Three Square Meals Ch. 86 – preview

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Perfect!” he exclaimed, before walking with her back up the Firing Range to the rifles they’d left on the shooting bench.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The two girls shared a smile then separated and climbed out of bed.

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

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

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

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

Sakura blushed, remembering the attention the two beautiful girls had lavished on her the last time they’d been together. “You don’t need to feel obligated, not after everything you’ve done for me.”

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

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

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

Sakura laughed and put her arms around the brunette, giving her a grateful hug. “Thank you for looking after me.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

\*Do you want me to come with you?\* Alyssa asked, catching his eye as she leant forward.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Eito studied the display for a long while, the tension gradually easing from his shoulders. He glanced skyward, then turned to walk back to his house, a hint of a smile on his face for the first time in twenty-three years.