Three Square Meals Ch. 60 - part 1

The shadowy figure crawled out of the sarcophagus, and took a deep breath before exhaling fully, efficiently clearing its lungs of the musty tasting air from cryostasis. It then performed a complex set of stretches, limbering up its body and preparing for action. It was a routine it had performed four-hundred-and-thirty-two times before, starting each mission in exactly the same way. Collecting the tools of its trade from the racks on the wall, the black clad assassin sheathed them about its person, then padded over to the pilot's chair in the cockpit and sank into the seat.

The console appeared inert and seemingly lifeless, but the assassin reached for a hidden button on the black surface, feeling for the familiar curves by touch alone. Pressing the button, an insubstantial holographic image suddenly appeared, floating above the console as it took shape, and casting a blue light across the darkened cockpit. After a second of static, the image coalesced into the familiar face of Master Amatsu Mikaboshi, sitting regally in his gothic throne.

He leaned forward, and smiling wickedly he said, "If you are viewing this recording, Shinatobe, the time of reckoning for my elusive quarry is at hand." Reaching out to his side, he pressed a button on the armrest of his throne, and a second image appeared, showing a man with pointed ears. "This is your target. Further information has been included in your mission debrief. You are to execute mission classification two-oh-seven. "

The recording ended as abruptly as it had started, and although this was not a live feed, the assassin replied by rote in almost indecipherable murmur, "Hai, Idaina-sha."

Reaching for a tiny data-jack port on the console, Shinatobe slid back a panel from their wrist, uncovering wrist mounted jack points. After hooking them up, there was an almost inaudible high pitched whine as the debrief data began to download. Eyes flickering from side to side, the assassin read through the target analysis and profile of John Blake and his crew.

Shinatobe rose from the Pilot's chair, then glided over to the airlock door in the starboard side of the shuttle. The tiny ship was nestled up against the side of the target's vessel, and the adjoining airlock could be seen through the porthole in the door. The assassin reached up to the secured container by the side of the airlock, and entered a complex code into the unlit keypad on the side of the box. There was a soft click, and the front of the locked box swung open, revealing the precious treasure within.

Reaching out for the object, Shinatobe gently peeled the silky material from the stand, then donned the genetic synthi-print glove over a Nanoweave-shrouded hand. Once the glove was snugly in place, the assassin reached up to activate the airlock door to the shuttle, pressing the button that would open it. The door parted down the middle with an ominous hiss, then smoothly separated, revealing the outer airlock door of the Invictus.

The portal barring the way into the Invictus was a Berrings-class model-twelve Airlock; a standard fit in Terran Federation cruisers of this age. Reaching into its pocket, the shadowy intruder retrieved a small black box and placed it above the top right side of the airlock. After a two second wait the light turned green, and with the signal jammer now in place, the airlock would no longer be able to send an alert to the Bridge.

Shinatobe placed the hand with the synthi-print glove onto the DNA reader by the side of this secure portal, holding it carefully in place over the built-in scanner. A light swept across the scanner, then after only a split-second delay it flashed green, as the DNA was matched with an entry on the list of authorised users.

"Welcome home, John," a throaty, seductive voice purred, sounding absolutely delighted at his return.

Shinatobe flinched, hands instantly reaching for weapons, before realising it was just an automated message. Relaxing once more, the assassin watched the inner airlock door spiral open smoothly. Activating the Nanoweave mesh built into its combat suit, the assassin disappeared from view, all except for the hand with the synthi-print glove.

After stepping through the inner airlock door into the Invictus, Shinatobe pressed that same hand to the DNA reader inside the ship. The door spiralled shut once more, leaving no trace of the intrusion, and the assassin peeled off the glove, then folded it carefully before tucking it into a discreet pocket of their combat suit.

Now completely invisible to the naked eye, the deadly invader was free to stalk down the corridor, and begin preparations for the strike.

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"You may enter," Edraele called out, answering the polite knock on the door.

"The Extraction teams have begun to arrive, Matriach," Almari said, as she walked into the Valaden Matriarch's study, before bowing respectfully. "We settled our guests in separate suites as you requested."

Edraele gave her a grateful smile, and rose from her seat, while replying, "Excellent, Almari, I had better go and introduce myself." She paused, eyeing the lithe young woman before her, and she added with a knowing smile, "I'm well aware that you, Luna, Ilyana like to gossip amongst yourselves. I'm quite sure Luna told you what happened a few hours ago?"

Almari blushed, and nodded briefly while looking down to avoid further embarrassment. Edraele glided over to her, and reached out to gently lift the woman's chin with her hand. When Almari's cobalt-blue eyes flicked up to gaze into her own, she said, "Then let's have no more of this 'Matriarch' business between us. Please feel free to call me Edraele. We've known each other for many years now, but I hope that with everything that's happened, we can now become friends."

A warm smile spread across Almari's face, and she said, "I'd really like that. Thank you, Edraele."

"So would I," Edraele replied, smiling back at her. She glanced towards the door, and added, "Regretfully, business calls, so would you guide me to the first of our guests, please."

"Of course, Matri-... I mean, Edraele," Almari replied with a self-conscious smile.

They left Edraele's study, and strolled through the plush lounge before exiting the suite, passing the guards that snapped to attention outside the entrance. Walking along at a relaxed pace, Edraele could feel the slight nervousness from Almari other their empathic bond, the assassin still not fully relaxed in her presence. The guest quarters were some distance from her own private suite, so they strolled along together in companionable silence for a couple of minutes.

Eventually Edraele turned towards the younger woman, and asked, "How are you coping with the changes since John turned our lives upside down?"

Almari was a little hesitant as she glanced at the older woman, and admitted, "It's still taking a little getting used to."

Leaning in to her companion, Edraele whispered conspiratorially, "I really was quite the tyrant, wasn't I?"

The assassin laughed lightly, relaxing as she replied, "Let's just say I was always, -cautious-, with how I spoke or behaved around you."

"I'm sorry, that must have been awful," Edraele said sympathetically.

They reached an intersection in the corridor, and paused a moment to let a small group of naval crewwomen walk past. With the fleet-wide refit still ongoing, Genthalas Shipyard was heaving with personnel. The group of young women looked shocked when they spotted Edraele, and they stared at her for a second before bowing respectfully and then hurrying out the way. Almari watched them closely, constantly on guard for any potential danger, but the tension left her body as the group hurried onwards, eager to be away from the dreaded Valaden Matriarch.

Edraele and Almari stopped and watched them rush away, and the young women began to chatter excitedly amongst themselves when they were safely out of earshot. When Edraele let out a melancholy sigh, Almari darted a look in her direction, and saw a sad look of regret on the Matriarch's face.

Almari paused, still unsure of the limits to the boundaries between them, before she said softly, "You have quite the reputation for your volatile and extremely deadly temper. That was in the past though, and it really doesn't take long to see that you're not like that any longer."

"I hope so," Edraele said wistfully. "It's horrible to see my people running in fear from me."

After glancing around to make sure they weren't overheard, Almari turned to Edraele with a reverent gleam in her eyes, and said, "They'll come around. The changes that John has made in you are quite astounding." She blushed a little as she added, "I really like the new you."

Edraele smiled at Almari affectionately, and said, "That was very kind of you to say, thank you Almari."

They continued walking towards their destination, and Edraele glanced at the assassin keeping pace at her side, and asked, "What about the other recent changes? The physical ones? Have they been unsettling?"

Almari laughed as she held out her arms, looking at the perfectly smooth unblemished skin, and she replied, "I must admit, it's been a little strange not to see my old scars any more. I had some of them for several decades, and now it feels like my past has been scrubbed clean. It's quite liberating!"

They had arrived outside the first of the guest suites, and they stopped by the sealed door in the deserted corridor. Edraele smiled at the younger woman, and reached out with her slender hand towards Almari, but her fingers stopped inches away from the bodyguard's torso. "May I?" she enquired politely.

Almari immediately replied, "Of course, Matr-." She smiled, and continued, "Sorry. Yes, that's fine, go ahead."

Edraele smoothed her hand over the firm muscles in Almari's lower belly, causing the younger woman to gasp at her touch. Looking into her eyes, Edraele asked quietly, "How about the other physical changes? The life-changing ones?"

Meeting her gaze again, Almari's sharp blue eyes lost some of their focus as she replied wistfully, "Oh, Edraele, I still can't believe he did that for me. It feels like a dream..."

Edraele smiled as she said, "He's a good man, and you're a lovely girl. I think you'll make a wonderful mother."

Almari let out a happy sigh, and then stepped forward to hug Edraele, forgetting about her previous reservations in her state of bliss. Edraele stroked the girl's back as they embraced each other, and after a long moment, Almari stepped back and studied the older woman's face. "You're really not the same person at all. You're so kind and caring now," she marvelled.

"Thank you, Almari," Edraele replied, but her expression was sombre as she added, "I've got a lot to make up for."

Almari gave her a sympathetic smile, then looked towards the door into the guest suite, and said, "The first of your guests is Kali Loreleth."

"I had better not keep her waiting any longer," Edraele replied, then opened the door to the quarters and stepped inside.

The youngest daughter of House Loraleth was confused and scared, sitting in an armchair in the cosy lounge of the guest suite. She had been darting nervous glances at the two assassins that were standing silently in the room, who waited with seemingly infinite patience for their Matriarch to arrive. When Kali heard the door to the room open with a quiet swish, she leapt to her feet, her face a mask of dread as Edraele swept regally into the room.

"What are you going to do to me?!" she exclaimed, verging on the edge of panic.

Edraele smiled at her, and replied in a soothing voice, "Be at ease, my dear. I have no wish to harm you, I promise." She looked across the room at the two House Loraleth assassins she had subverted, who were clearly unsettling the girl, and she added, "Avelissa, Renaya, it's wonderful to see you both, but would you give me a moment to speak with Kali alone, please? Almari here will show you to some comfortable quarters, and help you settle in."

Almari cast a wary eye over the last remaining member of the House Loraleth nobility, and said, "I'm not sure that's wise, Matriarch."

The House Valaden Matriarch forgave her the momentary lapse, as her bodyguard automatically slipped into using the deferential tone she had used with her for years. "It's quite alright, Almari," she said, studying the young woman standing on the other side of the lounge. "Kali's a sensible girl, and we're just going to have a nice chat."

Nodding obediently, Almari waited as Avelissa and Renaya gave their respects to Edraele, and the group of three assassins vacated the room. That left Kali alone with Edraele, and the young woman stared at her fearfully, unsure exactly what the devilish House Valaden Matriarch had in store for her.

"Please be seated, Kali," Edraele said, as she glided over to join her.

Her voice was warm and pleasant, but it rang with the calm confidence of someone who had been giving orders for nearly a century and a half, and who expected them to be obeyed. Kali had spent all of her thirty-five years having orders barked at her by her mother and three elder sisters, and despite her racing heartbeat, she responded instinctively, taking her seat. She watched with trepidation as Edraele approached, and her eyes opened wide as the stunningly beautiful woman stopped right next to her chair, then sank to her knees beside her.

A dark shadow of regret passed over Edraele's face, and she gazed into the younger woman's eyes as she said, "I'm truly sorry for what I've done to your family, but you are now the last surviving member of House Loraleth. Your mother and sisters are dead."

Kali gaped in shock, stunned into silence as she tried to process this information. She stared mutely at the mournful woman kneeling at her side, her numbed brain in denial.

Edraele was studying her carefully, watching her face to look for a reaction. She expected to see shock, but when nothing else was forthcoming, she said softly, "It was instant, and they didn't suffer, although I'm sure that offers little consolation."

Kali's eyes widened in fear, and she gasped, "So now all you need to do is kill me too, and House Loraleth will be wiped out! You'll be able to annex our entire House unopposed!"

Looking her directly in the eye, Edraele replied, "Yes, that is true, I certainly could, but as I said before, I have absolutely no intention of harming you." She paused for a moment, before she added, "Instead I wish to offer you an alliance, Matriarch Kali Loraleth."

If Kali thought she had been shocked before, it was nothing compared to this new bombshell from the House Valaden Matriarch. She gaped at Edraele, and stammered, "B-b-but why? You can just take what you need, why even bother with me?"

Edraele let out a heavy sigh as she replied, "You'll probably find this very hard to believe, but I really didn't want things to pan out this way. I would have liked to have offered an alliance to your mother, Shaedra, but she and I have been fighting for nearly ninety years. You must have known how much she hated me, and your elder sisters had developed much the same mindset."

The young Maliri woman nodded tentatively, admitting with more than a little trepidation, "Yes, mother loathed you. As her greatest rival, she was desperate to find some way of bringing you down."

Edraele found Kali to be guileless, and with a refreshing frankness to her, so she asked hopefully, "But you don't feel that way?"

Kali blinked in surprise, and she stared at the House Valaden Matriarch, unsure how to respond. Her mother had always said that Edraele was a vile, evil witch, which she had just assumed was a simple insult. However, now she was in her presence for the first time, she could feel there was something special about this entrancingly beautiful noblewoman. It was shocking to see her flouting all sense of decorum by growing her hair so long, but Kali couldn't deny that the long glossy white hair was extremely becoming. Despite all that, she knew what was expected of her as a House Loraleth Noble, and replied, "Well, you did just kill my mother and three sisters..."

Edraele gave her a knowing look, and said, "Believe it or not, I was the youngest of six sisters. If you were tormented by them, like I was by my elder siblings, I'm sure at least a part of you isn't completely overwhelmed by grief at their deaths."

A shadow of guilt passed over the young woman's face, but she didn't look away, and instead gazed at the woman kneeling unthreateningly before her. Although she'd spent her life being told she should hate the House Valaden Matriarch, in truth she had never cared much for all the scheming and political games. As the youngest daughter, her mother had largely ignored her, and she'd been left to pursue her own path, taking an interest in art and literature. She thought about what Edraele had just said, recalling the years of abuse she'd suffered at her mother's and sisters' hands, and she was forced to admit to herself that she didn't regret their deaths. In fact it came as somewhat of a relief.

She nodded slowly, and admitted, "Yes, you're right, Matriarch. It's true, I hated my sisters. My mother never cared for me either, and Arbane was always her favourite." After pausing to gather her courage, she continued, "You didn't answer my question before though. Why would you even bother with an alliance when you can just take what you want?"

Edraele smiled at her, and replied, "Please, call me Edraele. Believe it or not, I've had a dramatic change of heart recently, and I hate the fighting between the Houses." The fervent gleam of a true believer appeared in her angular purple eyes, and she continued, "I wish to unite all the Noble families, and forge a grand alliance between all the Houses. Together we can stop the in-fighting between the Houses, end the torture and the killings, and usher in a glorious new era for the Maliri!"

Kali felt herself drawn in by Edraele's speech, and she felt a brief surge of hope in her heart at the wonderful vision the woman was painting. Reality suddenly caught up with her, and she said ruefully, "The other Houses will never agree to this."

Reaching out to place her slender hands on top of Kali's, Edraele gazed into her eyes. There was an earnest expression on her face as she said, "All I care about right at this moment is you, Kali Loraleth. Would you like to work with me to make this vision of the future a reality?"

The young Loraleth Matriarch was spellbound by Edraele's passionate intensity, and she blinked twice before she nodded, then replied with conviction, "You have my word, Edraele. I'll be your faithful ally, and work with you to achieve this goal."

Edraele looked overjoyed, and the sense of relief radiating from her was palpable. She beamed a sparkling smile at the younger woman, and said, "I promise you'll never regret this decision, Kali. We have a bright future ahead of us!"

Kali smiled back at Edraele, sharing a similar sense of elation. Suddenly feeling much more at ease with the Valaden Matriarch than she ever had with her own mother, Kali had another moment of courage, and asked softly, "Edraele, may I ask you a personal question?"

"Of course, Kali," Edraele replied with a disarming smile. "I'd like to think that this is the start of a wonderful friendship, so please feel free to ask me anything."

Leaning forward a little, Kali couldn't help herself, and she reached out to gently brush her fingers through Edraele's flowing snowy-white locks that tumbled around her shoulders. "You look so radiantly beautiful," she murmured, quite entranced. "How is it that you and Almari have white hair? I've never heard of such a thing before."

Edraele's eyes sparkled, and she replied, "Would you like to look the same way too?"

Kali bit her bee-stung bottom lip with excitement, and nodded eagerly.

Smiling at her indulgently, Edraele said, "I'm sure I'll be able to arrange that for you." Her voice was full of enthusiasm as she continued, "We still have lots more to discuss though."

"What else would you like to talk about? Kali replied, listening attentively.

Edraele leaned forward, and asked her breathlessly, "Have you ever heard the story about the Mael'nerak?"

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John slowly opened his eyes, then did his best to stretch, what with Rachel and Dana cuddled up next to him. He grinned as he remembered the previous night's victory celebrations, and thanked whatever gods had decided to bless him with such willing and exceedingly naughty girls. Settling back in bed, the brunette and the redhead snuggled up closer to him in their sleep, and he wrapped his arms around them protectively.

A faint chime echoed through the room, and he smiled when he recognised Faye's customised internal comm ringtone. "Go ahead, Faye," he whispered, knowing she'd be able to hear him with the sensitive audio mics in the bedroom. "Everything alright this morning?"

"Morning, John!" she replied, sounding bright as a button. "There were no problems at all during the Watch last night, it was all just civilian traffic on the long-range sensors. We're deep in Terran Federation territory, so it should be safe, right?"

He laughed quietly, and replied, "Yeah, you'd think so, but we've been caught out before. One of Nexus' rogue cruisers caught us napping once, but that was well before your time." He lifted up his head to take a peek at the ship's chronometer, and blinked in surprise to see it was nearly eleven o'clock.

Faye was watching him on the cam-feed, and she chirped, "It was nearly four in the morning before you went to sleep..." After coughing politely, she continued, "I thought you'd all appreciate the lie-in after all the action yesterday."

John sank back against his pillow and said, "That was very thoughtful of you, thanks Faye."

"You're welcome," she replied sounding very happy. "Oh! I almost forgot. Admiral Devereux called last night, and wanted to speak with you. When I told her you were sleeping, she said not to disturb you, and left a message instead."

With a knowing smile on his face, John asked, "Did you honestly nearly forget?"

Faye giggled, and replied, "Aww, you caught me! No, of course not, but it was a new speech affectation I was trying out, to make me seem more like an organic lifeform." She paused, and sounded a little disappointed as she asked, "Didn't I get it right?"

"It was very convincing, and you pulled it off perfectly," John replied encouragingly.

He could hear the confusion in her voice when she asked, "How did you realise then?"

He laughed as he replied, "You're far too reliable a crewmember to suddenly start forgetting things. Besides, I don't think you -can- forget can you?"

She paused as she thought it over, until she finally replied, "No, not really. Not unless you count a hardware failure on a data archive, or perhaps some memory data becoming corrupted."

Despite their best efforts to keep quiet, the muted conversation had started to disturb the girls' slumber. Alyssa's tousled blonde mane appeared above Calara's olive-toned shoulder, and she blew him a kiss before nudging the other girls awake with a gentle telepathic wake up call.

\*John's awake now girls,\* she murmured to them, knowing they all liked to be up and around as soon as he was.

John was treated to a wonderful display of stretching by the nubile, bare-chested girls, and he marvelled at their stubborn refusal to let gravity do its work. He knew full well that they were only putting on a show for his benefit and the teasing smiles confirmed it a moment later.

"The message?" Fayed prompted him with a cheeky giggle.

John coughed and replied with a smile, "Let's hear what the good Admiral has to say for herself."

There was a crackle of light at the end of the bed, and a holographic image of the brown-haired, middle-aged woman appeared before them. The girls quickly fanned out so they could all comfortably see, while John sat up with his back against the headboard.

Admiral Lynette Devereux looked slightly flustered when Faye began the vid-feed playback, and she said, "Hello John, I trust you slept well." She grew more perplexed as she continued, "I just had a fascinating conversation with your Watch Commander. She's a very bold choice considering everything we've just been through with Nexus, but I suppose I have to trust your judgement."

"Pause it a moment, would you, Faye," John requested. He glanced up at one of the hidden cameras in the bedroom, and asked, "What did you two talk about exactly?"

Faye sounded far too innocent, as she replied, "Not much! We just said 'hey', really."

John raised an eyebrow, and asked in an even tone, "Are you sure?"

"Well we might have had a little chat about me being an unshackled AI, and how I'm allowed to roam freely through the Invictus' digital network. The Admiral did seem to start getting a bit worried at that point," Faye explained with a sigh.

"I'll bet she did. Alright, thanks for the honesty, Faye," John said with a smile. "Can you continue the message, please."

Devereux seemed to shake off her concerns for a moment, and her face grew sombre as she said, "I tried pulling some strings directly, but back here in the Terra Sector I'm outside the security lockdown zone. Everyone I tried to contact who might have been able to assist you, is involved in the big push, and incommunicado at the moment." She looked morose as she added, "I feel like I've failed you, John. I'm very sorry, but you're going to have to come up with a way of speaking to Fleet Admiral Buckingham on your own."

Alyssa glanced at John, and asked, "How bad is this?"

He shrugged helplessly, and said, "I was a Marine Commander; Me and my men stormed ships and shot people. There was a bit more to it than that, but I'm hopelessly out of my depth in the kind of political games that the Admiralty likes to play."

The girls looked downhearted, unable to offer any advice that would be helpful. All that is, except for Irillith.

She had a sly smile on her face as she said, "I've spent all of my adult life playing 'The Noble Dance', and I'll help you however I can. Of course, you also have my mother at your disposal, and she's been plotting and scheming for nearly a century and a half. Edraele would make the Admiralty's games look like toddlers throwing toys at each other in a sandpit."

John laughed at her metaphor, and then thought to his Maliri Matriarch, \*Are you there Edraele? Have you been listening to this conversation?\*

\*My lovely daughter is entirely correct, of course,\* Edraele informed him. \*I'd love to help you, although I don't enjoy the darker side of these games any longer.\*

Feeling a surge of relief, John said, \*I'll place myself in your lovely hands then. Thank you, Edraele, this means a lot.\* He could feel her delight at being able to help him over their bond, and he smiled, glad to be able to make her feeling that happy, even if it was inadvertent.

Faye had paused the message during the discussion, with Lynette Devereux's face frozen in a rueful frown. When John looked up at the camera and smiled, the attentive sprite started the video up again.

Admiral Devereux's expression brightened, and she said, "There is one thing that I can do for you, John. I hereby promote you to Rear Admiral, and for Calara's incredible efforts, I am raising her to Commander. Please don't think that your new rank is purely to expedite your mission into the Dragon March, although it will help you get a hearing. These promotions are well earned, and the Terran Federation owes you both a huge debt."

The Admiral continued speaking, but whatever she was saying was drowned out by the jubilant cheers and whoops from the girls sitting around the bed. John and Calara both looked as stunned as each other, and stared at each other in shock.

Calara muttered in disbelief, "She just promoted me two ranks! I outrank all my brothers now!"

John snapped himself out of his daze, and gave her a proud smile as he said, "You've more than earned it, Calara. The amount you've achieved in the last several months is truly astounding."

She gazed at him, and her big brown eyes shone with happiness. She bit her lip, and said, "My mother is going to flip out when she finds out I'm dating a Rear Admiral now!"

The Latina bounded across the bed, the launched herself into his arms, and they hugged each other fiercely. The girls gathered around, joining them in a group hug, while offering them both hearty congratulations. John could feel Alyssa doing her best to stifle her laughter over the telepathic link, and when he glanced her way, her lips were clamped closed in a herculean effort not to ruin the moment. As nice as it was to see her looking so amused, he couldn't figure out what she had found so funny.

"What's tickled you so much?" he asked her curiously.

"Rear Admiral!" she blurted out. "Come on! That can't be a real rank?!"

He grinned at her as he replied, "It is, I promise! I'm just one rank below Charles now."

Alyssa couldn't hold it in any more, and she guffawed with laughter, as she gasped, "Seriously, Devereux couldn't have given you a more appropriate rank!"

Dana smirked, and said, "The girl does have a point. You are quite fond of a firm bit of rump."

The girls joined in the laughter, and John raised his hands, and said, "Alright, I freely admit, you're all blessed with spectacular derrieres."

Faye coughed politely, and said, "Sorry to interrupt, but there's a bit more to the message."

John smiled as he said, "No problem, Faye. Go ahead, let's hear the end."

"Sure thing!" Faye replied enthusiastically. She had already rewound the message to the place they were at before all the impromptu celebrations. When everyone had settled down and were looking at the vid-screen again, she continued the playback of the message.

Admiral Devereux paused briefly, then smiled as she continued, "The rest of your crew are civilians, so I can't exactly promote them as a reward. I would consider it a great honour if you would all attend another award ceremony, as I'd like to present you each with a medal to honour your valiant defence of Terra."

There were more raucous cheers again as soon as everyone heard this, with Jade, Dana, and even Rachel looking excited at the prospect of another award ceremony. Irillith stayed quiet however, and was studying the frozen image of the Admiral with newfound respect.

John spotted her quiet introspection, and misreading her silence, he asked, "Worried about revealing the Maliri secret, Irillith?"

She turned his way, and shook her head, before pausing, and saying, "Well yes, I suppose. That's not what I was thinking about though, not at that moment."

"What then?" he asked her curiously.

She had a wry smile on her face as she said with grudging admiration, "Devereux is a sly old fox. However this turns out, she stands to gain."

John frowned, and asked, "Really? How do you work that out?"

Irillith leaned forward, and her angular violet eyes sparkled as she began to explain, "Alright, let's look at all the scenarios: If we manage to stop Norwood and his band of traitors, she gets to say she was heavily involved in unmasking them, which will do her career no end of good. Then she gets to milk us for maximum PR with the promotions and medals at the award ceremony, and she can claim responsibility for any improvement in approval ratings for Terran Federation High Command.

If Buckingham gets so offended at the implication of treason for one of his officers, and has John gets kicked out of the Terran Federation military, she isn't actually here with us, so her hands are effectively clean. She could explain away the promotions as another PR campaign, and while we get canned, she can avoid any repercussions. Then whatever happens with Norwood, she won't lose political capital either way.

Then potentially the most lucrative scenario for her in advancing her own career, is if Buckingham refuses to see us, and the Dragon March assault is a slaughter. She could use that disaster as a black mark against Buckingham, while spreading the word that she sent her agent, The Lion of the Federation, to try and stop Norwood. She can go on to mention that her efforts were stymied due to Buckingham's incompetence, and wouldn't it be a great idea to have a new Fleet Admiral."

\*She's a natural at this,\* Edraele said with a mother's pride.

John groaned, rubbing at his temples as he said plaintively, "See, this is what I mean! I haven't got the patience for all this second guessing and dancing around my enemies."

Alyssa rubbed his shoulder, and in a soothing voice she crooned, "My poor man. You just prefer to kill any bad guys in your way, right?"

He chuckled at Alyssa's teasing, then looked at Irillith and asked, "Do you really think Admiral Devereux is using us as pawns?"

The blue-skinned girl looked thoughtful for a while, then smiled at him as she gently shook her head, and replied, "From what Alyssa relayed to me of your encounter with her, she seems to be slightly intimidated by you, but can see your value as a potential ally. I doubt she'd risk playing games, not with someone she's that impressed but wary of. Saying that, my earlier statements are still true, and she has nothing to lose from assisting you, and potentially lots to gain."

John gave her an appreciative smile, and said, "Did I ever tell you, I'm exceedingly glad you've joined the team?"

The Maliri girl laughed at his playful but earnest words, and flashed him a beautiful smile.

Looking up at the camera again, he asked, "Is that it, Faye?"

"Only a little bit left," she replied brightly, and began the playback once more.

Devereux smiled warmly at the camera, and said, "I wish you every success with your mission, and safe travels in the Dragon March. I'll look forward to your return to the Olympus Shipyard, and perhaps you and I could have another chat. I found the last one most enlightening." She stared directly at the lens, and finished by saying, "Goodbye, John. Best of luck to you and your crew."

With that the message ended, and Faye shut down the vid-screen so they wouldn't have to listen to the annoying sound of static.

John leaned back and said, "Well that was a heck of a wake-up call!"

Alyssa smirked at him, and said, "It certainly was, Rear Admiral."

He laughed and said, "I'm never going to hear the last of that, am I?"

"No chance!" she replied with a sparkling smile. With that, she slid lithely over the bed, before standing elegantly and sashaying towards the bathroom.

"Where are you off to now?" he asked her in surprise.

She tossed her luxurious golden blonde hair over her shoulder, and gave him a wicked glance as she replied, "I'm getting myself ready. You and I are long overdue our XO catch up meeting." As she glided into the bathroom, she called out behind her, "I'm really looking forward to it. I've never been buggered by a Rear Admiral before!"

The other girls giggled, then each gave him a loving kiss began moving off the bed. Instead of heading to the big ensuite bathroom, they began to walk towards their own rooms to get showered and ready for the day, leaving John and Alyssa alone for some time together.

"We'll meet up at lunchtime," John called out to them, "We've got some things to prepare for before we reach the Dragon March."

Jade was the last to leave, and she gave him a flirtatious wink as she said, "I'll be back later for breakfast."

John reached out to hold her hand, pulling her back to him as he said, "Come and join me for a shower, then you can stay and watch if you like? There's no point you running off, then coming straight back again."

"I'd love that, thank you!" she exclaimed with delight.

They both left the bed, and strolled into the shower where Alyssa was thoroughly washing herself. She looked up at the pair of them, and smiled at Jade as she said, "Hey, sexy! I'm glad he asked you to stay."

John and Jade joined her under the warm water, and Jade asked, "Are you sure it's alright? If you want time alone together, I'm happy to come back."

Alyssa stepped close to the Nymph and placed her arms around her neck as she said flirtatiously, "It's always more fun with an audience..."

John ran his fingers over their bodies under the water, enjoying the feel of their spectacular physiques under his wandering hands. They were both so strong and supple, with well defined muscles in their beautiful toned bodies. At the same time, their skin was silky soft, feeling smooth and yielding to his touch. It was a marvellous contrast which he enjoyed immensely. Jade's body had started off feeling cooler, but as she and Alyssa kissed, he could feel her begin to heat up until she became warm to the touch.

HIs cock throbbed with desire as the beautiful girls kissed in front of him. Alyssa threw him a mischievously glance, and after a quick telepathic instruction, Jade shimmered before his eyes. Her skin went from dark-green to a tanned bronze, while her hair lightened from a rich black with green highlights to a glorious golden blonde. Two sets of piercing cerulean eyes glanced at him alluringly as they continued to kiss for his viewing pleasure.

"Fuck! You two look amazing," he murmured, as he watched the identical blondes kissing and stroking one another.

Alyssa pulled back a little, and asked innocently, "You like hot blonde twins?" Her expression grew wicked as she purred, "Perhaps we'll bring some blue body paint next time..."

Jade giggled, and nodded eagerly, giving him a very inviting come-hither look.

John laughed, and said to Alyssa, "You're such a naughty girl." He reached out to take a firm grip of her bottom, and said, "Enough teasing, let's get started."

She turned away from him and placed her hands on the wall, spreading her feet and arching her back to present herself for him. "I'm lubed and ready," she said, swaying her hips invitingly. "Mount up, Rear Admiral."

John grinned at Jade then nodded to the floor of the shower. She immediately sank to her knees, moving around in front of Alyssa, where he could hear her lapping away enthusiastically, even over the sound of the shower. The Nymph took a firm grip of Alyssa's buttocks and separated them for him, causing the exposed girl to hiss with excitement.

He could see the water resistant lube glistening in the light, while water cascaded down her back, making her look positively breathtaking. Not wasting any time, he lined himself up, carefully positioning the head of his shaft against her winking hole, and took a firm grip around her trim waist, holding her in position.

\*Are you ready?\* he asked, giving her plenty of warning.

\*Absolutely,\* she agreed, and he could feel how aroused she was over their empathic bond. Her voice was filled with need as she added, \*I want all of it in one go, and no stopping to let me adjust.\*

He did exactly as she asked, slowly stuffing all of his length inside her in one long thrust. She cried out in ecstasy as she felt him forcing his way into her body, ending up on tiptoe by the time he'd reached the base. Alyssa panted with lust as Jade kept her eager mouth clamped firmly in place, moving her long prehensile tongue in a blur over her clit.

\*Time for a status update, XO,\* John stated calmly, as he pulled about half his shaft out of her slick passage, then rammed all the way in, right up to the balls.

\*They all fucking love you, you big-dicked bastard!\* Alyssa wailed, her body trembling as she came explosively under the intensive stimulation from both her lovers.

Jade shuffled back to stay in position as John pinned Alyssa against the wall, and really began to ream her out, driving into her with powerful strokes of his cock. \*How about you, XO?\* he teased her. \*How do you feel?\*

\*I love your massive cock,\* she sobbed, arching her back as he ploughed into her, loving the feeling of being stretched wide to take him. \*And you know I'm your devoted little girl.\*

John was a gentle, considerate, and caring lover, but that wasn't what either of them needed right now. His hips were a blur as he pounded into Alyssa, her magnificent taut cheeks bouncing off his groin, and trembling with every impact. He could feel a powerful climax approaching, and didn't bother to try and stave it away. Jade's tongue lovingly caressing his balls was the final stimulation he needed, and his quad rose up as he blasted long gouts of spunk into the groaning blonde. She took him like a champ, her belly expanding to hold all his cum, and she whimpered through another explosive orgasm as she took his full load.

Jade helped support Alyssa's weight as John slid his sated cock from her slick passage, and she sagged back against him with a giddy smile on her face.

"Good catch up meeting, XO?" he asked her playfully.

She tilted her head back, her chest heaving as she regained her breath, and reached up to pat him on the cheek as she thought to him, \*Best one yet.\*

They cleaned themselves up in the shower, then dried off and returned to the bedroom where they promptly collapsed in bed. John was flat on his back with Alyssa lying on her engorged tummy, nestled in the crook of his arm. She let out a soft moan as Jade knelt between her legs, and began to suck the cum out of her with an insatiable hunger. John kissed her while Jade went to work, with Alyssa staring into his eyes, and whimpering every once in a while as she responded to the Nymph's questing tongue.

Jade had returned to her familiar green-skinned form by the time she was done, and she sat up with a contented smile on her face as she ran her hands over her dark-green belly. It was hugely inflated with cum now, and as her body began to feed off the heavy meal, viridian pulses of light began to spread out over her body.

Alyssa moved across the bed to make room, and beckoned the Nymph over to lie between them. "How's that feel little kitten? Nice having a full tummy?" she asked Jade, who waddled over to join them, then curled up on her side.

Jade began to purr as they both stroked her swollen belly, and she whispered, "It feels incredible, thank you both so much."

John rested his heavy hand over her stomach, and said, "I love filling you up like this, you look so beautiful."

The Nymph let out a sleepy sigh of contentment, getting drowsy as her body eagerly fed off his cum.

Alyssa traced her hand over Jade's body, following an ethereal green pulse of light as it expanded outwards, and she said, "He's making you stronger, Jade. Do you like that?"

Jade turned her head, and reached up to give Alyssa a tender kiss. "It feels amazing," she replied, deliriously happy.

John and Alyssa both cuddled the Nymph between them, and watched her eyelids grow heavy. Alyssa suddenly looked alert, and leaned over the sleepy girl as she asked, "Jade, do you know what date is your birthday?"

With a languid shrug, Jade murmured, "Nope, don't remember that far back."

"Alright, sleep tight, sexy girl," Alyssa crooned to her as she stroked her hair, and just like that, the Nymph was asleep.

\*Her birthday?\* John asked, giving the blonde girl a curious look.

Alyssa nodded eagerly, and said, \*After beating Nexus, I think we need a proper celebration. We'll be up to our necks in shit when we get to the Dragon March, so why not take a moment to smell the roses?\*

John smiled at her, and replied, \*A party could be fun.\*

The blonde teen grinned at him, and enthused, \*It's a while until everyone else's birthday, and mine's miles off; I only turned eighteen a day before I joined you on the Fool's Gold. Jade's always doing stuff for us, and we haven't been able to properly thank her for it. As we don't know Jade's real birthday, we'll just make one up for her... and it can be today!\*

Looking down at the Nymph, who was sleeping serenely between them, John placed a loving kiss on her verdant cheek. He met Alyssa's gaze and said, \*She'll absolutely love it. I think it's a wonderful idea.\* He smiled as he added, \*That was really thoughtful. Well done, beautiful.\*

Alyssa sat up, beaming with excitement, and mimed clapped her hands together with glee. \*I'll gather the troops and we'll get started! I thought the Officers' Lounge for the venue?\*

John unfolded himself from Jade, then climbed out of bed, and tucked her in under the duvet. He nodded at Alyssa and replied, \*Sounds perfect. I've got some pressing business to take care of, so I'll leave the preparations in your capable hands, if that's alright?\*

\*Of course! Good luck!\* she replied, as she glided around the bed to give him a swift hug, before rushing off to the walk-in wardrobe to get dressed.

John followed after her at a more sedate pace, and strolled into the wardrobe to get dressed himself. As he started putting on his clothes, he stopped for a moment to watch Alyssa dressing hastily, enjoying seeing how fired up she was about Jade's birthday party. She threw on her top and stepped into some heels, then flung her slender arms around his neck and kissed him soundly.

\*Thanks for this morning, Rear Admiral!\* she exclaimed breathily. \*You lived up to the expectations of your rank!\*

He laughed, and replied, \*Yeah, that was pretty incredible.\* Looking into her bright cerulean eyes, he continued more seriously, \*We'll do a proper XO meeting soon. I think it's good to catch up about everyone, and I like hearing your thoughts about each of the girls.\*

\*You're the boss!\* she replied, planting a big kiss on his lips, then sauntered away, hips swinging provocatively.

He watched her leave, admiring the impressive view, then finished dressing himself. When he walked back into the bedroom, Alyssa was nowhere to be seen, and Jade was still fast asleep. He crept out quietly so that he didn't disturb the slumbering girl, then strolled down the corridor to the grav-tube. It only took a few seconds to float up to the Command Deck, and he greeted Faye with a wave as he turned left and strolled over to the door to his Ready Room.

The purple sprite had been studying the Raptor's technical manual, to learn all about the flight characteristics, but she looked up sharply when he appeared on the Bridge. A huge grin appeared on her cute little face, and she fluttered over to him, buzzing around his shoulders.

Leaning in, she gave him a kiss on the cheek, and blurted, "Congratulations on your promotion!" She let out a little sigh, as she added, "I wish I could be there in person to give you a hug, but I guess I'll just have to leave that to the other girls."

He smiled back at her and suggested, "How about if I give Irillith a hug for you instead? Then she can pass it on, the next time she's in the Cyber Realm."

Faye giggled with delight, and replied, "I'm not sure my Creator would be too happy about being our physical contact proxy, but that does sound like fun!"

John pressed the button next to the door into his Ready Room, and asked, "How's the Raptor pilot training going at the moment?"

"All theoretical so far," Faye chirped, her purple luminescent eyes glowing with a fierce light. "We need to stop constantly rushing around, and then I can get some time behind the flightstick!"

"Things will calm down eventually," he said, nodding his agreement.

She grinned at him, then waved goodbye as he walked into his Ready Room. John strolled over to the far side, then sat down in the big, comfortable leather chair, and fired up the comm interface built into the desk. He quickly scrolled down through the long list of contacts, and settled on the name he was after, swiping across it with a finger. He made the call, and waited patiently for the person on the other end to answer.

He only had to wait about twenty seconds, and a stern faced man answered the call. "It's you," Yamamoto noted with a frown.

"Yes," John replied curtly. "Prepare yourself, it's time."

With that, he closed off the comm channel, not giving Yamamoto a chance to respond. He rolled his eyes at all the theatrics, but after spending weeks-on-end training with the taciturn swordmaster, he knew exactly how to yank the man's chain.

Truth be told, he did feel different now, more focused and sharper, and he was eager to test his skills against the veteran swordmaster. However, he just didn't feel like giving the man a grovelling apology for not calling for a few weeks. It seemed unfair when he literally hadn't been himself, and besides, they'd also been in Maliri territory at the end and thus out of range of the simulator signal.

He rose from his seat, and walked back out of the room and onto the Bridge. Faye gave him a cheerful wave when she spotted him, and he waved back at her as he stepped into the grav-tube, disappearing out of sight.

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"A surprise party!" Rachel gasped with excitement, looking up from her console and grinning at Alyssa. "That's a great idea! I love a good party."

Dana was down by her workbench, and she looked up at the Engineer's podium, then smiled at the brunette, and snorted, "Yeah, you told me all about your party-girl shenanigans. There's no bikers at this one though, I'm afraid."

Rachel laughed, and said teasingly, "That's not the sound of jealousy I hear is it, oh love of mine?"

The redhead pouted, and said, "John scrubbed that out from us remember!"

Alyssa smiled at her friend, and said, "Actually, I don't think it works that way, Sparks. We enjoy seeing each other getting a good bit of long-dicking from him, but I don't think he thought about us pairing off, and getting jealous of our partner's old lovers."

"See! You were getting jealous!" Rachel said gleefully, peeking over the Engineering consoles to see Dana's face.

Dana put down her multi-tool, and darted up the illuminated steps, then gathered Rachel in her arms as she said, "Only because you're too good for some hairy biker, babes."

The two kissed passionately, and Alyssa rolled her eyes, but grinned at the amorous teenagers as she said, "I'm heading up to the Officers' Lounge now, so come up when you get a free moment. There's loads of balloons to blow up, and decorations to hang!"

Rachel gave her a thumbs up but didn't break the lip-lock with the redhead. Alyssa left them to it, and strolled out of the Engineering Bay, and back down the corridor to the grav-tube. She'd already told Calara and Irillith about the party, so by the time she breezed through the door into the kitchen, both girls were already there. They both looked up at her at the same time, smiling happily, before getting back to work.

"How's the food prep going, Irillith?" she asked the Maliri girl.

Irillith didn't look up this time, instead she focused on moving her knife with deft strokes, as she carefully filleted an exotic Maliri delicacy, called a Lentaya fish. "There's lots to do, but it's probably best if I stick to preparing the meat. This fish can make you violently ill if isn't cooked perfectly," she explained, sounding distracted. She glanced over at the Latina, and said, "Calara could probably use some help though."

Alyssa prowled over to the brunette, and slipped her hands around her lover as she sidled up behind her. She leaned in to plant a loving kiss on Calara's coffee-coloured neck, and murmured, "Do you need some help, gorgeous?"

Calara chuckled, a happy smile on her face as she snuggled back against the blonde. "I don't need to ask if you had a good time with John," she began. "You're always so affectionate after he's giving you a good seeing too."

"You know me too well, baby," Alyssa crooned, slipping one hand under Calara's top and running it over her toned midrift.

The Latina giggled, and said, "Shoo! We've got too much to prepare at the moment. We'll have some fun later."

Alyssa pouted and said, "Fine, how can I help?"

"Dress the table?" Calara suggested, as she began to finely chop the exotic Maliri vegetables in front of her.

Giving her a snappy salute, Alyssa replied, "Right away, Commander."

The girls exchange an affectionate glance as Alyssa strolled out of the room, but Calara hadn't finished speaking to her yet. \*This party is a great idea,\* she thought to the psychic blonde. \*Choosing Maliri cuisine was inspired as well, Jade absolutely loves this stuff.\*

\*Just looking out for my girls,\* Alyssa replied, as she began to set the place settings.

\*No, it was really thoughtful, and reminded me how much I love you,\* Calara continued earnestly.

Alyssa paused with a fork in her hand, and replied, \*I thought you were too busy for me to ravish you? Keep that up, and I'll have you climbing the walls, party or no.\*

\*Mmm, I can't wait until later,\* Calara purred, and Alyssa's eyes sparkled with excitement.

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John walked into his training room on Deck Three, and knelt on the matting that covered the floor. He closed his eyes, and focused on clearing his mind of distractions, feeling that sense of inner peace descend on him. He'd been finding it easier to achieve a focused state like this, and soon his breathing was smooth and measured, his chest rising and falling in a calm even rhythm.

The women in his mind were proving to be a steadying influence, and as he relaxed, he tuned in to them, feeling their emotions over the bond they shared. Edraele and Alyssa seemed to sense exactly what he needed, and an aura of tranquillity descended over him as they both projected warm, gentle, loving emotions his way. The hairs on the back of his arms pricked up as his senses felt more alive than ever before, and when he finally opened his eyes once more, he was in a perfect Zenlike state.

He rose to his feet, standing upright in one long, smooth motion, then walked over to the simulation system. There was a button with a flashing green light on it, and when he pressed it, the device hummed contentedly to itself for a few seconds. The Pulse generators that Dana had hooked up to the communications relay in the Invictus kicked in, sending a powerful signal to Yamamoto's machine, and established an instantaneous connection with his surly trainer.

The flashing green light turned a solid green, and the room transformed as the simulator constructed a sophisticated holographic environment. The dojo was exactly as he remembered it, centred in the middle of closely cropped lawns, with a babbling brook winding its way through the grounds, filling the air with the sound of running water.

The rock garden had changed, showing a flat expanse of white stones, with a solitary onyx stone in the corner. The scene made him think of a boat, becalmed on the ocean, but when he glanced across the field of white, he realised there was a slight incline to the meticulously laid array of white stones. He realised the stones represented a massive upswell, foretelling the arrival of a huge tsunami.

Despite the tranquillity of the rest of the garden, with the beautiful cherry blossom trees exactly as he remembered them, his attention kept being drawn back to the rock garden and the scene unfolding with the stones. He took a deep breath to put it from his mind, and turned to look across the polished wooden floors of the dojo.

Yamamoto was there waiting for him, studying him with his fierce, brooding eyes. He was wearing his traditional black hakama, belted at the waist, and he was bare-chested, as he had been for all their other duels. The man didn't speak, but simply moved to stand in position across from John, as though waiting for his student to make the first move.

John held out his hand, and the Odachi on the weapon racks floated over to him obediently. It felt strange to move an object without the aid of embedded Etherite crystals, but after psychic shaping Crystal Alyssium, he was more than capable of the feat. Yamamoto's eyes widened at this casual display of Telekinesis, but they suddenly narrowed dangerously, his expression darkening with contempt.

"You seek to distract me with these parlour tricks?" he snorted in disgust. "I never thought you'd stoop to fakery in an attempt to defeat me."

"Enough," John said calmly. "Let us begin."

Yamamoto, drew the Katana that was sheathed at his waist in a long smooth motion, and moved to engage. John simply raised his Odachi, and glided forward, his long steel blade moving in a blur as he attacked. Yamamoto defended easily with his Katana, but this had been only the opening stanza in a long and intricate poem. John flowed through with one strike after another, in a relentless flurry of beautiful attacks, leaving Yamamoto reeling. The swordmaster's eyes remained watchful and impassive, but he was masking his shock, and he worked his Katana at a frantic pace to keep from being struck by the training blade.

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"How's Jade doing?" Calara asked, as she brought out the bowl of finely diced shenai leaves that she had prepared under Irillith's watchful eye.

Alyssa clipped the magnetic anchor for the balloons she was holding to the ceiling, then looked down from the chair she was standing on. "Still asleep at the moment," she replied as she made eye contact with the Latina. "She does like a nice snooze after a heavy breakfast."

She waved her hand towards some long ribbons, and they floated across the room, tying themselves into a neat bow as they slipped over the back of each of the dining chairs. Dana and Rachel strolled out as well, carrying more bowls of delicately flavoured and lightly spiced Maliri dishes. The dining table was rapidly becoming covered in bowls full of the exotic cuisine, and it smelt absolutely delicious.

"I'll wake her up in a few minutes," Alyssa said with an indulgent smile. "We can't have the birthday girl missing her special dinner after all!"

"What about John?" Dana asked, with a frown. "What's he up to?"

Alyssa grinned at the redhead, and stepped off the chair as she said, "Restoring the balance."

Dana grimaced, and replied, "What the fuck's that supposed to mean? Sounds like some kind of new-age hippy bullshit."

The blonde girl couldn't help laughing at that, and she smiled at Calara as she asked, "Could you grab a couple of bottles of wine please, honey."

"Sure!" the brunette replied, and then glanced over her shoulder, and asked, "Red or white with Maliri cuisine?"

Irillith pushed open the door to the kitchen with her bottom, and then backed into the dining area, before turning around gracefully. She was carrying a steaming platter of Lentaya fish that smelled positively divine.

"Go with a white," she replied, smiling at Calara. "It will go nicely with the fish."

"White it is," Calara agreed amiably, reaching over the bar for a couple of bottles.

\*\*\*

Yamamoto had counter attacked as soon as he'd seen an opportunity, lashing out with a sweeping backhanded blow to try and catch John unawares. John neatly parried the blow, then surged forwards, sending another series of deadly fast cuts towards the swordmaster's face. Yamamoto was stunned to find himself on the defensive again, and he backed away hurriedly as he dodged and parried the flashing steel.

He'd never seen John move with such purpose before, and he had to stop himself from admiring the effortless ease with which he flowed through so many of the moves that Yamamoto had taught him. Still the taciturn man had no intention of losing, and he continued to parry defensively, while looking for an opportunity to spring his trap. It had been the undoing of many an opponent, and he knew John would be no different.

\*\*\*

Shinatobe sat in the darkened room, watching the camera feeds from the dozens of tiny micro-cameras that the assassin had set up around the Invictus. The only major room that was not covered by the cameras was the bedroom, as the crew had all been sleeping in there when the furtive intruder was sneaking around the ship the previous night.

Still, it was nearly twelve o'clock now, and the crew had been up for nearly an hour. Shinatobe had counted five crew in the Officers' Lounge, which matched the crew count from the awards ceremony, and the primary target was in the room across the hall indulging in some kind of holo-simulation. Selecting the correct devices from the submenu, it only took a single blink to prime the ones in the key locations.

\*\*\*

Yamamoto was really on the back foot now, as his student moved inexorably for the kill. John was moving as if possessed, calm and composed, yet gliding from one swift stroke and fluidly shifting to another. Yamamoto knew he was rapidly running out of time, so he finally sprang his trap, overextended slightly to the left on a parry, to encourage John to attack on his right.

He knew exactly what kind of attack was coming, a cross-slash from the upper-right which would neatly decapitate any lesser swordsman. However Yamamoto was no ordinary duellist, and he darted inside John's attack, rushing past him with incredibly fast footwork. His blade moved in a perfect backhand strike, and he grinned, knowing full well that John would soon hear the simulator declare that he had been decapitated.

John didn't react as Yamamoto expected though, and instead turned to the left, rather than trying to follow the wily swordmaster around to his right. His long Odachi swept up and behind his head, and the clang of steel on steel echoed throughout the dojo, as John neatly parried the cunning strike.

Yamamoto was astounded, but not nearly as shocked as when John span in place, his blade slashing around like a whirlwind, and neatly catching the swordmaster across the throat.

"You have been decapitated!" the simulator cheerfully announced, showing Yamamoto a slow motion replay of John neatly cleaving his head from his body.

He shook his head in stunned disbelief, and slowly turned to look at his victorious student. John was standing calmly, a victorious smile on his face, and he bowed deeply to Yamamoto. The older man was about to reply, when there was a ripple in the simulator behind John, and a black clad ninja appeared to materialise out of nowhere a pistol levelled at John's back.

Yamamoto felt terror gripping at his heart, flashbacks to the past threatening to overwhelm him. He shook them off and yelled, "John, look out!"

\*\*\*

Shinatobe opened the door into the simulator room, finding the target in the midst of a duel with an older, vaguely familiar looking figure. The assassin crept closer to their unsuspecting quarry, while silently drawing a stubby pistol, and taking careful aim at the middle of the man's broad back.

At the last moment before engaging, Shinatobe glanced at the HUD menu, and triggered the devices.

Chaos erupted on the Invictus.

\*\*\*

Alyssa was watching Calara, admiring the beautiful brunette as she leant over the bar to fetch a couple of bottles of wine. Suddenly a piercing scream of absolute despair and tortured agony filled her mind, reverberating with terrifying intensity. Alyssa stumbled backwards as her senses were overwhelmed by the anguished wail, and she collapsed onto a plush lounge chair, clutching at her head.

Calara glanced down behind the bar, arm reaching for a bottle of wine, and spotted a small package on the floor. "Hey, no one said we were doing presents!" she exclaimed with a grin, as she looked back at the girls around the dining table.

Suddenly her world turned upside down, as a thunderous series of explosions ripped through the Officers' Lounge. Her body was overwhelmed with searing pain, and she was sent sailing through the air, before slamming into a bulkhead, and succumbing to the darkness.

\*\*\*

John smiled as he savoured his victory over Yamamoto, hardly able to believe he'd finally been able to defeat the exceptionally skilled swordsman. Tragically, several things all happened at once, which ruined any sense of satisfaction he might have been feeling.

Firstly he felt Alyssa react in shock to something, but before he could ask her what was wrong, he felt vibrations through his feet, instantly recognising the ominous aftershocks of explosives. A split-second afterwards the Invictus began to shake violently, and his eyes widened as he remembered the ship reacting this way to an interdiction, as they were violently yanked out of hyper-warp. He looked up in alarm, just as Yamamoto stared at him with a terrified expression, and cried out a warning.

He whirled around, and found himself staring at a black clad figure standing just inside the door to the simulator room. The assassin was pointing a strange looking pistol at him, and without even thinking about it he lashed out with his mind, slapping the pistol away. The gun flew out of the shadowy figure's hand, then skidded across the floor before coming to a stop by the wall.

Drawing two razor-sharp mono-edged blades, the ninja padded to the right, the matte black blades seeming to draw light in, rather than reflecting it like ordinary steel. The shadowy assailant suddenly darted over to the simulator and plunged a blade through the sophisticated machine, destroying the device in a shower of sparks.

The holo-simulation of the dojo ended in an instant, with Yamamoto banished from sight, and leaving John standing in a simple, unfurnished training room. He was left holding a blunt edged simulator blade in his hands, and the assassin stalked towards him, whirling the two deadly looking blades with an elaborate flourish.

His opponent was wiry, and a lot shorter than his own six-foot-two, probably standing at about five-foot-five. Clad from head to toe in a featureless black bodysuit made from some strange mesh type material, the ninja cut a sinister, mysterious figure.

\*Alyssa!\* he called out, as he backed away warily. \*Are you alright? I heard explosions. What's happening?!\*

His words were met with deathly silence, which made icy fingers of dread claw at his heart. The assassin gave him no respite, and came at him, blades flashing in a whirling display. John managed to deflect the attack, but he had to be careful parrying, angling his Odachi to avoid it being neatly sheared in half by the rapid slashes from the razor-sharp swords. He backed away, giving up ground as he blocked a dozen separate attacks.

\*John, what's wrong?!\* Edraele asked him in alarm. \*Why are you so worried?\*

John wanted to reply to her, but he had to devote his undivided attention to the assassin, who was lashing out at him with blindingly fast strikes. Edraele could hear his racing thoughts, and she stayed silent to avoid distracting him, although every fibre of her being was crying out in fear.

He tried to counterattack, but the black-clad opponent was very quick, neatly parrying with the right blade and readying a counterattack of its own with the left. As their blades locked, John's muscles surged, and he chopped down, taking advantage of his raw brute strength. The assassin was taken by surprise as the mono-blade flicked down, slashing across its left forearm, and spattering dark red blood across the training mat.

There was a strange humming sound, and the ninja back-flipped away, moving impossibly fast. The black-clad intruder glanced down at the wound on their arm, then seemed to freeze for a second before shifting stances. Suddenly the assassin burst into action again, charging forward with arms outstretched, pivoting and gliding inwards in a radically different fighting style. John's eyes widened as he stepped backwards and desperately parried the looping, arcing strikes.

He'd never seen anyone move so fast before, and the whirling blades caught him for several glancing hits on both arms. He hissed at the slash of pain, then recovered quickly and tried not to let the cuts distract him from his frantic defence. The assassin span away, then came to a stop, glancing down at the mono-blades as John's blood dripped off the end, pattering onto the mat.

Taking advantage of the momentary lull, John pushed out with his will, enveloping his sword in dancing lightning. At least that's what he tried to do, but without the Etherite crystals in his Crystal Alyssium blade to bond the electricity to his sword, the arcing lightning surged out wildly, and blasted into the ceiling.

The assassin flinched away from the uncontrolled lightning strike, then froze for another almost imperceptible moment. Shifting stances once more, and adopting a new one that John was much more familiar with, the ninja swept towards him, moving through the Kenjutsu Kata. He had no time to try another lightning attack, and was forced to move his blade in a blur, stepping back to avoid the flashing blades. He blocked and deflected the slashes at his head and chest, which were coming at him with neat, controlled thrusts and strikes.

He thought he was holding his own, until the Ninja attacked low and to the left, forcing a hurried parry. As the two blades met, he heard the odd humming sound again, and his opponent leapt upwards with an astounding burst of speed. The assassin's second sword scythed downwards, neatly shearing through the blade of his training Odachi, and leaving him completely defenceless.

John knew that he was a dead man unless he did something really crazy to try and turn the fight around. He dropped his sword hilt, and lunged forward, grabbing the startled Ninja by the Nanoweave tunic. Yanking the slight opponent towards him with a savage display of strength, he slammed his forehead into the wiry assassin's cloth masked face.

The bodysuit ripped away as the assassin was sent sprawling backwards, clutching at her battered face as she skidded across the floor. John blinked in surprise to see that he had just headbutted a sallow-skinned woman, her broken nose smearing a splash of crimson across her face. She had rolled with the impact, her astonishingly fast reflexes the only thing that saved her from having her head caved in by the crushing blow. Her angular dark-brown eyes looked into his own, but as their eyes met, he felt a shiver run down his spine. Those eyes were blank, dead things, utterly devoid of any spark of life.

As he stood there in shock, the assassin leapt to her feet and darted across the room in a flash, moving almost faster than his eyes could follow. He suddenly realised that she'd just been driving him backwards to give her an opportunity to retrieve her dropped gun. She dived for the pistol he'd knocked from her grasp, and fired wildly in his direction, not giving him a chance to upset her aim with another telekinetic attack. He rushed after her, but felt a couple of sharp stings in his chest, and then staggered drunkenly, before toppling face down on the mat.

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Faye was happily watching the long range scanners up on the Bridge, while glancing through her archived copy of the Raptor manual for the umpteenth time. Dana and Irillith had promised that they'd set up an upgraded link between the Invictus and the Raptor, which would allow her to remotely pilot the gunship from back here on the assault cruiser.

Her daydreams of flying John and his girls into battle were rudely interrupted by several explosions, and she looked up in shock as the Invictus began to vibrate ferociously as they were dumped out of hyper-warp. She frantically searched the long range scans in case she'd missing a marauding ship, but there were no ships anywhere near them on the Sector Map.

Fluttering over to Irillith's IntOps console, she activated the cam-feed footage, cycling through the images to find out what had happened. It seemed like there had been multiple explosions in two locations. The Drive Room was filled with smoke, and the Tachyon Drive was dark and lifeless, rendered completely inert. That explained the ship dropping out of hyper-warp, but Faye was far more worried about the carnage in the Officers' Lounge. There were several cameras in there, but two of them had been completely destroyed, while the last two showed glimpses of devastation between the clouds of acrid black smoke.

Faye felt fear grip her chest, and she cycled through all four hundred and fifty cameras onboard simultaneously, desperate to find any signs of life. She knew the girls were preparing a party for Jade in the Officers' Lounge, as Alyssa had come up to the Bridge to tell Faye, Calara and Irillith all about it. She felt even more scared when she suddenly spotted John battling for his life against some unknown black-clad assailant.

She watched the two of them locked in a deadly dance, and gasped when she saw John receive a number of cuts as she witnessed the fight unfold. She moaned in horror when she saw him get shot, but she felt a slight sense of relief when she spotted the two darts sticking out of his chest, rather than gaping gunshot wounds.

The mysterious assassin strode over to his prone form, and began dragging him towards the door, possessing a strength unlikely in such a slight girl. A brief movement on cameras thirty-two and thirty-three caught Faye's eye, and Jade's tousled dark-green hair appeared from under the covers as she rolled over in her sleep.

Faye felt a surge of hope, and she called the bedroom on the internal comm, cranking the ringtone volume up to maximum. Jade sat bolt upright at the obnoxious sound, hands clamped over her ears, and she frowned at camera thirty-three.

"Faye, is that you?" the Nymph called out, rubbing the sleep from her eyes.

"YES!" Faye blurted out. "We're under attack! Someone's got John!"

Jade leapt out of bed, her drowsiness gone in an instant. "Where?" she demanded, before shimmering in a verdant haze and shape-shifting into a huge green Tiger.

"Deck Three! His training Holo-suite," Faye replied immediately. She hesitated a moment, and then blurted out, "I think the girls are hurt! There was an explosion..."

Jade's furry head looked up at the camera, and she nodded once, before dashing out of the bedroom, claws scrabbling for purchase on the floor.

Faye flicked back to the corridor cameras on Deck Three, and watched aghast as the assassin hauled John's prone body out behind her. She suddenly had a brainwave, and activated the internal defences on that Deck, while being careful not to slam down the emergency bulkheads so that Jade could still come to the rescue. Two Gatling Lasers slid smoothly out of the walls, and she trained them on the black garbed intruder.

The two-metre-long barrels spun up with an ominous whir, and the woman pulling John looked up in surprise. Faye's tiny purple face took on a grim cast as she pulled the trigger to send a deadly hail of laser bolts at the assassin who was trying to abduct her friend. Except nothing happened. She noticed a flashing warning in the fire control GUI, and stared at the "Permission-denied" message in anguish. Rendered utterly impotent, she was forced to watch helplessly as the ninja manoeuvred John into the corridor.

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Jade fell into the smooth loping run of the Tiger, revelling in the effortless agility of this form. Familiar scents filled the air: those of the other girls, from John, and the ship, but there was one new one in the mix. It smelt musty, like an old suit left in a wardrobe for one too many years, but that wasn't all. There was an unpleasant stink of some kind of hydraulic oil intertwined with that scent, which made her nose wrinkle in distaste, curling her lips back and exposing her massive canines.

Bounding along the corridor on Deck Two, she reached the grav-tube, and was about to dive down to the lower deck, when she caught the acrid smell of smoke coming from the Officers' Lounge. Remembering Faye's frantic message about the girls, she half twisted, turning towards the double doors to go and help them. John was in danger though too, and she was torn with indecision, caught between an urgent desire to help all the people she cared about.

Although she knew John would want her to go and help the girls, her basic Nymph nature won out. As much as she loved Alyssa and the other girls, her purpose was to serve her Master, and he was in trouble. She dived into the grav-tube, floated down in the red glow, and then padded out onto the corridor on Deck Three.

The source of the stale stench was busy manhandling her Master, dragging him across the floor like a slab of beef, and Jade let out a blood curdling roar from deep in her chest. She sank low, prowling forward while lashing her tail with anger. Lightning burst out of her paws to shroud her six-inch-long claws with writhing electricity, and her lips curled back in a ferocious snarl as she stalked after her prey.

The assassin released her grasp on John, and calmly drew both swords from the sheaths across her back. The razor-sharp blades were well oiled, and slid free without a sound. Dropping into a defensive crouch, her weight was perfectly balanced on her feet, while her cold, dead eyes never left the Jade Tiger for a moment. She held one sword in front of her, horizontally across her chest, while the other was raised in the air behind her head running parallel to her shoulders.

Jade's big emerald eyes narrowed, and she charged in to attack, pouncing on this rank intruder. Her paws flashed out, the vicious claws catching and ripping flesh, and burning the half-dead creature with a sizzling bolt of electricity from her lightning sheathed limbs. The assassin tore free from Jade's grasp in a fountain of blood, and as Shinatobe rolled clear, the Nymph landed on her four heavy paws, then skidded to a halt. She twisted her body, turning around for another attack, when she suddenly felt a stabbing pain in her chest.

As fast as Jade was, Shinatobe had moved even faster, engaging her adrenal pump as soon as the Tiger had attacked. The cybernetic device hummed as it flooded her system with a potent adrenalin cocktail, letting her muscles surge into action with supernatural speed. As Jade sailed overhead, the assassin thrust upwards with her sword, accepting a grievous wound across her back and shoulder in exchange for a killing stroke.

Jade crouched low to the ground to get ready to pounce, but the pain in her torso intensified, becoming a lance of agony. Despite every fibre of her being urging her after the enemy who was trying to take John away from her, she sagged to the ground, flopping weakly onto her side. Her growl of rage came out as a weak, feeble whimper, and she was suddenly and painfully aware of the sword hilt sticking out of her chest, the blade driven straight through her body.

She could only lie on the floor, her breathing coming in uneven, ragged breaths as she stared at the black-clad woman who was watching her impassively. The assassin straightened, then reached down for John, hauling him away down the corridor with one arm, the other hanging limply at her side.

A tear formed in her beautiful emerald eyes, splashing down on the floor as she watched her Master being carried away. Try as she might, she couldn't even move, her body weak and lifeless, refusing to respond, no matter her desperation. Jade forgot all about the agony from the blade driven through her chest, as she was overwhelmed with the soul crushing realisation that she had failed John when he needed her the most. She let out a broken sob as she closed her eyes for the last time.

"Jade..." Faye wept, watching the horrifying outcome of the fight, while powerless to do anything about it.

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