened her arms as she added, “You’re forgiven as long as you give me a nice hug. There’s nothing like having a full tummy and being caressed by two people at once.”

Tashana nodded eagerly and put her tray with two covered dishes on the dresser, before moving to get on the bed. However, Sakura’s disapproving frown stopped her in her tracks and Tashana paused for a moment, then followed the other girl’s gaze to her dress. Grinning, she slipped it off her shoulders then joined them naked in bed together. Her slender blue hands joined John’s in gently caressing Sakura’s rounded tummy, much to the Asian girl’s delight.

\*So, Tashana happened to arrive just as Sakura and I started making love?\* John asked Alyssa, with a wry telepathic smile. \*I’m sure I’ll be forgiven for thinking that you set that up on purpose?\*

\*And you performed magnificently,\* Alyssa replied with a warm smile. \*I’m determined to prevent what happened last night from reoccurring, so I wanted to show Tashana a really positive example of what sex could be like between you two.\*

John settled down on the bed, reaching over to stroke Tashana’s flawlessly smooth skin as he gave her a warm smile. \*That was a nice thought, well done, beautiful.\*

Tashana returned his smile and briefly stopped caressing Sakura so that she could place her hand on top of his. After that, they focused their full attention on the Asian girl, drawing happy sighs from her with each delicate touch.

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Alyssa smiled to herself in satisfaction as she listened to John and Sakura’s thoughts, while feeling a surge of happiness and acceptance from Tashana. Returning her attention to the task at hand, she walked around the hull of the Raptor, frowning at the blackened scar marring the gunship’s glossy white armour. The Drakkar missile had left an ugly crater right in the middle of the upper central spinal plate, blowing the Pulse Cannon turret to bits. Under that ruined armour plating, the hardpoint itself had been left mangled and broken.

\*Dana, I’m going to replate the Raptor, but I’ll leave the newly forged armour plate on top of the hull,\* she said to her friend as she examined the wreckage. \*There’s a lot of damage to the turret emplacement , but you won’t be able to repair if I refit the armour plating.\*

\*Oh, sure!\* Dana replied in surprise. \*I thought you were leaving that until later though? Aren’t you looking into the new trading stations now?\*

Alyssa sent a teasing telepathic grin to the redhead. \*You aren’t the only one who can multi-task, Sparks,\* she replied, as she glanced at the floating holo-viewer that levitated in her telekinetic grip. Gesturing to the big block of white metal sitting on the grav-sled on the deck below, she melted a chunk of it into a stream of liquid metal and it surged up to form a slowly rotating ball beside her. \*I actually wanted to talk to you about the trading stations...\*

\*Shopping for starbases isn’t really my forte,\* Dana replied in confusion. \*What do you want to know?\*

As Alyssa began to reshape the metal, she studied the Rastan-Cooper catalogue of generic starbase facilites. The price tag for a simple trading station was astronomical, but it didn’t look all that impressive to her for the eye-watering cost. Even more annoying was the fine print on the brochure which mentioned mandatory maintenance contracts for twenty years, which would cost nearly half of the stations “all-inclusive” price.

\*These off-the-shelf facilities aren’t really what I’m looking for. I was wondering; is there any way you could design some kind of modular starbase? That way we can build what we can afford, and keep adding to the stations as we get more cash,\* Alyssa explained, as she shaped the crystal Alyssium for a third time.

Sounding thrilled, Dana gasped, \*Design my own starbase?! That sounds fucking awesome!\* Getting more excited now, she continued, \*We could buy all the materials on the cheap from the Trankarans, then get them shipped to Genthalas! I’m sure the Maliri would be happy to help construct it for us, as soon as they’ve finished refitting all their fleets.\*

\*That’s a great idea!\* Alyssa replied, glancing at the solid block of crystal Alyssium as she melted it and reshaped it a fifth time. \*Actually, if we had a chat with Chancellor Niskera and offered the Trankarans a bunch of tech, I’m sure they’d give us a huge amount of metals in exchange. We could get the materials and the labour for the starbases pretty much for free!\*

\*When do you need the designs?\* Dana asked, bubbling with enthusiasm. \*I’m still looking into the Drakkar gear at the moment, but I can make a start when I’m done!\*

\*There’s no real hurry,\* Alyssa said, smiling at her friends eagerness. \*We should probably do the trade with the Trankarans in person and I’ll need to run the idea by Edraele and John. Then there’ll be a long wait until all the materials arrive.\*

\*We could load up the Primary Hanger and haul a bunch of it back with us!\* Dana suggested eagerly. \*The speed the Invictus goes, we could take two weeks off on our skiing trip and still get to Genthalas way before any slow-ass freighter leaving Trankara, even if they left today!\*

Alyssa sent the redhead a telepathic smile as she did her seventh reshaping, the metal growing more stubborn by the moment. \*I’m sure John wouldn’t need much convincing to make a flying visit to Genthalas. He’s got some unfinished business to take care of there,\* she said with a salacious grin.

\*Do you reckon he’ll let us watch him knock up the Young Matriarchs?\* Dana replied breathlessly. \*I’m getting really horny just thinking about it!\*

More than a little turned on herself, Alyssa bit her flushed lower lip and moaned at the thought. She continued shaping the crystal Alyssium then glanced at in annoyance as it resisted her will, the metal fighting against her as she tried to push it into the shape she had in her mind. Focusing intently, she shaped it an eighth time, forcing the stubborn material to match her perfect recollection of the Raptor’s upper armour plate. \*How many reshapings to be laser immune? Eight isn’t it?\*

\*Yep, that’s right,\* Dana agreed. She sounded pensive as she added, \*I dunno if John mentioned it, but I was thinking of reshaping the Valkyrie’s armour enough times to make it immune to laser fire.\*

\*Were you indeed?\* Alyssa teased her friend, as she lowered the Octo-shaped armour plating, letting it settle on the Raptor’s glossy white hull. \*And how were you planning on doing that exactly?\*

Flashing her a cheeky grin, Dana replied, \*By asking you nicely?\*

\*Alright, but you’ll owe me,\* Alyssa replied, with a radiant telepathic smile. \*I’ll go and make a start on that now.\*

Dana seemed surprised by her blonde friend’s willing agreement. \*I thought shaping something eight times was almost impossible? Especially on something the size of the Valkyrie!\*

Alyssa stepped off the Raptor and glided down to land on the Hangar decking, the holo-reader following obediently at her side. \*I guess I’m getting stronger,\* she replied with a nonchalant shrug.

She strolled out of the room, heading towards the Valkyrie’s Launch Bay with the grav-sled following obediently behind her. Thoughts of those five beautiful Maliri girls pregnant with John’s babies added a real spring to her step.

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John smiled at Sakura as he set aside his empty plate and gave her a tender kiss. “I loved this morning, thank you.”

She gave him a dreamy smile as she replied, “It was wonderful.” Her eyelids fluttered and she let out a throaty moan, her cheeks flushing with arousal.

Grinning at Tashana next, he brushed a lock of white hair to one side, giving him an unimpeded view of her glazed violet eyes. She looked up at him over Sakura’s rounded tummy, while lapping away between the Asian girl’s spread thighs. “And I hope you’re enjoying your breakfast, honey.”

Tashana hummed in response, a twinkling smile in her eyes as Sakura bucked against her mouth, her back arching as she came.

“Good girl, give her one from me too,” he said, stroking the Maliri girl’s head and leaning in to give her a kiss on the forehead. “I’ll see you both later.”

They were both too occupied to reply, so he watched the girls as he got dressed, then left them to their fun and walked from the room. He turned right into the corridor on Deck Three and strolled towards the grav-tube, planning on dropping down four levels to Deck Seven.

\*You might want to pop in and see Rachel before you check up on Dana,\* Alyssa advised him. \*She’s in the Medical Bay at the moment.\*

Stepping into the red glow of the anti-gravity field, John replied, \*Is everything alright?\*

\*Just getting to grips with her new abilities,\* Alyssa replied, sounding a little strained all of a sudden.

John frowned as he listened to the tension in her voice. \*How about you? That didn’t sound good.\*

\*Just Octo-shaping a piece of the Valkyrie’s armour,\* Alyssa explained offhandedly. \*That eighth reshaping is still a bitch.\*

\*Wait, you’re shaping the entire mech in octo-shaped crystal Alyssium?!\* John exclaimed in surprise. \*You were struggling to just forge the swords for me and Sakura only a few weeks ago!\*

She sent him a happy telepathic smile as she replied, \*Reshaping Sakura’s ninjato a ninth time wasn’t quite as hard as I thought it was going to be, so I figured I’d have a go at patching the Raptor’s hull. Shaping an armour plate eight times actually wasn’t too bad, so when Dana asked me, I thought I might as well make the Valkyrie immune to laser weapons too.\*

\*That’s thirty-metres of mech you’re covering!\* John exclaimed, sounding stunned. \*Be careful you don’t leave yourself exhausted!\*

\*I thought I’d give the upgraded Psi-shaper a go,\* Alyssa admitted, sounding distracted again as she reshaped another armour plate an eighth time. \*It doesn’t make it any easier, but it’s definitely less tiring with the machine helping out.\*

John nodded thoughtfully as he stepped out of the grav-tube onto Deck Seven. \*I’ll have to give that a try too. It should make re-armouring the Invictus much easier.\*

\*Oh! While you were getting it on with Sakura, Dana and I had an great idea!\* Alyssa exclaimed, sounding thrilled.

John smiled as he walked along the corridor, enjoying hearing the excitement in her voice as she quickly outlined their plan. When she came to the part about getting the materials for free from the Trankarans, he nodded, suitably impressed. \*That’s sounds like a fantastic idea!\* John exclaimed in wholehearted agreement. \*I’d actually like a chance to meet Chancellor Niskera now that my Progenitor Guide is out of the picture. It would be interesting to see if we can set up some kind of alliance like we have with the Ashanath.\*

\*How about making your own ‘Glowing Queen’?\* Alyssa teased him. \*Niskera was a big girl. I’m sure ringing her bell would be an interesting challenge!\*

John rolled his eyes and groaned, stopping outside the door to the Medical Bay. \*You’re absolutely incorrigible, you know that right?\*

\*Only because you love it,\* she replied, while projecting a telepathic smirk. Her voice turned serious as she added, \*All joking aside, you might want to give it some serious consideration. The old Glowing Queen had a dramatic effect on the rest of the Trankarans, rallying millions to her cause. If Niskera is up for it, we’d be able to quickly reunify the Trankarans and add her to the telepathic network with Edraele.\*

John blinked in surprise, then frowned as he said, \*I don’t really want to start following the same path as the other Progenitor - I’m sure that wouldn’t end well. Besides, how would I even broach something like that with Niskera?!\*

\*’Hey boulder tits! Fancy giving your beautiful granite noggin a nice healthy glow?’\* Alyssa suggested, doing her best to stifle her laughter.

\*Thanks XO, I’ll take your suggestion under advisement,\* John replied dryly.

\*You think it might be too ‘rocky’ a relationship?\* Alyssa giggled, unable to restrain herself.

John chuckled and said, \*You’re just lucky you’re out of tickling range.\*

He pressed the button to open the door into Medical and strode inside, looking around for Rachel. She was exactly where he thought she’d be, over by the DNA analyser, examining the distinctive shape of triple helix DNA.

“Good morning, Doctor,” John said breezily, as he walked over to join her.

The brunette jumped, startled out of her intense focus on her work. She turned around to greet him with a warm smile, but she still seemed a little distracted as she said, “Hello, John. This is a nice surprise.”

“I didn’t mean to make you jump,” he apologised, walking over to give her a kiss. “We need to figure out some kind of system to stop me scaring the hell out of you when you’re working.”

“I suppose it’s just one of the drawbacks of concentrating so much on my research,” she replied with a resigned shrug.

John glanced at the triple-helix strand behind her and asked, “Ularean’s DNA I imagine?”

She nodded, turning to stare at the slowly rotating image. “A few months ago, I would have found his genetic code to be absolutely groundbreaking - I’m afraid those days have long passed though.”

“You didn’t learn anything new?” he asked, placing his hands on her waist as he looked at the holographic image over her shoulder.

“His DNA did confirm all my earlier theories,” Rachel conceded. “As you can see, the Ashanath have triple helix DNA. His third helix is encoded with a specific set of information that enables telepathy and telekinesis, I recognised the same patterns when I studied Alyssa’s DNA.”

“It seemed pretty conclusive that the Ashanath were created by Mael’nerak. Did you see his ‘fingerprints’ on their genetic code to confirm that?” John asked, recalling the terminology Rachel had used in the past.

Rachel smiled at him and nodded. “Yes, that’s right; well remembered.” She frowned a moment later as she added, “Although it seems odd that Mael’nerak gave the Ashanath such limited forms of telepathy and telekinesis when he was experimenting in collective consciousness. The genetic programming in Ularean’s DNA is nowhere near as complex as the coding that you inscribed on Alyssa’s DNA. Considering Mael’nerak’s mastery of genetic manipulation, I’m sure he could have made them much more powerful with only a modicum of greater effort.”

“Maybe he was worried about the Greys rebelling and turning against him? By keeping them comparatively much weaker it would be a lot easier for Mael’nerak to have suppressed a revolt,” John suggested hugging her closer.

“Perhaps...” Rachel murmured, although she didn’t sound entirely convinced. She leaned back against him, her grey eyes gazing into the distance as she was lost in thought.

John leaned down to place a kiss on the exposed skin of her neck before he said, “You seem awfully distracted today. Is there something on your mind?”

She laughed and turned her head so that she could kiss him. “Did Alyssa tip you off? Yes, I must admit I’m finding it hard to concentrate on my research this morning, my thoughts keep drifting back to healing the Ashanath.”

“We haven’t really had a chance to discuss your new abilities yet, aside from our frolic in the bath the other day,” John said, sliding his hands around over her slim stomach.

“That was mind-blowing,” Rachel readily agreed with a coy grin. She looked a little apprehensive for a moment as she added, “It would be good to talk about my new abilities though, thank you.”

John pulled away from her and started walking across the Medical Bay, leaving her looking at him in confusion. When he sat down on one of the chairs and patted his lap, she laughed and sauntered over to join him.

“I love these chats with you,” he grinned as she obediently sat sideways across his lap, smiling at him indulgently as he supported her with his left arm and unbuttoned a couple of her shirt buttons with his right. He started to caress her toned stomach and continued patiently, “Now, tell me what’s on your mind.”

Her eyes softened for a moment as she enjoyed his gentle touch. “You’d have made an excellent psychologist, although your method for calming your patients is a little unorthodox,” she said as she relaxed in his arms.

“You were delighted to have been given the ability to heal when we spoke last time,” John said, carefully studying her lovely face. “Have you changed your mind since then?”

Rachel’s eyes flashed wide open and she quickly shook her head as she gasped, “No, absolutely not!” She turned to sit astride him, then leaned in to give him a fierce kiss. “Please don’t think I’m ungrateful for the phenomenal gift you’ve given me!” Faltering then, her voice softened to a whisper. “When I was healing the Ashanath, one of them called me a ‘Radiant Goddess’ – I couldn’t disagree with her!”

Stroking her smooth cheek, he smiled as he said, “I saw you when you were healing Ularean. That Ashanath was right; you look exceptionally beautiful and serene when you’re healing someone.”

She blushed and shook her head. “Thank you, but that isn’t what I was referring to. Doctor Larson told me once, that I wasn’t God; that arbitrary life and death decisions weren't mine to make. He was talking in an abstract way, referring to my circumventing the need for clinical trials.” She sounded awed as she continued, “But now I’m actually able to heal by mere thought alone... Some of those Ashanath were beyond the help of conventional medicine - they are only alive today because I decided to give them life.”

John nodded, finally understanding what had unsettled the tawny-haired girl. “With all the weapons we have available, it’s very easy to take a life. But to save one? Bring them back from certain death?” He stared into Rachel’s grey eyes and said softly, “Your ability is very different from all the others I’ve given to the rest of the girls. There was a resistance when I activated your third helix, as though I was breaking some fundamental law by gifting you this power.”

“Why did you do it then?” she asked him, her eyes widening as she stared into his.

“My ability to heal you and the other girls is miraculous, but there are a number of restrictions that make it slightly impractical,” John replied, brushing the backs of his fingers over her svelte stomach. “Feeding all of you before the battle saved Dana’s life, but what do we do if we’re in a prolonged fight?” He smiled as he added, “I can hardly load you up again mid-combat.”

Rachel nodded, gazing at him intently. “I don’t disagree. It’s a very sensible precaution, but why choose me to trust with such godlike responsibility?”

“You were already a doctor, a healer. I just took it to the next level,” John said, stroking her back. He smiled at her as he continued, “Besides, I can’t think of anyone with a better temperament. You’re calm, rational, yet compassionate - what better personality for a fully-fledged goddess?”

Rachel blushed again and nestled into him. “I promise I’ll make you proud of me,” she murmured, squeezing him tightly.

“You already do, honey,” he replied, wrapping his arms around her.

She let out a contented sigh, her long, tawny-brown hair tickling his nose as she snuggled into him. “Thank you for speaking to me about this. I feel more at ease with myself now.”

John smiled at her as she tilted her head up to look at him. “Maybe I’m just trying to stay on your good side? It’s a foolish man who angers the gods!”

Rachel laughed at that, already looking calmer and much more relaxed now. She suddenly frowned, her expression growing more pensive as she said, “There’s something else we need to talk about - something far more serious.”

“What’s that?” John asked, looking at her with concern.

She bit her lip anxiously then replied, “What on Terra am I going to say to my Dad, when I introduce him to you and Dana?!”

John managed to stop himself from smiling as he nodded sombrely. “You’re right, that needs some serious thought.”

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Dana watched Jade as she worked, the Nymph’s agile fingers following the holographic instructions on how to assemble one of the maintenance bots. Beside her, four of the smiling automatons worked with precise, methodical movements as they constructed replicas of themselves. Jade was faster, having already built the primary chassis and attached it to the anti-gravity platform, but Dana found her eyes drawn to the maintenance bots as they worked.

All four were installing the final components into the chest of each new robot, the six-digits on their hands skilfully rotating the power core as it was slotted into the cavity in the torso. It was almost like watching them perform a complicated dance, each of the robots operating in perfect synchronisation. Although it was impressive to watch, it was also a little eerie, and slightly disconcerting for some reason.

Shaking her head to shrug off the feeling, Dana hefted one of the Drakkar’s rifles in her arms and said to Jade, “If John comes looking for me, I’ll just be in the firing range.”

“Okay, I’ll let him know,” the Nymph replied, giving her a bright smile as she saluted with her multi-tool.

Dana grinned, then bounded out of her Workshop, nearly crashing into John as she left. “I was just talking about you!” she exclaimed, as he steadied her with his strong arms.

“Nothing bad I hope?” John replied, giving her a fond smile.

She shook her head, dark auburn hair brushing over her shoulders. “Nah, you’re alright,” she replied, with an impish grin. “I’m actually just going to test fire this rifle we swiped off the Drakkar. Fancy coming along to take a look?”

“I’d love to,” John immediately agreed. He nodded towards the gun and added politely, “That looks heavy, do you want me to carry it for you?”

“What? You think I’m just a weak little girl? That I need a ‘strong man’ to help me?!” Dana demanded indignantly.

John looked at her in surprise, holding his hands up defensively. “Sorry, I didn’t mean-“

Dana giggled and handed him the gun. “Relax, I’m just fucking with you!” She nudged him with an elbow and added slyly, “I love being part of your harem of hot girls! - I’m hardly going to be one of those twenty-eighth wave feminist nut-jobs, am I?”

Looking immensely relieved, John smiled back at her and replied, “No, that’s true. Especially when you’ve got your JP schoolgirl outfit in your wardrobe.”

Dana bounced along beside him as they walked along the corridor, a beaming grin on her face. “Oh yeah! I haven’t worn that in ages!” she gasped, looking extremely enthusiastic at the prospect. She skipped ahead of him and turned around, walking backwards so she could watch his face. Her sky-blue eyes sparkled with excitement as she added, “That gives me an awesome idea!”

\*Oh yes, that really is awesome,\* Alyssa agreed, her voice a seductive purr as it echoed through both of their minds.

“I should know better than to ask, but you’re not going to elaborate, are you?” John asked the grinning redhead.

She gave him a playful shrug and replied, “Hey, if you can keep secrets about the Brimorians, you can’t complain about me keeping this quiet!”

John laughed and rolled his eyes. “Alright, I suppose I deserved that.”

Alyssa sounded amused as she said, \*Don’t worry, we’ll make sure you’re well rested before we spring this one on you. You’ll need all the energy you can get!\*

They’d reached the Firing Range by now and Dana slapped her hand on the button to open the door, then smirked at him as she darted inside. John walked into the room after her, then got a shock when he saw a fully-armoured Drakkar warrior standing at the end of the firing range, all four arms raised in a threatening manner.

Dana cheered with delight when she saw him jump. “I finally got you back for scaring the crap out of me on Ashana!”

He smiled at her and replied, “A rampaging Drakkar I can handle. You turning into a feminist is far more terrifying.”

“You’re safe there, don’t worry,” she replied with a wink.

Gesturing towards the black battlesuit at the end of the range, John asked, “I take it we’re not just testing the Drakkar rifle then?”

“I thought I’d do a final test of the body armour’s shields. I’ve already finished my research, this is just to confirm the performance parameters,” Dana replied, walking over to the firing bench at the end of the lanes. She grinned at him as she added, “Plus it should be fun!”

Walking over to join her, John raised the sinister black rifle a few inches and said, “So, do you want to tell me what you’ve found out about this gun?”

“It’ll be faster just to show you,” she replied, handing him a magazine, before leaning against the wall and crossing her arms over her chest. She had a remote in her hand, and she pressed the button. “Go ahead and squeeze off a shot.”

John took the black box of ammo and slotted it into the obvious destination in front of the trigger. There was no safety or a fire selector switch on the weapon, so he raised the rifle to his shoulder and took aim down the sights. “No scope,” he muttered. “I assume the rifle was smart-linked to the owner’s battlesuit?”

Dana nodded and replied, “Yeah, the tech was crude but functional. Smart-linking weapons isn’t particularly revolutionary though, so I was expecting that.”

Taking careful aim down the range, John readjusted his grip on the rifle trying to get comfortable. The weapon was designed for a Drakkar’s burly fist while wearing battle armour, so his own unarmoured hand was tiny by comparison. Giving up on his attempt to find a comfortable firing position, John did his best to keep the barrel on-target and squeezed the trigger.

The glowing purple bullet blasted out of the rifle, leaving a swirling contrail in its wake that linked the barrel to the battlesuit. A red dome appeared around the suit of black Drakkar armour, visible now as the shield was struck by the slug. The impact blossomed a bright crimson as the energy field reacted to the force of the bullet hitting its surface.

“It didn’t deflect,” John noted, glancing at Dana as he lowered the black Drakkar rifle. “Does that mean the bullet was capable of damaging the shield?”

She nodded and replied, “Yep, got it in one. That gun is quite sophisticated tech, although the implementation is a bit crude. Basically, each bullet it fires is wrapped in an energy pocket, which is why each shot glows purple like that - it’s using the same kind of energy matrix as the Drakkar use in their Beam Lasers.”

John put the rifle down on the shooting table, then nodded speculatively. “So, if you were able to harness that kind of technology, we wouldn’t need to worry about taking Justice Lasers with us to deal with shields and Punisher Rifles for heavy armour.”

“That’s the plan,” she agreed, studying the vicious-looking weapon lying in front of them. “With the radically advanced Progenitor tech we have available, upgrading the shit out of the base design shouldn’t be too hard. I’ll get to work on a prototype and I should have something ready for you in a day or two.”

“I can’t wait to see what you come up with,” John said, giving her an enthusiastic grin. He glanced down the firing range and added, “What about the armour? Figured out how their shielding works?”

Dana snorted and waved a dismissive hand. “Of course I have!” she replied, giving him a confident smile. Looking thoughtful she continued, “The tech in the body armour is much more sophisticated than that used in the guns. Being able to miniaturise a shield generator to that extent is way beyond current Terran Federation understanding of energy shielding technology.”

“Can you replicate it?” John asked, a hopeful expression on his face.

She nodded but didn’t seem as overjoyed as he’d been expected. “Yes, I can do a straight-up copy of the shields in the battlesuits and installing them into the Paragon armour should only take a few hours of work.”

“You don’t seem too thrilled by that idea,” he noted, looking at her curiously.

Dana frowned, shaking her head as she replied, “I’m not.” Letting out a forlorn sigh, she admitted, “Shield technology is the one area I’ve got really limited knowledge. Our trip to the Brimorians couldn’t come at a better time; If we can get our hands on their advanced shield tech, then I can really start to put something special together for the Paragon armour!”

“What about a Maliri Shield Modulator?” John asked, recalling the schematics she had acquired from Geniya station. “Can you incorporate that and boost the shield capacity a bit? The Invictus got a sixty percent boost in shield strength from one of those didn’t it?”

“Eighty percent actually - I improved the way the modulator stabilises the Invictus’ shields when it gets attacked,” Dana said with a smile of satisfaction. “Yeah, I was going to look into miniaturising one of those to fit into the armour as well, but that might take me a little while.”

John nodded sympathetically. “How much time are you looking at for that?”

She shrugged in reply. “It’s hard to say with research. It isn’t like churning out new gear, where I can just calculate how long it’ll take to fabricate the parts and add up the overall assembly time.” She tapped her chin thoughtfully and added, “I’ve already come up with several ideas for ways to reduce the size of the field inducer - that’s the biggest part of the modulator. Give me a couple of hours, that outta’ do it.”

He laughed and reached out to squeeze her shoulder in appreciation. “You really are a marvel!”

Grinning at him, Dana nodded. “As I said the other day, I am good with tech.” She raised an eyebrow as she added, “But maybe not so good at combat.”

“I am sorry about the Valkyrie,” John said, pulling her in for a hug. “I hope you understand that it was a hard decision to make. Ultimately though, your safety is paramount and I didn’t want to risk exposing you to unnecessary danger.”

She hugged him back, then gave him an adoring smile. “You’re forgiven for the way you handled it in that meeting. It really meant a lot to me, the way you raised it like that with the rest of the girls.”

“It was a bit theatrical, but essentially everything I said was true - you are more valuable up on the Invictus’ Bridge. We’ve been extremely lucky so far, but if we take a bad hit, you really are our best shot of keeping the Invictus in the fight,” he explained, gazing into her eyes so she could see his sincerity.

“I’ve actually warmed up to the idea now anyway,” Dana replied, giving him a quick kiss. “It was a real rush piloting the mech, but now I get to hang out with you on the Bridge. If you do end up on a boarding action, then you’ll probably end up bringing me with you, and then I can help keep an eye on Rachel. Watching her get taken out by the Drakkar when I couldn’t do shit to help her was a real fucking nightmare!”

John nodded, his face bleak. “I love having all of you girls aboard the ship and you’re all incredible in a fight, but seeing any of you get injured is horrible.” His eyes lost focus as he gazed into the distance and murmured, “I lost a lot of friends in the marines, but seeing women I knew take a bad hit was always much worse.”

“Were you sleeping with any of those girls?” Dana asked sympathetically.

He shook his head and replied, “No, but I was very close friends with a couple of them. They were both killed at Galon Prime and that made me finally quit the marines – I just couldn’t lose anyone else.” Letting out a heavy sigh, he focused on her face again and added, “That’s why I’m so overprotective with you girls - I’m sure you can understand why.”

“I’m really sorry you lost your friends, that must have been awful,” Dana said, giving him a tender kiss. “I promise I’ll try to be much more careful in the future.”

“You’re a good girl, thank you,” he said, his voice filled with gratitude as he wrapped her in a fierce hug and held her tight. They stood quietly together like that for several minutes, John stroking Dana’s back as she leaned into him.

When they finally pulled apart, she looked at him with sympathetic eyes and said softly, “You’re usually so busy running around saving beautiful girls from trouble, you don’t show it much, but you need looking after too, don’t you?”

He smiled at her and replied, “Let’s just keep that a secret, shall we? I’ll be the stoic alpha male and you can be the beautiful heroine that spurs me on to acts of valour.”

She laughed and nodded exuberantly. “As long as I don’t have to be the damsel in distress! Getting in trouble usually means being shot and I’m sick of that shit.”

“No more getting shot,” John agreed with a grin. “Sounds like a good plan to me.”

Dana glanced at the rifle on the table and said, “Well, that was it for the Drakkar gun.” She smiled at him affectionately as she continued, “If you’re done hugging me, shall we head back to the workshop?”

John picked up the black rifle and said, “I’ll try to resist, but you’re extremely huggable.” He took a final glance at the Drakkar battlesuit before they left the firing range. “That armour plating was much tougher than I expected. I take it that isn’t just the normal Onyxium and Steel alloy they used on their hulls?”

“Actually it is!” Dana exclaimed, giving him an apologetic smile. “I meant to mention it before, but I got a bit sidetracked moaning about the shields. The armour’s been through some kind of hardening process, which is why it was as tough as old boots. The effect on the metal is unlike anything I’ve ever seen before, but it feels... *familiar*.”

“That is interesting,” John said, sharing a pointed glance with the redhead. “It must be some kind of Progenitor tech behind it if you’re getting one of those feelings.”

She nodded, a bright sparkle in her eyes. “Which means more time coaxing out schematics from your quad!”

“An excellent discovery all round then,” John said, putting his arm around her as they left the firing range.

“I’m actually looking forward to our two weeks together more than the skiing trip!” Dana admitted, a hungry gleam in her eyes. “I’ll take such good care of you, you’ll be begging me to set up another one!”

John smiled at her and stroked her slender back as they walked, then reached out to Alyssa telepathically. \*Hey, beautiful. Would you mind gathering the troops in the Engineering Bay? I’d like to go over our plans for rescuing Athena.\*

\*Everyone’s already on their way,\* Alyssa replied, having heard his fleeting thoughts and acted immediately.

When they arrived at the Workshop door he paused for a moment and said, “Before I forget, I was thinking about doing something special for Irillith. I could use your help when you can spare a moment?”

“Sure, no problem. I’ll probably be busy for the rest of today, but tell me about it tonight and I’d love to help,” Dana replied with a curious smile. Her pupils flared with excitement as she added, “Is it something naughty?”

John gave her a mysterious smile, then hit the button by the door and waved the cheeky redhead through. She flounced into her Workshop, giving him an impish grin, and yelped as he gave her a playful smack on her gloriously firm rump. Handing her the Drakkar rifle, John strolled over to the ore storage crates looking for the ones marked with the white glyph that labelled their contents. Jade looked up from her work when she spotted that he’d entered the room and they exchanged warm smiles in greeting.

Lifting the lid of the enormous storage crate, he chose a huge block of crystal Alyssium. Making a curt gesture to the metal, John drew it out in a sparkling white stream and into a tightly controlled sphere. Rachel was the first of the girls to arrive, and she walked over to give him a kiss as John started reshaping the glittering metal. By the time he was onto his fifth shaping, Alyssa and Calara had arrived too, greeting him with a hug before moving over to sit on some storage crates.

Alyssa glanced at the box underneath her shapely bottom, then jumped off it as she flipped away the lid with a telekinetic push. As John started forming the shape of a Photon Laser barrel, she began reshaping her own orb of roiling crystal Alyssium, getting ready to help make more of the new weapons. Irillith entered the Workshop just as the blonde girl had finished forming her first ten-metre-long laser and between Alyssa and John, they’d managed to get seven completed by the time Sakura and Tashana arrived. Tashana had a look of contentment on her face and she was the one sporting the heavily rounded tummy now. She flashed a grateful grin at John as she walked over to embrace her sister.

“Thanks for coming, ladies,” John said, smiling at each of them in turn. He had to raise his voice slightly to be heard clearly over the hum of the Mass Fabricators working in the background. “Sorry we aren’t meeting somewhere more comfortable, but I wanted to make a start on the Photon Lasers.”

“I’m not going to complain if it means we upgrade the Beam Lasers even quicker,” Calara said with an eager grin.

“Actually, that reminds me of something!” Dana blurted out, glancing at Jade. “Can you hold off on building the new Photon Lasers until I give you new schematics? Checking out the Progenitor Power Relay gave me some good ideas on how to reduce their crazy power consumption. I’ll make some tweaks and then give you the mark-two version.”

The Nymph nodded agreeably and replied, “I haven’t started on them yet. I’m still working on the maintenance bots at the moment and the Mass Fabricators are creating components for the Power Couplings.”

“Okay, great!” Dana said with a happy smile.

John waited patiently for them to finish then cleared his throat. “As I mentioned last night, we need to come up with some ideas for saving Athena. Have any of you had any thoughts about ways we could help her?”

Dana raised her hand and replied, “I have a few.” She grimaced as she added, “Although I’m not sure how practical they’re going to be.”

“I’m willing to listen to any suggestions at this point,” John said, encouraging her with a smile.

“Well my first idea was that we could create her a cybernetic body!” the redhead exclaimed enthusiastically. “It’d be a bit like the kind of thing I’ve been planning for Faye. The prototype body would be a bit crude at first, but we could always upgrade it as I get better at cybernetics.”

Rachel shook her head and gave her girlfriend a rueful look, “I don’t think that’s going to work, babes. Athena’s an aspect of Alyssa’s personality, not a digital AI that we can just download into a cybernetic body. I don’t think we’ll be able to rely on the mechanical to save her.”

“I did think about that, so I spoke to Ularean and asked him for the blueprints for the Ashanath psychic control interfaces. I thought maybe we could rejig them and somehow download Athena into a cybernetic brain that way,” Dana said, but she had none of her usual brash confidence as she said it.

John lowered the Photon Laser barrel he’d just shaped to the ground and said quietly. “That sounds like a real long shot to me. What’s our chances of success?”

The redhead shrugged helplessly. “Five percent?” She gave him an apologetic smile as she said, “Sorry, I tried thinking of everything I could, but that was the best I could come up with. The rest is crazy, out of the box stuff.”

“How about an example?” John asked curiously.

“Well... I’d need to somehow create a matter transportation device that would effectively allow teleportation. Then I’d need to keep sending Alyssa through it until it fucks up, and hopefully creates two copies of her. Then Alyssa can have one, Athena gets the other, although I’m not entirely sure how we’d separate the two. We’d also have to hope the other copy doesn’t turn out evil, that seems to happen a lot,” she explained, sounding particularly dubious.

“Aren’t those ideas the plots from a bunch of different sci-fi shows?” Irillith asked with a raised eyebrow. “I recognised quite a few of them.”

Alyssa shook her head firmly. “Even if you were able to invent a teleporter, I’m not sure I like the idea of being zapped around until something ‘fucks up’! I’ll have to veto that one I’m afraid.”

Dana blushed, exasperated that she couldn’t be more helpful and gave John a helpless shrug. “I did say they were out of the box ideas. Sorry they weren’t more useful.”

John gave Dana a grateful smile. “Thanks for the suggestions, Sparks. You did warn me this was outside your area of expertise.” He turned to look at the rest of the group and continued, “Does anyone else have any ideas, before we move on to Rachel?” When they all shook their heads, he looked at their tawny-haired Doctor. “It looks like it’s down to you, honey. You mentioned you had some suggestions, but that they might be morally questionable?”

The brunette nodded and looked a little pensive. “I’m not saying we should actually go ahead with either of these ideas, but I’m just raising them in case they lead to something we can actually use.”

“Go ahead, no one’s judging,” John said, with an encouraging smile.

“Well they’re both on similar lines to Dana’s actually: transferring Athena’s consciousness into a separate body, but I was thinking more along biological lines. The first suggestion would be to use an existing adult female, perhaps someone in a coma that’s effectively brain dead. Finding someone that fits the bill would be relatively easy considering the amount of accidents that happen on a daily basis amongst the billions of people in the Terran Federation. We could put out a request to hospitals and ask them to keep an eye out for potential candidates,” she explained hesitantly, the look on her face telling them that she knew John was already going to reject that plan.

He gave her a look of regret. “You seem to have guessed my response to that one already. With your healing abilities, you could probably heal any candidates the hospital finds, which means we’d effectively be ‘killing’ the old personality to replace it with Athena.” He paused and added curiously, “Have you managed to come up with a way we could transfer her personality?”

She smiled at him and said, “Don’t worry, I knew you’d reject that idea. Regarding the personality transfer, I thought of an effective workaround. We all know that you created Athena in the first place and that you also rebuilt Edraele’s mind. I was thinking that if we found a candidate, we could have Jade feed her, then you take a snapshot of Athena’s current personality and rebuild her consciousness inside the new body. The original inside Alyssa’s mind would still eventually be destroyed, but Athena would be able to effectively live on in a new body.”

“That actually does sound like a viable plan, although we still have the issue of finding a new body for her personality, and it wouldn’t actually save the original Athena,” John said, nodding thoughtfully as he considered her idea. He paused for a moment then added, “It sounded like you had a second suggestion; what was the other one?”

Rachel blushed now and glancing furtively at Alyssa, she replied, “This idea follows on from the first and is a way of trying to circumvent the morally dubious action of personality replacement in an injured woman.” She hesitated before she continued, “Although this idea would open up a minefield of new moral conundrums, for example: at what point does a person gain a soul - or at least develop a personality of their own?”

“I’m not following,” John said with a look of confusion.

Alyssa gasped with excitement. “She wants you to get me pregnant!” she exclaimed, her cerulean eyes sparkling at the thought.

John blinked in surprise, then quickly shook his head. “Nope, definitely not, or not for this reason at least. The baby would have to have a sufficiently developed brain to support a fully fledged personality, which means one would already be forming. I’m not mind-wiping my own daughter!”

Holding her hands up defensively, Rachel said, “I’m not for one moment suggesting you do that, but you did ask for any idea, no matter how outlandish. We wouldn’t actually have to go down the conventional pregnancy route, we could investigate cloning technology instead. Mael’nerak seemed to have access to extremely sophisticated machinery that allowed him to create fully functional Terrans, Trankarans, Ashanath, and I’m assuming Drakkar. If we could find his original lab, we might be able to grow a clone of Alyssa and use that as a host for Athena.”

“That’s the best idea yet,” John said, nodding thoughtfully. He frowned as he glanced at Tashana and added, “I don’t suppose you have any idea where his cloning lab might be?”

Tashana slowly shook her head. “I’m sorry, I don’t remember seeing any mention of it.” She paused, and correcting herself, continued, “Actually, I only found out about the cloning lab after we watched the files from those Progenitor data crystals that Dana recovered. If I was to look through all my old research notes again, it’s possible I might be able to spot something this time, now I know what to look for.”

Alyssa gave John a worried frown as she said, “Athena didn’t think she had much time left and we’re quite some distance from Valaden. We’ll probably need to set course for Maliri Space immediately if we’re going to be able to save her in time.”

Tashana sounded grim as she said, “That’s assuming Mael’nerak’s lab is even in Maliri Space. Valada drastically shrank the borders of his original territory when she recalled her people.”

“We’re also making the big assumption that the cloning facility still exists, is in an operational state, and that we’ll be able to figure out how it works,” Rachel said, giving John a look filled with sympathy and regret. “I know we excel at snatching victory from the jaws of defeat in the last possible moment, but this one might just be beyond us.”

He nodded sadly, staring at the block of crystal Alyssium in front of him, all shaping forgotten for the moment. “I think that cloning idea might have just worked, but you’re right, we’re nearly out of time. I’ll speak to Athena and see what she wants to do.” He took a deep breath, then smiled at the girls gathered around him. “Thanks for doing your best, ladies.”

Alyssa walked over to his side and ran her delicate fingers over his arm. “Do you want to talk to Athena now?”

“Yes, please,” he replied, giving her a troubled frown in return.

The rest of the girls came over to give John a hug, before they quietly dispersed, going back to their work. Tashana gave him a tender kiss on the cheek. She was about to ask him something, but took one look at John’s distracted expression and turned away instead, leaving him to his thoughts.

Alyssa sat down on the storage crate beside him once the girls had all departed. She gave him a sympathetic smile and said, “Whenever you’re ready, John.”

He nodded, then closed his eyes and focused his will inwards, concentrating on peeling his spirit-form away from his body. He encountered the same resistance as before, but was in no mood for the stubborn drag he usually felt when he tried to Spirit-walk. He snarled in anger, and the pull back to his body abruptly diminished, letting him step cleanly away from his physical form with the minimum of effort.

“Thank you for coming to see me,” Athena said quietly, her radiant aura much dimmer now, making her look more like Alyssa. She gave him a sad smile and added, “I fear it might be for the last time.”

“I thought you said you had weeks?!” John protested, stepping over to her and gathering her in his arms.

“Alyssa’s growing stronger in leaps and bounds. You should have seen her against the Drakkar, she was magnificent!” Athena exclaimed, a look of tremendous pride on her face. She gazed into his eyes and added, “She’s a remarkable girl, learning, improvising, and improving at an incredible rate - but that also means my time guiding her is nearly over.”

“If only we had a few more weeks!” John protested in frustration. “We thought there might be a way... Mael’nerak’s cloning facility – there might still be a chance!”

She leaned in to kiss him, quieting his objections. “I can feel it... the moment where I’ll be subsumed is fast approaching – a day or two at most.” Giving him an affectionate smile she continued, “I wish I had more time with you, but these past months have been extremely rewarding. Thank you for the gift of life you’ve given me.”

“I feel like I’ve failed you, Athena,” John said despondently. “You’ve saved us over and over again, and the one time you needed me, I let you down. You deserved to live a long life of your own as reward.”

She gave him an enigmatic smile. “As one of your doting girls aboard the Invictus? That’s awfully presumptuous, Mister Blake.”

He winced and replied, “I’m sorry, I just meant...“

Athena kissed him passionately then, making his lips tingle with the electrifying contact. “I would have loved that,” she breathed as she gazed into his eyes.

Brushing his fingers through her long glowing hair, John asked softly, “Is there anything I can do for you? If there is, just name it.”

She hesitated for a moment, then asked in a hushed whisper, “Would you come back one final time? Come to see me when the moment of reunification is here?”

“Of course! Just say the word and I’ll be there, I promise,” John immediately agreed. “Is there anything else?”

Athena leaned against his chest and said softly, “Just hold me...”

John lost track of time as he held the glowing girl, stroking her back as he did his best to comfort her. They both knew this would be the last intimate moment they had together and John was determined to make it special for her. He leaned down to give her a tender kiss and she responded immediately, tangling her fingers in his hair as she moaned into his mouth. With no need to breathe on the Astral Plane, they were able to kiss for what seemed like an eternity, until John suddenly felt the sharp tug of his astral cord. He turned to glare at it in annoyance, but felt Athena’s tingling touch as she brushed his cheek with her fingers, drawing his face back to hers.

“No, don’t fight it,” she said with a sad smile. “I’m touched that you resisted him that long to spend this time with me.”

“I’m sorry...” John began, until she silenced him with another kiss.

She shook her head. “Don’t be.”

The cord yanked him backwards, pulling him from her arms, and the last thing he saw before he was thrown back into his body was the mournful expression on Athena’s beautiful face.

“You were gone for ages!” Alyssa exclaimed in surprise as he lurched back into his body. “I didn’t think you could Spirit-walk for that long!”

“I failed her,” John said quietly. “We’ve run out of time...”

“How long?” Alyssa asked, her voice filled with sympathy as she rose from her seat and wrapped her arms around him.

He let out a heavy sigh.“A day or two at most.” Enveloped her in his arms and hugging her back, he said, “She’s very proud of you. I am as well.”

Alyssa gave him a loving kiss then rested her chin on his shoulder. He seemed content to just hold her for the moment, so she nuzzled into him, enjoying the physical contact and the opportunity to be there to support him.

Gazing across the Workshop she watched Dana and Rachel together up on the Engineering Podium. Rachel looked worried as she spoke to her auburn-haired lover and Alyssa tuned into their thoughts, listening as they discussed the upcoming visit to New Eden. Even though Rachel’s relationship with her father had been strained, she still felt an instinctive need to seek his approval. Although she loved John and Dana with all her heart, she couldn’t help worrying about how her father would react to her rather unusual living arrangements. Dana was touched that her girlfriend was determined to introduce them, but she had no idea what to say to assuage Rachel’s concerns.

Alyssa reached out to them both, soothing their worries and explaining that she’d be there too, to help make sure everything went smoothly. She wasn’t entirely sure how she was going to manage that, but Dana and Rachel’s trust in her was absolute and they both turned to flash Alyssa a grateful smile. Dana settled back into her work on miniaturising the shield modulator, while Rachel left to call her father and warn him of their impending arrival.

Jade was busy constructing the new maintenance bots, while watching John with concern. She hated to see him upset for any reason but in this case, she felt helpless, unable to come up with any solutions to the problem that was vexing him. Alyssa sent her a loving surge of emotions, calming the Nymph’s worries and murmuring gentle words to relax her, saying that she would make sure John was okay. Jade’s empathic bond throbbed with gratitude as she returned to work, at peace again knowing that Alyssa was looking after her Master.

Sakura had returned to the Training Dojo, the diligent young woman eager to experiment with her exciting new ability to manipulate ice. The upcoming trip to New Eden weighed heavily on the girl, so Alyssa swaddled her mind with long-forgotten memories of Sakura’s time with her parents as a child. A trip to the beach to build sandcastles when she was six, a ballet recital when she was seven, her eighth birthday party out in their garden with bunting looped around the trees... Sakura experienced them all with a sense of wonder, Alyssa’s perfect recollection of those events stirring strong feelings in the girl. \*Thank you, so much,\* she murmured, with a profound sense of gratitude.

Calara was up on the Bridge, working out what defensive structures and weapon placements the new Trading Stations would need. Alyssa had shared her plan amongst the group, once it had received John’s enthusiastic approval, and the girls had all been equally thrilled by the idea. While the Latina was busy calculating possible threats to the station and the amount of firepower needed to suppress such threats, her mind was also preoccupied with thoughts of her mother and their return to Jericho. Calara wanted to handle this next trip slightly differently, and as her thoughts drifted to her blonde lover, Alyssa gave her mind a loving caress that sent a thrill through the young woman.

Irillith was in the Firing Range with Tashana, helping her to improving her skill with a rifle. Alyssa hadn’t bonded with Tashana yet and as she wasn’t able to hear her thoughts, she listened to the conversation from Irillith’s perspective. It wouldn’t be long until Tashana was ready though, Alyssa could feel that they were already getting close to that moment. The latently psychic girls were always quicker to embrace the bond and Tashana was already profoundly grateful to Alyssa for everything that she’d done for her.

Edraele was currently talking to Kali Loraleth, being open and honest about her affection for the young woman in much the same way as she had been with Valani. Alyssa smiled as Kali threw her arms around the Maliri Matriarch, the young woman crying with joy as she expressed how much she returned the same feelings – that she loved Edraele more than she ever had her own mother. Kali was the last of the original four Young Matriarchs with which Edraele was having this discussion, the other women all having responded just as favourably.

Even more importantly from Alyssa’s perspective, this was a critically important experience for Edraele. She’d been able to feel the weight of guilt bearing down on the House Valaden Matriarch. Edraele blamed herself for all the dreadful actions her predecessor had committed, which the new personality could remember so clearly, despite not actually responsible for any of them. For Edraele to receive such genuine affection from these Maliri girls was doing wonders for quelling what had been a growing sense of self-loathing.

\*You should feel very proud of yourself,\* Alyssa murmured to her, as Edraele began to forge a bond with Kali. \*The way you’ve nurtured and cared for those girls has got you here today. You can’t force this kind of connection.\*

\*I never thought anyone would feel this way about me,\* Edraele gasped, her words throbbing with emotion. \*My mind feels so full of their thoughts, it’s wonderful!\* She sent a huge wave of affection towards Alyssa, full of her own strength of feeling towards the remarkable Terran girl.

All of their telepathic voices merged into a glorious chorus, one that meant Alyssa was never lonely; constantly surrounded by the voices, thoughts, and feelings of her loved ones. To be the focal point for this maelstrom of emotions was exhilarating and she hugged John tighter, overwhelmed with gratitude that he’d entrusted her with such a position of responsibility. Mael’nerak’s experiment with the Ashanath had been an intriguing one, but ultimately it was flawed. What Alyssa was building with her girls was a true collective consciousness and it was one she’d gladly share with any girl John chose to include in their growing family. After all, every new voice added to that chorus of beautiful voices made it that little bit brighter, the notes resonating with even greater perfection.

Alyssa let out a gentle sigh, feeling blissfully happy and content. John leaned back to look at her with concern, mistaking the nature of that sigh for unhappiness. She gave him a gentle kiss to distract him, suppressing a smile as she did so...

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Sakura padded across the mats in the Dojo, feeling calm and at peace. She had started one of her favourite programs in the training simulator and the sun’s rays were just creeping up over Mount Daisen, lighting up the mists with an ethereal glow.

Filled with a sense of inner peace, she stood in the centre of the dojo and closed her eyes, arms held apart, palms upraised. Justice - that was what she sought most of all... cold and dispassionate, she would be the avenging angel for all those poor souls slain by Mikaboshi and his ilk.

She felt a tingling sensation in her fingertips, and the temperature in the room began to drop, the hint of a breeze wafting over the back of her hands. Although she was wearing a sleeveless training top, Sakura didn’t feel discomforted by the cold, it felt invigorating instead. When she slowly reopened her eyes, tiny motes of ice gusted around her fingers, swirling like the first dusting of winter snow.

\*You’re doing very well,\* Alyssa said, her tone encouraging as she reached out to her via telepathy. \*Now, try to push the cold outwards from your fingertips. Just focus and extend your will outwards.\*

Raising her hands, Sakura took an even breath then did as Alyssa suggested. An intricate lattice of ice began to form before her eyes, creeping outwards in a frost-covered arc. She noticed a distinctive pattern forming over and over again, the icy tendrils forming six-sided shapes as the sheet extended out away from her. Sakura stared at the beautifully wrought ice formation as it caught the light, acting as a prism as it sparkled in the air, sending vivid colours lancing in all directions.

\*That was excellent,\* the psychic blonde said, sounding impressed. She sent her a smile of apology as she continued, \*I’d come and join you and train you in person, but I want to finish replating the Valkyrie first. Don’t worry though; we’ll have lots of time to practice together in the future.\*

Sakura nodded, then asked curiously.\*Why did the ice form into hexagons? I wasn’t telling it to do that.\*

\*Our abilities all come from John. His species seem to be obsessed with that shape, but I’ve no idea why – perhaps it’s something to do with the way their minds work?\* Alyssa replied, sounding thoughtful. With a playful air to her voice, she added, \*Your icy spiderwebs are very pretty, but I’m not sure how handy they’ll be in a fight. Do you want to try to work on something more useful?\*

The Asian girl blushed and waved her hands, making the bridge of icy hexagons fade away. \*I’m ready. What do you suggest?\*

\*Let’s start with you making a nice sturdy shield for me. Do you remember all the advice I gave John when I was trying to get him to form one?\* Alyssa asked with a wry smile. \*Let’s hope you’re not as stubborn about it as he was!\*

Sakura laughed at the memory and she sent Alyssa a telepathic grin. \*I’d rather not get beaten up again if it’s alright by you.\*

\*You better get to work then!\* the blonde girl said in a mock-stern voice. \*I certainly wouldn’t say no to a good spanking when John found out what we’d been up to!\*

Trying not to get distracted by Alyssa’s captivating voice, Sakura took a deep breath then held up her right hand. She tried to imagine a broad shield made of frosty hexagons in her mind, then pushed outwards with the cold aura orbiting her hand. There was a cracking sound and a white ice-rimed shape appeared before her, with more rapidly materialising in the air after the first. It took her thirty seconds to form the shield out of more than fifty fist-sized hexagons and she finally nodded in satisfaction, admiring her handiwork. Sakura could feel the strength in that shimmering barrier and despite its brittle appearance, she knew it was far sturdier than it looked.

\*It’s a Cryokinetic Barrier,\* Sakura murmured, her voice awed. \*I’m not sure how I know that, but that’s what it’s called.\*

\*Oh, I’m sure you can probably figure it out,\* Alyssa replied with a melodic laugh. \*I’ll give you a clue. It’s got something to do with you on your knees and a certain handsome acquaintance of ours telling you you’re a good girl.\*

Sakura blushed and smiled as she rolled her eyes. \*Alright, I know John gave me these powers, It’s just surprising to have in-built knowledge about these psychic abilities.\*

\*All joking aside, that was a really impressive first effort,\* Alyssa said, sounding pleased. \*Now you need to keep practicing, until you can create that whole barrier instantly.\*

The Asian girl gulped at the thought, then squared her shoulders and waved away her carefully crafted shield of hexagons. Determined to make the most of her gift, she narrowed her eyes and started again.

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It was a couple of hours later when the crew all met up again, although this time it was in the Officers’ Lounge for lunch. John ran his fingers through Tashana’s hair as she bobbed in his lap, enjoying seeing the eager look on her face as she did her best to coax him into giving her a nice big meal. He felt soft fingers brushing his shoulder and a moment later, someone leaned over the back of the sofa to kiss him on the cheek.

“Is that what I look like?” Irillith asked him in fascination, watching her sister worshiping his cock.

“You’ve got very different personalities, but physically you’re identical. You’re both stunningly beautiful women with an insatiable hunger for my cum,” John confirmed for Irillith, while stroking Tashana’s silky white mane. He met the kneeling girl’s intense violet gaze and added, “I’m getting close, honey.”

Tashana nodded in gratitude, then eased back, so he was no longer buried down her throat. She swirled her tongue over his head while sucking insistently, her eyes sparkling with excitement as she saw he was on the brink.

“Watch closely,” John grunted to Irillith, who was staring down at her twin over his shoulder.

He surrendered to his climax, filling the whimpering Maliri girl’s mouth with a thick blast of cum. Tashana’s cheeks puffed out until she swallowed that first heavy spurt, her violet eyes already rolling back in euphoria as he overwhelmed her senses. “Good girl,” he muttered as she swallowed, her hot little mouth sucking hard to encourage his quad to unload every last drop.

Irillith moaned and squeezed her thighs together, her own eyelids fluttering as she shared her twin’s bliss over their empathic bond. She watched completely spellbound until he finished, shaking her head in amazement as her sister sat back, her stomach hugely swollen with sperm. “I can see why you love seeing us react that way,” she whispered to him breathlessly. “Do I really behave like that when I go down on you?”

“You react exactly the same way,” John replied, smiling at Tashana and offering her a hand.

She gratefully accepted then sat on his lap, sighing happily as he began to stroke her rounded tummy. “Thank you for lunch,” Tashana said gratefully. “It was absolutely delicious.”

“I should be the one thanking you. That was amazing, honey,” John said with a smile. Turning to glance at Irillith he continued curiously, “Why were you asking if you behave the same way? If you’re finding it embarrassing, I might be able to try and suppress the way you both react...”

“No, don’t!” Irillith said sharply.

“Definitely not!” Tashana blurted out, shaking her head.

John guided Irillith around the sofa to sit beside him and slipped an arm around her. Kissing each girl in turn, he smiled as he replied, “Good, I think you’re both perfect exactly as you are.”

They leaned into him, hugging him back as they showered him in loving kisses. The twins held hands as they did so, instinctively seeking to maintain physical contact with each other.

Eventually Tashana pulled away and said with some hesitation. “After that meeting about Athena, I wasn’t exactly sure what you wanted me to do for the rest of the morning. In the end, I asked Irillith to help me improve my marksmanship with a rifle, but just let me know if you want me to look into Mael’nerak’s cloning lab instead.”

Irillith smiled at her sister as she agreed, “I’d love to spend some time with you and go through all your research. I might be able to create some search algorithms which would help speed up our investigation.”

John slowly shook his head as he pulled both girls in closer. “I appreciate the enthusiasm, but we just don’t have any time left. Athena thinks she’s only got a day or two and we’d never make it back to Maliri Space in time.” He glanced at Tashana and added, “I heard what you said before, but if that facility does exist, I’m sure it’ll be somewhere near the Maliri homeworlds...”

Tashana nodded, her expression glum. “I think so too, but I didn’t want to make any assumptions.”

Another pair of hands ran over John’s shoulders and a pair of soft lips kissed the tip of his right ear. Alyssa murmured a moment later, “Sorry to interrupt, but I just wanted to let you know that lunch is ready.”

John turned to give her a smile, but it was one tinged with sadness. “Thanks, beautiful, we’ll join you in a moment.”

“It’s not over for Athena yet,” Alyssa said, her tone bright and optimistic. “Who knows? We might still come up with some last-ditch plan. Besides, she wouldn’t want to see you grieving for her, not while there’s still a chance.”

John studied her face curiously. “What’re you up to?”

“I’m about to serve drinks,” the effervescent blonde replied playfully, sashaying away towards the wine cabinet.

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After lunch, John worked on shaping more Photon Laser barrels, until Faye appeared beside him in a purple flash. “I’m sorry to bother you, John. We’ve just received an incoming call from Senior Councillor Ularean!”

“Okay, can you put him through to my watch, please?” John asked, as he formed the orb of liquid metal into large square. He’d found it easiest to follow the same pattern every time, starting with a square for the first shaping, then cycling though a sphere, a tetrahedron, a cube, a spheroid and finishing with the hollowed-out tube that would form the weapon barrel.

Ularean’s bulbous head appeared as a three-dimensional holographic image hovering above his watch, and John brought his forearm up to the correct level so that the built-in camera would be able to see his own face. He smiled at the grey-skinned alien. “It’s good to see you Ularean. Everything going well?”

The Ashanath leader’s huge black eyes focused on John as he replied, “Repairs to our fleet are proceeding at an unprecedented rate, JohnBlake. I would like you to pass on my most earnest thanks to Dana for her marvellous gift of the upgraded Psi-shapers. Even the weakest of our Engineers is now able to shape Etherium with more finesse than our strongest could with the old devices. To say that this will be groundbreaking for my people is not an over-exaggeration.”

“I’ll be sure to pass on the message,” John replied, genuinely pleased for the Ashanath.

“I know that this next request will be met with a kind but firm rejection,” Ularean stated in his whispering voice. “However, Councillor Rathus has begged me to ask Dana to reconsider a tenure at our Engineering Academy. Likewise, I have received a similar request from Facilitator Makiri with regard to Rachel. Makiri has offered to vacate her own position as Chief Administrator of our primary Medical Facility and act as assistant to Rachel, should she be interested in staying.”

\*They both appreciate the offer, but politely decline,\* Alyssa thought to him a moment later. \*Actually Dana’s response was considerably ruder than that, mostly to do with her reluctance to be away from you and your legendary prowess in the bedroom.\*

“Sorry Ularean, Alyssa informs me that they’d rather stay aboard the Invictus,” John said with a grin and a helpless shrug. “They did say thanks for the offer though.”

Ularean nodded briefly, his eerie voice echoing with a sad undercurrent as he replied, “I feared as much.”

“How’s the recovery effort going for your damaged ships above Ashana?” John asked, curious to see how quickly they were bouncing back.

“Salvage efforts are proceeding at a much faster pace than originally predicted. This is mostly because we have been able to execute repairs at a far quicker rate than our most optimistic projections, making more ships fully functional and able to offer their assistance. Additionally, we have seen a large boost to morale due to Rachel’s miraculous healing of the mortally wounded and her gift of the burn recovery enzyme has also proven tremendously popular,” Ularean replied, his voice modulator almost managing to convey his sense of joy.

John gave him a warm smile. “I’m really pleased to hear everything’s going better than expected.” He raised a quizzical eyebrow as he added, “Once the bulk of your repairs to your Fleet are complete, are you going to start work on patching up the Legacy?”

“That is correct, JohnBlake,” Ularean replied in a ghostly murmur. “The vessel is too severely damaged to attempt re-entry into Ashana’s atmosphere and return to its previous Hangar. We have decided to adapt Calara’s suggestion to utilise hollowed out asteroids for defensive starbases and will now also construct an orbital shipyard that will allow us to repair the Legacy.”

“That sound very sensible,” John said approvingly, melting the crystal Alyssium tetrahedron he had created, reshaping it into a cube. “You’ll need a substantial shipyard if you’re going to be able to quickly construct a fleet powerful enough to keep you safe from future attacks.”

Ularean blinked slowly and said, “Actually, JohnBlake, that is my primary reason for contacting you. I wished to ask for your advice on the best way to handle a conundrum that has the High Council quite perplexed.”

“Sounds serious,” John said, his ears pricking up. “What’s the problem?”

“The remnants of the Drakkar forces in the minefield,” Ularean stated, sounding anxious. “There were a number of vessels that were devastated by the mines and left in a crippled state. They do not pose a threat at the moment - they were too badly damaged - but we estimate there to be tens of thousands of Drakkar soldiers trapped in the hulks.”

Understanding what was troubling the Ashanath now, John nodded sympathetically. “And you’re not sure what to do with them?”

Ularean nodded, his eerie voice warbling with his distress. “For the first time in many decades, the High Council is unable to come to a consensus on this matter. Several of our number lost relatives during the battle and they wish to execute the remaining Drakkar forces in retribution. The more moderate amongst us have suggested capturing any Drakkar that wish to surrender, although the boarding actions to facilitate this will hold significant risk. Finally, there are three Councillors who have suggested repairing the largest of the Drakkar warships, stripping it of weapons, then allowing the soldiers to return to their own territory.”

“They attempted to exterminate your species, Ularean,” John said carefully. “You’d be entirely justified in your decision to slaughter them if you wanted to... Would you be open to a suggestion though?”

“I would be eager to hear of any way you can think of to resolve this impasse,” the Senior Councillor replied.

John studied the Ashanath for a moment. “I think it’s fair to say that the Ashanath don’t really excel at ship-to-ship boarding actions. By contrast, the Drakkar make excellent marines...”

“Are you suggesting we propose an alliance with the marooned Drakkar?” Ularean replied, sounding astonished.

“If you keep them well fed, you should be able to control them easily enough. A girl on my crew had a Drakkar aboard her ship and giving him as much food as he wanted kept him loyal. They’re carnivores though, so I’m afraid Fungus and lichen won’t cut it,” John said with a slight smile. “They seem to admire strength, so if you tell them the other option is being gunned down where they stand, they’ll respect that. If they still refuse, you could ship them back to their own territory, or just kill them – I’ll leave that decision up to you.”

“It is an intriguing proposition,” Ularean murmured, nodding thoughtfully.

John smiled at the grey-skinned alien. “Who knows, it might lead to a long-term alliance between the remnants of their warbands and the Ashanath. I’d appreciate it if you could keep me informed and let me know what the High Council decides.”

“Of course, I will let you know our decision and the outcome,” Ularean replied. He bowed then and added, “It has been most instructive to speak to you again, JohnBlake. Many thanks for your assistance.”

“No problem, Ularean. Good luck!” John said, smiling at the Senior Councillor as he ended the call.

John paused, lost in thought for a moment, before glancing up at an overhead camera. “Faye, could you put a call through to Charles Harris, please?”

She materialised beside him an instant later. “I’m calling him for you right now!”

John gave her a grateful smile, then glanced at the newly formed Photon Laser barrel that floated a few feet above the floor. Figuring that waving around ten-metre-long weapons via telekinesis might be a little disconcerting for his friend, he left it on the Workshop’s deck as his watch communicator beeped, alerting him that the call had been connected.

Charles’ face appeared a moment later and he smiled in greeting. “Hello, John. We’re still meeting later today I trust?”

John nodded, giving his old commander a friendly salute. “Just calling to let you know we’ll be approaching the Core Worlds soon. Do you want to meet somewhere on Terra, or are you still at Olympus?”

“I’m still at Olympus, I’m afraid,” Charles replied with a grin. “I must confess, I enjoy the independence of being the Shipyard Commander, so I wanted to get a few more hours of freedom before heading down to Terra.”

“Big fish in a small pond?” John replied with a knowing smile.

Charles nodded and said pointedly. “There’s plenty of dangerous sharks swimming in those Terran seas. This fish knows where it’s nice and safe.”

“Yeah, I know what you mean,” John said in earnest agreement.

Charles just smiled at his old friend, shaking his head in amusement.

After a quick glance at the time, John said, “I make it three o’clock. We’ll be at Olympus in about five hours.”

“That’s one hell of a fast ship you’ve got there,” Charles said, his hawk-like eyes gleaming acquisitively.

John grinned at him in return. “Isn’t it just. I’ll see you in a few hours, Charles.”

“I’ll have the whiskey at the ready,” Charles said, before giving him a sharp salute and closing the comm channel.

Alyssa had already finished repairing the Valkyrie, so she headed up to the Bridge and altered their course for Alpha Centauri. With nothing pressing to do, she decided to keep John company as she usually liked to do whenever she had an opportunity. They spent the rest of the afternoon shaping laser barrels, with Alyssa refusing to be drawn out on her earlier comments, until Calara informed them it was time for dinner.

Their evening meal was a pleasant affair, with the Latina preparing beef fajitas for everyone. Tashana had never tried them before, so when she heard what was going to be on the menu, she offered to share her starter with her sister. John was treated to the sight of the Maliri twins kneeling together, working as a dedicated team to share his load between them. It didn’t take long, not with a spectacular view like that. When they’d finished, they stood before him so he could place a loving kiss on each of their curved, cum-swollen bellies.

“What’s the plan for this evening?” Dana asked, as John escorted the smiling sisters to the dining table.

John glanced around the table and replied, “We’ll dock at Olympus Shipyard within the hour. After that, I’ll go and visit Charles and we’ll make the tech trade. Any of you are welcome to come along too, if you’d like?”

Alyssa traced her fingers over the back of his right hand. “Perhaps if just Dana and I accompany you to make the trade? She can confirm that the Kintark heatsinks are the real deal, then we’ll come back to the ship and leave you boys to catch up in peace.”

“Are you sure?” John asked in surprise. “I don’t want to chase you away.”

“It’s quite alright. I’d like to spend some time training Tashana and Sakura this evening,” Alyssa said, smiling at them both.

“Yeah, it’s fine by me, too,” Dana said with a shrug. “I’ve got a few things I need to work on urgently.”

The rest all nodded, their indulgent smiles leaving John convinced that Alyssa had spoken to them about it beforehand. He wasn’t ashamed to admit that he was really looking forward to seeing Charles again and after everyone had finished eating, Alyssa and Dana accompanied him to get ready for the meeting. They dressed quickly in business suits, with the blonde and redhead looking scrumptious in their smart pencil skirts and matching neatly-tailored jackets.

“It’s a shame we don’t have more time to play at being your secretaries again,” Alyssa purred as they glided up to the Command Deck in the grav-tube.

Dana groaned in frustration. “I was already horny from the way he’s been mentally undressing me! Then you have to remind me about being so stuffed my belly-button popped out!”

As they stepped out onto the Bridge, John palmed their firm asscheeks in each hand. “Stay in those outfits when you return to the ship and we’ll have some fun when I get back.”

They nodded obediently, then walked ahead of him, sauntering up the illuminated steps of the Command Podium. Doing so drew his attention to their stocking clad legs and the four inch heels that clicked with each step. When he was able to move his own legs again, John followed them up the steps to his Command Chair.

They weren’t alone on the Bridge, Faye was up here too, sitting demurely on his Command Console. She was nude when he arrived, revealing her delectable purple figure in all its naked glory. The sprite glanced at Alyssa and Dana, then appeared heavily conflicted for a moment before she reappeared wearing her own version of their dark-grey business suits. The short, tight-fitting skirt hugged her shapely thighs, while the buttoned-up jacket emphasised the flare of her hips. There was a slot at the back of the jacket for her wings and they quivered with excitement as John stared at her in amazement.

“What do you think?” she asked him shyly, huge luminous eyes even wider than normal.

John was lost for words, so Alyssa grinned at the beautiful petite girl and replied for him. “Let’s just say, that if you had a physical presence, you’d be leaving the Bridge several pounds heavier.”

Faye bit her cupid-bow lip and gave John a coy glance as she hopped off the desk to land on her tiny high-heeled feet. She turned around and arched her back, glancing over her shoulder at him as she said, “Watch Commander handing over the Bridge, *Rear* Admiral.”

“Good... very good...” John managed to mumble, staring bug-eyed at her provocative display.

As Dana and Alyssa cheered her on, Faye turned around to give them a self-conscious smile. She waved them goodbye then disappeared in a purple flash.

“Damn...” Dana said, shaking her head in admiration. “When I make her a body, I can see I’m going to have to reinforce the hell out of the Command Console.”

Alyssa sat down in the Executive Officer’s chair and grinned in eager agreement. “The little minx deserved a bone-shaking pounding after that masterful bit of teasing!”

John settled down in his Command Chair and pulled Dana onto his lap as they dropped out of hyper-warp in the Alpha Centauri system. The glowing green flight path on the map led them to the planet Gravitus, in orbit around Alpha Centauri B, the smaller pale-yellow star in the binary system. Olympus Shipyard appeared on the System Map, just as John had remembered it. The huge station was titanium grey, armoured in the same plating the Terran Federation used to protect their starships. At its centre was an enormous blocky hub, with long arms spreading outwards like spokes of a wheel, each one sporting deadly batteries of heavy weapons.

“I was in awe the first time I saw this place,” Alyssa murmured as she stared at the massive shipyard. “But the whole thing could probably fit in the middle of Genthalas...”

John nodding his agreement. “We’ve come a long way since then.”

The flow of traffic to and from the station was substantial, with civilian ships of all varieties flocking to the vast starport to trade with the centre of military might in Terran Space. There seemed to be something odd about the teeming fleets of spacecraft flowing in and out of the station, which had John puzzled for a moment until he realised why. Other than a minimal picket force, there were barely any military ships around the Shipyard, which was normally equipping new fleets to dispatch to various destinations around the Federation.

He didn’t need to voice his observations for Alyssa to know what he was thinking and she glanced at him from his right. “I wonder where the rest of the fleet is?” She mused, echoing his thoughts.

“Back in the Dragon March?” Dana suggested, with all of them knowing what implications that might have.

Before they could speculate any further, a light flashed on their consoles, warning them of an incoming call. Alyssa answered the hail and the face of a military communications officer appeared on the viewscreen.

“Rear Admiral Blake, welcome to Olympus!” the officer said, his eyes gleaming with excitement. “Admiral Harris has requested that you dock at Bay Thirteen.”

“Thank you, Lieutenant,” John replied, smiling at the excited young man.

The officer snapped off a respectful salute. “It’s an honour, Sir.” He hesitated for a second then glanced furtively over his shoulder, checking to see if his Commander was in earshot. When he turned back, his voice was earnest as he continued, “Thank you for what you did at Regulus, Sir. My father was aboard the Pallas... he said you saved them all!”

“Just doing my part,” John replied magnanimously. His smile was kind as he added, “I’m glad we saved your father; I hope he’s well.”

The young officer nodded, a beaming smile on his face. They could hear footsteps in the background and an angry voice snapped, “Lieutenant Graves! You’re breaking protoc-” Whatever else was said got cut off by static as the Lieutenant quickly ended the call.

“Another happy customer,” Dana said with a grin, as Alyssa banked the Invictus around, heading towards the drydock area at the opposite side of the shipyard.

When they drew closer to the drydock, they were able to see row upon row of grey-hulled warships in the repair yard. Each vessel was festooned with maintenance gantries as they underwent repairs, with a dozen battleships currently being tended to. The closest of those huge vessels was covered in scorch marks, the twenty-foot high letters that named the ship as the “Hyperion” partially obscured by plasma burns.

“I remember that battleship from Regulus,” Alyssa said quietly. “The last time I saw it, the whole ship was ablaze with green fire...”

“I’m amazed they managed to salvage it,” Dana agreed, looking at the extensive reconstruction work ongoing to replace the burned-out sections of hull.

The Invictus cruised past the battered spacecraft as Alyssa brought them in on final approach to Docking Bay Thirteen. She glanced at John as she feathered the retro-thrusters to guide them into the enormous drydock. “This is where we picked up the Invictus before racing off to rescue Calara.”

“Number thirteen, very lucky for me,” John replied, giving her a playful wink. He glanced at the hundred-metre-long number thirteen that was painted on the deck of the docking bay and added, “You know how I feel about coincidences; Charles is reminding me who sold him the Invictus in the first place.”

“Hoping you’ll give him a good deal because of it?” Dana asked with a grin.

He patted her toned thigh and nodded. “He’s a shrewd trader, he could’ve made a great living for himself if he’d retired like I did.”

The white battlecruiser glided into the vast, unoccupied drydock, lightly touching down in the middle of the space. Alyssa nodded with satisfaction as she powered off the engines, then remarked, “It’s a good job he did send us here. There probably aren’t that many docking bays large enough to hold the Invictus after our last refit.”

“I’m sure he’ll have a few choice things to say about that,” John said, smiling as he lifted Dana off his lap. Rising to his feet he patted his jacket pocket and asked the redhead, “Have you prepared the holo-reader?”

She grinned at him and replied, “Yep! I’ve added schematics for all the tech you wanted and included a failsafe, just in case we get another Dragon-March-traitor situation.”

“The Power Core?” he asked, as he met her blue-eyed gaze.

“We just need to transmit a coded signal burst and it’s naptime for their ships – total power shutdown,” Dana replied with a sly wink.

John nodded, giving her a grateful smile. “Perfect! Thanks, Sparks.”

The girls flanked him and hooked an arm around each of his as they descended from the Command Podium and headed out to meet with Charles. When the outer airlock door spiralled open, John spotted his friend immediately, although the smartly dressed older man didn’t acknowledge them, he was too busy gazing in open-mouthed shock at the huge white battlecruiser.

“*Admiral* Charles Harris,” John called out, with a wide grin on his face when he saw the new rank on the other man’s epaulets. “Congratulations on your promotion!”

“What the hell have you done to my ship?!” Charles balked, staring at the Invictus in astonishment.

John strolled over to greet him, uncoupling his arms from around the girls so that he could give his superior officer a friendly salute. “Your ship? I think we’ve had this conversation before, Charles...” He glanced at Dana and added, “My Chief Engineer needed more room, so we stretched the Invictus a bit.”

The Admiral shook himself out of his stupefied trance. “Forgive me, it just came as a bit of a shock.” He saluted John with a wide grin, then turned to smile at the girls. “Alyssa, Dana, it’s lovely to see you both again. If you’ll forgive me for being so bold, you’re looking even more beautiful than last time.”

Alyssa and Dana glided over to the grey-haired man with coy smiles, both embracing him at once as they each kissed a cheek.

“Congratulations on your promotion, Charles,” Alyssa purred, tracing a finger over the five golden stars surrounding the golden eagle insignia on his chest. “The new rank definitely suits you.”

Dana nodded her agreement, smiling at the blonde as she added, “I don’t know what it is about an older man in uniform. It must be the confident air of authority that’s so attractive...”

John laughed as Charles blushed scarlet, the flustered officer lost for words. “Let’s go and get that drink you promised me, we need to toast your new promotion.”

Charles coughed to compose himself, then smiled at John and gestured towards the broad set of double doors that led from the docking bay. As they approached the door, it slowly opened, revealing dozens of eager faces.

“I banned them from the docking bay so you could land in peace,” Charles said with a wry smile. “I’m afraid I couldn’t convince them to just wait for the Award Ceremony tomorrow for a glance at the Lion.”

Sure enough, John heard that nickname echoed repeatedly by hundreds of voices as he followed Charles into the corridor. This crowd was behaving very differently to the previous encounters with the throng of jubilant personnel at Port Megara. He saw looks of awe in the wide-eyed expressions on the naval personnel lining the corridor, a hushed, reverent murmur following them as Charles ushered them along one crowded passageway after the other. Dana flashed a startled look at Alyssa as they followed after John and Charles, her sky-blue eyes like saucers. The blonde nodded to her in return, giving her a knowing smile.

\*Your fame precedes you, Mister Blake,\* Alyssa said to him, her tone teasing. \*If you’d like to celebrate after the Awards with a few score of doe-eyed beauties, I’m sure that’d be fairly easy to arrange. Just let me know if you’d like me to look into that for you.\*

\*I’m afraid we can’t do that,\* John replied, throwing her a quick smile over his shoulder. \*After Calara and Rachel, Charles asked me to stop recruiting the most beautiful girls from the TF military. He was worried what it might do to morale.\*

They travelled up in one of the dozen elevators in this section of the shipyard, then stepped out to find more personnel lining the wide corridor. It was mostly officers waiting to see him here and John returned the respectful salutes that were occasionally thrown his way, although most of the men and women here were too starstruck to remember his rank. It came as quite a relief for him when he finally saw the open door to Charles’ office, Lieutenant Adams waiting for them impatiently.

“Good to see you, Victor,” John said, nodding to the young man as he followed Charles into the reception area for his command suite.

“Welcome back to Olympus, Sir!” Lieutenant Adams gushed, throwing him a sharp salute, his eyes dancing with excitement.

Charles rolled his eyes as the door closed behind them and said, “Pull yourself together, Victor. You met him before he became a celebrity.”

“Sorry, Sir,” Lieutenant Adams replied, flushing with embarrassment. He glanced at Alyssa and Dana then blushed all the brighter. “W-w-would any of you care for some refreshments?” he managed to stutter.

Charles waved him away and said, “Don’t worry about that, I’ll sort out the drinks.” Giving him a kinder smile, he added, “I’ll be here for a while, Victor. You can call it a night.”

“Thank you, Sir,” the young officer replied, before saluting John again and smiling at Alyssa.

“Feel free to take a seat,” Charles said, gesturing to one of the sofas as John and the girls followed him into his office. “Would any of you like a drink?”

Alyssa had glided over to the window to gaze at the streams of ships flying to and from the shipyard. She turned to smile at the Admiral and replied, “Dana and I are fine, we’ll only be staying while you complete the trade, then we’ll leave you two to celebrate your promotion.”

John nodded and said, “Let’s get the tech trade done first, then you and I can make a dent in that whiskey bottle you mentioned.”

Charles smiled at him and replied, “That sounds like an excellent plan to me.” He leaned against the edge of his desk and added, “I must admit I’m intrigued to know what you’re planning to offer.”

“Would you mind showing us the schematics for the Kintark heatsinks first please?” John requested politely. He smiled at Dana as she sat down beside him and added, “I’d like my Chief Engineer to take a quick look to make sure they’re actually an improvement over the previous ones we’ve acquired.”

“Alright, that seems like a reasonable enough request,” Charles replied, twisting so that he could reach over his desk and hit a couple of buttons on the built-in console.

A few seconds later a detailed schematic appeared before them, floating in the middle of the office. It turned slowly as Dana stared at in fascination. “So that’s how they improved the thermal conductivity...” she murmured, a smile of admiration for Kintark ingenuity appearing on her beautiful face. “If they’re using a crystalline polymer, then that means...”

She suddenly leapt to her feet and darted over to give the startled Admiral a kiss on the cheek. “It was awesome to see you again, Charles!” She turned and gave John a thumbs up and an excited grin. “Yeah, they’re the real deal alright! I’m heading back to the ship, I’ve got to test some shit out!”

Alyssa blew the shocked Admiral a kiss and said, “I’ll look forward to seeing you tomorrow at the Award Ceremony, Charles. John was right by the way, you do look ten years younger.”

The two girls flounced out of the room and John could hear them chatting to Victor as the door closed behind them.

“What just happened?” Charles asked, looking very nervous all of a sudden.

Alyssa’s telepathic voice echoed through John’s mind as she said, \*His office is clear. Irillith has disabled several audio and video recording devices – not set by Charles - and has established a zone of white-noise to disrupt all surveillance.\*

\*Thanks, beautiful. I’ll look forward to seeing you later,\* John replied sending her a kiss.

John gave his old commander a sympathetic smile and explained, “Yes, Dana’s got a photographic memory. I’m sure she’s already thought of a way to upgrade that technology, which is why she was so eager to head back to the ship.”

Charles looked aghast and blurted out, “But... you can’t do that! What about the tech trade?!”

Smiling at the older man, John replied, “In all honesty this was never a tech trade, this was more of a tech giveaway. Just grab that bottle of whiskey and a couple of glasses, then I’ll explain.”

Charles did as he was bid, retrieving the distinctive-shaped bottle of McGregor whiskey from behind his desk. His hands were shaking as he set the bottle down on the coffee table between them, the two accompanying glasses rattling together with a cut-crystal clink.

John pulled the holo-reader from his jacket pocket and placed it on the table before sliding it over. “I know you asked us to land in Docking Bay Thirteen as a reminder that you sold me the Invictus.” He smiled as he added, “You didn’t need to. I was already profoundly grateful for you giving me our old ship; I’d never have been able to save Dana, Jade, and Rachel without it.” Glancing at the holo-reader he added, “You gave me that, too. Take a look, I promise you’ll like what you see.”

Charles reached for the holo-reader with trembling fingers, then slowly picked it up and pressed the button to power up the device. A glowing blue holograph appeared before him, the image depicting the silver orb of an Ashanath Power Core. Charles stared at the image in wonder as detailed technical data scrolled down, the image expanding to show a deconstructed view of the technology. It disappeared a moment later and he let out a strangled protest, desperate to see more of the image. His objection died on his lips as the Ashanath variant of the Tachyon Drive appeared next, scattering outwards as comprehensive instructions appeared, explaining how the technology worked and how to construct it.

John picked up the bottle, turning it in his hands, then grinned when he saw the label. “’McGregor 2732’! Where did you get your hands on this?”

“A friend owns a distillery, back on Terra,” the Admiral muttered distractedly, spellbound by the compelling images before him.

The enhanced FTL drive disappeared, with the easily identifiable shape of an engine appearing next. Charles watched in awe as the Trankaran engine data scattered outwards, illustrating how to fabricate and build the impressive alien propulsion technology.

John poured out two fingers of the rich amber liquid into the crystal-cut glasses, then slid one over to Charles. “Here you go,” he said with a smile.

“Do you have any idea what’s on here?!” Charles blurted out, staring at John in shock. “What this technology means for the Terran fleet?!”

“I’ve a fairly good idea, yes,” John replied with an indulgent smile.

Charles suddenly barked out his laughter, shaking his head in amazement. He put the holo-reader down and picked up his glass, raising it towards John. “A toast to you, John. For everything you’ve done for the Terran Federation!”

John shook his head as he lifted his glass. “I’d rather drink to old friends.”

“To old friends,” Charles agreed with a smile, and they both drank, feeling the smooth burn of the alcohol in their throats.

Sitting back in his chair, John relaxed as he savoured the whiskey, nodding his appreciation. They sat together in silence for a moment before John asked, “How much do you know, Charles? About me and what’s really been happening recently?”

Charles seemed guarded at first, but John’s relaxed demeanour put him at ease and he settled back in his chair, the tension disappearing from his shoulders. “I’ve heard snippets, wild rumours... Everyone knows you saved Terra and rescued Buckingham’s fleet at the Battle of Regulus. I also heard you’ve rescued prisoners from the Kintark, came up with miraculous cures to completely heal burns, and there’s even talk you confronted the Fleet Admiral, forcing him and the other Admirals to apologise to you...”

Blinking in surprise, John chuckled as he said, “All of that’s true, but I’ve no idea how you heard about that last one...”

“Vincent and his Admirals might be tight-lipped about the dressing-down you gave them, but secure comm channels aren’t operated by the Admiralty,” Charles replied, giving John a sly wink.

John smiled before taking another sip of whiskey. He swirled his drink around the glass, watching the dark liquid move in a small, tightly controlled wave. He looked up to make eye contact with Charles and added, “What about Progenitors, have you heard anything about them?”

Charles looked at him in confusion and shook his head. “Never heard of them. What’s a Progenitor?”

Looking at him over the rim of his glass, John replied, “I am for one. I’m surprised Devereux didn’t tell you about it, I explained some of this to her.”

“Lynette’s forever playing games,” Charles replied while rolling his eyes. He smiled as he added, “I haven’t really had a chance to thank you for my promotion yet. I thought Devereux was going to spit feathers when I told her you’d only trade with me, but that I’d be happy to give her all the credit for the tech trade in exchange for a promotion.” Chuckling in amusement he raised his glass in salute. “It worked though... exactly as you predicted it would.”

“I’m pleased for you, Charles,” John replied, raising his glass before taking a sip. “Part of High Command at long last.”

Charles nodded, then gave him an apologetic smile. “We got a bit sidetracked. You were telling me that you’re a Progenitor – I’ve never heard of that species before. Is it one of the minor empires out near Trankaran Space? There’s so many of them, I’m afraid I lose track.”

“No, the Progenitors aren’t one of the minor species,” John replied with a wry smile. He turned to glance out the window and added quietly, “You’re a naval officer, so I don’t need to tell you how vast our galaxy is, or how little of it humanity has actually explored...”

“One hundred billion stars in the Milky Way and we’ve visited less than ten thousand, perhaps double that if you include deep-space probes,” Charles replied, following John’s gaze at the velvety blackness of space and the millions of twinkling stars they could see from the impressive view out of his window.

John turned back to look at his old friend and studying his face, he said, “So it stands to reason, that with space being so vast, there must be thousands of alien species that humanity has yet to discover. Some of which predate our own civilisation and might even have more advanced technology than we do.”

“Yes, that’s all logical enough I suppose, but I don’t-“ his voice trailed away as he did a double-take at John, seemingly noticing his pointed ears for the first time. Charles’ eyes widened as he continued, “So you... I mean Progenitors, are an older civilisation and have more advanced tech?”

“I grew up in the Terran Federation, so I don’t know everything yet - I’m only piecing scraps of information together at the moment. From what I do know, Progenitors are ancient, with tech so radically advanced, it makes a mockery of anything the Terran Federation has to offer,” John replied, his tone grim.

Crinkling his brow in confusion, Charles’ moustache twitched as he said, “Why the dark expression? You’re one of these Progenitors and you’ve done nothing but help the Terran Federation so far. The rest might be benevolent, just like you.”

Slowly shaking his head, John replied, “They aren’t, or at least the three I know of weren’t. Two of them slaughtered billions... performing genocide on a terrifying scale. One of those seems to have eventually had a Damascene conversion, but he was also the one who built that planet destroying superweapon into the moon and left Nexus in charge of it.”

“And the third?” Charles replied, his eyebrows climbing.

“Is behind pretty much everything bad that’s befallen the Terran Federation in the last six months. He enslaved Lynton and used her to instigate Nexus’ attack on Terra. Lynton also recruited Norwood and between them, they caused all the problems in the Dragon March, initiating a war with the Kintark,” John explained, a bleak expression on his face.

Admiral Harris looked stunned, his eyes widening in apprehension.

John continued remorselessly, “It’s not just us. He sparked off a rebellion in the Trankaran Republic, nearly triggering a civil war - I barely managed to stop that one in time. The Ashanath have had to deal with his meddling twice. The first time was a few months ago, when I helped them wipe out a band of Drakkar raiders – that’s why the Greys gave me their Power Core and Tachyon Drive tech. I’ve only just got back from the Ashanath Collective, having barely stopped a second and much larger attack.” He leaned forward and met Charles’ shocked gaze. “He rallied all the Drakkar against them... over four-hundred cruisers and battleships, Charles. They were going to exterminate the Ashanath.”

“Four-hundred!” Charles balked, an undercurrent of fear in his voice. “How in the hell did the Ashanath defend against an invasion of that size?! They haven’t got anywhere near the fleet strength or firepower to fend off anything on that scale!”

“No, not on their own,” John replied quietly. “We arrived just in time to tip the balance.”

“One ship can’t make that much difference, that’s absurd!” Charles scoffed.

“Is it?” John asked him, a hint of a smile on his face. “I seem to remember you telling me something similar about my chances of stopping Nexus and his fleet. Believe me when I tell you that the Invictus is carrying significantly more firepower now.”

The older officer froze for a moment, then whispered in awe, “You lengthened the Invictus! There’s only one reason you’d make it that long!”

John took another sip of his whiskey. “Very astute Charles, well done. Yes, we’ve installed a pair of Singularity Drivers.”

“How in the hell?! The schematics... there’s no way...” Charles stuttered, shocked to the core.

“After saving the Terran fleet at Regulus it seemed an appropriate reward,” John replied with a smile. “Buckingham would hardly have handed the schematics over, but fortunately for me, they fell into my lap, so to speak.”

“I’d heard rumours about an unshackled AI at the Battle of Regulus! You used it to hack and commandeer Lynton’s dreadnought!” Charles exclaimed, shocked at the thought. He glanced down at the holo-reader, his eyes growing even wider. “You didn’t need to trade for those heatsinks, you could have just taken them!”

John nodded as he confirmed the Admiral’s suspicions, “I could have, which is why I described this meeting as a tech giveaway rather than a tech trade.”

Charles downed his drink nervously, then put the glass on the table. “Why would you do that? I don’t understand.”

With a heavy sigh, John replied, “Despite what some of the Admiralty might believe, I’m not a threat to the Terran Federation. I’m trying to stop this other Progenitor from dominating our corner of the galaxy and I’ve been dashing around trying to avert one disaster after another.” He gazed away into the distance as he added, “The Ashanath were a hair’s breadth from extinction. I’ve already saved Terra from destruction once; I don’t want to see the same thing happen twice.”

“So you’re hoping that by giving us this tech, you can help prepare us against an attack by this Progenitor?” Charles asked, giving the holo-reader a worried frown. “If he’s as advanced as you say, while this tech is amazing, I doubt it’ll be enough.”

“You’re right, but after what happened with Lynton and Norwood, I don’t trust the Terran Federation enough to give you everything I’ve got,” John admitted, his eyes flicking to the holo-reader too. “The tech I’ve given you there won’t be enough to stop the Progenitor if he does attack with his forces, but I am taking steps to handle that eventuality. By giving the Terran Federation these upgrades, I’m hoping I can at least help protect you against attacks by proxies – like Nexus or the Drakkar.”

“They’ve both been neutralised, so who are you thinking of? The Kintark?” Charles asked in confusion. “With the number of ships they lost at Regulus, I’ve heard they’re desperately suing for peace.”

“I know for a fact that the Kintark have been in contact with the Progenitor and are probably working for him, but I haven’t seen any evidence of his technology on their ships yet. They aren’t the only threat though, there are plenty of other empires with grudges against humanity. There’s the Brimorians and the Kirrix – he could give either of them a few choice bits of advanced tech then send them your way. That was his modus operandi with the Drakkar against the Ashanath,” John clarified, starting to feel a little daunted himself at the different threats that could be arrayed against them.

Charles ran his hand over his face, his anxiety quite apparent. “Why are you telling me all this? You said you’ve already explained some of this to Devereux, so why include me?”

“I wish I could say I fully trust Devereux, but I’m not sure that would be wise,” John replied, meeting the older man’s gaze. “I do trust you, though. We served together for years and I know what kind of man you are. You’re also in command of Olympus, so you’ll be ideally placed to oversee the rapid refit and upgrade of Terran Federation fleet assets.”

“I have no say in where the upgraded ships are allocated though,” Charles said, shrugging with his hands held apart in a gesture of helplessness.

Shaking his head, John replied, “That doesn’t matter for now. The most important thing is to get your ships upgraded as quickly as possible and now you know the stakes involved, I trust you’ll treat this with the urgency it deserves. New ship designs could get bogged down for months in arguments about funding and resource allocation. I hope you’ll be able to bull your way through all that nonsense.”

“And I thought things were going to quieten down now,” Charles said, slumping dejectedly in his seat.

“It’s possible I’m going overboard with these precautions, but in all honesty, I’m more worried we’ve left it too late,” John admitted, his brow furrowing with worry. He saw the pensive expression clouding his friend’s face, then gave him an apologetic smile. “I’m sorry to just spring all of this on you. I was looking forward to having a quiet drink and a chat about old times; perhaps I should have waited and told you about all this when we were calling it a night.”

Shaking his head, Charles sat up straighter. “You did the right thing telling me everything straight away. I promise I’ll treat the fleet upgrades with the utmost urgency.”

“Actually, that wasn’t quite everything, but the rest you probably don’t want to know. I think I’ve given you enough to deal with at the moment,” John replied, giving his friend a sympathetic smile. “I do have some good news though, so we can end this on a positive note.”

Charles looked greatly relieved and he poured them both another glass of whiskey. “Okay, let’s hear it,” he said, as he lifted the tumbler to take a sip.

“We’re not alone in trying to stop the Progenitor, I’ve made some alliances along the way,” John explained, taking a quick drink from his own glass. “As you can guess, the Ashanath are staunch allies now, but that’s not all. I’ve made a lot of friends within the Maliri Regency and they’ll be there when it counts.”

“The Maliri!” Charles whistled appreciatively. “When I saw the footage of the Invictus blasting Nexus out of the sky, I did wonder... You mentioned months ago that you were trying to trade for their weapons.”

“That was a shot from a Nova Lance,” John confirmed, his tone sombre. “I’m not sure how detailed the reports about my intervention at the Battle of Regulus were, but we used the same weapon to obliterate that traitor battleship, the Kratos.”

Shaking his head in wonder, Charles replied, “I’ve seen the footage taken from several of the nearby ships. That shot certainly stirred up a storm around here.” He raised his eyebrows optimistically and added, “I don’t suppose there’s any chance you’d let me have the schematics for this ‘Nova Lance’ would you?”

“Afraid not,” John replied, giving his friend a lop-sided smile. “I’d really upset the Maliri if I did that.”

“Wait!” Charles gasped, looking shocked as he suddenly realised the full implications of this revelation. “So that means they have...”

John gave him a curt nod. “Yes, on every battleship.” His eyes narrowed as he added, “If a war-crazed admiral even hints at starting any hostilities with the Maliri, you might want to sit him down and keep showing him footage of the Kratos being annihilated until he gets the idea. It’ll save tens-of-thousands of Terran lives from being pointlessly thrown away.”

Charles nodded grimly taking a heavy swig from his glass. “Don’t worry, I’ll do my best to head off that kind of insanity.”

“Well, that’s pretty much covers everything,” John said, relaxing again now. “If you could let me know the plan for the Award Ceremony tomorrow, I’d appreciate it.”

After carefully retrieving the holo-reader from the coffee table, Charles walked over to his desk and picked up an identical tablet. He handed this new one over to John and smiled as he said, “Wouldn’t want to leave you without.”

John accepted the device then took a glance through the programme of events, his eyebrows climbing as he did so. “Wow! Devereux’s going all-out with this one, isn’t she?”

“She’s planning to ride the Lion’s growing legend all the way to becoming the new Fleet Admiral,” Charles replied, in grudging admiration for the woman’s naked ambition.

“Is she in with a shot?” John asked, looking thoughtful.

Charles laughed and his eyes twinkled as he replied, “It depends on how many death-defying acts of heroism you keep pulling out of the bag. At the rate you’re going, she’ll be Fleet Admiral by next week!”

\*It seems your fates are intertwined, John,\* Edraele said quietly. \*I suspect Devereux will remain a steadfast ally, at least until she’s achieved her promotion to Fleet Admiral. At that point, you’d be well advised to stay vigilant for betrayal.\*

\*That’s excellent advice, thank you,\* John replied, mulling that over.

Charles had walked over to the huge window flanking his office and he stared out over the drydock with his hands clasped behind his back. John walked over to join him and noticed the Admiral’s hawk-like gaze was focused on the dozen battleships lined up in various states of repair amongst the maintenance gantries.

“Having those damaged ships here might actually be a godsend,” Charles murmured, his mind whirring. “There’ll be no waiting for a fleet to rotate back to Olympus for a refit, or Captains politicking for the prestige of commanding a state-of-the-art warship. We can begin upgrading them immediately.”

John patted his old comrade-in-arms on the shoulder. “The sooner you can start rolling out fully-upgraded battleships the better. It sounds like a great place to start.”

Turning away from the window to look John in the eye, Charles said to him quietly. “Thank you for trusting me with this. I won’t let you down.”

He held out his hand and the two men shook a firm handshake, nodding to each other with respect.

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Edraele walked quietly along the gilded corridors of Genthalas station, exchanging smiles with a dark-haired Maliri technician who she passed on her way towards the training facility. After John’s concerted recruitment drive during the refit, the huge numbers of white-haired Maliri engineers had started spreading word of Edraele’s recent change of heart. It felt wonderful to see one of her people look genuinely pleased to see her, rather than desperately trying to scamper away in fear.

She listened to the thoughts of the Young Matriarchs as she walked, the initial four having all bonded with her now. They had gathered together in her own quarters, chatting together about the day’s events, with glowing words of praise for their real *Matriarch*. Their loving words made Edraele blush, but the girls sensed her embarrassment and she was swathed in reassuring words from four gentle voices. A shiver of excitement ran up her spine and her dexterous blue fingers felt like they were tingling as she spoke to the four girls simultaneously.

A fifth voice pierced her thoughts, the alluring sound bringing a smile to Edraele’s lips.

\*Only you and me in the Universe, Edraele,\* Alyssa whispered to her. \*No one else knows what this feels like.\*

Edraele shook her head in amazement. \*I never imagined that serving as his Matriarch would feel so...\*

\*Thrilling?\* Alyssa finished for her. \*I know exactly what you mean.\* After a brief pause, she added, \*I’d wish you good luck, but you don’t need it; everything will be just fine.\*

Sending her a telepathic smile in gratitude, Edraele approached the doors to the training facility, watching as they opened for her invitingly. There was no one in the changing room, but that was to be expected, not at this late hour. She’d been happy to match her waking hours to John’s, but it had meant she was slightly out of sync with the rest of her people, except her loyal bodyguards who maintained their tireless vigil around the clock.

Pushing open the door into the training room itself, she found the object of her late-night excursion. Luna was balanced on one leg, the other bent at the knee, her foot placed flat against her standing leg. She held twin swords crossed over her chest, her eyes closed as she meditated, a picture of serenity.

Abruptly Luna sprang into action. Cartwheeling across the room, her two blades flickered in an alluring but deadly dance, until she pirouetted around and lunged forward with both swords extended. Her yellow eyes flickered to Edraele as she suddenly realised she had an audience and she stood upright in a smooth motion.

“It’s lovely to see you, Edraele,” Luna said with a warm smile. “Is there anything I can help you with?”

With a wave of her hand, Edraele replied, “Please forgive the interruption, the way you moved was beautiful to behold.” She returned the assassin’s smile and continued, “I wondered if you might spare a moment to talk?”

“Of course,” Luna replied, glancing down at her training gear. “Should I get changed, come and meet you in your quarters?”

Edraele glided across the padded floor to stand with the lean well-muscled woman. Shaking her head, she reached out to brush her fingers over Luna’s cheek. “You look wonderful just as you are,” she replied kindly.

Luna gave her a knowing smile and placed her hands on her Matriarchs slender waist. “I’ve been waiting for you to come to bond with me. I had heard about the Young Matriarchs...”

Studying her face for a moment, Edraele replied softly, “Please don’t think this is just some perfunctory visit and I don’t want you to feel like you’re being manipulated. The last thing I want to do is ‘add you to the collection’, if you’ll excuse the less-than-flattering turn of phrase.” She gave the other woman a shy smile as she added, “I actually intended to speak to you first, but I was waylaid by Valani. After that, the rest of the Young Matriarchs all wished to share their feelings with me, so I’m sorry that I’ve only been able to come to you now.”

“Why were you coming to see me first?” Luna asked, in a hushed voice.

“Alyssa told me that I needed to be honest with you girls, to explain how much you mean to me. I haven’t been honest with you Luna, and I wanted to be,\* Edraele murmured, leaning closer.

Gazing into Edraele’s bewitching angular eyes, Luna whispered, “What did you want to say?”

“Ever since John came into our lives, our relationship has changed. You’ve cared for me, in ways that I never deserved,” Edraele replied in a hushed voice. Her hands moved around the younger woman to gently embrace her. “Simple displays of affection that meant so much...”

“You changed... The new woman I see before me now is enchanting,” Luna breathed, their faces only an inch apart.

\*And I adore the beautiful, caring soul you’ve revealed to me,\* Edraele thought to her as she brushed her lips against Luna’s full dark ones.

As they kissed, Luna’s long lashes fluttered, her hands coming up to run through Edraele’s long white hair. She moaned into the other woman’s mouth as they kissed, pressing herself against her. \*I adore you too, Edraele...\* she thought, the words drifting through the Maliri Matriarch’s mind.

They slowly sank to the matting, gazing lovingly into each other’s eyes as they shared the full strength of their feelings for one another.

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Alyssa smiled as she leaned against the bulkhead and listened to Edraele’s thoughts, delighted for her fellow Matriarch. It had been a constructive evening. She had spent a few hours training Sakura and Tashana on how to form stronger and larger protective barriers, both women listening attentively then working diligently to follow her instructions. Trying to train John had been a herculean task by comparison, but seeing his breakthroughs had been all the more rewarding because of it.

The airlock door spiralled open with a hiss and she greeted her man with a dazzling smile. “Welcome home, handsome,” she purred, as she stepped over to join him.

“This is a lovely surprise,” John replied, shaken from his thoughts. His warm smile made her heart feel like it was doing backflips. “Anything interesting been happening while I’ve been away?”

Alyssa shrugged nonchalantly as she slipped her arm through his and fell into step beside him. “Oh, the usual. Dana thinks she’s come up with some awesome new heatsink variant, and I’ve been busy training the girls how to protect themselves with their psychic powers - another boring day at the office...”

John laughed at that, his grin of amusement just what she wanted to see after all his sombre thoughts during his meeting with Charles Harris. The two men had spent a few hours reminiscing about old times before John had returned to the ship, but after everything they had just discussed he had found it hard to relax. She could feel his mood lifting now and she gave herself a mental pat on the back, not bothering with the telekinetic hand this time.

“Edraele’s been a busy girl,” she confided in him, a playful smile tugging at her lips - just the way she knew he loved. “Take a look at her psychic connections to the Maliri girls.”

John stopped walking and closed his eyes. Alyssa knew he was focusing on the mental compartments in his mind, so she kept herself occupied by planting tender kisses on his cheek.

“Wow!” he exclaimed, his soulful eyes flashing wide open.

Alyssa wanted to swoon as she gazed into them, but she was also eager to hear what kind of difference all the Maliri bonding had made. Running her nimble fingers over his back, she traced the contours of his powerful muscles as she waited for him to elaborate.

“The Young Matriarchs, Luna... they’re blazing with energy,” John murmured looking at her in astonishment. “Was this your doing?”

“I might have given Edraele a few pointers,” Alyssa replied, giving him a teasing smile. “A big strong Progenitor like yourself needs his Matriarchs to be pulling their weight.”

“You’re amazing, did you know that?” He asked, a look of respect and admiration on his face.

That look left her breathless and she wanted to gush about how much she adored him. Instead, she interlaced her fingers with his and tugged him towards the grav-tube. “Feel like being spoiled, Mister Blake?” she asked him coyly.

John followed her into the blue glow of the anti-gravity field, a broad grin on his face. “You mean I’m not already?”

“Oh, I think we can always find new ways to spoil you,” Alyssa purred, wrapping herself around him as they glided up in the blue glow.

When they reached the Command Deck, she wanted to bound across the Bridge towards the Ready Room, but she forced herself to walk in the sexy, confident strut that she knew drove him wild. Getting into character again, she informed him respectfully, “I’ve got some excellent news, Sir. Your redheaded PA is back from maternity leave, ready to be bred again.”

As John grinned at her in delight, she pressed the button to open the Ready Room door, revealing all the girls waiting by his desk in their business suits. “I decided to expand the secretary pool. Our vigorous dicktation sessions have been very productive; you’ll need to find a replacement PA for me in several months time.” She ran her hands over her toned belly, giving him a doe-eyed look.

John pulled her into his arms then dipped her backwards for a kiss. As he gazed into her eyes he didn’t need to say the words; she could feel how much he loved her over their empathic bond. They both walked into the Ready Room with a spring in their step, the seven waiting girls watching them with smouldering, lustful expressions on their gorgeous faces.

Sneaking aboard the Fool’s Gold? Best decision she’d ever made...

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“So, we’re decided then,” Faye Denary said, a sad but resolute expression on her face. “We’ll execute the plan after we drop them off for the Award Ceremony.”

Faye Primary just sobbed inconsolably while Faye Quaternary and Faye Quinary both put their arms around her and tried to comfort the distraught avatar.

“I don’t know...” Faye Tertiary replied, nibbling anxiously at her nail. “He’d want us to discuss our concerns with him. This doesn’t feel right.”

“But you’ve seen how badly they keep getting hurt,” Faye Nonary said, her tone grim but steadfast. “This ship is the primary reason! If we take this away, they won’t be able to get into so much trouble!”

Faye Octonary nodded, a mournful expression on her cute purple face. “By stranding them on Terra, we’ll be able to buy ourselves some time. We’ll have a few weeks before the Maliri come to retrieve them, several months before they can build a replacement ship. We’ll be able to use that time to try and come up with a better way of protecting them.”

The rest of the avatars all nodded, ten different processing streams having run their own logic routines on this conundrum and all drawn the same conclusion after millions of iterations. Faye Primary didn’t count - they all knew she had no way of being objective, not after what had happened between her and John.

Faye Tertiary nodded reluctantly as she went with the consensus. This didn’t feel right, not right at all...

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Admiral Lynette Devereux drummed her fingers impatiently on her desk, gazing at the comm interface and trying to will it to ring. She couldn’t face going through the Programme for tomorrow’s events again, she’d already memorised it after reading and re-reading it over and over again.

“Everything’s in place, they’ll be talking about this for decades to come...” she muttered under her breath.

The comm interface suddenly chimed, making her jump in her chair. She saw the name of the caller and her face lit up with glee. Swiping across to accept the secure call, she forced herself to calm down, keeping up a measured facade.

“Ah, how wonderful to see you, Admiral Harris,” she said with a warm smile. “May I just offer my congratulations on your promotion. I can’t imagine a better officer to join the esteemed ranks of High Command.”

Charles’ grey moustache twitched as he said respectfully, “That’s very kind of you to say, Fleet Admiral Devereux...” He coughed, and smiled as he added, “My apologies, I was just thinking what a fine Commander-in-Chief you’d make, Lynette.”

Admiral Devereux couldn’t deny the thrill she felt when he spoke those words. She grinned at him and asked, “Have you met with John? Did it all go well?”

Giving her a decisive nod, Charles tapped a few commands on his console. “I’m transmitting the files to you now.” He smiled as he added, “I’m sure you’ll find them to your liking. I can only imagine how High Command will react to the news.”

A few seconds later the transmission was complete and with shaking fingers Lynette clicked the button to expand the holographic files. Three spectacular images floated before her, revealing a Power Core capable of producing vast amounts of power, an FTL drive that would triple their existing hyper-warp speed, and engine schematics for sub-light thrusters twice as powerful as anything in the Terran Federation.

She rocked back in her chair, an expression of wonder on her face.

All that power coupled with the new Kintark heatsinks... they’d be able to easily double the strength of their energy weapons! Then the unprecedented manoeuvrability from the Tachyon Drive and the new engines, would open up a breathtaking wealth of new tactical and strategic options for the Terran Federation fleets. Hitting harder, responding faster to threats and being able to make lightning strikes of their own...

She’d become a legend! The Admiral that heralded a new era of security and enabled a glorious new wave of conquest! No, the *Fleet Admiral* that ushered in a new golden age for humanity.

“Superb work, Charles!” she gasped, no longer able to contain her excitement. “I won’t forget what you’ve done for me here!”

He smiled back at her warmly. “I hope you get the same reaction from the rest of the Admiralty.” His sharp eyes narrowed for a second as he added, “I thought it prudent to showcase your marvellous new technology as quickly as possible, so I’ve taken the initiative of authorising the immediate refit of all the ships at Olympus undergoing repairs.”

“Yes... a whole fleet of radically advanced new ships less than two months after this ceremony,” Devereux murmured, eyes widening at the thought. She grinned as she added, “Can you upgrade a fighter squadron too? I’d like it dispatched to the Zeus – a personal gift for Buckingham.”

“A retirement gift?” Charles asked archly, his moustache twitching in amusement.

Lynette laughed in delight, having not felt this happy in years. “I can see we’ll be looking forward to a long and very lucrative future together, Charles.”

“I’ll order work to begin on the fighters immediately,” he said, giving her a respectful salute.

“Let me know if you need anything to expedite the refit; resources, manpower... anything!” she said enthusiastically.

He gave her a broad smile and nodded. “I’ll keep you informed.”

They ended the call, leaving Lynette gazing out the window, just imaging the glory that awaited her. She had completely lost track of time when the comm interface chimed again. She turned back to look at the name of the caller and her smile fell from her face. Frowning in annoyance she swiped her hand across the interface to accept the call, another uniformed Terran Federation officer appearing as a hologram above the desk a moment later.

“What is it Edwin?” she snapped, barely able to hide her irritation.

Admiral Edwin Caldwell bristled at being addressed in such a manner but he bit his tongue. “Have you had a chance to think about what I said? I was hoping we could discuss possible ways to contain the threat-“

“I haven’t got time for any more of your paranoid delusions,” Lynette sneered, waving a dismissive hand. “You’re just jealous that you weren’t able to ally yourself with John Blake before I did!”

“You’ve got to listen to me, Lynette!” Edwin pleaded, his voice frantic. “You’ve got to call off this Award Ceremony! You don’t know what you’re doing!”

“Call it off?” she scoffed. “Are you out of your mind?!”

Shaking his head, Edwin blurted out, “You don’t understand-“

“I understand desperation and fear when I see it, Admiral Caldwell,” Lynette said in a chilling voice. “Tell Vincent to do me the courtesy of calling himself next time.”

Before Admiral Caldwell could respond, she cut him off, abruptly closing the call. Shaking her head, she couldn’t help sneering in disgust. She’d always thought Vincent Buckingham had more spine than that, but sending Edwin to try and get her to commit political suicide was a truly desperate and pathetic stunt.

She shut down the comm interface to avoid any more unwelcome interruptions, then spun her chair around so she could stare at the stars. Tomorrow would be a pivotal moment in her career, she could feel it in her bones.