

An Unfortunate Decision

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An Unfortunate Decision

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The Caldar Chronicles
Book Seven

Floyde Leong

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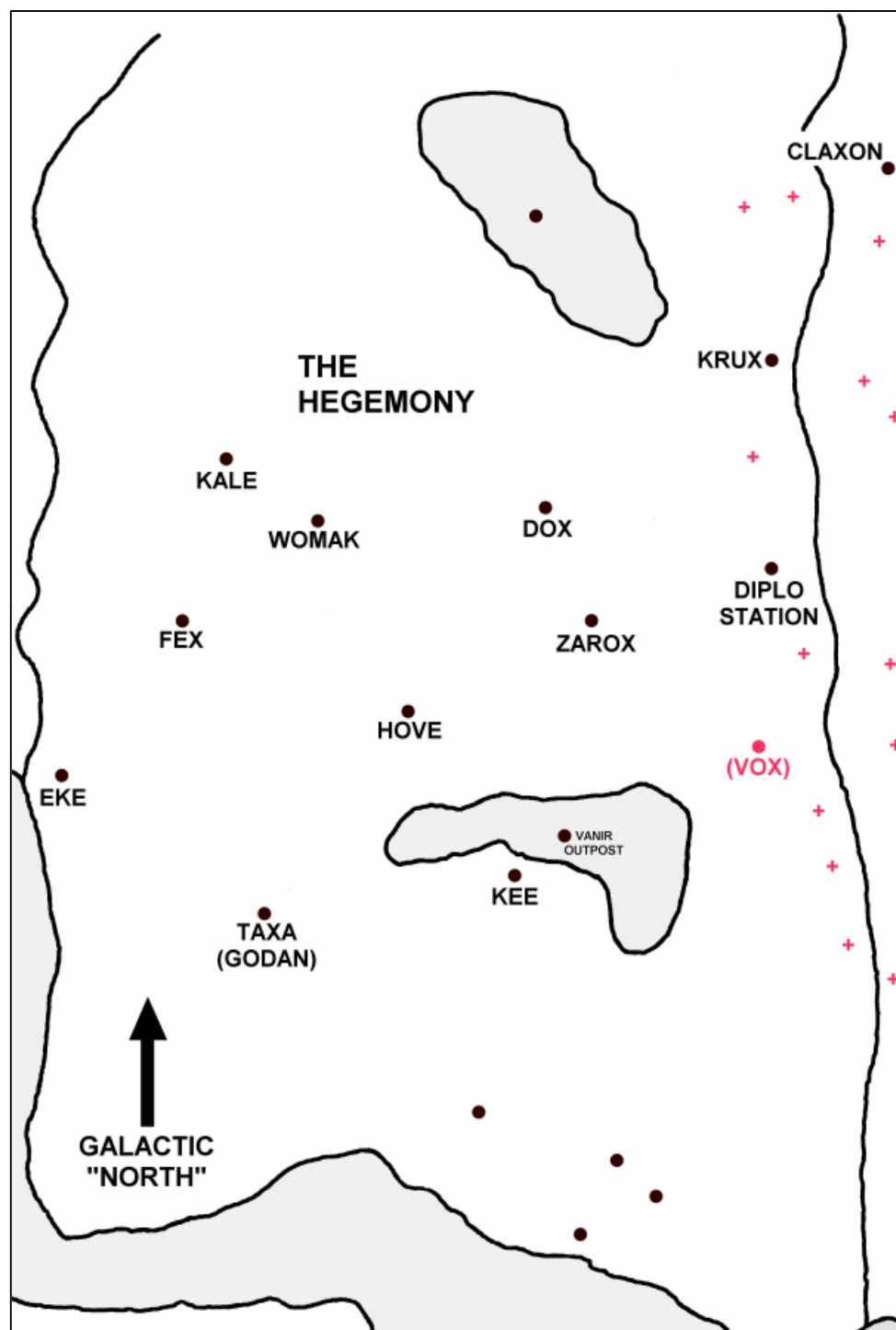
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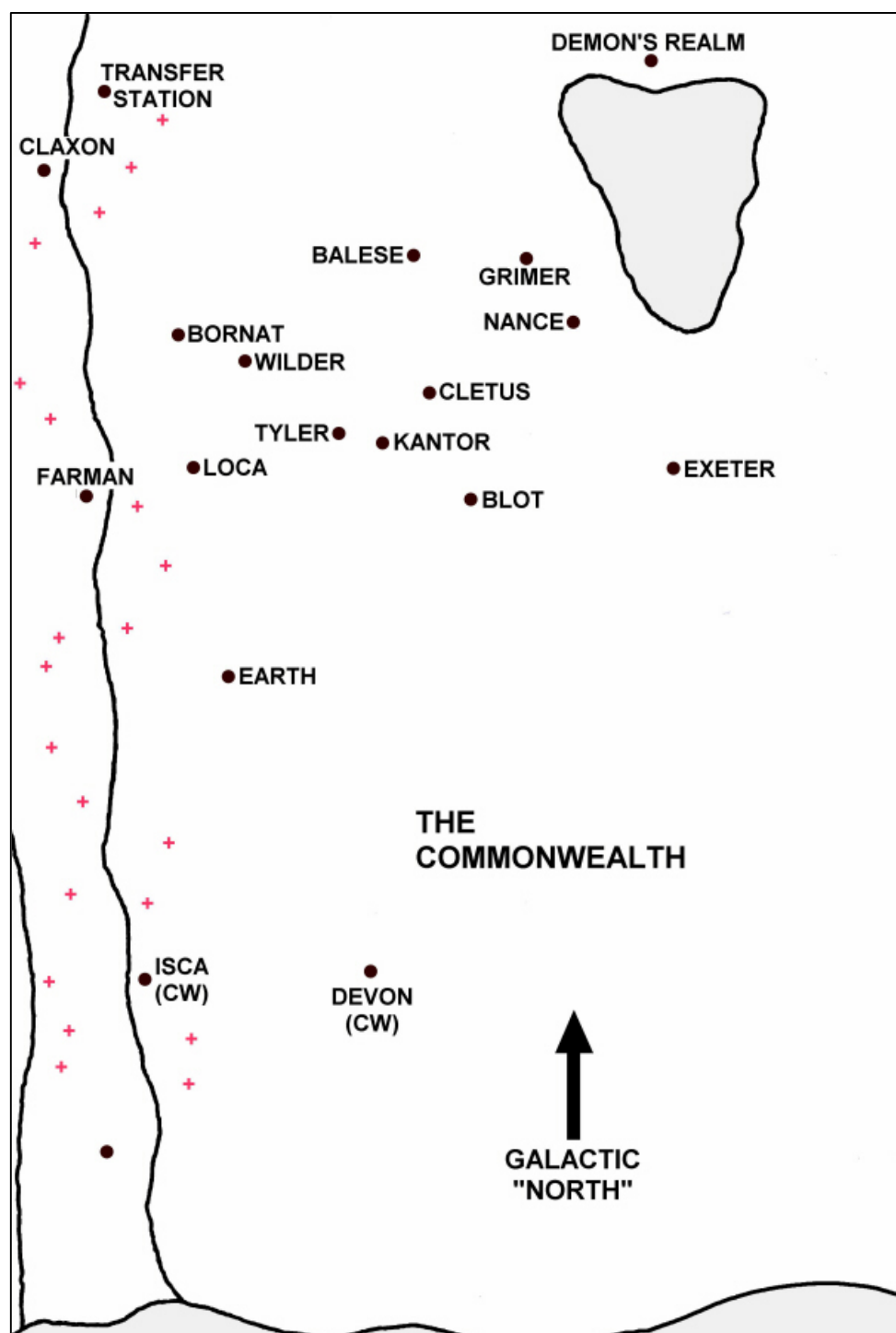
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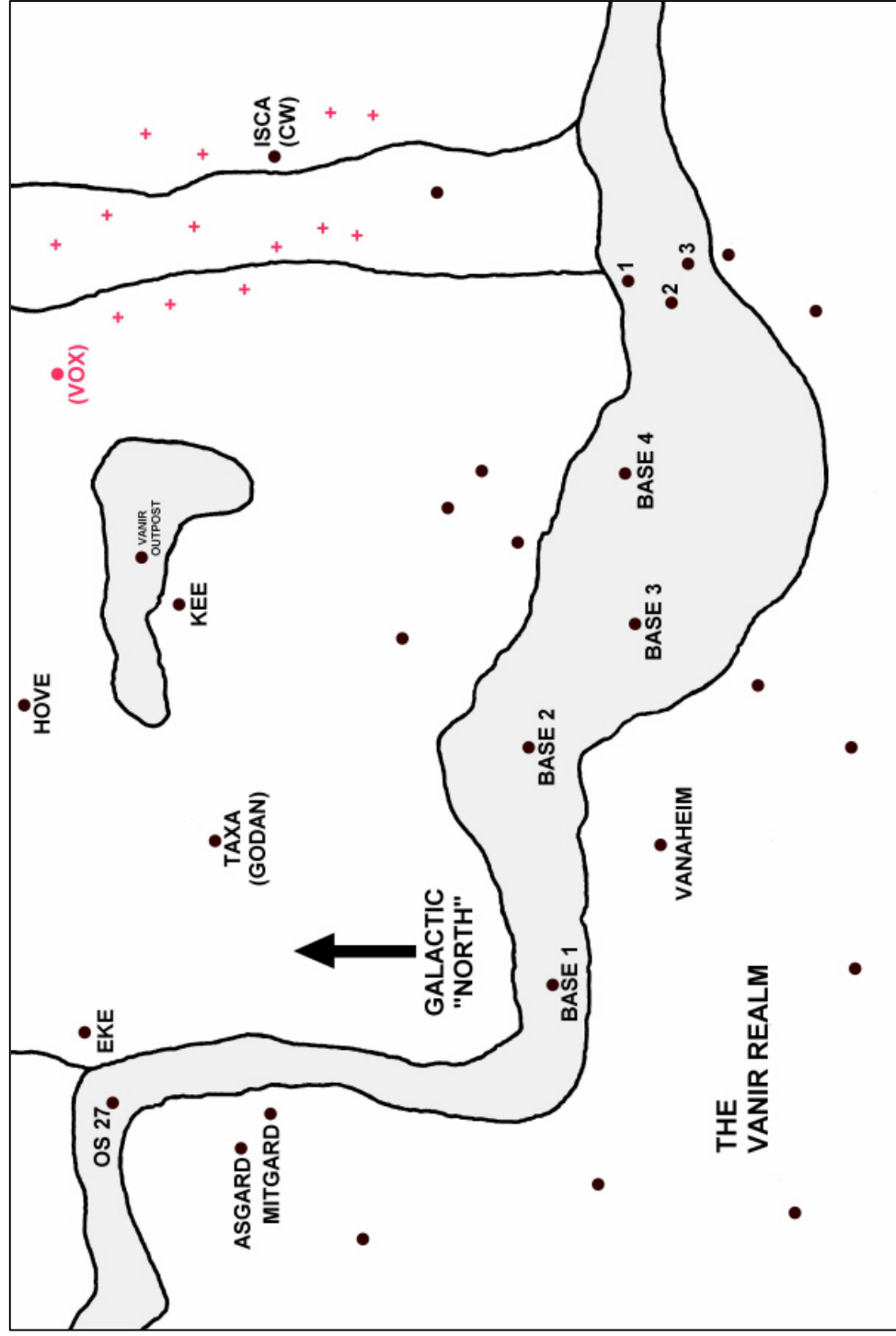
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For Gabriela, who brings smiles to her parents and Grandparents

A void... a place with no content, yet teases at wonders to come...







*Into every life, a little rain must fall...
(Just before it starts falling really, really HARD)*

*Every cloud has a silver lining...
(But it'll STILL rain on you)*

*A watched pot never boils...
(Until you turn your BACK on it; then it boils OVER)*

*You can't fix stupid...
(No matter HOW many times you beat it over the head)*

*Destiny waits for no man ...
(But make it entertaining enough, and Destiny just might stick around
to LAUGH at your pitiful efforts towards success)*

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Prologue

Lord Rondal Caldar, the Commonwealth Emperor's First Sword, discovered a new alien species that had been monitoring and interfering with human activities for their own protection.

With the help of his Senior Staff, he completed the delicate task of approaching and communicating with humanity's first true alien species – the Vanir.

Having transported the new Vanir Ambassador and his assistant to a face-to-face meeting with the Royal House of Kantor, he successfully conveyed them, and the Kantite Ambassador on a return trip to the Vanir Prime.

Along the way, his own hubris interfered and caused him to make incautious and even fatal mistakes that had left him suffering from debilitating incapacities at the hands of rogue elements of Vanir society.

In spite of all this, he and his crew managed to suppress those negative elements staging a coup against the current Vanir Prime, thus achieving a somewhat stable working relationship upon which to build a peaceful foundation.

Now that peace was at hand; Rondal Caldar's focus turned inward, as the insidious poisoning of his human body caused it to deteriorate at an accelerated rate.

In despair over his own deepening weakness and rapid aging, he took advantage of Lady Trenka Song, the First Wife's agent, and tormented her to the point of having her render justice upon him for his dalliance on the "dark side" against the Elder's Laws.

April 21, 2005, Aboard the Kraken, In the Gym

Ronnie figured Trenka was just about ripe, and he was just about done. He started a punishing attack for several seconds, before backing off the pressure so he could fire her up some more.

"Oh, the *BEST* part was how you made Ai feel so *HELPLESS* when you *DESERTED HER!* Just as well... she was *WORTHLESS AS AN ELDER!*" he shouted while brandishing his sword loosely in her direction. "Come *ON*, Trinkie-baby, *YOU* know how weak she was! She couldn't kill *ME!* She couldn't even kill *SAI!*"

He stood still while laughing loudly, and she stopped and stared at him while catching her breath.

"What do you mean?" she asked darkly, while focusing all her attention on his words now.

“I mean she ordered Sai to *EXECUTE* me, but she *WOULDN'T DO IT!* She *REFUSED* to do it! *SAI* knew Ai was insane!”

“No ... she didn't ... Ai wouldn't...”

“Yes. She did. And when *THAT* didn't work, she tried kill *SAI* ... but I couldn't let *THAT* happen now, could I,” he said menacingly, just now noticing Sai entering the compartment. “So I had a choice – do I let the evil bitch live, *OR DO I PUT HER DOWN?*”

He paused for a moment to let it sink in.

“I let her live ... *BUT I BURNED OUT HER MIND!*”

“*Trenka – DON'T LISTEN TO HIM!*” Sai pressed urgently, but Trenka was too focused on Ronnie.

Trenka was quivering in fury, but still didn't move, although her eyes never left Caldar.

“Trenka, he's *BAITING* you! *DON'T FALL FOR IT!*” Sai shouted aloud, but Trenka never flinched.

“What's the *matter*, First Sword? Lili sent you out here to take my *head*, and I've gone to the trouble of teaching you *how*. Or are you the *SAME* ... *WORTHLESS* ... *WHINY* ... *BITCH I THOUGHT YOU WERE ALL THOSE YEARS AGO?*”

Trenka snapped out of it and advanced with determination. Her kill strikes were accurate, and hitting his blocks hard and fast, but he was looking for something *special*.

“Come *on* ... come *ON*, *TRINKIE!* Show me what you *GOT!*” he taunted, and was finally rewarded with the set of her stance.

As she extended and flicked her wrist, he declined to block her attack and called the *Fire* instead.

“*TRENKA – NO!*” Sai shouted, but was as helpless to stop Trenka, as Trenka was to stop her swing ... even as the sword she was holding flamed to life, and the bright, violet, *screaming* blade cleanly severed the First Lord's neck.

For just a moment, Trenka felt a flash of triumph, even as she saw the peaceful smile cross Ronnie's lips, before his head tilted sideways and fell to the floor. The sword in her hand popped into silence, and she looked at it for just a moment, before letting it fall to the floor next to the body. Meanwhile, all time seemed to stop as the observers froze at the scene before them.

The enormity of the situation finally overcame her, and she dropped to her knees and began hyperventilating. Sai stood still; watching from the

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doorway, and wondering how she'd missed all the signs leading up to this. She slowly walked over to Trenka and squatted down beside her; reaching out, but not quite touching her.

"I killed him. I – I really killed him," Trenka whispered dully, then bent over far enough to touch her head to the mat. "I'm sorry ... I'm so sorry ... I'm so sorry ... I didn't mean to..." Her words faded as she broke into quiet sobs that shook her body, and left her tears dripping on the mat.

No one could move and no one could speak, until Casmir slowly walked over and squatted down beside the Seniors.

"You didn't kill him, Lady Song. You *couldn't* have killed him. *He's* the one that called the Fire. *You* can't do that ... not being a Healer and all," he said quietly.

"No woman can do that," another guardsman said. "You saw him before. His sword fires violet ... and it's a *talker*. As individual as a fingerprint."

Trenka was looking up at them now, but not really sure what they were talking about. The look on her face was obvious, though, and the senior guard stepped forward to explain it to her.

"Look ... the rank and file get power swords with power packs. They all come up the same and they're all pretty quiet about it. Kantites – the *Royals* – we don't *need* power packs," he said, then held out his own sword and called the *Fire*.

It came up in a slightly dark shade of blue. In moments, three more swords were drawn and energized, and they all had different shades to them. One of them even droned a little.

They all shut down with a little pop, before the senior guard continued.

"I think I understand why we're here now, my Ladies. The First Lord wanted witnesses. For *whatever* reason, I think he knew his end was coming and didn't want to die in bed. He chose *you*, Lady Song, to help him across."

"And he paid you *well* for the journey, my Lady," Casmir added. "You're the match of ... well ... *me* for one. He taught you a lot. We've been watching on the security system. Any time a master swordsman teaches, it pays to watch and learn. What he taught you will help save *our* lives at some point."

"It's true, Trenka. I – I just didn't see it in time," Sai told her quietly before hugging her tightly. "Ronnie was getting worse. Déjà said he was in a lot of pain. Oh Gods... Déjà... I – I have to tell Lili ... and the kids, and ... and Maya."

She looked at the body, and her eyes began to tear as she forced herself to look at Ronnie's pieces laying there in ... not really that much of a pool of blood. When he'd Fired her sword, he must have done it with a *vengeance*.

She extended through his head, but the essence of his being seemed to have left him already. Slowly reaching out, she touched his still-warm hand, and squeezed it a tiny bit, but jerked back in *shock*!

"You *BASTARD!*" she shouted angrily, before reaching out to the bridge.

Somewhere Else, Slightly out of Phase with Reality...

Destiny hadn't been all **that** surprised at the outcome. It was pretty much a given, when Caldor **deliberately** dropped his guard and **let** the woman take his head. He was still curious, of course, if the foolish man's **backup** plan would hold true, but since now he was out of play, the Fate was released from her involuntarily frozen pose.

"No ... no ... *why did he do that?*" the Fainting Fate whispered.

"Stupidity... Hubris... I'm curious to see if he **continues** down this path or..."

*He paused when the Fainting Fate turned to him with an expression of **shock** on her face. Could it be that she **really** had no clue?*

The Kraken, On the Bridge

Torga was wondering what other names Manya was considering for their child, hopefully not the *first* one she'd mentioned, when his brain was pierced by Lady Tal's silent shout.

'CALDAR'S HAD AN ACCIDENT! GET ONE OF THE STASIS BOXES TO THE GYM IMMEDIATELY! SEND DONNEL ARDEN WITH IT! – A REAL VANIR STASIS BOX!' forcefully pounded into his head, and he immediately reached out to both Endo and Gallus, before calling Donnel Arden in his lab to get him started on the way.

It wasn't until a few seconds afterwards that he wondered why Lady Tal had even bothered to reach out to him, instead of contacting Donnel herself. Then he considered the tone of her sending, brought up the security monitor for the improvised gym, and counted the body parts lying around.

In the Gym

Sai had completed her silent shout to the duty officer before bending over, and looking at the Fire-sealed wounds, with her head shaking at the impossibility of it; but if they worked *fast* enough...

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Kneeling on the floor, she called out a silent prayer before drawing the Healing through her and directing it to Ronnie's body. For those in the room, it was as if a spotlight had been switched on that was focused on the panicky Senior, and a body minus a head – *both* of them now covered in a bright, white glow. She kept it up while ignoring the sobs still coming from Trenka, and the actions of the senior guardsman when he covered the severed head with a towel.

Donnel showed up after a precious few more minutes, immediately followed by the stasis box, with Endo and Gallus as the prime movers. It was less than a minute later when the First Lord and his head were dumped into his own "Emergency Medical Transport Unit" before Donnel powered it up. With the status lights blinking satisfactorily, they were ready to move it out, but Sai stopped them until she could put a towel over the observation window. Then she ordered her boys to put it in a storeroom and post two guards at the door until further notice, but held Donnel back.

As they left with the covered box, she shook her head in disgust, before turning back to oversee the management of *this* little disaster.

On the Microcosmus

Lady Huan watched her lover humming happily to himself as he worked to set up the next test. She did not really have the heart to tell him, but could not let it wait any longer.

"Hifacious?" she called softly while walking up beside him and seeing the smile on his face from the side.

"Yes, my Lady," he said, then turned to see her standing beside him, but her face was not very happy at the moment.

"Hifacious ... there has been an accident on Vanaheim ... and also on the *Kraken*," she said quietly, before reaching out and pulling his hands to her. "This can wait for a little while longer, my love."

On the Kraken, In the Security Center

Lady Tal had contacted the security center and spoken with the duty supervisor. Fortunately, he'd been there by himself at the time of the incident, and watched – *mesmerized* – at the actions of the First Lord against the Elder's representative. That had turned to shock when she'd delivered the fatal blow – he *also* immediately knowing she didn't Fire that sword herself. The color and sound was as unique as the other guardsman had said, having seen it all throughout his years of service with other Royals. At Lady Tal's command, he'd sealed the recording, and halted any *further* recording until specifically permitted; but was instructed to observe and pay attention to what came next.

In the Gym

Sai slowly looked over her small audience, before announcing the “official” version of ... the *TRUTH*...

“Gentlemen, the First Lord has suffered an unfortunate *ACCIDENT*,” she said firmly, while holding their *absolute* attention with the fierceness of her expression.

When Lady Tal paused, they all wondered how the box those two Drecks crewmen had loaded him into could *possibly* help the First Lord’s rather dire prognosis.

Sai glanced up at the security monitor, then reached out to the security center; feeling the supervisor’s tension as he watched them, before turning back to her captive audience.

“He will be attended to by the Healers and Seniors of the *Microcosmus*, and will *remain* in their care until such time as he feels ready to resume command. I *WILL* know the source of any rumors passed around that say *OTHERWISE!* Do I make myself *CLEAR?*”

“Yes, Senior Tal!”

“Yes, Lady Tal!”

“Yes, my Healer!”

“Yes, my Lady Tal!”

Sai turned to Donnel and tilted her head in his direction, seeing him take a short breath while quietly folding his hands before himself.

“Donnel?”

“Lady Tal, Ronnie seems stable for the time being, and you *know* how persistent he can be. I don’t doubt he’ll recover from this little scratch like he has from all the others,” he quietly suggested.

He saw her face darken, but sprayed more fuel on the flame anyway.

“*You* saw the mess he made of his head. At least *this* one was cleaner,” he continued dryly, getting her face to freeze even harder before it began to thaw.

‘*ASSHOLE!*’ she silently shouted at him.

“Yes, my Lady Tal... We *all* have one,” he said, to the guardsmen’s confusion, but she let it slide.

Then she looked down at Trenka, who was still kneeling on the floor over a puddle of her own tears. She frowned, before looking up at Ardan again and dropping her voice to a softer level.

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“Donnel ... would you please call Milsie ... Doctor Blanaid, and have her come help you escort Lady Song to her quarters. If you have something you could give her?” she asked, then gestured with thumb and little finger to indicate drinking.

“It would be my pleasure to accommodate Lady Song. Ahh ... if you think it wise, perhaps we should bring her to *our* quarters ... just to keep an eye on her?”

She pushed through him and saw the wisdom of it before nodding, and Donnel stepped away to use the communications panel while she stood there and shook her head at her own forgetfulness. She could have had the bridge make the call.

With another shake of her head, she turned back to address the guardsmen once again.

“I’m sorry, gentlemen, but everything seems to be happening in a rush. Lady Laisee will be arriving shortly, with her daughter and Commander Zickgraf. They will need help moving their party to ships doc, and I would appreciate it if you made yourselves available...” she paused and glanced at the ships timer, “...at around the bottom of the hour,” she told them.

The senior guard acknowledged her orders, before starting them cleaning up the gym. Then he called the Security Center to advise the supervisor of his new orders.

Milsie arrived in very little time, to see the last of the blood being wiped up. Donnel waved his hand at her and pointed to Trenka, who was still down on the floor. Milsie let out a worried gasp, but he reached her before she could say anything, and quickly whispered what they were to do. They both approached Trenka and helped her to her feet, before leading her away while talking to her quietly, and being careful she was paying attention where she was walking.

Before the guardsmen left the gym, Sai called out to them.

“A moment, gentlemen ... the *TRUTH*, if you please?”

The senior guardsman glanced at the others, before stepping forward.

“Lord Caldar was giving advanced training to the Elder’s First Sword. During the course of that training, his quite-gifted student unfortunately injured him. The First Lord is being treated by the professional staff and crew from the *Microcosmus*, and will remain under their care until such time that he feels he is ready to resume command.”

“And Lady Trenka Song?”

Casmir nervously stepped forward alongside his senior.

“Uhh ... Lady Song is terribly upset about the accident, and believes it to be much worse than it actually ... *is?*” He paused and saw her slow nod before continuing. “Her ... ah ... her guilt is causing her such extreme distress that she is seriously confused over the *actual* severity of the injury she caused the First Lord ... so much so, that she’ll be under the care of the Healers and Seniors until ... until they think she’s got her head back on tight?”

He’d cringed the moment he said it, but Sai let out a single snort, then waved them on their way. She didn’t miss the elbow to the ribs given by the senior guard to the younger one, though.

Once alone, Sai looked around the gym and found nothing really out of place – except for the tip of a bloody towel hanging out of the laundry bin. She shook her head, then slowly strolled over while thinking of what was left to do.

After flipping the towel all the way into the bin, she contacted the security supervisor; confirmed he’d observed and heard everything said, then instructed him to squelch any rumors contrary to the “official” incident report, plus make a backup of the recording to a data tab – *one each* – and *wipe the original!* She would be by in a few minutes to pick it up.

Letting out a sigh, she leaned against the bulkhead, slid down to the floor, and focused on her next task.

‘*Lili, there is something you should know*’ she sent, then somberly waited for a response.

April 22, Kantor, The Royal Homestead, Late Afternoon

“Lili, where are you going?” Radatel asked.

“I have to tell him before ... before he finds out from someone else.”

“Let me go with–”

“No! He might... He might get carried away, and ... I have to apologize to him,” she said in a whisper.

“You don’t have to apologize for *anything*. He brought this on *himself*. Although, *I* would have chosen death by Déjà and Kiki.”

“*Radatel!* This is *not* funny! Ronnie is *dead!*”

They could both hear the angry growl outside their patio door.

“That is not for *sure*, yet. You know how *persistent* he can be.”

They both watched as a dark shadow paced in front of the doorway before stopping several feet away from it to wait for them.

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Radatel walked over to the door and slid it wide open. Boots sat outside, waiting patiently. Lili slowly walked up to the door, then stepped over the threshold and stopped; kneeling on the patio carpet while Boots stood up and slowly approached, ears up and attentive. He got within claws reach and sat down again.

“Boots... *Targa Slayer*,” she corrected, herself thanks to Radatel’s briefing. “Rondal felt it was time for him to end his days. He tormented another warrior until she ... until he allowed her to hit him... Very badly.”

Boots just blinked.

‘Too young’ he pressed.

It was only muffled to Lili, but Radatel heard it clearly.

“Yes. He *was* too young, but he became sick in his heart, and thought he was done,” Radatel explained, hoping the concept wouldn’t be lost on Boots.

‘Stupid Talking Man’

Radatel recognized Boots’ name for Ronnie, and agreed.

“Yes. Ronnie can be *very* stupid sometimes.”

‘Bring home... Make well’ Boots pressed at them, and Lili finally caught that last.

“Yes, Targa Slayer. We will try very hard to make him well. We all miss him. Maya ... *Milk Mother* wants him,” she said, using Boots name for Maya.

‘Milk Mother ... Make well. Make kits’

“We want her to try,” Radatel said, and Boots stood up and looked at him for a moment, before turning to face Lili, eye-to-eye.

He leaned in and licked her one time ... from her neck to her *forehead*.

‘Salty’ he pressed, before chuffing once and turning away.

‘Lonely’ they both heard, before he disappeared into the bushes again; the sound of his footpads already gone before he left the patio.

They both remained silent for several more seconds until Radatel finally let out a deep breath.

“I think it’s about time we audition a new *mate* for Boots, don’t you, my dear?” he asked quietly, but looking down, he could see the faint outline of dampness around the backside of her robe. He discreetly withdrew to avoid causing her any further embarrassment, before calling from the doorway to come shower with him before supper.

Outside the Children's Patio

"Well, *that* went well," Walter said with relief.

"Hey, *anytime* Boots lets you walk away is a relief," Josie reminded them.

"It was *Grandfather's* fault he let Trenka cut his head off," Cathy pointed out.

'Walter... Girls, you know what your Grandfather did...' Sai interrupted them '...and I'm sending the security recordings to Lili so that everyone who *SHOULD* know, *WILL* know – and that does *NOT* include Maya!' she pressed upon them.

'We understand, Grandmother' Walter sent. 'At best, he's had an accident and they're working on him ... slowly. What's the real damage?'

'Well... Head... Body... Floor... Not real close together'

'Ha! Now you're sounding like Grandfather!' Josie crowed silently.

'Really, Grandmother. What did you find?' Walter asked again.

'Well ... I couldn't hear anything from his head – obviously – but when I touched his hand, I swear it twitched, and ... and I *THINK* I heard *MUSIC*. Does that make *ANY* sense at all?' she asked in confusion; afraid for a moment she'd been imagining things.

The kids went into a private huddle before breaking a moment later, with Cathy the assigned spokesperson this time.

'Ahhh, Grandmother... You how Grandfather likes to have backups of ... everything? Well, he might possibly have thought of a way to bypass the loss of his head. You know ... because you wanted to chop off it for all those years?'

'What? He's got a box somewhere that he ... he dumped his memories into?' Sai asked incredulously.

'Well ... not exactly' Cathy admitted. 'And we aren't real sure it will work the way he expects. And he's not really that good of a Senior, either'

'What did he do, Cathy' Sai asked, now starting to warm up to the idea of it.

'Let's just say that ... any *EXTRA* organs you find in unusual places ... don't let Commander Woldron cut them out' she finally gave it up.

'Why he ... inside his own ... Eeewwwww!'

Back in Vanir space, Sai grimaced; suddenly understanding *exactly* what those extra organs she'd found in Ronnie's pelvic area were.

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'Yes. We all agree' Walter shared.

'You ALL know this?'

'Just the Senior Staff' Josie admitted.

'And me' Rose chimed in.

'And Lili?' Sai asked, but was greeted with silence until Walter broke it.

'We don't trust Aunt Lili as much as we trust you, Grandmother. You didn't kill him the first time, so we figured you'd give him another chance this time'

'You knew?'

'And Lady Ai no longer presents a threat to the family ... OR the Crown'
Walter added pointedly, leaving the rest unsaid.

'Ay-yah' Sai's muttered imprecation came from across known space.

'Please keep us informed as to Grandfather's progress' he asked her.
'We'll be watching the Vanir from here. Mama Laisee is very close to finalizing the treaty, and hopefully Jaiying will be awake by then'

'Jaiying is ... how much do you know about Jaiying?' she asked, but thought she already knew.

'We listened to Mama Laisee when she updated Aunt Lili' Cathy told her.

'Then we poked around in the memories of Galan and Hadrus' Josie shared. *'It was really bad, but it looked like they got to her in time'*

'Galan is pretty messed up about it, too' Cathy told them.

'He's gonna need some therapy' Josie suggested.

'I don't feel Jaiying right now, but sometimes I get a tiny impression of her ... somehow' Rose offered, which triggered a slight pause in the conversation that Sai ended up pushing through.

'Thank you, Girls... Walter... I have to go. My love to you all'

Sai ended the conversation, but not before hearing *'We love you, Grandmother'*

The kids looked at each other while silently sharing their sadness over the situation their cousins faced orbiting over Vanaheim.

For Rose, it was mostly the temporary loss of Jaiying's company – *hopefully*. For Jaiying ... she would return when they figured out how to deal with her damaged body – *hopefully*...

The extent of Jaiying's injuries was severe, even for Healers to deal with. Combat-Healers usually gained very *specific* talents in order to repair routine damage quickly. What had happened to Jaiying's tiny body didn't really fit the "quick fix" variety of repairs; instead needing very focused Healing in a variety of locations nearly all at once. Unfortunately, the benefit of being placed in a stasis that prevented further damage from occurring, also hindered efforts to effectively examine said damage and plan for its repair...

The female valaet wandered by and plopped down next to them, before rolling onto her backside to expose her itchy belly. Josie absently complied, while she brought up the other issue.

"What about the *other* project, Walter?" she asked, reminding him of what Aunt Lili had spoken to them about last month. "Did the delegation arrive safely?"

He gave a genuine smile for the *one* thing that seemed to be going smoothly.

"I've been keeping track, and so far, everyone seems to be behaving," he said. "Uncle Gagsa has kept his word, and it looks like they're in agreement. He even brought them back to the Master Pack court and restored their Pack status."

"Good! It's about *time* they all grew up!" Josie said. "When can we tell Grandma Sai?"

"Aunt Lili said not to bother anyone yet," Walter shared. "She doesn't want anyone to get too excited while Jaiying is unavailable, and Grandfather is ... resting."

"Ha!" Josie laughed, then rolled over and reached out to pull the valaet's tail, but Faithful Daughter was too quick for her and batted a claw-retracted paw at her.

April 27, On the Kraken

It had been six days since her mother and their guards had brought Jaiying's 'Emergency Medical Transport Unit' aboard the *Kraken*.

Petrus had been brought aboard on a stretcher, but was shifted back to his hated wheelchair and pushed to ships doc by a strangely melancholy Déjà – he only finding out later that Ronnie had suffered his *own* unfortunate accident. He'd been kept in the dark as to the details until the next day, when Sai had shown him the security recording.

He'd also been informed that Combat-Healers from the *Microcosmos* would be attending to him because he was needed back in command as soon as his feet could be reconstructed – *yet again* – but by more *experienced* practitioners, this time.

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On his second day back, Petrus made a personal appearance during the evening meal and announced the change in ship's Captain from Ronnie to himself. The reason cited was the unfortunate training accident that would keep the First Lord from performing his duties for the immediate future until he felt he was ready to resume command. Since everyone had already heard Ronnie was down, no one questioned it. The very few who knew *exactly* why, were not talking.

Ronnie had been held on board ship in his own 'EMTU' in a guarded storeroom until Sally and Samuel had become available – partly as representatives of the Prime, but mostly as technical advisors regarding the stasis boxes. This was so specific details about the stasis boxes could be explained to Commander Woldron and Lady Huan, before he was transferred to a secure compartment on board the *Microcosmus*. They needed time to come up with a suitable treatment plan, something made extremely cumbersome by Ronnie's decision to take things into his own hands and end his life earlier than expected.

They'd also brought along two factory representatives of the box manufacturer who were intrigued at new marketing possibilities that had never before been considered.

From initial conversations between all parties, they were not even sure recovery was possible – given that his head had effectively died, while his body had somehow not *quite* died while it was otherwise lying inert and headless on the gym floor.

At least they had time to think about it while he was still in stasis.

An Early Morning Meeting...

Healers and Seniors of four races sat around the conference room table this morning; reviewing their notes regarding Jaiying. Each of them had specific strengths and weaknesses, and they'd spent the last several days working with the Vanir engineers to understand the stasis process, and learning about what they could and could not do while the stasis field was active. Commander Woldron was there with his set of notes regarding test animals he'd subjected to stasis and recovered successfully – he *believed* – while Lady Huan had her own reports of what limited effects Healing efforts afforded living tissue while in stasis.

Donnel Ardan was there simply to make sure the enhanced holographic projector he'd installed in the conference room kept working properly during their meetings, which was in lieu of everyone taking over the gym at a moment's notice.

More than anything, all of them wanted their efforts to be successful, but not nearly as much as Jaiying's mother. Laisee had remained aboard,

while the Prime and her advisors dealt with the S'Slich'Tah Warren issue, planet-side.

Sally and Sai had been the only ones with any real experience with the process, so they took the lead in this morning's meeting, with Sai going first. She triggered the display system, which popped up a gender-neutral image of Jaiying's body lacking any recognizable features, other than a skeletal sub-structure inset with various bodily organs; the outer skin line indicated with a faintly translucent greenish tint. Even so, while the image slowly rotated on the horizontal plane at about average head height over the tabletop, she heard the same slight gasp from Laisee she'd heard every time it'd been displayed over the last several meetings.

"My Ladies ... Commander... From what Commander Woldron has reconstructed here, which was verified as much as possible by Lady Huan, this is the current condition of our client," Sai stated perfunctorily, while sharing it silently with Sally, even though Sally was wearing her translator's ear buds for this meeting.

Sai keyed in another command, and the green skin line was blotted in several places by pink spots and lines indicating the superficial damage Jaiying had sustained during the explosion.

"These areas indicate non-life-threatening injuries that can be easily Healed in just a few minutes by even an *entry*-level practitioner. A Combat-Healer can do them in just a moment."

She removed the pink, and brought up a solid red inset that pierced the simulacrum from the side, passed through both lungs, and sliced a tiny nick through the heart. Sai turned the pad over to Sally, who stood for her part of the presentation; she taking a moment to make sure her translator was set correctly before beginning.

"Guardsmen Second ... *Galan?*" she paused and glanced to Sai for confirmation, which was given, "...kept the client stable, but wisely refrained from removing the obstruction. Had he done so, the client would have quickly bled out through the lungs, and lost an additional measure of blood from the cut to her heart, as is shown here," she said while highlighting the area around the damage to Jaiying's heart. "The client was fortunate in that only two major organs were damaged significantly, while one other was only injured slightly. The client's spine, and subsequently, the path for control and regulation of her bodily systems, appears to be intact."

She paused while processing internally the unbelievable statements she'd just spoken, then shared just a very tiny shake of her head before proceeding.

"The repair of this amount of damage... I am told that a Combat-Healer is capable of repairing this, and even more. What we are not so

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sure of was her status going into stasis and how that will affect her treatment coming out of stasis. We have only worked on one client who had undergone a similar situation, but in that case, only her legs had been broken before stasis was enabled, while this client was very near death before reaching stasis,” she said, then sat down again.

“The previous client was declared dead upon ... decanting,” Sai interjected, selecting what she thought was an appropriate description. “But standard methods of resuscitation, including stimulants and Healer-triggering of the client’s heart muscles, got her going again.” She paused before adding, “Oh, and *that* client had been in stasis for nearly forty days.”

“Did she suffer any other complications?” one of *Microcosmus*’ Seniors asked.

“The amount of leg fracturing necessary to enclose her in the box, left shards floating in her circulatory system, but Ronnie had already...” Sai paused and looked away for a moment, wiping her eyes before turning back and continuing. “The First Lord had previous experience in using Healer techniques to filter out blood-borne debris. He was able to contain and remove those contaminants from her before they became a problem,” she finished weakly, before leaning forward and staring down at the table while taking a few more swipes at her face. Meanwhile, Sally took over again.

“What we need to do now is determine who will do what, and in what sequence. As Lady Tal and I have discussed privately, each of you have specific talents that may determine a more positive outcome for the client. I am told that Rondal Caldar, even as talented as he was, performed Healings in a somewhat haphazard manner – depending on his experience with the injury.”

“Or his own *arrogance*,” Sai muttered, to the shock of many of those present, but she glanced up at the sudden quiet and met the stares of those around her.

She nodded once before settling back in her chair.

Getting a silent nod from Sally, Sai addressed the room again with, “Let us defer to the one male in our little coven who has actually studied *real* medicine as practiced outside our norms, and get his thoughts first,” she said calmly. “Commander Woldron ... your *opinions*, please?”

Post Meeting, In Donnel Ardan’s Quarters

“Oh *Petrus! Thank you! Thank you so much!* We can use the break!” Milsie gushed quietly.

"Why Mistress *Blanaid*, one would think your charitable efforts have not been *appreciated* by your guest," he teased her, but caught the roll of Donnel's eyes.

"It's not that we aren't *concerned* about her, lad, but it begins to wear on you, for sure. And I'll thank you to note that it's *Lady* Blanaid, if you please!"

"*Finally!* Ronnie was *hoping* both of you would open your eyes one day," Petrus congratulated them, but saw a shadow pass over Milsie's face.

"How – how is the First Lord?" she asked in a whisper, before glancing back at one of the inner doors.

"*Ronnie?* You know him ... taking it easy," he said easily, but felt her true concern and uncertain knowledge of what really happened, and became much more appreciative of Donnel in that moment for keeping such a delicate state secret. "They got him over on the *Microcosmus* so they can figure out just how to fix him, but there's no rush. In the meantime, they're working on the Ambassador's daughter. She's got a *much* worse diagnosis, but between *real* medicine and the witches, they'll fix *her* up, too."

"Tha' be *right*, lass! Ol' Ronnie took a chunk ou' the back o' his *head*, on'e ... twie'..." Donnel left off with a shrug.

"*Three* times that I recall," Petrus added. "And he put *himself* back together ... *mostly*. They're probably gonna go through and do a *complete* overhaul now that he's available – on *ice*, as it were!" he said, then chuckled lightly.

"And I hear Lady Huan worked out how to pull that *powder* out of his head, so – *no worries!*" Donnel added.

They heard a thump from one of the back rooms, and Milsie frowned before walking over and looking inside. Petrus took the moment to speak to Donnel privately.

"Your accent is *slipping* again, Mister Ardan," he said quietly, but felt the answer before Donnel spoke.

"It distracts the lass," Donnel said just as softly, with a shrug. "Makes her think harder when I confuse her like that. Takes her mind off..." He gestured with his head to the door.

"How bad is she?"

"*Lots* of self-guilt... Little self-pity... The usual. Blames herself for Ronnie's ... *accident*," Donnel told him quietly while glancing over at Milsie standing by the door.

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Petrus gave out a quiet snort.

“Yes... Well, we *all* know how Ronnie has overcome little difficulties like this in the past. Who knows? He might decide to *stay* dead if it means avoiding the First Wife’s wrath. Of course, when he’s *born* again, he just might come back as another bouncing baby boy ... maybe even yours and *Milsie’s*,” Petrus teased him quietly.

“Ach! Nae be spreadin’ ya curses on *me*, lad!” Donnel said in mock distress, just as Milsie rejoined them. “Come, lass! There be a warm tub *somewhere* on this bucket we can soak ourselves in!” he added, before looping her arm in his and leaving Petrus standing there by himself.

As he and his new bond mate closed the door, Donnel wondered if there really *would* be a chance of Ronnie recovering from his little “accident” or not. At least Jaiying’s prospects seemed better after the meeting he’d just returned from.

Dismissing that from his thoughts, he steered his companion towards ships doc, and a tub of warm water with just enough room for two.

In Nathan and Dorcas’ Compartment

Nathan was sitting in their common room and watching Rose play, but her heart just didn’t seem to be into it since her cousin wasn’t with her. She put her things away, then came back to him and held out her arms; getting him to reach down and help her crawl onto his lap, where she settled in and rested her head against his chest.

It seemed that things were sad for both of them out here in the Vanir realm.

He looked down at his left hand and rubbed his thumb on the ring on his left ring finger. It was a gift from Lord Caldar – *Ronnie* – one for him, and one for Dorcas, presented to them on the morning he’d left for the raid on the Vanir research station.

He’d been repentant – *embarrassed*, even – that he’d left him back on Kantor in the clutches of Lili and the rest of the Wives, while he’d stormed out in an angry snit over a rather trivial personal issue with Lili. He’d *known* why Nathan had been summoned to Kantor and said he was sorry for not staying long enough to celebrate their bonding with them.

The rings were his way of an apology, and the Royal crest on both was a symbol to everyone that, in addition to being bonded, both Nathan and Dorcas were now members of the Imperial *family*.

Nathan let out a sigh, wondering how Ronnie was going to recover from this *latest* problem – if he could.

“Daddy, is Mommy going to help fix Jaiying?”

“Certainly. Mommy, and Lady Sai, and Lady Jia, and *all* the other Ladies are going to make Jaiying whole again,” he said confidently, but Rose didn’t say anything for a long while.

Nathan thought she’d gone to sleep until she looked up at him and said, “I *hope* so. Jaiying is tired of waiting,” before settling back down.

After a few more minutes...

“Can we watch a *musical*?” she mumbled against his chest.

In Donnel Ardan’s Quarters

With the door opened to just the tiniest gap, Petrus could see a small duffle where it lay against one wall; its contents spilled out as if thrown. A blanket was draped off the edge of the bed and dusted the deck on one side, while the rest of it covered part of a body lying listless on top of it. Leaning in further, he could see Trenka laying face up with her eyes closed, so he steeled himself and pushed the door open.

“Hello, Trenka. Second Team is here,” he said quietly. Her eyes shot open, and he felt the stabbing probe thrown at him at the same time.

A lifetime of dealing with Lili had made him immune to most intrusions of that nature – except Lili’s, of course, but she pushed harder still, before finally giving up.

“What do you want, Commander? Come to arrest me?”

“No. I’ve come to find out why you’re not back on duty,” he said, while looking around the compartment and taking note of the apparent squalor. “Looks like you’re a *lousy* houseguest.”

“Jokes? You’ve come to make *jokes*? I *killed a man! I killed the First Lord! THE EMPEROR’S BROTHER!*”

“Well, I’m sure he *thoroughly* deserved whatever he–”

“AAAAUUUUUGGGGG!” she screamed, before rolling herself into the remaining blanket and lying there sobbing.

Petrus let her wail for about a minute, before stepping over and sitting on the edge of the bed. He reached out and patted her shoulder – or something that felt very much like one – and she didn’t pull away.

“It’s all right, Trenka. I saw the security recording. Ronnie didn’t give you a chance. Sai told me he’d done the same thing to her on *more* than one occasion – and that was just for *fun*. Well ... he did break her wrist that one time,” he said softly, while listening to her sniveling drop down by a few steps.

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"I – I didn't *m-mean* to do it. He k-kept *at* me ... *o-over* and ... and *o-over*," she said in a quivering voice.

"And he waited until you were ready to be pushed over the edge. And when you were, he Fired *your* sword and let you take him. *That's* why you had an audience that day. He knew they would back you up, even if anyone else claimed you could have powered that sword on your own. *They* knew you couldn't, and they knew exactly who *did*."

"But ... but *why*? Why did he *do* that, Petrus? Sai said they had a *cure*!" she whimpered, and he let out a loud sigh, before getting her sitting up facing him.

"Trenka ... you saw him every day, right?" he asked, and she nodded while still sniffing. "I was down on the surface for just a few days, but when I saw those recordings..." he paused, not sure of how to explain it to her. "Ronnie and I ... we've seen a lot of action. We've been in some *nasty* places. *Nightmare* places, some of them, but ... but through it all, we both agreed that we'd rather go out fighting, than die of old age."

"But – but he wasn't *that* old," she almost whined.

"Trenka ... we talked, he and I, before I went planet-side. Ronnie figured he was aging a little over a year for every day he lived – we're *both* part human-Earth, Ronnie and me. He figured that, at the *most*, he only had another ten days or so, before his body wouldn't even be able to *move* anymore, and when you're talking quality of life, that means a lot. He chose to leave us on his *own* terms, and made you the delivery girl."

"But why *me*? It wasn't *fair*!"

"Fair had nothing to do with it. Besides, you have no idea of the *gift* he left you. I said I watched the recordings. Your sword work is *above* average – even for Kantite Lordlings like our guards. Ronnie left you that gift."

"Well, I'll throw that gift right back in his *face*! I'll *never* pick up the sword again! I'll become a *regular* Healer! I'll – I'll work someplace where no one *needs* a sword!"

"Won't find too many places like that – even in the Commonwealth. Besides, if it isn't the sword, then it will be a side arm, or a power-rifle of some sort. You're the Elder's First Sword, Trenka. *That's* what you're good at. *That's* what you should do."

He circled her with his arm and hugged her gently, but it took another minute before he finally felt her relax a bit more.

"Now, how about you clean yourself up and we'll go out for a walk. I've got *another* new set of feet, and they need the exercise."

“But – but everyone will...”

“I am now Captain of the *Kraken*, and everyone *will* be on their best behavior ... or they’ll be asked to play *outside*,” he said sternly, but cracked a small smile at the confused look on her face. “Until Ronnie comes back and assumes command, *I’m* the man in charge ... as long as I do what Lady Tal *tells* me to do.”

That remark finally got a small smile from her, and he helped unwrap her from the blanket so she could go wash up. While she was in the facilities, he set about straightening the room, and digging out some cleaner clothes for her to wear.

‘Mission almost accomplished, my love’ he sent to Sai.

‘Well, then ... almost a good job, my husband. When you get done with Trenka, Déjà seems to have something bothering her as well’

‘Alas, I should have taken up women’s studies instead of the sword’ he lamented.

‘Good idea... Ply her with your sword, but save some for me! If you need help, I’ll send Kiki along to assist’ she teased him.

‘I hear and obey, my love’ he sent with a wash of warmth, before dropping out.

Trenka joined him a few minutes later, so he helped her dress, then looked around one more time before escorting her out for their walk.

‘One almost down, one almost to go,’ he thought to himself.

April 29, A New Surprise

Déjà’s problem was easier to deal with. Or rather, it wasn’t something Petrus could necessarily *help* with.

It had taken two days of helping Trenka return to some semblance of stability, before she was able to rejoin the crew and return to her duties. Once that had been achieved, he finally had a chance to focus on his next project.

This morning he managed to find Déjà during breakfast, and they began to share a quiet conversation involving her sadness at Ronnie’s sudden accident. As the closeness they’d shared was different than she’d ever experienced with anyone else before, she really missed Ronnie, but had problems trying to express what it meant to Petrus.

She was finally warming up to him while discussing her new found feelings about the changes she was experiencing, but while taking her next bite of food, she looked down at her spoon strangely, then turned an

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interesting shade of pasty pale, just before voiding the contents of her stomach across the table at him.

His new feet proved their worth, and followed his combat reflexes with precision – helping to launch him out of his seat; thus narrowly missing the incoming semi-solid assault by mere centimeters. He observed from a safe distance while she continued to retch *horribly*, and when the great exodus finally ceased, she looked up at him with the most *woeful* expression he had ever seen.

‘Sai ... *you are NOT gonna believe this*’ he sent mirthfully.

He began to chuckle quietly before grabbing several napkins and walking around the table to help Déjà wipe off the majority of the mess. Afterwards, he escorted her to ship’s doc for a quick examination. They were only half-way there when Sai’s silent cry of ‘*DAMN YOU, CALDAR!*’ was heard by most of the Healers and Seniors aboard ship.

May 2, The Plan Comes Together

Although Déjà’s miracle pregnancy had been the very quiet talk of the ship’s Healer community for the last few days, Jaiying’s recovery was still proceeding on schedule. In just a few hours, their first, and hopefully *only*, attempt to ‘decant’ her and bring her back to the living would be made.

The exact sequence of events had been scripted and refined many times over, from the precise decanting sequence, to the first immediate Healing function, which would be to seal the ruptured lungs around the wooden shard using the skills of one Combat-Healer, while a second Combat-Healer would focus on performing the same function with her heart.

With any further potential bleeding stopped, stimulants would be administered, then another Healer, *very* well practiced with work on the nervous system, would inspect and repair any damage to the heart muscle before giving it a kick, if necessary, to get it going again.

Once Jaiying was functionally alive, the stake would be rendered by another Healer who’d proven herself to be very effective at working on *physical* objects. The stake would be hollowed out from the center, then collapsed from within, before withdrawing it from her body; the expectation being that it would cause minimal damage on the way out. Yet *another* Healer would be standing by to catch any bleeders that cropped up, before performing the final sealing of her entry and exit wounds. Only when Jaiying had finally woken up – and it was obvious she was still *in* there – would the final repairs, and slow and careful regrowth of her organs, begin.

Somewhere Else...

Ronnie looked around and considered all that he thought it would be like. Obviously, he'd **not** guessed correctly.

It all seemed like a rather mundane impression of a mildly pleasant environment to visit, but not some place he'd like to endure for a very long time. The surrounding landscape seemed composed of a rolling meadow, with scattered clumps of low bushes dotting the scene. It **almost** looked familiar; in the way **all** rolling meadows looked pretty much alike.

This one didn't stick out in any particular fashion, but at least it wasn't floating clouds, or worse, a beehive of disembodied essences. His reverie was disturbed by a familiar voice.

"Hello, Grandfather. Welcome to ... here," Jaiying said, and he somehow managed to turn himself towards the sound of her voice to see her standing behind him.

"Oh no! How did **you** get here?" he asked, while squatting down and reaching out for her, but she stayed where she was.

"Explosion on Vanaheim. In the S'Slich'Tah enclave. Uncle Petrus lived, though"

She turned in a complete circle while checking out the new digs, but frowned at him when she got back around to face him.

"We're all very disappointed in you, Grandfather. You were **supposed** to wait for Commander Woldron and Lady Huan to **fix** you."

"I was going to **die**, Jaiying. They couldn't stop that."

"They found a way. Grandmother was on the way to tell you when things got busy. You didn't have to **trick** Lady Trenka like that. That was very **mean**."

"She needed a **reason** to kill me, but I made sure she was innocent. Besides, she's **much** better with her sword work now."

"No, she's not. She's **quitting** the sword, and quitting the **Elder's service**. Now she's just wants to be a Healer, but **everyone** who finds out what she did will **hate** her."

"Just how long have I been here?" he asked, but she ignored the question.

"You made a lot of people **unhappy**, Grandfather. But that's what you get for being **selfish**."

"What do you **mean**, selfish? I try to solve **everyone's** problems, and **that's** the thanks I get? Rad asks me to 'go fix the Drecks' and I pull Gagsa out of retirement and set him on the right path. The Vanir were

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*messing with the Drecks and us, and I stopped them from doing that. I even pointed out their little **internal** problem, and resolved **that** for them, too! I even showed them how their own planet was **poisoning them**, and now they're gonna move away. What more can anyone **want** from me?"*

*"**You** did all that? **Really?**" she scoffed at him.*

*"**Yes!** In my considered opinion, I enabled **all** of that to take place. It's like I always said, 'Surround yourself with experts, and set them to the tasks they're best suited for.' You might have heard your Uncle Radatel **paraphrase** it."*

*"In other words, throw **credit** at the problem, and hope it goes away."*

*"**No!** I invested a lot of **sweat equity** to the task, young lady, and I deserve a little **respect** for the effort!" He was getting a bit disgusted with the conversation and would have **sat** ... if there had been anywhere to **sit**.*

*"Well ... you **did** make the Senior Staff. But you were **supposed** to make us with **Maya**."*

*"That was according to Elder **Kita's** plan. Maya and I had **nothing** to do with it. How is Maya?"*

*"**Very** unhappy with you. At least she can look forward to caring for the new **baby**."*

"Who's having a baby?"

*"I don't think I'm going to **tell** you. Besides, I'm **still** mad at you."*

*"Why? What did I do to **you?**"*

*"You were supposed to be my **first!** Hmm, maybe I can be **your** first," she teased him, but then seemed to become transparent.*

*"Goodbye, Grandfather. See you when you make up your **mind**..." she trailed off as her body faded away.*

*"Great! Stuck in a **void** for all eternity," he muttered to himself. "Make up my **mind?** I thought I already **did?** I wonder if it worked?"*

He let out a virtual sigh and contemplated his tentative situation; letting his loneliness be broken by the sound of music playing from his memories, before finally sitting down and closing his eyes; being content to float in an imaginary nothingness for a while.

May 3, Microcosmus, Commander Woldron's Quarters

Hifacious awoke at his usual time, but found that Jia had already gotten up and left the quarters they shared.

Truthfully, he'd expected to find Jia still lying in bed next to him this morning.

Since he hadn't been directly involved with Jaiying's Healing, he'd observed for the first hour, then returned to the *Microcosmus* to continue with their other project, while Jia was still busy on the *Kraken*. She'd come back very late, after she and the rest of the Healer and Senior specialists had plied their craft in bringing Jaiying Caldarous back to life ... *mostly* ... but otherwise reported the child now appeared to be alive and in relatively good shape, although remaining in a coma.

He showered and dressed, before heading to the commons for breakfast; not really expecting to see Jia there, but having a pretty good idea of where she might be. He finished his light meal, before heading to the medical lab, where he found her using two data tablets and reviewing data on a large monitor. He could tell from her subvocalizations that she was trying to cement new knowledge into her understanding of the human body; the text and diagrams on the monitor being a large part of that effort.

From the empty food wrappers pushed away from her workspace, he deduced that she'd loaded up with something to eat, and headed directly to the lab. He'd not been particularly quiet when he entered, but she gave no indication she knew he was there. It was about a minute later when she pushed away from the table, and leaned back with a disgusted and weary-filled sigh.

"Lady Huan... You're up early, my love."

She didn't say anything for a moment, then turned her head to look up at him; her eyes dull, and her expression lifeless.

"The Caldarous girl ... she still lives?" he asked quietly.

She nodded her head slightly, but her face didn't change, which meant she was probably working on the other issue.

"Jia, the First Lord can wait ... for a while longer, at least. That Vanir crewman of his was in stasis for a month."

That prompted a small burst of air from her nostrils, and a shake of her head.

"That Vanir didn't have her head cut off."

She'd said it without feeling, which was probably better than wallowing in despair, and he walked up behind her and circled her with his arms, while she leaned her head back against his chest.

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“I don’t know what to *do*, Hifacious. I’ve never ... no one’s *ever* tried to reconnect a severed head before. And even if we *did* get it reattached, there’s still the issue of that *powder* in his brain.”

He silently agreed with her, while standing behind her and offering the comfort of his support. There were several issues in the way of Lord Caldar’s recovery, not the *least* of which was his severed head...

The enzyme problem was currently still an issue. Ronnie’s cells had been failing, not so much from damage, but by simply aging out; the saving grace being that it was principally a *biochemical* problem, and they’d been able to develop a somewhat successful counter to it. Provided they had a long enough time to work on it, fixing it completely was not out of the question.

The bigger problem was all that damn *powder* stuck in his brain. Where the powder concentrated, it had effectively blocked the Kantite self-regulation and repair abilities that would normally keep Ronnie from aging as rapidly as a standard Earth human. Under the current circumstances, he’d been aging at an accelerated rate that seemed determined to bring him to his biological age of nearly two and a quarter centuries. That was old, even for a native Kantite. For a half-breed like Ronnie, it was certain *death*.

The argument could be made that, once cured, the First Lord could spend some “quality time” at the Fringe and begin another Healer Cluster, but it was doubtful he could get away with it again. He *did* remember Commander Zickgraf mentioning something about an attack by wild Kee, but hadn’t been made personally aware of the particulars at the time.

As for the severed head ... maybe that *wasn’t* an insolvable problem?

Jia had said Combat-Healers needed practice in order to do quick fixes for common injuries. Although a severed head was out of the norm, the *principals* were the same, weren’t they? All that really needed to be done was reattaching the head, then making all the important nerve connections. However, there was a time constraint, too, and that would be the tricky part.

Donnel reported it had taken between five and six minutes to get Ronnie’s body stuffed into the stasis box. The body might be in good enough shape, but that amount of time was about the limit for a brain deprived of nourishment.

Besides, even if the body was usable, it still needed functioning management and regulation from the brain ... or perhaps just a *part* of it? Or sometimes even ... *outside* assistance?

He slid his arms off Jia and reached for another lab stool. The monitor was already up and displaying the area he was thinking about, and he had a few more thoughts to contribute to the problem.

May 7, The Kraken, A Few Days Later

Laisee had not left Jaiying's side since she'd been decanted from the EMTU, and the Healers turned loose to attempt her repair.

Ships doc wasn't the most pleasant place for a visitor, but they'd moved in a comfortable reclining chair for her (from Ronnie's own compartment, no less), and set her up in moderate style.

From there, she watched her daughter sleep, while her body got stronger and stronger. Aside from irregular visits to the adjoining facilities, she'd done nothing but channel Healing to her, and listened for any signs that Jaiying was returning to her. She'd slept only fitfully when she could, and ate sparingly when food was brought to her by Livia.

Her exhaustion had finally caught up with her during the previous night, and she'd awoken later than expected this morning; not only to find her bladder painfully full, but that Rose had joined her sometime earlier in the morning.

A glance at Jaiying showed she was still sleeping, so she rushed to the facilities for relief before coming back to find Rose running her fingers through Jaiying's hair, and tickling her nose.

Haunted and yet charmed at Rose's concern, her heart nearly skipped a beat when Jaiying's arm swung up to smack Rose's fingers away, while she mumbled a quiet, "Cut it out," then twisted her neck slightly before stretching out her arms and legs.

Jaiying struggled to sit up, and finally made it by the time Laisee unstuck her frozen legs and rushed to her side.

"Hello, Mama. It's all right. I'm back no-," she almost got out before being crushed in her mother's embrace.

Kantor, The Royal Homestead

"She cannot *stay* there, my Husband," Lili repeated again. "Her daughter was *gravely* injured, and her objectivity has been *compromised!*"

"Ronnie has been injured lots of times, and he *still* argued for peace," Radatel tossed off blithely. "And besides, she's *my* daughter and *knows* what is expected of- *OUCH!*"

"*Right* thinking will be rewarded. *Wrong* thinking will be *punished!*" she snapped angrily, but immediately softened at his look of betrayal. "Oh my darling... *Please* forgive me, my Lord," she said, then quickly

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knelt at his feet; keeping her eyes to the floor while waiting for the Emperor's breathing to calm down.

"Lili! *We* do not find these outbursts of yours *amusing!* However, *we* will take it under *advisement* ... should you find a suitable *replacement* already on site. *And NOT Lady Tal, if you please!*" he added sharply, before turning and striding out of Lili's sitting room.

In the Children's Suite

"Oh-oh. Aunt Lili *really* upset Uncle Emperor this time. She should know not to do that by now," Cathy said.

"She's thinking like a mother and not the Elder," Walter observed. "He'll give her a pass ... I think."

"Let's hope so," Josie said, while rolling her eyes. "We've got *enough* drama going on around here, what with Grandfather playing dead, and Jaiying *almost* dead."

'I think it will get better' Jaiying's voice was faintly heard on their private band.

'Jaiying! Are you all right?' Walter asked anxiously, while Cathy and Josie held their peace for the moment.

'It was not what I expected' she shared a little more strongly, already feeling her strength returning. *'I did not think I would be back'*

'It wasn't what you saw?' Cathy asked.

'I saw a decision point coming, but nothing beyond. I guess my time is not here yet'

'Let's just hope we all have a long way to go' Josie pressed fervently, then asked about the other victim. *'What about Grandfather?'*

'I saw him. He was somewhere ... in between. He hasn't decided what he wants to do yet. I don't think he knows that he has a choice'

'Well, it's not like he's REALLY dead!' Josie exclaimed.

'No, but no one besides us knows it' Walter reminded her.

'Shouldn't we, you know, TELL someone?' Josie asked.

'It is Grandfather's decision. He has to make it' Cathy suggested reasonably.

'But what if he screws it up again?' Josie asked with a frown.

'Then I will make it for him' Jaiying asserted.

'No ... WE will make it for him' Walter corrected her.

'Umm ... how long are you going to wait?' the very quiet voice of Rose came through, causing Walter to flush at feeling her presence.

'Before he can screw it up again!' Josie pushed defiantly, and got feelings of agreement from *all* her cousins.

They continued with a discussion of the current set of problems, and how they might be able to affect the outcome positively.

Once consensus was gained, they spent the next several seconds getting Jaiying up to speed on what had been going on everywhere during her forced vacation.

The Kraken, Ships Doc

"Where's Grandfather?" Rose asked, while Jaiying struggled to free herself enough so she could breathe again.

"Jaiying! My baby! You're all right!" Laisee gushed and held on tight, but not quite as tightly as before.

"Grandfather is... He's somewhere ... else."

"They put him in a big metal box like yours. They moved him to his old ship but I don't feel him anymore," Rose told her.

"He hasn't made up his mind yet. But he's only a man, so it might take a while."

"Baby, what are you *talking* about?" Laisee asked her, becoming more confused than ever. Her little girl was alive and talking, but talking *nonsense?*

"It's all right, Mama. Grandfather did something stupid, but he can fix it ... or *we* can fix it later."

Laisee looked at her daughter in confusion, but decided to ignore anything she said for the time being. For right now, it was enough that she was alive and awake.

"Mama ... is there anything to eat?"

In Petrus' Compartment

Sai gazed down at her adopted daughter's face, while watching her eyes close in contentment, and her tension fade away; her immediate frenzy of nursing finally changing into a calmer nuzzling now that her hunger was satisfied, and her upset stomach settled.

Sai hadn't been so full since before Manya had finally gotten over her morning sickness, but Déjà's near constant need for milk was pushing her body to the limits.

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Somehow, Sai's breasts had managed to work overtime to fill Déjà's ailing stomach – several times a day – and she was considering suggesting a study on the native Kee reproductive and child rearing cycle to see if this was normal. This was extreme, even for Déjà, who thrived on human protein of one kind or another. With any luck at all, she would be back on solid food before it became too burdensome.

Sai's reverie was broken by the sudden silent jubilation radiating from Laisee, and she sighed in relief that their broken member of the Senior Staff was finally on the mends.

Déjà's eyes opened just moments later, and she stared up at her mother before unlatching from her nipple.

"Mother, Jaiying is hungry. Let's go feed her," she said, then started to sit up. Sai watched as Déjà stood and finished dressing, before shrugging and getting up as well.

She thought this was something else that should be looked into at some point, but for the moment, it was enough that her little girl was out of discomfort and had voiced concern for another needy child.

Her little girl was growing up, and she couldn't be prouder – *despite* the suspected parentage of the child she was carrying.

In Ships Doc

'They're linked up now – private band' Laisee sent softly, as she watched her little girl nursing from the ship's Senior Healer.

Laisee's milk production had gone inexplicably dormant during the recent crisis on Vanaheim, and hadn't recovered at all after Jaiying's accident.

She was very grateful, though, that Sai was a nursing Healer now, especially considering her management position aboard the *Kraken*.

'I can't read them at all, can you?' Sai asked her, but Laisee just shook her head slowly while still absorbed with the fact that her little girl was alive and awake.

'Earlier, I think I caught them mentioning Ronnie, and waiting for him to make some decision or other, but...' Laisee let it go from there with a shrug.

On the Way to the Commons

Déjà had come to ships doc with Sai, but ended up walking and talking, albeit silently, with Rose on the way to the commons.

'You're REALLY going to have a baby? And it's Grandfather's?' Rose asked her again.

‘Mother says so, and I think it is. I don’t know all that much about it, but ... but if it’s true, then ... I am complete’

She didn’t sound all that happy about it, though. Rose didn’t know what to tell her to make her happy, but reached out and held her hand for comfort anyway.

“You know, I think I would like to have Walter’s baby,” Rose spoke aloud offhandedly. “He always seems happy to see me, and I think I like him a lot.”

“I like Walter,” Déjà admitted. “But he’s *much* too young for me. For *you, too!*”

“Not right *now*, silly!” Rose laughed. “*Later* ... when we grow up a little. I think that would be nice. Then all our babies could play together in the Royal Gardens with the baby valaets.”

“But ... but I can’t go to the Royal Gardens. Ronnie’s gone,” Déjà said dejectedly.

“Don’t worry, Déjà. Grandfather will be back,” Rose assured her. “Besides, you’re a Royal *Princess* now, just like my *Mommy* and me! Didn’t you know?”

They continued like that, with their shadows walking along behind them – listening, but paying very little attention to the girl’s conversation.

It wasn’t any of their business, of course, but each of them knew the truth of it – only *Royal* personages got Imperial bodyguards, and Mistress Déjà had been bumped to the top of the list just a few days ago.

They meandered along until they came to the meal commons, where Rose enticed Déjà to try some solid food for a change.

A quick consultation with one of the food handlers resulted in a stomach-neutral meal of modest content that Déjà was able to swallow and retain – much to her surprise and delight.

Although the meal was new to them, the preparation staff knew who it was usually prepared for, and rumors were quickly passed around that one of the two young girls out there was very likely pregnant – and probably *not* the six-year-old.

Aboard the Microcosmus

“I just don’t know, Hifacious. This is something we’ve never dealt with before,” Lady Huan repeated quietly.

“I’ve seen Combat-Healers in *action*, Jia. *Flash* – and an arm or leg is reattached, and ready to go.”

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“Believe me, my love, if it were *only* that easy,” she muttered, before sighing deeply and turning to look up at him. “The First Lord was without... And... And losing one’s *head*... There is too much dependent upon all of those nerve endings getting connected back together again.”

Woldron looked at her in confusion.

“Jia, there are nerve endings in a human *arm*, as well. Sai was right there and flooded him as best she could, before the box showed up. Couldn’t have been more than five ... maybe *six* minutes – total. If he’d bled out totally, then it would mean there was very little chance. Sai said the wounds were *sealed* ... that he’d Fired his sword *hot*. If his head didn’t drain, then there’s *still* a good chance...”

“Hifacious! Of *ALL* people, *YOU* should know the difference between an *ARM* and a *NECK*!” she exclaimed, but caught herself against the backdrop of dismay on his face, and tried to reign in her frustration. “Please forgive me, my love. The number of important nerve messages passing through the neck to the rest of the body are *key* to its functioning,” she said quietly, before turning away in embarrassment.

He recognized her chagrin, but still had questions about the process.

“Jai... Please tell me about ... about an *arm*?” he asked, then waited for her to compose herself further before she finally turned back to him with a grim smile on her face.

“Very well... If you really *must* know, the secret to a *Combat-Healer*’s speed is familiarity with the accident. We become *very* well skilled in repairing arms and legs, simply because they are the things most often lost in combat. We get some torso cuts and stabs, but if they are shallow enough, they only cover a few organs, at most. The simple fact is, that we do it *frequently* enough so that we can *feel* the disconnections – they are *familiar* to us.”

He saw in her eyes the hope that he would understand the limitations, and nodded his head in unhappy acceptance.

“And the loss of the head is an *infrequent* event,” he said in dejection. “You would have to study it, and have *some* experience with the injury, to work effectively with it – as a *Combat-Healer*.”

She stepped closer and laid a hand on his arm.

“Yes. For a *Combat-Healer*, it would not be part of our normal ... ahh, repertoire,” she finally murmured. “As for studying how it *might* be done... We cannot risk decanting the First Lord merely to try things out, and it would be inhumane to remove the heads of living creatures just to study how to put them back together.”

“Certainly not with creatures of sufficient *complexity* to apply to the situation,” he muttered, as he turned away; missing the look of utter disgust on her face at the mere *suggestion* of it, before he went on. “But, given that we have the First Lord here, and have *non-invasive* techniques at our disposal, it might prove worthwhile to investigate his condition – *in stasis* – and perhaps develop a proper treatment regimen. As long as he *remains* in stasis, he shouldn’t get any worse.”

That thought brightened his outlook considerably, but Jia was doubtful of a positive outcome. Still, she couldn’t bring herself to shout him down completely.

“Yes ... that would be *one* solution. If Lord Caldar is *truly* still in there,” she said, then turned away again.

“Well, we have Lady Tal’s *word*, don’t we?” he asked her, but didn’t get an answer.

As depressed as she was, he debated mentioning his idea to her again. It might offer them *some* chance at success – even if just a meager one.

Somewhere Else...

The music echoed around his consciousness while easing his lonely vigil.

*It wasn’t **easy** being dead ... especially when it was so damn **boring**. He finished the Schubert passage, and briefly considered falling back to Chopin, but Chopin could be so **pretentious** at times. He finally decided on some Scott Joplin, and was about to let it flood his memories, when he was interrupted by...*

*“Do you plan to spend the **rest** of eternity here, or are you ready to move on?” the voice of Destiny asked him wearily.*

“Huh?” was Ronnie’s witty reply, before opening his eyes and looking around at the nameless meadow. Off to one side, he finally caught sight of an imposing figure that seemed vaguely familiar, so he got to his feet and...

“I said do you plan to–”

“And I said ... huh?” Ronnie interrupted him rudely. “Are you the ghost of Christmas past, present, or future? Or are you my spirit guide come to lead me out of this ... place,” Ronnie asked while gesturing aimlessly with his hands.

*“My ... my ... my... **Always** the witty one.” Destiny slowly shook his head, then sighed theatrically. “Three-hundred million sperm, and **you’re** the one Kita fostered?”*

“Kita? How did you know–”

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*"Oh, I know a **lot** about you, Ronnie. We've been watching you for a **long** time. You **seemed** to have promise, but ... giving **up** like that was unexpected."*

*"It seemed like a reasonable decision to **me**. Trenka got her heart's desire. Sai's revenge was complete. All of my work was done, and I was no longer needed. Why stick around a few more days, waiting for the end as a feeble bag of bones?"*

Destiny passed him a disgusted look, then began chastising him.

*"The **problem**, dear boy, is that you've upset the cart of **apples** and spilled everything to the **floor!** You've left Trenka a depressed **shell** of herself. Sai is **more** disagreeable than ever. Your **family** is in disarray, and the Vanir are **quite** worried about how your recent **accident** will affect treaty negotiations with the **humans!** On top of all **that**, you've left **ME – DESTINY – HOLDING THE BAG!**"*

*"Listen... Destiny, is it? No one is indispensable. There's always **someone** around who can step in and do the job of someone else. Maybe it's a little rough at first. Maybe it needs to be split between bodies, but the job **always** gets done. I did **my** part, and now it's time to let someone else do **theirs!**"*

Destiny shook his head in disgust, then looked around, before finally settling gracefully into the comfortable lounge that faded into view beneath him.

*A rather short but attractive young lady seemed to arrive out of nowhere, and handed Destiny a frosty mug of ... something. Ronnie couldn't tell what it was, but, unlike the bland meadow he was in, it **definitely** smelled delicious. For some reason, the female glanced at him nervously, before arranging to stand behind the lounge.*

*"Ronnie, my boy, you have a **choice** to make – one of **three**, actually. You see, you aren't **really** dead yet – not **all** the way dead. First – you can **choose** to die, in which case you leave here and go on to debriefing, before reassignment. Yes, **that** facet of your belief system is somewhat accurate."*

"Debriefing? Like ... what I screwed up, and what I did right?"

*"Basically ... yes. And **this** episode would be a **monumental example of screwing up!**" Destiny flared, before calming down while taking a sip of ... whatever it was. "Then you learn what you have to work on, and get kicked back down to work on that faulty aspect of your nature. You become – **REBORN!**"*

"Sounds enchanting..."

*"Or ... you can go to work with my little **friend** here," Destiny suggested while gesturing to the lady behind him. "She knows you quite*

well. In fact, because of **you**, she got the nickname of ... **The Fainting Fate.**"

"The **Fainting Fate**?"

"You took **great** exception to one of her administrative actions that caused you a great deal of distress. Your subsequent **outburst** struck terror throughout the division, and caused my little Fate here to ... faint."

Ronnie looked at her, and smiled his most genuine smile.

"Young lady, if **I** was the cause of such personal distress to you, please accept my apology," he said gallantly, before bowing to her. He watched as she stepped out from behind Destiny and gave him a quick little half-bow, before returning to safety. Then he turned back to Destiny and asked, "What's my **third** option?"

"Well, like I said – you aren't **really** dead yet." Destiny checked the nails on his fingers, then wiggled them in surprise. It had been **such** a long time...

"So ... I can come back to **life**?"

"After a **fashion**. You did a **half-assed** job, though. Oh, that **is** rather ironic, isn't it? Anyway, the memories you buried near your lower fundamentals are just that – **memories**. The **real** you – your '**soul**' if you will, used to live in and around that power spot in the center of your brain. Everyone figures they only use ten-percent of their brains, but what they **don't** realize is that the other **ninety-percent** of it is the host for their souls. But what do you expect? Humans – arrogant, self-centered..."

"...insane, hairless apes," Ronnie added helpfully.

"**Exactly!** Now the **Bornat**... Ahh, now **that** was an exceptional race! Too bad they moved back home. Anyway, you **can** come back, but as you **semi**-Earthlings might say, it would be a **crapshoot**. I'm rather intrigued myself to see if they'll try to reattach your head, or try to grow you a **new** one. They may even try to **clone** you. That **last** won't work, by the way. New body, new soul. Them's the rules."

"Either way, it doesn't sound like much fun."

"No, it doesn't, and it will probably hurt like a **bitch**. And there's an **excellent** chance you'll return as a gibbering idiot, and become a burden on your entire **family**."

Destiny smiled contentedly, while listening silently as Ronnie considered the prospect of rotting away as a useless meat-bag.

"**But** they'll still take care of you – no matter **how** awful it makes them feel, knowing that the once mighty **Rondal Caldor** was reduced to such

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dire circumstances. Who knows ... in ten, maybe twenty years, you might even learn to **feed** yourself again.”

“So what’s the catch?”

“No catch... Well ... option one and option two eventually get you a **mind-wipe**. You get **reborn**, you get a blank slate – with just your soul to keep tally of your pluses and minuses. Or you come work for **me**, and you get wiped immediately – don’t need to have you taking **revenge** on whomever you get assigned to ... let’s say – help **develop** as an individual?”

“Why can’t I stay here?”

“Because here is only here while **I’M** in town!”

Destiny stared at him hard, before his look became even sterner.

“This isn’t the **ONLY** pocket of humanity I have to deal with, you know! First, it was the runaway **Flux**. Then that bunch of renegade entities, led by your **GRANDMOTHER**, ripping apart **ships** when they got too close. And **now** ... **NOW**, I have to deal with **YOU!** ... **PERSONALLY!**”

“So **YOU’RE** behind the Visions, and the voices in my head, and the Vanir...”

He was interrupted when Destiny lurched up and leaned towards him menacingly.

“Those damn **Vanir!** I don’t know **why** the Founders didn’t simply let them die out with the **REST** of ... but they aren’t your concern!”

Destiny got control of himself and settled back in the lounge, but while watching him do so, Ronnie had an epiphany.

“You haven’t been **around** for a while, and forgot **all about** the Vanir, didn’t you? I wonder how often you visit our little corner of the galaxy?”

“Keep wondering,” Destiny told him. “And while you’re at it, decide what you want to do. Mind your **goals**, Ronnie. In the end, that’s **all** you’re here to do. Your success or failure determines your **progress**.”

“What’s my **ultimate** goal?” he asked, while sensing just a glimmer of the truth.

“When you reach it ... you’ll **know**,” Destiny said.

As Ronnie watched, both Destiny and the Fainting Fate began to fade away ... but he suddenly realized something **else**.

“Wait! I’ve **seen** you before! I **know** you! You’re...”

May 19, The Microcosmus, A New Plan is Discussed

The plan Hifacious had worked out was the back-to-basics option he'd first considered at the beginning of the month. It just wasn't particularly neat or pretty.

In fact, it would be very time consuming and stressful – both for the Healer staff, and for Ronnie ... or at least his body. It *did*, however, have the benefit of having worked for a variety of medical disasters within recorded history.

The only downside was the client's *current* situation...

Ronnie was in stasis, and couldn't be worked on. He would have to be decanted for anyone to do anything to him. The only problem with that, was that his body was incapable of regulating itself without his head attached to it.

Woldron's premise was simple. Decant the body, and attach standard medical devices to stimulate the heart, and pump the lungs. Meanwhile, a team of Healers and Seniors would attack the most immediate problem of properly sealing the blood connections at the neck so that he wouldn't become a fountain upon being restarted. He even thought he had a handle on the enzyme issue; having derived a synthetic telomerase reverse transcriptase they could flood throughout the body that should help reduce further degradation to its cellular structures, if not actually rebuilding them to their initial state.

They just had to work out all the *details*...

This morning he'd gathered a select group of Seniors, medical staff, engineers, and members of the Royal family to discuss the practicalities of bringing Ronnie's body back to life. As the most Senior Lady aboard in regards to pure Healer technical skills, Lady Qiaolian had listened quietly to Commander Woldron's proposal, and Lady Sai Tal's calm acceptance of it. However, the time for quiet listening was over.

"Lady Tal, I would not say this is madness, but by your own admission, you stated Lord Caldor's head was detached from his body for nearly six minutes," she stated quietly. "The likelihood of severe brain damage is almost *absolute* at this point, and the time required to bring the body back to a semblance of life would delay that even further."

She'd looked around the room while saying this; taking in all their glances and detecting various levels of agreement or negation of her opinion in the process, while personally feeling a certain amount of dismay as she'd never dreamt of having to explain something *this* simple to such a large group of supposedly *intelligent* people.

Hifacious was about to argue the point, but Jia spoke up first.

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“Lady Qiaolian... Dandan, the fact that the client’s body was placed into stasis so quickly is the *only* reason we are even considering this task. We know the prognosis is not particularly ... positive.”

She looked around at the gathered staff, then looked down at her notes. Laisee took that pause to say her piece.

“The Royal family is aware of the situation; and has requested the effort be made to restore ... the client to some level of functionality.”

Sai looked at her, as did Trenka – both of them thinking the same thing, but it was Sai who broached the subject.

“This wouldn’t be related to Lord Caldor’s penchant for creating new Healers by way of his special ... *gift*?”

A light blush rose on Laisee’s neck, and she glanced away for a moment before responding.

“We do not know the *exact* mechanism by which Lord Caldor was able to enhance a woman’s ability to become a Healer. We do have some evidence that implies only a ... a *portion* of Lord Caldor’s participation might be necessary. Lady Lili has requested that we examine the possibility of his recovery to that end.”

Everyone was silent at that ... except for Petrus.

“You want his body alive just to ... to *harvest* from? What does Lili intend to *do*? Stick him in a *box* somewhere, until they need a new batch of Healers, and then ... and then just...” He couldn’t bring himself to say it.

This was his *friend* they were talking about. Worse, he was a member of the *family*. Not trusting himself to keep his temper any longer, he spared a quick glance around the room, before getting up and taking his leave of them.

Lady Qiaolian was confused at Petrus’ outburst, before refocusing on Laisee’s comment. She’d been a fleet Senior for several centuries, and before that, she’d trained Healers at several clusters over a period of several more decades. In all that time, she’d never *heard* of such a disturbing proposition.

“Lady Caldorous ... is this *true*? Does Lady Lili *truly* wish to ... to subvert *everything* we’ve worked for over the millennia?” When the answer wasn’t forthcoming, she continued. “You *must* realize... You *all* must realize the *severity* of your actions! If the stasis is as good as you describe, then restoring the bodily functions is *trivial*, but you cannot restore a *mind*! Of *all* the cells in the human body, *the brain cells do not replicate themselves*! Once they are *dead*, the memories of what *makes* us who we are, are *LOST*! I am *appalled* you are even *considering* this, and I

am *ashamed* that our order would stoop so low, even for such a *noble* purpose!” She stood and gathered her data pad, but Sai cleared her throat and caught her eye before speaking.

“Lord Caldar... He... Ahh, he anticipated this outcome for many years. It has come to our attention that he made provision to... Well ... provide a means to *recover* his memories ... after a fashion,” she muttered quietly.

Dandan stopped and stared at her, first in confusion, then in shock.

She slowly sat down, then fumbled with her data pad while searching the scan records for the client, where it showed several anomalies in his lower body no one had been able to identify.

During a minute’s further reflection, she folded one arm around her stomach and covered her mouth with her other hand; a tiny gasp finally slipping out as she sat there, slowly shaking her head.

“Yes,” Woldron muttered softly. “We *wondered* what in the hell those nodules were down in his pelvis. Somehow, *Senior* Caldar had created a back up of his *mind* ... or at least, *part* of it.”

Kantor, The Royal Homestead

‘Lili, this is INSANE – even for YOU!’

‘What? That I would like Rondal to return to us intact? Do you really hate him so much, Petrus?’

She got up and poured herself a small measure of ambrosia – then doubled it and sat down to sip it – all the while letting her little brother rant at her ineffectually, before finally getting a word in during a pause.

‘Petrus, your complaints are too personal and do not address the true issue. The potential for enhancing the Healer community is too great to let this opportunity pass. We have an intact body, and the possibility of his head being recoverable is not beyond us. At worst, we can try to grow him a new head and transfer his memories to it. Besides, even if he loses some memories from his existing head, there should be plenty of unused neurons available to transfer his memories to’

Lili leaned back and stretched, while wondering if Petrus would consider the *unlikelihood* of that actually occurring...

Humans *did* create new brain cells, but not in sufficient quantities to matter at this stage of their existence. If even a small portion of Rondal’s brain were damaged, more than likely it would take longer than his potential lifetime to recover a mere *fraction* of even that.

She couldn’t imagine why Petrus was being so adamant about it, though. If Rondal’s head survived with only lost memories, they could be restored from his spares. She remembered overhearing that tidbit from

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the children. It seemed almost impossible, but from what Sai had later told her, it appeared to be true.

Best case would be that his body was made functional, while his head remained in stasis. Once his body was stable, they could determine the most efficient method to extract what they needed from it.

Once a suitable amount of time and study had passed, the effort could *then* be made to reattach the head and quickly make all the connections possible, while continuing to sustain the body on life support. If the head survived, then it would just be a matter of making the *correct* nerve connections between the spine and the brain stem. He might have to relearn the basic skills – walking, talking, feeding himself – but the result would probably be no worse than having suffered a stroke. Granted, a rather *severe* stroke, but he would at least be alive.

Growing a new *head*, however...

‘Lili, it is not proper! Not to mention disgusting! I’m tempted to...’

She waited, but he didn’t continue.

‘Tempted to what, Petrus?’ Her tone didn’t convey any anger, just curiosity.

‘Lili... I ... I’m sorry. I just don’t think... I don’t believe Ronnie will come back to us... Not ... not like this’

‘Still, we must try, Petrus’

She waited for his response, but it never came, and she considered for a moment if he would do something to thwart her efforts in this, but also knew he wouldn’t do anything to hurt his friend ... not any more than he already was.

In Vanir Space, The Microcosmus, Still Hashing Things Out

“I wasn’t there the night Lady Xiaoli Song was injured in an explosion,” Nathan quietly repeated. “I’m told Ronnie spent nearly half an hour rebuilding her brain – growing *new* brain cells, if what I’d been told is correct. He did it out there in the gravel driveway; out in the cold. Lili said he’d done it *perfectly* ... except the blast had left pieces of her brain scattered in the gravel. When she woke up, she only had the memories of her life at about five years of age.”

His voice had a somber note to it, but didn’t convey the complete loss Ronnie had displayed when he’d delivered Lady Lili’s niece that Christmas.

Little Oli had been discovered hiding in the century-plus-year-old body of Ronnie’s intended bride.

Meanwhile, Woldron's head had developed a tilt to it during Nathan's report.

"*New* brain cells? Ronnie actually grew *new* brain cells?" he asked, then turned to Jia. "A Healer can grow things that ... that *can't* be grown? In *bulk*, I mean?"

The Seniors all glanced at each other, but none of them had really considered that possibility.

"Ronnie did a *lot* of things that couldn't be done," Sai muttered, then looked around at the others helplessly.

"Maybe ... perhaps he merely reconstructed the remains into a cohesive *whole*?" Jia suggested. "If parts of her brain were reassigned, that would explain the extreme memory loss. Of course, if parts of her brain were *missing*, then yes, that would *also* account for her memory loss."

"The classic interpretation of Healing is that we provide the energy, and the client's subconscious directs it as appropriate," Dandan asserted, before going on.

"Under this model, and having previously worked on brain-damaged clients, I do not believe that actual *creation* of brain cells would be possible ... yet... Nathan, you actually *observed* this?"

"No, my Lady. I was on Kantor at the time. Lady Lili had gathered the family to explain what had happened to her niece, Xiaoli. She didn't seem to make that big a deal of it. Of course, Xiaoli could only remember her very early years," he said, then gave a slight shrug.

Dandan settled back and seemed lost in thought, while Jia looked over at Sai, and then to Laisee ... who merely supplied a shrug of her own.

'*Mother, it is something Grandfather was able to do. It was how he made his memory backups*' Jaiying sent to Laisee on a very narrow band, which startled her for a moment.

"Umm, my Ladies... It would appear that Lord Caldar created additional ... memory ... storage spaces ... within his body ... over the last several years," Laisee stammered out unevenly. "One presumes that he did not simply relocate *physical* portions of his mind from one place to another. He was known to violate the ... the *spirit* of the Elder's law upon occasion, but I do not see how this might be construed a violation of such law. Lady Qiaolian, I believe that, among *all* of us, you have the most extensive and practical experience in Healer techniques?" Laisee glanced around the table, before continuing.

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“Would ... ahh, would you consider working with Lady Huan and Commander Woldron to examine the *extra* organs that exist within the First ... the client’s body? Perhaps help confirm their *true* purpose?”

The Kraken, A Not So Quiet Evening

Sai had returned to the *Kraken* on a later shuttle than Petrus.

She assumed he was aboard, as his data pad was laying on the sleeping platform as if he’d thrown it there, but he remained missing all the while she and Déjà had eaten supper and returned to prepare for sleep.

Déjà had gone to bed in the smaller compartment, while Sai had just settled on the platform she shared with Petrus, when the outer door opened and she heard angry muttering in his familiar voice.

It stopped the moment he entered the room and saw her lying there; he standing still while they looked at each other.

“Well ... are you going to say anything?” she quietly asked him.

He ignored her and headed to the facilities while dropping his clothes in a pile just outside the door. After finishing his ablutions, he came back out wrapped in a towel, and started pulling out a clean set of clothes.

“Petrus?”

“I can’t *believe* you’re on board with this!” he said harshly.

He finished getting dressed, before tossing his towel into the bin with the rest of his used clothes, and turning back to her.

“Ronnie was my *friend*! He doesn’t deserve to be treated like a ... a domesticated animal for Lili to *milk* whenever she needs to make new *Healers*!”

A gasp came from the inner door where Déjà stood there looking between the two of them. She had a confused look on her face, and Sai felt the worry radiating from her.

Finally, she focused on Sai and asked, “Mother ... what does he mean?”

Sai was at a loss for words, and Petrus took advantage of that to launch another jab at her.

“Yes, my Healer, perhaps *you’d* like to explain to Déjà *just* what I mean!” he said angrily, before turning and leaving their quarters.

Mother and daughter were left staring at each other, until Sai raised her arms and Déjà slowly walked over and sat down next to her.

Wandering the Corridors

Petrus was really pissed about what the Healers were planning to do to Ronnie. To Ronnie's *BODY*, anyway. He may not have lived as full a life as he could have, but he certainly didn't deserve to be reduced to a piece of ... of... He couldn't even *conceive* of what they wanted to do with it as he wandered aimlessly around the *Kraken* while stewing about it...

He'd come back from the *Microcosmus* earlier and thrown himself into the role of ship's Captain – going about and seeing to the readiness of the ship and crew in support of the Ambassadorial mission. He stifled a laugh at that. Lili had indicated the Emperor wanted the Royal Ambassador recalled in consideration of her recent *negative* encounter on the Vanaheim surface just as soon as they found a suitable replacement for her.

Good luck with *that!* It could take *months* to prepare a new Ambassador for the position, and it would probably have to be someone from Cletus – a *Senior*, at least. Offhand, he couldn't think of *anyone* suitable; Sai included...

Out of habit, he found himself walking down Ronnie's corridor, almost as if his feet knew where he needed to go. He stopped outside the door and stared at it for several seconds before cycling it open. Stepping inside, he saw it had been straightened, if not thoroughly cleaned. Déjà had probably done that after Ronnie had left for the gym that afternoon ... or maybe afterwards. He saw the empty spot where Ronnie's cushy chair sat for all those weeks before being moved into ships doc for Laisee to use.

Wandering further inside, he sat down on the edge of the bed and flopped backwards on it, while considering if he should sleep there tonight. He didn't know if he could get over his anger at Sai's acquiescence to what the Elder pro tem wanted to do with Ronnie's body, then lay there brooding about Lili's *overall* game plan...

The administrators on Cletus had been breeding Healers for ten-thousand *years* now. Supply may not have always kept up with demand, but Ronnie had demonstrated alternatives to *classical* training techniques that improved results – even *without* providing a biological enhancement to the regimen. As for the apparent lack of Healers, the *real* problem society – the *Kantites* – kept to their control protocols, and the Kantite population was kept near the two-billion mark for the entire planet.

Through societal expectation and indoctrination, the excess male populace usually journeyed outward from Kantor, seeking glory and adventure among the stars, or on one of the many colony planets. Of course, such adventures usually increased the mortality rate among them, as well.

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Well, perhaps not as many as before. Now that the Hegemony and the Commonwealth were tending more towards a partnership, rather than a tenuous armistice, then maybe they could jointly focus on metered expansion and societal growth, instead of blindly killing each other over their differences, but that wasn't an issue for a lowly ship's Captain...

He sat up and looked around, his eyes catching on the cooler against the wall in the outer room. Getting up, he wandered over and poked around inside it; being rewarded with the discovery of an unopened bottle of ambrosia of a suitable vintage. He stood and looked around again. The table was small, and the seating, although otherwise adequate, didn't seem like it lent itself to the level of comfort he was looking for. Besides, he didn't feel that comfortable hanging out in the boss's cabin yet. He headed out the door and sealed it behind him, before considering a suitable location to apply a little self-sedation.

It was the work of just moments to make that determination, and he headed off to finish his evening in solitude.

In Petrus' Compartment

"Mother, that is ... it just doesn't seem right to do that to ... to him," Déjà murmured. Her body was still tense from their last several minutes of conversation.

Sai looked away awkwardly. She was still trying to figure out a way to discuss this calmly, while her daughter's level of stress kept creeping higher. With nothing else being offered to her, Déjà finally lost it.

"Ronnie is ... he's *dead!* I hear you when ... sometimes you and Petrus... Oh, *Mother!* It just isn't *right!*"

Déjà stood up, turned, and stormed out of their quarters, her adoptive mother letting out a sigh of resignation.

'Jaiying ... do you have a moment?' Sai called out silently.

After arranging suitable companionship for Déjà, she considered if she would be coming back tonight, or if Déjà would opt for bunking in with Kiki. Given her state of mind, and Kiki's generally *one-track* mindedness, she reached out to Dorcas and arranged another option for her, if it even came to that. That issue more or less settled, she thought of her earlier fight with Petrus, and hoped another operator was still available to her.

In the Visiting Vanir Quarters

"My Sally, do they *really* propose to treat him as such?"

Samuel still couldn't wrap *any* of his mind's segments around the idea of using Ronnie's body as a common biological generator of ... *whatever* it was he'd produced when he'd been alive.

Sally had been quite circumspect about the details, and he'd not pressed her. Still, within the human species, it's not as if they'd never had whatever this capability was *before* Ronnie had come along. Not according to what he'd been led to believe, anyway.

"Lili is insistent, my Samuel. She says the value to her society takes precedence over the traditional value of him as a ... a person."

"Sally ... he is *dead*."

"*Sue* was dead, as well," she reminded him.

"*Sue* was still *intact*," he pointedly reminded her.

She paused and searched through him to see if his questions had any underlying meaning other than the continuing confusion over how humans treated their dead.

Finding nothing beyond that, she refilled his fruit juice and poured another one for herself.

"The Seniors believe they have a chance to recover Ronnie – return a *portion* of him to life. Perhaps even reattach his head once the body is functioning again," she said, then sipped from her drink.

"Ronnie... I'm told that Ronnie had planned for this eventuality," he said delicately. "At any rate, they are humans, and will do as they will with his body. I was only there to provide information about the stasis box. I somehow don't think our human friend will recover from this incident no matter *how* well he prepared for it," he added, then sipped from his own drink, before curling his body into their nest.

She joined him after topping off both their drinks again, before switching topics.

"What is the latest news from Vanaheim?" she asked, and saw his smile when his head turned to look at her.

"Well, on that there is good news. Two ships have already been sent to survey the two planets the S'Slich'Tah had based their operations on. Representatives from the middle echelon – around two hundred of them – have gone along to observe. The S'Slich'Tah have already turned over their own survey data, and I'm told they would prefer to establish their new enclave on the site where their existing base is located."

"That would ... wouldn't that be ... *awkward*? The S'Slich'Tah were the instigators of ... of the genocide of another *species*! I would think that–"

"Yes... Nearly. Sue tells me the Prime was in a great deal of turmoil over the entire issue," he interrupted her. "She resolved it by reconciling the fact that the S'Slich'Tah were physically corrupted by the location of their existing enclave. This resulted in their irrational behavior, which

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eventually brought the humans into our space. The fact that the humans were the ones to point out the *obvious* – but not to *us*, apparently – dangerous levels of pollution, gave her a reason to *reward* them for their treachery.” He saw the surprise in her eyes, and enjoyed her expression for a few more moments, before finishing his story.

“*But ... they do not get to keep the base. Instead, the base will act as the center point of the new Capitol, and the S’Slich’Tah will be expected to support it, along with several other warrens. Sue has suggested the other warrens might include those who also currently suffer from excess pollution.*”

She blinked at that and ran it around in her mind, until a memory from Ronnie popped up that fit the circumstances.

“Keep your friends *close* ... and those who need watching, even *closer*,” she murmured, then saw the knowing smile from her mate. “But ... the lottery...”

“Fixed. She is the Prime ... although I get the feeling she is preparing to step down.” He let it sit there, but Sally had no issues with that, and remained silent.

“Do you think Sue is of sufficient knowledge to take over as Prime?” he asked casually, and got another look of surprise in return.

In Petrus’ Compartment

‘Lady Tal, Commander Zickgraf has advised the bridge that he will be inspecting the Kraken’s Child – overnight – just in case he’d needed’ Endo sent formally.

He’d seen Petrus from the security monitor on the bridge, and watched as he’d accessed the *Kraken’s Child*. His intentions were made clear just minutes later when he reached out to the bridge watch to let them know where he was. From his tone, it didn’t take much to guess why.

‘Thank you, Endo. He might be ... there may be someone stopping by to check on him later. Otherwise, please let Commander Zickgraf rest’

‘I hear and obey, Lady Tal’ he sent back.

Back in their shared quarters, Sai briefly considered if Petrus would be upset enough to leave the *Kraken*, but realized he would never do that. Hoping for the best, she reached out to her operator and provided his updated location.

Meanwhile, Found Wandering in the Corridors...

Jaiying caught up with Déjà and kept her company, both girls chatting amicably despite their huge gap in age. Rose joined them at the

commons, where they snacked and gossiped quietly, with none of Déjà's issues voiced aloud in mixed-company. Déjà was both surprised and relieved when Rose asked them both to come back to her compartment for a sleepover; casually mentioning that she'd already checked with her mother, Dorcas.

Their guards followed them, but a little further back than usual. All three saw the tension in Déjà and didn't want to add to it by shadowing them too closely. One of them fondly remembered the last time she'd played with him – back when she had a quite different perspective on life than this pregnant young woman who plodded along somberly in front of them. Hopefully whatever was bothering her would resolve itself with a good night's sleep.

They finally delivered their charges to Lady Dorcas' compartment and took up positions outside it. Their senior among them reported their current location, and arranged for the changing of the guard in another two hours.

In the Kraken's Child

Petrus had actually done a readiness check of the *Kraken's Child*, going down the list and finding nothing out of place – save for the lack of “special” rounds for the single gun. Those had been removed and locked away once Trenka had returned him from Ronnie's successful incursion at Site A – “success” being a matter of interpretation in this case.

He missed the luxuries of *Odontoceti*, but the *Kraken's Child* was a working warship with none of the amenities of his older brother. There was no “dinette” configuration for group dining, and very little flip-up table space at each seat location. The kitchen was smaller, and the bunk space was no better, but at least you could stretch out, if not actually sit up in the bunks.

In the forward cabin, he pushed the airlock side, center seats forward, then pushed the rear-most seats back as far as they would go before they stopped at the swivel pivot point, but he left them facing forwards. Tilting the seat-backs even further finally gave them a reasonable angle of comfort, and that's where he settled in for the evening.

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It was later in the evening, after he'd already consumed a good portion of ambrosia, when the door chimed. Tilting his seat forward, he touched a switch on the seatback monitor that caused it to flash to life. A few touches later, found Lady Trenka standing outside the ship, and looking around rather uncomfortably. He was tempted to ignore her, but instead, decided *her* situation was at least as bad as his, so he put down his cup and got up to let her in. He triggered the door lock manually, then grabbed another cup, before returning to his seat to finish his drink.



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Trenka stood at the open airlock and almost turned away, but her orders had been specific – find Petrus and make sure he didn't do anything *stupid*. Petrus was a man, so that was already a given, but she finally squared her shoulders, and soldiered on, anyway.

The sight that greeted her merely confirmed her expectations.

Petrus topped off his own cup, then filled the second cup for her. He reached out with his left hand, holding the second cup for her, while he sipped the moderately good vintage from the cup in his right. She walked over and accepted it, saying a quiet, "Thank you," before planting her butt in the seat across the aisle opposite him and settling in. They stayed that way throughout the remainder of that cup, and halfway through the next, before she began to relax. It was a pretty good vintage.

"How are the new feet holding up?" she finally asked.

He let out a sigh, sipped once more, then rolled his head to the left, which let him send a lazy glance her way.

"Same feet. New *ankles* this time."

He stared at her a moment longer, before rolling his head straight and closing his eyes; slowly taking another sip before letting out a resigned sigh. He was fighting the frustration he'd *almost* washed out of his system, before her presence here had jacked it up again. Maybe he'd have a chance this time if she just kept her mouth...

"I heard you weren't too happy about what they want to do with Ronnie," she said quietly.

His lips tightened, and he shook his head a tiny bit, his voice flat; almost dead, when he spoke.

"You were ordered by Sai to track me down so I wouldn't do something stupid. I'm a man, so you know that wouldn't stop me, because men always do something stupid. You really don't want to be here, but you're under orders. At least the ambrosia's a good vintage," he summarized.

Her following silence was more from shock than expectation.

"Liling is my older sister ... by two years," he muttered to the seatback in front of him. "I've played the game a *long* time."

They continued in silence until he decided to feel her out.

"So... What's the word from the Elder's Council? Are they leaving Lili in charge, or what?"

He'd timed it perfectly, just as she'd taken a larger sip of ambrosia, then subsequently *sprayed* it over the seatback in front of her. It also told him Trenka was much more than he'd suspected; bringing questions to

mind of her being assigned to report Lili's actions, in addition to doing her dirty work for her.

Being the gentleman that he was, he got up and retrieved a cleaning wipe from the tiny kitchen, and brought it back to her. She sat there and blotted herself, before wiping off the display monitor on the seatback in front of her – all the while passing nervous glances his way. When she was done, she looked away from him, and he could feel her anxiousness. He smiled inwardly, knowing she'd never expected him – or anyone *else*, for that matter – to have that intimate a level of knowledge about the political structure on Cletus. It was too good not to exploit further, and besides, he just couldn't resist.

"They'd be *fools* to pull her out now – even with this *latest* bit of stupidity about Ronnie that goes against *everything* a Healer is trained for," he muttered. "The Drecks coming to peaceful terms with the Commonwealth... The discovery of the Vanir, and the ongoing treaty negotiations with them..." He paused to let out a long, loud sigh before adding, "*Not* the time to shake the political tree. The Commonwealth has to remain strong in *everyone's* eyes – no matter *how* screwed up things are beneath the surface."

He turned to see how she was taking the news, and surprisingly, she seemed to be holding her own, so he went on.

"Lili was Kita's First Sword *long* before she was the First Wife," he continued, while keeping his eyes on her. "You're Lili's First Sword, and you *know* what that implies. You came here for *Ronnie*."

He saw a mixture of shock and sadness on her face. Not so much that he knew, but that things had turned out just like she'd wanted ... yet she wasn't all that happy about it.

"Ronnie did it to you, Trenka. He knew Lili would have to do something about him if he was found culpable for that mess at Site A. It only made sense to send in her First Sword so–"

"I wasn't going to *do* that! He didn't ... it didn't seem like he was *capable* of–"

"Back on Kee, Ronnie sucked the life out of *dozens* of Kee males. That was *after* they'd eaten me alive, and his demon took over. I watched his suit video later. Lili gave him a pass."

She looked at him in shock, before slowly nodding her head. It was a pretty good vintage.

"Elder Ai, she ... she *accepted* his actions at the Fringe. At Farman – where all the port ... *new* Healers ended up," she finally murmured.

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“Which is why Lili wants to bring him back and use his body as a means to generate new Healers. Or *enhanced* Healers, like *most* of the Royal Wives ... and a few others,” he said while nodding at her.

“You mean like ... Lady *Laisee*? Sai, and ... and the *Drecks* women?” She watched as his head continued to nod. “Not the ... the *Vanir*?”

He barely cracked a tightlipped smile at this, before nodding once, getting her to blow out a sigh of her own.

“Lili sent me on a *fool’s* mission,” she muttered angrily, then went to sip at her empty cup. She looked into it, then over at him, which prompted him to lean over and pour the last of the bottle into it. She nodded her thanks, then tossed it back – letting out a breath of air scented with the fragrance of exotic fruit.

He got up and disposed of the empty bottle, before beginning a systematic search in places he’d known Ronnie to hide valuable things in a tank – finally locating a stash of an *exceptional* vintage that he announced with a single laugh. She’d stood up to watch, and was amazed at how many hiding places she’d never considered before.

“My Lady Song, may I interest you in a cup from a very *rare* vintage? I believe these are from the selection left aboard the *Microcosmus* after he visited it during a time in the past.”

He showed her the label with writing in an archaic form of Standard, and she stood and looked around the cabin, while considering the accommodations.

“Wouldn’t you like to continue in a more *comfortable* place? How about we go to my quarters?”

“There’s bunks here. Hot bunking for nine,” he said, then watched her frown as she looked at the floor, then down at the seat she’d been sitting in.

It was a standard, doublewide rear seat that would rotate and fold flat. The two rearmost seats would allow two people to bunk somewhat uncomfortably. Four, if they were *really* friendly, but he put a stop to that notion.

“I didn’t come out here to do anything more than drink myself to sleep,” he said. “Despite what Sai may have told you, I don’t need to be drained to maintain my sanity.”

That got a tiny laugh out of her, but then she frowned at him.

“What about *me*? What if *I* want to be ... drained?”

“Should have thought about that before you–” He stopped before saying it aloud, but she could fill in the blanks; her expression changing to one of hurt and rejection.

“I’m sorry, Tren ... Lady Song,” he said contritely. “We’ve all had a very bad bunch of days lately. At least you’re not *pregnant* like Déjà.”

At that, her look turned stricken, and she turned away from him while curling at the waist. He could see her body shaking and heard quiet sniffles coming from her, but couldn’t fathom why he’d affected her so much. He was at a loss, but then reconsidered the situation.

While she remained standing there, he unlocked the seat she’d been using and rotated it against the outer hull. With the small seat trays folded down, it made a suitable couch, and he slowly guided her over to it and helped her sit. He flipped one up tray, poured her a cup out of the found bottle, then set it next to her. Capping the bottle, he cleared his own seat and performed the same manipulations – rotating it back against the right side of the hull and pulling up one tray to act as a small table for himself this time.

He poured himself another cup and sat down, sipping from it slowly while savoring the rarity of the find. As old as this stuff was, he’d have to watch how much he drank. He sat there and watched as she finally became aware of her surroundings again and reached out for her cup – cradling it carefully, before taking a cautious sip from it. He could see the lines in her face ease as the precious liquid slowly worked its way through her system.

### ***May 20, Messages in the Night***

Torga was just settling in on the bridge mid-watch when he received an incoming encrypted message from the Hegemony. Signs and counter-signs matching, he accepted the message body and saved it to secure storage. Before reading it, he watched and listened to a video greeting from his father that outlined the message’s content. It came as somewhat of a surprise.

He and his wife were being ordered home.

### ***In the Kraken’s Child***

Petrus looked over at Trenka while she lay there in a semi-soporifically-induced state. She was lying on her side and facing his side of the tank, with a blanket covering her up to her shoulders, and her head plopped on a couple of thin pillows. He watched as her eyelids slowly closed, then let out a slow breath while considering the strange sequence of revelations she’d just shared with him.

## An Unfortunate Decision

As he'd suspected, she'd come all this way to evaluate Ronnie at Lili's behest. She'd initially held a great deal of anger at him because of all the negative incidents she'd been witness to during his interactions with Elder Ai. Not knowing the *specifics* about his condition – other than he'd been “cursed” by the Elder – she'd read it as him being in a somewhat pathological state of mind; starting with that incident back on the *Microcosmus* involving Meela. To counter that, he'd brought her up to speed on what had *really* gone on during all those months when he was Ronnie's crewman and First Officer – up until he'd chopped his legs off to make it easier to haul him out of danger.

One of his talents was in telling entertaining tales, and he'd finally gotten her laughing at some of the more outlandish things they'd done together while sneaking around the Hegemony. She'd been astonished when he'd related how they'd recovered Mistress Calos and her Pack from Kee, then taken Kee females to create chaos on the Drecks engineering planet.

He'd told her she'd have to ask Sai about the more recent developments – such as how he'd acquired Torga as a Drecks fosterling, or how Endo and Gallus had acquired wives from Lord Gagsa back on Eke, along with Kiki, and Auda; the recovered transplant stolen from yet *another* world.

She'd already seen the results of his visit to the Vanir technical installation at Site A, and interviewed the survivors and crewmen from that disastrous incursion. She'd outlined that part of her investigation, and he'd thanked her once again for recovering him from the Vanir, before they'd launched for the planet where Site B was located.

Seeing that she was in a better frame of mind, he'd refilled her cup and finally dared to ask her about what had set her off earlier, but she'd stiffened and looked away from him. Even *he* felt the emotions rolling off her when she'd turned back and quietly admitted that it was Déjà who'd upset her so much. Not that Déjà *herself* was the problem, but that Déjà was *pregnant* – and presumably with *Ronnie's* child.

She'd remained silent after that, then lain down and covered herself with a blanket he'd gotten for her from the bunkroom. He'd watched as she'd finally fallen asleep, before reporting to Torga that Lady Trenka would be spending the night in the *Kraken's Child* with him should anything important come up. Torga, in turn, reported the incoming Drecks message of half an hour ago and gave him a brief summary of it. They both agreed it could wait until morning when the rest of the crew and official visitors were up and about.

After closing with Torga, he sat there for a while longer, before stretching out on the opposite couch and getting comfortable. Morning was just a few hours away, and it would probably be another busy day.

### ***In Petrus' Compartment***

Sai stirred early that morning, after having slept poorly due to her argument with her husband. The subsequent remote monitoring of his and Trenka's interactions revealed a surprising number of secrets, and a few heartwarming discoveries. Looking up, she could see the ship's timer approaching the bottom of the morning, and let out a disgusted sigh before rolling out of bed and heading to the facilities.

### ***On the Bridge***

The bridge timer was just rolling past Noon minus five when Sasha entered the bridge and asked for the latest message traffic from Vanaheim. He got a surprise when Torga gave him a quick brief of the Drecks request, and a promise to inform the Vanir Ambassador when they arrived at the commons for breakfast.

Glancing at the timer, Torga keyed the security center and left a message for Lady Caldarous regarding a non-critical diplomatic development she would probably wish to be advised of; either before or after breakfast. He was promised it would go right out to her personal guards for delivery no later than routine business hours that started at Noon, minus four.

### ***At the Commons***

Petrus looked around the commons before sitting down at his preferred table – the one with his back to the wall, and a view of two adjoining corridors of approach. It wasn't that he was *paranoid*; he just didn't like *surprises*.

The morning crowd was relatively light at Noon minus five. The breakfast window was somewhat narrow, somewhere in the two-hour range, as the total crew and passenger complement was only about a third of what would be expected for a ship the size of the *Kraken*. The kitchen was only half-staffed at Noon minus five, but by Noon minus four, they were fully up to speed.

He dawdled over his meal; some sort of fruit and grain product Ronnie had introduced to him a while back, and quietly observed the watch change in progress. In addition to the oncoming watch, there were Imperial guards, engineering staff, scientific staff, and the new Healer staff – all sitting in separate groups. To Ronnie's point of view, it wasn't the best situation for a crew. He'd always wanted everyone to mingle and become comfortable with each other. Now that he was gone, they all seemed to be falling back to their own comfort zones via free association. It seems that not all social experiments worked out as intended. He was about to leave when Sasha came up with his tray and politely stood across the table from him, but he already had an idea of what he wanted.

## An Unfortunate Decision

“Good morning, Sasha.” His greeting was in Vanir, but just a bit sloppy due to a piece of grain stuck at the edge of his throat, so he took a quick drink to clear it.

“Commander, I wonder if we may speak?” Sasha asked, using his rank to indicate it was an “official” request, then sat at Petrus’ welcoming gesture, before continuing. “Commander ... I learned the Drecks have sent a request to the Vanir. I was on the bridge earlier, and Torga advised me as to its contents. I have contacted Samuel, and he has requested that you, he, and Lady Caldaraus meet together to examine its contents and determine the best way to proceed.” Sasha seemed unusually flushed for a Vanir. It almost appeared that he was excited by the prospect.

“Certainly. I’ll schedule a conference room for ... would Noon minus two be too soon?” Petrus could feel the sidebands when Sasha whipped that suggestion directly to Samuel, and almost heard the instant reply.

“That would be most welcome, Commander,” he said with notable relief. “Petrus, the Drecks have—”

“Requested escort to Vanaheim so they may begin treaty negotiations with the Prime,” Petrus finished for him; feeling the surprise radiating off him. “Torga informed me of it very early this morning. This is a very promising situation, Sasha. The Vanir are in an *excellent* position to play the Commonwealth and Hegemony off against each other to your *own* benefit. Well ... time for me to go and ruin Lady Tal’s day!” he added cheerfully, before getting up and bussing his own tray.

The confused feeling coming from Sasha was its *own* reward.

### *In the Kraken’s Child*

Trenka stirred and stretched a bit, before bumping her arm against the wall nearest her, then flailing in confusion until remembering where she was.

She sat up in the dim light, and her motion keyed the sensors to raise the illumination high enough so she could walk without tripping over anything. Looking around, she leaned towards the closest seat back and entered the lighting overrides to turn the cabin lights brighter.

“Petrus? Petrus, are you here?”

Not getting a response, she stood up slowly and found herself to be quite stable. Thankfully, that was a *very* good vintage they’d shared last night, and she felt both relaxed and well rested. A glance at the other readjusted seats found a neatly folded stack of blankets and pillows – along with a note from Petrus saying he’d had a wonderful time last night and hoped they could share another one at some point in the future.

She looked down at herself and found she was still fully dressed, which only confused her further. Thinking back, she remembered Sai had sent her to watch over Petrus in the time-honored tradition of the Healers. Unfortunately, she only had a vague recollection of what they'd talked about, let alone anything that they might have done later.

She'd heard many rumors about Commander Zickgraf over the years, but in this case, the one about him being a real gentleman seemed to be true – unless she just couldn't remember. She let out a breath, then gathered up the blanket and folded it neatly. The pillows joined the blanket on the seat, while she considered what to do now.

A glance at the timer showed there was half an hour to go before breakfast would be in full swing, so she offered up a small shrug to her ego before dropping her clothes in the main cabin.

The layout of the Galaxy-class was common in the fleet, and she found the tiny, but well-stocked facilities had been recently used. The damp towel hanging across the shower entrance was an indication of how well she'd slept, while she pulled another one out of storage for her own use.

As she was drying off, the issue of last night passed across her mind again, and she decided to report in.

*'Sai, do you have a moment?'*

### ***Outside Petrus' Compartment***

Petrus had intended to update Sai on the latest events, but was unsure of which of them would give her the greatest grief. Trenka had obviously been sent to sooth his savagely affronted heart, but he'd gotten her drunk and talking, instead. Alternatively, he knew Sai and Torga had bonded somewhat over her taking care of Manya for those weeks when she'd been suffering during her early pregnancy. That would probably change when she was stuck back into the watch rotation once he left; being the next trained senior ship's officer.

He paused while standing outside his compartment door and reached in silently, but didn't feel Sai anywhere. A short visit inside only resulted in a quick change of clothes, and he took advantage of the room monitor to schedule a conference room for the human, Drecks, and Vanir meeting at Noon minus two.

A call to Laisee's compartment found her in residence and already aware of the situation; that "wake-up" message from Torga having been delivered the moment she opened the door on her way to breakfast. After advising her of the meeting time and location, he headed to the bridge to check the watch and have a chat with Torga. Torga would be off duty in a few minutes, and he needed to prepare for that meeting.



## An Unfortunate Decision

### *Cletus, The Elder's Council*

"Xiu, less than three decades separates you and Fan. Less than six between you and Liling. You'd *both* served Elder Kita for over *four centuries*," Elder Xue stated, "Yet for *all* the time you and Fan served Elder Kita, the *first* person you thought of to take Ai's place was *Liling*?"

Xiu stood very still in the center of the chamber housing the Elder's Council – or rather, the Council of *Elders*. The *true* nature of its existence had been a complete surprise to her; not so much the fact that it existed, but its existence had been sheltered for so many centuries – *millennia* even. She was not exactly sure *what* she could say that would not leave her without clan status.

The five not-quite elderly ladies sitting before her were the embodiment of Cletus in its *entirety*. They controlled the civil functioning of the planet, and maintained the societal structure that allowed the Clans to function as a more or less cohesive unit. Whatever dissension existed between the Clans was *allowed* – specifically because dissension was *needed* upon occasion; if only to give the *perception* of a free society. The Kantite leaders were well versed in its utilization, if not with the level of *finesse* the Council of Elders was wont to wield when necessary.

"Xiu?" Elder Xue prompted her gently, but felt the fear ramp up a little higher from the "Elder's" minion.

"Xue, don't be so hard on the child," Elder Rong chided her.

"Yes," Elder Wen added. "It's the first time she's been home in a while. Don't *frighten* the child, Xue. We still have Fan and Molara to interview."

"And the *new* one. Amy, is it?" Elder Daiyu asked.

Elder Ju gave out a chuckle.

"That one has less than three *decades*, *total*!" Her subsequent laughter was a somewhat familiar titter to Xiu's ears, prompting her to consider just how much the Elders on Cletus knew about operations on Kantor.

"Oh ... we know a *great* deal about your operations on Kantor, Xiu. After all, *we* were the ones who *established* them," Elder Xue informed her.

Xiu stood there in confusion; her uncertainty rolling off her in almost tangible waves.

Elders Rong and Wen got up and pushed over a chair for Xiu to sit, while Elder Ju brought her a crystal of cool water.

A small tingle passed from her hand as Xiu accepted the offered crystal; sipping from it gratefully as she looked down at the elderly Senior stooped before her looking back at her.

"We're sorry, Xiu. There is much you don't understand about our position here. The Elder on Kantor does not operate in a *total* void. The 'Elder's Council' monitors the Elder assigned to the Kantites, and tracks her performance. In the most *recent* case, we feel that Elder Ai was perhaps not selected soon enough to *fully* assimilate Elder Kita's responsibilities."

"And you're now aware of Elder Kita's difficulty in *interpretation* of the Visions," Elder Rong added.

"I - I - I..." Xiu stuttered.

"Yes. We understand," Elder Xue said, "but we'll try to make it clear to you. To *all* of you. After all, the game has changed significantly. I suppose we should even bring Liling into our confidence at some point ... perhaps next week?" she suggested, then turned to see the smiles behind her.

Xiu slowly sank into her seat; suspecting there was a *significant* level of change coming, and she was stuck right in the *middle* of it.

### ***In Vanir Space, The Kraken, A Surprise Meeting***

Noon minus two found the larger conference room occupied by separate small groups consisting of only one or two parties.

Torga and Manya sat separately from Petrus. Laisee sat separately from them, and across the table from Samuel and Sasha. At least the atmosphere wasn't tense, and there were liquid refreshments available on a sideboard. For the time being they were non-spirited, or, in the case of the Vanir, non-fruited.

"Thank you all for coming," Petrus announced. "A message came in during the mid-watch that affects everyone here." A quick round of glances passed between everyone, before Petrus continued.

"Sasha, the Drecks have requested permission to enter Vanir space. They are asking escort for two of their ships to guarantee their safe passage here to Vanaheim. One of them will be returning Torga and Manya back to Zarox. It appears Torga will be filling a *new* role in the Master Pack for his father, Lord Gagsa."

A small gasp came from Manya, indicating the secret had been kept from her until just now. Everyone could see the grip she had on Torga's arm, while her features were leaning towards the *happy* side of this event.

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“Congratulations, Torga, Son of Lord Gagsa,” Laisee commented, and he dipped his head to her in acknowledgement of her using his *proper* title.

There were a few seconds of silence until Sasha broached the question.

“The *second* ship?” he asked quietly.

“The second ship will be delivering a delegation to Vanaheim from the Master Pack of Zarox. An official Ambassador,” Petrus continued. “I’ve met them before.”

Sasha seemed stunned, but Samuel was nonplussed. He’d been expecting this at some point, and now that point was headed this way.

“Who is he?” he asked.

“*She*,” Petrus corrected. “Lady Calos of Pack Calos, and her consort, Gar of Pack Calos. Ronnie and I...” he paused, suddenly remembering the current situation, but continued anyway, “...we picked them up on Kee. They were the guests of the prior Master Pack. As was Pack Gagsa.”

“But if you and Ronnie...” It was Laisee’s turn to pause as she tried to work out the logistics of Pack Calos moving from the Demon’s Realm back into Hegemony territory.

“I’m sure there’s a reasonable explanation for them working for Lord Gagsa,” Petrus assured her, even as she reached out to Lili for confirmation.

She let out a choking gasp a few moments later, then looked around; embarrassed at her lack of composure. Petrus got up, poured her a measure of water, and handed it to her, which she gratefully accepted; taking a few sips and clearing her throat before explaining.

“Um... Lili has just informed me that several members of Pack Calos were recruited for manning a few of the surplus Bornat ships doing picket duty along the Human/Vanir border. Once the Vanir pulled away, they stayed in place until discovering Lord Gagsa had consolidated control of Zarox. They sent messages and offered their support; as long as his intentions were to begin peaceful negotiations between the Hegemony and the Commonwealth. Lord Gagsa responded with his promise of parole if they wished to return to Zarox to talk about it. I – I guess they liked what he said.”

Of them all, Torga was the one most stunned. He knew how much his father *hated* the Commonwealth, but – maybe not so much any longer? If *anyone* would be pleased by the death of Lord Caldar, his father should be at the very *top* of the list. But then ... he’d let his son be *fostered* to Lord Caldar?

“Torga, it would appear your father has achieved a new appreciation for cooperation,” Laisee stated gently. “No doubt, the existence of the Vanir has influenced it to some degree – along with your progress reports to him.”

She watched as he gathered himself, before turning to Petrus.

“How ... how soon will they arrive? Once they have an escort,” he finally asked.

“They are holding at the boundary ... about twenty-four minutes down from Zarox and another eighteen minutes out from Vanaheim,” Petrus told him. “Once they have an escort ... well, just as fast as they can follow the escort. If they’re still in one of those Bornat ... *THINGS*, they can be here in less than a couple of minutes – *real-time* – if they don’t mind their *BODIES* turning inside out.”

He still remembered the one time he and Ronnie had hitched a ride from one of the Bornat. Thankfully, it’d been a short jump of a couple of minutes. They’d covered it in only *seconds*, and that was at *normal* cruise speed for the Bornat. Just the *thought* of all that shared misery caused him to shiver involuntarily.

“Oh... That sounds *very* unpleasant,” Samuel muttered, and Petrus’ jaw and neck clinched in yet another unpleasant memory, prompting him to get up and get himself a drink of water.

“Samuel ... Sasha, do you see any problems on the Vanir side in getting an official escort for the Drecks envoy, and the additional transport?” Petrus finally asked after getting a measure of control over his involuntary gastric response.

“I will contact the Prime immediately,” Samuel said to the room. “Once she has made a decision, I will work with Sasha to see that it is carried out.”

“Very well. That brings this meeting to a close, unless anyone has any questions?” Petrus asked.

“I wonder what my father wants with me,” they heard Torga mutter to himself.

Hearing nothing else, the meeting broke up, with Samuel leaving first to send official messages down to the Prime. Everyone else gathered their data pads and prepared to leave the room.

While Torga read his portion of the message once again, Laisee lingered behind to say a few words of congratulation to Manya, and ask about the baby. From the side, Laisee watched Torga’s frustration unfold, and heard his resigned sigh. *She* knew why he was being recalled home,

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but as this was a surprise best delivered by his father, she just smiled and kept it to herself.

### *Kantor, The Elder's Office*

*'Sai, do you have a moment?'* Lili called out politely.

*'Certainly, my Elder'* Sai replied, and heard an echo of a familiar titter in the background.

*'Perhaps not for much longer. My "staff" has been recalled to Cletus'*

Lili's tone seemed somewhat jovial, which was *way* out of place. *No one* was called to Cletus, unless...

*'Lili! What's gone wrong?'* Sai pressed at her.

*'Nothing to worry about, I'm sure. Perhaps it's just a reminder of who REALLY holds the power'* she answered flippantly.

*'Lili! Don't say that! Don't even THINK it! You've done nothing but--'*

*'Overstepped my bounds, apparently. Perhaps. I'm sure I'll be informed'*

*'But ... but you have--'*

*'Many other issues to deal with at the moment'* Lili finished for her. *'Most prominent of which is, has Torga contacted his father yet?'*

*'He... We received a message during the mid-watch regarding Torga and Many. And about an official Ambassador to Vanaheim. Petrus held a meeting, and they talked about it with Laisee and Samuel'*

*'And what is the result?'* Lili asked her.

*'I ... don't know. I was not invited to the meeting'*

Sai's tone was a mixture of both sadness and frustration, but Lili had no trouble picking out the cause for both.

*'Arguing with Petrus does not lead to a happy relationship'* she chided her, before going silent for a few seconds while dealing with *his* issues of the moment.

*'Sai, Petrus will come to you and tell you of the meeting. However, my position regarding Rondal remains unchanged. I suggest you present a conciliatory attitude towards Petrus that will ease both of your paths. Besides, the matter may be taken out of my hands, and neither of you should suffer for my lack of judgment'*

*'But ... but what about YOU, Lili?'*

*'Don't worry about me. Have Torga contact his father directly. Plans have to be made. Accommodations have to become available. I would*

*recommend that Laisee speak with the boy after he's had a chance to speak with his father'*

*'I hear and obey ... Lili'* Sai pushed out, but got no reply other than the echo of a titter.

Lili sat forward in her chair and waved the Tier One messenger over from the door.

"Elder, here is the latest--"

She stopped when Lili started her quiet titter, so she silently set the data tab on the table in front of her. From the expression on her face, she could see the First Wife was under a great deal of stress at the moment, so she bowed her way out of the office; hoping everything would work out after Seniors Xiu, Fan, and Molara returned from Cletus. She still couldn't imagine why they'd dragged Lady *Amy* along with them, other than the obvious – she was a warm, loving companion who would share her comfort with them during their visit.

That caused her to think of her *own* situation, and she glanced at the clock in the corridor. She would be off duty in another two hours, and she and her partner would retire to their quarters, where they would relax and stave off old age for another day or two before supper – and then maybe another day or two *afterwards*. She quickened her pace to her desk while looking forward to the end of the day.

### ***May 21, The Kraken***

Sai had been formally brought up to speed the previous afternoon. This morning she sat in the same room with all of the principal players to discuss the *next* step – which was an invitation for Torga to *personally* visit planet-side and explain his father's intentions towards the Vanir.

Fortunately, the Prime had replied to Samuel's request relatively quickly – quickly enough so that Torga had plenty of time to formulate a proper message to his father about the entire situation. The response had been positive; not only telling him what the Prime wanted to know, but also what his father's plans were for him once he returned to Zarox. He'd had mixed emotions about the second issue, but this new meeting concerned only the first.

"Ambassador S'Shac'Kah 39496, I have been authorized by the Master Pack Leader to discuss issues of safe passage between the Hegemony and Vanir spaces. I am also directed to offer Drecks assurances that the Drecks are currently holding a peaceful posture between the Hegemony and Vanir spaces, just as we are between Hegemony and Commonwealth spaces."

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Torga had presented it formally in Commonwealth Standard, which was then translated into Vanir by the ever-present translation device Samuel wore. It also allowed the meeting to be properly recorded for ship's records.

"Torga, on behalf of the Prime, I accept your position as Ambassador pro tem. She would be pleased to have you attend her at court to present your requests," Samuel stated formally.

"I thank you, Ambassador," he said politely. "Ahh ... if I may, I would request that Ambassador Laisee Caldarous accompany me – strictly in an advisory capacity so that I may follow proper procedure."

Samuel paused before turning to speak quietly with Sasha. Petrus looked like he was about to say something, but when Laisee caught the surface impressions coming from him, she diverted it in Vanir.

"Gentlemen, in as much that Torga has never served in this position before today, I am quite willing to participate – but only in a *procedural* capacity. That is, as long as it's understood that negotiations are strictly between Torga and the Vanir until such time that Ambassador Calos and her party arrive."

She'd shared it silently with Torga and the other humans, then felt the acceptance from the Vanir, before Samuel finally spoke.

"That should be acceptable. I will confirm with the Prime, but I do not see a problem with it. It would also be advantageous, as you speak fluent Vanir and can translate perfectly for Torga." His eyes unfocused for a few moments before they turned towards Torga.

"Torga, the Prime would meet with you and your facilitator this afternoon. That will be acceptable?" he asked.

"That..." Torga paused, then caught the nod from Laisee. "That is acceptable."

### ***May 25, The Sky is Getting Crowded***

"Gods... Would you just *look* at those things," Endo muttered loudly.

The Bornat ships had taken a rather leisurely flight from the border, making the eighteen-minute passage in just less than five days.

Transit had been granted, and a course had been assigned, but instead of waiting for their "official" escort to arrive, the Captain of the group of two vessels had asked for, and been jokingly granted a "clear" transit to Vanaheim.

The Drecks weren't into jokes all that much, and took it as permission to transit – subsequently executing accelerated jump transitions somewhere between those of the *Kraken*, and those that could be pushed

out of the *Kraken's Child* with *lots* of Healer's milk aboard. Even then, they'd been holding back. That ship could flip through transitions even *more* quickly, but you had to know for sure that there was *nothing* in the way. Likewise, it could jump way *further*, but that was something *else* they just wouldn't do ... especially after they'd all suffered *severe* transit sickness after acquiring the surplus Bornat craft, and overriding the *physically* locked-out settings for both the first and *last* time.

Gallus stood beside his brother, along with Petrus and Sai, while they all stared at the *things* floating motionless in space; the only *real* looking ships being the two Vanir escorts pulled from local stations standing by.

Neither of them had regular lines about them, with parts of them lumpy and other parts elongated. Nothing stood out *anywhere* that screamed "spaceship" except perhaps the weirdly smooth surface they both had. Size-wise, one was a bit bigger – maybe a third the mass of the *Microcosmus*, maybe even a little bit more than that of the *Kraken*, while the other was a bit smaller and lighter of color. Of particular note, they had no discernable front or back.

For the most part, they resembled giant *potatoes* floating in space, the bigger one being somewhat misshapen; at the moment, a misshapen potato with a rectangular hole opening up in the side of it ... or maybe the front ... or the rear. It could have even been at the *bottom* of it, as there didn't seem to be any distinction in that regard.

"Standard transport," Petrus muttered as they watched a duplicate of their Dreds transport drift out of the potato's docking bay and wander over to the rear of the *Kraken*.

He watched its progress on switching screens, then keyed in the docking bay; toggling the main door open as the transport moved into position. He could see Torga and Laisee standing off to one side in precautionary ships suits while the pilot carefully guided the transport in and settled it to the deck in a rather tight squeeze. At a silent call from Laisee, he closed the *Kraken's* rear door.

"Well, guess I'll go down and see how Lady Calos is doing," he said jovially. "Sai, would you care to accompany me?"

She turned her head to him and asked, "She's not one of your old *girlfriends*, is she?" and got a guffaw out of him.

"Nope! But Ronnie shared *blood* with her one afternoon! 'Sides, I hear she finally hooked up with *Gar*! Nice lady. I think you'll get along!" he told her, then took her arm in his while guiding her out the door.



## An Unfortunate Decision

### *May 28, Cletus, Lili is Called to Task*

Lili sat nervously in the outer council chamber; her only companion a rather slim young woman who seemed blessed with the serenity of innocence. She stifled a titter at that, sitting here waiting to learn her fate; while the girl sat quietly across from her; blissfully unaware of her impending doom. Lili spent several minutes stewing over her past actions; trying to determine *which* of them had brought her to this final point in her life.

“You tend to worry too much, Lady Song,” the girl murmured, catching Lili quite off guard. “There are no absolutes in life ... only possibilities.”

The girl stood and walked across to her, finally sitting down beside her and calmly reaching over to take one of Lili’s hands into hers before covering it with her own.

“Think back, Lady Song. You served Elder Kita *faithfully* for all those years. You provided guidance and safety for the First Lord, and you continue to do so as First Wife of the Kantite Emperor,” she stated quietly. “Do you *truly* believe you have erred along your journey? Have you suffered lapses in judgment?”

Her hands were warm; and Lili could *swear* they felt tingly.

“I – I try my very *best* for the Commonwealth. My husband... I’ve guided my husband in what I believe is the *proper* path,” she stammered nervously, while wondering why she was suddenly feeling so awkward in front of this young girl.

They sat together silently for several more minutes; until the inner chamber door opened and an elderly woman called out to them.

“We’re ready for you, Liling. My... You look *lovely*, Elder Ju!” Elder Wen exclaimed; the warmth of her statements washing over Lili as a refreshing breeze.

The young girl stood and tugged gently at Lili’s hand.

“Come along, Liling. We’ve much to discuss. We are *particularly* disturbed with your suggestion that we recover Kita’s great-grandchild and use him to improve the Healer community.”

She led Lili into the room and directed her to the center of the chamber, while she joined the other Elders sitting across from her. The size and number of liquid containers on the sideboard suggested the meeting might take a while.

***Kantor, The Royal Homestead, The Children at Play***

*'I don't see how they can remove her'* Cathy pushed. *'She may be strict, but she's done nothing REALLY wrong ... except for sending Trenka after Grandfather'*

*'What bothers ME is that we didn't even know they EXISTED!'* Josie shared.

*'Yes. It was very strange that we didn't feel them at all before just now'* Jaiying called out from the Kraken. *'I can still barely feel them'*

Cathy flopped down on her back and stretched out on the neatly trimmed lawn; her hands brushing over the uniform surface and feeling the edges of the grass blades with her palms. She liked it out here in the gardens; where the freshly trimmed grass left a clean, organic scent in the air.

*'It kind of makes sense, though'* she decided. *'I mean, we'd never heard ANYTHING about Cletus in Elder Ai's thoughts'*

*'Walter, you don't think they're gonna FIRE Aunt Lili, do you?'* Josie asked.

He was unable to answer because Faithful Daughter was currently lounging across his body and licking whatever he'd had for lunch off his cheeks. He had to wait until he was relatively flavor-free; before he could answer his cousin without laughing.

*'From what I read from Mama Amy, it sounded like they were going to ask a few questions first, then see if Aunt Lili needed new directions'*

He began rubbing the female valaet between her shoulder blades, which caused her to relax *completely* – effectively *pinning* him in place under her hundred-pound bulk. They could hear the silent giggle coming all the way from Vanaheim's orbit as Jaiying observed Walter's situation through Josie's eyes.

Josie came over and started rubbing Faithful Daughter's back, which triggered a rumbling purr from the vicious predator resting peacefully across her helpless cousin.

*'Isn't it strange? Mama being considered part of the Elder's staff, I mean?'* Josie suggested lightly, then considered something else. *'You don't think that... They don't know about US, do they?'*

Everyone remained silent for several seconds, which was long enough for the two youngest kits to make their appearance, followed closely by Maya. The unnamed male and female trotted playfully onto the lawn before the male stopped *cold* – his eyes focused on his *older* sister. His body lowered to the ground as he slowly crept forward ... centimeters at a time ... until suddenly *springing* for the end of her tail.

## An Unfortunate Decision

She smoothly rolled off Walter and swatted the little devil five meters away with a fisted paw. They could feel the disgust radiating from her, as the littlest one righted himself and took up an aggressive sideways stance towards her – arching his back and hissing at her. She chuffed once and turned her back on him, before wandering into the bushes surrounding the small clearing. The children rushed her diminutive assailant and rolled him over several times while tickling and scratching him in all of his favorite places.

Maya sat down to watch the children at play, and the young female wandered over and crawled into her lap – repeatedly pressing her paws on the bottom of her breasts for some wanted attention. Letting out a sigh, she folded open her robes and allowed the kit to nurse; petting her along her flanks and causing her to purr in the process.

Although happy to be the center of attention, the young male heard the contented purrs coming from his womb mate, and struggled to escape his captors to get his share of Maya's bounty. A few claw pricks and some playful shrieks later, found him in Maya's lap and suckling from her other breast; the play forgotten as they both basked in the comfort of Maya's nourishment.

The children sorted themselves out and gathered around Maya, while each waited patiently for their turn.

### *Cletus, In the Elder's Chambers*

"Liling Shan Ting Song se Cletus ... we have asked you here to answer our questions," one of the Elders intoned on Lili's right. "We have watched you for a very long time. In fact, it was at the request of Elder Ju that Kita accepted you into her service."

Lili's eyes snapped to the young woman who'd sat with her in the outer chamber, while her head began shaking slowly. She received a delighted smile in response; almost as if a great joke had been played at her expense.

"Yes, Liling. I was the one who suggested you might be of use to Kita. She was *against* it at first," Ju said, her voice turning somber. "That business with your mother – and then your child ... that was *very* unfortunate. It pleased *no one* when Kita took them from you, but the law must be upheld."

Lili looked at her, then tried to extend into her, but her probe stopped at her outer layer of skin, which seemed relatively *young* for her claims.

"This body is a gift to me. The occupant and I *share* tenancy ... so to speak," Ju quietly explained, while raising her arms slightly and admiring her youthful hands, before turning back to Lili. "Mistress Guang was an ungifted Clan member, and looked forward to a meager future among us.

She was *not*, unfortunately, in a position to be blessed by your brother-in-law. Now she and I will work together to insure the continued existence of the Commonwealth – even during these very *trying* times.”

Lili looked very uncomfortable for the moment, so Elder Daiyu stood and prepared a crystal of water for her, and handed it to her. After sipping it quietly, it seemed to settle her nerves, and she looked at each of their faces curiously.

“Yes, Liling. We’ve *all* been here since the beginning,” Elder Rong said. “*Continuity*. We’ve found it to be a very *positive* means in maintaining our civilization, but Kita – bless her troubled soul – took that to *extremes* when she tried to fix what had gotten away from her.”

“My Ladies... My Elders... I don’t understand,” Lili told them, which elicited a quiet round of sighs from the Elders.

As the *new* spokesperson for the Council, Elder Ju considered for a moment that it was somewhat unfortunate she’d transitioned into her next willing host at this stage of their investigation. It couldn’t be helped, though. She sometimes wondered if things would not have gotten so out of hand if Kita had passed her responsibilities over to Ai when the Drecks incursions had *first* occurred. Due to Kita’s *own* hubris, opportunities were lost, and they were *still* dealing with the aftermath. Ju let out another sigh, before laying out the groundwork for Liling’s benefit.

Xue, sitting back and actually *relaxing* for a change, looked on in admiration at Ju’s calm demeanor, but wondered how long it would take *this* time before she reverted to type. Still, Ju was refreshingly cheerful for a change, so she would hold her peace for now and see how well things played out.

### ***June 1, In Vanir Space, The Microcosmus***

Today was the big day, and Commander Woldron seemed almost as gleeful as a child on Founding Day morning. Lady Huan looked on in amusement – as much as she could muster, anyway – for today they would decant Lord Caldor’s body and try to make it function once again ... *without* his head for the time being.

Hifacious was in his element, as he checked and rechecked all the medical equipment they planned to use in support of Ronnie’s body. There were heart stimulators, ventilators, monitors, and other devices the Commonwealth medical community had created over the centuries in support of medical science – each of them doubled with a live spare “just in case.” These had been developed totally aside from the “magical” elements that were possible with some of the more advanced Healers and Seniors from Cletus; if they were even available to render assistance to anyone so severely afflicted.

## An Unfortunate Decision

It was often a sore point between Healers and medical professionals, with one side pointing out that Healers didn't *really* understand what they were doing, and the other side often glibly insisting that their Healings were most often quicker and complete, and with much less trauma for the client.

There were two teams involved this morning. Team One would take the head and perform as many useful tests and scans on it as possible in the least amount of time; before popping it back into a smaller stasis chamber acquired specifically for that purpose. Team Two would focus on getting the headless body running on life support without the benefit of control signals and chemicals from the detached head. It promised to be an interesting experiment.

### *In the Observation Room*

"Commander Petrus, thank you for letting me attend this morning," Lady Calos said.

"I think he would have enjoyed seeing you once again," he assured her, leaving out the obvious dig that Lord Caldor currently had no eyes with which to see her.

They were observing the proceedings from behind an observation gallery window above the medical lab. This particular event would normally have been held extremely private, but at the request of the *Kraken's* Captain, the window had been switched from opaque to clear, and a small gathering of Lord Caldor's senior staff had been allowed to attend. They could see Woldron below as he shifted from one station to the next; assuring himself that everything was in readiness. After a final check of the second stasis chamber, they heard him issue the command to decant the body.

They watched intently as the lights changed on the box; and the lid was taken off. Immediately, two hands reached in and removed the head – quickly taking it to the other side of the medical lab and putting it into the smaller stasis box. Four other sets of hands reached in and grabbed hold of the body; raising it up high enough before someone rolled the stasis box out from under it. Then another person pushed a gurney beneath it in its place so the body could be set down. Not knowing exactly what to expect, Petrus was surprised when Woldron stood aside and let the Healers and Seniors take center stage for the moment.

"He's letting them flood the body with energy," Sai quietly shared in Drecks. "It will help replenish the cellular integrity within the body, while he prepares the ventilator and heart stimulator."

They watched the Healers and their client begin to glow brightly, and could hear the Senior from the audio monitor as she issued specific

instructions for their Healing activities. It was like watching a well-oiled machine in motion. Less than a minute later, Woldron and a helper moved the ventilator into position where the head would normally be, and he waited with a sharp scalpel in hand until the Senior gave her permission for him to cut.

Petrus had both inflicted and received a lot of deadly wounds over the centuries, but watching Woldron calmly slice into the remaining section of Ronnie's throat made him feel somewhat queasy for a moment. There was no blood, probably because the heart wasn't beating at the moment, and the insertion and sealing of the ventilator tube took only a minute longer. After making a few adjustments to the machine, the chest slowly rose and fell.

They continued to watch as he checked all around the neck, particularly at the *top* of the neck, where the head used to be, and placed his hand against where the throat had been cut, and seemed satisfied at the results. Then they heard him say something to the Senior; before backing away again.

This time the Senior approached, reached out, and laid a hand on Ronnie's chest. From their angle; they could not see if her eyes were closed, but the way she tilted her head made it obvious she was searching inside his body for something.

"Lady Huan is seeking out the proper location in the client's heart so she may tease it into functioning once again," Sai murmured.

"Isn't there a machine that will ... you know, do that for him?" Petrus asked, while continuing to watch Huan search within.

"There is a spot... Somewhere in the lining of the heart muscle, there is a spot that keeps time for the heart," Lady Calos muttered. "The heart will run without the body as long as you keep it fed."

They both turned to look up at her in surprise, which triggered a small blush from the Pack Calos leader.

"We used to see it when we carved out the beating heart of our enemies," she said quietly. "It wasn't until our Pack Healers were trained that I learned why that was."

By the time they looked back down, monitoring probes had been stuck to Ronnie's chest; and a heart monitor display was showing a flat-line with random pulses on it.

"She's prodding the lining of the heart," Sai murmured, and they watched as the general glow of the Healers faded away, while the glow coming from Lady Huan began to ramp up.

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The glow continued to get brighter while it suffused over Ronnie's general chest area. A few seconds later, the monitor gave out a few fitful beeps, before starting an erratic tempo that took several minutes to settle into a constant slow beeping. Huan dimmed slowly, but the beeping continued, and she eventually dimmed out completely before straightening up and offering a final double pat of her palm in reward for Ronnie's body falling into compliance. Petrus looked at the room timer and noted that only ten minutes had passed from start to finish.

The observation room was quiet, until a small laugh was heard from the monitor sounding very much like Woldron's. He stood there, shaking his head and smiling, before searching out the rest of the lab to see where the head had gone.

Petrus watched as two of Woldron's crew, a Healer and a medical type, were standing by the other stasis box and writing down readings from it. There was some sort of disagreement, then the Healer placed her hand over the box for a moment and said something else to the medical minion that caused him to make another note on his data pad.

Instead of remaining angry, they hugged each other and shared a quick kiss, before separating and going on to their next task.

Looking back at the now-living body, they could see the rest of the staff in various stages of hugs between them all.

"Well... That was the *easy* part," Sai muttered dryly. "Time to call home."

### ***June 2, The Kraken, Back to Work***

Laisee was enjoying the prospect of finalizing the treaty with the Prime this afternoon – *hopefully*. Then she would introduce the new Dreds Ambassador before returning for a well-earned break back on the *Kraken*.

She *specifically* avoided "wishing" for anything, or using the *equally* damning "wondering-what-else" phrase. This had been at the *urgent* request of Ronnie after them having survived the coup attempt by the S'Slich'Tah Warren Leader. He'd questioned her afterwards, and pried an admission from her that she *may* have uttered a variation of that fateful phrase before the attack; so he'd gotten a promise from her that she'd never, *ever* mention the "words-which-must-not-be-spoken" *ever again*; explaining that a *lifetime* of events, both unusual and painful, had occurred after each of his *own* transgressions.

She'd humored him at the time, before later thinking back to her *own* sequestered life. Too many instances had started to add up, and she decided that "better safe than sorry" would become the rule for her.

### *In Lady Calos' Quarters*

"Treat them as you would a member of the Commonwealth, and you should have no problems," Torga told Lady Calos, while giving her the benefit of his very limited amount of interaction with the Vanir.

"I have met with Samuel and he seems a pleasant enough individual. What is the Prime like? As a person," Lady Calos asked; giving Torga a question he'd never really considered before, and it took him several seconds while thinking of the closest analogy.

"She is most like Lady Sai Tal in my mind," he finally decided. "She is hard, but fair. She is concerned for her society, as are the leaders of the Commonwealth and us, but she is also quick to make judgments based on provable truths. Lord Caldor's short research into their pollution problem – something they'd overlooked for *millennia* – was accepted as a possibility, and then confirmed very quickly. And just as quickly, the Vanir are mobilizing to move off-planet to several other worlds within their area of influence."

Then he thought back to what he'd learned, both in person and by speaking with the Vanir he'd known.

"Something else you should know. Their usual solution to what they consider a disruptive element in their society is a *complete* sanction of that element – right down to its *roots*. Their history includes records of the destruction of entire warrens for the failure of a few of its members. We've punished individual packs before, but the Vanir suffer no qualms at eliminating entire *warrens* – over *thirty-thousand individuals* – should a problem be considered worthy of it. It's something to be considered."

They could both hear the choking gasp coming from Gar, who'd just taken a healthy gulp of a mild Drecks wine, before spraying it all over the table he was seated at. Lady Calos and Torga both grabbed towels and began mopping up after him, but his facial scars diverted attention from the flush that was struggling to gain prominence. Torga couldn't swear to it, but thought he'd heard a very quiet "tsk" from Lady Calos during their endeavors.

"I will go and change this shirt!" Gar said stiffly, then rose to his feet and left the room. Torga noted he headed for the same space Lady Calos had entered from when he'd come calling earlier. Lady Calos also noted Torga's attention to that detail.

"Gar is a loyal companion," she said quietly. "I still miss my husband, but life continues. I commend you on the beauty of your wife. I understand she is with child?"

"Yes, my Lady," he said with a notable amount of pride. "It was ... unexpected, but..."



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“Yes. They are *always* unexpected, but very welcome in time,” she said with a quiet sigh. “I thought I observed another woman aboard with child?”

“That would be Lady Sai’s fosterling ... one of the Kee.”

The comment caused her head to snap towards him, and her eyes startled him with her intensity.

“She... We believe it is the child of Lord Caldar. That is what the Healers are saying. Normally, it could not be, but ... somehow ... Lord Caldar ... he *changed* her,” he stammered out, then watched as this new information percolated through Lady Calos’ mind, until...

“Yes. We have observed the results of Lord Caldar’s changes,” she murmured, while continuing to stare at him. “Your father is very handsome ... and *youthful* ... for a man of his age ... with a *new* arm ... and clear sight in *both* eyes.”

She turned and paced away from him, while locked in thought; remembering when Gorlox had agreed to do a little spying on Lord Caldar’s behalf, and returned a little worse for wear; but bringing a few more girls for the Pack – one of whom had chosen *him* when she was granted a name. She turned back to Torga with a wry smile on her face.

“It would appear that Commonwealth-trained witches may become a *fixture* within the Hegemony, with those in power being loathe to lose the benefits Lord Caldar has bestowed upon them,” she said pleasantly. “Gods grant that *agreement* is found with his intentions.”

### ***Kantor, The Royal Homestead, Lili’s Suite***

Lili lay in her bed while quietly staring at the ceiling. She turned her head and looked to the side where Spring Blossom usually slept, but there wasn’t even a depression in the pillow where she’d normally be curled up beside her.

Of course, she’d actually have to *be* in bed to leave such a depression in the first place, but Fifth Wife had found other accommodations to suit her, after Lili had returned home in such a foul mood. She let out a wistful sigh, then stared at the ceiling again.

The extended conversations she’d had with those she’d considered her “advisors” had turned out quite differently than she’d expected. All the things she thought she’d known, all the things she thought she’d learned after being on the *Microcosmus* during Elder Ai’s assumption of the throne, then even *after* Elder Kita’s death ... *nothing* she’d learned was the truth!

Thinking about it again, her diaphragm spasmed once – forcing a silent exhalation through her nose at the *irony* of the entire situation.

Kita had been the Elder, and she'd worked on her behalf for *centuries*; first learning the skills of the Combat-Healer, before being assigned to manage the Elder's security apparatus. And she was *good* at it, too. So good, in fact, that her *final* assignment had been as First Wife to the new First Lord – something her “father-in-law” had denied the reality of. It did not matter to her, though. Her job was to insure the security of the First Lord, and monitor his progress as a professional administrator – something at which he *excelled*, but also something his father never really appreciated during his lifetime.

Later on, her role became making sure his increasingly chaotic father didn't make good on any of the rumors suggesting that his only surviving son's life was *worthless*. It was the Gods' own grace that the half-breed had finally resurfaced and decided to work the downside of the Gleanings far away from his birth father, and conveniently dragging his “stepfather” along with him as his resident keeper.

She slowly rolled her head from side to side; eyes closed and face flushing at the rise of her own hubris.

The *Elder* – she who pulls the strings of the *Commonwealth*. Or rather, she who pulls the strings of the *men* who manage the Commonwealth on *her* behalf.

The *Elder* – the reigning Queen of *Cletus* – whose office manages the *affairs* of Cletus through the “Elder's Council” on *Cletus*.

The *Elder* – she who has the *Visions*...

Except that she did not, nor did anyone else. At least, no one the Council of Elders had been able to locate since they'd gone away. She hadn't even *known* about such things ... not until Kita had...

She flushed again at her own presumptuousness. Unknown to her, Xiu had been in contact with the Council of Elders once it had been determined that Elder Ai had suffered a breakdown. It was at Xiu's urging that Lili be pressed into service as Elder pro tem; *primarily* on the basis that she had a much vaster amount of experience to apply to the current crisis. The fact that she had the ear of the Emperor, and was in relatively constant contact with the Emperor's agent afield, were the deciding factors, helped along by her initial suggestion to build the Tier One staff in support of the Elder's offices on Kantor to begin with.

Xiu hadn't *lied* to her. She'd merely said, “they'd reached a decision,” and assumed she'd meant Fan, Molar, and herself. She felt so *stupid* now! The wetness in her eyes gathered at the edges of her cheeks, before rolling down past her ears and causing her to fling a hand across her face to wipe it away. Rather than give in to her frustration, she got up and walked out to sit on the patio under the morning shadows.

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The outside air was cool, but not crisp, and she watched as the sunlight slowly crept down the canyon walls across from the residence on its way to the canyon bottom. In the edges of the shade and light, she could see flying insects flittering about, tiny motes chased by local fliers out for their morning breakfast. The view was distracting, but not enough to blank out the memory of her *summons*...

It had come through her offices at the Capitol, directly from Cletus. Xiu had immediately contacted her and requested that she return to the Elder's offices to "discuss an important message." She'd given nothing else away, and instead waited until she'd arrived to "explain a few things" to her – one of which included a *COMMAND* to return to Cletus – reason not explained. It had remained so, until she'd sat in the vestibule of the Elders chambers; sharing it with a young woman whose soul had been quite a bit older than she'd looked...

Her body shook in silent laughter. She could laugh about it now. Did she *really* think she ruled in a void? Did she *never* consider what would happen if an Elder suddenly went missing ... or *died*?

At least she now knew why it was *locally* called the "Council of Elders" and not "The Elder's Council."

The Council of *Elders* – as in *more than one*.

*Five*, actually.

*Six*, if you include the resident Elder on Kantor.

Six Elders ... as it is *now* ... as it was in the *beginning*.

Her mind delved into the memory of that lecture...

A little over ten-thousand years ago, the Elders of Cletus administered the societal structure of the clans. They did not rule, so much as manage the interactions between the various factions, and insured the clan matriarchs maintained appropriate control over their men.

The men were kept happy, peace was maintained, and the women enjoyed autonomy over their lives.

They'd already witnessed a long history of men being left to their own devices, and the resultant chaos that ensued. Over the centuries, they'd developed their talents to help mitigate that chaos.

By the time a fledging Kantite ship Captain had landed and made overtures of peace – while secretly planning (or so he'd thought) to kidnap an assortment of women for breeding purposes – one of the Elders had suggested a rather unique solution.

Their subsequent dalliance on the "edge of the dark side" (what little of it they were able to achieve so long ago) had yielded fruitful results,

which then prompted the eventual visit by a Kantite Lord with the rather pretentious name of Aquintus Tiberious Rakel Caldarous. The Elders had examined this “Aquintus Tiberious” character, then met in Council to determine his usefulness.

What they’d finally determined was that, unlike the *previous* Kantite visitor, Aquintus was actually quite the scholar, and understood a great deal about his society, and its history of self-depredation. They’d become convinced that, under *proper* supervision, this Kantite Lord might become a useful tool in managing the stability of the local clusters.

It was finally decided that the most prudent path would be to bind a Cletus bride to this Kantite Lord and have her manage him for the benefit of *both* races. As they were all of an appropriate age, they drew lots, and the loser was chosen as his bride. After that, it was a group effort to implant the suggestion that he found her intriguing, and of suitable breeding stock, and the deed was done.

What her companions never suspected, however, was the innate charm of her new husband, and the strange consequence of her actually falling in *love* with him – so much so, that they achieved the first “Healer’s Bond.”

She’d continued giving him small advantages over the other males in his society, while making sure he didn’t realize she was doing it to him. Along with insuring his continued good health, she subtly guided him towards a *non-destructive* expansion of power and control over his peers ... finally conceiving of an entire *series* of subtle “upgrades” to his mind that should have transpired over *decades*.

It was unfortunate, but the next gift she gave him would be her last.

The event of her unexpected death during childbirth was the key that unleashed his inner potential. Without another Cletus female nearby, the Elder that was his wife passed on through the Healer’s Bond some of her abilities – churning the genetic mishmash that was his brain into something that had never before existed. This, it turned out, was the beginning of the *Visions*.

By the time of his passing, another Cletus wife had been bonded to him, and the Visions has passed on to her. His son, fully grown now, and running Kantor under the supervision of *his* Cletus wife, set up offices for his stepmother to help administer the selection and placement of Cletus wives for the other Royal families; knowing by now that wives from Cletus were a stabilizing influence in Kantite society.

And thus, it began. The Elder’s office on Kantor that, with the Emperor’s full approval and support, selected suitable companions for the Royal houses, such that chaos was kept in check. The only downside

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– the Elder would remain unwed during her term of office. There would be *no more* unilateral “upgrades” to their Kantite minions.

Over the years, the Cletus clans improved their Healer skills, and the Elder’s office managed the distribution and staffing of both wife and non-wife Healers and Seniors throughout the growing Commonwealth; with the *resident* Kantite Elder using the memories and Visions as passed down to her to best manage the Kantite leaders ... but *never* in a void.

The Council of Elders was *always* an element of the office. The Kantite Elder became a *solitary* position – *without* a husband – but with supporting Seniors to share the work, and support the soul. It stayed that way, with the sitting Elder passing her legacy down to the next, every five-hundred years or so, then leaving for a well-earned retirement – just like on Cletus. Both offices were kept fresh, and the Elders grew in strength and ability.

And *then* ... then there was the accident. Elder Kita’s predecessor died in an *accident*. A skeptic might have said that she wasn’t that sharp of an Elder if she couldn’t see her *own* death rushing towards her.

Whatever the circumstances, the Visions had passed to Kita, but, at over eight-hundred years old, the Senior had been frightened and confused at what she was experiencing. She’d spent months away from the Elder’s office while struggling with something she’d never known was a possibility. It was only when ordered back to Cletus and entering the Council of Elders that she’d finally been made aware of her situation.

It had been explained to her, and she’d eventually worked it all out, but without a proper “pass-down”, there were lost memories involved, which included nearly ten-thousand years of knowledge about the Visions, and how to best utilize the gifts they bestowed.

At least Elder Ai had shared the knowledge of the Visions with her staff – although Lili could well understand what would happen if it were to get out that, not only did the Elder effectively *rule* the Commonwealth, she did so on the basis of, as Ronnie had once said, “\*reading tea leaves\*.”

She stifled another snort as her memory continued the thread...

As for the *rest* of it, the Council of Elders would make the final determination of her status, based on their collective knowledge of Commonwealth history spanning nearly ten-thousand years. She *still* couldn’t conceive of it. Each of the Elders she’d met, retained the memories of *all* the ones who’d gone before her.

More properly, the memories of each of them were the same; but the *bodies* they used had been volunteered for a set period of time – usually not exceeding five-hundred years. At the end of that time, the collective

memories were passed on to a new host, while the existing host pursued her *own* interests; perhaps having gained Healer talents she'd previously lacked, or simply choosing a field of activity that she felt suited for.

She'd been told that some volunteers had even settled down with an extended family, and taken up a simple life with a husband or two, along with their existing wives and children...

A rustling in the bushes preceded a familiar black face. Targa Slayer stopped to look at her, then glanced to either side. She watched as his head tilted up to the canyon's rim – checking the status of the Imperial guards set to watch the grounds.

Satisfied that everything was in place, he plodded forward and stopped in front of her chair.

***'Talking Man?'***

She wasn't surprised. The valaets weren't known for small talk.

"They are working on him."

***'Bring home. Make well'***

He seemed to have a higher opinion of her than she deserved.

"We will try," she promised him.

He stared at her a moment more, then shifted his gaze behind her; chuffing once, before turning and heading back into the bushes.

"We will try," she whispered to herself, something *else* that was an issue with the Council of Elders.

"Lili, I – I brought you some juice," Spring Blossom said quietly from behind her.

She watched Lili's shoulders as they tightened in startlement. Then she slowly slipped around her and carefully deposited a tray on the table in front of her, while keeping her eyes lowered to avoid seeing any annoyance on her face. She turned and was about to leave, when Lili reached out and grasped her arm lightly.

"Spring Blossom ... my lover... Please forgive me," she murmured, then gently tugged on her arm until she was able to pull her palm to her lips for a kiss. "The visit to Cletus... It – it was not the most pleasant experience this time."

Spring Blossom gave out a quiet gasp. then bent over to hug her lover, before gradually ending up in the lap and warm embrace of the taller woman.

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“They are unhappy with you?” she murmured, with her face tucked into Lili’s neck.

*‘Unhappy?’* she thought to herself. *‘That was an understatement.’*

“They are ... undecided,” she finally said, leaving out the issue over Ronnie’s potential recovery.

Almost as if she’d read her mind...

“Have you heard from Sai about ... about my little TS’ILSQSÉ BIYIGÉ?”

Spring Blossom’s baby name for him still made her smile, and she hugged her just a little bit tighter.

“Yesterday they had his heart beating on its own. His lungs ... those are on a machine, much as they use on your Earth. They are feeding him through a tube; a mixture of Healer’s milk and nutrients. They are working to bring back your little Star Seed, but ... but the Elder’s Council is not pleased, and want him brought to Cletus before an attempt is made to attach the ... the rest of him,” she said delicately, waiting to see how she would take it.

After a quiet gasp, she heard, “Then it must be as they say, but I must be there for my little TS’ILSQSÉ BIYIGÉ. He must not be left to ... to *strangers*.”

“Yes, my lover. We will be there together,” she promised her, hoping the Elder’s would allow it to be so.

### *In Vanir Space, The Kraken, Evening Updates*

Petrus warily entered his quarters, unsure of the mood Sai was in. She hadn’t been particularly pleased with him when he’d bailed on her over Ronnie’s potential “retasking” by Lili, but her behavior the next day had been mollified for some reason, certainly more so than expected.

He heard the shower running and glanced inside. Seeing a familiar full outline in the shadows, he started dropping his clothes in anticipation, but the shadow doubled, so he diverted to the toilet and avoided making a smell while the girls finished their shower.

He made some noise indicating he was there; not presuming to impose his thoughts on anyone for the time being, and was rewarded with a call from Déjà to bring her a towel. He got up and pulled one from storage, before passing it over to the wetly gleaming body of his stepdaughter, who was showing a bit of extra tummy that wasn’t there a few days ago.

“What have you been *eating*, girl?” he teased her, and heard a chuckle from the shower stall behind him.

“She wouldn’t *be* in that shape if she’d just settled for *eating* him!” Sai called out, followed by a delighted giggle or two. “Get in here and wash my *hair* ... and whatever *else* you can reach!”

He was happy to comply, and eagerly joined her in the shower.

As they were drying afterwards and preparing to relax for the evening, he tempted fate and quietly asked her, “What’s the status from Woldron today?”

Sai glanced at the closed door of the room Déjà slept in, and turned back to him.

“I spoke to Jia this evening,” she murmured. “His heart is beating strong, although Woldron put some sort of timing device on it. The machine is keeping his lungs going – no brain stem to drive them. Woldron is frustrated that we won’t let him do some exploratory surgery on those ‘extra’ organs Ronnie grew somewhere down in his pelvis.”

“Gods, I should *hope* not! If what the kids say is true, they might be the *only*–”

Sai stopped him with a finger across his lips and pulled him over to the bed; sparing a glance at Déjà’s door once again, before turning to face him.

“There’s another problem,” she said quietly. “Lili was... She was called to... Petrus – how much do you *really* know about Cletus? How everything runs, I mean?”

He looked at her stupidly for a moment, but started working it out.

“Well... The Elder is the Queen. She runs things on Kantor, because, you know, the Kantites are irresponsible bastards for the most part. She manages the Seniors, and they select other Seniors and Healers for political marriages to problematic Kantite men. Or just management assignments. I never really gave it much thought.”

“The Elder is the *Queen* ... of *Cletus*,” she murmured. “Yet she never goes there,” she whispered, seeing a lot of confusion in his eyes.

She knew her husband well, even after all their years of separation. She also knew that he and Lili spoke often. Lili *might* have told him; or perhaps not, as she’d just learned about it herself.

She truthfully didn’t know if *she* would be yanked back to Cletus if she told him herself, but still felt that he really needed to know and understand what was what. It would be better if he could figure it out for *himself*, though.

Petrus sat there and stared at Sai’s face, wondering what in the hell she was trying to tell him. He knew she wanted him to know *something*,



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but, like *most* women, he would have to figure it out from her *non-useful* cues and body language. He *hated* playing these damn games with her – with *any* woman, for that matter. It was just as bad as when they asked how they looked in their clothes, and the answer was *always* the same – they looked better *naked*!

‘Clues,’ he thought. ‘*Lili, Elder, Cletus ... Queen. Queen of Cletus ... but never goes there?*’ He *hated* these games.

“Something about ... *Cletus?*” he suggested to her hopeful face, and picked up a tiny positive impulse from her surface thoughts.

He stared at her for a moment, before smacking himself mentally.

“Cletus,” he said, and felt the positive tingle again. “*Queen of Cletus ... but never goes home. Manages Seniors and Healers for the Kantite Lords,*” he said, and felt positive pings for each statement.

“Somehow manages Cletus from her *Kantite* offices?” he suggested softly, but got a negative response this time.

‘Oh-oh,’ he thought. ‘*That means someone ELSE...*’

He flopped back on the bed and closed his eyes, while running through the political structures he was currently familiar with on Kantor, Tyler, Balese, and Loca. The older colony worlds of Grimer, Nance, and Exeter didn’t count, and that *certainly* left out the mishmash of political chaos that existed on Earth.

He suddenly realized that he didn’t really know *anything* about the political structure on Cletus! He opened his eyes, then slowly blinked once, before sitting up and holding her hands.

“The Queen of Cletus works on *Kantor*, but is focused on *Kantite* issues ... *Commonwealth* issues, really,” he said, and detected the appropriate response. “But she can’t do that and deal with *Cletus*, too, so there’s something *else* on Cletus that...”

He paused while running through what he *thought* he’d known...

‘*Lili’s only the Elder pro tem, and she really reports to her Senior Staff on Kantor, but is there more staff on Cletus that report to them as well? But ... does that even make sense?*’

His thinking was getting confused, and he stopped and thought about the *current* monarchy, with all the husbands, wives, children, and the rest of their extended family.

“Oh crap! There’s a whole *other* body on Cletus running things on the *ground*!” he said, and the positive pings peaked, causing him to follow it to its logical conclusion. “The Elder isn’t ... she isn’t *really* in charge of everything? She’s just the figurehead of the *real* power back on Cletus?”

That's what the *Elder's* Council does!" he said in excited conclusion, just now realizing he'd nailed it with Trenka earlier, which explained her explosive response.

Sai looked at him, almost in relief. At least that's what she projected towards him when she leaned in and hugged him tightly; her body shaking from the stress of it all. He hugged her back and came up with the safest, to *him*, remark.

"Sweetie, it's all *right*. I'm not *stupid*. I know and *fully* understand why our society works the way it does," he murmured into her hair. "Me and Ronnie used to talk about it sometimes. For a young man, he'd read up on a *lot* of history, but we *both* agree that things are *much* better when you guys are in charge."

He could have *left* it at that, but...

"And the *best* part is, when things screw up, and *we're* blamed for it, we *both* know whose fault it *really is!*"

The grateful hug lasted another three seconds, before it was replaced by the resentful shove that slid him right off the edge of the bed. The resultant pillow fight lasted only a few minutes, before the door to the other bedroom opened and a sleepy-eyed Déjà looked out over the battle zone.

Caught in the middle of a nude pillow fight, both parties calmly separated, before straightening out the bed. Then Sai walked over and offered a breast to her daughter, which only earned her a frown, before Déjà turned her back on her, and closed the door on her way back to bed.

"I love you, my girl," Petrus said quietly, glancing in Sai's direction and catching the smirk on her lips. "But why did you put me through all that ... no, wait. Plausible deniability?"

Her single laugh told him as much, but she sauntered over and quietly confirmed it anyway.

"They yanked Lili in for questioning. Haven't yet decided if they'll let her continue or not. Petrus, with the Visions gone, things over there are in *chaos*. They aren't yet ready to--"

It was his turn to tap her lips closed.

"Then we do it like it's *always* been done – with a careful analysis of the situation, and a reasonable decision to deal with it. You guys ... you know, just keep us men from screwing things up, and we'll get through it just fine," he assured her, then drew her in for another warm hug.

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“That’s pretty much what Lili said. She said they were impressed with the Tier One staff. They weren’t so enthused with what she wants to do with Ronnie,” she murmured.

“Huh?”

“They don’t want anyone to try putting his head back on until we reach Cletus,” she whispered.

“Well, it won’t do much good until they can clear all that *crap* out of it first,” he reminded her.

“That’s not what they’re concerned about...”

### *In Laisee’s Compartment*

Laisee was rummaging restlessly through her closet and wondering why she’d shipped out with all the belongings she’d brought with her.

For one thing, she had *way* too many clothes, considering how little she actually changed her basic attire from day-to-day. Looking through her drawers, she wondered why she’d brought along twelve sets of underwear. Realistically, she hadn’t actually packed them herself. Her personal servants back on Kantor had done most of the selection and packing, then shipped it to the *Microcosmus* for her. It was a wonder a servant hadn’t been assigned to her back then, but apparently, it’d been an oversight that has since been rectified. Of course, she’d been planet-side at the time.

She almost snorted at that, having someone aboard whose *sole* purpose in life was to make sure she had clean underwear, her room was straightened daily, and her bed linen was changed frequently. Being a Princess of the Commonwealth had some perks, but even when Ronnie was still vertical, he wasn’t beyond sending his own clothes through the wash, and changing his own bedding. Granted, his room wasn’t always that tidy, but at least he was capable of managing without a handler.

She closed the drawer and slowly turned to look around her compartment; stopping to stare longingly through the door at her imported “\*electric piano\*” sitting in a corner of the outer chamber. Unfortunately, it was too late to play it, as Jaiying had just taken her shower and gone to bed in the other room. It had come with accessories for private listening, but she’d never gotten used to sticking those things in her ears, or the cord dangling down from her head that distracted her from her efforts

A familiar quiet knock at the compartment door caused her to turn her head that way, and she saw her personal servant peek through the opening, then enter confidently.

Livia stopped at the entrance to the bedchamber and bowed politely.

“My Lady Caldarous, are you ready for me to turn down your bed?”

Her earlier introspection clearly in mind, she held back her laughter and smiled warmly.

“Yes, Livia. Now would be a good time,” she said, then politely ignored her loyal servant, lest she become worried that she wasn’t doing the job properly.

After folding down the covers, Livia made a quick pass through the facilities and came out with a bundle of towels for washing. Glancing around, she picked up the obviously used clothing and added them to the bundle, before turning back to Laisee and bowing once again.

“Will there be anything else, my Lady?”

Laisee paused for a moment and studied what she’d felt when asked that. They’d certainly spent some interesting nights together on Kantor, but it felt like she had something else on her mind this evening.

“Not tonight, Livia,” she said warmly. “Unless perhaps ... you would *like* to stay?”

“Oh no, my Lady. I-I...” she stopped while the blush ran up her cheeks, and Laisee gave out a light giggle.

“Who is it?” she whispered. “Who draws on your heartstrings this night?”

“It is ... he is one of the new guards. Casmir is his name,” she said; the blush burning brighter on her cheeks.

“Well then, you’d better run along, girl,” she told her; a smile showing her delight. “And Livia ... tell him if he does not please you, he will have to deal with Lady *Tal*.”

At that, Livia gave out a tiny gasp, then bowed her head again; a grin easily detected from the bunching of her cheeks.

“By your leave, my Lady,” she said to the floor, then scooted out the door and left the outer chamber, leaving Laisee alone with her thoughts.

*‘Good for her,’* she thought. *‘At least SOMEONE won’t be sleeping alone tonight.’*

She gave her room another turn, then sat on the sheets recently uncovered, before removing her slippers. Stretching out without pulling up the covers, she considered the day’s events...

A successful treaty signing, followed by introductions to the new Drecks Ambassador, Lady Calos. Torga had been on hand to help. Between the two of them, Lady Calos had made a passable impression on the Prime. She was then formally introduced to both the Vanir

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Ambassador to the Commonwealth and his mate, then the *new* Vanir Ambassador to the Hegemony, and his Senior Medical Technician.

This had been a surprise to both Torga and Laisee, although it should have been expected. It was even news to Samuel and Sally, as they'd just found out that morning, but had been forbidden from mentioning it prior to the meeting; the supposition being that the Prime wanted to observe how big a bulky hand tool she could throw at the opposition to see if it lacked any balance. In this case, Lady Calos' position as Pack Master's wife, and now, de facto Pack Master of Pack Calos, stood her well.

She and members of her team would meet with and learn more about Vanaheim, the Vanir, and the Vanir Ambassador and his team, before they all transited back to Zarox for formal introductions at the Hegemony court. Eventually, the two sides would establish Embassies on each other's respective planets.

Samuel, Sally, and *their* staff would be returning to the Commonwealth, and once "public" introductions to the Kantite court were made – in this case, mostly a done deal – a suitable location in the Capitol would be selected, and become a tiny, sovereign piece of Vanaheim ... or wherever the Vanir Capitol finally ended up being located. The next few months promised to be very exciting.

As for Laisee, the communication from her father had sealed her fate. She would be returning, along with the Vanir Ambassador's party, with a stop scheduled at Cletus before their arrival at Kantor.

As related by Lili, all she'd need to do now is bring the *new* Commonwealth Ambassador up to speed before she left ... provided Trenka was up to it.

### ***June 4, Disagreement in the Ranks***

Trenka had just returned from a late breakfast and started to relax, when someone knocked on her door. Reaching out silently, she felt a familiar presence, and a disgusted look came over her face. It was still there when she opened the door to face Laisee.

"I already *told* you! I don't *want* the job!" she said, just short of shouting, which would have been extremely rude to a member of the Royal family. From the expression on his face, it certainly sounded rude to the Imperial guardsman standing next to Laisee.

"Good morning, Trenka," Laisee said sweetly, then pushed her way past her into the room. "These quarters are quite lovely, but your *new* quarters on the *Microcosmus* will be *much* nicer."

As soon as the door closed behind her, Trenka grabbed her arm to jerk her around, but found herself frozen in place. She stewed silently, unable

to move anything but her eyes, as she learned Laisee had *another* skill set she hadn't been made aware of. She watched in frustration as Laisee slowly walked over and settled into the room's only comfortable chair.

A few moments later, the paralysis left her and she was able to move once again, but she stayed in place as Laisee sat there and calmly observed her.

"Lady Trenka, if my guard had observed your actions, you could have lost an arm. Granted, with as many Healers and Seniors aboard the *Kraken*, the inconvenience would only be temporary, but *still* – why suffer the trauma of it?" She paused for a few more moments, before quietly adding, "You could have also lost your *life*."

The frustrated Elder's agent struggled to gain control of herself, and finally rendered a short bow – just on the side of civility – before turning away and sitting at the single desk chair as far away from Laisee as she could get in the rather spacious compartment.

"Now, as we discussed yesterday, at Lady Lili's recommendation, the Emperor has chosen *you* to fulfill the role of Commonwealth Ambassador to the Vanir. You will have a small staff to support you, plus three Imperial guardsmen of your choice as a security detail," Laisee reminded her.

"And what if I *still* don't want the job?"

"Trenka – the Emperor trusts that you will do the right thing. *Lili* trusts that you will do the right thing," Laisee assured her.

"Lili wants me to *ROT* out here because I *BEHEADED THE FIRST LORD!*" she shouted at her.

"And I'm sure he thoroughly *deserved it!* My stepbrother has *always* been difficult to live with!" Laisee said in frustration, catching Trenka totally off guard at that reminder.

"Laisee ... I ... I didn't *mean* to..."

Laisee got up and walked over to her, before squatting and taking her hands into her own.

"Look – Ronnie screwed up. It happens. Worse, he lost *faith*," she told her quietly, while squeezing her hands in hers. "But what *else* would you expect? After all, he's only a man."

"Was a man," Trenka muttered. "I *killed* him."

"He *tried* to commit suicide ... *without* permission," Laisee said firmly. "He just completely forgot who he was surrounded by. His heart is beating on its own now. His lungs are breathing, too, just ... not without some assistance. They haven't hooked up his brain stem, yet."

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Trenka looked at her in shock. She'd known they'd stuffed the body into a stasis box and hauled it over to the *Microcosmus*, but she'd not been privy to anything other than that.

"You're... You can put him back *together*?"

"Commander Woldron was *thrilled* at the opportunity ... you know how those medical types pride themselves on their skills. Ronnie's body is still functional – kind of like being in a coma. They're still working out the details of yanking that powder out of his brain so he can get back to normal when they reassemble the rest of him," Laisee assured her, before getting up from her squat and filling a cup with water.

Coming back to Trenka, she handed her the cup, before returning to the comfy chair.

"Trenka, the Emperor and Lady Lili *believe* in you," she said, picking up where she'd left off. "More importantly, the Elder's Council has assured Lili that you will do the right thing."

"Elder's... When did *they* become involved?"

Laisee remembered that revelation, given to her by Jaiying after the children had yanked it out of Amy's head. From Trenka's reaction, it sounded like it hadn't been a mystery to her, despite being kept secret from Lili for all those centuries. Perhaps Kita had just been keeping circumspect after all her intrusions into Lili's personal life?

"They've been involved from the beginning. You *do* understand the relationship?" she asked her, and got a cautious nod back from Trenka, before continuing to reveal her own understanding of the situation.

"The Elder's Council was contacted by Xiu as soon as Lady Ai became unable to fulfill her duties. The Elder's Staff suggested that Lili sit in the Elder's chair while things were sorted out. The Elder's Council agreed – provisionally."

She left off some other pertinent information – such as the lack of Visions and how badly Elder Kita had screwed things up.

"Lili may be formalized in the position, or hold it only temporarily," Laisee continued. "She is in the age range for selection as Elder, and has worked for the office since before the first Drecks incursions. She is a good choice, Trenka, and her placement as First Wife could not be better for managing the Commonwealth."

She also left out the part where Elders were not supposed to be *married* to the persons they managed.

"Trenka, there is no one else here who has the backing of the Elder's Council, and I am called to return to the Commonwealth, along with the

*Kraken.* The Council has ordered that Ronnie be returned directly to Cletus. Will you please accept this appointment as Ambassador to the Vanir on behalf of the Commonwealth?"

Trenka turned away to avoid the look on Laisee's face. She'd sprung it on her yesterday, and it had almost come to blows. It still might have, if her little daughter hadn't been present. She considered the child, and her being stuck out here in the middle of alien space with only one other child as a companion. Then she remembered that Déjà was carrying a child ... no, *two* children. She'd felt them, a boy and a girl, while passing by her in the corridor. Letting out a sigh, she turned back to Laisee with a resigned look on her face.

"Very well, Laisee. How can I oppose the will of the Elder's Council? What must I learn to become the Commonwealth Ambassador?" she asked, while getting a relieved smile from Laisee in return.

Fortunately, given clues passed on by the children, Laisee had an *excellent* idea of how to teach Trenka everything she needed to know about becoming the Commonwealth Ambassador.

### ***June 6, The Microcosmus, In the Medical Lab***

They'd shared a quiet breakfast, before heading to the medical lab. The Commander had been eager to share his plans with his companion in the hopes she would approve of them. So far ... not so much.

"I – I really think it can work, Jia," Woldron said quietly...

He was seated at a large monitor that displayed the scan results they'd taken of Ronnie's head before they'd popped it back into stasis. Lady Huan was standing by his side.

From what he could tell, Lord Caldor had cleverly arranged for Lady Trenka to sever his neck *precisely* where it would do the least amount of damage – relatively speaking. He'd fired her blade *HOT* – hot enough to seal the edges of the wound, and the skull had lost little to no blood in the process; similar to the rest of his body. That was understandable, of course, since the body held the pump for all that blood in the first place.

The brain cells would have retained stability for, at most, between five and six minutes – depending on the current temperature, and his genetic make up. The reports from Lady Tal and the security recordings suggested they'd gotten his corpse into stasis very nearly within that time frame. It would have been better if Lady Tal had flooded his *head* with Healing energy the moment it hit the floor, but there might still be a chance that some part of him was recoverable ... maybe.

Using the scans, and working with what was available on hand, Hifacious had spent a lot of time thinking about how best to go about



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recovery. He'd been most delighted to find that an extracorporeal membrane oxygenation system had been part of the medical equipment stocked onboard the *Microcosmus*. It was certainly something that *Healers* would never use, if they were even aware of it, but he'd used them several times in the past...

"Hifacious, this is not heart surgery you are contemplating, nor is it a client's lungs," Jia said quietly. "You would have very little time to connect your machine to Lord Caldar's head, and begin circulation of blood to it. And you still have not found matching blood of his type to use, have you?"

"No. But we have a very good source for it," he reminded her, while turning to look up at her. "We'd only need very little. A liter at most ... well, maybe a little more for the machine to use for processing. But blood thinners needed to hold clotting at bay would help, and it's not like we'd be trying to keep his *whole* body alive."

Jia turned away; thinking about what Sai had told her a few days ago. Lord Caldar's head still needed to be cleansed of the powder, but it was questionable if it would damage his neurons in the process, or simply allow further deterioration of them while the cleaning was taking place.

Even lowering the temperature, as Hifacious had told her, might not prevent further damage.

"Hifacious ... do you have everything you need? Do you *really* think I will be able to pull the powder to the holding filter you've been growing?" she asked the wall; thinking of the machine-fabricated organic cellular filter he'd created with the engineer's help. It had worked in theory, and then in the lab – just before Lord Caldar had taken it upon himself to wait no longer.

He stood up and reached out to draw her around to face him, before pulling her into a gentle hug.

"Jia, my love, Ronnie was *Rakel's* son. Rakel was ... not right in the head – not at the last, but he was my friend. During his autopsy, I think I discovered what happened to him – *besides* his aneurism," he said dryly, getting a quiet gasp from Jia in the process.

Despite her disgust at the mere thought of it, she leaned back and looked up at him questioningly.

"He used to *rave* about the Drecks, about how the Elder had somehow kept him from crossing the Fringe," he muttered with a frown. "Said he could have eliminated them *totally*, if only he'd been let loose to do so – which she finally did. After Ronnie failed him at Zarox, he became less and less concerned about the Drecks. He began withdrawing into himself – so much so, that his last wife grabbed her daughters and left him."

“But ... she was *married* to him – a *Kantite* marriage, wasn’t it?”

“Hmm? Oh, yes. And she fled for her *life*. Rakel was becoming quite the *bastard* about then. He called me in ... wanted to talk to me about it. He said he wanted to know what was happening to him. I gave him a full work up, but didn’t find anything in particular. I did some more research, and was about to schedule some *specific* tests, but he died before they could take place.” He looked away uncomfortably, while Jia continued looking up at him in expectation.

“You said ... you think you knew what was wrong?”

“Yes. The autopsy showed calcium deposits in his brain – *specifically* around his amygdalae, and mostly on the right side. It could affect some of his *baser* emotions ... even to the point he could react out of fear to certain situations or events. Sometimes ... in his *relationships*. I think it may have even had something to do with that Healer he killed. Elder Kita mentioned he’d gone down the *dark* path that time.”

Jia shrank back at the thought of it – a *Kantite* male *actively* using forbidden skills, and then *killing* with them.

“That – *that’s* what happened to Mistress–”

“We believe that to be the case, yes,” he quickly assured her. “As for Rakel’s situation, it is incredibly rare to begin with – maybe three to four-hundred cases in a given society at any time – but with a *mature* *Kantite*? That would be a *deadly* combination.”

He gave her a tighter squeeze, then loosened up so he could look down into her eyes again.

“Jia, I think we should still try to help Ronnie. I know you told me they want to wait until they reach Cletus to put him back together, but we’re the only ones right now who have the knowledge of removing that powder from his brain. I can be ready in two more days ... *three* at the most.”

“Then ... then I will tell Lady Tal, and she will inform the Elder of your progress,” Jia promised him.

### ***The Kraken, Laisee’s Compartment***

After a relatively bland dinner, Trenka found herself sitting quietly in Laisee’s suite. She had a small crystal of ambrosia at hand, and a data pad linked to the one Laisee was using seated across from her, while they were jointly reviewing an inventory list.

“There. You see? Item 278,” she said, while wiping her finger under the item in question, which caused a corresponding indicator to move at the identical location on Trenka’s pad. There was a large list of supplies she would be responsible for once the transfer of duties was complete.

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“Your staff will manage most of it, and what they do not, the stewards aboard the *Microcosmus* will handle the rest. Your quarters will be *much* more comfortable than you currently have, and you even have room for a *companion* to share your spaces.”

Trenka looked at her in surprise, even knowing the average Kantite was seldom ever alone. For some reason, Laisee didn’t strike her as the type to be as promiscuous as most of the Kantite Ladies she’d met in the past, especially given her Loca origins. Of course, nurture probably had much to do with it, and being brought up in the *Imperial* household would have provided her with ample opportunities for companionship.

“Don’t seem so shocked, Trenka. Petrus mentioned your kindness to him after his rescue by you,” Laisee said, getting another surprised look from Trenka in the process.

“Ah, as Healers, we feel our client’s needs, and try to provide for them,” she said evenly.

“Yes, Trenka. *We* Healers are often in a position to make our companions lives a little richer by sharing our compassion with them,” she agreed. “Of course, we also enrich our *own* lives in the process.”

They shared a quiet smile between them, before Laisee continued down the list.

“We have not talked much about trade goods, just the few samples that Samuel – Ambassador S’Shac’Kah 39496 had suggested the Vanir might be interested in. Quite frankly, as apex species for both our spheres of influence, there is probably very little the Vanir might be interested in – aside from that nasty anti-matter weapon which takes up the center of this ship. We would certainly like more information on their *stasis* technology, and their current nanotechnology is *way* beyond ours. Those might be brought up as casual talking points with Samuel’s counterpart down on the surface.”

“Laisee ... I – I really don’t know what I’m going to *do* down there,” Trenka said nervously. She took a shaky sip of her drink before looking away awkwardly.

“I gave all of that you *earlier*, remember?”

Trenka remembered. Oh, *how* she remembered. Yet *another*, for the umpteenth time, new experience for her with this relatively new Senior.

“Trenka, an Ambassador is like a salesperson. You try to present the Commonwealth in the best light, while downplaying its faults. You don’t *deny* those faults, but you do acknowledge them, and explain how you are dealing with them – or possibly, if the *Vanir* can suggest ways of dealing with them. It is a two-way path between the societies. Humans

are different from Vanir. Your job is to show them we are not totally evil as a society, and share many of the same goals. At best, we all get along fine. At worst, we go our separate ways – but continue to leave each other alone.”

“So ... anywhere between those two extremes is all right?”

“Well ... yes. That is the goal,” Laisee assured her. “Peaceful coexistence. We don’t go out of our way to kill them, and they return the favor. If trade develops, then that is just a bonus. Even if it is only foodstuffs, or perhaps soft or hard goods. You just never know.”

“And the valuation of trade goods is by those actually doing the trading?” Trenka still wasn’t sure of the concept. The last time she’d checked, the Kantite system managers had a lot to do with the exchange rates between all the clusters.

“Pretty much. The trade missions will try to establish a balance of trade by relative worth. It would be ideal if there were a *common* valuation – a standard ‘credit’ that was the same between societies. Who knows? One might be established,” Laisee suggested. “But that’s a ways into the *future*. The Vanir have a big moving party planned, and they’re going to be busy for a while – a *long* while, it looks like.”

Trenka nodded while considering that last. The Vanir were packing up to leave Vanaheim – their ancestral home. Or maybe *not*, according to some of the files she’d reviewed over the last few days.

Laisee was still going down the list, when Trenka thought of another question.

“If I’m to be stationed on the *Microcosmus*, then what are we going to use as an escort ship once the *Kraken* returns to the Commonwealth?”

“You’ll still have your *personal* transport – the one you docked on the *Microcosmus* when you first arrived there.”

Trenka gave out a snort, saying, “That really doesn’t fit the situation. The *Microcosmus* is completely defenseless. At least leave me the *Kraken’s Child*, or maybe the *Orca* – something with some *fire power*!”

Laisee pushed her data pad away from her on the tabletop, and sat back. For an agent of the Elder, this Senior seemed *terribly* naïve.

“Have you even *looked* at the specifications of the *Microcosmus*? No – it isn’t armed. *Defenseless*? Have a word with Donnel Ardan when you get the chance. He, Lon, and Granger were the principal engineers when they were refitting the *Microcosmus*. There are some *frightening* capabilities within the shield design that negates the lack of offensive weapons.”

It was Trenka’s turn to scoff.

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“You think that thing’s *shields* will save it if the Vanir attack?”

“Trenka ... Donnel, Lon, and Granger were aboard the *Microcosmus* when a Zarox planetary siege platform hit it and tore it *apart!* Donnel assures me that will *not* happen again,” Laisee told her. “He also mentioned what it could do to most moons and smaller planets once a few *adjustments* were made to the shield settings.”

“I don’t think...” Trenka then froze when she remembered stories of an insane Galaxy-class pilot who had the nasty habit of driving his tank *through* much larger ships when his beam weapon just wasn’t having the desired effect. She didn’t think she’d like to be aboard the *Microcosmus* if that particular situation ever came up.

“Besides, you’ve still got that lumpy Bornat thing that’s going to stay around while the *Microcosmus* is here,” Laisee reminded her. “I’m told they did picket duty at the Vanir/Human boundary while Ronnie was helping the Vanir work out some *internal* problems.”

Trenka thought back to the recent recall of the Vanir planetary striker-like platforms, and how two of them just disappeared while heading the *wrong* way. She gave Laisee a slow nod, before concentrating on the rest of their turnover.

### *The Microcosmus, A Tour*

Lady Huan had been quite surprised to receive the request from Commander – *Captain* Zickgraf, now, requesting a tour of suitable compartments to house the Drecks Ambassadorial mission to Vanaheim. She’d said that her Drecks was a bit rusty, but he’d assured her that Lady Calos’ Standard was pretty good, and he’d be coming along anyway to visit “the Boss.” Besides, he’d wanted to come over and check out the old platform after the refit.

Petrus, Lady Calos, and Gar had arrived that afternoon, accompanied by two Drecks guards, and two staff minions. They were greeted by Jia, and another human crewman at the “official” Imperial dock. It was one of several, but had been leased out specifically for government business – as was the entire platform for the foreseeable future.

After a rough start, with Lady Calos gracefully switching to Standard for Jia’s benefit, they began the tour, and visited the surprisingly large spaces seemingly designed specifically for Drecks in mind. At Jia’s lack of specific knowledge, a crewman politely explained, *in Drecks*, that the *Microcosmus* had been redesigned with multi-race capabilities built into it. Accommodating the Drecks had been easy, but they were still working out the recently acquired Vanir atmospheric requirements.

The tour included the commons – the shared dining area for *all* species – along with casual meeting and relaxation areas, which included

rooms adjacent to the commons area for entertainment or private group events.

Petrus was intrigued, as he *almost* recognized certain areas until failing to come across the expected wall or corridor that seemed to have shifted – sometimes by quite a bit. The Drecks guards were impressed with the full gym; observing the large space with plenty of room to move around in. Petrus asked, and was assured that a variation of the ‘*Kraken’s Child*’ was still installed, but some of it had been “toned down” to accommodate the sensibilities of the non-military users of the gym. The crewman did tell him, however, that the more *aggressive* portions of the program, including the original Drecks, and a new Vanir option, were available if the gym was booked for a private event.

They were eventually shown the Drecks-compatible living quarters, and even Lady Calos was impressed with the spaciousness and amenities available. She made known the needs of her support staff, and was shown adjacent quarters for them, assuring herself they could all be berthed within the same section if she desired it. Her smile was just as genuine as Petrus remembered it.

As supper was about to be served, Jia suggested they partake of it, and provide a suitable critique of it so the galley crew would know if the meal was suitable for the Drecks. At the end of it, Lady Calos assured them it was quite edible, but her staff had a cook who could suggest particular spices that were in demand by the Drecks palate.

Having separated from the group during the meal, Petrus rejoined them after having seen Ronnie’s body. He’d watched it for about a minute – seeing it lying there and making motions as if it were merely sleeping. At least it didn’t snore anymore.

On their way back to dock, their transport requirements were made known, and a specific docking slot was assigned for the standard Drecks-sized transport Gagsa had provided her party upon her assumption of the Ambassadorship. They’d finally said their goodbyes, and headed back to the *Kraken*.

### ***June 8, The Kraken, Laisee’s Compartment, Mother and Daughter***

Authorization had finally arrived that would allow an attempt to try to purge the powder from Ronnie’s head. It had taken a while, as the Healers had to communicate intricate details of the situation, and the proposed treatment for, it all the way back to Cletus; followed by a test run by Woldron and Lady Huan utilizing the medical hardware and the special membrane filter that was engineered specifically for the task.

Aside from the general “ick” factor, the test had proved its worth, and the first, and likely *only*, attempt would be made the following morning.

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There was some concern, however, and that was being discussed this morning.

“Jaiying, do you still feel him?”

Laisee watched as her daughter closed her eyes and seemed to drift into a world of her own. He wasn't always around, and the one time she'd actually contacted him was when she was in her coma during her recovery from the explosion on Vanaheim. She could still sense him, though, just ... not all the time. She opened her eyes, then walked over and sat on the bed, somewhat sadly, it seemed.

“Not right now, Mother. The last time I felt him, he was still trying to make up his mind. I think he might be afraid of coming back – of becoming a burden on the family if he doesn't come back right.”

Her mother looked at her, then turned away, shaking her head.

*‘A burden on the family? Maybe... Probably... Or more likely he's afraid of what Lili will say to him about him toying with Trenka like that,’* she kept to herself.

Laisee's disgust was softened by her own feelings of loss over her childhood companion, when she turned back to her daughter.

“Thank you for checking, my girl. Perhaps Ronnie will grace us with his presence once again – although I don't think he'd like coming back to a head without a body.”

“It would certainly be difficult for Aunt Lili to use him for making new Healers out of the *serving* staff.” Jaiying giggled, getting a shocked look from her mother in the process. “We *all* know why Aunt Lili *really* wants him back, Mother. She loves Grandfather, but also sees the potential to improve the quantity of Healers within the Commonwealth. We've seen what he did to Dorcas and the other Drecks wives. What he did to Sally was *exceptional*. As for *Déjà...*”

“Yes. Your Grandfather had a certain talent that could prove very valuable to the Commonwealth, but, I think, only if he becomes *whole* once again.” Laisee turned and wandered towards the door of their compartment.

“Mother, what was it like when Grandfather graced you with the Gift?” Jaiying asked, and Laisee stopped without turning around...

She remembered when Ronnie had *first* shared Lili's Gift with her ... a few years *after* he'd become engaged in regular operations in and out of the Hegemony. It had been *very* exciting, *unbelievably* so, considering she'd not expected him to spend any real time with her after one of his recovery operations.

Her father had asked her to meet with him privately during the transfer of passengers and supplies out at the Fringe; her goal being to evaluate his emotional state, and report to the Crown. Petrus had taken the opportunity to seek out a willing female companion for the duration, and she'd approached Ronnie and suggested sharing a meal together while they caught up on his mission, and the goings on at home.

That meal had been served in her cabin, then extended well into the evening, as she'd first plied him with friendly companionship, then increasingly flirty suggestions.

Finding that Petrus still seemed to be occupied, he'd finally given in and spent the night with her.

When the question of the "Gift" had come up, he'd politely offered it, and she'd willingly accepted, and it had been as good as everything she'd ever heard about it.

*Almost* as good, in fact, as what she'd experienced with someone else back in Death Space, on a dead battle platform...

"Mother?"

"It was ... very exciting. *You* know what it was like," she said while turning to face her daughter accusingly. "But you didn't ... actually..."

"It just has to be inside you, and *then* you need the feelings to make it work ... somehow," Jaiying told her; admitting that even *she* didn't understand the mechanism of the Gift.

"But Déjà... She'd been with him *several* times before, but she'd never..."

"That night was when it happened, Mother. Déjà saw me in distress and tried to help me. She kissed me, and ... and we shared the feelings, and it *triggered* something in her ... some change at the *genetic* level." Jaiying turned thoughtful for a moment, then jokingly added, "You know, you should have Commander Woldron take genetic samples of Déjà, Grandfather, and Spring Blossom, and see if they have any matching markers."

Laisee stared at her daughter for a long time, before Jaiying broke the silence with a giggle.

"But what do *I* know? I'm just a little girl," she said, adding a very worldly shrug to go with it.

Laisee smiled and nodded, before turning away again.

"Umm, Mother... Would you like me to show you?"



## An Unfortunate Decision

Laisee froze, locked in confusion. She didn't understand if Jaiying understood exactly what...

"Come sit with me, Mother. Hold my hands. It will be all right," she promised her. "Just hold my hands."

Laisee stood still for several more seconds, before slowly turning and walking over to the bed. Jaiying reached out for her, and grasped her hands; holding them as her mother sat next to her on the bed.

*'Close your eyes and remember with me, Mother'* she shared silently, and moments later, they both fell backwards on the bed while locked in the throws of uncontrollable feelings.

### ***Petrus' Compartment***

"Sai, I thought you said we weren't supposed to mess with Ronnie's head until we get back to Cletus?"

Petrus had just come from the bridge, where he'd casually observed the changing of the noon watch. While he was there, he'd received a private message from Woldron that the attempt to repair Ronnie's head was scheduled for the next morning.

"The Elder's Council forbade any attempt to *reattach* the head," she said. "They didn't mention anything about us not preparing for it. The powder has got to come out, or it will start killing Ronnie once he's put back together again."

"But ... what do you think they'll say when Lili tells them about—"

"Lili ordered me to do this ... to prepare his head," she said flatly. "We have the authorization."

Petrus thought about it. Lili was used to getting her own way, but the conversations he'd shared with her had taken a decidedly stiffer tone once she'd returned from Cletus – almost as if she'd finally found something to cower before. Knowing Lili like he did, that concept *alone* was almost unimaginable; but there were a few times lately when he'd also felt a few threads of worry coming from her, with overtones of something horrible having almost happened to her somewhere in the garden; or perhaps out on the patio. However, that didn't make any sense, either.

"They probably already know," he finally decided. "I don't think she would go against the Council's orders – not now ... not when so much is at stake."

"You mean ... you understand why she wants to—"

"We're talking about the life of my *friend!* *Anything* we can do to bring him back is worth the effort!" he told her sharply.

Sai contained herself, knowing he had other priorities in mind that were separate from the authorities on Cletus. She did understand him, however. He and Ronnie had shared time together under extremely dangerous conditions; much longer than he and she had been together.

“Petrus, we will do everything we can to make sure Ronnie has the best chance of recovery,” she promised him; hoping all the while that the Elder’s Council were in agreement with everything they would be attempting.

### *Cletus, The Council of Elders*

“There, do you hear them now?” Elder Daiyu asked her, but Elder Ju simply shook her head.

“It is *always* this way!” she said in frustration. “A new body has to grow into the job. I remember ... oh, I *forget* the girl’s name, but I could not reach across the *planet* for several months until I’d sorted it all out.”

“I believe it was Tung-Mei,” Elder Wen suggested helpfully. “By the time you released her, she was able to reach all the way to *Loca* and beyond, but that was millennia ago. Today we are reaching farther than ever before, and Kita’s great-grandchild gives us promise of an even *brighter* future. Imagine, Ladies, if Rondal had been available to us and shared Lili’s Gift with us, as well?”

Ever since they’d noticed the rapid buildup of Healer-capable port girls along the Fringe, and finally determined their *origin*; thanks to the efforts of Sai Tal and the confirming efforts of Liling and her servants, the thought had been most intriguing...

They’d already known about Rondal Caldar – Kita’s fallen champion. The Kantite Lordling whose heart had led him astray from the warrior’s *true* path in favor of family ties. His failure had condemned the Commonwealth to continued nuisance raids from the Hegemony, and they’d casually observed as the child drifted aimlessly while pursuing seemingly pointless tasks that took him into the Blight on Imperially-contracted raiding parties, or simply doing the odd mercenary jobs that became available.

Once he’d joined Reclamations and started working the downside, they’d stopped watching him closely for several decades until he’d suddenly caught their attention by drawing an *incredible* surge from the source, and brought his rescued Healer back to stability and health.

Kita had been nearly beside herself, gloating that he was becoming what she’d seen in her Visions. They’d reminded her the rescued Healer, Lady Sai Tal’s daughter, was too old to fulfill her *original* predictions, but she’d assured them he was on the *proper* path now, and that his *true* value had yet to be observed.

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They'd waited ... and waited ... but Kita never pressed the child, waiting instead for him to grow into his path by *himself*. The incidents in the Death Void had alarmed them, and it seemed like Kita was going to step in and take charge of the boy – or perhaps finally *sanction* him for his transgressions. Instead, she'd died, and transferred her memories and the Visions to Lady Ai – who'd *blatantly* allowed knowledge of them to be shared with her staff, and even some outsiders. And Caldor, it appeared, had *also* received that particular gift somewhere along the way. At least he hadn't *used* it – not in any *meaningful* sense, anyway.

*None* of them could imagine what Ai had been thinking when she'd bound the geas of Rakel to the child. Still, although the boy had initially struggled with it, he'd worked out a time-sharing plan that seemed to have served him well – right up until he'd managed to divest himself of it entirely. That was *also* something reeking of outside interference. Even after researching it themselves and looking at all the possibilities, *none* of them had a clue as to what it could have been...

"Sai Tal... What do you sense from her?" Ju asked, still frustrated at her own – *new* – limitations.

"She intends to prepare the boy's head just as Liling has ordered," Elder Xue calmly explained. "I didn't feel any interest in attempting to reattach it to the body."

"That should be *apparent!*" Rong blurted out. "It is too *delicate* a procedure for mere Healers and Seniors! Even for Kita's favored physician. I shudder to think how he's managing all of the body's enzyme and hormonal requirements without a *head* to go with it."

Daiyu looked up from her data pad and let out a chuckle.

"He is quite skilled, or so Kita had told me privately," she shared. "I understand he worked with Rakel in attempting to find out what was wrong with him. Unfortunately, Kita was forced to sanction Rakel when we lost one of our own."

"Yes. And it didn't come soon *enough!*" Ju muttered angrily. "Rakel was a *monster* – *barely* under control! He ruled the court by *terror!* Even his last surviving *wife* fled with her daughters before his end!"

"I wonder where they went," Daiyu murmured, not really expecting an answer.

Ju walked over to pour herself a crystal of water, then went back to her seat while sipping it thoughtfully.

"Not a current issue," she finally said. "Radatel is in place, and Liling is managing him well. There was that tiny issue between him and his stepbrother, but I believe it was of benefit to the Commonwealth. It allows

Liling and her husband to effectively manipulate the Court in a *positive* direction, even as he plays the *fool*.”

“At some point that will have to change,” Xue said pointedly. “It was useful to confuse the enemies of the Commonwealth, but with everyone approaching a state of *non-aggression*, it would behoove us to have Liling affect an impression of *maturity* into her husband.”

“It shouldn’t be a problem,” Wen said. “I remember when Kita assigned Liling to him. I felt so sorry for her, as he didn’t seem to have much potential. To this day, I don’t really know if he was *destined* to be the meticulous businessman that he is, or if Liling inspired him.”

“*Please!* He ran the Commonwealth from *Earth* – with or *without* Liling’s presence!” Ju pointed out briskly. “I’ve been inside that man’s *mind!* Before his little brother messed with it, it was like reading a pile of *spreadsheets!* Now, it’s – it’s like there’s a *canniness* inside of him, but not in a *bad* way ... not *yet!*”

“Well... Then we must watch our puppet *carefully*,” Xue suggested mildly. “If we make Liling the *official* Elder, then she will be in an *excellent* position to do so – on *our* behalf.”

“There is no rush,” Daiyu said quietly while looking around at her companions.

“No. There is no rush,” Wen agreed with her.

“She is of the appropriate age,” Xue pointed out. “Although, it’s unfortunate we’ve lost the memories of Kita when Ai... Isn’t there a way to pry Kita’s memories from Ai? Is that something we can try?”

They all looked around at each other; the situation never having quite come up in this fashion before. Finally, Daiyu breached the silence.

“Well, perhaps we should pay attention during our attempt at reattaching Caldar’s head and see what that teaches us?”

It took several seconds for that to sink in, which was then followed by a slow series of unanimous nods. It looked like things promised to become even *more* interesting in the next several weeks, if only to discover secrets of memory extraction from a currently deceased head.

Xue privately noted the frustration of Ju, but it hadn’t yet reached a critical stage – being somewhat familiar with the cycle herself. Still, she kept her own counsel on Ju’s mindfulness and waited to see how well she handled herself as their current situation continued to vex them all.

### ***June 9, In Vanir Space, Microcosmus, Medical Lab***

Unlike the previous event, Woldron was nervously checking everything in preparation for the cleansing attempt on Lord Caldar’s head. This

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would be a “mixed-operation” utilizing *very* intrusive medical technology – along with the Healer efforts of Lady Huan – to flush the powder from Lord Caldor’s head, before popping it back into stasis for the long ride home – or to Cletus, at any rate. He busied himself with the minutiae, hoping to reduce potential damage to the head while they were working on it. That is, any more damage than was already sustained by simply being lopped off the body that no longer supplied it with fresh blood.

Jia was bundled up for the occasion, the room being kept cool – close to 18 degrees Centigrade to accommodate the hardware being used to attempt the recovery operation. The machinery itself was set to the 30 degrees the bypass process would actually be using while it circulated the recovered blood harvested from Lord Caldor’s body over the last three days. The mere thought of that still made her shiver...

Hifacious had explained to her in exquisitely teasing detail how the blood would have “thinners” added to it to keep it from clotting during the process. This was in addition to running it through an oxygenator to replenish the oxygen carried by the platelets, then through the various mechanical filters – including the special one Donnel Ardan had originally constructed to filter out loose powder from Lord Caldor while he was still alive. They would also include the other Vanir chemical mix that should help “loosen” the powder from areas inside the brain where it had lodged.

Thankfully, that last had been proven in practice, as they’d worked together in extracting much of the remaining powder from Lord Caldor’s body – even from down in the liver and kidneys – and proved the practicality of the cellular filter in actual operation. Hopefully, this would be much the same in operation, with the only unknown being how much of Lord Caldor’s mind had been destroyed during the act of losing his head.

She watched abstractly as he carefully checked the bundles of feed and return lines she would help attach to the severed portion of the neck. It was, however, *way* out of her comfort level, and she just couldn’t conceive of a positive outcome through any “medical” means for this task. Nevertheless, as Senior Healer aboard the ship, she would be attending to him during this event no matter *how* wrong it felt to her. She glanced up at the gallery above them and wondered what Lady Laisee and Sai Tal were feeling about all this.

### *In the Observation Gallery*

“Jia is undecided,” Sai murmured. She was staring down at the operating table surrounded by Woldron’s equipment. “She feels overwhelmed at the concept that machines might prove a match for a Healer’s skills.”

Laisee glanced at her sideways and gave out a quiet titter.

“The Kantites were *always* very inventive, Sai. Not *every* planet has access to Healers. I’m actually rather surprised the Elders even *allowed* Healers and Seniors to serve at other places ... like out at the Fringe,” she said, but caught the quick look from Sai. “Oh, I understand the *necessity*,” she quickly added. “The Fringe provides a meter on the frontier so we can judge just how well it’s being supported. If we fail to support the Fringe, then we might lose them altogether. That would be an unfavorable situation for the Crown.”

“I look at it as a reasonable investment in our security,” Sai muttered stoically. “The houses report back to the Elder’s office, and the Elder’s Staff reports back to Cletus.”

“Yes. Reporting back to Cletus,” Laisee pondered. “Sai ... did you know?”

They sat quietly together, watching the activities below as Woldron got ready for the recovery attempt.

“I ... suspected,” Sai finally said. “The Elder was the ‘Queen’ of Cletus, yet I recall no instances of Lili or Kita ever mentioning Cletus *directly*. Hardly even a comment about ... about *anything* from home. Now that we know, it makes all kinds of sense.”

The next silence was a bit shorter before Laisee asked, “Do you think it was deliberate ... on the Council’s part, I mean? You don’t suppose they actually *suppressed* knowledge of themselves, do you?”

This silence was even shorter, as Sai had recently wondered about this herself.

“I suppose anything is possible,” she murmured, now unsure of Cletus history as she’d known it. “We were never taught about them while growing up. The Seniors gave us assignments, and we all assumed they came from the Elder on Kantor. We never considered the origins of our orders came from a much *closer* group. It does seem now that the Elder on Kantor couldn’t *possibly* have dictated all of our assignments in such a detailed manner ... except for Maya’s birth, and what Kita had planned for her.”

“Yes. Ronnie’s, too,” Laisee murmured.

They shared a look, before turning their attention back to the operating theater.

“Lili never mentioned anything, either,” Laisee confided. “But she told me it was just explained to her that the *Kantite* Elder had the Visions, and the *Visions* were what kept the Commonwealth stable – so much so, that the Kantite Elder was nominally in charge of ... well, *everything*.”

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“Then she might have *delegated* authority to the Council,” Sai considered thoughtfully. “All the while continuing to run the Commonwealth through the Emperor and his administration. And kept them apprised of her decisions, of course.”

“Oh. Of course,” Laisee murmured, then caught a purposeful motion from below. “Look. They’re opening the stasis box.”

Their eyes were riveted to the actions below, while Ronnie’s head was removed from the box and immediately placed in a cradle prepared for it. Once strapped down, Woldron and Huan worked together to attach feed and drain lines to it, before carefully priming the lines, and starting the cardio bypass machine.

Several small leaks became apparent and, expediently sealed by Huan using tiny flashes. Once things settled down, Woldron connected several pads to Ronnie’s head, and observed the lines on a monitor for several moments before saying something to Huan. She seemed to give out a sigh, before repositioning herself to one side of the table where the special cellular filter was located. They watched as she began to glow; her hands – wearing protective gloves; they now saw – resting on Ronnie’s face.

She stayed like that while Woldron monitored his machines and made delicate adjustments to them; hoping to improve the conditions for success. They could hear a silent chatter coming from Jia that appeared to be directed at Ronnie’s head.

After several minutes, Woldron walked around the table and moved a chair over for Huan to sit down in – touching her gently on her shoulder and guiding her down to the seat. Nothing at all was said, just the thoughtful courtesy of one professional to another being accepted at face value during a very difficult procedure.

As the minutes ticked off, Woldron dithered between his life support machines, and the sensors listening to Ronnie’s head. An hour into the process, Sai and Laisee both noticed when his head snapped around at a slight sound coming from the brain monitor.

“Was that–” Sai stopped, unwilling to even suggest a positive outcome so early in the treatment.

“He sees it,” Laisee murmured. “I feel his excitement, but there is some concern as well. I don’t know about Jia.”

“She asked us not to probe during this process,” Sai reminded her. “She doesn’t need the distraction. Woldron... She didn’t mention anything about him.”

“Umm-hmm,” Laisee murmured even more quietly, before sending a feeler out to Woldron’s surface thoughts. “He is ... reservedly gratified.”

She watched as he turned and checked several of the machine's settings, and looked over various meters.

"He is checking the results of the filters, and ... the powder is being pulled loose and trapped in the cellular filter before the blood goes through the mechanical filters and becomes oxygenated again," she murmured. "You know, I have never *heard* of such a thing."

"Ha! Even *Earthlings* have machines like that," Sai quietly muttered. "Although, only for the very fortunate. Ronnie once told me he wanted to go back and drag the Earth into the Commonwealth as full members – get everyone on his planet upgraded to 'civilization' as we know it."

"*Earth?* That would be an *insane* task," Laisee said in surprise. "My father was assigned to Earth for nearly two *decades*, and he said it was a *horrible* place. The only thing that made it interesting was when Ronnie set up his refugee camp there, and even then, the Earthlings interfered with it."

"Not any longer," Sai muttered. "Not with the *garrison* Lili sent down there. That Healer Cluster is probably the most secure place on *Earth* right now."

Laisee considered that ... then remembered how secure the Royal Homestead had been back on Kantor, just before the attack by minions of the Vanir. Having no way to compare the two, she spared a hope – not a '*wish*' – that the garrison was staffed and armed to defend against *anything* that might be thrown its way.

The operation continued for another hour, until Huan's glow finally died down and she relaxed. Several more readings were taken before they began the delicate task of disconnecting everything, sealing up the arteries and veins, then packing the head back into stasis once again.

Upon completion of that task, a weary Woldron looked up at the gallery and waved at them; seemingly both relieved and guardedly happy with the results. Jia silently called out to them with a terse promise to provide a full report once she'd had a chance to get it all written down – *after* getting something to eat.

Sai and Laisee both sat back and stretched, relieved it was over for now.

"Brain wave traces ... barely," Laisee commented quietly.

"Doesn't mean that he's still in there," Sai warned her. "Could just be some loose neurons firing randomly."

"Jaiying said she hasn't felt him around for a while," Laisee glibly shared with her. "Maybe he's waiting to see if they manage to attach his head to his *body?*"



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Sai turned and stared at her, while Laisee calmly gathered herself and prepared to head back to the shuttle. Glancing up, Laisee noticed the look on her face but misunderstood the reason behind it.

“You don’t think he’d bother to come back if he was just a *head*, do you?”

That last didn’t help Sai at all, but Laisee offered nothing more, before turning and heading out the door – followed slowly by a very confused Sai.

### *Somewhere Else...*

*Ronnie stared up at the moderately bland sky, and took a deep, relaxing breath. He squinted a couple of times, then slowly rolled his head from side-to-side, but the view hadn’t changed significantly from what it was before he’d gotten dizzy and passed out.*

*He finally sat up and looked around; finding a repeat of the non-descript view he’d become accustomed to for the last several ... days? Months? Years?*

*“About **time** you came to your senses,” Destiny announced from somewhere behind him.*

*Ronnie rolled over and looked around, but all he saw were the usual scattered clusters of mundane bushes – one of which was slowly swaying in a non-existent breeze. Getting to his feet, he turned in a slow circle before ending up facing the softly wafting leaves of that singularly mobile bush. A smirk distorted his lips as he sat cross-legged to address it.*

*“Aren’t you supposed to be **burning**?”*

*The bush froze for a moment, then began to glow ... slowly brightening to the semi-faded brightness of a moderately skilled Healer.*

*“No flames?”*

*“**Primitives.** If it glows by itself then it **must** be on fire,” the bush muttered, each word causing tiny changes in the intensity of the glow.*

*The glow slowly faded out completely, before the voice erupted from behind him.*

*“**BEHOLD!**” Destiny shouted, and Ronnie did a shuffle turn on his butt to see Destiny sitting in the same lounge he’d occupied before, and drinking the same drink – at least from the smell that wafted over to his nose.*

*“**That’s** the big finish?” he chided him. “No great pronouncements? No stone tablets?”*

Destiny looked at him in silence for several seconds, before he began to laugh. It started out as a low chuckle that eventually worked its way up to a hearty belly-laugh. He got to the point of wiping his face of non-existent tears before finally settling down.

**“Now** I think I understand now why Kita never sanctioned you. You’re **fun** to have around,” Destiny admitted with a sad shake of his head. “Too bad that S’Slich’Tah Warren Leader never appreciated the humor in you. She **should** have stuck ... but that’s someone **else’s** problem, now.”

Ronnie leaned back on his hands, something that didn’t hurt at all, now, and contemplated the purpose of this visit.

“So ... what brings you around?”

Destiny took another sip of his drink before setting his cup down on the arm of the lounge.

It slowly faded away as Destiny stretched in place, then raised one leg over the other – finally relaxing with his legs crossed, and his hands folded behind his head.

“I keep asking myself the same question – **why** are you still wasting my time? I have **things** to do. **Places** to go–”

“And **lives** to screw with,” Ronnie interrupted. “What did you just do to me? My head feels all ... not right.”

**“Me?** I haven’t done **anything**. You might want to remember your **sister-in-law**, though. I hear she has **plans** for you,” Destiny whispered loudly, then gave out a quiet chuckle. “What **happened?** Did you have a ... **near-life** experience?”

“What? Wait! What’s going on? What are they **doing** to me?” Ronnie pressed. “Are they **actually** trying to put me back together?”

Instead of answering the question, Destiny shared some more news.

“Your **Granddaughter** misses you. So does your **stepsister** ... well, I guess she’s actually your **niece**. That chunky **Senior** who kept trying to kill your friend – **not** so much.”

Ronnie got up in frustration and struggled not to pace.

“Why won’t you **tell** me anything? You’re not being **helpful!**”

“Correction, my dear boy,” Destiny challenged him. “**You’re** the one not being helpful ... or rather, you’re not helping **yourself**. I’ve provided you with your options. It’s up to **you** to make a decision.”

“How can I make a **decision** when I don’t know what’s going **on?**” Ronnie whined, only to get a disgusted sigh out of Destiny.

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*“Ronnie ... my offer is **still** on the table. You can come work for **me** – **if** you can manage to keep your frustrations under control. You can be **reborn** – no muss, no fuss, and someone **else** changes your diapers for a while. **Or** ... you can try to cram yourself back into your **head** when they ... well, if they ever actually **manage** to reattach it. Between the women and the man, it looks... Well... It should be an **interesting** experiment, to say the least.”*

*Destiny stood and stretched; his face contorting into a lock-jawed yawn, which had Ronnie struggling to keep his mouth shut. Destiny looked around, before looking down at Ronnie again. Glancing back down at the lounge, the cup reappeared, and the fragrant scent of its contents wafted towards Ronnie once again. Destiny picked it up and handed it to him, while nodding his head in reassurance.*

*“Thought you might be thirsty. Don’t **waste** it. Don’t simply pour it out, and never, **EVER** lay it down on its side.”*

*Ronnie took a cautious sip, which caused his eyes to open in welcome surprise as Destiny looked on approvingly.*

*“**Whatever** you do, **don’t** lose the cup! I want my **deposit** back!” Destiny told him, as he was fading away in front of him.*

*“Wait! What should I **DO**?” Ronnie asked again, but Destiny had already disappeared from sight.*

*“Typical...”*

*He let out a sigh, then took another refreshing sip of ... **whatever** it was. He looked longingly at the lounge, then reached over and touched it. It **seemed** solid enough. He turned and slowly settled into it; finding it to be quite comfortable.*

*There was no cup holder on it, and he considered either resting it on the arm of the lounge or setting it on the ground. In the end, he chose a more secure option, and settled it between his thighs before leaning back and relaxing.*

*Make a decision? He had not a **clue** of what his best options were. He let out a silent snort at the thought that working for Destiny might provide him with a long-term source of this drink he’d been gifted with. After a little more consideration, he figured that Destiny was just showing him a bit of kindness. Besides, he’d get wiped anyway and probably forget all about it.*

*He reached down and lifted the cup to his lips – finding that it was **full** once again.*

*‘Oh **my**...’*

*Destiny stood by invisibly as she contemplated Ronnie's reaction to her gifts of the cup and the lounge. She shook her head sadly as she watched him settle in for what looked like **another** bout of self-pity.*

*A feminine voice from behind startled her.*

*"You're not being **fair** to him!"*

*The Fate yanked from her usual duties, had been a silent and invisible witness to all of Destiny's subsequent dealings with her Champion, and this **latest** one had finally reached her limit. Destiny slowly turned; allowing her regal countenance to look down upon this lowly Fate with a sad frown gracing her lips.*

*"Ah ... the Fainting Fate has discovered her inner **strength**," she muttered sadly. "Do you **dare** question my motives, little Fate? Didn't you see the **gift** I granted your 'Champion'? Those **were** your thoughts, weren't they?"*

*The Fainting Fate blanched and leaned away from her accusing words. **This** presentation of Destiny was a new revelation to her that brought back dim memories from the past. She could **almost** place this image before her with Destiny's **other**...*

*"You have so much **faith** in Ronnie," Destiny continued with a sigh. "I wonder if he really **deserves** such loyalty."*

*That comment seemed to fire up the diminutive Fate, and she rose to the occasion.*

*"He's worked so **hard!** He **deserves** to go back and be with his Maya ... with his whole **family**. He's..." she stopped at the stern look from Destiny.*

*Destiny shook her head slightly, turned, then slowly walked away ... shifting herself through semi-realities, while dragging the Fainting Fate with her. She'd deliberately left the semi-reality where Ronnie was planted as she considered what to do with this rebellious Fate.*

*As she strolled along, the landscape fading from one memory to another over his/her many travels over the centuries, she considered what she'd done to **other** Fates who'd questioned his/her motives in the past. Only moments later, she paused; much surprised over a revelation, then turned to smile at her little Fate.*

*"You're very **fortunate**, my little Fate," she murmured, the hint of **delight** oozing through her voice. "**Most** of those who've displeased me have done so when I've been my ... '**other**' self. Count yourself **lucky**, little Fate. **This** form brings out my **maternal** instincts, and I find that **another** reward for your loyalty is warranted. Think of it as an **opportunity**, my little Fainting Fate. My little ... **Faith**."*

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*‘Faith’ looked up at her – knowing that a **fundamental** change in her existence had just occurred, but not yet knowing what that might actually **entail**.*

*The surrounding landscape slowly faded away, and was replaced with the view of a solitary figure asleep in a lounge chair out in the middle of nowhere.*

*As they wandered closer, she noted that Destiny, now back in his **masculine** presentation, was nodding his head with satisfaction that Ronnie had kept the cup upright between his thighs in order to keep it from spilling.*

*She wondered if what Destiny had told her was true – that the **last** time he’d misplaced his cup, it had created a totally **liquid** semi-reality, before being found and removed from that now-abandoned location.*

### *Cletus, The Council of Elders, Post-Luncheon*

“Please tell me you have some *positive* news, Xue,” Ju muttered, as she settled into her chair within the Elders’ Chambers.

Ju was still suffering from her lack of reach when using mindful communications, and her mood wasn’t relieved by the ill-prepared meal she’d just consumed. Either it was a fault of the staff, or her new host had an undisclosed food allergy she’d need to overcome before she could once again enjoy one of her favorite dishes.

“Initial reports from Senior Huan are positive,” Xue calmly told her. “The head was removed from stasis, attached to medical hardware Commander Woldron had insisted be used, then Jia used her talents to entice the powder to leave Lord Caldar’s head, and become trapped in a special tissue filter.”

“A *tissue* filter?” Rong asked.

“You remember, Rong,” Wen reminded her. “Those engineers designed a machine to assemble cellular tissue from a protein soup of some sort.”

“Oh. Yes. Ugh!” Rong remarked, then turned away in disgust.

“What is the prognosis?” Daiyu asked Xue.

“Jia is guarded, but she reported traces of brain activity from one of Commander Woldron’s machines,” Xue told her. “Woldron seems to have a higher level of confidence in their results.”

“That is probably just his *own* hubris,” Ju muttered in frustration, then looked down at her data pad; watching as the written report *finally* caught up with mindspeak all the way from Vanir space. She reviewed it quickly but didn’t see one of her concerns addressed.

“Have they established a limit on how many times living tissue can be placed into and taken out of stasis *without* deterioration?”

“From earlier reports, it seems to be dependent upon the source of the tissue – vegetable matter, or animal protein,” Xue said. “As might be expected, animal protein seems to be less resilient to the process.”

Wen looked up in surprise.

“It really should make no *difference*, should it?” she suggested. “Going into and coming out of stasis should just be like ... like turning off a light and turning it back on.”

“The neurons seem to suffer from the process,” Xue explained. “Even *we* do not understand the complexity of human consciousness or how it is maintained within the brain, which brings up the issue Liling has made us aware of. Lord Caldor had grown *additional* memory storage within his body, and somehow transferred some of his memories to it. It remains to be seen if we can affect a memory transfer back into Lord Caldor’s head – should we be successful in restoring his head.”

“Well ... failing any *volunteers*...” Ju paused and looked around at her companions for several seconds while they all averted their eyes. “I see we are in *agreement*.”

They let that sit for a while, as they looked down at their updated data pads to read more of the formal report. Working down past the results of the head “flushing,” Daiyu glanced over the status of Lord Caldor’s body, and read the reports of the bodily systems that still seemed functional.

“Sisters, it would appear Liling’s experiment might be tried,” she said quietly. “All she need do is have one of the Healers extract a sample, then find a volunteer to accept it.”

“And someone would have to apply Liling’s Gift,” Wen added.

“Yes. That does seem to be *key* somehow,” Rong muttered, while looking around at each of her companions. “Is there anyone on board their ship who can perform that ... ah, particular function?”

They each shared a blank stare, before adding another line item to look into.

### ***Vanir Space, The Kraken***

Sai paced their quarters, while contemplating the official report from Jia. It seemed hopeful – *initially*. She remembered the feelings coming from Woldron, but Jia was more ... constrained by *reality*? No matter. The job was done, and the project was shelved for the time being.

Now it was just that little matter Lili wanted her to pursue with Ronnie’s body – that is, with his *essences*. They would *still* need the

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second component, though, but Laisee said she might have a way to duplicate that. If she did, it would be news to Sai.

### *Outside Petrus' Compartment*

Petrus returned from his tour of the ship, and was looking forward to a hot shower and a quiet moment of rest – hopefully. Sai should still be over on the *Microcosmus* with Laisee, and his afternoon seemed to be open to a short nap before supper. He readjusted his plans once he opened his compartment door and saw her figure standing there.

“Sai? You’re back already?” A glance at the compartment timer still showed four hours until the bottom of the day. “Did everything go–”

“It went fine – we think,” she said, cutting him off abruptly. “Popped it out, flushed it, and popped it back in. Didn’t seem to hurt it. Even got a few pings on that brain monitor thing of Woldron’s.”

She turned away and looked longingly at the bed, then walked over and sat down on it; closing her eyes and letting out a frustrated sigh, before flopping back on it – but not in an inviting way.

He walked over and looked down at her, feeling curious sensations of confusion and stress radiating from her. Sitting down beside her, he rested his palm on her arm and felt her stiffen, before she relaxed and seemed to settle into the platform cushion. He waited, knowing she needed some time to think over what *else* she was going to surprise him with.

She reached over with her other hand and patted his arm, before running her fingers over it. She could feel a thin layer of stickiness from dried sweat, but didn’t bother to open her eyes before asking, “You’ve been to the gym?”

“Air handler went sour on level two,” he said; causing her to open her eyes and look at him sharply. “Ronnie and I ... well, we’ve not taken him in for service in quite a while.”

She didn’t recall Ronnie *ever* taking the ship in for service. The hardware was a mix of Commonwealth and Hegemony technology, but all critical systems were of Imperial design and nearly impregnable – as long as routine maintenance was performed. That usually meant filters were changed or cleaned on a regular basis, and the tanks were kept topped off.

Battle damage aside – or a breach of the containment fields in the BFG – the *Kraken* should suffer no system failures that weren’t caused by simple incompetence.

She could see him looking away from her, and felt a trickle of embarrassment radiating from him. Simple incompetence seemed to be rearing its ugly head, and he confirmed it.

“We’ve never actually had this many bodies on board doing this many things over such a long period of time. We used to wander through every few months – just going compartment to compartment and checking things. We actually cleaned a few filters back in ... well, several years ago – but they weren’t really dirty. That air handler on level two feeds three sections of crew quarters, plus the commons. Before this trip, those crew quarters used to house temporary refugees on an infrequent basis. Now ... well, there’s a *lot* more debris flushing through the air filters.”

He caught her frown and nodded his head.

“I’ve already spoken with Donnel Ardan, and been properly chastised, my love,” he admitted. “I’ve also updated the standing orders to include regular maintenance on all serviceable systems per Ardan’s schedule, which he so kindly provided me. We’ll still have to take him back to ... Ronnie told you where he was made?”

“Claxon?” She saw his smile and continued. “I saw memos in the logs to send cases of ambrosia to Clax every so often. The only Clax I could think of was that guy out at the Fringe.”

“So much for plausible deniability...”

“*Really*, Petrus? Where *else* would you go to have something this special built and keep it off the books?” she teased him.

He looked down at her and smiled, then leaned down and kissed her soundly ... which eventually lingered into the realm of *hunger*. She pushed him away, but kept smiling at him.

“Let’s *shower first!*” she said, then pushed up from the bed and dropped her robes; his clothes joining hers, while they headed to the facilities.

Seeing him naked in the shower, she looked down at him and remembered the task Lili wanted her to perform with Ronnie’s body. She hadn’t yet mentioned it to him, knowing how he felt about it, but considered she might need to practice ... or perhaps use him to teach *Laisee* how to do it?

She turned around and smiled at the thought of it, then closed her eyes and smiled even wider when his soapy fingers reached around and began teasing her nipples under the running water.



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### *In Laisee's Compartment*

Laisee sat quietly after she finished reading Jia's report. Things seemed to be progressing, but not in the measured steps she'd expected. They appeared to be lurching forward in an awkward gait reminiscent of the video depiction of the living-dead creatures Jaiying and Rose were streaming from the ship's storage system in the other room.

She shivered at that image in her head; but the laughing resistance the children put up when she'd tried to make them turn it off had swayed her efforts. At least they had no interest in some of the more esoteric selections available, although even *she* was shocked at some of the things Earth humans considered pleasurable play. She knew Jaiying and Rose had been exposed to physical adult activities, if only vicariously, but it didn't extend to the extremes *Earthlings* seemed willing to encompass. She'd asked Ronnie about them once, and he'd told her they'd been copied from the media Larl had brought with him from Earth, and then transferred from his previous ship – the *Odontoceti*.

She considered again what Jaiying had told her just yesterday – and then *demonstrated*. The concept had seemed reasonable; but the application of the Gift by the mere *memory* of it still seemed – *off-putting* ... especially when shared by her daughter of only six years.

It had been *exciting*, though. Perhaps not as fully invested as when *physically* shared with Ronnie, but the feelings had been similar, if not identical. Afterwards, Jaiying had offered to let her Mother share the memory with *her* this time, but Laisee had begged off. She knew that, in the *normal* course of Cletus society, in a few more years, she would be expected to teach Jaiying the *proper* methods of physical intimacy, but the children had already been exposed to them; if only in a virtual sense.

Jaiying had then proposed she practice on someone else, and suggested one of the other Healers – or perhaps Grandmother Sai. She'd admitted that she didn't know what would happen if tried on a male, but to her knowledge, Aunt Lili had never done that to any males of her acquaintance. That had finally brought a bright blush to Laisee's face, and she'd hugged her daughter, before getting up to leave the room. A quick dash to the facilities to wash her face got it down to a reasonably public countenance, before she returned to sit in her outer chamber.

Today, she was still pondering the next step in the process – not getting Ronnie's head reattached, but the special request Lili had asked of them. Sai had already spoken to her, and afterwards, Lili had confirmed it directly. She'd even told her Sai might be *particularly* reluctant to participate in that specific procedure, but she had every confidence Laisee would do as her stepmother requested.

She smiled at that. *Stepmother*, indeed. First Wife had *never* referred to herself as such that she could remember. She *did* understand the

importance of the test, however. Whether it worked or not might be the difference between trying to bring Ronnie back together with himself, or simply letting him stay as he was. Or perhaps returning him to his birth planet for interment, or *however* they disposed of bodies on Earth.

She let out a quiet sigh, then glanced at the timer on the wall.

Another four hours to the bottom of the day, before she would gather Rose and Jaiying, so the three of them could head to the commons for the evening meal. She was just about to review some documents, when she received a silent request from Sai.

*‘Laisee ... do you have some free time to spend with Petrus and me?’*

### ***In Donnel Ardan’s Quarters***

“Donnel, how ... how is the First Lord?” Milsie asked him quietly.

She’d just come back from her lab, and they were getting ready to wash, before heading to the commons for supper in an hour.

“He seems to be doing all right – the *lower* ninety-percent, anyway. Woldron is a master at balancing the enzymes and other hormones needed to keep the body functioning. Never had to do it without a *head*, though.”

He’d been facing the clothes cabinet when he’d spoken, before turning to face his bride and seeing the strange expression on her face.

Not as strange as when he’d finally been allowed to explain *Trenka’s* state of despair, but more on the lines of curiosity.

“What’s wrong, my girl?” he asked, then reached out to her, but she turned away from him.

“I... It... It’s nothing ... really. Lady Caldarous just met me in the lab, and asked... She asked if I would participate in an experiment for her. *With* her, actually.”

He looked at the back of her head, then swiveled her around by her arms to face him.

“What did you tell her?”

“That I – I have to ask *you*,” she stammered.

He drew her into a hug, before quietly asking her, “Is it dangerous?”

“I don’t really... She said it wasn’t... If it worked at all...”

“My girl, what does she want you to do?” he asked, and felt her stiffen in his arms. “Milsie?”

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### *At the Commons*

It was Noon plus six point two, and Laisee and the girls were finishing supper at the commons, with Nathan and Dorcas sharing the meal with them this evening. The expected “sleep-over” with Laisee had been put on hold for the evening since she was planning a visit to the *Microcosmus* to see if the situation was suitable for Lili’s purposes.

She was not really surprised to see Donnel approaching their table with Milsie in tow. His expression was less than friendly, but she greeted him with a smile anyway.

“Mister Arden! It’s so nice to see you and Milsie together! We’re about finished here, but you’re welcome share the table with us, if you care to?”

“Lady Caldarous, Milsie tells me you want to perform an experiment with her,” he confronted her. “With *you* and her. She won’t tell me what it is.”

Laisee glanced around at the other tables to see how much attention he was drawing, but kept the smile on her face when she responded.

“No, Donnel. She would not. It is an issue that is specific to *Seniors* – by orders of the *First Wife*,” she said quietly. “I can only tell you that we need a *non-Healer* participant, and that no harm would come to them. Livia from my personal staff has also volunteered.”

“Milsie has *not* volunteered!” he said stiffly, while forcing himself to keep his voice very low.

“Donnel, I merely asked if she would consider it. I do not intend to *force* her to participate,” Laisee said placatingly, while still maintaining the smile on her face. “That would be counter-productive. Milsie ... you are under no obligation at all. I merely thought of you first because of your scientific curiosity.”

Donnel stood stiffly, being frustrated at both the lack of information he was getting, and worry for his bond-mate. He never wanted to stand in her way, but when she wouldn’t tell him what was going on, it had made him concerned for her.

“Mister Ardan ... I was part of the *last* experiment,” Jaiying offered quietly, causing him to snap his head around and look down at her. “Except it wasn’t really an experiment. It was more like an *accident*, but it didn’t hurt me.”

Jaiying could feel the confusion in his mind, and just a bit of wavering in there. She trusted him, but just to be sure, she reached out to Kantor and got permission –  *begrudgingly*, but permission just the same.

“I’m sure Aunt Lili would approve, Mother,” she said. ‘*She just told me it was all right to tell him*’ she added silently.

“Donnel, would you and Milsie please join us for supper?” Laisee asked sweetly, while channeling her inner Lili with the precision born of years of observation. “I’ll see if the First Wife would be willing to make an exception for a trusted Master Engineer of the fleet.”

As the couple awkwardly joined them at the table, Laisee had a sudden epiphany. Over the years, she’d often wondered how Ronnie’s garden had continued to grow – and now it looked like there might be two *more* mouths to feed at the Royal table. She kept a cheerful countenance, while suppressing the sigh that threatened to escape her lips; all the while wondering if there would be enough room for *everyone* in Ronnie’s extended family. Hopefully, the conversation would be short, as she had another appointment to keep on the *Microcosmus* this evening.

### ***June 10, Reflections on a Busy Day***

Laisee still lay awake, with the timer on the wall, proclaiming the lateness of the hour – or rather, the earliness of the morning. As she watched, the timer flickered for a moment, before the indicator reflected the current time – midnight plus three.

She finally gave up and got out of bed. Putting on her robe, she moved to the outer chamber and dug out a bottle and a cup. The ambrosia went down smoothly, but she poured herself another measure, before settling into a cozy chair – the same one taken from Ronnie’s compartment before they’d moved it into the ships doc for her when Jaiying had been in a coma. She let out a sigh, then leaned the chair back before contemplating the events of the last several hours.

It had been one *hell* of a day...

Earlier, Sai had called her over to provide some “special” training, using Petrus as the unwitting test subject while she’d guided her through the biological systems specific to the *male* orgasm. The reality of the hormonal, nerve, and mechanical triggers of the entire event were all new to her, since the men she’d been with usually reacted as expected.

Sai had gone into detail, *silently* explaining that Petrus could ejaculate even *without* his brain attached. After the fifth or sixth time, it might just as well have been detached, as he’d fallen asleep in spite of both their efforts.

Under Sai’s guidance and her repeated demonstrations, she’d watched internally and learned the specific sequence of events that triggered emission of the sperm, followed by the involuntary muscle spasms that caused the actual ejaculation. She’d never known that ejaculation had two phases.

Sai showed her the proper places to stimulate so the vas deferens contracted, pushing the sperm from the epididymis to the ampullae.

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Then it was just a matter of pestering the pudendal nerve until it fired off a series of involuntary muscle spasms that drove the sperm through the ejaculatory ducts, allowing it to pick up additional fluids from the seminal vesicles, the prostate, and the bulbourethral glands along the way to create the end product of semen.

Not knowing the *exact* components necessary to duplicate the desired end effect, they would have to evaluate Ronnie's body and analyze the contents of his semen – provided they could extract any – before applying it to their “volunteers,” followed by application of the *final* trigger element.

Sai had asked her about that last step, as they'd looked down at Petrus sleeping so peacefully. They'd finally decided to push him over to the side against the wall before Laisee had Sai lay down herself, then told her to relax and what to expect. Letting out a relaxing breath, Laisee then leaned down and kissed her, before starting to share the memory of the Gift with her. The kiss deepened, and Sai soon found herself uncontrollably excited by the Gift. They ended up locked in a passionate embrace, while Sai began to loop in sync with the memory of the Gift.

Finally coming down at the end of nearly an hour, they were surprised to find themselves totally naked together, with their fingers firmly inserted into each other's vaginas. They each giggled a bit, then carefully separated – slowly getting up from the messy bed covers and looking each other over. Glances at Petrus, still snoring quietly while facing the wall, started another round of giggles, then they kissed and hugged before heading to the facilities to freshen up.

While drying off afterwards, Sai had asked her if Lili had shared knowledge of the Gift with her, but she'd explained it had been the reason Jaiying and Déjà had changed the way they had – and Jaiying had actually learned it from what *Sally* had been feeling.

That had been a revelation to Sai, and Laisee could almost hear her thinking of dredging up some memories for later on that evening – if Petrus ever woke up. They'd kissed once again, then she'd made her way back to her compartment to pick up Jaiying and Rose for supper.

That business with Donnel afterwards had been unexpected, but also unexpected was Lili's acceptance of his involvement as an “outsider” to the experiment. Once explained to Donnel, Milsie had accepted the volunteer position. He'd not been real *happy* about it, until it was made clear that Milsie would *not* be subject to impregnation by Ronnie's sperm. At that point, he'd held up his hands and said that he didn't need to know any more than that, and that was where they'd left it.

The only pacing item was finding out if Ronnie's body still worked, and she'd headed over to the *Microcosmus* to meet up with Jia.

“Ronnie” had proven to be the *least* of their problems; the only disturbing thing about the situation being the lack of a head at the top of the neck. That had been solved by placement of a surgical screen, before she and Jia proceeded to extract two samples of fairly good consistency, before finally running out of suitable quantities of all the ingredients in a typical emission.

Jia had promised to have all three samples turned over to Woldron in the morning so a baseline of compounds could be established. Then it would just be a matter of getting the volunteers together and performing the experiment...

Laisee sat there and glanced up at the outer room’s timer – half past Midnight plus three – then pushed herself to consider their options once again. If it *worked*... If Ronnie’s sperm *would* actually enhance a woman’s acceptability to becoming a Healer, then Lili would have all she needed from him, and they probably wouldn’t try to replace his head. If *not*, then perhaps they *still* might not make the attempt to replace his head unless they could somehow determine that his head was absolutely *necessary*.

She loved her stepbrother. He was her first, and she’d never forgotten how good he was to her all those years ago. Even after a couple of centuries, he’d *still* proven to be the best of companions, and she wanted to do right by him, *however* it turned out. *One* thing she was sure of, though, was that he wouldn’t want his body to be used like this – merely as a simple tool on a whim from Lili. She just didn’t know what she could do about it.

With that thought in mind, she finished her drink and went back to bed – hoping she would manage to catch a few more hours of sleep, before the grand experiment planned for later that day.

### ***The Microcosmus, Morning Tests***

Jia brought out the three vials stored the evening before, and handed them to Hifacious. He took them with one hand, and held her other, while leaning down and kissing her soundly until she finally giggled and pushed him away; putting him back on track. The medical lab was no place for romance, and besides, they really needed breakfast to settle – at least for a little while longer...

Laisee had arrived the previous evening; burdened with the task of extracting semen samples from Lord Caldar’s body. As a bonus, Laisee had shared Sai’s teachings with Jia about the process, and she’d applied them to her lover that evening – giving him a *second* orgasm shortly after his first one. His reaction to it had been a revelation to her, as his mind-set had suddenly become more firmly focused upon *her*, while feelings of amazement had suffused throughout him, and she’d been well cuddled for the remainder of the night.

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In the morning, Hifacious had been the most gracious lover, and spent an inordinate amount of time insuring her *total* satisfaction. Afterwards, they'd gotten up and shared the shower, where he'd continued his efforts by washing her hair and scrubbing her back. She'd enjoyed the attention, before quietly mentioning the samples Lady Lili had requested to be tested, and he'd promised to deal with them immediately after breakfast...

Hifacious started the tests, and only thirty minutes later, had her results ready.

According to the tests, the first two samples contained the majority of elements expected during a normal ejaculation, with the third one showing a marked absence of sperm, and other fluids necessary for proper emission. He estimated a recovery time of four to six hours to replenish the body's supply of the necessary ingredients.

Jia looked over the results, gave her lover a quick kiss, then turned away.

*'Laisee ... do you have a moment?'*

### ***The Kraken, Noon minus Two***

*'Thank you, Jia. I will gather my volunteers, and see if we can get there around Noon, Kraken time'* Laisee sent, but then wondered if they'd stay on "pirate time" now that Petrus was in charge of the *Kraken*.

With Jaiying already out and about with Rose, she gathered the few things needed, before heading to the labs. She knew Milsie was usually at work by this time in the morning, and she'd previously spoken to Livia. She just needed to plan *exactly* how the experiment was going to take place, and then explain it to her volunteers – although Jaiying's experience had already become the principal method in her mind. She just needed to provide the appropriate assurances so that both Milsie and Livia were up for it.

### ***The Microcosmus, A Noontime Rendezvous***

Jia greeted them at the docking bay, and escorted them to the medical lab. Upon entry, they could see Ronnie's body off to one side, and surrounded by its support equipment; the surgical screen still blocking the view of his missing head. From there, Jia led them into a small room that contained a single bed, and a few chairs. From the medical equipment mounted on the wall, they could tell that it was a private client room attached to the lab.

For their personal comfort, Commander Woldron was discreetly absent for this event

“Ladies, please be seated,” Jia said, while gesturing to the chairs. “Lady Caldarous, would you please refresh me on the experiment that will be performed today?”

As Jia stood aside, Laisee sat on the edge of the bed and turned a smiling face at her volunteers.

“Milsie, Livia... We’ve known for a while now that Lord Caldar’s bodily essences could provoke a change in the ability of women to become Healers. For a non-Healer, they gain an increased aptitude towards the Healing arts. For someone who is already a Healer, they may sometimes become capable of working at the Senior level,” she stated quietly.

“What happens if ... if she was *already* a Senior?” Milsie asked, causing Laisee to glance at Jia for a moment, before looking back at her.

“What Senior Tal has discovered is that her abilities became even *more* pronounced. Her sensitivity to communicate over distances was enhanced, and her ability to perceive and understand intricate elements of the Healer’s arts was greatly increased. Of course, not everyone reacts in the same fashion. Livia, I believe Lady Lili asked you to participate in an experiment with Lord Caldar in the *past*, this is true?”

“Yes, my Lady,” she admitted, but then blushed lightly. “She asked that I accept the Gift of the First Wife directly from Lord Caldar. She said she wanted my opinion if it was any different than what I’d experienced from her.”

“Yet you did not develop any enhanced Healer leanings?” Jia asked.

“No, my Lady, but Lord Caldar did not ... he did not expel himself within me,” she said, while turning away and blushing much brighter this time.

“Lady Laisee ... we won’t be ... you know ... *actually*...” Milsie paused and looked over at the door.

“No, Milsie. Jia and I will harvest what we need, and bring it back here for each of you,” Laisee assured her, immediately seeing the relief on Milsie’s face.

“Umm, my Lady... Without Lord Caldar’s ... participation, how will the Gift–” Livia stopped at Laisee’s raised hand.

“I have been instructed on how to provide what we hope will be a suitable stimulus,” Laisee assured them. “It has worked twice in the recent past – by *accident* – but this will help us establish the *specific* means to duplicate the results.”

It was Jia’s turn to look at Laisee, but she held off any questions for later.



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“So ... who wants to go first?” Laisee asked them.

### *The First Extraction...*

Jia was intrigued by the concept of the Gift of the First Wife.

She'd heard of it over the years, but never learned anything solid about its application or effects – other than it left a woman feeling *fully* satisfied, even if not awake. It was all she could do *not* to try to pry it out of Laisee's mind, but it didn't keep her from asking about it.

“Tell me, Laisee... Did Lord Caldar teach you the Gift?” she asked as soon as the door was closed behind them.

“Actually ... no. What I plan to do is give Milsie the *memory* of the Gift,” she explained. “It's really a simple bio-feedback loop within a woman's body that constantly triggers an involuntary climax for as long as you let it run. It is quite ... satisfying.”

Jia let that sit for several seconds; sensing the feelings it brought out in Laisee while those memories replayed in her mind. It couldn't really be *that* simple, could it?

“Lady Lili developed it to enhance her sexual play when her husband was otherwise occupied,” Laisee continued. “As it turns out, it is *much* better when a man is participating during its application. You have something to *clench* upon, you see.”

They stood before Ronnie's body and looked down at it – then *through* it. With his bladder empty and his semen replenished, Jia let out a sigh, then removed the catheter from his penis before washing everything thoroughly. Laisee applied the appropriate stimulus, and a few minutes later, Jia caught a fresh sample in a small dish. She covered it and handed it to Laisee, before wiping him down again, and temporarily tucking a towel around him, before they headed back to the room and their first volunteer.

### *The First Volunteer*

“Milsie, are you all right with Livia and Jia being in the room with us?” Laisee asked, while Jia was lowering the lights in the room.

“Umm ... sure. That's all right,” she murmured after glancing at everyone and seeing reassuring smiles coming from them. “What do you want me to do?”

“Just lie down on the bed and get comfortable,” Laisee told her.

As Milsie settled in, Laisee brought over a chair and sat next to her by the bed. Livia sat across the room, and Jia stood next to her, looking on curiously.

“All right, Milsie. What I want you to do is take a taste of this, and then swallow it,” Laisee said quietly while holding out the sample to her. “It would normally be deposited in the *usual* receptacle, but that’s how Déjà became *pregnant*,” she teased quietly.

“Oh? *Ohhh...*” Milsie nodded, then accepted the container.

She looked at it and gave it a sniff; determining that it smelled much like Donnel, but with a tiny difference to it somehow. She took a quick breath, and then licked it; swallowing it quickly, then looking up expectantly.

Laisee looked in the container and licked up the remainder of it, before setting it aside and turning back to Milsie. She smiled down at her, before leaning in closer.

“Milsie, however this turns out, I want to thank you for your help,” she murmured, then covered her mouth with a penetrating kiss, before following it with a flood of remembered feelings.

Jia and Livia spent the next half hour watching as Milsie alternately moaned and screamed into Laisee’s mouth; her body twitching and sometimes quivering, then going into periodic spasms that ended with a full-body lock that held for half a minute or more, before releasing her from its grip – only to repeat the process over again.

Jia was catching the sidebands of the Gift, and suppressing her reactions to it, while Livia was remembering the *last* time she’d experienced what Milsie was feeling right now, and looking forward to a repeat of it in the very near future.

### ***The Kraken, Noon Plus One***

“She’s not doing it right,” Jaiying muttered, catching Rose off guard and causing her to lose concentration on the events happening on the *Microcosmus*.

“*Milsie* seems to be having fun,” Rose considered. “It *feels* like it should be fun.”

“It’s not enough to be *fun*, Rose. It has to trigger the *change*,” Jaiying reminded her.

Even after so many minutes of exposure, she *still* could not see any evidence of the changes that would be expected within Milsie’s body from the effects of the Gift.

Rose thought about it, then thought back to the night of Jaiying’s change.

## An Unfortunate Decision

“Maybe she has a poor memory of the Gift?” she suggested. “You were following along when Grandfather was Gifting Sally, and Déjà kissed you. Maybe it really *does* need Grandfather to make it work properly?”

Jaiying pulled away from her mother and Milsie to consider the situation. She *thought* she remembered the sensation of the Gift properly, but maybe the memory wasn’t enough? It shouldn’t be *that* hard to actually perform the actions of the Gift directly, should it? After all, if Lili had managed to teach *Grandfather* how to do it, how hard could it be? The mechanics were easy enough – a simple bio-feedback loop within the genitals. It was certainly nothing that the kids had never experienced vicariously before. She gave it a whole minute of thought, before reaching out to Walter, Cathy, and Josie to ask them to pick Aunt Lili’s brain for anything she might have missed.

Afterwards, she focused back on the *Microcosmus* and caught the tail end of the first experiment. Poking around, she still didn’t feel any positive results, but remained hopeful she’d have something to add for the next experiment.

### ***The Microcosmus, Second Team is Up***

Jia and Livia were leaning against each other, their faces flushed, and their hearts pounding at the scene that was slowly settling down in front of them.

As Laisee and a panting Milsie lay next to each other; Jia came to her senses, took Livia by the hand, and left the room with her, their leaving unnoticed by the remaining occupants.

Laisee eventually pushed herself up and looked down at Milsie, worried that she might be in distress over their encounter.

“Milsie ... how do you feel?” she asked her gently.

Milsie’s panting finally calmed down enough for her to catch her breath, and she opened her eyes to the dimly lit room; looking around until she was able to focus on Laisee’s face hovering above hers.

“Can ... can you teach *Donnel* how to do that?” she asked weakly.

### ***Back in the Lab***

Jia had led Livia out of the room and into the lab, where they ended up sitting next to each other at one of the desks while still holding hands.

“Wow... I mean... Wow!” Jia muttered.

“Yes. That’s how I remember it,” Livia murmured, her eyes half closed in sweet memories. “Lord Caldar shared himself with me at my Lady’s

request; and it was... It was like *that*. At least I *think* it was like that. I don't really remember that much of it..."

They sat together for several minutes longer, letting the experimental subjects have their privacy for a while.

"Livia, did the First Wife *really* want your opinion about any differences between the Gift from her or from Lord Caldar?" Jia finally asked her.

"*Truly?* We lost *many* of the staff during that time, my Lady," Livia told her. "Those remaining all told the same tale. Lord Caldar graced us with the Gift, but he did not expel himself within us. He told us the demands placed upon him by the First Wife had prevented such, but he enjoyed our participation, just the same."

"*Demands?* Did she—"

"One after another, my Lady," Livia cut her off, thinking about that eventful day; before realizing her impertinence. "Your pardon, my Lady!"

She made a move to get up and bow, but Jia still had her hand in hers and patted it with her other hand.

"It's all right, Livia," she assured her. "You said you lost many staff? Were they let go for some reason? They did not *die*, did they?"

"Oh *no*, my Lady. They were all reassigned to a Healer Cluster on Cletus for *training*."

Jia stared at her – the rumors about the new Cluster on Farman finally having a hidden root exposed.

"Oh *my*..." she finally murmured, then reached into the room to feel what Laisee and Milsie were up to. Getting a positive response, she stood up and looked down at Livia.

"Livia, I'm going to recover another sample," she said. "Do you still want to participate?"

"Oh *yes*, my Lady!" Livia said, then stood up and hugged her, taking her by surprise. After a tentative pause, Jia leaned in and shared a simple kiss with her, getting a warm response in return.

"I have to get the sample now," she finally said. "Do you want to wait here, or in the room?"

"May I ... may I *help* you?"

Jia blinked, then nodded her head, before taking her by the hand and leading her over to the body. The towel was still dry, and a quick look inside found the bladder wasn't anywhere approaching critical capacity

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at the moment. She washed the area again, and produced another sample container.

“Hold this for me and be ready to catch it,” she told her, then began the stimulation process she’d learned from Laisee. After just a few minutes, she looked at Livia, and said, “Be ready now, it’s about to expel.”

As they watched the body begin to pulse, Livia leaned over and took the penis in her mouth and waited.

Just seconds later, she was rewarded with a warm spray of semen that she quickly swallowed down – drawing upon the source until it was empty. She leaned back and gave a sheepish look at Jia, but only got a smirk back in response. The towel replaced, they headed back to the room, where Laisee and Milsie were sitting in chairs and waiting for them.

Laisee looked at the empty collection container in Livia’s hand, and turned a questioning look at Jia, who merely tilted her head at Livia. Catching the byplay, Livia flushed a tiny bit and dipped her head.

“I have already received the sample, my Lady,” she admitted. “It tastes very much like I remember it from years ago.” She immediately headed over to the bed, where she assumed a horizontal position and looked up at Laisee expectantly.

While the other two settled in to watch, Laisee lay down next to her and joined lips with her – something they’d done often enough in the past, and more recently since she’d joined them on the *Kraken*. In just moments, Livia was suddenly reacting to the sensations being pushed upon her by Laisee’s memories, and enjoying every moment of them.

### *The Kraken, Observing the Second Experiment*

“I don’t really know if this will make a difference,” Jaiying considered aloud.

“We’re both different,” Rose reminded her. “You were already a Senior when you sampled Grandfather. Déjà was already almost a Healer because she was taught by Grandmother. If the way Aunt *Lili* does it makes a difference, then maybe it should be done that way?”

Jaiying looked at her, and Rose nodded; emphasizing her suggestion.

“I suppose it wouldn’t hurt,” Jaiying finally agreed, before reaching out to her mother.

### ***The Microcosmus, Switching Teams***

Livia lurched and clenched tightly, while Laisee took that moment to pull away and slide off the bed. She stood up and backed away, as Livia began looping savagely; finally taking a chair next to Jia and Milsie. They watched passively until Jia just had to ask, “Is it supposed to be like ... like *that*?”

Laisee turned her head and smiled grimly, before turning back and watching her servant reliving the passions she’d shared with the First Lord those many years ago.

“It was suggested that the *memory* might not be enough,” she murmured. “She is now experiencing the *true* application of the Gift.”

They watched a while longer as Livia groaned and panted helplessly while under the throes of the feelings channeling uncontrollably through her body. They were all reacting to the sight in front of them, and Milsie was leaning forward from her seated position, while both Laisee and Jia were watching her. They looked at each other, then Jia nodded down to Livia. Laisee nodded back and reached out to touch Milsie; getting a tingling feeling from the touch of her skin.

“Milsie, would you care to help Livia experience the Gift? Just do like we did. Lie next to her, and ... help her,” she suggested quietly.

Milsie stared for a moment more, then looked at Laisee sharply. She looked back at Livia, then stood and stepped over to the bed before finally laying down next to her and kissing her gently.

The kiss turned passionate, before she was suddenly lost in the feelings when Jaiying remotely triggered a loop within *her* as well.

### ***The Kraken, Rose and Jaiying***

Rose got up and followed Jaiying to the facilities, joining her there while they continued their conversation.

“Do you see any changes yet,” Rose asked her.

“Not yet. They’re both looping independently, though, so I’m not sure what will happen,” Jaiying muttered, while still considering the issue...

She’d not found any indications of a change in either one of them, but then again, she’d never actually seen a “before and after” scenario, either. If she’d thought about it, it would have been something she could have observed when Grandfather had gifted Sally those several months ago.

Still, something had happened when Grandfather shared himself and the Gift. She was still thinking about it while she flushed, then washed herself. Washing her hands afterwards, she considered maybe it might have something to do with Grandfather’s *brain*?

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Unfortunately, they were in no position to actually test that.

She reached out again, and observed Livia and Milsie remotely; thinking she'd give them another quarter hour before breaking the loops and letting them come back to their senses.

### *The Microcosmus, The Big Finish*

Livia and Milsie lay next to each other, both of them staring blindly at the ceiling and breathing heavily. Otherwise, neither one of them were moving at all.

Jia looked at the room timer and saw that another half hour had passed. She looked at them and wondered again what it was like. To her, it looked like it was an *exhausting* lot of fun. A glance at Laisee saw her sitting back in her chair; a finger tapping idly on the arm of it.

They stayed silent while their volunteers finally came to their senses; Milsie being the first to say anything.

"That ... was ... *different*," she said brokenly, before rolling her head to the side and looking at Livia. Livia smiled and leaned in to kiss her, both of them taking their time and enjoying it.

"How are you feeling?" Jia asked quietly.

They broke apart and began giggling, then looked down at themselves and started straightening their clothes. Both Jia and Laisee came over and helped them sit up, before Jia turned away and came back with a couple of cups of water for them. Once refreshed and smiling contentedly, they both looked up at Laisee.

"Thank you, my Lady," Livia said.

"Thank you, Lady Caldarous," Milsie said. "That was different than before. It was ... *different*."

"It was very much like the Gift of the First Wife," Livia said, before letting out a contented sigh, and closing her eyes languidly. "You have learned it well, my Lady."

"Perhaps..." Jia paused, unsure of being so forward. "Umm, perhaps you would care to experiment on *me* next time? Simply as another test subject?" she suggested, catching Laisee's surprised expression.

"Well ... let's see how this test turns out, first," Laisee finally offered, and Jia gave a reluctant nod in acquiescence.

### ***The Kraken, Rose and Jaiying***

"I don't feel any changes in either of them," Jaiying muttered to Rose's questioning look. "Of course, I wasn't aware of myself while Déjà and I were changing, and I don't know what I was like *before* I changed."

"You took the rest of the night to change," Rose reminded her. "Déjà, she took the rest of the night, too, but then she *kept* changing."

Jaiying stopped and stared at her; a sudden epiphany rearing its ugly head. What if *everyone* Grandfather had changed suffered the same process to some degree? It was certainly not something she or any of her companions would be able to interpret properly, but Commander Woldron had the necessary equipment to test for it. She'd already jokingly suggested it to her Mother just a few days earlier – testing for DNA compatibilities between subjects that Grandfather had Gifted against himself and his mother.

"Rose ... I think there's a way to check," she finally conceded. "I'll suggest it to Mother, and see if Lady Jia can get Commander Woldron to confirm the results."

### ***The Microcosmus, The Party Breaks Up***

"Honestly, I don't really feel any different," Milsie said, catching the look from Livia that called her a liar, so she expanded on her experience.

"I mean, it felt *wonderful* and all – especially the *second* time around, but – I don't feel anything special. Not right now, anyway."

"I feel warm and much loved," Livia reported honestly. "And *very* relaxed. It would not matter if I became a Healer or not. The Gift was a *welcome* blessing, my Lady, and I thank you for the sharing of it."

"Well, it took some time for Lady Diane and Lady Amy to develop into Seniors after Ronnie shared the Gift with them," Laisee allowed. "And that was *after* Lady Maya had already begun training them as Healers."

"Yes, my Lady. And they are *Earthlings*, too," Livia reminded her, getting a surprised look from Jia in the process.

"*Earthlings?*" she exclaimed.

"So is Lord Caldor," Laisee said. "Well, *half* of him, anyway. And Lady Diane and Lady Amy are of his bloodline on Earth."

Jia sat down in confusion, and Laisee took pity on her.

"Hifacious knows all about it," she said. "I'm surprised it never came up before. Ask him about it. Tell him he has my permission."



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They gathered themselves and made ready to leave, while Jia finally got up to take care of Ronnie's body, with Laisee following along to speak with her privately.

"Jia, I would be *honored* to share the Gift with you – with or *without* Ronnie's participation," she told her, quietly, getting a blank look from her that slowly evolved into a warm smile.

They joined for a hug and a kiss before separating – Jia heading to deal with Ronnie's body, and Laisee turning to join her two companions for their return trip to the *Kraken*. As they walked down the corridor to the docking bay, Laisee reminded them that what they'd done and experienced was considered confidential within the Healer community – specifically at the *Senior level* – and was *not* to be discussed with anyone not already involved.

### *The Kraken, Donnel is Worried*

Donnel was pacing nervously in his compartment while hoping his new bride wasn't suffering from the insidious intrigues of the Imperial family. A glance at the ship's timer showed Noon plus three – three hours being two hours *too* long in his opinion. His pacing stopped at the sound of the outer compartment door opening, and he rushed out to find his Lady staring warily at him from the outer doorway.

"*Milsie!* Are you all *right?*" He'd asked this while on the move, and gathered her in his arms the moment he reached her.

"I'm ... I'm all right, Donnie. I really am," she told him quietly, then pushed him away so she could look into his eyes. "It was all right. Laisee gave me the Gift of the First Wife, and it was ... it was very nice."

As the outer door closed behind them, he pushed her out at arms length and looked her over carefully. The dampness of her jumper told a different story, as it looked like she'd been working out in the gym for the last three hours. He walked her back to their sleeping quarters and got her seated on the bed, then knelt down before her and held her hands – the expression on his face still showing signs of worry.

"Donnie, I don't feel any different. Neither does Livia," she told him. "Lady Caldarous suggested we give blood samples in the morning, and have Commander Woldron run some tests on them, but other than that, I'm just a little tired ... and sticky."

She looked down at herself, then started unfastening her jumper, Donnel helping by removing her footwear and helping her to stand. Once her jumper was off, she shucked her underwear and they both headed towards the facilities, with Donnel shedding his clothes on the way. After helping his Lady in the shower, he dried her off and got her to bed, before finishing drying himself. He joined her on the bed, and they lay quietly

together – close but not touching – while he waited for her to tell him about ... about whatever she wanted to tell him.

“We spoke on the way back,” she finally said. “It may be that the body needs the head to make the experiment work as was intended. Maybe that’s why nothing really changed ... that we can tell.”

She tentatively reached out to him, and he turned and gathered her into his arms again.

“Milsie, I was so afraid for you,” he murmured. “And I’m *glad* that it failed. I mean, not that it was *your* failure, but ... but that you’re all right.”

“Donnie! Of *course* I’m all right,” she mumbled into his neck, then pulled away to speak easily. “And I think there would be *plenty* of benefits with becoming a Healer. Think of the additional *research* I could perform as a xeno-biologist by being able to actually see for *myself* the internal workings of a living body!”

He lay there and snuggled with her; knowing she was right, of course. He never wanted to stand in her way – even if she *was* only a biologist.

“My girl, if that’s *really* what you want, then maybe they can train you to be a Healer, anyway,” he suggested. “Lady Tal trained her girl, Déjà. She even trained Endo and Gallus.”

She held her breath for a moment, before letting out a relieved sigh, tightening her grip on her lover while the warmth of his body reminded her of something *else* she’d missed over the last several hours.

“Umm, Donnie? What Laisee did was very nice, but it was missing something,” she murmured. “It was missing *you*...”

It took only moments for him to figure out what she was leading up to, and just seconds to get his lips in the vicinity of hers. He then tried very hard to make up for what she’d been missing for the last few hours.

### ***Laisee’s Compartment***

Sai and Déjà were announced by Laisee’s guardsman promptly at Noon plus four, and she bid them enter her compartment. Jaiying felt their entry from the other room and joined them, before walking around to hug Déjà and reaching in to feel the two lives growing within.

It was very strange to sense the mindlessness of the unborn lives nesting within Déjà’s womb.

“Well, do we have two more potential Healers now, or what?” Sai asked.

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Laisee glanced at her, but turned away; instead pouring a small crystal of ambrosia for Sai, and one for herself, while Jaiying offered Déjà a cup of cold juice.

After Sai and Déjà were served, Laisee directed them to comfortable seats so they could sit and talk. Once settled in, Laisee let out a sigh and shook her head slightly.

“Sai ... I honestly wouldn’t know how to test for it,” she finally said. “They both had samples – we *think* they were good ones – but I have no idea of how to detect any change in the subjects.”

It remained silent for several seconds until Jaiying spoke up.

“Grandmother, it may be a genetic change Grandfather forces on them. I suggest we have Commander Woldron screen for genetic changes in Livia and Milsie. And me and Déjà ... and you and Mother.” She paused for a long while before adding, “And probably *everyone* Grandfather has graced with the Gift in the last several years.”

Sai choked on her drink, but Laisee had already swallowed, so she recovered first, before turning to face her daughter.

“Are you *serious*? I thought you were *joking* earlier,” she said, her head giving little shakes of negation.

“You ... you think...” Sai paused to clear her throat again. “You think that Ronnie was... You don’t think he was doing it on *purpose*, do you?”

Jaiying smiled grimly before letting out her own sigh.

“I think Grandfather was just being *nice*,” she said. “He only did it to Sally because Aunt Lili *ordered* him to. He stopped sharing himself and the Gift at the same time once he found out about the Cluster on Farman.”

Sai’s mind snapped back to her discovery of the reason behind all the new Healers being found at the Fringe. He’d done them *all*, and he’d not *known* he’d been doing it at the time.

“Then it’s just a matter of waiting to see if Milsie or your girl become acceptable,” she finally decided.

“There is another test we can make,” Laisee suggested. “Lady Jia has expressed a desire to participate – with or *without* partaking of the sample ... although it would be somewhat pointless without.”

Sai thought it through and considered her own experience with it.

“Well ... it’s true I noticed certain enhancements after Ronnie had Gifted me on a few occasions,” she admitted. “It seems to manifest much quicker on someone who’s already a Healer.”

“Remember what it did to Sally,” Jaiying pointed out. “And look what it did to *Déjà*,” she added unnecessarily, while resting her hand on Déjà’s arm.

“Yes,” Sai agreed easily. “And it certainly affected *you*, Laisee, when you were with Ronnie that first time back on the *Microcosmus*.”

Laisee turned away and held her tongue about her first experience with Ronnie and the Gift. It had happened *well* after they’d left the Death Void, but she diverted her thoughts back to the current issue.

“We can plan a test with Jia, then,” she said. “I’ll make arrangements to meet with her tomorrow, and have her take a sample of Ronnie before the Gift is applied. Since she’s already a Senior, it should take little time to affect her – if it does at all. In the *meantime*, she can have a sample of herself taken by the good Commander to compare it with afterwards.”

“Do you want me to come along, Mother?” Jaiying asked her politely, while getting a strange look from both Sai and her mother.

“My girl, I think we should keep your secret for a while longer,” Laisee muttered while looking at Sai instead of her daughter. Sai rolled her eyes and nodded, then caught the soft growl of a hungry stomach coming from an embarrassed Déjà.

Sai smiled and unfolded her robes, before waving Déjà over to come sit in her lap. Once settled and latched on, Déjà sighed in contentment while her mother ran her fingers through her hair and let her Healer’s milk ease her daughter’s hunger and worries. Jaiying looked at her mother longingly, and Laisee soon followed suit; having her daughter crawl into her lap and latch on for a relaxing pseudo-feeding in the late afternoon.

Her milk hadn’t fully recovered yet, but the physical bonding with her daughter was *definitely* worth the effort. That was how Livia found them a little while later when she came in to straighten up the compartment before supper.

### ***June 11, The Kraken, Settling In***

The Drecks Ambassador’s assistant assigned for the journey to Kantor was on the bridge and chatting with the new day duty officer – Captain Zickgraf – while carefully feeling his way along this new path in his life.

It was a new position for him – his last position being a survivor of the purge of the *previous* Master Pack. With the remnants now merged with Master Pack Gagsa, he intended to carefully toe the line and see which way the sword swung while this delicate business of attaining a peaceful relationship between the Hegemony and the Commonwealth either succeeded or failed – but hopefully not by *his* hand.

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They'd even let him bring his woman with him, but none of his children. They'd been left behind on Zarox with the rest of his household – not exactly held *hostage*, but probably being indoctrinated in the new political structure Lord Gagsa was planning to institute all across the Hegemony. Looking at the large display screen showing the ugly planet below, he considered once again that perhaps now was a *good* time to forge new friendships against a common cause.

“Has Lady Calos completed her transfer yet, Moack?”

Petrus had asked this while looking down at the console in front of him, and the Ambassador's minion still marveled at this human's command of Drecks. Aside from the pitch of his voice, it was a pure court dialect that even *native* Drecks had problems with if they weren't born to it.

“Captain, she and her staff have vacated their quarters, and I understand the rest of their belongings are being transferred from the Bornat ship this afternoon.”

“Very good,” Petrus muttered, then turned to smile up in Moack's direction. “Are you and your companion finding your quarters comfortable enough?”

“They are *quite* comfortable, Captain. Everyone has been most accommodating. It is very...” Moack's voice faded away as another passenger entered the bridge behind Petrus.

Petrus had already turned away to check the console again when Moack stopped speaking, but thought he knew what the reason was.

“Yes, the rest of the humans aboard are finding it strange to have Hegemony Drecks aboard who aren't actively trying to sabotage their journey,” Petrus told him. “No doubt, you and your staff are finding the situation just as strange.”

Moack was still staring at the newcomer, when Petrus finally took note of it before turning to greet Samuel in Vanir.

“Good morning, Samuel. I trust you and Sally have settled in for the transit back to the Commonwealth?” he asked him politely.

He watched as Samuel made an adjustment on his translator, and then spoke; his answer coming in a reasonable approximation of Drecks.

“Good morning, Petrus. Sally is excited to be aboard again, and she is looking forward to *new* lessons from Sai and Laisee. We've brought everything needed – including extra nesting material for the quarters here, and on Kantor,” he said, then turned to the Drecks assistant and tilted his head politely.

“Assistant Moack, welcome to the exciting world of interspecies relationships. I have been an official Ambassador for...” he paused and looked at Petrus for a moment. “I believe it is nearly a year ... as measured by Earth humans?”

Petrus, knowing the ships logs, quickly searched and ran the numbers, before translating them to the equivalent in Zarox years. Moack seemed confused for a moment, before realizing this was relatively new territory for the *both* of them.

“Samuel, you and Moack should spend some time together and learn about each other,” he suggested. “Moack will be setting up the offices for the Drecks Ambassador on Kantor, just as you’ll be doing as the Vanir Ambassador. Perhaps you’ll find similarities in your backgrounds that will help you both overcome your differences?”

Samuel smiled widely, then turned to look up at Moack.

“Moack, would you and your companion care to share the Noon meal with me and my companion? I am sure we’ll find many things to talk about. I’m advised that Healer training may become available for your companion as well, if she is interested?”

Moack blinked in surprise, the open invitation by this huge lizard being to share a meal, being overshadowed by the concept of his woman being trained as a Commonwealth *Witch*. It took him several seconds to overcome his inertia before he could focus on an answer.

“Ahhh, yes,” he finally said. “I will discuss that with my woman, and ... and let you know.”

“Excellent! The bridge knows where to find me at any time,” Samuel told him, before turning back to Petrus. “Petrus, perhaps I’ll see you later. Now I must return to my Sally and help her with our nest. I’ve found that she’s become *very* particular now that she intends to hatch all *eleven* of our eggs.”

“Oddly enough, on Earth, it’s called a \*nesting\* reflex, which translates to nesting,” Petrus said in Drecks, which spewed out of Samuel’s translator in a fairly accurate version of Vanir. “It won’t get any better until the eggs are hatched, but then you’ll *both* start losing sleep while trying to take care of all *eleven* of your children.”

Both Samuel and Moack froze and stared at him – Moack at the thought of having eleven new offspring all at one time, and Samuel at the realization that his eleven offspring *weren’t* going to be downsized, and would be raised by him and his wife *directly*. Petrus just smiled.

“Yes... Well... I must be off,” Samuel finally said, then turned and staggered to the door.

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“So tell me, Moack ... do you have a large family?” Petrus asked him, after Samuel’s leaving.

### *At the Docking Bay, Moving In*

Moack’s two assistants were on detached duty from Pack Calos, and were being escorted by two of the *Kraken*’s staff. They’d been aboard once before, but that previous visit had been under the watchful eyes of just Petrus and Rondal Caldar. This time it seemed Petrus had advanced to the Captaincy, while Rondal Caldar had been transferred to the other Commonwealth ship that lay close by. They were unsure of exactly why, but it was rumored to be for medical reasons.

“This must be very familiar to you,” Mistress Yan Yu said, her Drecks language skills becoming even more useful during this assignment...

They had just left the docking bay and were walking along the corridor to the temporary quarters set aside for the Drecks. Mistress Qiao Ning followed along while directing the assisting stewards who were moving the packages containing the Drecks belongings...

“Lord Caldar rescued us from Kee,” one of the Calos minions said. “We’d been left to starve there, and Lord Caldar and Commander Zickgraf pulled us out after...” He stopped at the memory of his pack leader’s death by consumption.

“There was an accident at the wall,” the other pack minion said. “Part of it got knocked down. The Kee swarmed through, and ... it wasn’t very pretty.”

“Lord Caldar landed and accepted our Lady’s parole,” the first continued. “He took us all out, and then Gar rounded up some of the Kee – some of the *dangerous* ones – and we left them on Kale. We owe our *lives* to Lord Caldar.”

They walked on silently after that, until reaching the Drecks corridor and coming across Maier, Moack’s companion.

“Mistress Yan Yu, I see you’ve brought me some helpers,” she said quietly but firmly.

Both Yu and Ning smiled serenely; already having taken the measure of Moack’s woman, and determined she would manage Moack’s household adequately for the time being. If she were able to achieve *Healer* status, all the better.

“Maier, Lady Calos has selected these two individuals as Moack’s assistants,” Yu said. “Their personal belongings are here,” she added, and waved at the *Kraken*’s stewards following along behind them.

“Excellent!” Maier said, then turned to her man’s new helpers. “I thank Lady Calos for selecting such fine specimens to help my man during this exciting new journey! Please come this way!”

Yu and Ning listened to the surface impressions of the Calos minions, and stifled laughs.

Lady Calos was no fool, and had sent along two of her finest to assist Moack – the selected “assistant” to the new Drecks Ambassador, Torga of Master Pack Gagsa. She was not about to let *any* possibility of treachery rear its ugly head by this former Master Pack member. Her selected staff would monitor, assist, and report any hint of trouble directly to the Ambassador. Such was the arrangement she’d made with Lord Gagsa after accepting the appointment as Ambassador to Vanaheim, and she intended to follow through as best she could.

Yu and Ning said their goodbyes, and returned to report their findings to their staff lead, Lady Dandan Qiaolian.

### *In the Corridors*

Petrus joined Sai on the way back to their compartment after the end of his relatively quiet day.

Torga had already been taken off the watch rotation, and he and Manya had been getting their belongings moved over to the Bornat ship, as they were scheduled to leave for Zarox the next day. They would be missed, but seen again on Kantor. Petrus thought for a moment, then considered that Manya would probably give birth on Kantor, as well.

Then he considered the fact that Torga was fostered to Ronnie, and wondered if that would justify holding a planet-wide holiday for the birth of yet *another* member of the Imperial family?

Knowing the headaches that would bring to the Emperor, he didn’t envy Lili’s position amongst all the upcoming chaos.

Petrus and Sai held off talking about their day until they returned to the privacy of their compartment, where they passed Déjà headed out the door on her way to the commons to have supper with Jaiying. After closing the door with a sigh, he reached out and hugged his wife.

“Déjà is absolutely *glowing*,” he murmured. “She’s going to make a *beautiful* baby.”

“*Two* of them,” Sai muttered, then snickered into his neck. “Maybe it’s something weird about the Kee – or *whatever* Ronnie is turning her into. The littlest one is a boy. and looks like he started later.”

“Will it be a problem?” He pushed back to look into her eyes, but she just blinked and shook her head.



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“We’ll just have to wait and see what happens. The girl baby looks healthy. It’s developing faster than Kantite ... Cletus ... even *Wilder* babies. We figure a due date in another eleven or twelve weeks or so. If she goes full term, the boy would only be a few weeks behind ... we think. Still viable, though.”

They looked at each other, then hugged once again, before separating – she to the facilities, and he bringing out a bottle of ambrosia and two cups.

He set them down, then joined her in the facilities, with the thought of a hot shower sounding more appealing the closer he got.

Afterwards, they sat together and considered the day over cups of ambrosia while bundled in their robes.

“Lady Calos is aboard the *Microcosmus*, and the assistant to Torga is aboard us with his woman,” he said quietly, while letting the ambrosia level his mood for the evening. “His name is Moack.”

“Lady Dandan tells me the helpers Lady Calos sent to help Moack are there to keep an eye on him,” she shared. “Moack was part of the *old* Master Pack that Gagsa didn’t completely purge.”

“Risky business, that. Goes against tradition,” he muttered. “Probably *Ronnie’s* fault.”

Sai gave out a reproachful snort.

“*Everything* Ronnie touched was mostly Ronnie’s fault,” she said with a laugh. “Just look at my daughters.”

“Maya turned out all right. She’s not *nearly* as confused as she used to be,” he suggested, only getting a glare back from her in return. “And Déjà is growing into a *beautiful* mother.”

She continued to glare at him for a moment longer, before settling back with a sigh and taking another sip of her drink.

“Chaos. It follows him *everywhere*,” she finally said.

“Followed. He’s not going to be causing anymore problems,” he muttered.

“Don’t count on it. The Elder’s Council wants to take a look at putting him back together – just for what he can do for *them*, I think.” She paused and took another sip of her drink. “So does Lili,” she finally added, the thought of using Ronnie’s body for such purposes lingering in their minds for a bit.

“I don’t think he’d like that,” Petrus finally suggested. “Besides, Laisee didn’t get any results from the ‘grand’ experiment, did she?”

Sai thought of the report Laisee had shared with her earlier. Laisee and Jia had reproduced the experiment once again, but lost themselves for an hour while trying to see if it would work. In a few more days, another round of blood tests for all three volunteers would search for subtle DNA changes. Along with that, a call had gone out from Cletus to the Elder's office on Kantor, and from there to the Fringe, requesting genetic sampling of the new Healers at the Farman Cluster.

If Jaiying's supposition had any basis, then matching markers should become apparent.

"Nothing to report yet. I understand Milsie wants to see if she can be trained anyway," she said quietly, then thought of something else. "You know, if they test the Healers at Farman, they should also get a baseline sample from Healers who've never been with Ronnie."

That statement sat between them until Petrus finally said, "Well ... yeah."

Sai nodded her head, then closed her eyes.

*'Lili, do you have a moment?'*

### ***Cletus, The Council of Elders***

Elder Ju settled back on her side of the bed. It wasn't a *bad* life, even sequestered as they were on Cletus, but she wondered sometimes if it wouldn't be better to get out more often.

The soft snoring of Elder Wen reminded her that moving "residences" had another side effect – in this case, she didn't need as much sleep as she used to.

Well, in a few more years, another Elder would transition to a new host, and she'd likely find a new bed partner for a while. In the meantime, she'd worn out Wen but still felt the need to be up and doing *something* ... something creative or useful.

*'Elder Ju, do you have a moment, please'* Lili's call softly reached out to her.

### ***The Kraken, Petrus and Sai Relaxing***

Petrus was patiently waiting for Sai to come back. He'd felt her call to Lili and caught the gist of the conversation, thinking it was nice that she'd even considered his opinion at all. He was surprised when she opened her eyes and smiled at him.

"Lili says hello, and says the Elder's Council agrees with you – at least *one* of them does."

"Well ... I'm partially pleased, then," he said, then smiled.

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“They’re all asleep on Cletus,” she continued, but saw him wince. “Yes, we’ve *all* been there, but it’s expected. Lili was given permission to start a ‘scientific study of Healer genetic profiles’ in order to help examine the nature of the Healing arts.”

“Sounds like something *Larl* would be all over.”

“Larl’s still working with Auda on the Midgard and Asgard projects ... well, mostly Midgard. They’re gonna go out and snatch some more Midgardians, and a few Asgardian subjects for evaluation.”

Petrus started to chuckle.

“How much you want to bet the Asgardians take it harder than the Midgardians?” he asked, but she looked at him strangely. “Think about it, Sai. Auda’s people believe in Gods and such, but the Asgardians already know better so it will probably hit them harder ... *especially* if they find out they’ve been yanked from one side of the arm to the other.”

After a short pause...

“No. Not something I want to think about,” she finally said. “We’ve got enough problems with the Vanir, the Drecks ... even the Kee.”

“The Kee are no problem. Just leave them down on Kee.”

“Is Gagsa still going to use Kee as a prison planet?” she asked. “It didn’t seem to make much sense sending people there, then leaving them to starve.”

Petrus kept to himself how he and Ronnie may have inadvertently caused the chaos that led to their lack of resupply ships during that time. Instead, he pointed out Gagsa’s solution.

“Gagsa had no problem with it. He just tricked the Kee into breaking into the compound. Fresh meals, delivered on demand.”

“I remember hearing Ronnie talking about...” she paused, thinking back to some of those late nights sitting up with Ronnie and listening to some of the stories he’d told after Gagsa had been dropped off back on Eke.

“Sai ... you all right?”

She looked away for a moment before turning back to him.

“He’s really *gone*, isn’t he? I mean he’s...”

Her statement hung in the air between them.

“Unless they can bring him back,” he said quietly, “but *part* of him is still here – growing inside Déjà. Focus on *that*, my girl. You’ll have

grandchildren. We'll have grandchildren, and Ronnie will live on in them."

He set his cup down, then came over and hugged her while being careful not to spill her drink.

### ***June 12, Kantor, Elder's Office***

Lili sat back and relaxed for the moment while nibbling at a piece of fruit and waiting for the "Elder's Council" to render their decision...

She'd received the indeterminate results of Laisee's experiments and shared them with Elder Xue on Cletus. As new spokesperson for the Council, Elder Ju could hear her earlier, but was unable to reach back to her for some reason and had to rely on Elder Xue to deal with Lili's request. She wondered if...

*'Lili, as the experimental results are inconclusive, continue to monitor the subjects and take samples to test for the theoretical genetic changes Lady Laisee suspects. Have the body and head of Lord Caldor returned to us in Commonwealth space. We have decided to evaluate them physically before deciding if an attempt is warranted to reattach the head to the body'*  
Elder Xue sent.

*'My Elder, the body is currently functioning under medical life-support and is being monitored by Commander Woldron. I believe it would be preferable to have the head and the body reconnected without the body going back into stasis ... simply to avoid any further damage to the body'*  
Lili suggested politely. There was a long pause while a five-way silent conversation went on without her. Finally...

*'Your observation is a reasonable precaution. Have Commander Woldron transferred to the Kraken, along with all the equipment and support staff he needs to keep the body functioning during the journey. The head will remain in stasis until arrival here at Cletus'*

It took a moment for Lili to catch up. Woldron wasn't going to like this ... not at all. She forced herself to focus on the communication and responded.

*'I hear and obey, my Elders'*

### ***In Vanir Space, The Kraken, Vanaheim Orbit***

Petrus and Sai were on the docking bay to say goodbye to Torga and Manya. Along with them were a few more of Lady Calos' minions to accompany Torga back to Zarox.

"Torga, Ronnie would be proud of you," Petrus said, while looking up at him and shaking his hand. He turned to look at Manya and smiled at her.

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“Manya, you’re a beautiful bride, and you’ll be a beautiful mother,” he said, then leaned forward to speak to her belly. “You be good to your *mother*, now!”

Manya giggled and hugged him to her belly, just barely fitting his head above her navel. Then she reached over and pulled Sai in for a hug as well.

Gallus and Gaia, along with Edna, were also at this send off, and hugs were shared all around. Endo was up on the bridge, having said his goodbyes earlier, but watching from the security monitors just the same.

Torga and his bride entered the transport, and it shortly lifted and drifted out of the docking bay shield before heading towards the smaller Bornat transport. It would be a little later in the day when the Bornat transport would finally maneuver away from the planet and transition out of the system, leaving the larger and “lumpier” Bornat vessel behind as a “courtesy” escort for the *Microcosmus* on behalf of the Demon’s Realm. A while later, Petrus stood by the wall monitor in their compartment and watched them leave.

“I’m really gonna miss him and Manya. He was a fine ship handler. And now *I’m* on the watch rotation.”

Sai walked over and hugged him from behind.

“Don’t worry, my love. I can still fill in ... upon *occasion*,” she suggested, but he began to chuckle, then turned in her arms and hugged her tightly.

“Only if there are no *stars* in the way!” he teased her, then kissed her quickly before she began to struggle in his arms.

The resulting tussle ended up in another pillow fight, which eventually settled into a naked wrestling match that somehow descended into debauchery of the most delightful kind.

### ***June 14, The Microcosmus, Changes in the Wind***

Commander Woldron suddenly awoke and stared at the ceiling. In the room’s half-light, he observed the uniform pattern that had been applied during the remodeling of the ex-planetary striker to make the resident’s journey a more pleasant one. He began to let out a disgusted sigh, but stifled it so as not to disturb the sleep of his bed partner.

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Jia lay there, eyes closed and unmoving. She’d felt Hifacious awaken, then followed his emotions from the surface of his mind. At least they’d receded from the chaos that had consumed him since new orders had arrived for him two days earlier – directly from the Emperor’s First Wife,

the new Elder. Out of all his *good* traits, that was the one remaining deficiency she worried about the most – his incipient childish anger over situations that didn't go the way he expected. This one had flared up and lasted almost two days. After he'd received his orders, she'd made a point of avoiding his company until late last evening. Even then, they'd not really spoken, other than to assure each other that they cared for one another in spite of the sudden disruption of their previous mission.

She understood him, of course. He'd looked forward to performing research on the Vanir species, and perhaps even developing treatments for their pollution-addled citizenry. Now they'd been yanked from that history-making scenario to nursemaid the First Lord's body on the way back to Commonwealth space – all because *he* was the most qualified person to monitor and insure the chemical brew keeping the body functioning without its head was being administered properly. She heard a sigh escape his lips – a quiet one – and listened within to see which way the morning would go.

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Hifacious moved slightly and glanced over at his Healer. Jia was beautiful, but even more so when she slept. The worry lines in her forehead disappeared when she slept – caused, he knew, mostly because of *him*. He loved this little Senior who'd graced his life so willingly, and chided himself for being the cause of so much of her pain. Another tiny sigh escaped his lips as he turned back and focused on his *new* task.

Elder Lili – Elder *Liling*, that is, wanted him to monitor her brother-in-law's body so it arrived safely back to the Commonwealth. Fair enough. He knew that expending the minute, but *constant*, amounts of energy necessary to keep a human body functioning without a head attached would severely tax the average Senior's resources. It only made sense to provide a relatively simple mechanical means as a substitute for the vital hormonal and chemical signals necessary to keep the basic functions of the body working.

Of all the bodily systems involved, the heart was pretty much the *only* self-contained system onboard.

As long as it had an oxygen-rich blood supply, and a moist, safe, and warm environment to work in, it was good to go.

He ran through the mental list of available medical equipment aboard the *Kraken* that he and Donnel had talked about yesterday afternoon. Maybe a third of it would be useful to him, with the rest transferred over from the *Microcosmus* prior to moving the body back to it.

That had brought up the issue of where to stash the body. If they put it in ships doc, someone was eventually going to stumble over it and discover it was lacking a good ten inches of height.

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They'd talked about establishing a *private* Medical Wing out of one of the *Kraken's* many recovery spaces. It would provide privacy, and certainly provide security. His staff – composed of himself, Jia, and two of her Healers – would occupy those spaces and provide round-the-clock monitoring of the body. The best part was the available space was on the same level as the *existing* ships doc and not too far from it.

The rest was just a matter of making sure they brought along enough supplies for the trip – medical supplies they couldn't synthesize onboard the *Kraken*, anyway. He thought along those lines for several seconds before adding another piece of hardware to the list.

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Jia smiled in her faux sleep. She would have to think of ways to make this new journey a comfortable one for him. The memory of Laisee's presentation of the Gift suggested a way, if Laisee would care to share it with her while she was engaged with her lover.

The Kraken, Stirrings in the Morning

Milsie watched Donnel as he slept while again wondering if she was headed in the right direction. He said he'd support her, but his relief that the experiment didn't "take" seemed to imply otherwise.

She was still staring at his face when his eyes opened and looked directly at her, triggering a tiny gasp out of her in return.

"Milsie," he whispered almost soundlessly, "...is there a *bug* on me?"

She looked at him, then moved her head around slightly to see more of his head and ears.

"Umm ... no," she finally said. "Do you feel something on you somewhere?"

"I ... I felt something crawling on me," he whispered, just a bit louder, and she could see his arms slowly move under the covers separating them. "It felt like ... just like ... *THIS!*" he said while reaching over and tickling her along her naked ribs.

Her giggles started, and he began to laugh, then circled her with his arms and hugged her to him tightly.

"Oh, Milsie, I love you!" he gushed, then dove for her neck and started working his way up to her ear, her giggles getting louder before settling into heartfelt sighs.

Thirty minutes later they were snuggling together in the exhausted afterglow of morning sex while ignoring the ship's timer that said breakfast was almost over. Milsie took a deep breath and let out a relaxed sigh before turning to him and kissing him lightly on his lips and nose.

"I love you, Donnel. I'm proud to be your wife," she murmured, then snuggled her face into his neck.

The silence grew as they lay there and rested until Donnel finally made an effort to get up, but she held his arm and kept him in place.

"Donnel ... the experiment didn't seem to do anything to me," she said quietly, while raising her head to look at him. "But it doesn't mean I don't want to pursue Healer training ... if someone will try to train me."

He searched her eyes for several seconds, but smiled contentedly.

"My love, if you still want Healer training then I'm not going to stand in your way. After all, even Dreck's *males* can be taught – with the right *teacher*."

She looked at him lovingly, but considered what he'd just said.

"I – I don't really know if Lady Tal is the right *teacher*," she considered seriously, getting a confused look from him before she burst out in laughter. He finally joined in and they shared a happy few more minutes in bed before getting up and starting their day.

Near Trenka's Quarters

Trenka had just finished a late breakfast and was headed back to her quarters to finish packing. She'd almost made it, but bumped into Laisee at the last turn to her corridor.

"Your pardon, my Lady," she quickly said while ducking her head and moving to go around her, but stopped when Laisee held up her hand.

"Good morning, Ambassador Trenka," Laisee said while holding back a smile.

She'd felt Trenka from around the corner as the jumbled thoughts of her impending transfer distracted her from proper blind corridor walking protocols, something she *herself* had experienced at one time.

"Good morning, Lady Caldarous," Trenka offered quietly, then stood passively where she was stopped, noticing the Imperial guardsman standing several feet behind Laisee while casually ignoring the both of them.

"Trenka, you seem distracted this morning," Laisee said with some concern before she took Trenka's arm in hers and started walking with her towards her quarters: Laisee's guardsman now leading the way. "You know, it won't be all *that* bad, Trenka," she continued. "You'll have your staff, your guardsmen ... and Lady Calos will be available for consultation if needed."

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They got another few steps before Trenka asked, “Won’t that be prone to counter-productiveness?” Laisee felt, if not heard, the silent snort coming from her guardsman, before Trenka went on. “She could very well recommend a posture that benefits the Drecks and not the Commonwealth.”

“She *could* ... but then Lord Caldar’s fosterling could recommend *against* any such action at the Imperial Court,” Laisee countered. “The new Drecks Ambassador has *very* close ties to the Commonwealth, you see.”

Trenka almost paused in the corridor to think that through, but the guardsman leading them had already stopped outside her compartment door, and was trading silent hand-signals with the Imperial guardsman who was already standing there. Then Trenka *did* pause and looked at him carefully, finally recognizing one of the three men she’d accepted into her personal service for the duration. He smiled at her, then pressed his palm against her door announcer, causing the door to slide open silently while he stepped to the side and out of the way.

As the women approached and entered the compartment, both guardsmen bowed their heads and assumed positions on either side of the door, with Trenka’s man signaling for the door to close and lock behind them.

Laisee looked around at the open containers littering the floor and tables, wondering all the while who had packed them for Trenka, as she didn’t seem the type prone to clutter. Trenka caught her at it and almost laughed.

“Your girl, Livia,” she said. “She determined that a representative of the Crown has certain expectations to uphold. Apparently, I was severely lacking.”

Laisee wandered through the compartment and looked at the various containers and their contents. Except for the sizes, much of it seemed familiar. It would appear they *both* fell under the same guidelines for this mission. She suddenly wondered if her *own* wardrobe had been reduced appropriately due to her loss of position.

“Well ... at least you won’t run out of *underwear*,” she finally said while holding up a diaphanous bit of fluff pretending to be a night garment of some sort. Trenka’s face flushed while Laisee carefully folded it and placed it down, but still turned in time to see the blood tinting Trenka’s cheeks.

“Don’t be embarrassed, Trenka. Some of our *best* diplomacy is negotiated in the afterhours ... although I doubt our *particular* set of talents will be of benefit with the Vanir,” she teased her, getting a fresh flash of blood to brighten her cheeks.

Laisee looked away and found a place to sit. Settling down comfortably, she turned back to Trenka and looked at her quizzically ... before looking *through* her. Trenka saw her gaze and started to bring up her block, but too late.

'This change in your status weakens you, Trenka. It should not be so' Laisee pushed at her.

'I was not trained for--'

'You are a Senior of Clan Song, and there is NOTHING you cannot achieve, Lady Song!' Laisee admonished her, the push being almost physically felt by her.

'I ... forgive me, my Lady. I do not feel--'

'The Elder's Council has placed their trust in you. Elder Liling has placed her trust in you. The Emperor has placed his trust in you' Laisee pressed to her, leaving out reservations the Senior Staff still held against her. *'I place my trust in you to pursue outcomes of benefit to the Commonwealth such that peace is maintained between us and the Vanir. Advise Lady Calos as you see fit. She is also rather new to this position'*

Trenka looked at her, but slowly shook her head while Laisee nodded slightly.

'She was the wife of a Drecks High Lord who had fallen into disgrace. He was imprisoned on a deadly planet and left to die with his entire pack. She is a SURVIVOR – just as YOU are. We have every confidence, Trenka. Just ... don't screw it up'

Trenka stared at her in shock before stepping over and kneeling at her feet with her head bowed to her knees, earning a tiny sigh from Laisee in response. Laisee reached out with her hand and caressed the side of her face before raising it up so she could look into her eyes.

"Trenka, I am truly sorry things have not turned out as you may have expected. Be assured that your job here is important, and you have the benefit of all your training and experience to back you up," she said, then leaned forward and kissed her on her forehead.

Laisee felt her surface thoughts, then suddenly wondered just how well *any* of their local secrets were being kept. Trenka seemed to have knowledge, or at least *suspicions*, of certain recent activities taking place over on the *Microcosmus*. Thinking about it, she remembered similar situations taking place on a very different *Microcosmus* that was once located in a Death Void in space. Looking back, she remembered some of the stray feelings she'd felt at the time, then let out a sigh and reached down to help Trenka up before getting to her own feet, as well.

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"I have so much trust in you that I will *share* something with you that might lighten your heart," she said quietly, then turned to look at the corridor door before looking around at the rest of the compartment.

She took her by the hand and pulled her towards the other door in the compartment – finding a sleeping platform and an open door to the facilities within. She closed the door, then took them to the sleeping platform and sat down upon it, patting the space beside her and waiting for Trenka to get comfortable. As Trenka got settled, she made a show of looking around the room one more time before speaking quietly.

"Trenka ... we have been conducting tests on the *Microcosmus*. Tests on Lord Caldar's body ... and on his head," she said quietly. "We've got his body on life support ... the heart is beating on its own, but the lungs are on a respirator."

"But ... without a head... You've reattached the head?"

"Not yet. The Elder's Council wants to evaluate the head and the body before they try to put him back together," Laisee told her while keeping her voice very low. "Lady Lili was concerned about *another* issue – Ronnie's tendency to make Healers out of regular women. We've conducted a few experiments," she added softly.

"*That's* what I've been feeling?" she asked while shaking her head slowly.

"Probably. We know that, between Ronnie's essences and an application of the Gift of the First Wife, he was able to affect a change in a woman. We just don't have a handle on exactly how or *why* it works."

"So ... your experiments... You've tried to..."

"With a few volunteers, yes," Laisee confirmed for her.

Trenka turned away with her mouth open and her head shaking slowly. She'd heard about the Gift of the First Wife, and also read reports from the Elder's office about the new Cluster out at Farman being the result of Lord Caldar's interference ... somehow. It all seemed so unreal.

She turned back to Laisee with a question.

"So, if Lord Caldar is ... indisposed, how is the Gift being ... applied?" she asked tentatively.

Laisee looked at the compartment's timer, and asked, "When does your transport leave for the *Microcosmus*?"

Trenka shook her head slowly, then turned and glanced at the timer.

"Ahhh ... another two ... maybe three hours..."

Laisee watched as Trenka's thoughts shuffled through what she'd just been told, then felt the underlying desire to know what the mysterious Gift was *really* like. She considered it for just a moment, then made her decision – starting with a simple, infectious yawn.

“Oh ... I'm sorry, Trenka,” she said, then ducked her head a bit. “With all the things I've been involved with lately, I haven't been sleeping well.” She made a show of rubbing her arms and feeling the skin over her wrists.

“I meant to shower this morning, but discovered I was late for breakfast,” she murmured, then reached out and slowly ran her hand over the platform cover. Her other hand came up to cover another yawn, triggering a sympathetic yawn from Trenka in return.

“I wonder... Trenka, if you have the time, would you help me to practice the presentation of ... the Gift?” she asked quietly, while tilting her head just the slightest amount. “I mean, if you don't mind. I just learned how, and I was told that I needed to practice it, or I could fail to apply it properly over time.”

Trenka looked at her ... and smiled.

“My lady, perhaps we have time to shower first? Then I would be *honored* to receive the Gift of the First Wife from you. It wouldn't do to lose such a ... a *helpful* addition to the Healer's craft.”

Laisee matched her smile, then pushed a thought out to her personal guardsman that they were not to be disturbed unless an emergency occurred. Then she reached out to Jaiying and asked for assistance in presenting the Gift to Trenka when they were ready.

The Docking Bay

“Commander ... *Captain* Zickgraf! I am honored you came to celebrate our departure,” Lady Calos called to him from the doorway of the Drecks transport. Gar was beside her and raised his arm in greeting.

“Lady Calos ... Gar,” Petrus said with a smile. “Everything all packed and transferred to your new quarters?”

“Yes. We're just here to pick up our remaining staff,” Gar said. He pointed to a small group of Drecks who'd spent some time aboard the *Kraken* to become accustomed to working with Vanir on the human's ship.

“And pick up Lady Trenka – the *new* Commonwealth Ambassador to Vanaheim,” Lady Calos added.

The Lady in question sauntered in slowly and walked along with two of her guardsmen in attendance. She was followed by Laisee and her

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guardsman. A small line of ships stewards pushed carts of her new belongings along behind them.

“Welcome, Lady Calos,” Trenka called out to her in Drecks, the softness of her voice conveying the *extreme* relaxation she was feeling at the moment.

She walked up to Lady Calos and grasped her hand before pulling it to her forehead in appreciation of her coming to transport her and her staff to the *Microcosmus*. Gar and Petrus looked on in bemusement, while Laisee smiled secretly behind her hand.

Switching back to Standard, Trenka turned to Petrus and wrapped her arms around him.

“Petrus, I *really* would have liked to spend more *quality* time with you,” she murmured, then topped it off with a lingering kiss.

When she broke away, she turned and hugged Laisee, surprising her with a kiss and then a formal bow, before turning towards the transport and wandering up the loading ramp to find a place to sit – the eyes of everyone following her every move as she disappeared inside. There was silence for several seconds until Laisee murmured, “We had a long talk and she’s very ... I guess relaxed is not *too* strong a word.

Trenka’s guardsmen failed to smirk, but Petrus didn’t. He watched as the stewards pushed the carts up the loading ramp and came out just a few minutes later with empty carts.

“Safe journey, Ambassador. May the Gods grant their grace on you and your mission,” Petrus said, then raised his left hand up, fingers spread, to Lady Calos.

The formal ritual surprised and delighted her, and she accepted the role of the higher officiate in direct representation of the Hegemony. She pressed her right palm against his much smaller one, and barely nodded her head, as was her prerogative. When she pulled away, Gar stepped forward and raised his left hand to Petrus, honoring his rank above his own as the consort of Lady Calos.

They broke apart and headed up the ramp, the door closing behind them as the transport powered up.

They waited for the transport to ooze through the air shield before he turned to Laisee with a question on his face – not that she hadn’t already felt it on his mind.

‘Yes. She *NOW* knows what the Gift of the First Wife is all about’ she confirmed silently.

'I wish I'd known. I understand it's MUCH better when a man is available for the lady to ... work against?' he offered lightly.

Laisee graced her smile with a smirk before turning away from him.

'She packed some toys' she silently muttered, while she and her guardsman left the docking bay and headed back to her quarters.

In the Commons

Laisee was just sitting down to dinner, which she'd nearly missed due to her dalliance with Trenka, and now found herself suddenly confronted by Donnel.

"Lady Caldarous, may I have a moment of your time, please?"

"Certainly, Donnel. Why don't you get something to eat first, though."

"I've already... Ah, it's about Milsie. You see, she wants very much to pursue the issue of ... you know, training to become ... you know, a Healer..." his voice had become softer and softer as he'd stammered out his words.

"We have no indication the experiment has made any sort of--"

"Oh *no*, my lady," he interrupted her. "She wants to be trained just like a *regular* Healer," he urged, but realized what he'd done. "Your *pardon*, my lady. Umm, Ronnie said that even *men* can be trained. Gallus and Endo have... Well, Lady Tal probably spent *decades* training them, but I'm thinking that with Milsie being a woman and all, it should be much easier."

Laisee looked at him, then chided herself for being so nosy, before poking around his surface thoughts to find out what was *really* going on between the two of them. What she found surprised her, and she was even more surprised when she reached out and touched Milsie.

"Donnel ... normally a Healer begins training when she is a very *young* girl," she said, and immediately felt his spirits drop.

"However, Ronnie has shown us that age doesn't have to be a burden to learning the art," she continued. "We spoke about it upon occasion, and he told me that the very *hardest* part was convincing someone to simply *believe* it was possible. His Earthling Healers started out that way ... slowly accepting the reality of the situation, before learning to channel the energy properly. Even *native* Earthlings developed similar techniques all on their own," she added, and felt Donnel's spirits shoot right up!

"So ... can you... Do you think... Would you have the time to..."

"Oh Donnell!" she exclaimed, while smiling and shaking her head. "For all I've learned, I also know that I'm *not* a teacher. However, I *will* speak

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with Lady Qiaolian and follow her recommendations. Dandan has a reputation of being a traditionalist, but also shown herself to be open to new practices – as long as she can rationalize it within *traditional* teachings. She also has two assistants to help her, so it shouldn't be *that* much of a burden." She ran through the basics in her mind, and remembered something else.

"Donnel, becoming a Healer involves a more ... *global* application of the Healer's arts," she brought up delicately. "Milsie would be expected to complete and fulfill the traditional training and duties of a Healer. She might even be expected to be *posted* upon occasion – although, since she is *already* bonded with you, that would seem to indicate she'd be assigned as *your* keeper... I mean, your ... ahh..."

"To keep me under control so I don't go off the *deep* end?" he suggested with a chuckle. "My father was Kantite but my mother was an Earthling. Gods grace that I don't have any *Royal* blood in my veins, or not much of it, anyway. I don't have a problem with what you mean – her watching me, or her being expected to treat her clients in any way that a Healer may be expected to. Although, I understand that certain practices are not exactly ... mandatory?"

"No. We have the right to pick and choose whom we share ourselves with," she agreed quietly. "But you should *both* be aware of what she'll be going through – *and* the possible disappointment if she is unable to achieve any reasonable level of the art at all. You know, not even being born of Cletus stock guarantees affinity with the Healer's arts. Sometimes a girl just ... never gets it."

He sat back and looked at her, showing a tiny bit of sadness in his eyes for those born to the arts and not being able to use them.

"Milsie sees an application in xeno-biology ... down the road," he finally said. "I can understand that. A Healer can look at things that I have to take apart to look at. If it will help her with her work, then it's a worthwhile goal. If she can help save lives in a pinch, that's even *sweeter*."

Laisee smiled and patted his hand, then reached out to Lady Qiaolian to pass the gist of this meeting along to her in a blip of mindspeak. Her answer came back a second later. She was intrigued by the concept.

"Donnel, why don't you and Milsie contact Lady Qiaolian and ask her opinion? Tell her that I find the journey might be profitable for the Commonwealth. If nothing else, it will enhance your lives for the better."

"Thank you, Lady Caldaraus!" he said, then stood, bowed, and trotted off to find his bride.

“Oh, they’re always so *eager* in the beginning,” she murmured, before turning back to her meal with a sigh passing her lips.

June 22, The Kraken, The Return Home

It had taken over a week to get everything transferred and in place, but they’d finally left Vanaheim orbit and were headed back to the Commonwealth, meanwhile leaving a bloated, misshapen Bornat potato-ship standing guard over the *Microcosmus* as it orbited Vanaheim in support of the Ambassadorial missions.

Their scheduled arrival in Cletus orbit was July 14 as defined on the Earth calendar. Only a few had asked why, and Petrus calmly reminded them they were all officially still “pirates” and thus needed to maintain “plausible deniability” as to their *modus operandi*. After the first week, they’d stopped asking.

The *best* part, according to Samuel, was that the *bulk* of the anti-matter loads had been transferred back to the transit shell, which once again surrounded the *Kraken* for its return voyage to Commonwealth space.

There were still two loads on board, but at least the *remaining* charges were safely off the ship – unless you thought about it for more than a second or two.

The Medical Wing

Jaiying and Rose had been turned away once again because they were still not allowed into the new Medical Wing to visit their “sick” Grandfather. At least the guardsmen had seemed *genuinely* apologetic about it this time.

It didn’t really matter at the moment, but Jaiying had wanted a chance to physically *touch* the body to see if she could decipher the secret of how Grandfather had created the extra memory modules in his pelvic area. Then it was just a matter of how he’d subsequently transferred data to them. If nothing else, it would be useful to have more individuals aware of the problem and working on a solution for it.

She and Rose silently discussed the situation while they wandered away.

‘*You still can’t hear anything inside him?*’ Rose asked her before sparing a glance at one of the guardsmen behind them, even knowing he couldn’t hear them.

‘*No. It’s like he’s gone dormant or something*’ Jaiying shared in frustration. ‘*Grandmother SWEARS she heard music when she touched his hand. That’s why she hasn’t gone near him since the accident*’

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‘Maybe it has something to do with his head?’ Rose suggested. ‘Maybe when they put him back together, it will trigger something in him that wakes those memories back up?’

‘If they put him back together’ Jaiying’s sigh was audible this time. *‘The last time I tagged along with Aunt Lili, it didn’t sound like they really wanted Grandfather to come back again’*

They walked along in *silent* silence until they got close to Nathan and Dorcas’ compartment before Rose pointed something out to her.

“But it’s not really up to *them*, is it?” she asked quietly before triggering the door and entering the compartment together – leaving their thoroughly confused guardsmen standing outside where they took up positions on either side of it.

Both of them had heard partial conversations like this before, but usually from more Senior women aboard the ship. Neither one of them said anything, however, knowing their continued silence was expected of them. Perhaps even more so, their *life* expectancies were probably significantly enhanced by not saying anything. A quiet sigh could be heard from each of them, though, hoping they *both* lived through the remainder of this watch cycle.

June 24, In Transit to Cletus

The mid-morning meeting moved along smoothly, with each department reporting in turn regarding the status of their projects or situations. There was enough food and fuel, which pretty much meant there was enough air and water, as well. Otherwise, the systems were all functioning as nominally as would be expected from Imperial craftsmanship – as long as routine maintenance was performed.

Lady Tal reported a nominal level of crew contentment, and the security staff reported their new traveling companions – the Drecks and the Vanir – seemed to be fitting into the shipboard routine, with no problems having arisen in the last two days ... yet.

As the shipboard staff filed out, all that remained were Petrus, Sai, Laisee, the Vanir Ambassador and his companion, and the leader of the Drecks support staff, along with his second-in-command. The second *upper*-level meeting came to order as soon as the conference room door closed.

“Petrus, we have news from Vanaheim!” Samuel stated aloud, with his words being translated to Drecks as a courtesy to them. “The bomb that took your feet was set off by a disgruntled Observer Station Captain!”

Petrus sat back in surprise, which didn’t last long.

“Let me guess, S’Slich’Tah 24854 from Observer Station 23?”

It was Sally's turn to show surprise.

"You've heard *already*?" she asked while looking from Petrus to Samuel, then glancing at Sai. Samuel made the equivalent of a Vanir frown, which caused Petrus to laugh.

"No, Sally, I didn't read your mind, and we haven't cracked your encryptions, either," he told her. "It makes the most sense, though. He'd been recalled and was probably pissed at us humans."

"Actually, he was upset at his Warren Leader," Sally offered quietly. "The fact that you were meeting with S'Slich'Tah 29531 appears merely serendipitous."

"Just a bonus for *him*, no doubt," Sai muttered angrily. "Is that a *normal* reaction within a warren? Killing the warren leader who brings the warren into disgrace?"

"Well ... no," Samuel said quietly. "Although, now that you *humans* have interfered, it might be considered in the future. Traditionally, the entire *warren* would have been sanctioned – depending on the severity of the offense."

"What do you plan to do with him?" Petrus asked, and both Vanir looked at each other while their tint changed slightly.

"Ahh ... the Senior Observer seems to have suffered a complete mental breakdown," Sally muttered, but looked away before adding, "...shortly after Lady Trenka arrived and started asking questions of him. Currently he is under observation by some of my students. Lady Trenka was kind enough to offer *additional* training for them in my absence."

"Well ... good," Petrus murmured, then turned his attention to the Drecks contingent.

"Assistant Moack, how are you and your mate finding your accommodations aboard the *Kraken*?"

"Maier states that the kitchen lacks a variety of favorites, but the quarters are very comfortable ... in *her* mind," he said, while focusing on his new Drecks-sized data pad.

"And *you*, Moack? How are *you* finding the accommodations?" he pressed, finally getting Moack to look down at him with a neutral expression on his face.

"I find them quite comfortable," he said stiffly. "Almost as if they were designed *specifically* for Drecks habitation."

Petrus looked at him while considering the situation – then asked himself, what would *Ronnie* do? Of *course*! In this case, Ronnie would tell the *truth*.

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“Moack, it’s no accident the *Kraken* has accommodations suitable for Drecks ... *and* humans ... and *Vanir*, for that matter – although they take up a little less room than your fellow travelers do.”

“Yes. One would think it was *designed* so,” Moack muttered. “But one also wonders how such a ship might come to be?”

Petrus gave out an audible snort, which brought the entire room’s attention to him.

“Well ... it’s no *real secret*, is it? Your two support staff are part of Pack Calos,” Petrus reminded him. “They’ve been aboard the *Kraken* before – back when Lord Caldor and I rescued them from Kee.”

While Moack reacted with surprise at this revelation, Petrus turned to Sai.

“You guys *told* Gagsa what you’d been up to, didn’t you?” he asked her in Drecks. “*He* knows we picked up Pack Calos, then went back to get his, but he was already gone?”

“I honestly don’t know *what* they talked about while he was farting around down on Eke,” she said in Standard, the translation coming out sketchily from the translator and causing Moack to stiffen again.

“This *ship!* It is a *Drecks* ship!” he said, while standing up and looking down at them from his nearly eleven-foot height. “It was stolen from the *Drecks!*”

Petrus looked up at him and tilted his head a fraction.

“Well ... *certainly*,” he said. “It costs a lot of *credit* to build a ship like this. Lord Caldor was concerned about the cost, and it was simply easier to find a ship that was already available and making a nuisance of itself, rather than building a new one from scratch.”

“And the *WEAPON!*” Moack shouted angrily! “He stole our greatest *achievement!*”

“Oh *please!*” Petrus chided him. “The weapon was unstable to *begin with!* It took *years* of research to figure out how to dampen it so it wouldn’t blow up the ship. Even now, everyone’s still terrified to even *fire* it, let alone carry anti-matter rounds to *load* it with!” He paused a couple of seconds, before asking, “Have you had the tour?”

“The ... the *tour?*”

Petrus turned to Sai and politely asked her, “Sai, could you please see your way to having either Endo or Gallus take Assistant Moack, his companion, and his staff, on a tour of the *Kraken?*” Then he thought to acknowledge her more extensive experience in that regard by adding, “You’ve shipped with Ronnie a bit longer on this thing than I have.”

Sai looked at Moack, glanced over at Samuel, then turned back to Petrus.

“Certainly, Captain. And perhaps Ambassador Samuel might come along to explain what the Vanir Observation Stations where doing in Commonwealth and Hegemony space – and why they are no longer doing it?” she suggested evenly.

Samuel let out a sigh before nodding reluctantly, a tiny bit of unexpected embarrassment tinting his scales when he turned and looked up at Moack.

“Assistant Moack, we have not spoken about the Vanir presence among the humans,” he said through the translator, which caught Moack’s attention. “There is much you are not aware of, and rumor can only cloud the issues between humans and Vanir. I am quite willing to speak with you about anything that I am aware of. When you join with the Drecks Ambassador on Kantor, you will be fully advised on the situation, and possess knowledge the Ambassador is already aware of.”

“And I will be happy to speak with Maier about the Healer training I have received,” Sally offered, getting a pink flush to rise up Moack’s neck.

It was Sai’s turn to deal with this issue, and she did.

“Assistant Moack,” she called up to him. “Lord Gagsa has learned the benefits of *some* Commonwealth offerings – such that he finds himself residing on Zarox once again. It could be to *your* benefit, as well.”

Moack stood there, looking down at the tiny humans sitting so calmly before him.

A glance at the two aliens also showed them to be resigned to the situation, but not particularly worried about it.

He took a breath, then sat back down, deciding to let it ride for now.

“Very well. I will *take* this tour, Maier and I,” he finally said, then glanced at the room’s timer. “One hour *after* the mid-day meal!”

He stood up again, gave a curt bow to Petrus, then left the room, with his minion following along meekly. When the door closed behind him, there was a collective release of breath before they all shared a look between them.

“Just about a *month* to Cletus,” Laisee murmured, while adding a tiny shake of her head.

“Kinda reminds me of *Torga*,” Sai offered after another few seconds, which triggered a few chuckles at his absent expense, before they all stood and filed out; hoping the mid-day meal was compatible with the Drecks palate.

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July 4, Kantor, Family Weekend at the Royal Homestead

Acting First Lord Taldus Remy and his rather rotund wife, Healer-Trainee Lady Mayella Donszi, had arrived at the Royal Homestead late in the afternoon of the previous day. Their Senior companion, Lady Lifen Ning Shan se Cletus, had arrived just this morning after having dealt with Healer issues affecting the Imperial Court as a favor to Elder Liling.

After reporting to Lili, they both chatted amicably while waiting for Taldus and Mayella to finish their morning routine, he once again relishing the techniques of Mayella's additional training to effect a temporary resetting of his aging triggers *despite* her 28th week of pregnancy.

Once they felt the relatively young couple had finished and entered the shower, they shared a giggle, before Lifen left Lili. After arriving at their suite, Lifen announced herself, before letting herself in. Just a few minutes later, she had the both of them back in bed and receiving another lesson in pleasure play; this time with additional benefits to *her* health and longevity.

After another bit of rest, and another shower accompanied by Lifen this time, they finally dressed and presented themselves to their smiling hostess, who was waiting for them in the informal dining room, where several other members of the extended family were enjoying a simple weekend brunch.

With polite conversation all around, the relative newcomers found themselves welcome in the presence of the Imperial family and began to feel even more comfortable as the brunch continued.

Taldus, in particular, was feeling *very* comfortable, as this appeared to be another one of several visits to the Homestead where he'd likely walk out alive at the end of it.

He still regretted his actions against the Crown, and, more so, the duplicity he'd shown the Emperor's Second Wife, Lady Meela. He'd actually liked the somewhat rebellious young woman, even as he was feeding her false information and extracting state secrets from her destined for his Drecks handlers – not that he'd known *that* part of it at the time.

He'd been upset to learn that her mother and her guard captain had been killed by the treacherous Drecks, here at the Royal Homestead.

The Emperor had never spoken of it in detail, other than to say that security had been much improved afterwards.

After brunch, the Ladies removed themselves to the family lounge area, each eager to discuss Mayella's upcoming birth in perhaps another month, while the Emperor asked Taldus to accompany him for a walk in

the gardens to catch a breath of fresh air and, as the Emperor said, "To let the Ladies chat in confidence without us."

Walking along one of the various pathways, they passed a children's play area where he saw two of the young Princesses and the young Prince burning off their energy by using the unusual play structures.

As they continued past it, Taldus considered this relatively large family grouping, compared to the normal strictures on reproductive activities on Kantor; supposing that Royalty had certain benefits that the common man on Kantor wasn't allowed to take advantage of. He also knew that all of these children had been conceived somewhere in space, but had not been made privy to the circumstances.

The pathway continued until it reached a relatively new construct on the grounds, a small irregular pond no more than ten meters across that was surrounded by a rock barrier. The pond itself seemed to have plants growing out of the water in various locations. It was an unusual creation and not something he'd ever seen before.

The Emperor approached it, before sitting on a comfortable looking bench in the shade of an awning facing the pond, granting Taldus an invitation to sit with him in this part of the garden.

As he looked out over the pond, a pair of rather small green circular objects rose to float just under the surface of the water, some three meters from the closer edge of the rock barrier.

Moments later, a head rose up in front of one of them and examined him curiously. Suddenly, another head joined the first, before they slowly approached the edge of the pond.

In the Children's Playground

Walter was sitting at the top of the climbing structure, while the girls were lazily pumping themselves on the swings.

There were five seats total, but Jaiying and Rose were still aboard the *Kraken*, and he just couldn't bring himself to play while they were still out there and worried about their Grandfather.

"It won't do any good, you know," Cathy called out to him on a back swing. "Whatever the Elders decide, that's what they'll do."

"Well, we'll just have to make sure they make the *right* decision!" Josie asserted loudly, but then looked around quickly.

Walter climbed down and sat on one of the adjacent swing seats, his feet dangling as he thought about it.

"I don't think that's such a good idea. They don't seem to be aware of us yet, and we don't need them to be – not for the time being," he

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considered aloud. "We didn't even *know* about them until Aunt Lili was called to Cletus to explain herself. We should probably stop talking to our mothers ... you know, silently," he added sourly.

"We should be safe as long as we stay on our higher band, or simply touch them when we use mindspeak," Cathy suggested, while only glancing at Walter and Josie as she swung by them.

"Yes, but what about *my* mama?" Josie asked them. "She got yanked to Cletus, too. Supposing they figure out what we did to her so she doesn't know anything about us when they ask her?"

"Maybe we should have done that to Aunt Lili, too," Cathy muttered, and Walter reached out to grab her swing and stop her.

"Aunt Lili would not tell about us," he said firmly. "Besides, I think she's *stronger* than the Elders. After all, she's been with Grandfather *lots* of times, and we've been working with her, too!"

They were quiet for a while, until Cathy remembered something.

"I think you're right," she said. "Grandmother's hand was broken on Earth – I remember her saying that to someone one time. When I looked, I heard her memories of being on Earth when Aunt Lili had gone with her and shared Grandfather's bed for the night. Surely he shared himself and the Gift with her then?"

Walter closed his eyes and took a peek, dancing through the Kantite Elder's memories as lightly as he could and coming back with a smile on his face.

"She was with Grandfather on Earth," he said. "She thought it would be a good enough distraction to enjoy some time with him. I think he Gifted her *twice*."

"Well ... I'm sure Grandfather was quite capable of enhancing Aunt Lili's skills even *more* than she already was," Cathy considered, and Josie laughed.

"You *think*?"

"I think..." Walter paused while tilting his head slightly, "I think Bob and Larry are hungry."

'Mother, can you please ask the kitchen to send out some food for Daddy Andrew's **turtles?**' he sent very lightly on their high band, and got an affirmation that it would be done shortly. Then he looked around, but didn't find any of their usual snoops in the immediate area.

It didn't really matter, as the valaet kits previously hiding under the bushes had already been alerted by their big sister, and scampered off to the pond to see if any extra food would become available.

Cletus, A Somewhat Heated Discussion

The Council of Elders was at a deadlock – with two for and two against bringing Lord Caldar back to life – *all* the way back, that is. The holdout was adamant that having his body around without his head should be sufficient – *if* the results of Lili’s experiments became fruitful.

“But there is no *guarantee!*” Ju exclaimed. “If we bring him back, his damage might make him an even *bigger* threat to the Commonwealth!”

“Ju, he was never a threat to the Commonwealth. Kita made sure of it, even in her later years,” Daiyu said quietly, which triggered a gasp from Rong.

“*Later* years? Kita should have passed her mantle on to Ai before she became too *enfeebled!*” Rong stressed loudly.

“Lord Caldar has *always* acted with the best interests of the Commonwealth at heart,” Wen asserted quietly, causing Ju to turn on her for another round.

“*Ladies!* Ladies ... let us not argue so. It is unbecoming of our office,” Xue said calmly, causing Ju to focus on *her* instead.

“Fine for *you*, Xue! *You* will not decide one way or *another!*” she almost snarled at her. “I say he’s *dangerous*. Daiyu and Wen think he’ll be *helpless*. And *you* balance on the edge of the cup – neither pouring it out, nor sipping from it heartily.” She turned away in disgust.

“Ju, all I ask is that we let it play out,” Xue suggested politely. “We have time to consider all the issues. That mechanic, Commander ... ahh...”

“Woldron ... Jia’s latest charge,” Daiyu reminded her.

“Yes. Commander Woldron seems to be keeping the body alive,” she continued. “If Lili can continue the experiment and obtain *positive* results, then perhaps it would be sufficient to keep the body and utilize its resources for our purposes.”

“The body was *dead*, Xue,” Rong reminded her. “Worse, it was an *Earthling’s* body. Well, *half* of it, anyway. There is no guarantee it will last long enough to be of any use to us.”

“Then there will be no harm in maintaining it for as long as it may last, will there?” Wen asked them all. “And if the body starts to fail, then there is no need to rejoin the head to it. Besides, no matter *how* well Senior’s Jia and Sai have presented it to us, we have not physically seen the problem in *person*. Liling will make herself available to us, as well. I’m almost *sure* of it.”

“She *WILL*,” Ju said determinedly. “And I will *insure it!*”

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‘Elder Liling! A moment of your time, please!’ she sent out fiercely, now easily covering the short distance to Kantor.

Kantor, The Royal Homestead, The Royal Turtle Pond

“Taldus ... we’ve come a long way in such a short time,” Radatel murmured contemplatively, while keeping a wary eye on the aquatic creatures staring at them – almost *hungrily*, he thought.

Taldus remained quiet. He hadn’t heard a question, and wasn’t about to volunteer a statement that wasn’t requested of him. People had been rendered into tiny pieces for saying the *wrong* thing in front of the Emperor. Not that they didn’t fully deserve it, of course.

“You’ve done *well* this year, Taldus,” Radatel continued quietly. “Your reports have become quite succinct, leaving out wasteful detritus that only confuses the issue at hand. I’m also reminded that, within your area of responsibility, those decisions you’ve made have played out well. Your departments are running smoothly, and I commend you for it.”

“I ... thank you, my Lord Emperor,” he said politely, declining to embellish it with a reminder that it was through *Radatel’s* instruction that he’d learned much of what he was doing. His established staff had also had a lot to do with it, of course.

“You know ... I was *surprised* when Lili suggested that I bring you on to fill in for my wayward brother – not that *he* ever wanted the job in the first place.” Radatel sighed, leaning back and stretching his arms across the back of the bench. “At the time, I could not imagine bringing a dangerous *separatist* into the Court and putting him to work ... certainly not as the Acting First *Lord*.”

Taldus’ ears began to flush, followed by his neck and the sides of his face.

“We’ve been *watching* you, Taldus,” he continued, while peeking into the surface thoughts of the young man sitting nervously beside him. “We were concerned that your previous associates might try to take advantage of your position to their *own* purposes. First Wife was quite delighted when she discovered how those few you’d selected for relatively minor positions had passed all of our background investigations.”

Taldus almost started shaking, not considering those very minor positions with no connection to *anything* of importance had risen to the level of observation they’d obviously had.

“Of course, managing a small supply department is not a position that is *particularly* susceptible to corruption, now, is it? I mean, either the job gets done, or the manager is replaced.”

Radatel spared a quick glance at his guest and stifled a chuckle.

“That *other* man ... *Tanis*, was it? I note that you’d relocated him when those shipments went awry – but truthfully, he did *mean* well. He just could not *read* properly. I was *impressed* the way you’d handled that misadventure by getting him the *training* he’d obviously been lacking.”

Taldus froze, not wanting to hear any more ... not that his wants held any value.

“Of course, some of your previous associates put an effort into *removing* you from our employ,” Radatel continued quietly. “I’m afraid we had to send the remains of three individuals back to the Drecks with a note on each one stating that *further* attempts to assassinate someone in our employ would result in even *less* restrained actions.”

Taldus hadn’t even *considered* that attempts on his life would be made, then closed his eyes, letting his chin slowly lower to his chest.

“Oh, not to worry, young man,” Radatel assured him. “You enjoy a level of security that rivals many of our *highest* citizens. Even here in the gardens, you’re being watched over by hand-picked guardians.”

He leaned over and lightly tapped him on the shoulder, causing him to jump and look at him sharply. Then he gestured to the rim above them, pointing out several sentries standing above them and keeping an eye on things. Radatel sensed motion below him, and, looking down, caught sight of a little black ball of fur that could just be seen crawling forward through the slats of the bench, followed by another one that stopped just beside his feet. A glance behind him confirmed their keeper was close by.

“Of course, we have *special* guardians around us at all times,” he added, while pointing down through the slats at the valaet kits just now nosing out from under the bench between them and slowly creeping towards the edge of the pond.

The Emperor and his guest watched in silence as the kits approached at a crawl and just barely poked their noses over the rock rim of the pond. One look at their heads caused the turtles to withdraw below the waterline, prompting the kits to jump up the short distance and look into the water. At the rise of one of the heads, both kits hunkered down and began chittering quietly.

Taldus didn’t know what to think, except that where baby valaets walked, *bigger* ones weren’t far behind. A ruckus to one side of him almost made him wet his pants, but it was only the little Prince and the two Princesses, followed by their milk mother, Lady Maya.

The bucket carried by the Prince drew the kits attention as soon as they saw it.

“Hello Uncle Emperor,” Walter called out, gaily. “We’ve come to feed Bob and Larry!”

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“My Lord Emperor,” Maya said quietly, “We will withdraw so that we do not disturb you.”

“No, Maya. Those hateful beasts have been eyeing us since we arrived,” Radatel said seriously. “Better to feed them *now*, and not risk having them escape *again*. I remember the *last* time they attacked me.”

Taldus looked at him with sudden concern.

“They ... they *attack*?”

“Oh, yes. It was *terrible*,” Radatel confirmed. “Only took them all of five minutes to climb over the *original* barrier, and then another minute to crawl over here and tromp all over my *feet*! I swear, I barely escaped with my *toes* intact!”

Maya smiled at his joke, then gathered the children by the pond. They each took turns holding tiny pieces of meat over the water – alternating between the two turtles until they stopped splashing to be the first to snag the next treat. While that was going on, the kits sat by patiently.

Once the turtles were content, the kits stood up and made their own demands, which were somewhere between a mew and a purr, then finished off the remainder of the treats ... almost. The last bits – pieces quite a bit bigger – got tossed in the direction of the bushes behind the bench, where the sounds of movement and gulping could be heard. Taldus stayed very still until the Emperor grasped his hand and led him up and away down another path, leaving the children and their nanny with the kits and their keeper.

Once the pond was out of sight, Radatel continued the conversation.

“Taldus ... Rondal Caldar will probably *not* be returning to assume his duties as the First Lord,” he said quietly. “Not that he ever actually *was* the First Lord ... not *officially*. Unfortunately, the position calls for a person of *Royalty*.”

Taldus remained silent as they continued down the new path. They eventually came across a flower garden with another bench by it, and he sat when the Emperor sat, figuring that his time was just about up, then wondered if he’d still be allowed guards once he was cast aside.

“You know, Ronnie had a habit of ... *we* call him Ronnie. Anyway, Ronnie had a habit of picking up strays and bringing them home,” the Emperor continued.

“Seems like every time *he* invested time and effort into someone, they ended up on *our* doorstep, and became *our* responsibility. His Grandson, Lord David Lane and his wife. His Great-Grandson, Lord Andrew Lane and his consort. His Great-Granddaughter, Lady Amy Lane and her consort. And their children. And Lady Maya. And her *MOTHER*...”

He stopped and shuddered slightly, before letting out a great sigh and going on.

"I never really understood it, Taldus. I mean, Lady Tal has adopted sons – *Drecks* boys ... well, *men* now, but the point is – they are *all* family to him ... and to *us*, now. Lord Gagsa fostered his own *son* to him – the new Drecks Ambassador to the *Commonwealth*. He should be arriving soon," he said, while looking off across the narrow river.

"I've arranged spaces for them in the Capitol," Taldus murmured helpfully.

"Yes. No doubt they will be quite acceptable," Radatel muttered before getting back on track. "But my *point*, Taldus, is that family is not always limited to *bloodlines*. Family is sometimes whom you *choose* to associate yourself with, which brings me to the question I have for you. Taldus, would you consider it awkward if you were to be adopted into the Imperial family? Merely to comply with the social *niceties*, of course. You wouldn't actually be *required* to live here with us in our little Homestead – not if you didn't *want* to, anyway. Although we've got plenty of room, and your wife would probably get her *fill* of companionship from all the other Wives while we're both out managing the Commonwealth."

"I – I – my Lord Emperor, I..."

"Don't answer now, Taldus. Talk it over with your wife and let us know in a few days. There's certainly no *real* rush, but I'm sure the *rest* of the Royals would like to have a solution presentable to Parliament at some point in time."

While Taldus remained speechless, Radatel reached out to Lili; but found she was in conference with Ladies in high places – high enough that *he* certainly didn't want to interrupt them with his trivial comments. They continued to sit there for a while longer until his acting First Lord seemed able to manage the walk back to the household without meandering off the pathway.

With the Ladies...

Lili opened her eyes, realizing she'd been gone for quite a few minutes this time. The expansiveness of the conversation was almost unheard of in mindspeak. On reflection, the time involved seemed almost *absurd*. She looked around and found that everyone had been politely ignoring her while she'd been otherwise engaged, so she relaxed and let the conversation wash around her while contemplating her orders...

Far from being united in their decision, the Elder's Council was conflicted by the possibilities in front of them. On the one hand, bringing Ronnie back could be of definite benefit to the Healer community – *aside* from the simple fact that he would be back. There was the concern,

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obviously, that he would be somewhat *hampered* by his circumstances, but certainly it should be along the lines that her niece, Xiaoli, had suffered after her unfortunate accident. Preliminary reports indicated that Ronnie's brain was much more intact than Xiaoli's had been, *despite* the presumed loss of neurological function in some areas. Xiaoli had physically lost entire *sections* of her brain.

The *conflicting* issue was a concern that, if Ronnie came back, he could return with little or no control over his abilities, which could make him *extremely* dangerous to the Commonwealth. The *last* thing they needed was a repeat of the debacle at the Vanir research site that took the lives of the Vanir lab director and his subordinates – *despite* the current evaluation of the action in question.

Of course, he might not come back at *all*. If his brain was sufficiently damaged, then most likely it wouldn't provide a safe harbor for his personality, let alone his memories...

She paused at that. Ronnie had *regrown* certain areas within Xiaoli's brain, or something to that effect. He'd been adamant that a *proper* Healing had been conducted, and let the *client* direct the Healing as appropriate. The problem was that, with bits and pieces of her brain tissue scattered all over the place, it was a forgone conclusion that the *subconscious* of the client was very probably out of the office at the time of the Healing, and thus unable to direct it. Ergo, *Ronnie* had directed the Healing, even if he'd not been trying to do so at the time.

She thought back to the last time she'd spoken to Oli's mother about her progress. Oli seemed to be developing well enough, perhaps not as quickly as before, but that could be the result of having to play catch-up with new neurological connections within her brain. Her *memories* had never come back, though. But then again, Ronnie had created spare storage space within his *own* body, then copied his memories *into* them.

She closed her eyes and stewed for a moment while bringing her hands up and letting her fingers rub across the worry lines on her forehead, before they began rotating around her ocular orbits a few times. She did this for several seconds, until noticing the silence in the room, and looked up to see everyone staring at her. A tiny blush graced the delicate lines of her cheekbones, and she let her lips form a tiny smile.

"Forgive me, my Ladies. I've learned that Ronnie will be returning to Cletus *first* so that he might benefit from the skills of some of our more *experienced* Senior Healers," she said, while tactfully avoiding mention of the cadre of Elders to the acting First Lord's wife.

"He is ... is the First Lord not *well*?" Mayella asked, curious now if her husband was soon to be replaced after all.

The silence continued until Amy spoke up.

“Just a training accident. Grandfather has been all over the Hegemony and back, then he stumbles on a *gym* mat and screws himself up! Typical,” she offered to the silence, while gaining a glare from Lili for her trouble.

“Yes. No doubt our Ronnie was quite chagrined over his *own* clumsiness,” Lili filled in with a teasing diversion to steer Mayella *away* from the comment about Ronnie’s clandestine activities abroad.

Just to be sure, she peeked across Mayella’s thoughts, but found nothing more than concern that Rondal Caldar was injured.

The young Healer-trainee never even considered just how *much* damage he must have sustained to require *exceptional* Healer services from the Healing Center of the Commonwealth. She did note Mayella’s side concern that her husband was potentially in line for replacement, but kept that smile to herself.

‘Lili, do you have a moment?’ her husband asked her politely.

‘Certainly, my love. I trust that young Taldus has been made the offer?’

*‘Yes, he has. I was going to offer it at the *turtle* pond, but we became surrounded by children and valaets. We moved on to the flower gardens, where the subject was broached. I’ve given him time to consider the offer’*

‘Wonderful! Mayella just learned of Ronnie’s training accident, but kept her concern that her husband was being replaced to herself’ Lili shared with him.

‘Not likely. Ronnie was never very good at this sort of thing, and he wouldn’t like it anyway. We’re on our way back now’

‘My love ... I fear I must leave the household for a while. I’ve been summoned to Cletus to assist with Ronnie’s evaluation. I plan to leave soon – probably tomorrow afternoon – and board the Kraken in transit’

The silence ticked by as Radatel considered his disappointment at missing Lili for the duration of her assignment. No matter. It was, no doubt, a *command* performance.

‘I will miss you, my love ... but we will still have tonight?’

‘As always, my husband’ she sent with warmth, then dropped her link to him before settling back with a tiny sigh passing her lips.

A moment later, she leaned forward and picked up her crystal to relish the freshly poured ambrosia Spring Blossom had just brought to her.

She swirled it around in her crystal while contemplating a short transit and visit aboard the *Kraken* accompanied by her long time companion and lover.

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But ... it *wasn't* a visit, and would probably not end well for their little Ronnie.

In spite of his mother's desires, she decided against her coming along. Spring Blossom was already upset over the circumstances regarding her son's injury. Seeing his body in person would make her inconsolable.

July 8, The Kraken, Meeting the Arrivals

Petrus, Sai, Laisee, and Jaiying stood patiently just outside the docking bay while waiting for the transport to broach the atmospheric shield and settle to the deck. It had been a long while since family had gathered, but it was not the best of circumstances that drove this meeting just a minute out from Kantor. After setting down and bleeding air to match the *Kraken's* current pressure, the hatch opened, and Lili walked out in a stately manner, followed by two of her personal guardsmen. Petrus was the first to greet her.

"Elder Liling, we welcome you aboard the independent vessel, the *Kraken*," he said, then bowed deeply as he rendered proper honor to his big sister.

She froze at the formality, but let out a well-rehearsed tinkling titter that belied the seriousness of her visit.

"Such formality, little brother?" She took a quick look through him from top to bottom. "I see your Healers have sustained you *adequately* during your absence. They've even straightened out the ankle Dorcas had left off-set the *last* time you were home."

Petrus raised his eyebrows before looking down at his feet, meanwhile, missing the smiles from all the women at the joke.

"Welcome, my Elder," Sai said, before stepping forward and being embraced by Lili. "We've arranged accommodations for you in Ronnie's compartment. It's very spacious."

Lili's look turned bleak, which prompted Jaiying to step over and hug her legs.

"Aunt *Lili*! It's so good to see you! Would you like to stay with me and my *Mother*?" Looking up at her, she sensed the relief that she wouldn't be sleeping alone in Ronnie's cabin if she didn't care to.

"Lili, you are most welcome to join me and Jaiying in our compartment," Laisee invited her. "It has two sleeping areas. You are welcome to either, or you may share our beds," she added, seeing Lili's smile of relief at her offer.

"I would be grateful, Laisee. I anticipate the circumstances to be somewhat less of a pleasure cruise for the near term," she said, just as

two more of her guardsmen brought out the small amount of luggage accompanying the passenger and themselves.

While Sai and Laisee chatted quietly with Lili, Petrus spoke to the guardsmen and reached out to the bridge to have a ship's steward report to the docking bay with a cart, along with two escort guardsmen, one for each pair of Lili's men. The steward would transport the luggage, with the guardsmen following along. Once everyone was settled, the ships guardsmen would provide a quick orientation for them that should be sufficient for the short duration of the transit to Cletus and back – but that would be delayed for a short time.

“Sai, I wish to visit Lord Caldor,” Lili stated quietly. “I will inquire into his current state of health, and perform a preliminary evaluation of his care.”

Caught flat-footed, Sai took a moment and flashed a silent message to Jia, before saying, “Certainly, my Elder,” then took her arm to lead her to the new Medical Wing.

Petrus watched them go, followed by Laisee and Jaiying, who were followed by their personal guardsmen, who were then joined by two of Lili's personal guardsmen, plus the escort guardsman.

After the door closed behind them, he turned to the steward and remaining guardsmen, then absently waved his hand in the direction of another door, before leading them to Laisee's compartment. After getting Lili's belongings stashed there, he had the remaining ships guardsman escort them to the security center supervisor for berthing assignments.

The Medical Wing Office

“*Now*. She is coming *now*, Hifacious,” Jia told him, which pushed him into an unexpected state of panic. “She wants to see the body – *both* parts of it. *And* she'll want to look over your treatment regimen.”

“But ... but how could she *possibly* evaluate my work?” he muttered in frustration. “She's a *Healer*. She's the *Elder*! She has no *idea* of what I do here!” He finished stacking his reports, thankfully being a fairly organized individual, and turned to the door to go check on his patient.

Jia followed him out and watched him perform the routine tests for pulse, respiration (silly that, since the machine was breathing for him), and checking the body for bedsores, or any *other* examples of poor care.

She felt sorry for him, but was also amused at his level of anxiousness. He was a very proud man, but also a very skilled *medical* practitioner – even considering that he was only a man. He finally sat down and leaned back, and she could sense him running down his internal checklist and finding every thing accounted for.

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Now that he was still, she sidled up to him and placed an arm around his shoulders before resting her head on his.

“It will be all right, Hifacious. Elder Lili knows how much you care about the First Lord. You’ve done very well, so far. After all – he *used* to be dead.”

“I somehow don’t think the Elder will consider a *half*-dead First Lord a suitable accomplishment,” he mumbled sourly.

On the Way to the Medical Wing

As they continued on their way to visit the patient, Sai was giving Lili a quick update on where they were headed.

“When we considered bringing Ronnie back on board, we decided privacy would be easier to maintain by setting aside one of the recovery corridors and making a temporary Medical Wing out of it,” she told her.

As they walked along, Lili looked curiously at her surroundings. She’d known Ronnie had ordered a custom ship to be built, but this *far* exceeded the expenditure from his personal accounts.

The corridors they traversed and the quarters they passed were easily capable of housing several dozen Drecks – or nearly four times that many standard-sized humans.

“Sai, I was not aware the *Kraken* had such an *expansive* quality to it. It would appear to cater to Drecks passengers almost *exclusively*,” she said, this comment getting a laugh out of Sai, followed by an explanation.

“It was used to recover Drecks from the Hegemony – along with many of their subject humans. The accommodations on *this* level are almost entirely built for Drecks. The Vanir enjoy roomy accommodations on this level, as well. More standard accommodations are on other levels, but the corridors on *all* levels are compatible with all races of passengers and crew.”

“I wonder that he had the *resources* for this ship,” Lili murmured, before pausing to look into an open compartment that would fit the entire Royal family in it with plenty of room to spare, yet had only two Drecks sleeping platforms within.

She let out a tiny sigh before continuing on.

“Lili, this is the ship he *stole* from the Drecks,” Sai told her quietly. “Surely you knew?”

“I – no ... he *what*?” Lili stopped and turned to her in confusion. “He had it *built*, didn’t he? He took all those used tanks from the *Microcosmus* when he left, and then stole the gun from the Drecks and had them turned into ... *this*?”

“Grandfather told me that’s what he’d *intended*, Aunt Lili,” Jaiying piped up from her waist. “But the Drecks were being naughty, so he took this ship away from them. Since it was already built, it only needed extra armor to make it *better*.”

“Ronnie never told me,” Lili murmured. “And my *husband* never said *anything!*” she muttered angrily.

“Plausible deniability, Aunt Lili!” Jaiying supplied cheerfully, then reached up to hold her hand as they continued to their destination.

The two Medical Wing guardsmen had already had their orders updated: Elder Liling and her party were granted *unlimited* access, while their personal guardsmen were restricted to remaining *outside* the Medical Wing for safety reasons. Sai had ordered the change in protocol, and reinforced it now.

“Gentlemen, Elder Liling and her party will have unlimited access to the medical spaces. Once the additional visitors from Cletus arrive, they *too* will have unlimited access to the medical spaces. However, there will – *at all times* – be notice passed to Doctor Woldron and Senior Huan when they are intending to enter past this point. As always, the space inside is restricted to medical personnel or members of the Elder’s party – with or *without* the Elder present. Guardsmen will remain *outside* this door unless called upon for support. Any questions?”

She’d addressed this last to all the guardsmen, both shipboard and Lili’s – getting quiet negations from all of them, before unlatching the door and letting the party in.

With one hand still in Lili’s, Jaiying smiled up at them and waved as she walked in with the Elder. Then her mother followed her and closed the door behind her. For just a brief moment, one of the guards considered asking for clarification about the young Princess, but immediately thought better of it. He knew that *some* Royal families thrived on pretension, but he’d yet to see *this* Royal family make a judgment error of that nature. Unless told otherwise, Princess Jaiying would be allowed into the medical center unless booted out by the medical staff.

As she walked along, Lili reached out but didn’t feel Ronnie anywhere. She did stumble across Jia, and let that teasing bit of sense bring her to the proper compartment, where she found both Jia and Hifacious waiting for them and standing next to each other. On the table in front of them lay the majority of a body.

She steeled herself and slowly walked up to it, seeing the medical interventions that had been applied to keep it functioning at whatever nominal level could be obtained. She avoided looking at the location

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where the head was supposed to be, and instead, looked down at the adjacent arm and laid her hand on it.

She gripped it very lightly and closed her eyes, but withdrew after nearly two minutes and opened her eyes again while still avoiding the missing head.

“Commander Woldron, we thank you for all your efforts on our behalf,” she said formally. “You have done exceedingly well considering what Rondal had left you to work with. I would review your findings and treatment protocols, and learn of your idealized prognosis.”

“My Lady Song, you honor us with your presence and your praise,” he said quietly. “You see what little we’ve accomplished, yet I have hopes that more can be done. His heart is beating on its own, but his lungs...” he stopped and shrugged his shoulders.

“The lungs are supported externally because of the missing brainstem,” Jia mentioned helpfully. “Hifacious and I ... we think it may be possible to reattach the ... the *rest* of him and get him functioning once again.”

“But his *memories*...” Lili said, but paused, “Do you *truly* believe his memories may be recoverable?”

As Hifacious and Jia shared a prolonged glance at each other, Jaiying finally got a chance to voice her complaint.

“I felt him *before*, Aunt Lili,” she said, “Back when they were cleaning that stuff out of his head. He sounded confused, but then he went away again.”

Hifacious glanced down at her, but held his tongue. The *last* thing he needed was to put up with a pouty Princess – no matter *how* well behaved she usually was.

“Your pardon, Elder Liling,” he said to Lili. “With your permission, I will withdraw to prepare the treatment records for your review. Jia, will you please escort the Elder to my office when you are through here?”

He waited just long enough for Jia to nod at him, then gave Lili a quick bow and left the space before saying something unforgivable in mixed company. Jia watched him leave in confusion, before turning back to a frowning Lili.

“Your pardon, Elder. Hifacious has been working very hard to keep the First Lord functional,” she said quietly.

Lili nodded, still thinking of the impressions she was getting from Woldron, then turned to Jaiying, who was looking up at her.

“Jaiying, do you feel your Grandfather now?”

“Not at the moment, Aunt Lili, but they put his head back in the box,” she explained. “The box turns it off, I think. I think that’s why he didn’t stay very long when he came back.”

“How about the ... the *other* memories? Can you hear *them*?”

“I don’t know. They wouldn’t let us in to see Grandfather.”

“Please try, Jaiying,” Lili asked her. “See if there is anything readable within.”

Watching and listening, Sai thought back to that day she’d held the hand of the headless body and heard music in the silence. She slowly backed away, then turned and left the room, no one taking notice of her.

Jia stood there silently, not quite believing what she’d just heard the Elder ask of the child, but decided to file it away for the time being and just observe.

Jaiying pushed a chair over to the table and climbed up on it. Then she ran her hand along his chest, before moving it down towards his waist. Her eyes were closed while her attention focused on anything inside his body that might hold his memories. She began a running commentary after finding them.

“Okay, the nodules begin about here,” she said, while patting a location just inside his pelvis on the right side. “There are three of them on this side, and...” she paused and reached over the body, “...three more on *that* side. They aren’t really that big, but they might not have to be.”

She became quiet, and they could see her eyes roll around under her eyelids while her head tilted from side to side as she searched. She mumbled a few broken words, then became quiet again, before letting out a frustrated sigh and opening her eyes.

“It’s all messed up in there,” she declared. “I don’t know how Grandfather arranged things. There’s stuff in there, but it’s all jumbled up.” She closed her eyes again, but smiled this time.

“I see *you*, Mother. You were tied up and naked with ... something on your *head*? Grandfather was looking at someone... Oh, the S’SlichTah Warren Leader ... with a sword in her hands. Oh ... Grandfather called the *Fire*, and her *hands* fell off!”

Her eyes opened and she shook her head.

“He told us it was for *important* memories. I guess he thought that was important – or maybe it’s just because he was under stress? Anyway, there are just flashes, and the sounds are just bits and pieces. It’s gonna take some time to figure out how to put it all back in his head – unless he remembers how he did it?”

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Lili smiled and ran her fingers through Jaiying's hair. She'd followed along silently and marveled at what Jaiying had shown her. At least *some* parts of Ronnie were still in there.

"Thank you for looking, Jaiying. We remain guardedly hopeful. Jia, where is the First Lord's head?" she asked while turning to Jia.

Startled out of her confusion, Jia turned and pointed to a box in the corner, its blinking lights throwing flickering shadows against the bulkhead. She led the way to it, and stood aside as Lili and Jaiying looked at it.

"It's a standard, small stasis box – useful to store a limited amount of fresh food, or in this case ... body parts," Jia said with a slight interruption.

"Jaiying, would you—" Lili started to say, but Jia cut her off.

"My Lady, we've found the stasis box halts the memory function of the mind. While in stasis, the mind does not function – no memory, no dreams, no – *nothing*, actually. Those are the reports from both persons who have entered stasis and been successfully decanted," she shared.

"Thank you, Jia," Lili said, just on the safe edge of politeness. "Jaiying, would you please take peek and see if you can detect anything?"

"Yes, Aunt Lili."

Jaiying focused intently, picking up surface thoughts from *everyone*, but nothing from her Grandfather. She pursed her lips and frowned, before expanding her search field into a larger space.

She'd done it once before. She *knew* she had. It was just a matter of remembering *how*. She thought back to that incident, and focused really, *really hard*...

Somewhere Else...

Ronnie **suddenly** sat up, having experienced the feeling of being **watched**. He grabbed the cup from between his legs and took a grateful sip, still marveling at the relief that passed through his non-existent body.

He'd stopped worrying about it after about the **tenth** full cupful of ... whatever it was. It appeared to have no other quality other than being satisfying to drink.

Looking around once again, he settled back and considered maybe the cup's gift **did** have a side effect, but it wasn't bad enough to worry about.

He took another refreshing sip, then secured the cup in place by holding it tightly between his thighs once again, before closing his eyes for another nap.

Jaiying looked on, invisible in this invisible place, and smiled down at her Grandfather. She really wanted to go over and yell at him, but for some reason she found the landscape fading away...

The Kraken, The Medical Wing

“Jaiying! Are you all right?” her mother asked anxiously, while lifting her from the floor and cradling her in her arms.

Jaiying slowly came around, looking dazed for a few moments while taking in her surroundings. She finally gave out a groan and tried to sit up, but her mother held her still.

“I’m all right, Mommy,” she said, reverting to an earlier version of their relationship. She felt disoriented for a moment, but that slowly started to fade.

“Jaiying ... did you hear your Grandfather?” Lili asked her, which only got a short, barking laugh from the girl.

“Heard him *snoring*,” she said, the memory of it still clear in her mind. “He’s still stuck in the *between* places. He hasn’t made up his mind yet,” she added cryptically

“Well... I suppose that’s both good *and* bad, then,” Lili muttered. “Jia, please direct us to Commander Woldron’s office. We’ll pick up the records and review them at our leisure. Jia, I want both you and Hifacious to know how very much we appreciate all you’ve done for us. This has been a very trying time, and we understand the disappointment that you *both* must feel at being dragged away from the *Microcosmus*. Once the current issue is resolved, I will arrange transport back to the *Microcosmus* for you both – or anywhere *else* you might prefer to be posted. The Imperial house owes you *both* a debt of gratitude.”

“My... My Elder, that is very *generous* of you. Rest assured that we go where we are needed,” Jia told her. “I would like ... if it were *possible*, I would like to *remain* assigned to Hifacious. We get along well, and ... and we *care* for one another.” Jia dropped her eyes at requesting something she could not expect as a practicing Senior.

Lili glanced at Laisee, both of them smiling at their sister’s embarrassment.

She didn’t know if it would be a reward or not, but she still had the power – at least for a *little* while longer.

“Lady Huan, I grant you the freedom to serve whom you please, for as *long* as you please,” she said, then considered another issue. “At some point, you may find the desire to bond with, or even *marry* someone, and that is *also* allowed, but be sure it is someone you can *tolerate*. After all, they are only men, and require *much* management.”

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Jia looked up to see a smiling Elder before she let herself be drawn into a warm hug. The subsequent kiss they shared was not in the least perfunctory, and Jia came away slightly out of breath. She turned to look at the stasis lights, then down at Ronnie's body one more time, before leading Lili to Woldron's office to pick up the reports.

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Jia and Hifacious walked arm-in-arm back to the treatment room, she smiling from an inner glow, and he grateful for the praise he'd received ... and the *relief* he'd gotten from not being reduced to a lump of dead flesh – not that he'd really expected *either*; but as the good Lady had explained, Lord Caldar had not left him much to work with.

Jia walked along quietly, but not without some concerns. As they entered the room and separated to manage their individual tasks, she considered all that had transpired earlier. The Elder had been really quite nice to her ... *and* to Hifacious. Likewise, Lady Laisee was her usual friendly self, although she had no idea where Lady Tal had disappeared to, or when.

No, what was disturbing her were the Elder's conversations with Jaiying, and the actions that had followed them. She'd always felt there were a great deal of obscure feelings coming from Jaiying, whether she was alone, with her mother, or even with her little friend, Rose. If what she'd done was *real*...

She pushed that thought away, but considered it would probably be prudent to keep her thoughts to herself – *indefinitely* – unless she was made privy to it officially?

That thought lingered just long enough for her to remember something else. Jaiying had accurately located each of the mystery organs in Lord Caldar's pelvic region, and as far as she knew, that wasn't public knowledge to *anyone* besides her and Hifacious.

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Laisee and Jaiying had left Lili and her guards at the Medical Wing, and headed back to their compartment, nearly alone, being followed by their own guardsmen for the duration.

'Lady Huan is curious about me' Jaiying shared silently as they continued down the corridor.

Laisee let out a sigh and rotated her head slightly.

'I suppose the Senior Staff's secret might be slowly leaking out by drips and drabs' she considered.

'It will eventually come out, Mother, but it would be better if it were AFTER we get Grandfather back together again'

They walked along for a few moments more, before her mother responded with *'I believe that would be prudent'* just as they reached their door.

The lead guardsman triggered the lock and stood aside to let them in, just as Rose and Déjà approached from around the corner, with Rose taking the lead, their guardsmen following along behind.

"Jaiying! ... Lady Laisee! Would you like to come have dinner with us?"

"None for me, girls," Laisee said, as she was still thinking about the current issues at hand. "Jaiying, you are welcome to join with the rest of our family if you desire?"

"Thank you, Mother!" she said, then gave her a goodbye hug, before blithely turning away and linking arms with Rose.

Laisee stood still and watched them walk away, noting they looked like a walking stair-step when narrowing their path to make the turn at the end of the corridor, with their guardsmen – *three* now – following along off to one side behind them.

Jaiying, at six years old, was slightly less than 120 centimeters tall, but Rose, even being younger, was easily a head taller. Déjà seemed to have added half a head of height since she'd inadvertently participated in that experiment with Jaiying, which was *exceptional* – considering that she was over a hundred years old to begin with.

She let out a sigh, then turned to enter her compartment, the door being closed by the guardsman left behind.

In Petrus' Compartment

Sai waited nearly two hours for Lili, knowing she would eventually be on her way. She didn't know for sure what she wanted, but suspected it could be any *number* of things, not the *least* of which was her leaving them in the Medical Wing without a word of justification. The knock on the door broke her concentration, and she opened it to a politely smiling Lili.

"Please come in, my Elder."

Lili entered and waited for the door to close, before she turned to her and said, "We missed you, Sai. You disappeared from the lab."

"I ... it brought up unpleasant memories, my Elder. I–"

"Enough, Sai," she stopped her. "We are alone, and we are family. I am Lili. You are Sai. You wouldn't, by any chance, have a bottle of *ambrosia*

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available, would you?" She continued across the compartment and took a chair at the small desk before sitting down and visibly relaxing from the stress she'd been under for the last several hours.

As Lili waited patiently, Sai dug out a treasured bottle Petrus had brought back from Ronnie's compartment – one of his *personal* stash – and opened it to pour them both a half-measure into standard cups. Capping the bottle, she handed one to Lili, and cradled the other in her hand while settling into a chair of her own.

"How may I help you, my ... Lili?" she finally asked, and got a dazzling smile from her that suddenly started to fade.

"Sai, I would like you to explain to me how you let Ronnie get so far out of his mind that he tormented Trenka into taking his head," she asked calmly, then let the request sit while Sai gathered her suddenly scattered thoughts.

The seconds ticked by, with Lili's visage becoming more focused on her as she waited for an answer.

"Lili ... Ronnie was ... he was *sick*," Sai finally offered. "He was sick. He was *dying*, actually, but we were seeing to his needs as best we could. Woldron and Huan finally figured out how to extract that powder from his head on the same day he tricked Trenka into killing him. I was going to stop them. I *felt* them, but I was too..."

She stopped after finally listening to the words that had come out of her own mouth. They left a sour taste on her tongue, and she turned away, knowing Lili would *never* believe she'd tried to save Ronnie – not with their past history. After just a few seconds, she felt Lili's hand reach out to hers and grasp it lightly.

"Sai, we *both* know Ronnie had a way about him. Sometimes he would get an idea in his mind, and just ... *run* with it. Especially when he thought it was a *good* idea." She waited for Sai to face her once again before continuing with, "For me to understand, I need to know what was going on in *his* mind."

She saw the confused look on Sai's face and stopped the objections before they verbalized. "I know that his *mind* was blocked, but still, his behavior should have told you *something* about his frame of mind. Just start from the beginning, Sai, and we'll lay down the pieces, and see what picture is revealed to us."

Sai gave her a blank look, but then relaxed. Having Healer scripture quoted to her had a tendency to lift her spirits ... at least that was what she was feeling, anyway.

She took a big breath, blew it all out, sipped from her cup, then settled into her chair.

“Well, I suppose it starts when Ronnie killed all those Vanir at that research station. For some reason, the kickback from what he did affected him somehow. It triggered something... No, it probably started *before* that – when he was being tortured by that Vanir lab director. The stuff he was injected with really messed up his...”

She paused while seeing in her mind the scattered pieces gathering in random groupings, before shuffling themselves into place. There were *lots* of pieces, some directly related, some not – and some in the most *obscure* ways. She took another sip from her cup while thinking back to a critical element in her failure to save Ronnie – and saw the pieces suddenly line up in a causal chain.

“Actually, we can probably trace it back to when he Gifted *Sally*, the Vanir Healer,” she said, now nodding at the relevance of that event, aside from all the *other* elements that had been in play up to now.

Sai looked at the ship’s timer on the wall, and let out a groan. She reached out to grab the data pad on the desk and flipped it on before starting a new file entry – “How Ronnie Got His Head Cut Off.”

She hoped they finished before *supper* was over.

In Dorcas’ Compartment

After dinner, the girls gathered at the compartment Rose shared with her parents and sequestered themselves in the second sleeping room to lay around and watch animated programming from the ship’s data stores. It wasn’t a particularly *productive* afternoon, but it kept them from being bored, what with all the seriousness going on now that the Elder was aboard and the ship headed to Cletus. At least Déjà got to practice some *non-bloody* Healer skills with both Rose and Jaiying to help her.

It was getting towards suppertime when Déjà and Jaiying decided to locate their parents and share the evening meal with them. As always, Rose was asked to go along, which she did after letting Dorcas know her friends had invited her to supper with them. They were in the corridor when Jaiying finally brought up the issue that had been gnawing at her all afternoon.

“*The Elders called Aunt Lili to be with us at Cletus*” Jaiying silently told them both while sparing a glance back at their guards. “*They may want her to do something to Grandfather that won’t be very pleasant*”

“Elders?” Déjà muttered, then glanced behind her as well.

“*We aren’t supposed to know*” Rose told her. “*Aunt Lili is not the ONLY Elder in the Commonwealth. There are five more on Cletus*”

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‘But they don’t get the Visions’ Jaiying added. *‘They never did. Grandmother didn’t tell you about them?’*

“No. What do they do?” Déjà asked quietly, while resisting the urge to look behind her again.

‘Well ... they’re kinda like Super Seniors, but they never leave Cletus’ Jaiying explained roughly. *‘They’re like ... ahh...’*

‘As Aunt Lili is Elder to the Emperor, the Cletus Elders are to Aunt Lili’ Rose explained simply. *‘They are above Aunt Lili, and have been in charge since the beginning. They just don’t show themselves’*

‘I don’t understand’ Déjà finally shared silently. *‘If Elder Lili isn’t REALLY in charge, then why didn’t they send someone else in her place?’*

‘We think there was no one else with the skills needed to do the job’ Jaiying suggested. *‘Aunt Lili was best suited to take over. In fact, we think she’s probably better at being an Elder than the ones on Cletus’*

‘I don’t know, Jaiying’ Rose sent. *‘They’ve been in place since the beginning’*

‘But they never leave Cletus. Probably not in centuries’ Jaiying continued. *‘We’ve talked about it, and think they’re not as skilled as Aunt Lili. Or us, for that matter’*

Déjà stopped and turned to stare at her, only to see Jaiying nod her head in affirmation of her silent words.

She took a half step forward, before turning to continue down the corridor while trying not to think too hard about that confusing idea. When they finally arrived at the right corridor junction, she turned away to head to the compartment shared with Petrus and her Mother. Rose and Jaiying watched her go, before they headed to Laisee’s compartment to see if she would join them for supper.

In Petrus’ Compartment

While Sai availed herself of the facilities after their long discussion, Lili sat in quiet contemplation. She occasionally nodded her head in memory of Sai’s rather protracted version of events that led to Ronnie’s eventual despair – one that made the decision to end his life the *only* one he could reasonably fathom. According to reports, his manipulation of Trenka had merely been a useful form of instruction – a *parting* gift, if you will. Her observation of the *final* recording in the gym did show a marked improvement in Trenka’s technique during the final blow.

There might be some truth that her orders to Gift the Vanir Healer may have triggered some rather precipitous events – such as Jaiying becoming more sensitive, and perhaps even more powerful, while Déjà

had begun an *irreversible* mutation back to a more *human*-standard genetic profile.

She considered that last. The current presumption was that Ronnie's semen was converting Déjà into a genetic mirror of his principal organic make up. What if it were merely restoring Déjà to her *original* genetic structure? The Kee were laboratory experiments created to be the ultimate management species that, according to Sai's information, had gotten severely out of hand. She *did* remember his misgivings about the results with Sally, so much so that she'd intervened by having his local Senior apply her skills to lessen his concern about it, even getting the Vanir Healer to participate in that little bit of testosterone management.

Lili sighed, trying not to curse the stupidity of her brother-in-law.

He'd helped the Vanir correct many problems in their society by pointing out treachery from within, then helped them deal with it. It was his *own* hubris that had finally taken him down, though. That assault against the research station was ill-advised, dangerous, and *should* have been left to the *professionals*! Her thoughts halted at that point. Ronnie *was* a professional. He was her husband's *First Sword*.

She closed her eyes, and let the rest of it play out from Sai's monologue concerning his decline; from the weakness after he'd returned, to the rapid deterioration of his physical body. Healers, Seniors ... even the *medical* professionals had not been able to help him. Not until the last, anyway. All Commander Woldron had been able to accomplish was to ease his pain ... just like with Elder Kita.

And Déjà... She opened her eyes while considering this *new* development. A Royal child of the First Lord, born of a *Kee* female?

Her thoughts were disrupted by Sai coming back from the facilities with a towel wrapped around her torso.

"Sai, please tell me about Déjà. I would like to visit with her and learn more about her," she asked, just as a quiet knock at the outer door drew both their attention.

As Déjà walked in, the guard closed the door behind her.

"Déjà, we have a visitor," Sai called out to her through the open bedroom door while motioning her towards the inner room.

Once she got to the doorway, she saw Lili and stopped, stood up *very* straight, then stepped forward to stand in front of Lili – raising her left palm up and facing out with fingers spread.

"Déjà se Kee ... ne Lady Sai Tal," she said formally, and got a tinkling titter from Lili, who stood up to greet this new member of the family.

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“Child, that is no way for an Imperial *Princess* to greet a loving member of her *family*,” she said, then pulled her into a hug.

Lili flushed through her entire body from top to bottom; searching out her physical changes, before looking through the boy and girl babies she carried within her. She then flashed a question at Sai, which she begrudgingly agreed to, before separating from Déjà and looking down at her with a warm smile on her face.

“Déjà se Kee... But Ronnie trusted *you* to carry his seed within you, and now his family *continues* to grow,” she murmured, while bending down to plant a kiss on her forehead before straightening back up.

“Déjà sai ... *Caldarous* ... se Kee ne Lady Sai Tal,” she proclaimed, now *formally* adding her to the family tree of the Royal house. “Come sit with me, Déjà. While your mother is getting dressed, you must have some interesting stories to tell about the scoundrel who caused all this fuss.”

She patted Déjà’s stomach, but it triggered a shocked look on her face that was teetering towards a teary conclusion.

“Ah-ah! No *tears*, child,” Lili said lightly, then smiled at her again. “You’re going to give your mother *two* grandchildren to love, and we can’t *wait* to introduce you to the rest of the family on Kantor!”

July 14, In Cletus Orbit

Lili had taken advantage of her privilege to sit quietly in one of the seats on the bridge during the approach and orbit of Cletus ... not that she’d actually been focused on it. Instead, she’d been running through her mind the status of the “accommodations” she’d ordered, and reassuring herself that everything that could *possibly* be needed was already in place...

On the day after her arrival, she’d had the corridor adjacent to the Medical Wing secured and prepared for the small group of visitors that would be arriving in just a few hours. The Elders on Cletus were making, what was to *them*, an almost *unheard* of off-planet visit to *personally* inspect the man-child who’d caused so much fuss for nearly two centuries.

Strike that... It was to inspect the man-child who’d been *engineered* by Elder Kita to perform some apparently “not-quite-well-defined-task.”

It was his blundering about for the last nineteen decades that had brought them to *this* particular point in their sociological and political relationships between, not only their *traditional* adversaries, but also the new and not even *human* adversaries – at least for the time being...

Lili let her chin drop to her chest while rubbing her brow with the thumb and fingers of one hand; not even caring whether anyone noticed

her or not. She almost dreaded what was surely coming, having heard the comments by the Elders after she'd relayed her latest findings on the *final* experiment she'd attempted with Lady Huan.

She'd so hoped Livia would have responded by now, especially since she'd Gifted her *personally* after she'd received another dose of Ronnie's essences. The procedure had been replicated with Lady Huan just two days ago, but so far, Jia had not felt any different from before. For *whatever* reason, the effectiveness seemed related to Ronnie as a *whole*, rather than in *pieces*, and she had an idea of which way the pendulum would swing if it were between maintaining stability within the Commonwealth, or bringing a unique and potentially *uncontrollable* factor back into play.

That thought conjured up other possibilities, with Ronnie being only one item of issue. There were currently five *other* items that, as far as she could tell, no one had mentioned as yet – the Senior Staff. She hadn't mentioned it – *ever* – and was pretty sure they'd not become intrusive enough to pick her brain for the information. Unless the Elders had pried it out of Amy's mind, there was a good chance the children would remain outside of their purview. She didn't want to consider what they might be prompted to do about five *more* variables that were not under their direct control.

"Orbit obtained, my Elder," Petrus said quietly, reporting formally as was correct, while trying not to overly disturb her meditations.

"Thank you, Petrus," she muttered, then closed her eyes for a moment. "Our visitors will arrive at Noon minus one. Please notify Sai, and have her advise Security for the proper protocols – *full* Imperial honors, please."

"I obey, my Elder," he said, then silently relayed Lili's orders to Sai. In just moments, he felt her on the move, but before he could confirm this to his big sister, she was already out of her chair and leaving the bridge.

"Elder Liling does not look too happy," Endo muttered quietly once the door had shut behind her, earning him a very quiet snort from Petrus for his trouble.

"Endo, please announce our orbit status to the ship, and set the station-keeping watch. We're likely to be here for a few days." After setting that in motion, Petrus glanced at the bridge timer. "Mention that official arrivals are due to arrive within ... make it an hour, now," he added, seeing the timer roll over to Noon, minus two. "You have the ship, Endo."

"I have the ship, Captain Zickgraf," Endo replied to his vanishing back, before turning to complete his last set of commands as the door closed behind Petrus.

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In the Security Center

Nice thing about Imperial guardsmen – give them their orders and they just go out and do it. You just had to make sure they weren't *confusing* orders – not that they weren't capable of thinking on their feet when necessary, but better safe than sorry. Sai watched the men and their squad leader as they trundled out of the security center to take up their assigned positions, which left her alone with the security center supervisor.

After several seconds of silence, the duty supervisor dug around in a cabinet, and pulled out a cup and a familiar bottle. He poured a measure into the cup and handed it to her before putting the bottle away. She gratefully accepted it; acknowledging his kindness with a smile and a nod, but couldn't quite remember him directly ... although she did remember spending time with someone who *felt* a lot like him. Then it hit her. He'd been planet-side on Vanaheim when Petrus and Jaiying had been involved with that bomb attack against the Vanir Warren Leader. His had been the mind she'd forced herself into to take charge of the situation, and get Jaiying safely into stasis.

"How are you feeling now, Garlan?" she asked him, remembering now how bad his emotional state had been while trying to deal with Jaiying's injuries. She'd gotten Lady Qiaolian to interview him and deal with his emotional distress, and once she'd eased his mind, Dandan had assigned a Healer to him for a few hours.

"*Much* better, Lady Tal," he said, while thinking back on how he thought he'd failed. "Lady Dandan explained to me how difficult it was to separate myself from situations like ... like what we'd found ourselves in. Between the explosion and Commander Zickgraf's injuries, it was almost a *routine* combat situation – something we've been in before..."

He paused for a moment, thinking back on what he'd felt.

"With Mistress *Jaiying* lying there, that was much harder for me. Lady Tal... If it wasn't for you, we would have lost her," he said quietly.

She chanced to read his surface thoughts, and found him relatively stable – although remorseful for being stuck in that situation and feeling helpless at the time.

"It's always difficult with children involved ... even *after* they've grown up," she said somberly, then turned away before taking another sip of her drink.

"Mistress Déjà – she's your *daughter*, right?" he asked, having seen the change in her eyes before she'd turned from him.

“Yes. I adopted her a while back,” she admitted to the wall. “She tried to *eat*... Anyway, we came to an understanding, and she’s been with me and my boys ever since.”

“She’s changed – ever since Lord Caldor got sick,” he said to the back of her head. “She seems happy enough with the kids, but she don’t come around with Kiki anymore. We all hope she’ll feel better when Lord Caldor recovers.”

Sai gave out a quiet chuckle, thinking about a *Princess* pulling Healer duty with a guardsman of the ship. Well, maybe after the babies were born...

“Kiki seems a bit lonely,” he continued. “Like she’s missing something – *family*, I’m thinking. Wouldn’t have room for *another* daughter, would you?”

She slowly turned to look at him, while wondering if he was intentionally trying a bit of not-so-subtle social engineering on her.

“We know Kiki and Déjà are both Kee, what we read up on them, anyway,” he went on. “Their social bonds are very tight. Kiki is happy enough in our company, but it’s almost like she’s *driven* to us – like she can’t *help* it. And Mistress Déjà is changing. Easy to see,” he added unnecessarily.

“What – *exactly* – are you suggesting, Garlan?” she asked, while letting a frown form on her face.

“Just that everyone here has good friends – *close* friends,” he continued. “Mistress Déjà has family to be with. I have my fellow guardsmen around me. The shipboard crews all work together, and have mostly similar backgrounds. Kiki seems at loose ends all by herself. Hate to see that burden on a soul. Just saying...”

Sai stared at the side of his head as he returned to his monitoring duties, all the while wondering if he’d always been this insightful.

“Thank you for your observations, Garlan. I will take them under advisement,” she finally said, then tossed back the rest of her cup before rinsing it out in the small sink in the compartment.

Just before she left, she turned to look back and watched him shift through the camera views while setting up the route to observe the arriving visitors. She saw Petrus and Lili walking through one of the corridors, and let out a sigh, hastening her decision to get back to duty.

“Have a peaceful day, Lady Tal,” he said to the monitor. “We’ll be watching out for *all* of you.”

She paused and blinked at that, before closing the door behind her.

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At the Docking Bay

It was Noon minus point five, and Lili was standing nervously just inside one of the receiving corridors with the corridor-to-docking bay containment door closed for safety. Petrus was standing with her, along with two guardsmen, in addition to her *own* personal guardsman.

Just as on the bridge, her primary thoughts were of the preparations she'd ordered for this occasion. She resisted the urge to pace, and instead settled for glancing fruitlessly out the door's window into the docking bay – which was when she wasn't evaluating the two additional guardsmen she'd had Sai assign to this portion of the route to the Elders' temporary accommodations.

The thought had crossed her mind if either of these men could be found *personally* useful to any of the Elders, but dismissed it out of hand. Determined not to fidget publically, she glanced out the window and saw the docking bay timer roll over once again.

Where *were* they?

The Bridge

At Noon minus zero point one, the coms speaker finally crackled to life with news of their visitor's arrival.

"Hello Kraken, this is Transport One – inbound. Estimated docking time is five minutes."

"Hello Transport One, this is the *Kraken*," Endo replied, just as formally, then toggled open the docking bay doors. "Docking bay opening now. Please follow the marker lights to your assigned space – left of center. Ships atmospheric pressure is one point five, Standard."

"Transport One, docking space left of center. Atmosphere one point five, Standard – received."

"One almost down. Two almost to go," Endo muttered, while watching the display as the first of three transports made its approach.

His scanner showed four ships out behind the *Kraken*. Three of them were from Cletus, and the remaining ship was their own transport. What he *didn't* see were the *Orca* or the *Kraken's Child*, each of them having taken up defensive positions around the *Kraken* while remaining cloaked. He hoped these transports just dropped off their passengers and departed, otherwise Mother and Gallus would be out there for the next several days with just one ship-qualified partner to spell him during their vigil.

The Docking Bay

Lili had been startled the moment she heard sounds coming from the docking bay. As she watched the outer door open, she could see running lights shining from a rather small transport, with more lights further out behind it. The transport eased through the atmospheric shield and set down at the illuminated parking space – the blinking rings finally going out when it settled. They continued to wait until all three of the transports settled onto their respective parking places, before watching the outer door close behind them and receiving authorization from the bridge to break the corridor seal.

Petrus led Lili up to the first of three transports while barely hearing the intake of air pressure from each – a very tiny whistle while they balanced inner and outer air pressures to match the *Kraken*. Hopefully their passengers would not be overly burdened by it.

As soon as the whistling stopped, the first transport popped open its passenger door, and a Cletus guardsman stepped out – his uniform different from the standard Imperial garb, but his demeanor very much identical. He eyed the three Imperial guardsmen, exchanged invisible, but universally acknowledged protocols, then stepped to the side to allow his single passenger, Elder Ju, to step down.

“Welcome to the *Kraken*, my Lady,” Petrus said formally, flinching once before resisting the urge to raise either of his palms in greeting, just as Lili had warned him not to.

“Captain Zickgraf ... Liling has told us so *little* about you,” Ju said to him, glancing at Lili out of the corner of her eye, before looking back up at Petrus. “I do see the resemblance, however. Just as Liling is a beautiful woman, you, Captain, are quite *handsome*. Perhaps you will have time to grace *our* table during our short stay?”

Petrus almost froze – wondering if it was simply a polite dinner invitation, or an invitation for something else.

“Ah, if my duties allow, my wife and I would be *honored* to join you for a meal,” he managed to get out, while wondering how Lili was taking this abrupt request.

“Your ... *wife*? Ah, Lady Sai *Tal* ... the *disobedient* one,” Ju muttered. “Still, it is well that she *refused* to kill Lord Caldor when Elder Ai had ordered it. If not, then we might all be embroiled in a war with the *Hegemony* – fostered by our *newest* friends below us.”

Petrus didn’t know how to answer that, or if there was even a question in there for him somewhere. Lili managed to rescue him, though.

“Senior Ju, it is good to see you again,” Lili said in greeting, pausing to see if it met with Ju’s acceptance, before continuing with the status of

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their visitor's habitation needs. "I have arranged accommodations for you and the rest of your staff during your visit."

Ju stood still while silently reviewing those accommodations with Lili, before nodding once.

"Very well, Liling. Let us gather up my staff and see where we will be sleeping. We have much to do, and little time to do it," she said, then walked towards the center of the docking bay to face the other two transports, whose occupants were just now opening doors and stepping onto the docking bay.

As they stepped out, Rong, Daiyu, Wen and Xue looked around at the austerity of the bay, then focused on Ju while receiving information from her of their current status in a few seconds. Included was Lili's apparent subterfuge over their supposed seniority, rather than their *actual* function. During their visit, they would be merely five of the most *senior* Seniors from Cletus, having been welcomed on board to evaluate a particularly gravely injured Kantite Lordling.

Petrus stepped forward and assumed the gracious host, once again.

"Welcome aboard, my Ladies," he announced formally. "We will escort you to your accommodations, so you may get settled. If you have need of stewards for your personal items, please let me know now, and I will call for them."

They each looked at one another, then turned back to their transports. All could see other guardsmen coming out with carry-bags for both the Ladies and themselves. Seeing the number involved, Lili reached out to Sai, still outside on security patrol, and requested that she update the Elders corridor to accommodate ten additional guardsmen. Sai immediately relayed the order to Petrus, who smoothly stepped up to the task.

"My Ladies, do you prefer your guardsmen's accommodations close to your own, or would you allow them quarters with the ships company?"

"Captain, I think we would be better served if they were quartered as close to us as reasonably convenient," Ju told him evenly, then waited for him to complain.

"Very well, my Lady," he said while smiling calmly. "Your corridor is close to the Medical Wing, but separate from it. It has room for all of your party to enjoy individual compartments. Do you have much in the way of luggage?"

"Just what you see, Captain."

"Excellent! I will see to it immediately," he said, then walked over to a wall com port to call the bridge and request transport for the baggage.

From his own experience, he knew the guardsmen would prefer to remain unencumbered while escorting their charges – especially within a *new* place.

While they waited, the Elders and Lili chatted in Cletus, something Lili hadn't had the opportunity to do for quite a while, and not since her last visit with the Council of Elders. She was still picking up tiny tidbits of changes in the language that had occurred over the centuries she'd been absent from home.

The conversation continued politely, until two stewards arrived, pulling carts behind them. The ship's guardsmen greeted them and directed them to the visitors' baggage, where they were closely watched by the Elder's guardsmen while they loaded, then headed the carts out the door – directed by the two extra ship's guardsmen, and followed by five of the Cletus guardsmen.

"My Ladies, this way, please," Lili said to them, and the entire party of Elders and remaining guardsmen followed their luggage to their temporary quarters deeper into the ship. Petrus followed along until leaving the bay, then used one of the corridor wall coms to reach Endo at the bridge.

"Endo ... please contact the transport pilots and advise them their passengers will contact them when they are ready to leave. Once they are secure, open the docking bay door and suggest a departure sequence – just so they don't bump into each other on their way out," he said.

He waited in silence, wondering if they'd received contrary instructions from the Cletus leaders. The lights coming on from the third transport, followed by the telltale whine from its converter ramping up, told him otherwise, and he watched it rise from the deck and back directly out of the dock ... followed by number two and number one.

'*Sai ... Gallus ... you can come home now*' he sent very softly, and felt their relief that they wouldn't be banished for the duration of their visitor's occupation.

He called the bridge and ordered the *Kraken's* transport to return, before the two tanks docked. There was no *real* expectation of an attack in orbit, but now was not the time to drop their guard. After all, they were *still* pirates. Once all three ships were settled, the *Kraken* would cloak and vanish from planetary screens, before moving out of orbit and maintaining a vigilant profile for the duration. He didn't stick around for the docking, though. He had other things to do, and left the bay.

Medical Wing

It was Noon plus one, and Commander Woldron was concerned about the imminent visit from the Cletus Senior staff. Not just Seniors, but

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senior Seniors – some of the most *skilled* Healers that Cletus could muster.

“Now *remember*, Hifacious, you must be *absolutely truthful* with these Ladies,” Jia was reminding him. “They will want your *honest* appraisal of your treatment plan, and how it has varied from your expectations – both good *and* bad. Try not to think of how easily they could turn you inside out with a mere *glance*,” she chided him, then smiled when his face turned pale at the concept.

She finally relented and hugged him, telling him that she was just teasing him – but reminded him they would expect honesty from him in *all* regards.

Coming Back from Dinner

“So, this is the mighty *Kraken*,” Ju muttered as they were returning from the commons after suffering thorough a “merely adequate” meal. “Captain Petrus, I note your other passengers seemed *absent* during the meal.”

Petrus was pacing Ju and Lili as they headed towards the Medical Wing for their initial assessment of Ronnie’s condition. The meal had been *more* than adequate for the entire ship’s complement, but the Ladies were apparently used to more scrumptious rations.

“We’ve learned to stagger our meals, as not everyone aboard can be seated at the same time,” he said. “Ronnie and I worked that out when we were pulling out entire villages from the Hegemony a few years back.”

He made a point of deliberately *not* thinking of anything beyond the immediate necessities of conversation, and not felt any probes from any of the Ladies. Lili had warned him they were at least her equal, if not stronger in their abilities. He maintained his internal shield, and avoided thoughts of anything unbecoming of the current situation.

As they reentered the corridor where the Ladies would be staying, one of the guards spoke to one of the trailing Ladies, received her orders in Cletus, then walked quickly past them to alert the five guardsmen they’d left behind. As those men came out and stood aside, Petrus immediately noticed the quick exchange of signals that told the off-watch section to head to dinner, while the active escort stayed with the Ladies.

At the end of the corridor, Petrus triggered a passageway door, and led the party through to the door of the new Medical Wing. It was guarded by two ships guardsmen, and that’s where they stopped.

“This is as far as I go, my Ladies,” Petrus told them, then turned to Lili. “Elder Liling, I leave them in your care. I will make myself available should you need me.”

That said, he provided a polite bow to them all, before turning and leaving them there, heading back to the bridge by himself to review the current tactical situation.

He didn't expect any problems, certainly not from Imperial Commonwealth forces, but he didn't really know anything about the Cletus forces, or their current political alignment, other than as working members of the Commonwealth.

Besides, being around all those women gave him the willies.

Lili turned to the ships guardsmen and conducted the new security introductions, at the end of which found all six of the additional security forces being left standing outside the door, while she and the Ladies entered alone, and closed it behind them.

In the Medical Office

"I'm sure you have nothing to worry about, my love," Jia told him again, giving him another hug, before she sensed Lili and her party outside the compartment they used for an office and meeting room. She pulled away from Hifacious just as the door opened to reveal, not Lili, but a rather petite woman standing there.

Jia smiled awkwardly and walked towards the door.

"Welcome, my Ladies," she said. "I am Senior Jia Huan, assigned to the Medical Department of the *Microcosmus* before going on detached duty here on the *Kraken*. Please ... come in."

Jia stepped back as Lili's party filled the compartment, now bereft of its typical sleeping accommodations, in favor of a substantial conference room-sized table surrounded by chairs. Hifacious remained standing by his desk, where he'd been receiving Jia's comfort just moments earlier.

After the party entered the room, Lili made short work of introductions, while Hifacious joined the group and made the appropriate bow at each individual Senior in the party.

After introductions were completed, the Ladies seated themselves, and Ju went straight to the point.

"Commander Woldron, my understanding is that you are the principal architect towards Lord Caldor's potential recovery. You will tell us, please, your treatment regimen up to this point in time."

Hifacious fought his fluster and offered another bow, before joining them at the table and taking a seat in front of a data pad.

His typing triggered the large display panel on the wall along the long edge of the conference table across from them, and the screen lit up with a timeline to work with.

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“My Ladies, we received word of Lord Caldor’s initial injuries from his Senior, and also from some of his engineering staff,” he led with. “From their findings, we attempted to determine the *exact* cause of his injuries, along with the basis of the compounds he was injected with that seemed to prevent Healing by traditional means.”

He looked around but saw nothing but intense stares focused on him. Suppressing a sigh, he keyed in another sequence that was the start of his investigative protocol, before beginning his lengthy explanation.

In Dorcas’ Compartment

“What are they doing *now*,” Rose whispered to her partner in hiding.

Jaiying looked at the compartment timer, Noon plus almost four, and let out a quiet chuckle.

“When Hifacious gets going, he just can’t *stop*,” she said with a giggle. “He’s finally up to the point where he got Lady Huan to pull that stuff from Grandfather’s head.”

Rose chanced a look around, before snuggling lower into her bundle of blankets. Intellectually, she knew that she and the rest of the kids could communicate on very high and narrow bands, but being so close to the Elders, even *whispering* between themselves didn’t seem that safe to her.

“Are you *sure* they can’t hear us?” she asked once again, and Jaiying leaned over and hugged the collective bundle of blankets surrounding her cousin.

“We both have good enough blocks to keep out Aunt Lili, and I think Aunt Lili is *much* stronger than the rest of the Elders.” Jaiying tightened her hug, then snaked a hand under the blanket to hold one of Rose’s hands. “Time to update everyone back home,” she whispered, then almost burst out laughing.

In less than ten seconds, they had updated the family back on Kantor, and gotten into an extended conversation regarding the need to maintain secrecy, until they got their Grandfather back together and vertical once again.

Jaiying had also verified that nether Petrus, Grandmother Sai, her mother Laisee, Roses’ mother Dorcas, or Aunt Lili would be able to share their secret with the Elders – accidentally or deliberately. She’d also added that she put a block into Senior Huan – just because of the suspicion she’d overheard when she’d been looking into Grandfather’s auxiliary memory nodes.

The only other risk on board was Sally, but she didn’t consider it much of a risk because she knew Sally had more capabilities than Aunt Lili even suspected. As for Déjà, her thoughts remained rooted in the Kee

language – only being translated when verbally expressing herself. Even if they *could* detect her particular Kee band, learning to deal with the rolling encryption that had escaped her conversion to “normal” humanity would prove extremely difficult in the limited amount of time they’d be on board.

Medical Wing

“Thank you for providing the details of your efforts so diligently, Commander,” Ju said politely. “You may withdraw.”

Hifacious’ fluster threatened to reoccur, but he kept it under control while shutting down his data pad, before standing and bowing to each of them, then leaving the compartment.

Ju glanced at Lili, then turned to look at Jia, while gracing her with a delighted smile.

“Lady Huan, Liling tells us of the *experiment* you helped to conduct, and in which you *also* participated. I would like to hear your interpretation of the procedure – in *detail* – and learn of any side effects you’ve discovered.”

Jia nodded meekly and began her recitation.

Engineering Lab

At Noon plus five, Milsie and Donnel were finishing up in the lab, and contemplating the evening they’d planned for after supper. Earlier they’d been told to expect a summons by their visitors from Cletus, probably in the next day or so, but the arrival of Laisee and Livia would seem to indicate the timetable had been moved up.

“Hello Milsie ... Donnel,” Laisee called out from the door. “Milsie, you’ve been requested to accompany us to the new Medical Wing. The Seniors from Cletus wish to ask a few questions about ... things. If that is all right with you?”

Milsie and Donnel shared a look, but he shrugged, letting her make the decision.

“Certainly, my Lady,” she said. “Can Donnel–”

“I believe he may be called *later*,” Laisee interrupted her. “For right now, they wish to learn of *your* experiences.”

Milsie stared at her for a second longer, before turning to hug her husband lightly. She planted a kiss on his cheek, before turning away to leave with her escorts; Donnel helplessly watching her go.

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In Petrus' Compartment

Sai came back from the shower with a towel wrapped around her. A glance towards the door to Déjà's room showed it was closed, but she couldn't feel her daughter inside. Extending outwards, she found her on the way towards the commons, or maybe ... yes, heading out to find her two companions, Rose and Jaiying. She smiled at that, the thought that Déjà found company with mere children more comforting than with any of the adults on board.

She noted the time, Noon plus five point five, and considered if Petrus would be back in time to join her for supper.

She got out clean underwear and robes, forsaking ships jumpers for the duration of their guests' visit. It probably wouldn't really matter, but for some, appearances were everything. In hindsight, it might have made the discussion with Lili about Ronnie's "accident" a little more comfortable if presented as one Senior to another. As she dried and dressed herself, she contemplated a repeat of that recitation with the Elders...

Lili had picked apart every detail of her actions on the day Ronnie had lost his head. The fact that she'd been dealing with events down on Vanaheim at the same time were certainly mitigating factors, but there was also the issue of her ignoring the call from Jia regarding the solution to Ronnie's little problem – something that might have changed his mind at the last minute. Given the circumstances, her "excuse" that she was celebrating her daughter's reaction to an otherwise normal sexual response seemed somewhat trivial...

Thoughts of telling that tale to the Elders caused her to shiver for just a moment, and she found herself pulling out a bottle and cup in response.

She poured herself a drink, but stared into the cup with memories of the past swirling around in her head. As they unfolded before her, she wondered if *this* was how Ronnie had become so enamored of drink in his earlier years. She was using it to stave off stress and worry, but he'd used it to deal with the aches and pains he'd let linger in his body, as was reported by her daughter, Maya.

She shook it off and took a sip, then sat down to wait for Petrus.

'Sai, do you have a moment?' Lili called to her.

Senior Healer's Office

Lady Qiaolian was finishing the day reports from her minions, Healer Yu and Healer Ning, while scrupulously avoiding any thoughts as to the *ease* of this particular assignment. She'd learned from Lady Caldarous that hubris was a *vicious* bitch poised to turn on her at any moment, or

so she'd surmised during a discussion they'd recently shared over supper.

She'd politely accepted it at face value – one did *not* publicly argue with the Emperor's daughter – but it stuck with her. Upon further reflection, she'd matched several instances in her past with corresponding negative events that had followed them. It seemed ridiculous – almost bordering on the edge of *fantasy* – until she considered what Laisee had told her of Lord Caldor's speculations. Lord Caldor *himself* was a contradiction in her experience – a “male” Senior, if one could believe it. Still, the things she'd heard, and the things she'd read and *seen*...

She let out a sigh, then ran down the last report. Crew health was optimal – *human* crew, that is.

The Vanir Healer (what a *dreadful* surprise that had been) was tasked with maintenance of the Vanir passengers, and she'd found that “Sally” was easily the equal of most Seniors, actually *stronger* than several she'd known, and yet this was all still new to the creature.

The Drecks aboard had *three* Healers within their group – Gaia, Edna, and “Lady” Dorcas, although she'd not yet been made privy to how *that* had come about. The fact that Lady Dorcas and her consort, the *Earthling*, bore rings with the Imperial crest on them appeared to have something to do with it, however.

Not surprisingly, the Drecks officers, Endo and Gallus, had limited Healer talents as well, something she'd learned from one of Yan Yu's earlier reports. Lady Sai Tal seemed to have had a hand in that, not wanting to be constantly bothered by the usual bumps and cuts that rambunctious boys tended to receive – although their apparent “adoption” by Lady Tal was yet *another* issue that begged resolution.

She smiled as she noted the report from Qiao Ning regarding the efforts of “Kiki,” the little Kee. Here was *one* little non-Healer who took to her assignments *eagerly*...

When she'd first read the report about the Kee, she'd been appalled at the savage environment their women had to endure – forced to live *separately* from their men simply to avoid being *eaten* by them. She'd not understood the concept of “forced sexual emanations” until both Yan and Qiao had insisted she share an interlude with Kiki – which had ended up lasting the better part of two *hours*. She'd awoken satisfied, relaxed, and *very* happy ... then almost *immediately* re-read the report on Kee to find out what she'd missed – which was hidden in an “appendix” she'd failed to read.

Their *biological* adaptation for self-preservation seemed perversely *ideal* – an almost desirable standard to apply to Cletus itself. The only

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downside was that the women would have to do *all* the work, instead of letting the *men* do the heaving lifting for them. Aside from that, the fact that they could easily overcome both men *and* women was a potentially deadly situation unless they were kept well fed, and she'd subsequently learned from other sources that the Kee ate *well*.

The other Kee, Mistress Déjà, was off the duty roster. Unlike Kiki, Mistress Déjà *was* a Healer – of a *sort*. There were also other peculiarities about her that suggested she was a special case – the fact that she carried Lord Caldar's unborn children being just one of *several* current mysteries about her. And again, just as with the Drecks males, Mistress Déjà had been adopted by Lady Sai Tal at some point in the past. Dandan supposed there were very interesting back-stories involved, but her position here was in support – not rumor or gossip. She finished her reports, and filed them away for another day...

A glance at the ships timer showed Noon plus five point seven – nearly time for supper. She considered either eating early or returning to her quarters to bathe first. She only had one appointment for later in the evening, so an early meal seemed appropriate. She was just straightening her desk when she was contacted.

'Dandan, do you have a moment?' Sai called out to her.

In the Medical Wing

Milsie and Livia were still relaxing comfortably on individual sleeping platforms in the new Medical Wing. Around them, the five Seniors from Cletus sat while silently probing them, occasionally reaching out and touching their naked bodies while attempting to sense any changes to their structure. This was done without any effort to test their innate Healer abilities – of which Milsie was just beginning training, and Livia was completely bereft of.

Standing to one side, Lili and Jia waited quietly while the Elders conducted their examination. They'd been at it for the better part of an hour, when Lili's silent concern finally broke through to one of them.

"Do not be so worried, Liling," Ju said quietly. "The fact that Lord Caldar's *body* seems to have lost its ability to enhance a woman's capabilities is not a terrible event. However, your suggestion to have *other* victims of Lord Caldar tested for genetic modification has already shown positive results. In fact, the Imperial family would grow *significantly* if DNA were the *only* criteria required to prove birthright."

Lili looked at her in shock.

"You mean..."

“Yes. *All* of the women he’d been with have shown changes in their genetic make up.”

Ju smiled at her, easily reading the panicked thoughts radiating from the surface of her mind.

“It causes us no worry, for we have been watching and monitoring the situation since Sai Tal discovered the “infection” spreading out at the Fringe. You, yourself, have been *much* improved, Liling. Even all of *us* have felt it.”

Lili looked around the room, now seeing all the Elders looking up at her and smiling.

“But ... but that means...”

“Yes. Sai Tal, Lady Caldarous, Lady Dorcas ... even the little Kee ... Mistress Déjà? *That* one is special,” Ju considered, before her thoughts shifted back to the present moment. “But not these two. Jia, Commander Woldron found no changes at *all*?”

“None whatever, my Lady,” Jia said while maintaining the polite fiction that these were *not* the Elders of history before her. Their names had been known from the beginning, but to see them in *person* – right here in *front* of her... She snapped back to herself.

“Hifa– ... Commander Woldron performed the tests several times, my Ladies, but found nothing to indicate any genetic changes to Lady Milsie or Livia.”

Ju looked at Milsie, prying just the tiniest amount to determine what that title indicated, and found it in Donnel Ardan’s background.

He’d been seeded in the past from one of the Royal houses – thus becoming a minor Lord because of it. Not that it really mattered here...

“Very well, Jia. Thank you,” Ju muttered, then turned to Lili. “Has Lady Qiaolian been notified?”

“Yes, my Lady. She is just at the outer door,” Lili told her.

“Very well, then.” Ju sighed, and turned back to Milsie and Livia. “Ladies, I thank you for visiting with us. Lady Milsie, please continue with your studies *however* they may turn out. It is our opinion that men need a *firm* hand to guide them, and I’m sure you’ll find your bond mate no different.”

Milsie blushed charmingly from her upper breasts to her cheeks before she sat up and started getting dressed.

“Livia, when you go out, please escort Lady Qiaolian back to us before you leave,” Lili told her.

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“Yes, my Lady,” she said, then rendered the appropriate bow before throwing on her clothes and scooting out of the room, followed by a still-blushing Milsie.

Milsie stopped at the door and turned, offering a bow to the Ladies before leaving. Once she left, Elder Wen let out a quiet giggle.

“She is so much in love with her man,” she murmured, getting a corresponding titter from Daiyu and Xue.

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*‘Livia is coming to get you, Dandan’* she heard Lili’s warning.

*‘Thank you, my Elder’* she sent back, while continuing to wait by the outer door.

Dandan stood there in front of eight guardsmen, two of whom she’d already made the acquaintance of, while pondering the sense of having so much overhead for a small group of Seniors who weren’t even in the same room with them.

A knock at the door prompted one of the ships guardsmen, Lael, she remembered, to open it and reveal Doctor Blanaid and Lady Caldaraus’ servant girl, Livia. Milsie stepped out, while Livia bowed and gestured Dandan inside invitingly. They remained silent on their way back to the compartment, before Livia gestured to it, turned, and left her standing there in front of the open door.

“Come in, Dandan,” Lili called out to her, and she entered to see the five Seniors sitting there next to the standing Elder ... or perhaps, the six Elders?

As the introductions went around, even Lili could feel the confusion from Dandan when the names triggered memories of her history lessons from so long ago. Elder Xue took pity on her, and after a silent chat with her companions, tried to put her at ease.

“Lady Qiaolian, we may share the same *names* as our storied ancestors, but please be assured that we are not the same *bodies* who lived so long ago,” she said disarmingly. “After all, there are *limits* ... even to an *Elder*,” she added, while gesturing slightly to Lili.

After that comment was digested by their guest, they felt her concerns collapse, so Xue pressed on with their question.

“Lady Qiaolian ... Dandan, you’re aware of the experiments that Milsie, Livia, and Jia were involved with?”

Not quite catching her flat-footed, Dandan responded with what little she was actually aware of.

“Only that it involved Lord Caldor in some respect, and was related to the training of *Healers*?” she offered tentatively, while suddenly noticing the platforms in the room and wondering what *else* she might be here for.

Lili noticed that, and suggested a change of venue.

“My Ladies, might we adjourn to the conference room? Jia, we still have refreshments available, do we not?” she asked, while turning to Jia at that last.

Jia quickly nodded and left the room, prompting all of them to follow along slowly.

‘*Well done, Liling*’ Xue sent to her, and Lili bowed her head slightly.

They shifted over two compartments, where a large table surrounded by chairs was found, along with an unoccupied desk. The room’s sideboards held water, juices, and cups, and all could feel it when Dandan’s anxiety level dropped to normal – for the *current* conditions.

They got comfortable while Jia delivered cups of water for each of them, leaving the juices alone for the time being.

Once settled, Xue continued.

“Dandan, over the years we’ve discovered that Lord Caldor’s involvement with an apparently random selection of women has had the interesting side effect of allowing them to become more acceptable for Healer training,” she said. “So much so, that a new Healer Cluster needed to be fostered out on Farman.”

This took less than a second for Dandan to register.

“Farman...? *He’s* the reason Farman was built?” Dandan had heard *rumors*, but now it looked like they’d had a basis of *truth* behind them.

“In a word ... yes,” Xue confirmed for her. “Lord Caldor’s unusual condition – the first *male* Senior in nearly ten-thousand years – had repercussions that had not been expected.”

She’d left out other repercussions, but Dandan didn’t need to hear about ten-thousand years of arguments surrounding the loss of their original *sixth* member, Elder Yanmei, whose storied past with the Kantite founder of the Commonwealth had led them down this path from the beginning. At least *he’d* never left a trail of rogue Healers in his wake – none that they’d ever *discovered*, that is.

“It appears that when Lord Caldor had relations with a woman, and subsequently expended himself within her while supplying the Gift of Elder Liling at the same time, a most unusual change occurred within the victim’s genetic structure that allowed her to become more...” Xue paused for a moment, lost for an appropriate description.

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"They became better Healers?" Dandan offered while looking around at their faces.

"Yes... Even if they weren't ones *beforehand*," she agreed while nodding slowly.

"Oh... Oh my..."

"*Exactly*," Rong muttered sourly, while getting a surprised look from Dandan.

"It was not exactly a *bad* thing," Daiyu quickly interjected. "The Gods know, Healers are sorely needed to manage our expanding responsibilities."

Wen tried to defuse the sudden flurry of silent anger.

"The fact remains that we've learned Healer abilities can be *enhanced*," Wen said quietly, "And even introduced where none had existed *beforehand*."

"It's just that the mechanism for doing so has remained elusive – so far," Xue stated neutrally, hoping to quell both Ju and Rong from any further outbursts.

"And you don't know if Lord Caldor ... he might not become well again?" Dandan asked quietly, it now becoming obvious that Lady Tal's efforts at keeping certain secrets seemed to be holding.

For Dandan's benefit, Jia took the opportunity to continue the official "Truth" regarding Lord Caldor's situation.

"Lord Caldor had suffered grievous injuries from Vanir rebels that prevented his Healing by *traditional* means," she brought up quietly. "The chemical exposure to his body had blocked any efforts to repair it. Senior Tal *herself* was unable to Heal even simple bodily wounds, let alone internal injuries. We were eventually able to neutralize many of the problems, but by *that* time..." Jia stopped, finally settling for a half-hearted shrug while the silence widened.

She wasn't about to mention the particularly damning injury to Lord Caldor's *neck*.

"But that discussion is for another time," Ju finally stated. "What we need right now is your evaluation of Milsie Blanaid. I understand she has begun Healer training with your staff?"

"I ... umm, yes. She is *very* early into the training," she said, not expanding on more than that. "My staff are taking turns working with her, and she is responding as one might expect ... as a beginning Healer."

“But without any *native* talent?” Lili asked while seeing confusion in Dandan’s eyes.

“Yes. She is like a raw beginner. She is, of course, *female*, so she has *that* in her favor, but I’ve seen nothing special about her – except for her drive.”

“You’ve examined her *personally*?” Ju asked.

“Oh yes. She is *very* eager to learn. It’s just that it is taking longer than someone *born* to it,” Dandan asserted, which caused a general silence in the room.

“Elder Liling?” Ju asked quietly, waiting to see if she would get the proper response.

“Healers are *created* – not *born*,” Lili said quietly, hoping the stories told by Diane and Amy held the truth they were looking for here.

She watched as Ju’s eyes narrowed in her direction, before she nodded ever so slightly.

“Just so,” she finally muttered, before turning back to Lady Qiaolian with another question on her mind. “Dandan, I understand the Drecks women and their two men have *also* received a bit of training?”

“Yes, my Lady. Her adopted sons had need of wives, and the women were trained by Lady Tal after they were first ... *acquired*? My understanding is that Lady Tal spent *many* years teaching her adopted sons, but the women took very little—” she stopped, now thinking of their earlier conversation.

“Yes. Two *more* victims of Lord Caldar,” Rong muttered quietly, triggering disapproving frowns from both Wen and Daiyu.

“And Lady Dorcas,” Lili said sternly, starting to get tired of Rong’s attitude. “She was a food girl sent along as a celebratory meal for a Drecks assassination squad. Lord Caldar *eliminated* the squad, and recovered Dorcas. Sometime during her stay on Earth, he apparently offered the girl *comfort*,” she said somewhat smugly, sharing that attitude with everyone in the room, before adding, “For the last *several* years, Lady Dorcas and her husband have been managing a colony planet of both Drecks *and* human standards on the far side of Commonwealth territory.”

The silence stretched, both Dandan and Jia, now fitting the pieces together that linked Lord Calder with the Demon’s Realm, while the Elders already knew this from the moment Ai had become involved. Finally...



## An Unfortunate Decision

“How ... how did Lady Tal teach the Drecks *men*?” Dandan asked. “Do they ... are they receptive in their *minds* for such training?”

“We understand it took *decades*,” Xue suggested quietly, “But just a few months for the women.”

“My understanding is that Sai used the *old* ways to teach, not being able to help them internally,” Lili offered helpfully, but decided not to mention what *else* she knew about the Drecks.

Dandan looked confused, before worry started to radiate from her.

“Elder Kita *already* knew about the Drecks men, Dandan,” Ju said. “She approved. Besides, it took a *very* long time.”

*‘Liling, would you please ask Sai to join us’* Ju asked her silently while glancing at the compartment’s timer before turning back to Dandan.

“Lady Qiaolian, please accept our apologies for keeping you this late,” she said. “Thank you answering our questions. Have a pleasant supper.”

Summarily dismissed, Dandan rose, bowed, found her way out the door, and wandered down the corridor – refusing to guess the relative levels of authority in the room she’d just left, while making her way to the commons for the evening meal.

### ***In Petrus’ Compartment***

*‘Sai, please join us in the Medical Wing’* Lili called out to her. *‘There are questions that need answers’*

*‘I hear and obey, my Elder’* Sai sent back, then looked up at the timer once again... Noon plus six.

*‘At least Dandan didn’t have to stay too long,’* she thought to herself, before tossing back the last of the cup.

With a shake of her head, she stood up and rinsed out the cup, before putting it and the bottle away.

A last glance around the room showed everything in acceptable condition. Then she reached out to Déjà, finding her still with the girls in Dorcas’ compartment, and viewing very *colorful* moving images of impossible creatures pretending to act like humans – no doubt something from Ronnie’s *vast* collection of visual entertainment.

With a reluctant shrug of her shoulders, she headed out the door and made her way towards the Medical Wing.

### ***In the Medical Conference Room***

“The thought intrigues us, Lili,” Ju said, dropping from formal to familiar now that they were alone with Jia. “If the specific genetic

markers that enhance a woman's aptitude for Healing could be *identified*, then perhaps a serum could be developed that would widen the available Healer pool."

"But you said..."

"*Specific* markers, Lili, other than those indicating a more *familial* relationship with Lord Caldor," Rong said stiffly.

"Rong, a Clan *already* has the majority of their hereditary gene pool in dominance," Xue reminded her. "There are common links between *all* the Clans on Cletus. Lord Caldor's contribution seems to include a tiny portion of these ... probably from his father."

"Well ... that would be *expected*, would it not?" Lili asked. "His *mother* was from Earth, but his father was borne of Cletus and Kantite stock."

"Yes," Rong said, "But simple exposure to Lord Caldor doesn't seem to have any affect on women. Your '*Gift*' seems to be the key that *activates* whatever Lord Caldor provided these women!"

"Yes, Lili. If we could duplicate the effect, then we wouldn't suffer with our current limitations," Ju stated, almost frowning in frustration when Jia raised her hand.

"But... But *certainly*, my Ladies, once you put Lord Caldor back together again, you should be able to determine *exactly*—"

The glare from Rong effectively cut off Jia's words.

### ***At the Entry to the Medical Wing***

Sai arrived outside the corridor door, passing a group of guardsmen idly standing by while their charges were somewhere inside. At the door, one of the guardsmen bowed politely, along with revealing a slight grimace on his face, before opening the door for her.

"Thank you," she murmured, then passed through the door, while wondering what *he* already knew that *she* was soon going to face.

After the door closed, she'd intended to extend herself and feel where Lili was, but instead discovered the argument already in progress gave adequate directions to her destination. Steeling her nerves, she reluctantly paced towards the sounds of increasingly loud voices, while hoping for the best.

### ***With the Guards***

Lael was almost sweating, his grimace threatening to become a permanent fixture on his face. Where in the *hell* was...

## An Unfortunate Decision

“Lael! I *got it! Go!*” Casmir called out from the corridor adjacent to him, and saw the sudden relief wash over his companion’s face.

Lael passed him in an awkward rush, walking quickly, but very carefully, before ducking into the closest unassigned compartment. Casmir assumed his watch post, while sharing silent security gestures with the other guardsmen.

One of the Elder’s guardsmen looked at Casmir, and wondered if there was a problem aboard the *Kraken* they should be aware of – *especially* considering the sounds coming out of that still-open door. Before he could speak, Casmir cleared it up for him.

“Right now, I’d say he’s wishing he’d *never* bet me he could eat a typical Drecks dinner,” he explained. “It’s not that bad, but ... well, it’s a *lot* of food.”

“Drecks? You got *Drecks* on board?”

Casmir gave him a blank stare for a moment, then remembered how surprised he’d been when he’d shipped back with Lady Trenka and her two “special” passengers. Then he launched into a more detailed explanation of the *Kraken*’s current mission, which included mention of the special crew and passengers they’d be likely to catch sight of during their visit – all the while being serenaded by muted explosive sounds coming from the direction of Lael’s panicked departure.

### *The Bridge*

Petrus was kicking back on the bridge. Since he was waiting for Sai to survive her visit with the Cletus visitors, he was filling in while Gallus had supper. The fact that she’d used ship’s coms to advise him of her delay told him she was being even *more* circumspect than before.

He counted himself lucky. There was no particular situation he could think of where *his* presence would be needed down in the medical spaces. The only concern he had was if they were able to get the boss back together – and then hopefully convince him to *retire* afterwards.

He knew Ronnie would probably fight retirement, though. Maybe the prospect of returning to reclamations would appeal to him? He seemed to really enjoy it – especially during the time he’d worked down on Earth. The stories he’d told about it would seem to say so, anyway. Maybe he’d take a spot at the Demon’s Realm? Ronnie had never actually been out there, leaving that up to his brother and his wife. He thought back to the one time *he’d* visited it...

The world was pretty nice, with a good mix of land and water. The colony planners had said it’d been cooking for the better part of four centuries, and it certainly looked like it; with clean skies, fresh air, *lots* of

plants, and a relatively mild temperature band that spanned nearly eight thousand kilometers wide from pole to pole. The best part for him was being *personally* greeted by many former guests of the Demon – having been extracted by them from the Hegemony, by either force or invitation.

Both Nathan and Dorcas assured him complications had been kept to a minimum, and told him the Commonwealth social engineers had worked overtime in establishing a reasonably mixed-race environment that had minimal issues with conflict. For sure, there were still some rough spots to be worked out, but that was normal in any society. The fact that *everyone* was off the dinner table seemed to make the biggest difference, though...

He let out a sigh, then checked the station-keeping status once again.

They were still locked over a specific spot above Cletus, although *way* further away from it – just for safety – and still cloaked. Ships status showed nominal fuel load, waste storage *well* within tolerances, food stocks to last for several more months, and enough ships poop to last *years*.

He settled back in the bridge chair and continued his vigil.

### ***Medical Wing***

Sai stood outside the compartment door, and listened as the argument continued.

“What you *fail* to see, Lili, is that Lord Caldar is *DANGEROUS!*” Rong shouted.

“Not so dangerous that he *DIDN’T* start a war with the *DRECKS!*” Lili shouted back. “And now we know the *TRUE* parties responsible for pointing the Dreckes at *US!*”

“*LADIES!*” Xue shouted loudly, before continuing a little more calmly in the ensuing silence. “Ladies, this is *not* the way to discuss issues affecting the Commonwealth.”

Wen took the opportunity of this break to offer her comments.

“Regardless of how we *perceive* Lord Caldar, we must look at his *actions*, and not just his potential for destruction,” she suggested gently. “Lord Caldar is merely a man, and can be managed as such.”

“Kita should have *sanctioned* him when she was still *alive*,” Rong muttered angrily, then turned away.

“Fighting among ourselves will accomplish *nothing*,” Daiyu said, a silent member of the party up until now. “Everyone here can agree the situation has changed *significantly* compared to what it was ten thousand years ago.”

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“Yes,” Ju muttered furiously. “Yanmei is *DEAD* because she fell in love with that ... that *Kantite!*”

Rong snapped around and nodded her head in agreement.

“*YES!* It was *Aquintus* who started it all!” she trilled. “If not for *him*, then we’d *all be—*”

“Dead,” Xue stated calmly, causing all eyes to look to her.

“You know it’s true,” she continued softly. “If left unchecked, the Kantites would have imploded once again – taking us, and the *rest* of the Commonwealth, with them.” She looked at them while nodding silently.

“By accepting *our* responsibilities, we’ve managed the Kantites, and grown in strength ourselves. It was through Aquintus that the Visions were gifted back to *us* – and *only* because Yanmei gave him added gifts to help him manage himself and those around him. It was a *terrible* loss when Yanmei left us. I miss her still, but that does not mean we have followed a false path all these centuries.”

The silence after Xue’s speech continued for several seconds, long enough for Sai to make herself known.

“My Ladies ... my *Elders*,” she said quietly. “I served the office of the Elder during Elder Kita’s rule, and during Ai’s ascension. There were many things that... Things did not seem well in hand for *either* Elder.”

That comment got dark stares from Ju and Rong, but thoughtful looks from Wen and Daiyu, while Xue offered more calming words.

“Lady Tal, we recognized the problems Elder Kita had to endure. Her ascension was very difficult for her. When the previous Elder passed due to an *accident*, and really, given access to the *Visions*, we do not understand how that could have *possibly...*” Xue paused for a moment, before shifting back on track. “At the time of her ascension, Kita was already a much older member of the Elder’s staff on Kantor. The fact that the Visions had automatically passed to her, meant she was the new Elder ... as was already established by precedent. At least she was able to affect a somewhat *normal* transfer to Ai in her later years.”

“Brilliant, that,” Rong snorted. “Kita held the post for a *millennium*, yet Ai for just a–”

“We all agreed upon her ascension, Rong,” Xue reminded her softly, getting a glare back but no further arguments from her.

“My Elders,” Lili added gently, “In the time of Kita and Ai, there were forces at work that eluded even the *Visions*. Ronnie never saw the Vanir at all, or that *any* outside forces were at work against us, other than the Drecks.”

“Lord *Caldar* used the Visions, *too?*” Ju would have sputtered, but she was too ladylike to do so. Meanwhile, Lili just nodded sedately.

“Ronnie also had *suspicions*,” Sai added quietly. “When we first shipped out with him, it was like putting a huge puzzle together with but one color in it ... mostly black. It wasn’t until he found Lord Gagsa when things started falling into place.”

“Yes,” Ju muttered, “Just about the time Ai started losing her *mind!*”

Silence filled the space while tempers seemed ready to flare again.

Lili couldn’t bring herself to explain *how* Ai had lost her mind, but could supply mitigating supposition about it by falling on her own sword.

“My Elders, Ai had *already* cursed Ronnie with the geas of his dead father, and he struggled with it greatly. It was *most* of the reason the Healer Cluster at Farman exists to this day. He managed to mitigate its effects while on Earth ... eventually developing a working relationship with it, if you will. I truly did not understand all the ramifications of that development, but it was a very difficult time for Ai, and ... and I felt she would have taken it negatively if she knew he’d been relieved of *part* of his burden.”

She felt interest from Daiyu, Wen, and Xue, but anger from both Ju and Rong, before going on.

“I told Ronnie... I *ordered* him to behave as if the geas still held sway,” she continued. “I felt Ai needed the reassurance that he was *still* under its influence.”

“Oh, he *was*, Lili,” Sai spoke up, and turned to face those seven heads, which turned in her direction. “He used to bitch about the arguments he’d have with his ‘inner demon’ as he called it, and how much trouble it was giving him. And you could *see* it, too. When things got busy, he got *real* business-like – *more* than when he was the Madman of the Fringe. I think that’s when the Demon took over ... or helped him out. Like when he saved Petrus from the Kee. Ronnie didn’t remember killing all those Kee before pulling Petrus out of that building.”

“Yes. I told him to be aloof and arrogant – just as Ai expected him to be,” Lili agreed. “It allowed him to continue with his task, and find out what’s *really* been going on all these centuries.”

“But ... the man is *dangerous!*” Ju pressed. “*He is uncontrollable!*”

“He followed *my* orders well enough,” Lili said calmly, while following Xue’s lead by trying to defuse the environment.

After several more seconds, Ju turned to Sai while switching subjects almost as an afterthought.

## An Unfortunate Decision

“Lady Tal ... you have adopted Dreck's citizens as your own sons,” she stated calmly. “Kita kept us advised, of course, but we'd like to hear from you how you'd managed this ... and also how you'd taught them the basics of Healing.”

Sai smiled. She was *proud* of her boys, and talking about them was something she enjoyed.

### *Vanir Quarters*

“I wonder ... did they bring their *own* food?”

Samuel was relaxing in their shared nest, and sipping lightly from a cup of fruit juice while contemplating their mysterious Senior visitors from Cletus. So far, no one he'd spoken to had seen evidence of them, other than the guardsmen scattered in random locations along the access route to the new Medical Wing.

“My Samuel, it is nothing of our concern,” Sally assured him. “They are Seniors among the Healers of Cletus – very *advanced* Seniors, and most skilled. Hopefully, they'll be able to help return Ronnie to health.”

She left out any comments about simply putting him back together.

“Well, *I*, for one, choose to remain hopeful their treatment will be successful,” he shared with her. “I like Ronnie, and I miss the companionship we've shared during our short time aboard his ship.”

“Samuel, do you truly miss all the *chaos* that follows him around?” she chided him gently.

“Sally...” He paused with a hissing sigh. “Ronnie has given us a new reality, and guidance towards a healthier future. Treachery has been rooted out of the Capitol, the Prime is now secure, and we're in the midst of expanding onto fresh, *clean* worlds where our people can finally *grow* as a society.”

She looked down and smiled at him lovingly while running her tongue over her teeth as she thought of the evening's play they'd planned. They'd even gone so far as to dining privately in their quarters to quietly share the end of the day together. She finished her own cup, then curled down next to him, letting his arms wrap around her snugly.

“You are correct, my Samuel,” she murmured. “Change is upon us, and we must do our best to make sure we stay on the *true* path.”

She relaxed in his arms, knowing the trials before them had yet to really begin – starting with an interview with these most *senior* of Seniors that had come aboard that day. She would meet with them ... perhaps tomorrow ... or the next day?

Her thoughts were washed away when his hands began stroking along her abdomen, before finally reaching a spot that had become *very* familiar territory to him over the last several months.

### ***The Commons***

Now nearing Midnight minus five point five, the commons was still not particularly crowded yet.

Despite the fact that their visitors had sequestered themselves near the new Medical Wing, very few of them had actually been seen – other than the new guardsmen, who wore different uniforms.

Certain areas around those corridors were still manned by ships guardsmen, but for the most part, the restrictions were very limited, and didn't affect normal operations by much.

The ongoing watch began to trickle in as they came to eat before assuming their posts. Later on, the ships staff and crew would be arriving by ones and twos for the evening meal.

Conversations were subdued and avoided any comments about their guests. Even an *inkling* about the seniority of the visitors precluded such curiosity – certainly of the *verbal* variety.

This is what Petrus faced when he arrived to grab a bite to eat before heading back to his compartment. He was greeted quietly by his crew, and appreciated that no one asked him anything regarding their guests.

Getting a lightly populated tray, he thanked the server, then sat down to eat, while wondering if his wife would survive the inquisition.

### ***In the Medical Wing***

"Thank you, Sai. That was most enlightening."

Xue's smile was genuine, having finally heard in *person* the thinking and emotions behind her decision to take in two homeless Drecks children and raise them as her own. The fact that she'd raised them as if they were *born* on Cletus was not surprising.

The fact that – until just *recently* – they'd maintained a *physical* relationship with her was a surprise she'd found intriguing, but kept that to herself.

"Sai, you are to be commended on the sincerity of your heart," Ju told her. "You rescued two children of our nominal enemy, and raised them to be honorable men in service to the Commonwealth ... or in your case, in service directly to *you*? Endo and Gallus ... ne Sai *Tal*?"

Sai flushed a tiny shade of pink, but she'd had plenty of time to justify her thinking.



## An Unfortunate Decision

“Forgive me, my Lady. The Drecks typically do not have more than a given name, and that, only if they are named by their Pack Master. Many Drecks never receive a name at all, other than being related to a particular pack. Endo and Gallus were nameless when I found them, and I asked them what they would like to be called. They each chose a name they liked, and I thought that was it.”

She paused to look at each of them, seeing patience in their eyes, before she continued.

“I later realized they would need an association with me, as there *were* no Drecks in our society, and certainly no place for *them* in our society as well. I could not associate them with Cletus, or any other planet, but it was not unheard of to accept *direct* fealty from a person – if for no other reason than there was nowhere else for that person to be. When they reached the age of sixteen, Standard, I swore them to me personally. They have accepted service with me ever since, which again, there really was no other place in our society for them to be. I have not *forced* them to stay with me, but I have benefited from their service. Through me, they have served the Commonwealth as well.”

“And you found them wives, as any good mother would do,” Daiyu commended her.

“Ahh, actually that was Lord *Caldar’s* doing. When I accepted a position on his ship–”

“As a *spy* for Elder Ai?” Ju asked lightly.

“Yes. That was my mission. Ron... Lord Caldar told me I was holding them back, and it was time for them to grow up. I eventually saw the wisdom of his suggestion, and finally accepted the inevitable. I stopped delaying their aging. On Eke, Lord Caldar bargained with Lord Gagsa to find girls for my boys, and that’s how we got Edna and Gaia. Ronnie formally named them, then bonded them to Endo and Gallus.”

“He ... he *bargained* for them?” Rong asked her incredulously, leaving the question hanging there in silence for several moments. Finally...

“Yes. Ronnie traded several transports of Earth meat for them, and ... and a few other ... things...”

Sai’s voice faded at the end when she realized what she’d walked herself into. She looked away, wondering if the Elders realized just *what* Ronnie had asked her to do for Lord Gagsa.

“I wonder if these ‘things’ were *omitted* from your reports to Ai?” Ju mused aloud, while enjoying the stress on Sai’s brow as the seconds ticked by.

Seeing she was struggling with the issue, Lili stepped in and told the tale.

“My Ladies, Ronnie used his power and influence to turn a fallen Drecks Lord *against* the Master Pack of the Hegemony. The ex-Master Pack leader’s head is *still* hanging from a pike in the Capitol city of Zarox.” Lili’s eyes flashed as she warmed to the occasion.

“By the simple application of common Healer techniques, Ronnie and Sai restored Lord Gagsa’s eyesight and his arm. It was only appropriate, as Ronnie had taken *both* from him years earlier. He had Sai create Healers out of a few Drecks women, one of whom became bonded to his son, Torga. Lord Gagsa *fostered* Torga to Lord Caldor for safekeeping while he was bringing down the Master Pack. To top it off, Ronnie also gave him the equivalent of ten years, Standard, from his *own* life force.”

“Life force he stole from *comfort girls* at the *Fringe!*” Ju pointed out angrily.

“Actually, he *paid* for it ... *handsomely*. Six months from each girl ... a *year* or two in a few cases. And these are the *same* girls who ended up at the Farman Healer Cluster – all of the girls both Gifted and *well*-paid for their services.” Lili almost tittered at their shocked expressions. “Of *all* things, Sai tracked them down by tracing the *credit transfers* from Ronnie’s *household accounts!*”

Ju simmered, seeing that Lili was *well* aware of her brother-in-law’s dance along the edge of the blade. She was also aware of the incident at the Vanir installation, but that investigation seemed to point culpability more towards the Vanir than Lord Caldor, or so Lady Trenka had determined.

Lili wasn’t done, however.

“My Ladies, it might be obvious to state, but if Lord Caldor were restored, then it would just be a simple matter to ask questions of him *directly*, rather than conjecture as to his motives, would it not?” Lili was taking a chance here, already knowing Ju and Rong were against it, but throwing it back at them anyway.

Rong was ready to leap out of her seat, but Xue made the effort to contain her outburst.

“That issue remains to be discussed, Lili, but this is not the venue for it,” she said politely, while sparing a glance at both Ju and Rong, before turning back to Sai.

“Lady Tal, we are interested in your girl, Mistress Déjà ... *also* ne Sai Tal?”

## An Unfortunate Decision

Sai suppressed the majority of her sigh and presented the simple truth.

“It seemed expedient at the time, my Ladies,” she admitted quietly. “We found her... Actually one of my *boys* found her, then nearly got *eaten* by her when he opened his mouth to say hello.”

Xue settled back in her chair, looking forward to learning how a wild carnivorous genetic experiment ended up becoming a semi-talented Healer, who became impregnated by a half-breed Kantite Lordling from the Imperial household ... one who just happened to be the *only* male Senior to occur in nearly ten-thousand *years*.

It just *had* to be a fascinating tale.

### *Dorcas' Compartment*

It was almost Midnight minus five point two, and Dorcas was just getting up to look in on the girls, when Sai reached out to her. Déjà was wanted in the Medical Wing. Her lips thinned at the possible reasons for her being summoned this late, but she obeyed her instructions, and knocked on Rose's door before opening it.

“Déjà, your mother has requested that you join them in the Medical Wing.”

“Thank you, Lady Dorcas. Please let Mother know I am on my way,” she said, then got up and prepared to leave her friends.

Seeing her compliance, Dorcas nodded and smiled, before returning to the other room while the girls said their goodbyes.

“Déjà ... wait,” Jaiying said quietly, all the while thinking of what she suspected was coming for her. “The visitors will probably have some very simple questions to ask you, and you should answer them just as simply.”

“Yes, Déjà,” Rose agreed with her. “You probably shouldn't say too much about ... all of *us*.”

As Déjà looked at the two of them, Jaiying reached into her mind and made a few, slight adjustments.

“They'll probably ask you how you changed so much, so quickly,” Jaiying suggested. “Just tell them the truth – you were helping my Mother with Sally, and you cleaned up some of Grandfather's leftovers.”

Déjà stared at her, then tilted her head quizzically.

“That ... that's just what happened. *You* know that. There was some of Ronnie left over, and I didn't want it to go to waste, so I licked it up while he was still giving the Gift to Sally. That made *her* change, too.”

Jaiying nodded her head in agreement, then stood and hugged her big friend goodbye. After Déjà left the room, Rose turned and looked at her accusingly, her feelings easily felt by her cousin.

"I'll give it *back*," Jaiying said in exasperation. "She just doesn't need to be *burdened* with it right now. Besides, I don't trust the Elders."

Rose frowned, before reluctantly nodding in agreement. They needed to maintain secrecy, and the *last* thing they needed was uncontrollable honesty coming out of Déjà; something that was becoming *habitual* since her change.

### ***Medical Wing***

Ju looked to the others, and they all nodded in agreement – it was time to remove themselves to more comfortable quarters and find something to eat.

"Liling, I believe we've spent enough time in here," Ju spoke for all of them. "Let us refresh ourselves in our assigned quarters, and see about the evening meal."

"But ... *Déjà*. You've requested Déjà to—" Sai was cut off as Ju continued.

"Have her redirected to our quarters, Sai. I understand she is under a somewhat stressful situation. Meeting us in quarters would probably be kinder to her." Ju turned her attention to Lili and Jia, saying, "Ladies, please accompany us for a little while longer. I might have need of your observations about our young Healer."

At that, the Elders all stood and filed out of the conference room, followed by Sai, Lili, and Jia. Sai caught up with Ju to escort them to their quarters, while Lili stayed behind the group, silently hoping the ships stewards had made adequate preparations for their visitors.

She had no idea if the Elders had ever taken to space on board a combat vessel before and was worried about their acceptance of their assigned accommodations. As Sai led them away, Jia stayed behind to redirect Déjà to the proper compartment when she arrived.

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Just as he'd been instructed, Déjà's guardsman led her directly to the new Medical Wing, then stood by while Lady Huan redirected their path to the visitor's quarters. It didn't take a whole lot of guesswork to figure out the corridor lined with guardsmen they'd just entered was the destination they sought.

The proof was Lady Tal just coming out of a compartment door and turning to face the arriving party of three.

An Unfortunate Decision

“Déjà, how are you feeling? Have you had supper yet?”

“Not yet, Mother, but I am well. We ... Rose, Jaiying, and I, were watching presentations from the ships library. We were planning to eat, but Lady Dorcas said I was to come here.” She stopped and looked at all the guardsmen standing along one wall of the corridor.

“Mother ... is everything all right?”

Sai stifled a laugh, and hugged her little girl.

“Everything is *fine*, my girl. Come inside and meet the Ladies. They have a few questions for you.”

Déjà stepped to the door, but paused, looking at the mix of both younger and older Healers seated within. Lili stepped forward and waved her in, and with Sai’s gentle prodding, Déjà walked in, then stopped and bowed deeply. Pausing for the appropriate length of time, she straightened up and raised her left hand, fingers spread, and introduced herself.

“Déjà ne Lady Sai Tal,” she said softly, her voice clear but muted in front of these strangers. She was startled when Lili gave out a quiet titter from beside her.

“Child! These are *family*,” Lili told her brightly. “Ladies, I present to you Mistress Déjà sai Caldarous se Kee ne Lady Sai Tal,” she said, rendering her new name and title proudly.

As this conversation was happening, the seated Elders were looking through Déjà from top to bottom, and aside from a few anomalies, finding very little to indicate that standing before them was a genetically mutated human being – certainly finding nothing they’d *expected* to see from the detailed physiology reports of Kee.

Lili contained her mirth at the confusion coming from a few of the Elders present.

“Déjà, seated before you on the left is Senior Ju. To her left is Senior Rong. In the middle is Senior Xue.” When Lili gestured indirectly towards Xue, Déjà finally saw a smile from one of the visitors. “On *her* left is Senior Daiyu, and finally we have Senior Wen. They are all from an advisory council on Cletus,” she finished, thus leaving *which* council they represented sufficiently vague.

As the oldest looking Senior present, Xue stood to greet Déjà personally.

“Mistress Déjà, it is so very nice to finally *meet* you,” she said warmly, then leaned in to give her a hug.

Lili almost missed it when Xue's millennia of practice came into play. Xue had already extended through Déjà and examined the unborn children within her – in *detail*. Lili could see the smile form on her face, just before she backed away from the young Healer.

“Oh, and your babies are so *beautiful*! But how strange that one is *older* than the other? Is that *common* among the Kee?” she asked her politely, while backing away and finding her seat blindly.

She glanced at Lili and silently asked for a chair for their young guest. As Déjà was seated, she finally caught up to the question put before her.

“My Lady, I – I don't really know how my ... how the Kee have their babies,” she stammered out. “I mean, I did not know that babies could be ... made like this? Mother said I was taken from Kee when I was very young.”

Xue looked to Sai, who offered up a shrug.

“Truthfully, Ronnie and Petrus didn't study their society all that much,” she said. “Just enough to take advantage of their female's aggressive tendencies to use them as a weapon.” She looked over to Lili and got a nod in response.

“The research team we sent to Kee last year had to work *very* carefully,” Lili explained. “They only observed single births, and the children they produced were ready to breed in as little as two weeks.”

“Two *weeks*!” Ju blurted out, almost rising from her seat.

“Yes,” she confirmed. “And their gestation runs to just over four months, Standard.” Heads turned to look at Déjà, and Lili could almost see the numbers being added up.

“We believe Déjà has perhaps two more months left to her pregnancy – if this is the limit to her changes,” she added quietly.

Ju and Rong stared at her, then turned to look at Déjà again.

“Mistress Déjà, I am so very sorry for what that rude man did to you,” Rong told her sympathetically. “To have your life ruined for you at such a young age must be terrible.”

Lili saw Sai's hackles begin to rise, but Déjà's head tilted in confusion.

“My Lady? My life is now *fulfilled*! I am carrying children I could *never* have had before, and ... and now I am *Healer*... After a fashion...”

Ju stood up and ran a finger along her bare arm, splitting it open and letting the blood run down her hand to drip onto the floor. She stepped over to Déjà and offered her injured arm to her.

An Unfortunate Decision

“Healer, I am injured. Please Heal me,” she asked, now putting her to the test.

Déjà blinked, before reaching out to wrap a hand around the cut. She closed her eyes and called the energy, just as Mother had taught her. Her hand began to glow, and the wound sealed itself, the edges knitting together neatly and leaving no visible scar after she removed her hand.

Ju looked at her arm, then twisted around to show Rong and the rest of the Elders. Rong stood up and reached out for it, running her hand along where the cut used to be, and seeing within to detect the quality of the work. She found it to be the equivalent of someone *well* surpassing the basics they’d expected of her.

“You surprise us, Déjà,” Rong muttered. “Who taught you how to do this?”

“My – my Mother,” she stammered. “She taught us how to perform basic Healing like this ... me and my brothers.”

All eyes fell on Sai.

“Well, it took *years!*” she said in exasperation. “I couldn’t read Drecks, and I had to go back to the *old* ways. It was the same with my girl.”

“We wondered about that,” Xue murmured. “We could not feel the girl, although we seem to hear an echo now?” Sai nodded reluctantly, while starting to get pissed that they were talking *around* her daughter.

“But that does not explain *this* level of skill from her,” Xue continued curiously. “Is there something we are *not* aware of?”

Déjà felt her Mother on the verge of lashing out, but she spoke up before Sai could get a word out.

“M-My Lady, I was assisting Lady Caldarous and Lord Caldar when they were... Lord Caldar was Gifting Lady Sally, the ... the *Vanir Healer?*”

She paused, waiting for recognition of that knowledge. When Xue slowly nodded, she continued.

“It involved taking some of Lord Caldar’s semen and applying it to Lady Sally. There was a bit left over, and – and I just thought that ... well, I was *hungry*, and it would be a shame to *waste* it, so I had the rest of it.”

The room remained silent as she looked around at the seated guests.

“I – I guess he was still Gifting Lady Sally, and ... and I must have been caught up with it, *too?*”

Xue’s eyes never left Déjà when she asked the question.

“Liling?”

“Yes, Xue,” she admitted. “It was an experiment I’d ordered Laisee to perform. I wanted to see if Ronnie could enhance a Vanir Healer, just as he could a human Healer. Déjà was just a happy coincidence.”

All eyes turned to Lili, the Elders remaining silent as they suddenly realized that – up until a few *months* ago – Déjà had been a pureblooded *Kee*. *Whatever* Lord Caldor had done to her, had made *significant* changes to her genetic profile – *much* more than all the Fringer girls he’d been with.

Ju let out an irritated hiss, followed by, “And a *Kee*, a *genetic construct* designed as a weapon to manage *other* life-forms – *SPECIFICALLY US* – is now considered a *SUITABLE* subject for advancement to *HEALER STATUS*? That incident with Caldor and Zickgraf would seem to indicate *OTHERWISE!*”

Lili didn’t have to see the light die in Déjà’s eyes. The anger radiating from Sai was palatable enough, and she stepped it to quell it.

“I beg your pardon, Ju, but that incident was unrelated to *this* situation,” Lili pointed out calmly. “In their native habitat, the *Kee* *do* express a violent lifestyle – but only as a necessity for *living*. With enough food and living space, the *Kee* have been found accommodating to civilization.”

“That’s true,” Sai added, with difficulty. “The Drecks have taken *Kee* female slaves into their packs with little problem.”

She left out the part about making sure they were kept well fed, before adding another benefit they offered.

“Native *Kee* are *particularly* attentive to physical pleasure – probably due to the nature of their societal structure, or perhaps better to say, survival technique?” Sai continued. “If you’ve read the reports, the *Kee* females exude enzymes that dampen physical reactions, along with producing emanations that excite both male *and* female humans. Déjà has used *both* in my service when handling prisoners or capturing specific targets. Although, since that experience with Lord Caldor, Déjà’s drive has been significantly dampened, and she’s lost some of her other *Kee*-normal abilities. She’s also grown a bit taller than Kiki, our other *Kee* crewperson.”

“*Other*? You have *two* *Kee* aboard?” Daiyu asked her. She’d read the reports, and the concept of controlling another person’s arousal had intrigued her at the time.

“Yes. When Ronnie bargained for my boys’ wives, we got Kiki and that transplanted girl, Auda, as a bonus.” Sai paused for a moment. “Lili, where’s Auda now?”

An Unfortunate Decision

“She’s still working with the sociologists. They think Midgard can be reintegrated within a decade or so. The Asgardians might take a little longer.”

“Oh, yes – the ancient ‘Gods’ from Caldar’s home system,” Rong muttered. “Too bad we did not know of *them* in time.”

Xue looked at her and frowned, then felt a thin thread of dismay coming from Déjà. She reached out and within, but could not read any of her thoughts. Wen noticed that, and reached out to the Kee Healer herself.

“Déjà, I’m sorry if we’ve upset you. As Lady Tal has certainly taught you, Healers and Seniors are responsible for the continued health of our clients. My understanding is that Lord Caldar is the father of your children?”

“Y-Yes... Ron ... Lord Caldar was my assignment before ... his accident,” she said quietly. “I kept him company as he became ... *older*? His body aged ... *a lot*... And he became dependent upon the pills Commander Woldron provided him with to manage his pain.”

“Did he not respond to your ... *enzymes*?” Daiyu asked this, now wondering how much the Kee had lost in her conversion.

“As I changed, I lost a lot of that. And I could not excite him as much,” she admitted. “But he was happy with my company, and we shared as much pleasure as we could. I am grateful he spent his time with me, and ... and that he gave me his children.”

Ju sneered at that, considering what kind of children that *half-breed* would produce with this *laboratory mistake*.

“Unfortunate, then, that Lord Caldar committed *SUICIDE* to avoid his *FURTHER RESPONSIBILITIES*!”

There was a shocked silence in the room, broken only by the keening rising out of Déjà’s throat. Sai lurched towards Ju, but was intercepted by Lili and redirected to Déjà, who was in the process of crumpling to the floor. Jia, who’d remained silent all this time, rushed forward to help Sai bring Déjà to her feet, before escorting both of them to the door. Once they’d left, she turned back to face Ju.

“She did not *KNOW*! *Very* few know of Caldar’s condition,” she said stiffly. “For *all* aboard, Caldar has had an ‘*ACCIDENT*’ for which the most *SENIOR* of Healers from Cletus have arrived to advise and assist with his difficult *RECOVERY*! *ELDER JU*! – if my time with Hifacious has taught me *ANYTHING*, it is that you lack *ANY* degree of *PROPER BEDSIDE MANNER*!”

She gave a very curt bow of her head, before turning on her heel and leaving the compartment of stunned Elders.

In Laisee's Compartment

Lili glanced at the room's timer – Midnight minus three – before reaching out to Kantor and feeling around. She was thankful at having found him awake and somewhat unencumbered at the moment.

'My Lord Husband, do you have a moment for me?' she asked sweetly.

'Certainly, my love' he immediately sent back, then raised one finger while apparently reading a passage on the data pad sitting on the arm of the throne. He picked it up to concentrate, not on it, but Lili's message.

'Everything has gone somewhat smoothly so far, my love. The advisors from Cletus are still reviewing the situation. The current impression is of mixed determination'

'Divisions within the advisory personnel?'

'There seem to be feelings and agendas that do not correspond to current reality. Ronnie has a few detractors in very high places that may be cause for concern – but hopefully may become mollified by the time a decision must be made'

'Then let us hope it becomes so, my darling wife. How is everyone else?'

Lili paused and leaned over to gently nuzzle Laisee for a moment, before letting out a tiny sigh of satisfaction, and returning to the conversation.

'Your daughter has become a talented student of mine – almost, but not quite, the equal of our Rondal. My brother and sister-in-law are stymied by the crass behavior of a disagreeable person who went out of her way to upset our new niece, Mistress Déjà sai Caldarous'

'Sai Caldarous? Ronnie adopted her?'

'Oh, it is much BETTER, my Husband. Ronnie has left her pregnant with his CHILDREN!'

Radatel sat frozen on his throne, only experience keeping any hint of expression off his face, despite the upcoming days and schedules rapidly flashing through his mind while contemplating yet *another* impending shutdown of government.

Then it caught up to him.

'Children? Twins?'

'Not really. They were conceived at least a few weeks or more apart. Something about the Kee, perhaps?'

An Unfortunate Decision

'No doubt, the researchers will be delighted at this new finding, Lili' he sent blandly, while letting a tiny sigh escape his lips. *'When will you be returning, my love?'*

'I suspect within a week – two at the outside. Is there any news for me?'

'Yes. Taldus has accepted a place at our table. He said his wife has allowed it to become so' Lili could feel the amusement rolling off his mind, before he added *'I suspect his Senior had more to do with it'*

'Just as I had instructed her' Lili assured him, sharing a silent titter with him at that pronouncement.

'I miss you, Lili. Come home to me safely, my love, and avoid irritating those who must remain nameless, if you please, for I would be lost without you'

'I hear ... and will take it under advisement, my Husband. Sweet dreams, my love'

'And for you, Lili'

Lili remained silent, but stayed present in his mind for a few moments more, until feeling his quiet acceptance of this new reality become suppressed when he turned to conduct further court business.

She was very proud of her husband, and admired the way he could compartmentalize the very trying issues that surrounded him daily.

She hoped her sister Wives were taking good care of him in her absence, then stifled a laugh. She knew her sister Wives were probably taking *advantage* of her absence to take advantage of *him*!

Kantor, The Elder's Office

Molara shuffled a few more physical notes that were never sent to deep storage on any of the memory banks available to the Tier One staff. In *certain* circumstances, the less any particular group of persons knew about a situation, the easier it would be to manage the release of that information later on – *if ever*.

In this instance, the information concerned a certain male Senior who had the remarkable tendency to create viable Healers by simply playing with them. Well, in point of fact, he needed to ejaculate within their bodies and apply the Gift of the First Wife to accomplish the task ... *somehow*. Exactly *how* the mechanics of it all worked remained to be determined, however.

Xiu and Fan strode in holding *another* pile of notes to be added to the binder – a somewhat curious throwback to much earlier days.

“Any word from Cletus?” Fan asked. She’d never considered the likelihood of *all* the Elders of the Elder’s Council being off-planet and in the same place at the same time.

It truly sounded like a recipe for disaster.

“No, but Xue sends her greetings, and reports the investigation is taking place on schedule,” Molara muttered, leaving out speculation that factions *within* the Council itself were hardly conducive to keeping *anything* on schedule.

“Well, let us remain hopeful that Lili–”

‘My Ladies, do you have a moment?’ They could all feel a mixture of both happiness and despair filtering through the ether to them.

‘Lili, we have all the time that you require’ Fan shared with her, and they listened silently while Lili brought them up to date on the situation aboard the *Kraken*.

The conversation was short and not particularly hopeful – with indications that the trip to Cletus was probably not going to be fruitful.

‘They may still change their minds, Lili’ Xiu shared hopefully.

‘One can only hope’ Lili didn’t have the humor left for even a trifle of a titter. *‘There is another finding... The genetic conversion of the Kee – Mistress Déjà – has progressed significantly. In addition to that, she carries two children of Lord Caldar’s’*

‘And no – not twins’ she quickly added. *‘Rather, she was impregnated on separate occasions by him – at least a week apart’*

‘Lili ... you’re SURE they’re his?’ Molara asked.

‘You’ve looked within him yourself. When we return in a few weeks, you’ll see for yourself. Sai is quite happy about the situation, which is strange in itself’

‘Not really, Lili’ Xiu sent to her. *‘She suffered a great loss when her granddaughters were taken from her. In this small way, Lord Caldar has replaced them. Gods grant that they be healthy’*

That gave Lili reason to pause in thought, which prompted *other* thoughts as what these new children would be capable of.

The current Senior Staff were not of Ronnie’s seed, but the boy and the girl?

She suddenly realized what she was thinking, and locked those elements down *hard*.

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'My Ladies, please forward the genetic information to Larl Riker for evaluation' Lili asked them. *'There will be additional reports coming from Commander Woldron that will be specific to Mistress Déjà. I will let you know if anything changes'*

'We hear and obey, Lili' Molara sent, then felt the tiny equivalent of a mental wave as Lili faded away.

"She does not appear overly happy," Fan said, while catching the eyes of her companions. "Nor is she surprised at the situation."

"The Council is divided," Xiu concluded. "Without the Visions to guide Lili, they don't necessarily trust the direction she wishes to go. They are old and fixed in their ways. They probably could not *conceive* of accepting a group such as our Tier One Staff to perform the minutiae of our positions."

"That sounds rather *harsh* coming from you, Xiu," Molara muttered, looking up from her papers, only to see eyes staring back at her. "Do not mistake my comments for contempt, but rather recognition of their reluctance to adapt to a changing environment," she explained calmly. "We've *all* felt their discord over the decades, and it is not conducive to a stable environment."

After a few moments of consideration, she got silent agreement from both Fan and Molara in return.

The Kraken, Midnight -2.5, the Elders' Wing

"If only Trenka had not been assigned to replace *Laisee!*" Ju fumed quietly.

"As Liling said, it was the most reasonable compromise after Laisee's daughter had been injured so severely," Xue murmured, otherwise ignoring the upset Elder sitting across from her.

"And that's *another* issue!" Rong exclaimed. "Why would *anyone* bring a child along on a diplomatic mission such as *that?*"

"In hindsight, perhaps it *was* a little premature to presume a level of safety existed for their mission," Wen mused. "After all, the head of their government *was* severely compromised until Lord Caldor and his crew resolved *that* little issue for them."

"Trenka's reports have been most enlightening, Rong," Daiyu stated quietly. "Lord Caldor's efforts to stabilize the Vanir society coincided very nicely with his efforts to reorganize the Hegemony – certainly enough for us to achieve a *peaceful* coexistence with them. That is what Elder Ai had requested of him, was it not?"

The atmosphere remained tense, while both Ju and Rong considered their words, so Xue decided to change the subject.

“The Vanir Healer... When would be a good time to interview her?”

“The *Vanir*? Must we, *really*?” Ju had been ignoring that issue, almost trying to forget it entirely. “It is just another *Healer* ... or so they *claim*. *Surely* you don’t think–”

“You didn’t feel Sai *Tal* today?” Xue asked her pointedly. “You didn’t feel *Déjà*? By the *Gods*, Laisee fairly *reeked* of power, yet you want us to ignore the *aliens* who’ve been trained as Healers? Who’ve been *enhanced* by Lord Caldor? Ju, I don’t know about *you*, but I’ve not been able to penetrate Liling, any further than the *Kee* girl!”

There was further silence until Daiyu spoke up again.

“The *Kee* ... it is my understanding they communicate using a form of rolling encryption,” she said. “And, like the Drecks, their mind-bands are in another location. It would be unlikely that anyone could understand them unless they were thinking in Standard ... or a language that any of us understood. Even *we* do not think in Standard. It is just what comes out when we need to *say* something in Standard.”

“I believe that is quite accurate,” Xue suggested. “I heard echoes from the girl’s mind, but nothing else.”

“Very *convenient*, that,” Rong muttered in frustration.

“I believe Trenka, too, was frustrated when she attempted to investigate Lord Caldor,” Wen said. “His treatment by the Vanir prevented her from reading his mind. She was quite upset about it.”

Ju seemed lost in thought, and it wasn’t going unnoticed. Xue extended a tiny bit, and felt memories of Elder Yanmei at the forefront of her mind.

“Ju, you dwell in the past. We all miss her, but the past is long gone.”

“No! I – I *felt* her today ... *strongly*! She is *with* us somehow!”

Even Rong turned to look at her after this outburst.

“Ju, it has been over ten *millennia*,” she murmured patiently. “Elder Yanmei lost the wager. By the Gods grace, she has gone on to her next journey by now.”

“*No!* You don’t *understand!* She was–” Ju stopped as they all stared at her. Even *she* could feel their worry and confusion over her behavior.

“I – I am sorry, my friends,” she continued contritely. “I forget the confusion that sometimes comes with transitioning to a new body. We are

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still settling in together. Her myths and my realities are still being resolved to each of our satisfaction.”

A few seconds later, everyone else let out a collective breath.

‘*Crisis averted*,’ Xue thought to herself, although she still wondered just a bit if what Ju had felt was true.

Since coming aboard the *Kraken*, there had been a heaviness around her that she’d kept to herself. Perhaps it was just the mix of human, Drecks, and Vanir Healers aboard, or perhaps it was the surprising strength of Sai Tal and Laisee that had set her aback.

Certainly, the little native *Kee* girl suddenly becoming a rather well accomplished Healer in just a few months would be a struggle to assimilate without further study and understanding.

She looked at the compartment timer, and considered the hour – closing in on Midnight minus two.

“Tomorrow, then,” she said cheerfully. “We’ll interview the Vanir Healer. Then perhaps we may review what to do about Lord Caldar?”

The relaxed mood seemed to dissipate, with its epicenter radiating from Ju.

“What they did to him is an *abomination*!” she said angrily, setting the tone as they started their bedtime rituals.

Somewhere Else...

*Faith stood quietly by Destiny’s side as they watched while Ronnie continued to doze in his current semi-reality. She heard Destiny snicker, then recognized the **precariousness** of the Ever Full Chalice that was wavering awkwardly where it rested between Ronnie’s thighs.*

*Destiny let out a virtual sigh. She knew that her **male** aspect would be upset with Ronnie if **this** reality became inundated with the fragrant beverage, as had a **previous** one. She reached down and took hold of Faith’s hand while twisting realities to seek out that unusual sensation she was feeling once again.*

*Once stabilized, she was caught by surprise when she felt some very **familiar** presences. The **faces** were all different, but the **feelings**...*

*“Ju? Rong? Wen? Daiyu? ... **Xue**?”*

*Destiny held her virtual breath when she realized these women were her sisters from her distant past. But **how**? ... **why**? The **how** came to her easily. The **why** she had to drag from her **counterpart**, Senior Xue.*

*She let go of Faith's hand so she could cover her face for a moment while assimilating this tidbit of **real** reality. Aquintus **must** have known about them, but he'd never even bothered to leave her a **note**...*

"Is there something wrong?" Faith asked her. "You seem to know these humans."

Destiny looked down at her, and let a wry smile grace her lips.

*"From my past ... my very **distant** past," she admitted. "It would appear that **consistency** became more important to them than **personal** growth," she added cryptically, then shook her head while taking hold of the little Fate and twisting them away from this version of reality.*

*They ended up back where Ronnie was still sleeping, but the cup between his thighs had finally slipped out and fallen to the ground. Fortunately, he was on **higher** ground, so he wouldn't drown – not **immediately**, of course. Although, he was **already** dead, but still – it was such a **waste** of that delightful beverage.*

*Destiny could still feel the curiosity of Faith, so she decided to spend some time with her while **she** was still in charge of her shared existence. She missed her sisters, and had no other person to talk with about them.*

*Besides, it's not as if Ronnie was in **that** much of a hurry to make up his mind.*

July 15, The Kraken, In Laisee's Compartment

Lili rolled over, but simply snuggled closer to Laisee; her hunger for both food and passion assuaged for the time being.

Glancing at the compartment timer, she saw the bottom of the morning was just beginning to turn, and there was plenty of time to enjoy her stepdaughter's company for an hour or two longer.

She missed this ... sharing quiet time with a loved and loving companion. She missed her husband, certainly, but she also missed her Spring Blossom ... and Mei-Mei, and Yin-Yin, and Diane, and Amy ... and even Maya. She let out a wistful sigh at the memory of her little Kita ... having lost her to Healer training and subsequent reassignment after Ronnie had "infected" her back on the platform.

*She opened her eyes, and with her head at breast level, reached out her tongue and gave Laisee's nipple a little lick, but got no reaction from her at all. She appeared to be still sleeping off the effects of the very *early* morning application of the Gift. It had been well worth it, though...*

*She'd arrived at Laisee's compartment the night before, and later suggested that a *personal* lesson in the Gift might be appropriate, since Laisee had never experienced it from her before. She'd taught her*

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through *several* applications of it, then lay back while Laisee applied the Gift to *her* in return. Those two hours caught up to them shortly after Midnight, when they both shuffled into the facilities to wash each other before falling back into bed and snuggling in each others arms.

It was Lili who'd awakened several hours later and began induction of the Gift once again, this time latching on and draining Laisee of whatever milk she had left over from the night before. After exhausting the poor girl, she let her fall asleep, while pondering what the Elders intended to do. That had lasted all of about ten minutes until she found herself dropping off again...

Now that she was awake, she was considering whether to get up or not when she became aware of a soft intrusion.

'Liling ... do you have a moment, please?' Xue's gentle call came to her.

'Ummm? Certainly, my Elder. How may I serve?'

Noon -5.9, The Elder's Wing

Ju and Rong were still asleep, but Xue was already up and making plans for the day. She'd waited until Lili seemed done with her activities before intruding on her.

'Liling, we would like to interview the Vanir Healer if it is at all possible? There is a way for us to communicate with her? Trenka mentioned translators of some sort'

'Better, my Elder. I can stop by and teach you Vanir mindspeak. It will be much easier to communicate with her, and you will gain the verity of her intentions in the process. I could come now, if you desire?'

'It is very early still, Liling. After ships breakfast... Perhaps before the midday meal?'

'Then I will make it so, my Elder'

'Go back to sleep, Liling. I almost envy you your company' Xue sent in closing, along with a light tinkling of laughter.

'Mindspeak?' she thought to herself. *'That's the SECOND time I've heard that phrase mentioned.'*

She considered it for several seconds, before deciding it was probably just a new evolution of language. It happened sometimes that a concept or phrase evolved into a new understanding of a situation.

Then another thought struck her. Liling had said she would teach them to *mindspeak* with the aliens ... presumably also learning the *language* of the aliens in the process? It took her several seconds to

remember that Liling was *very* good at learning languages, most likely part of her very long history in serving in the Elder's office, but *still*...

Several more seconds of introspection later had her deciding not to mention this to either Ju or Rong ... or Wen or Daiyu. Liling's level of skills was *expected* of an Elder, and she was certainly well qualified.

Elder Kita had originally considered making Liling her replacement, but it had been pointed out she was *already* the First Wife of the Emperor's son, and currently unavailable – unless they wanted to sacrifice the Emperor's son? As it turned out, that decision was never made, and Kita had sacrificed the Emperor instead.

It was just too bad that her *second* choice, Senior Ai, didn't have the strength for the position.

Dorcas' Compartment

Rose snored quietly beside Jaiying, never noticing anything that didn't actually reach out and *poke* her while still asleep. Jaiying had considered doing just that, but the compartment timer showed that it was still very early – just a little after the bottom of the morning.

She lay still, having been awake since she'd felt the call from Elder Xue to Aunt Lili. It would be interesting to observe and learn how Aunt Lili taught a *beginner* a new language, but probably also bring them closer to exposure at some point – especially if she wasn't careful during the process.

She and Rose did learn more details about the Gift when Aunt Lili was teaching her Mother last night, though. There were differences involved between the way Grandfather triggered it, and how Aunt Lili triggered it. Of course, Grandfather's *mind* did something "special" during the process – of that she was sure. Certainly, whatever her mother had done with Milsie, Livia, and Jia hadn't produced any positive results so far – just providing the pleasure of pure, physical satisfaction during an involuntary sexual response from the ladies in question.

She hoped it was still enough reason for the Elders to reassemble Grandfather for them.

Noon -5.8, Petrus' Compartment

Petrus watched as his wife lay tossing and turning, the tiny beads of sweat on her forehead and lips being wiped off by the pillow cover. He'd tried to comfort her when it'd happened earlier that morning, but she'd angrily pushed him away before falling back into a troubled sleep...

After being chased out of his compartment the night before, he'd tracked Lili down in Laisee's compartment ... apparently getting ready for a sleep over.

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They'd shared a cup of ambrosia with him while he'd spoken of Sai's anger about something going on with Déjà. Laisee had remained silent, but Lili offered that the "visitors" had been very rude to his stepdaughter, and Sai had taken great exception to it when they'd made Déjà break down in tears. She'd advised him it would probably blow over – *eventually* – and he should just be the supportive husband when she finally let him.

He'd thanked them, then headed back to his compartment – cautiously opening the door to find Déjà's door closed, but with Sai's consoling voice coming from within. He'd listened at the door and heard Déjà's exclamations – the shock of learning the *reason* Ronnie had died on the day of his accident having been the trigger for her anguish.

He'd mused it had probably been cruel to hide it from her all this time, but not surprised no one had ever spoken about it aboard ship – at least not within earshot of *him*, anyway.

Having established the cause of the crisis, he'd prepared a cup of ambrosia for both Déjà and his wife, and set them on the outer table. Then he'd gone into the sleeping compartment and used the facilities to get ready for bed.

When he came out, Sai was still engaged with his stepdaughter, so he did something unusual for him and perused the ship's library on a data pad in the outer room.

He found something not terribly involved and began reading – figuring that having Sai come out and seeing him watching an entertainment video would not be well received. Just to cover the possibility of it, he had a copy of the ship's log opened in another window.

An hour later, Sai had come out by herself, looked at him, then at the cups of ambrosia he'd gestured to. She'd let out a sigh and downed one with several gulps. Then she'd finished off the other one, before setting them both down and heading into the facilities. She'd wandered by him on the way and barely glanced at what he was reading, but he'd already brought the ship's log to the forefront. After her shower, she'd dressed for bed and crawled in by herself, turning off the light, and leaving only the light from the desk to accommodate Petrus.

He'd gotten up and closed the door to a crack before going back to what he'd been reading and giving her time to fall asleep by herself. If she wanted his company, she knew where he was. Otherwise, he was safely out of range, and could keep an eye on Déjà's door.

Another hour later, he'd crawled into bed with her, but seeing her sleeping on the furthest edge of the platform, had kept to himself...

Her early morning thrashing was what had woken him, and triggered the subsequent rift. Now an hour later, he was looking down at her in

troubled sleep – totally at a loss of how to be supportive. Keeping a sigh to himself, he raised the lights a little higher, and grabbed his data pad before finally settling into a chair across from the sleeping platform again.

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Sai was reliving her nightmare again and remained frustrated at the repeating outcome.

*Her power sword was out and slashing at the throat of Elder Ju, but Lili had stepped between them again, and caught her wrist before she could complete her swing! Every pass she made at Ju, Lili was right there to protect her!*

*What made it worse, Déjà was laying at her feet, having crumpled into a crying bundle of rags while trying to hang on to two crying babies the other Elders were calling for her to give to them!*

*The loop repeated once more, with Lili catching her wrist again, but this time she was ready and let the sword fly in Ju's direction. Just before it hit, the sword shut itself off, and Sai screamed in anger – suddenly sitting up in the dim light of the room.*

Sai had awoken in a sweat, then looked around the room and saw her husband sitting in a chair across from her.

It looked like he'd stayed up all night reading the ship's log. Then she remembered her anger with him just earlier that morning. A glance at the compartment timer said it was just half past the bottom of the morning, and she let out a sigh and listlessly flopped back on the bed.

She lay there, catching her breath while thinking about the day before and what was yet to come. After she calmed down a bit more, she looked over at her husband and raised her arms to him.

"Petrus? I'm sorry. I was–"

"Not to worry, my love," he interrupted her gently. "We all have a bad day now and then. As long as our girl is all right, then that's all that matters." He'd said this while he stood and began walking over to her.

"She is all right, isn't she?" he asked cautiously.

She gave him a funny look, but shrugged helplessly.

"It's just that... I'm just a little edgy with the 'Senior' Seniors on board," she lied gracefully.

He knew better, but still let himself be pulled down to the bed to be used as her comfort pillow for the remainder of the morning.

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### Noon -5, Kee Quarters

Kiki glanced at the compartment timer, and decided it was time to get up. Breakfast didn't wait for *anybody*!

She'd been relaxing in the arms of ... *someone*. *Whoever* it was had given her a *wonderful* time, but now it was time to move *on*. She slipped out of his arms and dashed into the facilities, quickly showering, rinsing, drying off, and dressing, before heading to her next stop.

She couldn't believe how *fortunate* things had turned out for her! With *Déjà* out of the picture, she'd been getting *all* the play she'd ever *dreamt* of. She glanced at her latest client on the way out – still smiling as he dreamed sweet memories of their full night together – but now she needed to fill up on some *food* before her *next* assignment.

As she skipped along the corridor, she remembered what Lady Tal had *constantly* reminded her, “Always *eat* something before you *play*!”

It was *silly*, really, but she listened to *Déjà*'s mommy, and ate between play times. After all, it's not as if she wasn't always hungry *anyway*. She swooped into the commons and grabbed a bowl – filling it with gruel from the ship's “*poop*” dispenser. That *always* made her laugh! *She* knew what poop tasted like, and this was so much *better* than poop!

### Noon +1, Vanir Quarters

Samuel watched curiously as Sally prepared herself to leave their quarters. She noticed the look on his face, and thought that perhaps he'd already forgotten this morning's request.

“I am meeting with the Seniors from Cletus in a while,” she reminded him, and saw the look on his face shift from curiosity to acceptance, but without any real understanding.

“You bathed yesterday, and I applied oil to you last evening,” he stated calmly. “Yet you act as if you are ill of odor. I do not find it so.”

She stopped and looked at him, finding understanding behind his words, but recognizing his lack of social graces towards their new acquaintances – *human* acquaintances.

“You forget how it was in the *beginning*, my Samuel. These humans have never *seen* Vanir before – in *person*, that is. It would be better to present as *little* unpleasantness as possible until they get used to us as a species ... *and* our smell.”

“Our smell? Do you forget our first meal at the commons with *them*?” His tone wasn't exactly accusing, but he did have a point.

“That is my *point*, Samuel. Now we are able to live and work *together*,” she said while reaching out and rubbing the side of his face with her

palm. “Back then, it was difficult for *all* of us – *them*, as well as *us* – but now we are a *known* thing and accepted, even with our differences. These are *new* humans and I would avoid a poor presentation of our species. I’m afraid that you are not invited, as it is related to only Healers.”

He smiled at her, then reached up to hold her palm against his face.

“Then you must take care to avoid creating a diplomatic rift in my absence, my Sally.”

She let out a Vanir hiss of derision, before leaning in to lick around his lips for a moment.

“I assure you that I will leave *all* the rifting to *you*, my love,” she murmured, then turned and left him standing there in confusion.

### ***Noon +1.1, The Medical Wing***

Lili had been kind enough to escort Sally from her compartment to the Medical Wing, all the while chatting about the visitors and the questions they would likely be asking her. Sally had kept her *own* council as to the upcoming meeting. She’d noted that Lili had never exactly identified just *who* these Seniors really were or what they represented, but already had her own suspicions...

While visiting with her on the *Microcosmus*, she’d learned that Lili was supposed to have assumed the throne of Cletus – as did *all* the Elder’s of that planet. The only curious thing was that Lili had never mentioned any of the Elder’s duties *regarding* Cletus. What she *hadn’t* understood was that the *Queen* of Cletus, was the equivalent to the Prime on Vanaheim, therefore, Lili should have been intensely focused on the security and operation of her *planet* – Cletus. Instead, Lili only voiced concerns between the Vanir and the Commonwealth, and had couched them in terms of how the *Kantite* administrators would be dealing with the Vanir Ambassador...

With the increasing stress level surrounding Lili, the closer they approached their destination, it was obvious to Sally that these Seniors were probably *more* than what they seemed.

If nothing else, the way they’d been catered to would imply that they had authority at or *above* Lili’s level – and that was a curious situation *indeed!*

They paused to go through a security checkpoint of several guards, apparently one for each of the Seniors behind the locked door in front of them. She recognized only one of Lili’s escorts, the rest being new to her and wearing slightly different insignia on their human clothing – something she’d picked out after Ronnie had “enhanced” her Healer skills.

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They'd shown no more than average curiosity towards her, and certainly not fallen back from her in terror or fright before the door was opened and Lili led her through.

### *On the Bridge*

Petrus had followed them on the security cameras as far as the Medical Wing, where they all cut out inside the Medical Wing. For obvious reasons, the blackout was at the orders of Lili, and he could certainly understand why. They didn't need a casual glimpse of Ronnie's headless body being moved from one compartment to another, even by accident.

He nodded his head at the apparent lack of concern by the attending guardsmen while they let the Ladies pass without comment – even *after* the door was closed.

*'Absolute professionals in action,'* he mused internally.

He let his shoulders rise and drop in a relaxing shrug before checking station keeping once again – still finding them exactly where they were supposed to be.

As he stood there idle for the moment, he considered the months they'd been deployed, and the amount of deferred maintenance that could be accomplished while they were hanging around in Commonwealth space. Servicing the air handlers immediately came to mind. He opened a ship's reference file of maintenance tasks, and started checking off the ones that would require depot-level maintenance. Then he keyed in a maintenance order with a projected budget.

After that, he considered his options – really only one – and sent an encrypted message to one of his distant cousins associated with Claxon Shipworks. If the quoted costs lined up with the projected budget, then the current ship's account should cover it neatly without tapping into the Imperial household accounts. That was something he just *knew* his fiscally conservative brother-in-law – the *Emperor* – would appreciate.

### *Medical Wing*

Sally found herself staring down at a group of five Senior Healers.

Some appeared very old, while at least two of them seemed much younger – for *humans*. She also knew that age was "Relative" in the Commonwealth, and the younger ones could easily be as old, or even *older* than the others in the room.

"Welcome, Healer Sally," Ju verbalized in reasonable Vanir, which surprised Sally completely. So far, only Lili and Petrus, along with the Kee and Jaiying, had been able to accomplish that rather difficult translation.

“I thank you for your kind welcome,” she replied slowly, knowing the Vanir pace of speaking could be difficult to follow for beginners. She was wondering if all of them could...

*‘Welcome, Healer Sally’* Xue sent warmly, with her hand raised to single her out from the crowd. *‘To your left is Senior Ju. On her left is Senior Rong. I am Senior Xue, and to my left is Senior Wen. At the far right is Senior Daiyu. We represent the most Senior of Healers on Cletus, and we are both surprised and gratified that we meet with you today’*

Sally bowed her head slightly, and turned back to Ju.

*‘You honor me with the effort to learn my language, Senior Ju’* “You honor me with the effort to learn my language, Senior Ju” she both sent and said at the same time, before staying on the Vanir band. *‘Rondal Caldar has taught us that humans can be valuable allies, instead of dangerous enemies to be guarded against at all costs. He has worked tirelessly in achieving peace between Vanir and humans, even between human and Drecks – which we now understand are merely BIG humans’*

Lili suppressed a titter at that, knowing how the Drecks were usually considered by the Commonwealth’s populace.

Sally reached down and shut off her annoying translator. All of their verbalizations had been repeated by it, and the noise of it wasn’t really necessary for this visit. Lili took the opportunity to do a little social programming, and conducted a more formal introduction.

*‘My Ladies, may I introduce Lady Sally, the wife of the Vanir Ambassador, Samuel. Her Vanir name is S’Shac’Kah 38521, and Samuel’s Vanir name is S’Shac’Kah 39596. Ronnie, of course, found that too confusing, and made it simpler for himself’*

*‘Actually, my husband and I find it quite charming’* Sally quickly rebutted. *‘We grew up with a warren name and a birth number. The distinction of a PERSONAL name is quite refreshing. We find it somewhat liberating, after a fashion’*

*‘Lady Sally, we were surprised when we learned you had become a Healer’* Xue continued smoothly. *‘We would like to ask about your impression of the experience, and how you see it affecting your people. We would also like to hear of how Rondal Caldar enhanced your Healer skills ... if it is not too difficult a memory for you?’*

Seeing Sally glance around, Lili called out silently to Jia, who moved in a seat suitable for Sally’s physical body. She was accompanied by Kiki, who rolled in a cart of cups and juices, along with chilled water for all.

“Hello Sally!” Kiki called out happily in Vanir, and rushed over to give a hug to her big friend, who gently hugged her back, and ran her fingers through her hair fondly.



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Kiki had been wondering if this was going to turn into a *girl's* playtime, but it didn't look like it with all the frowny women here. Still, she'd packed enough oils and towels just in case.

"Just water for now, Kiki" Sally said quietly, pronouncing her name awkwardly as always, but getting a smile from her just the same.

After settling down with a large cup of water, Sally started at the beginning.

*'I was assigned as the Senior Medical Technician aboard Observation Station 27. Samuel was assigned as the Senior Observer aboard that same station. In the course of our duties, he was contacted by Rondal Caldor through the use of something your people call mindspeak? It was something we Vanir had never achieved before. My Samuel thought he had been going insane, but I, like he, was also taught to use mindspeak, and we were reassigned to investigate the humans. Rondal Caldor then asked that Sai Tal begin teaching me about Healers. I had no idea...'*

### **Noon +1.4, In the Medical Office**

Hifacious and Jia had been just a few doors down from the Cletus visitors when she'd received the call from Lili.

He'd wondered what that funny-looking stool had been for, but when Kiki had shown up with the cart of drinks and oils, he figured another ladies' party was in the works. After Jia had left him there, he'd gone in and taken another sample from Ronnie's body, and started running it through the gene analyzer again.

It had been a frustrating balancing act between keeping the body alive, and keeping it from aging to death. The loss of the head was felt deeply, as none of those native Kantite abilities were able to be duplicated in the lab. They'd hoped to reattach the head by now, and now that it had been purged of the contaminating powder, there should have been a chance to reduce or even *halt* the rapid aging that was affecting the headless body.

At least he'd been able to moderate it somewhat by a careful mixture of enzymes, and a special chemical cocktail he'd cooked up. Unfortunately, it wouldn't last forever.

The truth be known, Ronnie's body should have joined his already preserved head in stasis while they were still in orbit around Vanaheim.

He didn't really see a positive outlook for the future. Not unless someone lights a fire under someone's ass and makes a decision about recovering the First Lord.

His eyes kept glancing at the gene analyzer, but it had a while to go yet.

***In Conference with the Elders***

*‘Unlike the previous lessons from Lady Sai Tal, the procedure with Rondal Caldar and Lady Caldarous was not without pain’*

Sally stopped to sip from the fruit drink Kiki had poured for her at the request of Lili, and she closed her eyes while the liquid settled further into her system. She was shortly rewarded by the sensation of the chemical reaction taking place that would dampen her uncomfortable memories.

The seconds ticked away until Xue thought the alien had lost interest in the question.

*‘The pain ... was it a physical feeling, or was it more of a shock to your senses?’* she finally asked her.

*‘The pain ... it was a burning. All the way from my cloaca, to my brain. It traveled slowly ... relentlessly ... but I was unable to react because of what he was doing to me’*

Her eyes finally opened, and she looked at each of them. *‘I understand that it does not affect humans in this manner?’*

“Sally, for that I am truly sorry.” Lili had spoken aloud in Vanir and rested her hand on Sally’s arm. “I did not expect you would have a reaction like that to his ... bodily fluids.”

Sally hissed a light Vanir chuckle, and spared a tiny smile in her direction.

*‘It did not hurt at first ... not until Laisee applied his semen to me’*

Sally’s smile tightened into a thin line, before she turned back to the other Seniors.

*‘It was an unexpected combination of stimulations’* she said to the group. *‘The Gift did provide an intense mating reaction within my body, but the fire from within made it less a pleasure, and more a punishment. I know that was not your intent, Lady Song, but it did have the intended results’*

She held up her hand and focused on it. The glow that began in her palm, quickly ramped up from a deep golden hue, to a very bright white. It lit the room briefly until she dropped her hand. The demonstration left Lili with a smile on her face, but not the collected Elders. It was something that had been *totally* unexpected.

*‘Lady Sally, we are sorry for the pain Lord Caldar caused you’* Ju pressed at her. *‘We also understand the Kee females were in attendance. How did they ... participate?’*

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Sally glanced at Lili, before turning back to Ju.

*'As they usually do. While Lady Laisee prepared Rondal Caldar, they provided oiled massages to relax me, before beginning sensual arousal techniques to bring me to readiness. When Rondal Caldar was sufficiently aroused, Lady Laisee extracted his semen. Afterwards, he grasped my hands and did ... whatever it was he does. It was really very pleasant – until Laisee applied his semen, and the burning began. By that time I was under his thrall and could not resist'*

Ju blinked, not so much for the application of the Gift, but the fact that the Kee were involved *physically* with the Vanir.

*'The Kee became involved during the process?'* Wen asked curiously.

*'My Ladies, from our research we've established that the Kee are quite adapt at interacting with other ... bipedal species?'* Lili suggested gently, which Sally agreed with avidly.

*'That is very true! They are very wonderful companions, who seem to have little trouble adapting to Vanir ... needs? My fellow Vanir have discovered their openness to be refreshing, despite them being creations of one of our own warrens. They have limitations, true, but both Kiki and Déjà are good examples of their adaptability'*

Sally was curious at the initial question, and turned to Lili for an explanation.

*'Lili, they truly do not know?'*

*'Learning about the Kee is not the same as experiencing them in person, Sally'*

Sally shook her head, before turning and making a suggestion to the group.

*'I suspect the Kee would be of benefit for emotional support of ANY of our peoples of either sex. They certainly seem to be focused on only one thing, but the benefit of that focus is a balm to chaos of the mind. Certainly, it was key to returning the Prime's daughter to sanity after Rondal Caldar brought her back to life'*

Xue could feel the confusion radiating off her companions. She glanced at Lili and made a silent and private suggestion. There was a lot of missing history involved, and they needed to arrange time to sit down to hear it all – probably involving not only Lady Sally, but also her husband, the Ambassador. In the *meantime*...

*'I thank you for your observations, Lady Sally. We will have to investigate your suggestion, and see how best to implement something like*

*that to our benefit. We are curious about the Kee named Déjà. Did she become involved in any special way during your ... process?’*

*‘I’m afraid I don’t remember much after Rondal Caldar started on me ... not until I woke up much later. Except for Lady Caldaraus, everyone else was already gone. I understand now that Déjà has somehow received advanced training, but the particulars were not revealed to me. My enhancement happened many months ago, and I recall that her behavior began to change at around the same time’*

There was a moment of private conference, there seeming to be a lot of holes in the information they’d been given, and Xue made a suggestion to take a detailed history of the Kraken’s voyage to date before making any further decisions. A series of nods followed before Xue turned back and stood in front of Sally, bowing properly, then straightening and addressing her.

*‘Lady Sally, we thank you for sharing your time with us this afternoon. We find that our information about your treatment has been lacking, along with many details about Rondal Caldar’s interaction with the Vanir. We will review what information is available before we decide on any further actions regarding Rondal Caldar’*

Sally looked at her, but kept her confusion to herself. Something was up, and these women were *not* what they seemed. She slowly stood and mustered a neutral mindset before dipping her head slightly.

*‘My mate and I will be available should you require more information about Rondal Caldar’s interaction with our people. We are quite grateful for his efforts in helping us discover elements in opposition to our peaceful co-existence. We are also grateful that his scientists were able to discover how our own planet was poisoning us, and causing deficiencies in our citizens. The Vanir people owe him our lives, and we look forward to his healthy recovery’*

Sally was no fool, and the thoughts she felt coming from the Seniors before her indicated that recovering Ronnie was the *last* thing that at least two of them wanted to happen.

Almost as if they’d detected her, their minds closed up tightly, and she only felt Lili from that moment on.

*‘My Ladies, I will escort Sally back to the Vanir quarters and inform the Ambassador of your intentions’* Lili sent, then turned and smiled at Sally, before looping their arms together and directing her to the door.

They passed Jia on the way out, sharing a simple departure comment between them, then got past the secured door and were finally out of earshot from the Elders’ guards when Sally gave out a lingering sigh.

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“To be a grugnat on the wall,” she muttered irritably, causing Lili to glance up at her strangely as they continued down the corridor.

It was after they left the Medical Wing when Sally silently pressed to her *‘Did you not feel it? They mean to KILL him, Lili!’*

*‘Only two of them. Wen and Daiyu remain positive, and Xue is in the middle’*

*‘That is not enough! Rondal must be made WHOLE!’*

Lili walked along, wondering just how she...

*‘Of COURSE I knew! How could I not? The emotions roiling off Sai and Laisee are enough to wake a DEAD person! Jaiying is BESIDE herself! The only BRIGHT spot during this entire episode is knowing there are those who are willing to do what must be done to SAVE HIM!’*

Lili stopped short and pulled her arm away to face Sally in the corridor, their respective guards continuing a little bit further as if they didn’t know a conflict was brewing.

*‘I know you, Lili, and you know me and Samuel. Most important, you know Rondal Caldar, and what he has done to keep the peace! The Vanir honor that about him. If these Seniors of yours cannot help him, then YOU must arrange for him to be helped by someone ELSE!’*

Lili looked up at her sister Healer, then bowed her head gravely, before stepping in to render a hug.

*‘Sally, you see through their deceptions, but you do not understand. They are the most senior of Seniors on Cletus. They are–’*

*‘Your MASTERS! YOU control the Emperor, and THEY control YOU! We are not that much different, human and Vanir. Yet there are things we may BOTH accomplish!’*

Lili relaxed and stepped back.

*‘Yes, but it is a difficult and dangerous path to tread’*

*‘And you, even as the Elder, cannot be seen to walk it?’*

*‘To keep my life, the life of my husband ... my family...’*

*‘Then OTHERS may walk it for you?’*

*‘If only there were others’* Lili whispered silently, but clamped down tight; keeping her thoughts locked away from the children.

*‘They are not as strong as you, Lili, or as strong as Sai ... or even Laisee’* Sally pressed sensibly.

*‘Or you?’*

*'Or me... But we must wait to see what they will do. Perhaps an opportunity might arise if we are patient?'*

*'Then we must be patient, Sally. Not a trait that Rondal shares'*

Sally stared at her for a second longer, before bursting out a gasping series of hisses.

*'Certainly. After all, he is only a male'* she shared reasonably. Lili joined in with a titter, and, arm-in-arm once again, they turned and approached their guardsmen waiting for them further up the corridor.

### ***Noon +2, The Medical Office***

Jia was waiting with Hifacious while the gene analyzer was still working its magic. She already knew what the results would be, but waited with her companion as he hoped for more positive results this time. While waiting, her thoughts drifted to greeting Sally and Lili as they left the Medical Wing together...

Sally had seemed disturbed, and Lili tightlipped about what had gone on during their meeting.

Kiki, on the other hand, had joined her on the way back to Hifacious, and chatted aimlessly with her along the way – mostly about if she wanted to play with her as she'd pushed along the cart with its contents. She'd kept teasing her by offering a *very* nice massage, along with fruit juices, but Jia had suggested that both she and Hifacious would be very busy for a while – at least until the evening meal...

She looked over at the desk where Kiki had left behind two cups and a carafe of fruit juice, before she'd dragged the cart back to the kitchen, the condensation still dripping onto the absorbent setting she'd placed underneath it. In truth, the idea of taking time out to play with the little Kee was appealing, but the *last* time they'd played, she'd lost the better part of an afternoon, and could barely *move* afterwards. On top of *that*, Hifacious had been *jealous*!

She suppressed a sigh while looking at the back of her lover's head.

He'd reviewed with her the genetic anomaly, and what he was hoping to see this time – some promising change from the last set of trials he'd attempted. She already knew the interfering enzyme Milsie had detected in Ronnie's system weeks ago wasn't responding well to his attempts to eliminate it.

Still, Hifacious was determined, and she admired him for that.

She stood and entered the adjacent room where Ronnie's body was kept. The readings were promising; the heart was beating, and

## An Unfortunate Decision

oxygenation of the blood was within tolerance. The lung pump was working, and the heart monitor was stable.

The only thing lacking was a head to go with the body. She looked carefully around the attachment points on the neck, but there was no leakage and no apparent weak spots.

She pulled up a stool and sat down, preparing herself for yet another pointless exercise. Focusing her effort, she closed her eyes and extended within – seeing cellular decay similar to what she'd seen in human races without Healers or trained couples resetting each other's aging triggers on a regular basis.

She frowned at that – knowing that Sai Tal had assigned Déjà to Ronnie, instead of a fully trained Healer. Sai had countered that he wasn't accepting contentment from *anyone*, but at least Déjà had a way of making his last days comfortable, if not as easily as Kiki.

The situation frustrated her. Ronnie was continuing to grow older at an accelerated rate. She opened her eyes, reached out, and pinched the skin on his arm. She could feel the wasting musculature below the skin confirming it. Without his head, they just didn't notice it as much.

She leaned back and looked down at the bag hanging to the side – nearly half-full. At least his bladder and kidneys were still working. She clamped the catheter and pulled off the bag, taking it to the sink, where she drained it before hanging it up and plugging it back in. She felt his chest, legs, and arms – all seeming to be warm enough for the condition he was in. With a last look at the body, she turned and headed out the door – knowing that he'd have to be reassembled pretty soon or this whole exercise would have been for *nothing*!

### ***Kantor, The Royal Homestead***

*'Jia is concerned Grandfather will die before the Elders agree to Heal him'* Jaiying quietly told her cousins on their private band.

Walter looked to the door, making sure the duty parents weren't going to notice they were still up as long as they all kept quiet. He responded on their private band.

*'Is there any way to get them to put Grandfather back together?'*

*'I thought of that, but they might discover us too early'*

*'Jaiying, can YOU put Grandfather back together?'* Cathy asked her.

*'He's still APART, isn't he?'* she snapped in frustration.

*'Too bad there's no one to practice on. Maybe Elder Ju would--'*

*‘Josie! That is not appropriate!’* Walter warned her. *‘Besides, we don’t know what they’re capable of yet’*

*‘They still don’t know about US yet’* Rose pointed out.

*‘And it would be best that they do not find out. Not until it’s too late’* Jaiying asserted.

The silence ticked off for several moments, until Walter brought up the other issue.

*‘We also need to find a way to give life energy back to Grandfather without taking it from other humans’* he reminded them.

*‘How about we ask the Vanir?’* Cathy suggested.

*‘Maybe we can round up a bunch of Kee males and suck the life out of them? That’s what Grandfather did that time, and Aunt Lili gave him a pass!’* Josie almost chortled at the suggestion.

Of them all, only Jaiying had a momentary reservation about *that* particular suggestion, but shelved it for the time being in favor of getting her Grandfather back to life.

*‘It would be better if we could do it without tapping human life energy at all ... OR Vanir’* she stated, almost reluctantly.

*‘We’ll look into it and let you know’* Walter promised her.

With nothing else to say, they let the conversation with Jaiying drop.

*“There must be some way to get energy without draining it from a human,”* Walter muttered to his companions.

*“Tomorrow, Walter. We’ll research it tomorrow,”* Cathy assured him, then rolled over and snuggled next to Josie.

*“Tomorrow, then,”* he agreed, then turned away while letting out a sigh.

The female kit, having come in with her womb-mate earlier, noticed Walter finally settling down for the night, and decided it was time to come to bed. She leapt onto the foot of the bed and started walking towards his head. Once getting almost within arms reach, she started in with a head butt to his leg, and followed it with quiet mews that prompted him to stretch out an arm in her direction. She reached his fingers and let him scratch her behind her ears, while voicing her pleasure with a low purr.

After a suitable amount of scratching, she snuggled up to his stomach and lay down before rolling onto her back.

He draped his hand over her belly and gave it occasional rubs before finally drifting off to sleep.



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From the corner of the room, her womb-mate silently chided her for her domesticity, to which she responded, *also* silently, with the valaet equivalent of a “Pbbbt.”

### *July 18, The Kraken, The Elder’s Wing*

Two days of research had provided a more or less accurate account of Lord Caldar’s activities since he’d left his broken battle platform for the last time. Interviews with Petrus, Sai, her adopted Drecks sons, several of the staff, crew, and passengers, all painted a picture of a man *determined* to secure the safety of the Commonwealth, but the way he’d gone about it just didn’t set right with at least two of them.

They could not fault the results, aside from apparently driving Elder Ai insane, or at least to the point where she’d lost her Senior abilities. There was even some extra discussion over his possible culpability for her loss.

He’d played the game fast and loose, following his own set of rules, which were both admired by some and appalled by others, but without coming to a consensus about the reasonableness of his actions. The fact that he’d located two lost human worlds – worlds stolen by the Vanir in the distant past – was admirable, as was the Commonwealth’s efforts to return those worlds to Commonwealth monitoring and protection. However, his actions against the Drecks – going in and causing death and destruction in even limited measure, seemed to be those of a madman. At any point during those particular events, the Drecks could have declared outright war with the Commonwealth, and caused even *more* loss of life.

The deployment of suddenly available Bornat battle platforms manned by ex-Hegemony citizens under Commonwealth control was *another* issue. Was it possible the Bornat had left in fear that Lord Caldar was likely to bring destruction and *ruin* to the Commonwealth?

The *last* issue, the Vanir, brought up an entirely *chaotic* wealth of disjointed evidence. During interviews with the Vanir passengers, they’d readily admitted that the Vanir were behind the Drecks aggression towards the Commonwealth. The Vanir had orchestrated a long and carefully calculated advancement of the most dangerous elements they could find, then pointed them in the direction of the Commonwealth – inadvertently causing the loss of twenty-seven colony planets in the process. They were *further* shocked to learn the thinking behind genetically engineering humans into the efficient killing machines they’d left on Kee – their *own* findings revealing there was no safe way to control them once they’d gotten loose.

The *final* tidbit of information – that the Vanir political structure had suffered from rot from *within* – had sent them into a *tizzy*. This had necessitated an hour-long break during the second day.

The fact that Lord Caldar had countered each problem and dealt with it successfully only seemed to infuriate Ju and Rong. Meanwhile, Wen and Daiyu were in even *more* agreement that he deserved a chance at recovery. Xue was left making the call, and she determined that it rested *solely* on the possibility of his recovery, which is what they'd accomplished on this third morning.

The examination had been extensive – the visual aspect of the living, breathing but headless body being shocking in itself. The detailed reports from Woldron had been reviewed, along with another interview with him just this morning to determine what, if any, progress he'd made.

Each of them had extended through the body, going over each organ and stumbling over that curious cluster buried deep within his pelvis. Lili had to explain again *exactly* what they were, and how they'd gotten there, noting it was something he'd done himself "just in case."

They'd looked at her, then looked down at the body – with Xue sparing a glance at the stasis box containing the head over in the corner. They'd continued their examination, and even Lili could see they were determined to be thorough; the comments they'd shared, either positive or negative, telling her these women knew their way around a body. Unfortunately, the feelings she was getting from them – even from Wen and Daiyu – weren't very positive.

They took a break for the midday meal before gathering back in their quarters to present their decision – something they'd worked out silently, and even somewhat reluctantly for some of them. They welcomed Lili, Jia, Sai, and Laisee to join them, and had on hand ambrosia and cups to soften their decision. As the drinks were passed around, Xue took center stage this time, and spoke for the group.

"Lili ... the injury to Rondal Caldar was not as severe as one might assume," she said quietly, then looked at Sai. "Sai, your quick reaction in getting him into stasis opens new possibilities for treatment of ... well, *very* severe injuries." Her face didn't change its expression while she paused to take a sip from her cup before continuing. "It is remarkable to consider it, but ... having a head removed might *not* be the death sentence one might usually assume. We find that, under *other* circumstances, we would be pressing for recovery of Rondal. However, the circumstances that we have before us would seem to imply that restoring Rondal would not be in his best interest."

Xue held up her hand before Laisee could get a word out.

"Lady Caldarous, we understand your concern for your stepbrother... *Uncle?*" At Laisee's nod, she continued.

"Rondal's body was injured *long* before his unfortunate decision to teach Lady Trenka the sword. Even now, Commander Woldron can find

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no way to counter the affects of what the Vanir scientists had done to him – *despite* his head having been flushed of that powder substance that blocked his early recovery.

“You all understand that each of us had concerns, one way or another, about how Rondal Caldar’s actions had reflected his *true* concerns about the Commonwealth. We find that his behavior, although unsettling at times, seems to have achieved the goals set out for him by both Elder Ai and the Emperor. We find in consensus that Rondal Caldar had *achieved* his goals. You should also know that it had *nothing* to do with our decision.”

She paused to take another sip, but everyone knew what was coming.

“What we find is that ... even if we *did* bring him back, he would most likely die within a week ... perhaps lasting as long as a month. It is our opinion that it would bring very little consolation to anyone involved, least of all to have Rondal Caldar *possibly* regain his senses, only to die once again in a very short amount of time. I cannot *imagine* the anguish that you and the rest of your family would experience in maintaining a deathwatch over him, as he lay unresponsive until his death. As such, we declare Rondal Caldar to have ended his life at the time of his ... accident.”

Lili reached out to Sai on one side and Laisee on the other. Sai grasped Jia’s hand with her other, and they all bowed their heads. It was a reasonable decision, and they’d known it.

Ronnie had played the game right to the end. Lili finished her drink, letting the ambrosia go down and begin dulling her senses before she stood to speak.

“My Elders, we thank you for your service to the Royal family. We understand your concerns about Rondal. He ... he could certainly be a handful at times. We appreciate the effort you applied to come to this decision, and ... and I’ll arrange for your transports to return to you Cletus.”

### *In Laisee’s Compartment*

Jaiying had been listening while Xue had given her summation, and knew that time was running out.

If nothing else, the Elders would have the *best* likelihood of reconnecting Grandfather’s head to his body.

She narrowed her band and slipped into the one that she and her mother used for privacy.

*‘Mother, ask if they will at least put the head back on the body. Tell them Spring Blossom will be upset if he comes home in pieces’*

### ***In the Elder's Meeting***

"Umm, Lili ... would it be possible for his head to be reattached? I don't think Spring Blossom will be very happy to see him like ... like he is," Laisee asked her quietly.

Lili looked to Xue, who looked back at her companions – two of whom were frowning, while the other two were smiling. She turned back to Lili with a rather stern expression on her face.

"You must understand, Liling, that you must make *no* attempt to bring him back to life," she told her. "It would be cruel to *him*, and to your *family*."

"I understand. I promise you that I will not attempt to restore his life."

"Or your companions, Liling?"

Xue's question was met by surprise from Lili, while Sai bristled just a tiny bit at the Elder's lack of compassion, but dampened her thoughts just the same.

"If you'll pardon me, my Elder, but if we thought *we* were capable of it, we wouldn't have called *you*," Sai reminded her gently.

'*Ladies?*' Xue asked her companions.

'*Do not let her do it!*' Ju sent forcefully.

'*Xue, the family will be dismayed to see him as such*' Daiyu pointed out.

Rong and Wen looked at each other, then nodded.

'*Allow it, Xue, but do it yourself*' Rong suggested, and Wen nodded with her, before Xue turned back to the family.

"Liling, the Ladies agree that Lady Spring Blossom should not suffer any more than she must. I will personally attach Rondal's head to his body, but *no* attempt will be made to bring him back to life."

"Thank you, my Elder," Lili said, then bowed her head respectfully.

"When would you—" Jia started to ask.

"Right *now!*" Ju exclaimed, causing Jia to stand up and leave the room.

### ***In the Medical Office***

"Hifacious – they are *coming!*" Jia called out to her lover.

He turned back from his monitor and looked at her quizzically.

"The Ladies are coming to restore Ronnie's head," she continued.

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“That’s *wonder-*” he stopped at her raised hand.

“No, my love. They only intend to make him whole so that his mother will not be distressed. They will reattach his head, but he will be removed from life support. We must not make any attempt to prevent his death.”

Hifacious looked down and shook his head sadly.

Bracing himself, he gathered his strength and looked up at her.

“What is my part in all this, then?”

“Come with me to Ronnie’s body and we’ll wait there.”

They started to walk out, but he paused.

“Let’s get the other stasis box ready. I don’t care to share spaces with a decaying body, and it will at least keep it fresh for his family,” he suggested.

She quickly nodded, and helped him maneuver the bigger box into the room with the body, then waited there for the party to arrive.

### ***In Laisee’s Compartment***

Jaiying was pacing anxiously in her mother’s compartment, while Rose sat calmly on the bed.

“We read from Jia that Grandfather is already dying, Jaiying, even if his head is put back on,” she reminded her.

“We just have to get him assembled and back home in *one piece!* Once we get him home, then we might have a *chance!* Woldron and Jia have moved in a stasis box so he can be put into it for transport.”

Rose looked up at her, then stood and reached out to bring her into her arms.

“Jaiying, Aunt Lili promised she would not try to bring him back.”

They stood together, and Jaiying hugged her cousin tighter.

“I didn’t promise *anything!*” she muttered determinedly.

### ***The Medical Wing, With Ronnie’s Body***

The group filed into the room, seeing Woldron standing by the body and Jia just rolling the small stasis box closer.

“What is *this*, Commander,” Ju asked, pointing to the larger box that was opened nearby.

“A convenient way to transport dead bodies without having them decay and smell up my spaces,” he said, on the verge of curtness.

Ju bristled, but kept her tongue. The head might be going on, but the body was going to die *anyway*.

"A good idea, Commander," Xue commented politely. "Your observations and reports told us Rondal Caldar's life expectancy was measured from between a week to a month at most – if he even regained consciousness. The stress of observing an insensate body wither and die is not a welcome one, Hifacious, and we reluctantly agreed that it would be too painful to subject the family to it."

He looked at Lili and Laisee, and saw their reluctant nods, before turning back to Xue.

"How may I be of service, my Lady?" he asked politely.

"It was decided that we restore the head to the body, thus easing the added stress of that sight to his mother and the rest of his family," she said. "I ask for your assistance in removing the medical accessories that are keeping it alive before I attempt to reconnect the head."

She turned to the family and tilted her head just a tiny bit with a somewhat apologetic expression on her face. Then she focused on Lili and lowered her voice.

"Lili ... I will do this for you, but the opportunity that presents itself is very rare," she said softly. "I will do my very *best* to make the proper connections ... as a *trial* of the process. You *do* understand that the body will be taken *off* life support, and life *terminated* if necessary?"

Laisee gave out a gasp, then turned and fled the room. Lili looked at Sai, who shrugged, before turning back to Xue.

"I understand. If the body accepts the head... If the blood flows..." she paused, and thought it through. "The head has been cleaned, but there is no guarantee the organs controlling the bodily functions are in any condition to manage it. Even if you make all the connections, the likelihood of everything working immediately is extremely remote. Most likely, the lungs will fail without control from the head. It was dead before. It will simply remain dead."

Lili had said it simply, without emotion. Like them, she had already shifted from a personal relationship with Ronnie, to just "it" – accepting as fact that "he" and "his" no longer applied. It was the only way to maintain her composure.

"Very well, then. Jia, please prepare to hand me the head," Xue said quietly as she maneuvered herself just behind the tubes coming out of the neck.

She took another close look at the neck, noting the location of everything that needed to be reconnected to the head.

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“My Ladies, it is worth noting that this head was severed cleanly. This would be *much* more difficult with a greater amount of damage.”

“Such as having it ripped off?” Woldron suggested.

“Umm, yes. That *would* make it more difficult,” she agreed thoughtfully. “The issue of *timing* is very important, of course.”

“We’ve found that cooling the body to below twenty-nine degrees is helpful in such situations,” he advised her. “It helps extend the time we have to work.” She looked up and gave him a warm smile.

“I’ve always admired the effort the medical establishment puts into the craft of Healing, Hifacious. Would that it were not so dangerous for men to trained as Healers – more so than just the very basics, of course.”

“I’m afraid I’m from Tyler, my Lady, and not a good candidate.”

She nodded, and then turned to Jia.

“May I have the head, Jia?”

She watched as the decanting process started, asking Woldron to remove the ventilation system just before the lid of the stasis box was opened.

Once Jia handed her the head, she lined it up perfectly with the neck.

“Lili, you were trained as a Combat-Healer, were you not?”

“Yes, my Lady.”

“Pay attention and observe within,” Xue ordered.

While the rest of the room was blinded, Lili barely perceived the transition from two separate pieces, into a complete whole in less than a second. She heard the gasp from Jia and Sai, along with a few snickers from the other Elders.

“That looks ... *beautiful*, Xue,” Lili murmured, dropping the honorific in amazement.

“Xue is *very* talented,” Wen said. “But she no longer get’s enough *practice*.”

“It certainly does not show,” Lili continued. “Xue, if you feel the need for more practice, an opening as a Combat-Healer can be found for you?”

As the banter had gone on, the body had given out a few struggling gasps before breathing stopped. The heart monitor began to race, but then faltered, as the lack of oxygen starved the muscles driving it.

The face, which had been flushing from its pale starting point, was beginning to darken, with the lips turning bluish as the blood lost all

oxygenation. The body remained still, then the heart monitor finally flat-lined. Woldron gave out a sigh and gestured for Jia to help him.

Lili placed a hand on the chest, then leaned over and placed a kiss on the cheek, before placing herself into position to help with the body.

Sai finally moved over to help as well. Between the four of them, they got the body into the box, and Jia and Woldron got the lid on.

Jia triggered the stasis to maintain the body in the same state until it could be disposed of.

"We will return to Kantor with the body, and hold a Remembrance with the family. After that ... we'll have to check Ronnie's legacy to see what he wanted done," Lili murmured while patting the lid of the box.

"Legacy?" Jia asked her, but then remembered. "Oh... His final instructions upon his death." She looked at the box, then turned and walked out of the room.

"Stasis boxes... A Vanir product? It seems they would be *bigger* to accommodate a Vanir body." Rong's comment got a laugh out of Sai.

"They use them to store *food* in," she said. "That's how we saved Laisee's daughter back on Vanaheim. She was injured in an explosion, and they popped her into a stasis box and brought her back to the ship. It took several Healers working on her at once to put her back together."

"I ... yes. I remember Samuel telling us about that," Xue said thoughtfully. "The girl suffered no damage from the box?"

"Not as much as Sue, the Prime's daughter. The guy who crammed her into a box this size, broke both her legs to do it," Sai told her, gesturing to the box Ronnie was in. "Her mind was really confused when she was first decanted, but we now believe it was related to other issues that were present before she was placed in stasis."

"Remarkable," Daiyu whispered.

"Yes. Once word got out about it on Vanaheim, the manufacturer started looking at new ways to use their product in a medical application," Sai muttered.

Woldron could see them looking at the bigger box and comparing it to the smaller box.

"My Ladies, if you would care to take the smaller box with you for evaluation, you might find further usefulness for it," he offered. "The Vanir use it to store fresh food – fruits, meat ... even cooked meals. When they are decanted, they are still as hot and ready to eat as when they were put in the box."



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“Thank you, Commander. That is very kind of you,” Xue said, then turned to Lili. “Liling, we are sorry for your loss. Please convey ... well, tell your family that the Seniors of Cletus are saddened that a hero of the Commonwealth has fallen.”

“Thank you, my Elders,” Lili said politely, not missing the quick glance that Ju and Rong threw at Woldron, whose attention seemed to be focused elsewhere.

At that, the Elders filed out, followed by Lili and Sai. Woldron was the last to leave, stopping at the door to turn out the lights. He glanced back at the compartment timer, noting that it was nearing the evening meal, but he didn't feel particularly hungry at the moment. Then he shook his head sadly, as he looked at the blinking lights on the stasis box before turning away and heading back to his quarters.

### *Somewhere Else...*

*With the dizziness finally fading from his senses, Ronnie pushed himself over onto his back and looked up at the nondescript sky. He knew better than to shake his head, but carefully turned it and looked to the side. The bushes were still there, way off in the background, and the chair was still there, but lying on its side.*

### *The **smell**...*

*He sat upright, bracing for a headache that didn't come, then quickly looked around. The sound of it finally drew his attention, and he shakily got to his feet and staggered over to the cup, which was lying on its side and shooting stuff out of it just as **fast** as it could.*

### *“Aww, **crap!**”*

*He carefully bent over and gingerly lifted it upright – holding the open end **away** from him. As it tilted it upright, the volume decreased until it dribbled just a little bit at a forty-five degree angle, before it stopped overflowing. Holding it upright, he watched as the level in the cup rose until it stopped just a half-inch from the top. **Slowly** bringing it to his lips, he took a tiny sip, and let out a sigh of relief that it was **still** just as good as when Destiny had given it to him.*

*No... Destiny had **loaned** it to him – and told him **not** to knock it over. He wondered how much ... then noticed the new **pond** downhill from him.*

*It was **huge**, and now that he was vertical again, the smell wafting up from it was almost **overpowering**. He carefully put the cup down, and staggered over to the chair. Up-righting it and standing there for a few seconds, he watched the grass and leaves moving in the **breeze** – something that he didn't think existed here. Hoping the wind would remain steady, he grabbed the chair and dragged it upwind until he couldn't smell*

*the pond so much. Then he went back to get the cup, sipping from it all the way back to the chair, where he planted himself and settled in once again.*

*Once he was relaxed, he tried to figure out just what had happened **this** time. He'd been sitting there, then everything had gone **black**. Then a faint **glow** seemed to come through his eyelids, but he didn't seem to be able to open them. He thought he'd heard **voices** ... or **a** voice? A **woman**? Or **women**? And then he thought for **sure** he'd heard **Lili**. But then **blackness** again, and waking up on the ground.*

*He looked at the cup warily, wondering if he actually drank **too** much of it. Then he decided that it didn't really matter and had another sip to help calm his nerves.*

***Slightly** out of phase with Ronnie's current reality, Destiny let out a sigh and shook his head sadly ... all that good stuff gone to **waste** like that...*

*"He **almost** made it," Faith said sadly, "until that **BITCH** kept Woldron from keeping him **alive**!"*

*Destiny kept his surprise to himself while considering the possible consequences during the **next** few steps.*

### ***The Kraken, Laisee's Compartment***

*Laisee had just returned and closed the door to keep out the outside world. She'd kept herself from crying all this way but was ready to let loose until she heard quiet sobbing coming from Jaiying's room. She walked over quietly and saw that Jaiying was in there, along with Rose.*

*"Did Grandfather come back?" Rose asked her cousin once again...*

*She'd watched as Jaiying had frozen in place, then crumpled into a ball on the floor before letting out a wail of despair.*

*The sobbing had finally wound down to the point where she'd felt confident that Jaiying might give her an answer this time...*

*"I – I *thought* I felt him ... just for a *second*. And then ... then they just let him *die*!"*

*"I'll miss Grandfather, Jaiying. We'll *all* miss him."*

*"It isn't over *yet*, Rose," Jaiying said firmly. "The \*Fat Lady\* hasn't sung *yet*!"*

*Rose tilted her head quizzically, confused at her cousin's sudden outburst.*

*"It means the play is not quite over just yet," Laisee said, drawing their attention to where she stood at the doorway.*

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She crouched down when they came to her, and ended up holding both of them tightly while they let out their anguish at the loss they'd suffered once again. She tried not to, but joined with them before finally sitting in the middle of the floor and sharing her tears with theirs.

### *July 22, Approaching Kantor Parking Orbit*

Early on the day after Ronnie died again, the Elders' transports had arrived to take them back to Cletus. No passengers accompanied them, and no mention was made to the crew. The smaller stasis box was sent along with Elder Ju, with a set of operating instructions and a sample of fresh food contained within.

After the last transport left, the docking bay was secured and the ship departed Cletus orbit and headed to Kantor. Notification had not been made to the crew, but it was becoming known that Lord Caldar was *not* going to be walking off the ship when they arrived.

The first three days of transit found the ship in a mostly somber mood. On the morning of the fourth day, things seemed more cheerful, at least at the commons during breakfast.

Crew noted that the Captain and the rest of the Royal family sat together this morning for probably the first time ever, but kept their distance from them out of certain knowledge that they probably needed their privacy.

As it was, discussion was limited within the family, as each of them were keeping their thoughts to themselves; the only exception being Lili telling them that a proper Remembrance would be held at the Royal Homestead sometime after they all arrived.

### *Odontoceti, On Approach*

"Any update on their arrival, David?"

Radatel wasn't all that concerned with meeting the *Kraken* on any specific timetable, but he *was* looking forward to seeing the First Wife again. Mei-Mei and Yin-Yin were filling in nicely, but Spring Blossom had become despondent ever since they'd learned Ronnie had been denied recovery by the Seniors on Cletus. Not only that, but the Seniors had *specifically* ordered that Lili *not* attempt to bring him back.

David read the screen in front of him, checked the updates from Andy, who was sitting to his left, and reported their new timetable.

"Sir, the *Kraken* should be in orbit within the next half hour. A notice to navigation was just transmitted recognizing an exclusion zone above the Royal Homestead. I believe they intend to stay inside the rock for the time being."

“Inside the...”

“Plausible deniability, Sir,” Andy interrupted him, then blushed fiercely. “I beg your pardon, my Lord. I meant no disrespect.”

Just for a little variety, Radatel had taken the left-most seat for this trip. Glancing to the side, David could see the grin on the Emperor’s face.

“Quite so, Andy,” the grinning Emperor allowed. “No reason to cause any more panic than our *new* Ambassadors will eventually have to account for. Torga and Manya are enjoying our company for the time being, and the sociologists are working with the Elder’s staff to ease their transition into Commonwealth reality.” He released an Imperial sigh of resignation at the chaos that was sure to follow.

“Is it all *that* bad, my Lord?” Andy asked him, then glanced back at the two guardsmen who’d accompanied them for this trip. They were both long time members of the household staff and known to him.

“Honestly? I really have nothing to compare the situation to,” Radatel told him frankly, before going on.

“On the one hand, the reports filtering out of the Hegemony pointed to a coup at the Master Pack level. You remember the ensuing panic when *that* was revealed. On the *other* hand, if Ronnie had simply destroyed the Hegemony’s leadership, indeed the entire control structure, then certainly we would become *bankrupt* in rebuilding the left-over infrastructure as we attempted to absorb them into the Commonwealth.”

“A solution will be found, my Lord,” David told him confidently. “Aquntus Tiberious assimilated the separate clusters into the beginnings of the Commonwealth. I’m sure that history will act as a guide while you proceed to normalize relations with the Drecks.”

“*And the Vanir,*” the Emperor muttered. “At least Samuel and Sally are returning to us. Two *known* quantities are better than complete strangers, eh?”

David smiled, then looked over at Andy when his com panel beeped at him.

“A rock just showed up in stationary orbit over Kantor, my Lord...” Andy paused for just a moment, listing to communications from a newly installed headset. “Message on encrypted channel, my Lord,” he said, then switched it to the speaker.

“*CS Odontoceti, this is the Kraken. Kraken One calling. Anybody out there?*”

“Andy, please transmit my words,” Radatel requested, then leaned forward over the seat. When Andy flipped the switch, he began.

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“Welcome home, Petrus. I trust your big sister survived the journey?”

*“By the Gods! At last a FRIENDLY voice! Yes, my Lord. The First Wife is MORE than ready to return home, as are your daughter and your granddaughter.”*

“Excellent. We look forward to their safe return. Ahh, there are no more passengers for this trip?”

*“I am reminded that my duties here preclude returning groundside until preparations for the Remembrance are in place. Sai and our daughter will remain aboard with me until that time. Rose will be going along with Jaiying, while Nathan and Dorcas will leave by separate transport to the Capitol to catch up on colony business, my Lord. They will attend the Remembrance before heading back to their duties at the colony, and taking Rose with them.”*

“Very well. We will see you shortly then. Kantor One – out.”

After Andy closed the circuit, Radatel turned to David.

“Please arrange for docking on the *Kraken*. I fear my wife is still distressed over the situation, and I find myself in the hapless position of being her comforter.” The subsequent sigh he let out was long and heartfelt.

### ***The Kraken, In Orbit***

The immediate family had gathered near the docking bay, and waited for the ‘Ceti to shut down before opening the corridor door and walking out to meet the new arrivals. Lili was in the lead, followed by Petrus and Laisee. Jaiying was standing by the entrance with Rose and her parents, letting the Elder and the Emperor share their greetings in private.

Lili looked on anxiously as the airlock hissed while matching atmospheres. Once the pressures had balanced, she sought out the first face leaving the ship, and was surprised to discover it held the steady countenance of her husband. She rapidly started forward, then caught herself ... slowing to proceed to him in a stately manner. She came within arms reach, then stopped – bowing appropriately, as befitting the Queen of Cletus to the Emperor of the Commonwealth.

“Welcome, my Lord,” she greeted him simply, all the while wondering if he felt the same elation she was experiencing.

“My Elder... Lili...” was as far as he got before reaching out and pulling her into a tight hug. He held on for several seconds before pushing her away just far enough to attach himself to her lips for several more seconds. They finally broke away from each other, each breathing faster as their emotions had caught up to them, before turning back to the rest of the party.

“Petrus ... Laisee...” Radatel stopped as he looked her over carefully.

In the case of Petrus, injuries in his line of work were expected. Not so for his daughter. From what he could see, she seemed to be intact, if a little nervous to see him. He smiled at her, and opened his arms in greeting before seeing her expression lighten as she came forward into his arms.

“Laisee, you are as beautiful today as the day you were born,” he murmured, then kissed her on the cheek warmly. She hugged him back, until his comment percolated through her thoughts, then pushed away from him and turned an accusing frown on him.

“*You* said I came out fat and *bald!*”

“Well ... *yes*. But you’ve since grown hair, and you’re much taller and slender now,” he teased her, then hugged her again.

Looking over her shoulder, he could see his granddaughter by the corridor door, along with Dorcas and her family. He raised an arm and waved them over, while continuing to hug Laisee.

“My girl, I am very proud of you ... not only for your *skills*, but also for your *bravery*. You have served the Commonwealth *well*,” he murmured, then gave her another squeeze, before letting her go so he could reach out and take Petrus’ hand.

“Petrus, I see that things seem to be well in hand,” he greeted him warmly. “I have a *list* for you – people to contact, and things to do regarding our new Ambassador from the Vanir. The Ambassador and his staff will be relocating from the ship to the Capitol at their earliest convenience ... or so I’m told.” He continued searching his robes until he found the data tab he’d placed in a hidden pocket, checking the markings on it before handing it over to Petrus.

Not missing a beat, he squatted down to receive first Jaiying and then Rose, each of them having out-paced their watchers in order to greet their Uncle.

“Uncle *Radatel*, they put Grandfather back *together*, but they wouldn’t let him wake *up!*” Jaiying said with a frustrated pout. “It wasn’t *fair!*”

He gently pushed her back, and wondered what he could *possibly* say to make her feel better but was completely stumped.

Fortunately, both Nathan and Dorcas arrived at that particular moment and looked down at him.

“My Lord Emperor,” Nathan said formally, then bowed deeply while feeling awkward at bowing to the Emperor while he was still squatting down to be close to the children.

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“My Lord Emperor,” Dorcas echoed, and bowed as well, she holding her position until he straightened up in front of them.

“Nathan ... Dorcas. You both look well,” he told them. “The voyage seems to have agreed with you. One hopes it was a worthwhile experience for you all.”

Nathan straightened, but held his tongue; thinking he'd mostly been a glorified gigolo during the trip, but it'd still been an educational experience. Dorcas was more practical and asked the obvious question.

“My Lord, how may we serve you?”

The Emperor stalled while glancing around the deck for a few moments. In between counting the obvious luggage that had been bundled for immediate transport, he was considering Nathan's silent comments. By his estimation, the parcels matched the number of bodies expected to be returning with him and his crew. As for Nathan, he thought a bit more praise might be appropriate to ease his lack of self-esteem.

“Dorcas, you and Nathan have helped *immeasurably* with the recovery efforts for my little brother's growing colony planet, and I thank you both for that. We look forward to having you visit with us for the Remembrance. I understand you and Nathan will be visiting the Capitol before returning to the Royal Homestead, but I'm sure Lili will keep you informed as to the correct date,” he said, before reaching out to hug Dorcas, then shaking Nathan's hand in a purely Earthling gesture of acceptance.

Then he turned and caught Petrus' eyes.

“Petrus, we'll need the returning luggage packed into the '*Ceti*. David and Andy are aboard, and will tell your people where to stash it.” He turned again and found Lili standing right behind him.

“Lili ... I would visit with my little brother for a while,” he told her softly. “Please take me to him.”

He saw the dismay in her eyes, and almost changed his mind, but it was a necessary thing for him to do. “Please, Liling,” he whispered, and she finally nodded her head, and looped her arm with his.

They left the group on the docking bay while Lili escorted him to the Medical Wing to view the body – or whatever was visible through the viewing port in the lid. They were both trailed by their personal bodyguards, who followed along dutifully. By the time the corridor door closed behind them, David and Andy had exited the '*Ceti*, and joined everyone on the hanger deck. General greetings were exchanged, before

Laisee broached the big question by asking, “David, how is the family taking the news about Ronnie?”

He hadn’t expected this from her, but fielded it as best he could.

“The family? They understood Ronnie was on a dangerous mission, but don’t understand why the Seniors just gave up on him. Maya is distraught. Spring Blossom ... you wouldn’t recognize her now. It’s as if she’s lost her reason for living. She seems to have aged almost twenty years or more, Relative ... *Earth* Relative. If what we understand is true, it seems an even more deplorable loss. He didn’t really *let* it happen, did he? You know ... *deliberately*?”

Laisee looked at Petrus, then down at the deck. Dorcas looked away, but Nathan just shrugged. Petrus finally broke the silence.

“Look. I was out. An explosion on the planet surface got both me *and* Jaiying,” he said, and rested his hand on top of her head. “Laisee was also on-planet at the time. Sai ... Sai was here ... at the gym.” He raised his other arm and gestured to the large room towards the back of the hanger bay.

“She tried to intervene between Trenka and Ronnie, but he’d goaded Trenka so badly that she became too focused on what she was doing. I watched the video. When she took the proper set, Ronnie dropped his guard and Fired her sword ... the one in *her* hands. She took his head off cleanly – right across here,” he muttered, while drawing a line across his throat with one finger.

Laisee cleared her throat, before offering additional comments.

“Ronnie was ... he’d been abused by renegade Vanir in a secret lab. They injected chemicals, and a nasty powder into his body. The chemicals and powder prevented us from Healing him, and they also accelerated his ... his aging process. By the time we got to Cletus, they estimated that bringing him back would allow him no more than a month of life – even if he regained his senses.” She looked at the sad expressions on David and Andy’s faces before going on.

“Neither the Seniors nor Commander Woldron were able to achieve a method to reverse or even halt the deterioration of his body. The Cletus Seniors ... they put his head back on his body before they left.” She looked away before bitterly adding, “They at least did *that*.”

They stood together as a family and bowed their heads for several seconds. Laisee finally straightened, and without a word, walked over and brought her luggage to the airlock of the *‘Ceti*, where the junior member of the Emperor’s guard took it and set it down on the deck. Her guardsman, caught flat-footed, had missed her intention, but grabbed a couple of bundles and brought them over as well.



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“He’s gonna inspect them ... protocol,” Andy muttered, but Laisee just nodded, knowing it would be required anyway.

Rose and Jaiying watched their guardsmen take their luggage to the ship’s airlock, then waited while the single guardsman inspected it, hauled it into the ship, and packed it away before returning for the next. After everything was inspected and loaded, they all shared their goodbyes, then boarded the ship. Nathan and Dorcas returned to their quarters, and Petrus waited on the hanger deck for Lili and Radatel to return for the flight home.

### *Later, On the Bridge*

Petrus was reading the orders Radatel had given him. The Vanir and Drecks supporting staff were to be transported to the Capitol at their earliest convenience and turned over to the Imperial Majordomo for interim quarter’s assignment. Translators were on hand for the Drecks, and additional Vanir translator packs had been made available for the Kantite support staff. A complete list of contacts had been provided, along with assurances that individual full communications suites would be made available to the Ambassadorial staffs on a continuous basis while their missions were in residence.

To him, it seemed all very above board and reasonable. He wondered if the Kantite populace were even aware of their hidden nemesis’ orbiting above them, let alone that they would be publically announced in the near future. At least it wasn’t a worry that *he* had to deal with. He was more concerned with where Sai was and what she was doing.

He hadn’t seen his wife since early that morning when she and Déjà had left the compartment and gone to an early breakfast. Then they were supposed to visit with Lady Qiaolian and her staff to receive the current status of the crew’s health and wellbeing, as if they were a *real* Commonwealth warship.

He almost laughed at that. Aside from the Imperial guardsmen aboard, the *majority* of the crew were either scientists or engineers, some of whom were just along for the ride. Once they’d reached Vanaheim, they’d begun to *seriously* eke out a justification for their existence when more detailed information about their new neighbor’s society and living conditions became available to them. It was all very open and above board, and the Vanir had also brought a few specialists along for the return trip to mirror the efforts from their own perspective.

Up to now, it had been an interesting voyage. He wondered how much of what they’d learned over the last few weeks would change once they’d taken up residence at the Kantite Capitol and experienced Kantites in their native environment.

He sat back and scrunched his tired eyes closed while rubbing his face distractedly before yawning. Glancing at the bridge crew once again, he nodded once, and called for a secure channel to the Imperial offices at the Capitol. He needed to chat up the Majordomo and let him know exactly what to expect, then determine if they were even ready for them down there. Almost as an afterthought, he checked the ships environmental and verified the drop to Kantite sea level they'd all endured over the last several days in support of their new Vanir passengers to Kantor.

### ***Kantor, The Royal Homestead***

"Down and docked, my Lord," David said quietly, while Andy was verifying the 'Ceti's atmosphere was already bled down Kantor normal. He continued to shut down the tank as Andy closed the communications and sensor systems.

The guardsmen were already up and moving before the Royal party even loosened their seat restraints. Some of them were recovering stored luggage, while two others cycled open the airlock and insured that the stairway was properly lowered and in place. Those two exited and stood to either side, ready to assist their charges when they disembarked from the ship.

Radatel and Lili led the procession, and waited near the foot of the stairway while the rest of the family joined them. Once ready, they all made their way to their individual quarters to freshen up and change into relaxed clothing suitable for the remainder of the day.

A small phalanx of household staff had magically appeared and recovered their belongings before following along behind everyone else.

As they proceeded through the corridors, a subtle changing of the guards took place, with fresh guards replacing those arriving. Laisee didn't miss the transition, then asked a question of her current escort.

"Tell me, please, is the brother of Captain Teldrus Avitus still part of the household security staff?"

"My Lady? Ahh ... I believe Aquila is on liberty these next few days. Shall I request that he be recalled, my Lady?"

"No... It can wait. It has waited for several weeks," she murmured.

"You speak of the loss of Teldrus? We received reports, my Lady," he continued quietly, then let it lay there in front of her.

"You surmise correctly. I would speak of Captain Teldrus' sacrifice for the Crown. I would speak of it with Aquila *personally* after he returns to the Homestead."

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“I understand, my Lady. After his return, I will inform Aquila of your desire.”

“Thank you.”

She didn’t order it and he didn’t confirm it. It was understood between the two of them that their conversation would *remain* between the two of them until after she’d spoken with the missing brother of Teldrus.

### *July 23, The Kraken*

The fully loaded transport had left the ship and was headed to the Capitol as scheduled. Once landed, the Vanir and Drecks passengers would be escorted by the contingent of Imperial guardsmen that had gone along to help ease their transition to their new accommodations. It was through the wisdom of Lady Qiaolian that she’d successfully developed interspecies social bonding exercises upon arrival at Vanaheim for just this occasion.

On Kantor, both the Drecks and Vanir visitors would interact with known humans for a period of time until the Kantite staff and populace became familiar and complacent with their presence – for *however* long it took. Presumably, the example of Kantite Imperial warriors getting along with their previous enemies would set an example of cooperation for the Commonwealth – at least in theory.

### *Aftermath of a Meeting*

Sai and Petrus sat silently in the conference room, still sharing blank stares across the width of the conference room table.

After all these months, this latest twist had taken both of them by surprise. It was certainly something that neither of them had considered, or even thought about, but the fact remained that the “mission” was officially over.

Each group had presented its final report, before going through a quick schedule of their transition phase. One by one, they’d thanked Petrus and Sai for this rare opportunity to participate in such a historical adventure, but now it was time for them to go home and continue with their lives. Of them all, just a few – like Milsie, Donnel, Jia, and Hifacious – were looking forward to returning to the *Microcosmus* to continue their research on the Vanir.

The others had had enough adventure for this period of their lives, and intended to settle down for a while.

The last report had been met with silence until Petrus stood and thanked them for their participation. He’d then expressed his regret they would be leaving, but were welcome to return if their skill-sets were suitable for the *Kraken*’s next mission – *whatever* it turned out to be.

After that, they'd filed out of the conference room and left Petrus and Sai behind. At the moment, the formerly estranged couple were lost in their own thoughts, but both knew things were prone to changing rapidly. After all, it went with the job.

### *July 24, Thinking About the Future*

It was nearly Noon plus five when the last of the Kantite transports left the hanger deck with the final group of departees. This particular group was headed to a port halfway around the planet, where its members would catch a connecting transport to other clusters; for some, finally going home for a well-deserved vacation.

Standing on the bridge, Petrus glanced at the security monitor as the last guard detail positioned Ronnie's EMTU at the rear of the *Kraken's* own transport. He could see Laisee's personal servant, Livia, standing alongside, with several small packages beside her for transport down to the Homestead.

It seemed strange that, once Livia and the guardsmen left the ship, the *Kraken* would be returning to its original staffing level, but with him taking Ronnie's place.

"Endo, status of the ship?" he asked quietly.

"Nominal volumes of fuel and sustenance. Still in stationary orbit over the Royal Homestead. Exclusionary warnings still in effect. Systems report no outages."

Petrus almost snorted at that. The systems didn't *always* know when an outage had occurred, or even where the outage was. The fact that Claxon had reworked the Kale-engineered ship to function as well as it did was almost a miracle in itself.

He'd have to seriously consider adding additional crew when he got his new orders from the Emperor – *if* he got new orders from the Emperor ... or the *Elder*.

"Sai ... do you want to take Ronnie down, or do you want me to do it?"

She glanced at him, then looked over at Déjà, who was staring at the display showing the planet they were in fixed orbit above. From the back, you couldn't tell she was pregnant until she turned sideways and it became obvious.

"I think I'll stay here with Déjà," she finally decided. "We should go through the compartments and see if they left a mess anywhere."

It wasn't very likely, as the ship's water reserves had been run through the recovery system a few times while all the laundry had been cycled, just before everyone had packed up and left. If anything, with *everyone*

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involved at some point, the ship was probably cleaner that it had been when she'd first brought Déjà and the boys aboard. Then she thought of something else.

"We should go and track down Kiki. She's probably driving Edna and Gaia crazy by now," she said, and he nodded slowly.

"Good idea," he agreed while smiling lazily. "You can only fight her off for so long."

That finally got a snort out of her, and she turned, grabbed her daughter, and together they headed out the door. Petrus let out a sigh at the sight of them leaving before turning back to Endo.

"Endo, you have the ship. Sai is First Officer in my absence."

"I hear and obey," he said, nodding his acknowledgement along with his words.

While Petrus headed to the docking bay, Sai and Déjà strolled along the empty corridors. Déjà was feeling the loneliness of the ship, and turned to her mother for comfort.

"Mommy ... what are we going to do *now*?"

They walked along while Sai thought it through – not having a *clue* of what the future held for them all, but definitely knowing one thing.

"I don't know, my girl, but whatever it is, we will be a family together."

She hugged her daughter to her side as they continued to the Docks quarters. They would probably find Kiki in there accosting either one or both Docks wives ... or in the kitchen raiding the fridge.

### ***Kantor, The Royal Homestead***

The transport gently settled on the pad before Petrus shut the systems down to idle, not planning to stay long. He'd already matched to Kantor pressure during the transit, so he simply popped open the airlock and dropped the rear door at the same time. From the rear door camera, he could see an honor guard standing by to escort the EMTU to its temporary resting place.

From the other cameras, he could see where a few family members and staff had gathered outside the airlock. They seemed to be waiting patiently, but he quickly secured the console and went out to greet them.

"Hello, Lili ... David ... Andy. Is anyone else coming?"

"We thought it best that we wait until Ronnie is resting elsewhere," Lili stated softly. "We will return him to his quarters where he will stay until the Remembrance. You and Sai will be attending."

That last was not a question.

“Of course, Lili. As my Captain, Ronnie saved my life. As my sister’s brother-in-law, he is family, and I will honor him as such,” he said quietly. “Sai and Déjà plan to be here. They both have a deep history with him.”

“And Déjà carries his children,” she murmured.

He gave her a half bow with his head, before turning at the sound of the EMTU being moved out the back of the transport. It moved easily, the four guardsmen on either side of it simply guiding it along on its wheels. Livia, he saw, was carrying two bundles, and she’d been joined by some of the household staff bringing the rest of the bundles.

David and Andy held doors open as the guardsmen followed their directions to Ronnie’s suite of rooms. Once there, Lili palmed the door panel, and the door slid open to reveal his outer room bathed in soft lighting. They wheeled him in and set the wheel locks before filing out and returning to their duties – the returning guardsmen finally going off duty, and the remaining household guardsmen going back to the security center.

*‘Ladies ... Ronnie has been returned to his quarters’* Lili silently called out, then waited for comments, of which there were few.

Of them all, only Maya and Spring Blossom were on the way immediately. The others were determined to follow along slowly and assist as necessary; each knowing chaos was sure to ensue once those closest to Ronnie had arrived first.

As expected, their assumptions were not in error, and both Maya and Spring Blossom suffered emotional breakdowns and needed to be escorted back to their individual quarters. There they sequestered themselves, not wanting anyone to share in their anguish. It didn’t stop Mei-Mei from staying with Spring Blossom, or Diane from staying with Maya, but it was a sad, lonely evening for those four Ladies.

After a very short stay, Petrus said his goodbyes and headed back to the *Kraken*. There was enough misery at the Royal Homestead, and he thought Sai would appreciate his return for the additional comfort it might offer her.

### ***August 1, Settling In at the Capitol***

The Emperor was in his element – this time acting as mentor to his protégé, the new First Lord. He was leading his newly adopted son through the protocols necessary when setting up and dealing with foreign embassies on Kantite soil. It was an area in which he’d been surprisingly lacking just a few weeks ago, but it seemed to be coming back to him

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pretty quickly. Taldus, too, seemed to be assimilating the knowledge adequately, and was following along with his instructions. Lili would be proud of both of them.

Radatel was helped along by his twenty years of experience as Ambassador to Earth. The laws were very similar, something that had surprised him at the time, but made perfect sense when you thought about it. Of course, it depended upon trust between the hosting country, and the Ambassador and staff of the guest country.

The Vanir Ambassador's minions were still outfitting the Vanir spaces above, and they'd requested an informal inspection by the Ambassador. It had taken a while to convince the minions they would eventually *appreciate* their prime location within the Imperial complex itself. The fact that they would work and reside *above* ground level was considered a choice position among most of the other missions who resided one or two levels below grade level.

Samuel didn't really care one way or another, as his last duty station had been on an Observer platform out in the middle of nowhere. It was only of minor interest to him that his minions were planning the space allocations. After all, that's what minions did.

At the moment, Taldus was off dealing with the Drecks contingent, and Radatel was escorting Samuel and Sally through the ground-level atrium...

They'd been delighted when they'd first arrived at the Royal Homestead and discovered the air flowing through the living spaces was actually *outside* air that had been filtered only for plant pollen, dust, and tiny insect life. The fact that they could open a transparent door and safely step out into the gardens had been an unsurpassed thrill for them...

The Vanir, along with their escorts, had been delivered by David and Andy to the ground-level landing pad at the Capitol, and both Samuel and Sally were looking around at the open interior space with wonder. The transparent walls surrounding the atrium illuminated the entire garden, including its decorative pond and fountain arrangement. They even had trees within the space that reached ten meters high, nearly two-thirds of the way to the ceiling. The fact that there was actual greenery, and living creatures swimming in the pond, was a revelation to them here in the Capitol.

Radatel guided them to a central structure, and into a huge box with sliding doors – very similar to the mechanical lifting structures back on Vanaheim. To their surprise, the buttons indicated only three levels above them, but another six levels *below* them. They could see where freshly inscribed plates had been applied to the top three button

positions that added simple Vanir script, and what they assumed to be Drecks. As Sally reached out and stroked the plate, Radatel took notice and smiled.

*‘The Majordomo was most chagrined that this detail had almost slipped his mind. The rest of the lower floors will be labeled later this week, although I doubt you or your staff will be exploring the city by way of the transit hub access down on level seven’* he told them, then pressed the button marked Level 01.

Samuel considered that, having noticed the meager amount of visible surface transportation available on the flight over from the Royal Homestead.

*‘You travel underground? Burrowing through the ground like...’* He stopped himself at Sally’s sharp jab, but Radatel didn’t take offense.

*‘Yes. Just like the common worm, only much faster. The transit links cover the entire city underground. We do occasionally have wet weather, and there is in recorded history a two-year span where it sometimes actually froze before it hit the ground. I’ve seen images of it. It was most astonishing’*

The bell dinged, and the door opened on Level 01. It was facing a wide corridor whose ceiling was nearly ten meters high. The Emperor’s two guards filed out first, followed by the Emperor and his two guests. They followed signs and arrows on the walls that guided them to one of the outer facing suite of offices whose double doors were opened wide. Various noises could be heard from within as Samuel’s assorted minions continued with their tasks.

*‘As you can see, your staff has been very busy in your absence’*

Radatel waited until the human guards made contact with their Vanir counterparts and traded countersigns with them, before both sets of guards faced their principals, bowed, then took their places – a human/Vanir pair standing outside the door, and another human/Vanir pair standing just inside the door. Protocol having apparently been served, Samuel stepped forward with Sally, and they entered their new Vanir suite of offices at the ruling center of the Commonwealth. He paused just inside the door, then turned to invite Radatel to join him with a simple gesture.

As all three of them explored the space, they could hear Vanir being spoken, and translations spewing out of portable translators worn by the staff. The reason became obvious when a small group of human workers pushed a cart out of a room, then stopped and stood smartly before bowing to the Emperor.



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“None of *that* please, gentlemen. Like you, I am a *guest* in these spaces and merely an outsider ... until I step back outside the door. Carry on, please.” There followed another bow, a quick one this time, before they went back to work while ignoring the most powerful man in the Commonwealth.

The tour progressed through the spaces, finding meeting rooms, storage spaces, display areas, several offices, a kitchen and pantry arrangement, and several areas set aside and configured for living quarters. Sally noted the facilities had been modified to accommodate the Vanir body quite nicely, and she smiled in appreciation. Exploring further around the living and sleeping spaces, she noted the tilted outer wall, and a ledge that spanned the width of it, with a small set of controls inset on the wall next to the ledge. Radatel stepped over and pointed them out to Sally.

*‘Those are the same controls as the ones in the Imperial Suite on the next level above’* he told her, then triggered a few commands.

A thick armored panel silently rose into the ceiling, uncovering a transparent window behind it. The view from just over thirty meters above ground revealed the greens and browns of the surrounding area. Off in the distance, a slightly taller pyramidal structure could be seen, with its glistening sides reflecting the sunlight in their direction. Radatel reached out and adjusted a setting, which caused the window to change its opacity to compensate for the glare.

*‘That was my father’s contribution to the city – yet another blot on the skyline’* he told them, almost bitterly. *‘Just another reason to go HOME every night, instead of staying here, day in and day out. I MUCH prefer the gardens at home’*

He sounded almost wistful for a moment, and Sally wondered how it must have been for him growing up as the son of the Emperor.

Samuel walked up and touched the window gingerly before tapping it with the tips of his claws, noting that it sounded very solid.

*‘One meter of transparent armor. It’s very much like that used on our Imperial transports, only much harder,’* Radatel explained. *“The outer armor is another two meters, and the one which slipped up into the ceiling is only about a third of what you see before you. I don’t know why they bothered, since the windows don’t even open. My father did have a healthy level of paranoia, I suppose’* He reached out himself and gave it a couple of sharp raps.

Samuel silently stared out the window, still amazed that *this* is where first contact by the humans had led him to. It was almost unbelievable, as was the fate of his first human friend. The actions of Ronnie’s immediate family were of concern to him as well.

*‘Radatel Caldarous ... how is the health of the ones called Maya and Spring Blossom?’* Samuel almost surprised himself by asking, but the chaos that had struck the family after Ronnie’s body had been delivered was still very confusing to him.

*‘They are still plagued by sadness at the loss of Ronnie. Spring Blossom was his mother, and Maya was a long time companion to him on Earth. Unlike the Vanir, this grouping of humans raise their own young from birth, until they are able to contribute to society’*

Samuel didn’t know what to say, but Sally had noticed something about Spring Blossom that confused her.

*‘Radatel Caldarous ... I was told that Spring Blossom had maintained herself at a young age among your people, yet during my first viewing of her, she seemed to be somewhat more elderly than I expected ... from a description shared with me by Lady Lili’*

*‘Spring Blossom is an Earth-human. As such, if she does not maintain an adequate physical relationship, then she will age rapidly, as was the case with Ronnie if he were allowed to be returned to life. My understanding is that Lili was ordered NOT to attempt to bring him back’*

That last comment found silence descending among the three of them.

Radatel continued to stare out the window while the reasoning behind that ruling still escaped him. If he could be brought back, then it makes sense they could simply *Heal* him if they tried hard enough. According to what Lili had told him, everything had been done to clean out his head, and repair his body. It was just a matter of getting his aging triggers reset – unless the Vanir had *broken* that aspect of his physical body? He let out a dejected sigh at the current situation. If nothing else, Ronnie had completed his mission for the Crown. Of *that*, they could be grateful, at least. He turned and excused himself after assuring them he was available to them at a moment’s notice. Then he wandered out and attached his human guards as an escort to his offices above. Life went on in the Commonwealth, and *he* was the one responsible for making sure things moved smoothly.

### ***The Royal Homestead, The Children’s Play Area***

The kids were sitting on the grass this morning and working on the problem.

“I got nothing,” Josie said in frustration.

“Me too,” Cathy said.

“I would not know where to begin,” Rose murmured quietly.

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“How about you, Jaiying?” Walter asked her, but glanced around to see if any adults had decided to join them.

He could feel Cathy’s mother wandering around nearby, but she seemed to be going away from them. All he could see were a few guards up on the rim.

“Well ... *before* the bomb went off, I got about ten years, Standard, out of that insane warren leader,” Jaiying told him. “She didn’t *seem* to feel anything, and didn’t change any that I could detect. But then the bomb went off, and I can’t really be sure of my recollection.”

“We’ve traded several months back and forth between us,” Cathy volunteered quietly. “But that was a regular life suck.”

Josie turned thoughtful for a moment and made a suggestion.

“The *Vanir* seem to like Grandfather. How about we just ask Samuel or Sally if they’d volunteer a decade or two to restore him?”

### *Inside with Lili*

Diane was slowly strolling the grounds with Lady Mayella Donszi, the new First Lord’s wife. In truth, Diane was strolling, while Mayella, at less than four weeks to her due date, was waddling somewhat awkwardly. Meanwhile, Lili was getting an update on her Healer-trainee status by the Senior she’d assigned to Taldus Remy when he’d become the acting First Lord.

“She is doing very well, my Lady Song,” Senior Lifen Shan told her approvingly. “It is unfortunate she was not at the Fringe when Lord Caldar was busy creating students for the *new* Healer Cluster, though.”

Being a Senior agent of Lili’s, she was privy to quite a bit of *non*-public information within the Commonwealth. Just the same, Lili took a quick read of the emotional content behind those words, but found Lifen was merely stating what she felt was a truly unfortunate lack of access to Lord Caldar. She hadn’t yet been told of his untimely demise.

“Alas, his duties for the Emperor take him elsewhere for the time being,” Lili muttered evenly, then smiled demurely. “Has Taldus expressed any *dismay* since you’d all been sponsored for adoption by the Imperial family?”

“You mean, compared to when he first learned about Kantite bureaucracy from the *inside*? Well ... perhaps,” Lifen considered. “He was just getting used to still being alive after those few blunders he’d made. Actually, he’s acclimating rather *well*. He still suffers a certain amount of dread, though, with the Emperor looking over his shoulder. Mayella, too. In fact, I think Mayella was more shocked about the situation than Taldus was.”

Lili closed her eyes for a second and reached out to Mayella to see for herself. Poking around delicately, she could read several areas of worry for her husband, but also for the second issue Lifan had mentioned.

She contacted Diane silently and suggested a topic of conversation for her to pursue, then opened her eyes to address Lifan once again.

“How do they like their new living quarters at the Capitol?”

### *In the Gardens*

The mid-morning was beautiful, and Diane was subtly leading Lady Mayella away from the area where the children were playing. In doing so, they continued along a pathway that wound its way through sculpted hedges, while circumscribing flowerbeds in full bloom. As they sauntered along, she paused to reach out and pluck a fragrant flower from a thorny bush. It would serve two purposes during its sacrifice, but at least one of them would be pleasant.

A turn in the path brought them in view of an open pond, and she smiled as she saw the greenish lumps sunning themselves on an otherwise bare rock surrounded by water. She guided Mayella to a bench facing the pond, and bid her to sit with her to contemplate the view.

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen creatures like those,” Mayella finally said. She’d had to wait until one of them moved its head to confirm that it was alive.

“They’re from my home planet. They are called \*turtles\* and live on aquatic plants and swimming animals,” Diane explained. “My husband’s father raised them until he became sick. Then my son used to visit and feed them. We finally got permission to bring them here.”

“You brought a pair of these ... \*turtles\* to *Kantor*?” she asked, then turned to look at her in dismay. Diane had already explained this more than once to various visitors, and her smile was both calming and reassuring.

“They’re both females,” she said. “No risk of them reproducing and getting loose on the planet. One of them used to lay eggs, but they were always infertile.”

Mayella turned and looked at them intently for a while before settling back on the bench, her folded hands resting on her prominent belly.

“How unfortunate for them,” she finally said, and got a chuckle from Diane.

“Not really. They lay their eggs, but then wander off. If any hatch, the babies are on their own. My husband’s father had these for ten years before we left.”

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They continued to watch while Bob and Larry gave every impression of being green-tinted, flat statues on the rock in the pond.

Finally, Diane brought the rose up to her face and breathed in the fragrance of it – letting out a soft hum of pleasure at its pleasant scent.

After a suitable pause, she deliberately pricked herself on a thorn deep enough to leave a spot of blood behind on her finger.

“Ai-yah!” She’d said it without thinking, and found amusement in the saying of it. Apparently, she’d immersed herself in her new life to the point of replacing “\*Ouch!\*” with the appropriate exclamation.

“Oh! Did it *bite* you?” Mayella asked her seriously, again forcing Diane to hold her laughter.

“No. Simply thorns I’d neglected to clear it of.”

She spent several seconds pressing thorns from the side to snap them from the stem before offering it to Mayella with her bloody fingertips.

“You’re *hurt*!” Instead of accepting the flower, Mayella looked at her hand in dismay, and Diane could feel the tentative need from her to reach out and seal her tiny wound, even to the point of detecting a ramping of energy flow from the young Healer-trainee.

“Oh ... would you please, dear?” she asked, and held out her injured finger for a simple Healing.

Mayella brought Diane’s hand between her palms and closed her eyes, letting a tiny glint of golden light begin to glow around her hands. Thirty seconds later, the glow died down, and she pulled her hands away, opening her eyes to see that all the blood had been successfully restored to its rightful place. A self-satisfied smile graced her lips until she looked up and caught an expression from Diane that verged on the judgmental. She quickly glanced away as she endured the tiny chuckle from the *Senior* seated beside her.

“Very *good*, Mayella. You’ve developed the natural instincts of a Healer, and I will report such to the First Wife,” Diane praised her gently, then tried to soften the blow. “You know, my *own* training was very cruel. I suffered from disbelief in the Healings. They are not done on my home world.”

Mayella gave out a tiny gasp. She knew Healers were found throughout the Commonwealth, but demand far outstripped the available supply. They even found staffing on colony worlds to provide services for the most severely injured, and supported various outposts along the Fringe. She could not imagine *anywhere* that you could not find at least *one* practitioner – even someone at *her* meager level.

Diane didn't follow all of it, but caught the gist of most of it, then decided to share a few state secrets.

"My home world is not really part of the Commonwealth," she whispered loudly. "Earth is a *Protectorate*."

Mayella turned to look at her, shock filling her eyes as she stared at the Earthling – *the barbarian* – calmly sitting next to her. Diane had no problem at all reading *this* reaction.

"Yes, it's true," she admitted sadly. "Our family legacy is *filled* with instances of Commonwealth seeding programs interfering in our bloodlines. My husband's family was seeded a few generations past. Even *I* was a victim of the practice," she lamented. "I've even met my Commonwealth *father* ... and *he* was a product of seeding as well," she whispered softly, before finally feeling the shock from Mayella turning into sympathy.

"Kantite men are *ANIMALS!*" she blurted out, before leaning over to hug the poor Senior seated beside her. "I'd heard *rumors* of such things, but never *dreamed* they'd still be true!"

Diane aborted the sigh that tried to force itself past her lips. She'd intended to lead Mayella into a discussion of Kantite management principles, by comparing them to the *worst* examples she could imagine – those of *Earth*. On reflection, she considered that now that the door was open, she might as well run with it.

"The Kantites are not the *worst* leaders I've ever endured," she stated quietly. "On the whole they've been rather even-handed."

Mayella pushed back from her in confusion. Kantite men were the *WORST!* Why *else* would they need Healers and Seniors to contain their voracious appetite for *power!* She recalled the incident that occurred sometime after her husband had been sentenced to forced labor under the Emperor.

"What about that administrator from ... from *Wilder?*" she exclaimed. "The Emperor committed *MURDER* when he fed him to those ... those *things!*" She let out a shudder, before quickly glancing around. She knew valaets *often* prowled the grounds here at the Royal Homestead.

"Believe me, dear, that Borgalas filth was *nothing* like a proper administrator," Diane muttered distastefully. "He was as power-mad and cruel as any wayward Kantite who'd lost his guidance."

She'd stopped short of saying "Drecks" since Torga and Many were on the verge of being formally introduced at Court.

"Klaner kidnapped members of Lady Shay's clan on Wilder," she continued bitterly. "Lady Shay was from Cletus, and her clan was in

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allegiance to Cletus. Hers, and other Clans were allowed on Wilder for the benefit of their people. By Commonwealth law, we may not interfere with strictly *internal* matters of a world. As Klaner had made repeated raids of those Clans – and made sacrificial *killings* of citizens of Cletus descent – the Emperor determined he had *violated* Commonwealth law.”

Mayella stared at her, barely able to believe what she was hearing.

“Ask Lady Shay,” Diane told her. “She watched members of her clan *die* at the orders of that Borgalas madman. She watched female slaves being *killed* to expunge the honor of Borgalas *men* who’d argued over something as trivial as ... as the taste of a *meal*, or the quality of a *wine*.”

Diane’s face had grown hard at the telling, before it got even grimmer.

“Nothing, of course, compared to the chaos that exists on my *own world*!” she nearly spat out.

Mayella sat mute, unable to respond, while Diane began a comparison study of Kantite versus Earth political realities – including all the *hundreds* of variations that would likely be found on Earth.

It wasn’t a *short* discussion.

### *The Odontoceti, Outbound*

David and Andy were returning to the Capitol after having dropped off yet *another* family of strays Ronnie had “acquired” a few years ago. While David was piloting, Andy was running through his mind the legal requirements the Royal family would be bound to if the couple and their young daughter became permanent fixtures at the Royal Homestead...

First of all, lands would have to be set aside for the production of staples to feed the new family – all at the expense of the Royal Household. In addition to that, if workers necessary for that needed to be hired, then *additional* funding would be required for their wages and support. Offsetting some of those expenses would be the redistribution of any excess produce or other products from that activity into the distribution channels of the commodities marketplace. Finally, the overall expenses would be counterbalanced by the combined individual incomes of each family member – if they had any...

Andy smiled at that last. He’d often wondered how those two reporters had suffered the shock of not finding an established news-reporting agency that *wasn’t* under the immediate supervision of the government.

### *At the Homestead, In the Gardens*

“Diane, is it *really* like that on your home world?” Mayella had misplaced formal a while ago. Now it was just Diane and May.

"May, you would not *believe* the shock I went through when I first learned the Commonwealth was run like a dictatorship! Back on Earth, dictatorships are the absolute *worst* form of government. It makes my *own* country's political system seem almost benign in comparison."

"But ... but you said your government was run by its *citizens*," she said, while still being confused at the concept of a \*Representative\*-*"Democracy"* which often raised non-issues over decisions that should be of obvious benefit to the *majority*. "And ... and how can your leaders fail to support the needs of their *citizens*?"

"Well, if *Ronnie* were here, he would probably say *greed*."

If any of *Ronnie's* diatribes were an indication, Diane was almost *sure* of it, and she'd *never* wanted to bring up the plight of the Native American Indians with him again.

"Greed?" Mayella asked, then flushed for a moment, having momentarily forgotten that she'd come from Loca with Taldus, but *surely*...

"May, political corruption on Earth occurs *everywhere* among the hundreds of independent countries that currently exist ... each with their *own* language, their *own* form of exchange, and their *own* laws. Without the Seniors and Healers, the Kantites would probably follow suit. As it is, *we* – you and I – hold *great* responsibility within our hands to manage our men so our Commonwealth remains *stable*."

She looked down at the bloody-stemmed rose in her lap, and lifted it up to sniff it once again, before presenting it to Mayella for her own pleasure.

"If we fail in our duties, we might suffer the loss of many beautiful things," she murmured while looking into Mayella's eyes. "Our children ... our families ... even this beautiful flower."

Diane leaned towards her with the flower held at chin height. Mayella looked at it cautiously, then bent forward tentatively, before finally breathing in the fragrance of it, and humming appreciatively. Opening her eyes, she could see Diane's smile from only inches away. It wasn't really that much further when she closed the distance to share a kiss with this very kind and *informative* Senior.

### ***Inside the Household***

Ralph Laurence and Stephanie Twain were enjoying themselves as they chatted with the Wives.

They'd arrived just an hour ago, and even before getting settled in the visitor's quarters, they'd reported to Lili with their perception of the



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status of the Demon's Realm. Once finally unpacked, bathed, and dressed, they'd joined the Wives in the family casual room.

They were excited to be back on Kantor, having brought a new daughter into the world since they'd last visited the planet. The only downside of their visit was learning they'd be attending the Remembrance for Lord Caldar.

That didn't matter to their daughter, Marion.

Their toddler was currently pinned to the floor by the new kits, who were licking her and causing her to giggle gleefully.

### *With the Children*

Out in the gardens, the Senior Staff was getting frustrated.

They'd read the memories of anyone they could find who'd ever experienced giving or receiving life force. It wasn't that they *couldn't* do it, but they'd have to do it without being detected by anyone outside of the immediate family. They finally decided to take a break for dinner, and work on it later.

As it was closest to the kitchens, they headed back to the living spaces by way of the family room. Looking through the patio window, the small party they found inside was graced by two vaguely familiar visitors, while a third one was being tasted by the valaet siblings, but fortunately categorized as "family" in their tiny minds.

### *With the Ladies*

The Senior Staff became the subject of curious stares from the adult visitors; having stopped just inside the doorway before noticing the Caldarous crest on the rings the visitors wore. Walter continued forward, and the girls followed in his wake, while Lili turned and smiled in their direction.

"Ah! Children, you're just in time to meet another branch of the family!" she said cheerfully. "These are Ralph Laurence and Stephanie Twain. They were \*reporters\* on Earth before your Grandfather brought them to us." She gestured to the helpless child pinned to the floor.

"That is Marion, their daughter," she added unnecessarily.

"I'm Walter Lane," Walter said, acting as spokesperson for the group. "This is my sister, Cathy Lane."

As her name was called, Cathy raised her hand in a single wave and dropped it.

"Next to her is Josie Lane, my big sister's daughter," he continued. "The skinny girl is Jaiying Caldarous, daughter of the Emperor's

daughter, Lady Laisee. This young lady beside me is Rose, daughter of Nathan and Dorcas. Do you remember them?"

"Ahhh..." was as far as Ralph got before Stephanie took over.

"I heard about them after Ronnie blackmailed us into joining the Commonwealth!" she quickly said, her smile belying any distress over that incident. "Later on, we met them in person over on—" she stopped and looked at Lili, not knowing how much could be said in mixed company, but with the Senior Staff, it didn't really matter.

"You met them on Grandfather's colony world," Jaiying said quietly, then asked, "What does a \*reporter\* do?"

The sudden shift in gears didn't faze Stephanie, and she warmed to the question.

"A \*reporter\* is a person who researches information about a person or an event. Then it's recorded for its informational value. It's important that the truth be recorded, so a proper record of it can be made."

"So ... you're kinda like ... *spies*?" Josie asked them, which triggered a titter from Lili.

"They work for *me*, Josie!" she said cheerfully. "The information they gather allows us to determine the effectiveness of our social programs within the Commonwealth. They've even helped Dorcas at the Demon's Realm by pointing out social imbalances between the Drecks and the other human-Standards your Grandfather had recovered over the years."

"Back on Earth it was a little different," Ralph offered. "Now that we're here, we've learned to *appreciate* the delicate balance between what the public should know, and what information must be properly managed when being introduced to the public."

"Like bringing the Drecks and Vanir Ambassadors to Kantor?" Rose asked quietly. "They seemed very nice while Jaiying and I were traveling with them. Manya and Sally were very kind, too. They even learned to become Healers."

The reporters sat very still while staring at the children; now discovering there was yet *another* news item that would probably never come to light. Ralph finally shrugged and gave out a short laugh, while Stephanie released a tiny giggle.

Upon hearing her mother's giggle, Marion struggled to sit up, but the kits were still holding her down. Walter felt her frustration building, so he silently called off the kits, who then noticed them for the first time and broke away to join their bigger companions.

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The female stood at Walter's feet and looked up at him imploringly, so he bent down and picked her up before cradling her in his arms and scratching her around her ears. The male picked out Cathy and entwined himself in a roving pattern between her legs. After several passes, he flopped across her feet before wrapping his paws around her ankles.

Marion took in the newcomers, then shyly drifted over to her mother, where Stephanie wrapped her arms around her and drew her into her lap.

While Stephanie was distracted, Jaiying took that opportunity to peek into her mind and dig around to learn a little about her experiences with Grandfather. She tried to key off a memory of her Grandfather and found references to direct conversations she'd had with him, and information she'd learned about him from other members of his Earth family.

It seemed a pointless exercise, until she flashed on the image of a dark-haired Earth girl with the curious name of Kayla Wind Runner, who was *also* an Earth-trained Healer of some sort. She memorized that image, and the feeling Stephanie had of her, before filing it away for later.

As the adult's attention turned to the patio door, Walter turned to see Faithful Daughter standing there. A quick glance at the room's clock told him the kits were late for a meal, so he pushed the female up around his neck and squatted down to pick up the male. While he was gathering the truant valaets, Josie walked over and slid the door open – leaving nothing but air separating the hundred-plus pound valaet from the rest of the household.

When Walter got there, he set the kits down. The female docilely headed to the den, while the male made an abortive attempt to slip back into the room, but was hooked and swatted seven meters into the yard for his trouble. After rolling to his feet and shaking off his dizziness, he slunk off in the same direction as his sister, followed by his *big* sister.

Josie closed the door, while Walter turned around to address the room.

"I think it's time for dinner."

~~~

After days of absence, Maya finally made an appearance later that evening at supper. She came in quietly, her face drawn and puffy-eyed, but greeted everyone politely and sat down while the meal was still being served.

The family politely ignored her, for the most part, not demanding any interaction from her, but not deliberately excluding her from anything, either. They knew when she felt like talking again, she would likely warm

up during a conversation. The Wives silently monitored her intake, but never forced anything upon her.

Towards the end of the meal, the children gathered around her to give her hugs before eventually escorting her back to her quarters. As she prepared for bed, Rose and Jaiying kept her company for a while, then kissed her goodnight and left, heading back to the suite they shared with their cousins.

Along the way, neither of them remarked on how nice it was to be without a constant Imperial shadow lingering close by, but they both felt it, and relished the feeling.

The Kraken, The End of the Watch

Gallus had relieved him early, so Petrus headed to the commons to grab a bite to eat before joining Sai and Déjà. When he got there, he was struck by the utter loneliness he felt at the empty space surrounding him. He fell back on his usual solitary meal – a bowl of ships poop – and afterwards went to put his empty bowl and spoon into the commons dishwasher. Even that showed the loss of crew, as it only had a few soiled bowls and utensils within.

He stood there for several seconds while starting a new list in his head to decide what to do with all the food still stored in the kitchen pantries and freezers. Depending on what the Emperor wanted from him, it might be reasonable to sign on a regular crew. Perhaps even query some of their previous crewmates from the Fringe for special missions?

He finally kicked himself for worrying about it now, and closed the washer door before setting the timer to start the wash cycle at midnight. Thinking about *that*, he began thinking of how much it would suck going back to permanent three-section duty once again. It had been pretty nice having additional bridge crew aboard to cut down on the number of hours everyone had to stand during the bridge watch. On a Galaxy-class, you didn't much worry about it since everyone was right *there*, while on the *Kraken*, it was a given fact of life.

He continued to think about it while walking along the vacant corridors to his compartment – the previously ignored low thrumming of the ship's systems now becoming obvious without the persistently random sounds of human occupation to mask it.

When he, Sai, and Déjà went down for Ronnie's Remembrance, it would leave only Endo, Gallus, their wives, and Kiki aboard to watch over things. Not that they hadn't done so in the past. Nor was it unheard of to abandon the *Kraken* entirely while everyone was off somewhere else causing disruptions within the Hegemony.

He got to the door, but paused a moment before opening it.

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He would have to talk to his big sister when they went down for the Remembrance. It wasn't critical at the moment, certainly not before taking the ship in for service, but it was a consideration if it was to remain a viable tool for the Emperor. Nodding his head at that decision, he opened the door and caught the conversation in progress.

"Mother, have they made a decision yet? When will the Remembrance be held?"

"I told you, girl, when Lili decides, she will tell us. Now please try to rest, Déjà. You don't need any extra stress."

"I'm not tired, Mother. I just want to..." Petrus' entrance finally got her attention, and she turned on him. "*Petrus!* Has anyone set a time yet? When will we be going down there? Who is going to watch the ship when we go down there?"

"*Girl!* Your stepfather just got here. Let him catch his breath and rest a while."

"It's all right, Sai," he said, then walked over to hug his stepdaughter.

"Déjà, we'll go down sometime before the Remembrance ... probably on the same day of the Remembrance. Endo and Gallus will remain up here, along with their wives and Kiki. Your mother and I are immediate family, and you're going along because you're a Princess, and you carry the next Imperial Prince and Princess. After we're done, I have to return to the ship to relieve whoever is left on watch."

Sai looked at him, then caught his feelings of concern.

"Watch on watch. That gets old *real* fast," she muttered, "Especially when we're not *doing* anything."

He turned a wry smile in her direction before letting go of Déjà and stepping over to hug her in turn.

"We've done it before, but you're right. I guess I've gotten spoiled," he murmured into her ear, then squeezed her a little tighter before letting go. "We'll have to figure it out, depending on what Radatel's new mission is. In the meantime, Gallus is on duty, and Gaia will be bringing him his midnight meal. I'm yours until ... the bottom of the morning," he said, after glancing at the compartment timer over her shoulder.

When Sai started helping him out of his clothes, Déjà let out a quiet sigh, and turned to step into her own room. She closed the door behind her so she wouldn't be distracted by their impending play, then decided to browse the entertainment collection to see what was available.

She missed spending time with her little friends. Neither Rose nor Jaiying ever talked down to her when they chatted about anything that

came to mind. She also enjoyed watching the animated programs stored in the system with them. Now that she was alone, she was feeling particularly empty for some reason. She gave out a silent snort at what she *used* to focus on when she had nothing better to do.

After a few more moments of consideration, she decided to revisit that part of her life and see if it still held the attraction it once did. She switched the library search over to more intimate instructional programs, and found a selection that seemed interesting. Several minutes into the program, she rummaged through a drawer and withdrew a toy she and her mother used to play with, and applied it to good use.

Well over an hour later, she was pleased to discover that she hadn't *really* lost a desire for that part of her life – it was just that she'd lost the partner whom she liked best to share it with. She finally decided the toy would just have to do until she found someone else to play with on a regular basis.

Kantor, The Children's Quarters

Even after her cousins had fallen asleep, Jaiying was still wide-awake and worrying about their Grandfather. There was a solution out there but she just couldn't seem to find it.

She glanced over at her sleeping companions, and thought how grateful they'd been when Stephanie Twain had kept Marion with her and her husband instead of trying to burden *them* with her company.

It wasn't that Marion was particularly stupid – not for a child her age – but the cousins had been living a very special existence since their births, and just couldn't relate to a *normal* child.

This had been something their parents had discovered years ago during the one aborted attempt to participate in what they'd called a "play-date" with some children of the staff.

The reporter, Stephanie, turned out to have an interesting set of memories, though. Jaiying had slipped inside earlier after she and her husband had finished playing. What she'd discovered were more flashes of her Grandfather in several places.

At first she found a lot of anger towards Grandfather, but as her timeline continued, that had gradually turned into acceptance, and eventually, appreciation. She'd found references to some woman who'd paid them credits of some sort to research her Grandfather and his friends – all of which had somehow ended badly, or *something* like that.

Aside from the flashes with her Grandfather, she'd also caught snippets of images and conversations with other people she'd interacted

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with. Unfortunately, Earthlings had poorly ordered minds, and there was very little context she could relate it to.

She'd been ready to leave Stephanie's mind, when the image of that dark-haired girl appeared again. She stopped, went back to look at her again, then picked away at the impressions of her within Stephanie's mind.

Afterwards, she pulled out and considered what she'd just learned – that Kayla Wind Runner had been an actual *student* of her Grandfather!

She wondered if Grandfather had talked to this Kayla person about the forbidden path, before considering how hard it would be to find her.

It was a moment's reflection to remember that she'd linked with Aunt Lili on a few occasions when she was contacting her agents on Earth, so she decided that it shouldn't be *that* hard to accomplish.

She settled back and relaxed before extending outwards to begin searching for that lone individual out of the *billions* on Earth.

August 4, Kantor, The Royal Gardens

It had taken her a few days, but Jaiying had finally located that mysterious “Kayla Wind Runner” person, and managed to poke around in her memories a bit. Erring on the side of caution, she'd *not*-wished it could have turned out better.

Kayla had indeed been a real student of her Grandfather's, but for the most part, been taught in a somewhat non-traditional fashion. She'd certainly never suffered the horrible treatment *Cathy's* mom had endured, but likewise she'd never received Senior training from him, or even information about the “forbidden” acts. Those particular aspects had been left to be taught by the Healers assigned by Aunt Lili to run his Healer Cluster.

Last night she'd gone into that Healer's mind once again and replayed that first critical lesson to her, while trying to find hidden meanings in his instruction, but to no avail.

This morning found the kids back in the garden and trying to work out a solution to deal with the problem. At the moment, there just didn't seem to actually *be* a solution to that particular problem – not one that wouldn't cause problems for everyone *else*. The best they could hope for was getting volunteer donations from the Vanir, or possibly sacrificing criminals to gain enough suitable life force, which had been *Josie's* personal suggestion.

On Maya's Patio

It had taken time, but, unlike Spring Blossom, Maya had finally rejoined the family in a rather subdued capacity. While Ronnie's mother remained sequestered in her suite, Maya had taken a positive step this morning by sitting outside and taking comfort in the view of the lush gardens surrounding her patio.

Surprisingly, over the last few days, she'd found an unlikely companion in Faithful Daughter. Perhaps the valaet was simply drawn to her as another creature with a loss comparable to her own, although the lost of both a mother and a brother might not equal the lost of a mere human to her furry companion. Just as Maya had set down her chilled drink, the valaet had come out of the bushes and padded over to sit in front of her before resting its head in her lap.

Maya was no longer worried about the odd relationship she shared with the valaet, and was content to accept it for what it was. She extended the comfort of her touch, as the big sister of the kits seemed to need it. Maya understood loss as well, having lost her *own* "kits" many years before. She ran her fingers through the silken hair around Faithful Daughter's ears, and was eventually rewarded by a soft purr of contentment.

"Where are your little brother and sister?" she whispered quietly, but the valaet remained content with the status quo and kept purring.

It was strange, this human and animal relationship. Ronnie had not spoken of it very often, and she'd had no idea he could actually *communicate* with the creatures – to carry on an *intelligent* conversation with them, no less. It was yet another of his lies in a long *list* of lies, if only a lie of omission. *Lili* had certainly been surprised when the Emperor had finally admitted it to her. It explained a *lot*. Perhaps it also explained why *Lili* had avoided the gardens since she'd returned from Cletus?

She reached over and grasped her chilly drink, the condensation wetting her fingers in the process. After sipping it and setting it back down, the valaet reached up with one paw and delicately pulled her hand down so the moisture could be licked off her fingers.

'Too soon' Maya felt pressed into her mind, and she froze for just a moment while the black face looked up into her eyes. Then the valaet closed its eyes and rested its chin back on her lap, letting out a sigh, and beginning to purr again when Maya finally continued with her gentle ministrations.

Out in the Gardens

The kids had kept experimenting with manipulating life force, but this time they were working on a small burrowing animal the male kit had

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proudly brought to them – *mostly* intact and still breathing. Walter knew his limitations, and Josie was just too damn dangerous with this stuff, so this time it was Cathy's turn to try to restore the tiny creature.

While Walter threw a shield up over *everyone*, Cathy spread her hands over it, expended a tiny amount of life force from her *own* body, and directed it to the recovery of the tiny beast.

It glowed for a short period of time, then suddenly came to its senses, and looked around in a panic. Before Jaiying could reach out to comfort it, it scurried away in fright, and *nearly* got to the bushes, before the female kit caught it and tore it apart.

Jaiying let out a groan and was about to go and gather the pieces, but Josie put a hand on her arm.

"Let it go, Jaiying. It's not coming back from *that*."

Jaiying settled back and looked away from the meal *both* kits were now sharing, before turning her attention to Cathy and extending through her to see how much she'd lost for her efforts.

"What do you think? A week? A couple of days?" she asked her, although she couldn't say for sure, as she'd never noticed a difference within herself after taking ten years from that Vanir Warren leader.

Cathy ran her hands up and down her torso, then shrugged her shoulders.

"Maybe a little tired ... but no more than when we were working with insects," she said, then turned to Walter. "Are you *sure* nothing got through this time?"

"Well... I don't *think* anything got through. With Aunt Lili home this week, we can reasonably believe *she'd* notice something like this."

"That's true, Cathy," Jaiying told her. "Remember how Grandfather would block Elder Ai when he would dance on the *dark* side?"

That comment only reminded them of what they were trying to do, and ultimately how dangerous it would be if anyone *outside* the family found out about it – anyone they couldn't make *forget* about it, that is. The kids decided to wrap it up for the day and headed back to their suite.

They had much to talk about, and plans to make, before the Remembrance ... whenever Aunt Lili got around to scheduling it.

At the Evening Meal

It was just before supper that evening when Lili announced the timetable for the Remembrance. It would be held in six more days. She could have waited for the meal to be over, but then everyone would have

probably suffered stomach upsets for the remainder of the evening. Instead, the family ate in relative silence while contemplating the celebration of the First Lord's life in six days.

Maya finally left early, heading off to relieve the baby sitter for Marion. This had given her an excellent excuse to experience an act of helping someone, rather than sitting around moping for the rest of the evening. The kids found themselves in pretty much the same situation, albeit for different reasons. They hugged their individual parents, then learned Mama Laisee would be the parent on duty that night. They promised to bathe and get ready for bed once they got back to their suite.

They kept silent on the way back to their suite, and once there, took care of business first; washing, drying, putting on clean underwear, and in general, getting ready for bed. All of them made the rounds of the rather large suite and straightened things so Jaiying's mother wouldn't feel the need to perform any busy work on their behalf – not usually necessary because of the household staff and their own general tidiness.

They all recognized the need to relax before falling asleep, but that plan was thwarted when the kits traversed the valaet door and started cavorting across the low sleeping pads. Josie giggled, while Walter sighed.

Then Cathy got up and pulled a few items out of their special valaet toy box and tossed them across the room.

Off to one side, Jaiying and Rose watched as the kits went nuts chasing the toys until they caught them and brought them back to Walter and Josie. It was strange that the female always brought her toy to Walter, but the male alternated between Josie and Cathy.

Jaiying felt a tiny bit of loss over having failed to bond with the kits as well as her cousins during the months she'd been gone.

Rose and Jaiying watched for a while, but not being involved with the play, Jaiying finally lay down and thought about their results from that morning, which finally precipitated a conversation about it.

"Walter, do you *really* think we can do this?"

Walter was lying on the other side of the low bed, and tossed the toy across the room and through a door, sending the female scrambling after it.

"Are you having doubts? We *have* to get Grandfather back no matter *what* those old women say," he said while leaning back and looking up at the ceiling. "Cathy did well this morning."

"Yes. I brought it back," Cathy stated quietly. "But it would be better if *Jaiying* would do it. She was closer to Grandfather, and also *boosted* by him."

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“Umm... Jaiying was able to *hear* Grandfather ... a few times,” Rose offered timidly. “Remember what she shared with us?”

“Jaiying, did you *really* see and hear Grandfather, or was that part of a bomb-induced nightmare?” Josie asked her bluntly.

“Well... You might be right about that – the *first* time it happened,” she admitted. “But that doesn’t explain the other times I’ve seen him and heard him.”

“Jaiying’s right,” Cathy said, then captured the male and snuggled with it for a few seconds, before it escaped her arms. “We’ve *all* shared her memories of contact with Grandfather, but I don’t understand where he got the cup or the chair. And I think I’m right about having Jaiying do it. If Walther can hold the shield from the Elders, then we should have a chance to bring him back. We just need a suitable source of life force.”

There was silence for a moment, before the outer door opened, and Laisee came in to check on the kids.

“Time for bed, children,” she said quietly. “Time to put away the toys, please.”

“Yes, Mother,” Jaiying said.

“Yes, Momma Laisee,” Cathy said.

“Goodnight, Momma Laisee,” Walter said.

“Sleep well, Lady Laisee,” Rose said.

“Do we *really* have to go to sleep *now*?” Josie whined.

“I ... yes ... *please*,” she finally muttered, and with a shake of her head, entered the parent’s room and partially closed the door behind her.

Cathy got up and gathered the toys, while Walter manned the lighting control and waited for her to come back to bed. Once she got settled, he toggled the controls, and the overhead lights went out.

The soft, ground-level lights came on in their stead, letting them easily find their way around in the darkened room. Once they’d all settled in, each of the kits found their chosen partner for the evening and snuggled up to them.

Jaiying reached out and lightly tapped her mother’s mind.

From Laisee’s viewpoint, it was just a few minutes later that a subdued purring duet was heard coming from the kids room. Her mother bathed and dressed for bed herself, poking her head out one more time to see the human and kit bodies laid out in the outer room before finding her own comfortable platform for the evening.

After her mother settled in, Jaiying switched to their upper band and directed a question to Walter.

‘How much life force do you think we’ll need to bring Grandfather back and make him healthy?’

‘I’m thinking maybe ten years’ he shared.

‘That’s all?’ Josie asked.

‘We don’t need to completely rebuild him, do we? Commander Woldron and Lady Huan flushed that stuff out of his head. Jaiying even heard him when they were doing it, isn’t that right?’

As slight as it was, there was a pause before...

‘I – I believe I heard him ... yes. He was confused, but they put his head back into stasis before he ever really got the chance to return ... not completely’

‘If it’s like Woldron said, Grandfather can Heal himself once he gets back together. It was that stuff in his head that made him age so quickly’ Josie reminded them.

‘Yes, but ... ten years...’ Jaiying persisted. *‘I can understand making him younger to offset his losses, but... Where are we going to get ten years from?’*

‘We’ve talked about the Vanir. You said you ripped ten years from that warren person, and she never even noticed it’ Josie pointed out. *‘Maybe Sally would volunteer to donate ten years to Grandfather? She and Samuel will be here for the Remembrance, won’t they?’*

‘Probably... But if anyone ever found out...’

‘It’ll be kinda OBVIOUS, Jaiying. Grandfather will be glowing, our VOLUNTEER will be glowing – not to mention the glow that’ll be coming from YOU’ Josie sent with a silent smirk.

Walther was laying there thinking about the logistics of the act, but there was an important issue that needed to be brought up.

‘You know ... Grandfather is dead right now. If they pull him out of his box for the Remembrance, he’s STILL going to be dead. We have to make sure he stays in his box until we’re ready to act. And we have to figure out how to turn off the box when we need to’

‘Grandmother knows the sequence’ Jaiying told them.

‘Doesn’t matter. I can kill the box with a touch’ Josie shared arrogantly.

‘The lid is very heavy’ Jaiying pointed out. *‘It takes two men to remove it’*

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Walter's pause was only slight.

'So, we'll have help' he shared.

'Before or after?' Cathy asked him.

'I think afterwards. We hold the Remembrance to honor Grandfather, then wait for everyone to leave. We get the Vanir to help with the lid, and ... and if we're caught, and we fail, it can be blamed on our emotional attachment to him, and we might eventually be forgiven'

'But what if we DO manage to bring him back?' Cathy posed the question.

'Then Walter's shield better hold, or we're gonna be in deep crap with those Elders over on Cletus!' Josie pressed forcefully.

'The question is valid, Josie. What will we do if we bring him back, Walter?' Jaiying asked him.

Walter knew she was right. The question was a valid one, and his answer was long in coming.

'Then we'll have to trust that Aunt Lili loves Grandfather as much as we do, and finds a place to stash him while she figures out how to hide him from the Elders' he finally shared with them.

They remained silent for a while longer, none of them thinking of anything else to add, until Jaiying thought of the obvious and made an offer.

'We have a few more days to work on it. If Sally or Samuel won't help, then I'm willing to donate a few years for Grandfather'

There was more silence until...

'Okay'

'I'm in'

'M-Me too'

'Works for me!'

~~~

Being the clever adult that she was, Laisee had a few years of experience in dealing with her daughter, but even *more* years of occasionally sharing Ronnie's company. She'd had no problem following the conversation from the other room, but the only problem now was, is how to handle it.

As she'd lived in the Royal Household since birth, she understood the difference between what was right, and what was *politically* correct.

Either condition could be considered proper, but usually only under widely divergent circumstances.

She could go to Lili and report it to her, but it was tentative at best. Besides that, bringing it up at this hour would be inappropriate.

She finally decided to sleep on it and talk to Lili first thing in the morning. After all, they had a few more days until it became critical.

### *August 5, Moving Things Along*

Earlier that morning, Jaiying had been very cautious in probing once again the memories of Kayla Wind Runner. She'd done it herself because she didn't want to involve her cousins any more than they already had been.

What she'd learned was her Grandfather had given Kayla her first *real* lesson in Healing when a person there had been involved in an accident.

It hadn't been all that serious, and he'd taken the time to lecture her a bit before beginning the lesson.

What she'd heard from her memories sounded simple, but a portion of it kept nagging at her, so she decided to go out and test it just as soon as sunlight brightened the canyon walls enough to see by.

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Jaiying walked alone along a garden path that wandered between rows of flowers and short bushes until her movement had her leaving sight of the patio windows. All around her she could see the morning feeding frenzy, as various insects attacked the plants – either siphoning out nectar or chomping down on defenseless leaves. A few fliers were dining on more stationary prey, or capturing them in flight. She eventually stopped where they'd been practicing the day before, and sat down on the grass.

She exerted herself and reached out to draw an insect into her hand – the defenseless bug floating through the air and dropping onto her fingers. She focused intently, and gently pulled life from her tiny victim, bringing it nearly to the end of its already very short lifespan. Instead of trying to crawl away, it staggered a few times, before settling on her palm – her mind supplying imagined groans to match the enfeebled creature's torment. She didn't bother looking around, as she knew the silent scream of pain from the insect would be insignificant to anyone – least of all the rim guards standing tens of meters away. Most likely, they wouldn't even register with Aunt Lili, even if she'd been listening for them.

They knew, *all of them*, the story of how Elder Kita had found Grandfather in the void. He'd taken the forbidden path, and opened a locked door. They knew how Grandfather had taken life force from

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Grandmother Meela, yet weakened *all* of the Seniors on the platform at the same time; but they *also* knew he'd taken life force from comfort girls out at the Fringe in exchange for credits and the Gift, and *no one* had been the wiser.

Realistically, they were in no position of trying to Gift their Grandfather while sharing life force with him. It was impractical for any number of reasons, not the *least* of which was that he was already clinically dead. They'd been successful in trading life force between *themselves*, however, which was something they'd pursued ever since the position of the Elders had been made clear. It was rather ironic that Lili had been their primary instructor in that regard, while Jaiying was still on Vanaheim. Walter had practiced blocking their efforts, and so far, none of the adults had caught on – or they weren't mentioning it.

It seemed reasonable that *donated* life force would preclude the “psychic scream” that usually accompanied the taking of it by force – as had happened on the *Microcosmus*. If she and her cousins donated a couple of years each, then no one should notice – except empirical data suggested they'd become extremely hungry and maybe suffer a physical change overnight – which is why drawing it from the Vanir was so attractive.

However, if there was *another* source to draw upon. A *silent* source...

Jaiying focused on the dilapidated bug resting on her palm, then pressed her other hand to the ground before closing her eyes...

In the Children's Suite

Laisee woke up with a start while looking up at the ceiling, but a glance at the room clock showed that it was still early morning. She contemplated staying in bed for a while longer, until remembering the conversation she'd overheard the night before.

She reached out and found the children still asleep, so she got up and visited the facilities before getting dressed and slipping out the door. She knew Lili was sometimes an early riser – especially when Radatel was in the Capitol – so she headed to the breakfast room to meet with her. On the way out the door, she never noticed Jaiying was missing.

In the Gardens

Jaiying watched as the bug seemed to gather its senses before passing to her what seemed to be a dirty look. Then it straightened itself before flittering back to the flower it'd been harvested from, and *almost* made it there when a flyer swooped in and snatched it out of the air for breakfast.

“So close,” she murmured, then moved her hand through the stiff grass below her fingers. She raised her hand and brushed the dust off

her palm and fingers while looking down at the palm print she'd left behind.

Standing up, she slowly turned in a complete circle while running estimates through her mind of how much life force might be needed to restore her Grandfather to them.

Letting out a wistful sigh, she brushed off her clothes and headed back to her cousins. Halfway there, she decided instead to take a detour and visit the *other* person who was part of the upcoming event.

Off to Visit Lili

On the way to the dining area, Laisee could smell the scent of baked goods in the air – most likely **donuts** or perhaps even **waffles** served with that thick, sweet syrup Diane liked.

Upon arrival, she was relieved to see that Lili was dining all alone this morning. Presumably, Spring Blossom was still in mourning over Ronnie, which is why she'd thought Lili would be here alone.

"Good morning, Lili," she called out, but her words lacked any evidence of cheerful greeting in them.

"Laisee, you're up early this morning. Did you not sleep well?"

"I slept... Lili, I fear the children are–"

"Yes, the children are most upset about Rondal," Lili interrupted her. "He was their Grandfather, and loved them dearly, just as they loved him."

"Yes, but the children–"

"It was very endearing of Jaiying to ask that Rondal's head be reattached," Lili interrupted her again. "Spring Blossom took it very hard, but if he had come back *less* than intact... Well, it would not be very comfortable for her."

"I know, Lili. But I fear–"

"There is nothing to fear, Laisee. Rondal is home now, and will be laid to rest after his Remembrance – just as the Elders' ordered."

"LILI! I *MUST* speak to you about the *CHILDREN!*"

Laisee's sudden outburst brought Lili her to her feet, and the expression on her face was *unforgiving*.

"*LAISEE!* You *forget* yourself! You forget *WHERE* you are, and to *WHOM* you are speaking! Not another *WORD*, *now!*"

"B-But the *children...*"

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Lili held up a hand and stared her down. “Laisee, one of my husband’s *favorite* sayings dictates that *some* things need proper paperwork, while others suffer an *EXCESS* of a paper trail.”

She stared at her pointedly, but Laisee was still in a state of confusion, so she finally let out a frustrating sigh of resignation and relented just a tiny bit.

“Laisee... I am the *Elder*. I am the *Kantite* Elder, and I serve at the pleasure of the *Council* of Elders on *Cletus*,” she explained obliquely, to Laisee’s slowly shaking head. She sighed once again, then reached out and laid her hand on Laisee’s arm; passing along a calming glow in the process as she continued.

“It is generally understood that asking *forgiveness* for something is much easier than asking – and *receiving* – permission *before* the act ... *especially* when that permission has *already been denied!*” she stated pointedly, and *finally* felt Laisee starting to understand, before going on.

“My dear, the children are growing up so fast, and it will become increasingly *harder* to protect them from those who would take advantage of them ... or perhaps find them *inconvenient* to their existence? It would be unfortunate if it were revealed that the children might possibly be capable of much *more* than a simple capacity to Heal one in need. We are *family*, Laisee, and it is our duty to *protect* them from ... well, any possible threat to their *existence*.”

She patted Laisee’s arm before sitting back down in her seat. Laisee stared at her for a moment longer before nodding slowly and sitting down as well.

“I understand that we are family, Lili,” she murmured while still looking into her eyes.

“Yes, Laisee. Rondal *always* made that distinction between family, Commonwealth, and Crown. He held family as his *first* priority – *most* of the time. In many regards, he treated authority poorly, but it was *always* with the intention to protect the Commonwealth and the Crown ... as long as his *family* remained safe.”

Lili sipped at her morning beverage and set the crystal down before continuing.

“I, on the other hand, am an agent of the Council of *Elders*. As such, I am *duty bound* to report such things that might be construed as *unsuitable* to the stability of order ... or perhaps, *dangerous* to the Commonwealth. Such was the perception of a *fully*-restored Rondal. You know how *disagreeable* Rondal could be when he put a little effort into it.”

“But ... but Ronnie would *never*...”

“Perception is *everything*, Laisee,” she reminded her pointedly. “And the thought of *uncontrollable* wild talents would be something to bring under *control* – or be *eliminated*.”

Laisee’s eyes bugged a bit, and she saw a satisfied shadow flicker across Lili’s face before it faded away, now catching just the tiniest hint of a nod. Turning away in shame, she let out a slow breath before turning back to Lili with a polite smile on her face.

“How are the deep fried breakfast circles and *waffles* this morning, my Lady Song?”

“Oh! I find them *delicious*! The kitchen staff has produced them with love and care – as are *all* the actions taken within the Royal Household.”

Laisee smiled widely before transferring a pair of baked, patterned flat breads to her plate and pouring a measure of Diane’s favored sweet syrup over them. They enjoyed the remainder of breakfast in companionable silence – now that she realized she’d been fighting the *wrong* battle.

The only problem was that she wasn’t quite sure of how to fight the battle she *should* be fighting.

A Morning Visitor

Maya left her quarters that morning after finally steeling her nerves and deciding to face her demons. Along the way, she pondered that, then considered it was just the *one*, actually, and he wasn’t really a demon – although he’d *played* the role well enough, but that had turned out to be a lie as well.

She soon found herself hesitating while standing outside the door of Ronnie’s suite – suddenly realizing she didn’t remember actually walking here so quickly. She finally decided it must have been out of habit, so she pressed her palm against the panel to let herself in. She closed the door behind her and turned to look at the darkened room.

Furniture had been moved aside to allow the EMTU to be placed in the center of the outer room – its blinking lights indicating it was keeping Ronnie in stasis. No... Keeping the *body* in stasis.

She stood by the door, and reached to the lighting controls, bringing up the room light so she could clearly see the stasis box, and a safe path to reach it. Stepping off slowly, she advanced on it and stopped just short of the observation port. She looked at the control panel and saw where Standard notations had been made, one of which was an internal light source that would allow someone to see if there was any food inside ... or in this case, a body. She hesitated for a moment before toggling the light

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control – immediately seeing a soft glow radiating from the observation port.

“This is silly,” she murmured to herself. “We were no longer together. He was even going to marry Lili’s niece...”

She took a shallow breath, then leaned over to look inside ... seeing Ronnie’s face in front of her with his eyes closed as if in sleep. The lines in his face were deeper, and his hair had turned even grayer than before. The light was bright enough; she could clearly see the laugh lines around his eyes, which were much more prominent, but still a reminder of all the times they’d laughed together.

She closed her eyes and looked away before finally letting out an anguished sob at her loss. Her body shook as she tried to hold back her tears, but she was startled by the sound of a toilet flushing from the facilities off the bedroom.

She quickly wiped her eyes to try to make herself more presentable to whoever was in there with her. Could Spring Blossom possibly...

“Hello, Maya!” Jaiying greeted her cheerfully.

Jaiying didn’t miss the stress radiating from her, or the sense of recent loss. Even absent that, the puffy eyes were a dead giveaway as she walked over and hugged Maya around her hips.

“I love you, Maya. Grandfather loved you, too,” she said, but it was somewhat muffled in her robes. “He still does,” she mumbled very softly.

Maya was confused at her being there, but couldn’t bring herself to ask why, as Jaiying grasped her hand and pulled her towards the door to guide her away from the source of her angst.

“Let’s go have breakfast, Maya. I think we’re having *waffles* this morning,” she whispered loudly, already knowing her mother had met with the Elder over breakfast and what they’d *almost* talked about.

Jaiying led her to the door and opened it, pausing only long enough to turn the lighting back down. Pulling on Maya’s hand once again, she led them down the corridor at a slow pace, knowing Maya would need time to gather her composure before meeting with others in the family.

Maya followed along docilely while the young girl chatted aimlessly during the journey. She’d never even noticed when Jaiying had closed and palm-locked the door to Ronnie’s suite.

The Breakfast Room

The breakfast crowd continued to grow. Mei-Mei and Yin-Yin had joined them, followed shortly by Diane. Laisee praised the virtues of the breakfast offerings, and Diane mentioned the *strawberries* were almost

ripe enough to harvest. The conversation continued to revolve around household affairs until the Ladies noticed Lili was staring out the window at the patio. With a turn of their heads, they could see the reason why.

Lili watched as Targa Slayer stopped at the patio door and stood there expectantly. Several things flashed through her mind – including simply ignoring his presence. Unfortunately, that would only put off the inevitable. She put down her utensils, and reached for her cup, but stopped when a memory of the past flashed before her. She closed her eyes and pursed her lips, then licked them once before wiping them with her napkin.

“Ladies, please remain seated while I see to my guest,” she said quietly, then stood and headed to the door. Once there, she slid the door open, stepped outside, and closed it behind her.

“Greetings, Targa Slayer. I have not seen you since my return,” she said aloud, now knowing full well the huge valaet understood her perfectly well, and had done so for all these years.

‘Too soon’ he pushed at her, then turned away and paced towards the patio table near the edge of the greens before sitting down near a chair and waiting for her.

She finally forced herself into motion and followed him over to sit down beside him – facing away from the door, and far away from supposed safety.

They sat in awkward silence until he finally broached the question.

‘Talking Man?’

“He has been returned to us. His head has been restored, but his spirit has not joined his body,” she said, hoping this simple explanation would be accepted.

The huge black head turned and looked at her, its eyes boring into her own.

“M-My masters have forbidden me from trying to bring him back,” she said quietly.

He stood and moved to face her directly before sitting on his haunches once again, his eyes never leaving her face.

“Please understand, Targa Slayer. His body ... they were able to keep his body alive, but his head was dead. It was not part of his body any longer.”

He’d tilted his head as she’d spoken, but she knew she was losing him. Despite his obvious native ability to communicate with humans, she didn’t understand how much the valaet could truly understand of the

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metaphysics involved, and continued to think of ways that he might understand before her answers became insufficient.

On the Rim

Senior guardsman Aquila Avitus had been watching the tense meeting between the First Wife and the old guard valaet below. His partner – his brother's son, Philo – was with him this morning, and had already picked out the source of his Uncle's focus. They both watched as the human and the valaet faced off against each other, and from the looks of it, the meeting might turn ugly at any moment.

Philo softly patted his beamer and looked to his uncle ... who gave the slightest of nods without turning his attention away from the scene being acted out below.

The Breakfast Room

"Ummm, it smells *good*, Mayal!" Jaiying said loudly after they entered the silent breakfast room.

They stopped when they saw everyone staring out the window at the figures of Lili and Targa Slayer sitting facing each other at the table outside. Jaiying shook her head slightly, then let out an exasperated sigh before heading to the patio door.

On the Patio

Still at a loss, Lili was considering if the valaet would be able to view her memories – yet *another* forbidden act in the Elder's view – when she heard someone knocking on the window behind her. Seeing Targa Slayer's attention drawn to the window, she took a chance and glanced that way to see Jaiying standing at the door. She watched as the door started sliding open, and panic suffused through her. She started to rise, but a huge paw landed on her lap and forced her back down in her seat.

On the Rim

"Fuck!" Philo muttered very softly.

The valaet didn't seem to notice him, which was *very* unusual for the big one. Aquila considered that, then considered the tension he could clearly feel from his junior partner. He decided that prudence was warranted, and he would take the lead during any action this morning.

He gently tapped Philo's arm – causing him to startle – which only confirmed his decision. He patted his beamer, patted himself, then slowly unslung his weapon and lowered himself to the ground. He was careful to line himself up at an angle that should avoid accidentally hitting the First Wife.

That would *not* look good on his resume – provided he *lived* afterwards.

On the Patio

Jaiying's frown melted away before she turned from sliding the door closed and walking up to greet Targa Slayer with a smile on her face.

"Boots! I *missed* you!" she cried out, then leaned in to hug him tightly. "I missed you *all* the time I was gone!"

'*Aunt Lili must follow orders from her Masters. She cannot disobey*' she added silently.

He'd kept his foot on Lili's lap while Jaiying had talked to him, but finally relented when she gently pushed him away from her. She stood between him and Lili, letting Lili shakily rise to her feet.

"Good *morning*, Aunt Lili! Why don't you go in and finish your breakfast while I catch up with my *friend*?" Jaiying suggested cheerfully, all the while continuing to hug the huge predator.

In the Breakfast Room

Stephanie had just entered the room to find the silent crowd, then moved to find a position where she could see what everyone was looking at outside.

"You know, I've always been *amazed* at how well the guard *cats* have been trained to take care of everyone," she said aloud. "Even little ... isn't that *Jaiying* out there?"

She ignored the blank stares from her companions while she continued watching Lili slowly backing away from the table.

On the Patio

While Jaiying continued to chat aloud with Targa Slayer, Lili kept backing away slowly. A sudden thought struck her, and she glanced up at the rim guards – seeing one of them now ready to fire if the situation became unruly. She pushed out to them a silent command to withdraw, then added a sideways slash of her hand to confirm it, before turning and calmly walking back to the door.

She reentered the breakfast room, facing confusion from the rest of the wives, while leaving Jaiying alone with Targa Slayer.

On the Patio

"Boots, Talking Man was really, really sick before he let someone remove his head," Jaiying told him quietly, then let go of him and climbed

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up on the chair Lili had vacated. “He wanted to die *fighting* – like a *warrior*,” she assured him.

‘Good. Protect family’

“Yes. He trained a fighter to protect the family. He was growing too old, and was giving his last lesson when he died.”

Targa Slayer stood there and looked at her. He suddenly sneezed, then shook his head, which made her laugh.

‘Understand. Talking Man come back?’

Jaiking gave out a sigh, then leaned in to hug him around his neck again. Just in case anyone else was listening, she shared her thoughts with him *very* quietly.

‘We will try. Me. My cousins. But Lili must not know’

He considered that for several seconds before accepting it at face value. As long as *somebody* was willing to try, it was good enough for him.

‘Good’

He leaned back and stuck out his long tongue – licking her cheek and making her giggle – then stood up and turned away before calmly disappearing into the bushes.

On the Rim

The rim guardsmen watched as the old valaet meandered through the gardens on his way back to his den. They finally lost him in the bushes, but relaxed anyway, as the First Wife had already entered the premises, and the little girl was headed that way.

“Makes you wonder about the wisdom of letting those furry killing machines loose on the grounds around the children – let alone *themselves*,” Philo muttered irritably.

Aquila glanced at his nephew and tried to remember just how young he really was. He could see the tremors around his eyes while his flush was still winding down...

His brother’s son was still upset over the loss of his father. That visit from Lady Caldarous with the both of them hadn’t done much to temper his anger over his father’s death. The fact that he’d given his life, and *still* lost his principal was shameful, but not to the good Lady; and she’d earnestly told them so. Still, it was a burden the boy would carry for a few years at least...

“You know ... that little fracas with the Drecks might have turned out a whole lot worse if *we’d* been down on the canyon floor instead of *them*,” Aquila murmured pointedly. “We went down there afterwards. We only lost two valaets ... but they took out *most* of the Drecks for us.”

Philo glared at his uncle, but softened it a bit before turning his gaze back over the canyon floor. He finally let out a thin sigh and grunted acknowledgement of that assessment. Aquila blanked his smile, but kept watch over the canyon.

He’d watched the grounds for years now. It was lonely duty up here, with him and his partner on this side of the rim, and their counterparts on the other side. He suppressed a snort, but relaxed just the same – yet *still* kept a wary eye out. He’d had a feeling it probably wouldn’t have gone *totally* sour down there, but you just never knew.

He’d observed a lot over the years, and through it all he’d wisely kept his own counsel, but the one thing he was now *sure* of was the most *dangerous* thing down there probably wasn’t the *valaet*... It was the little girl who’d talked him out of eating the *First Wife*.

August 9, The Night Before

The household was alive with family who’d come to celebrate Ronnie’s life. Petrus, Sai, and Déjà had arrived from the *Kraken*, and picked up Sally, Samuel, Torga, and Manya from the Capitol along the way. Larl and Amy had arrived separately, along with the Emperor, who was taking a rare “day or two off” for a family matter.

After a simple dinner, they all gathered in the largest lounge room, and began sharing personal stories of Ronnie, with Petrus leading them off. He told them tales of some of the more humorous actions they’d shared in his early military career but avoided mentioning the *Microcosmus* – instead jumping forward to his years at the Fringe while chipping away at the Hegemony’s raids against the Commonwealth. Sai added a counterpoint to that, as she’d been contracted to him as an undercover agent for the Elder’s office at the time.

Petrus bounced over the time Ronnie had gone back to die with his Senior on the *Microcosmus*, and instead shared a few tales about the common mercenary life they’d lived – which brought up the story of that last mercenary mission to rescue colonists when Ronnie had decided that enough was enough and decided to work the Downside instead.

Lili chimed in with her niece’s report of meeting him at one of the training camps ... how Xiaoli had gone out of her way to irritate him to see if he’d quit – and how proud she’d been that Xiaoli had failed.

David told of his first arrival back on Earth – that *he* knew of, anyway – and how he’d taken a special interest in his father and his family. He

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related a few antidotes about his awkward interactions with Earthlings, but said he'd always gone out of his way to be fair and helpful to everyone he'd dealt with.

Maya was pressed to tell of her time with him on Earth, and she did so, but left out the incident when they'd first met. She stated they'd had nearly sixteen good years together but eventually drifted apart.

The room became silent for several moments until Diane spoke up and related the friendly holiday picnic where they'd ended up being kidnapped and taken away from Earth. She told them of her initial anger, and how he'd worked very hard to make sure they could make it back to Earth safely, but they'd all decided to stay with him in the Commonwealth, instead.

Andy brought up that it was too late anyway, since he and Shay had fallen in love and planned to bond after she fulfilled her obligation to David and Diane by carrying his new son, Walter. Larl pointed out that he couldn't *possibly* let Amy return to that scoundrel who'd left her pregnant and alone back on Earth, and he'd felt the need to become a father after all his years of bachelorhood – after which Amy pinched his arm and he yelped.

Laisee mentioned her joy at discovering she was carrying Andy's baby, and David finally shared that they couldn't very well return to Earth anyway because they'd broken so many Earth laws that none of them would be safe. That got a mixture of both laughter, and some confused looks from some of the newer attending family.

Nathan offered the story of how Ronnie had brought him and Dorcas together on Earth, then how he'd brought them both to Lili for "safe keeping", which got a quiet bit of laughter from the family.

Stephanie and Ralph shared a brief tale about their first meeting with Ronnie back on Earth, and how he'd eventually suborned them into joining the family – but then promptly dumped them on Lili, which got a much bigger laugh from everyone.

Petrus spoke briefly about working with Ronnie in the mighty *Kraken* to rip intelligence from the Hegemony in order to bring it down.

Sai filled in the remainder of that effort when she provided loose details of Ronnie's plan to suborn an ill-favored Drecks Lord and turn him against the Master Pack.

Torga stepped in at that point to give *his* interpretation of events – which was that Lord Caldar had come to establish an *honorable* peace between himself and Torga's father for his reprehensible behavior during the *last* time he'd shown up for dinner uninvited.

A general silence hung over the room until Sai piped up with the complaint that, sure, *Ronnie* had promised him a new arm, but he'd made *her* perform the regrowth of it for him. That got a few laughs, even from Torga and his wife, and the memories continued to flow.

Through his translator (for the men) and with mindspeak for the women, Samuel told of his initial astonishment at having a human actually approach *him* for the very first time in Vanir history. He followed it with an overview of how Ronnie had consistently strived to improve relations with the Vanir, and how he and Ronnie had gone on a rescue mission to recover the daughter of the Vanir Prime.

Sally chimed in that they were simply going out on a fool's mission at the time, and it was only *fortuitous* that Sue's paramour had broken her legs and stuffed her into a stasis container to save her life when their observer station inadvertently strayed into a death void and began breaking up.

Sai picked up the tale where they were on their way back to Vanaheim by a circuitous route so they could observe the behavior of various factions within the Vanir society – during which Ronnie was key in helping to identify and manage them.

Samuel voiced his opinion that it was through Ronnie's intervention that the Vanir Prime was able to maintain the stability of their society, and eventually able to accept the concept that Vanaheim was entering the *end-stage* of sustainability for a safe and healthy place to live.

Sally stepped forward and looked over the assemblage before speaking of what she'd felt for a long time now – that Ronnie had exemplified the *best* traits of humanity, even as his health began to decline. She thanked them all for producing such a remarkable human being, and for turning him loose to prevent a massive loss of life among all *three* of their societies. Sally's speech was a hard act to follow, and Lili stood up and hugged her tightly in appreciation of it.

Conversation started to mellow, as individuals shared more intimate antidotes about Ronnie with each other, and that's about the time the children said their goodbyes and headed to bed.

A few minutes later, Maya also bid them goodnight and headed off to relieve the sitter for Stephanie's toddler after mentioning she was feeling a little full.

Stephanie and Ralph begged off to go with her – each secretly hoping she'd share a little of her bounty with them; something that Maya picked up, along with every other Senior in the room.

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Lili smiled as the three of them left, knowing Maya had not been with anyone since the ship had returned from Cletus. She was hopeful Maya would find some comfort in the arms of Marion's parents this evening.

In the Children's Suite

All washed, changed, and lounging across their bed, the kids were settling down and making their final plans.

"I spoke to Sally earlier," Jaiying told them quietly. "She said she would gladly volunteer ten years or more if we needed it. I told her the S'Slich'Tah Warren leader didn't seem to notice when I took it from her, and she said it didn't matter – that bringing Grandfather back would be worth it. She said she–"

"You don't think she'll *tell* anyone about it, do you?" Cathy interrupted her.

"I don't think it really matters," Walter suggested. "As long as Aunt Lili isn't blamed for it, we should get away with it."

"*And ...* she said she wouldn't say anything, either way," Jaiying finally finished. "Walter, are you confident that you can shield me from the Elders on Cletus?"

"I don't really think they have as much sensitivity as Aunt Lili does, but yes – I'm sure you should be safe from them."

"Oh... Mother and Aunt Lili had a strange conversation," Jaiying suddenly remembered. "The morning before Boots spoke to her?"

At their nods, she went on.

"Anyway, the impression I got from Aunt Lili was that she would *like* Grandfather to be brought back, but she can't know of it in *advance*. They talked *around* the issue, but Aunt Lili never mentioned it *specifically*."

They looked at her expectantly, and she finally nodded her head.

"Yes. I found out Mother heard us talking about it the night before."

"Did *she* tell anyone?" Josie asked her.

"She *tried* to tell Aunt Lili, but Aunt Lili wouldn't let her. Here ... listen," she said, then shared the confused conversation from her memory of it. Afterwards...

"Sounds like Aunt Lili has been backed into a corner. She might get fired if we bring back Grandfather," Walter said glumly.

"It might be worse than that if they find out about *us!*" Josie pointed out fiercely.

“You’re not worried about Aunt Lili?” Cathy asked her.

“Well, *yeah*, I’m worried about Aunt Lili! Didn’t you listen to Jaiying’s *memory*? But she was also talking ‘*inconvenient to them*’ – and not about herself! She meant *US!*”

There was silence for several seconds until Jaiying asked the question.

“Walter, what do you think we should do?”

“I think... I think Aunt Lili is stronger than the Elder’s Council,” he finally said. “I think we’re *all* stronger than the Elder’s Council, but we should remain cautious. I believe I can shield our efforts from anyone outside of the household. We can do individual interventions with anyone who might become a threat afterwards.”

“You don’t mean–”

“I mean we can make a few adjustments, Cathy, like we did with Elder Ai. Besides, it’d be much better if Aunt Lili was blind-sided by us, rather than being an accomplice,” Walter asserted.

“Well, *yeah*,” Josie said with a snort. “But would it be harder to train a *new* Elder, or deal with a bunch of angry *Elders* out for revenge? We can always just *leave*, can’t we?”

Her comment left everyone in stunned silence for several seconds...

“You don’t *really* want to leave the Commonwealth, do you Josie?” Jaiying finally asked her, but all she did was shrug.

That pretty much ended the conversation, so they each lay there thinking of contingency plans for after their Grandfather came back to them – *if* he came back to them.

The only disturbance later was when Andy and Shay came in as duty parents for the evening.

August 10, The Remembrance

It was approaching dusk by the time the family began gathering on the largest patio space. All the tables and most of the chairs had been moved aside to make room for Ronnie’s EMTU, which had been brought from his suite and moved into position within a few feet of the patio edge under the open sky just an hour beforehand.

A chair had been set up close to the EMTU where Spring Blossom would be seated near his head. When she was escorted to the patio, the shock of seeing her did not go unnoticed. She appeared to have aged at least twenty years, Earth Relative, since Ronnie had been brought home.

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Instead of sitting down, she stepped to the box and placed a traditional dream catcher over the middle of it before muttering a quiet prayer over her son. Afterwards, the children walked up to their Great-Grandmother and slowly pulled her back to her seat, each of them kissing her on the cheek and hugging her before turning away to join their mothers.

Since this was a family Remembrance, both wives and husbands were in attendance, although the husbands would not be participating directly during the service. Lili was busily walking around to each couple and arranging them around the EMTU, while having each of the wives stand in front of their husbands.

She finally noticed the children, and decided they would be better seated instead of underfoot, so she called for five more chairs, and had them placed in a half-circle around the foot of the EMTU closest to the garden.

Although wearing the crest of House Caldarous on their rings, Stephanie and Ralph stood to the back by the walls, with Torga and a visibly pregnant Manya on one side, and Samuel and Sally on the other.

The Drecks, being particularly somber during this occasion, carried on a quiet conversation with the Vanir couple *literally* over the heads of the two Earthlings.

Sally mentioned that both Edna and Gaia would be observing *through* her for the Remembrance, while she was there only as an observer of human customs. Samuel quietly added that they were *also* there as representatives of the Vanir Prime, which Sally then admitted with a nodding acceptance.

While trying to adjust the setting of her translator even lower, Sally promised they would turn off their translators during the actual ceremony. Ralph suggested that *ear buds* might be a welcome accessory for them, before having to explain the concept to them; getting knowing smiles from them both afterwards.

Once Lili was satisfied with the arrangements, she sought everyone's attention, and reminded the husbands that the ceremony would be conducted *only* by their wives, and *only* if they were Healers. Then she explained the steps they would follow.

Lili apologized for the time it would take, but reminded everyone the goal was to offer a traditional prayer and proper send off for the spirit of their departed family member, who just happened to be the *last* male Senior in existence.

In the Valaet's Den

Faithful Daughter was stuck baby-sitting her little brother and sister, along with the green-footed rocks from the pond. Her father had been insistent that all five of them remain *inside* the den until he allowed them out.

She looked over at the kits, who were still trying to entice Bob and Larry to play with them, but the best they could do was get Bob to circle the den in her effort to escape back to the pond. Larry had found a shadowy spot and hidden herself in it – pulling in her legs and head for the duration.

She let out a disgusted chuff and stretched out across the opening of the den. A few minutes later, she rolled over so that Bob would be pushing along her backside as she attempted a return to the great outdoors, to no avail. After the third escape attempt, she reached out to her father and found that he'd crept onto the patio where the humans were having their solemn party, and hunkered down to watch.

At least *he* didn't have to put up with that hard-shelled nuisance every few minutes.

On the Patio

Jaiying looked around behind her but couldn't see anything outside the circle of family.

'Walter, have the grounds been cleared?'

'Yes, but I feel Boots a few yards away' he shared, then gave her a mental pointer in his direction

'Boots, stay off the grounds' she sent out narrowly. ***'Do not leave the patio until we tell you it is safe'***

'Unless someone hurts family' she felt his insistent rejoinder.

She accepted that and relaxed – for just a moment.

'These Drecks and Vanir are family, too' she added, just to be on the safe side.

He sent her the impression of humor, followed by a quiet chuff that didn't reach as far as the outer ring of adults.

In the Valaet's Den

Faithful Daughter was idly considering if the green-footed rocks might be good to eat, but her father chose that moment to contact her, and reminded her to keep everyone *inside* the den and alive.

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She reluctantly shared her capitulation to his instructions before rolling over and planting a paw in front of Bob during her next pass. Bob simply plowed over it as a minor obstruction before continuing her circular quest for freedom.

On the Patio

Lili sent the silent message for the Wives to hold hands and began the formal Remembrance – beginning it herself with the simple prayer for home and hearth, food and time.

The circle of prayer rotated to her right, first with Diane, and then Amy, followed by Shay, and then Sai.

Next to Sai stood Maya, and then Déjà – who uttered the prayer with difficulty while she stood in front of the body of the man who'd given her his children.

The circle continued around, with Dorcas, Laisee, Mei-Mei, Yin-Yin, and finally Spring Blossom – whose voice cracked during her recitation.

When the circle reached Lili again, she said Ronnie's name and his father's name, but in the fading light, the body remained dark inside the EMTU.

She looked down, saddened by this, but continued with her *own* name and antecedents – which attained for her a uniform white glow around her body.

The Lane women spoke their names, but had no antecedents to add to them. Just same, Diane, Amy, and Shay all glowed a shade of white – not as bright as Lili, but indicative of how much they'd grown as Healers in such a short period of time.

Sai continued the circle, stating her own name and her mother's name. She'd hoped calling upon Yandi would have evoked *some* kind of response from Ronnie, but his EMTU portal remained dark, even as a steady ivory glow surrounded her.

Maya continued with her own name, which evoked a surprisingly white light. Then she squeezed her little sister's hand and pushed the proper sequence of words into her mind once again.

"Um ... Déjà sai Caldarous ... se Kee ... ne Lady Sai Tal," she stammered out, and was surprised to be looking at everyone through a dark golden glow that was scattered with lighter streaks.

She didn't feel the delight that radiated from the other Healers and Seniors present, but what she *did* notice was the tiny kick in her abdomen. She looked down and rubbed her stomach with one hand

before looking up at Maya with a smile on her face. Maya squeezed her hand again as the circle continued.

Dorcas added her name and presented a uniform white glow, which was becoming the expected norm from one of Ronnie's trainees.

Laisee took her turn, stating her name and then her mother's name. Not surprisingly, she glowed a very bright solid white that almost matched Lili's in strength and purity. She was followed by Mei-Mei and Yin-Yin, who each glowed a uniformly even tint of white.

Spring Blossom sat still, unable to speak, and Lili didn't press the matter.

'*Walter, what's wrong with Great-Grandmother?*' Josie asked silently while extending herself to tease the thoughts from her Grandfather's mother.

'*She is saddened by this ceremony. She believes that children should not die before their parents*' he shared with them all.

'*No, it's more!*' Jaiying exclaimed angrily. '*She thinks Grandfather should be placed out under the SKY. She ... she wants to take his body someplace and let it ROT! She wants to do it right after the REMEMBRANCE! We've got to do it NOW! We can't WAIT!*'

Jaiying stood up and moved to the head of the EMTU, quickly followed by Walter, Rose, Cathy, and Josie. They held hands as Cathy began the call.

"Cathy Lane se Earth ne Kantor," she said, and everyone was surprised at the white glow that emanated from her entire body.

Radatel took a step forward to interfere, but Lili reached out and stopped him – shooting a flow of glow into his arm that immediately calmed him, so that he just stood there and watched.

She glanced to the side and noticed that her co-Wives and the rest of the Ladies had suddenly closed ranks to let the children do *whatever* they intended to do.

"Josie Lane se Earth ne Kantor," Josie said next, and her glow was streaked with tiny whorls of pink, but not *nearly* as frightening as Ronnie's had been so many years ago.

She looked at Walther through her glow, and squeezed his hand.

"Walter Lane se Earth ne Kantor," he said, and matched Cathy's glow in brightness and purity before turning his head and smiling at his taller step-cousin.

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“Rose Thomas se Womak se Earth ne Kantor,” she said, and a bright yellowish-white surrounded her, bringing a smile to Walter as she squeezed his hand, and then looked over at Jaiying.

“Jaiying Caldarous ne Kantor,” she said, and her body flashed a bright white in the patio, dimming all the other emanations to a dull glow.

As a group, the children all stepped up to the EMTU and placed their hands on it.

‘Josie?’ Walter reached out to her, and a moment later, the lights on the EMTU died out.

“Rondal TIS'ILSQSÉ BIYIGÉ Caldar sai Caldarous se Earth ne Kantor,” Walter and Rose carefully pronounced together, and the surrounding glows all died out while a faint, pale light started leaking from the window on the EMTU's lid.

Somewhere Else...

*Destiny and Faith observed curiously, while Ronnie began to slowly fade away. He was gratified to see the boy had had enough sense to put down the **cup** this time.*

“Do you think he'll make it this time?” she asked hopefully, but got a wry look in return.

*“If he doesn't screw it **up!**” he said, then materialized enough to retrieve his cup and take a sip from it, before shifting them to the plane of the festivities to see what would happen **next**.*

At the Remembrance

“Rakel Timorous Caldarous se Kantor ... Rex,” Josie and Cathy spoke loudly in unison, causing red flashes to stream out of the lid's window.

“Uncle Radatel...” Walter said quietly, then nodded towards the lid.

Radatel suddenly shook himself, then found himself stepping forward, with David and Andy joining him. They slid the lid off to one side and set it on the ground.

Looking inside, they could see Ronnie's body was glowing fitfully with streaks of white and red all over it, then hurriedly backed away.

The children all joined hands again for Jaiying to make the final call.

“Aquintus Tiberious Rakel Caldarous se Kantor ... Rex,” she pronounced clearly, then closed her eyes from the brilliance, before reaching in and flooding her Grandfather with life force.

The Kraken, On the Bridge

“Edna? What happened?” her husband asked her.

Edna’s eyes opened to see the confused expression on the face of her husband. There was a corresponding gasp from Gaia, who was standing next to her while holding hands with Gallus. Both men looked at each other, then at each other’s wives – seeing the shock on the faces of the women, matching the confusion from each other.

“I... It just...” Edna was at a loss for words.

“It’s gone,” Gaia said quietly. “Something Sally saw was... It... I don’t understand, but it’s gone,” she murmured.

“Was there an *attack*?” Endo asked, and both men immediately let go of their wives and turned to the sensor systems on the bridge.

Try as they might, the only thing they could detect was a bright light source in the approximate middle of the Royal Homestead. It was steady and unwavering, so that left out the possibility of an explosion of some sort. Since the ship was in geosynchronous orbit directly above the Homestead, it was very unlikely that something from *space* was causing the light – unless something was burning up from beneath it, but there were no radiation signatures.

“I don’t...” Gaia stopped to think for a few seconds, then offered up an option. “Perhaps there is something the *Elder* is doing that was not previously announced?”

“Sai explained what they would be doing,” Edna offered, “but with *all* those Senior wives and Healers participating ... perhaps *that* would explain what we experienced?”

Endo and Gallus looked at each other while sharing the doubt in their minds.

They knew Petrus or Mother would have let them know by now if they needed help or not, so for the time being they’d sit it out and try to contact Mother in a few minutes – or whenever that light finally went out.

Kantor, The Royal Homestead, On the Patio

The light remained intense for several minutes before it finally began to fade away. Jaiying and the rest of the kids looked inside, then Jaiying nudged Josie. Josie reached inside, and a loud *crack* was heard, followed by a gasp, and a fit of coughing.

Spring Blossom gave out a shriek, and passed out on the ground. She was followed by Maya, who’d fainted dead away on the other side of the EMTU. As the coughing petered out, a low groaning could be heard from within the EMTU.

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Just Slightly Out of Phase with Reality...

"I did **NOT** see that coming," Destiny declared in amazement, adding a confused shake of his head to go along with his pronouncement.

"Did he **make** it? Is he **in** there?" Faith asked him fearfully.

"I don't... Well ... **mostly**," he finally decided, then started looking around for the **rest** of him.

"Figures," he muttered, then shook his head disgustedly. "Boy couldn't make up his mind between **three** simple choices – **so he fucks it up!**"

"Can we **fix** it? Can **you** fix it?"

"Ha! Out of my hands **now!**" he said, then gave out a short, barking laugh.

He looked around at the assemblage, which was milling about in confusion.

"Gonna make at least three or four of those people absolutely **miserable** for a while until he sorts himself out ... **if** he ever does."

"But will he be **all right?**" she persisted, which drew an angry glare from him.

"Girl, he's been **reincarnated** ... **MOSTLY**. All we've got left is a **soul thread** to keep track of him, and **that** will be confusing enough. As for **IF** he'll be all right, that's up to whatever condition his **body** is in. That little girl pumped him up with life force, but ... well, let's just sit back and **watch** for a while, shall we?"

Faith was about to say something else, but saw his face and thought better of it. She certainly hoped Ronnie had made the **right** decision this time. Then she considered how often **that** had happened of late, and fell despondent.

At the Remembrance

Targa Slayer figured things had *sounded* promising, so he got up and moved closer to the action. When he got close enough to be noticed, everyone froze and looked at him warily as he stalked past them to approach Lili.

He stopped in front of her, and looked up at her before turning to look down into the EMTU – at the warm, *living* body inside of it.

He reached his head inside, sniffing carefully around the face and shoulders, before abruptly pulling back and letting loose a loud sneeze.

He shook his head in surprise before leaning in to stare at Ronnie for several more seconds, then pulling out again and facing Lili.

‘Stupid Talking Man’ he projected at her, then gently head-butted her in the stomach.

She leaned down to push him away, and he took that opportunity to lick her face one more time. She jerked back in surprise, and heard him send **‘Salty’** before chuffing quietly and turning to walk away.

He walked along the side of the EMTU, but stopped and began looking around curiously until finally turning to face Déjà.

He took a short step forward, then another, and then another, until he was looking at her eye-to-eye. He tilted his head curiously a few times, then leaned closer to sniff at her.

Leaning back, he finally looked down at her stomach, and declared **‘Family’**.

‘Kits’ he shared, then turned to Lili.

‘Milk Mother ... feed kits’ he pushed at her, then turned and began walking away through the strangely crackly bushes. Before he got out of sight, she heard him share **‘Stupid Humans’** followed by another loud sneeze, before the noise of his passage faded away.

Just Slightly Out of Phase with Reality...

*Destiny was getting **very** frustrated until noticing the most **likely** receptacle. Then he smiled.*

“Typical,”** he muttered dourly. **“Leave it to **him** to fuck it up. I wonder how he’s going to get out of **this** one.”

*Faith was struggling to keep her mouth shut. She saw where he was looking, and suddenly understood the **hell** Ronnie was going to go through for the foreseeable future ... not to mention his **family**.*

***“What do you think he’ll **do?**”** she asked worriedly.*

***“Knowing **him?** Something stupid... **Probably,**”** Destiny muttered irritably.*

***“No! He is **not** a stupid man! He’s just ... just **tired** is all,”** she said lamely.*

***“Nope! Can’t keep making **excuses** for him! Come to think of it **you’re** part of the reason he’s **in** this fix!”** Destiny looked down and **smiled** at her, which made her shrink away in fright.*

The Aftermath

The old valaet’s departure let everyone begin to relax, until faint moaning from the EMTU reminded them of the immediate few minutes

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prior to right now. David, Andy, Radatel, and Petrus gathered to haul Ronnie out of the EMTU, but Lili stopped them before they got started.

“No. Take him back to his ... to *Rondal’s* quarters and put him to bed,” she ordered. “Where’s Maya? She needs to...”

She looked down at where Petrus was pointing, and saw Maya lying there.

“You men take this box to *Rondal’s* quarters and put the *person* inside of it to bed,” she ordered, and they started to wheel him out. “Put down some *towels first!*” she hastily added.

The kids moved to follow, but Lili spread her arms to block them.

“*NO! YOU HAVE VIOLATED THE ORDERS OF THE ELDERS! THIS WILL NOT GO UNREMARKED!*” she shouted loudly, then spared a glance at the rest of the Ladies.

She finally looked down at their sad little faces – except for Josie’s, who remained defiant – before switching to one of their higher bands.

“*Thank you, my darlings! But we must be wary of word getting out. The punishment for taking life from a living being is excessively severe*” she pressed at them.

“*ALL OF YOU! TO YOUR QUARTERS! THIS INSTANT!*” she shouted aloud, while pointing to the door.

Josie was about to say something rude, but Jaiying grabbed her arm and shook her head, before they headed back to their suite.

Once the children had left, Lili turned to glare at the standing Ladies, then hunched her shoulders once – followed by pointing one hand at Maya and the other at Spring Blossom. They immediately switched from frozen bystanders, to first responders, and gathered around their downed companions.

Now that Maya and Spring Blossom were being looked after, Lili ran the events back through her mind, and discovered that she’d never felt *anything* herself. She looked over at Sally and Samuel, then pushed through *both* of them, but found no evidence of a life force drain from *either* of them. Everyone *else* also seemed intact. She was wondering if the children had actually donated *themselves*, when Jaiying reached out to her.

‘*Aunt Lili, no one had their life force taken from them tonight. No one suffered from what was done*’

Since she’d stopped short of telling her what had *actually* happened, it was less than enlightening. It didn’t mean she could let it *end* there, but ... but perhaps *morning* would be soon enough?

In the *meantime*...

On the Rim

Aquila and Philo had caught the duty this evening, and been told the family would be holding a Remembrance ceremony at dusk for a deceased family member – something they'd seen before in the past. It was to be a quiet, solemn, and *ceremonial* event – presumably in honor of the body that had been temporarily stashed in the First Lord's suite several days ago.

Nothing had really prepared them for *this* particular evening's event, whose first bit of confusion had been the valaet slipping through the gardens and secreting himself within a shadowy portion of the patio. It had arrived silently – apparently, simply to watch the festivities.

At least the canyon had been completely deserted earlier at the orders of the First Wife.

After the family had finished positioning themselves, the women began the formal intercession of "Home and Hearth, Food and Time," followed by the Healer's *traditional* invocation of spiritual lineage in support of the deceased's spirit.

And *then* there was the light show...

Aquila was trying hard to keep his mouth shut, but the much younger Philo was muttering all *sorts* of possibilities – the revealing of any *one* of which could be sufficient to remove them to a very uncomfortable place somewhere *else* in the Commonwealth – or perhaps even somewhere down on that hellhole known as *Earth*. Aquila frowned, but then tried to lighten the mood of his nephew.

"*Imperials!* The Gods know they like to throw wild *parties*," he muttered helpfully.

Instead of letting up, the boy kept murmuring about glowing bodies, so Aquila reminded him it was *normal* for Healers and Seniors to do that when they worked, and even more so during ceremonies such as this one, where even the dead *body* was made to glow. That part hadn't gone over very well, but the topper had been when the lights had gone out, and the *valaet* decided to check things out.

As it stood, there was *no way* they could take out the valaet without taking out half the Imperial family in the process, and they both knew what *that* would look like on their resumes – not that they'd ever *need* one after something like that.

After some very tense seconds, it finally seemed to have ended peacefully when the valaet casually wandered off, and the men and women had separated – the men taking the dearly departed back within

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the household, and the women attending to the two laid low by their mutual anguish. As the situation seemed to resolve itself, Aquila considered the events taken as a whole, and prepared his nephew for the probable results.

“You know, I wouldn’t be surprised if we’re called in for a debriefing about ... about *that*,” he muttered, nodding in the direction of the cluttered patio.

Almost before he’d finished saying it, Aquila felt his communicator begin to vibrate. Already having a pretty good idea of the message, he watched when Philo pulled his up to read the screen, then spared him a grim smile when Philo turned it to him to share the news of their sequester at the end of their watch.

“Typical,” Aquila muttered, then let out a despondent sigh of resignation as Philo acknowledged their new instructions.

On the Patio

With Diane, Amy, and Shay dealing with Maya, and Mei-Mei, Yin-Yin, and Laisee taking care of Spring Blossom, Lili felt a sense of order coming back. She started after the men, but stopped and shot a thought to Sai, who swiveled to her and silently replied in acceptance before Lili entered the household and followed the path of the EMTU back to Ronnie’s suite.

As she walked along, she began running an estimate of how much damage control would be needed to deal with *this* new crisis.

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After Lili had left, Sai stepped forward and took abrupt charge.

“Ladies, we need to get Maya and Spring Blossom *inside* where it’s safe!” she called out. “Nathan, you and Ralph help bring Spring Blossom to the big family room. Torga, please bring Maya inside as well.”

She watched as her assigned minions followed her directions, and in short order the party had been relocated inside the household.

After having pulled cushions down from the furniture for them to lie on, the men set Maya and Spring Blossom on the floor, but before anyone could wander away, Sai closed the doors and stood in front of them.

While they were reluctantly making themselves comfortable, she did a quick head count, and compared it to the missing men – finding she’d successfully rounded up everyone except for Sally and Samuel. She reached out silently and found them both in the adjacent facilities, then waited for them to be done before asking them to return to the family room for an important announcement, which they immediately did.

“May I have your attention please?” she called out, then waited for them all to settle down. “My Ladies ... and our wonderfully helpful gentlemen, Elder Lili finds herself drawn away for the moment, and has asked me to fill in for her.”

She looked at each face, making *sure* they were paying attention to her.

“Forgive me, everyone, but tonight’s event has deviated *severely* from what was expected,” she continued, while blithely stating the obvious. “The most *important* thing we must remember is ... the *TRUTH*.”

That prompted a few groans, along with some confusion among the uninitiated, but she intended to make it clear for *all* the parties involved.

“The Cletus Seniors have *formally* recognized the death of Rondal Caldar,” she stated bluntly. “His head had been removed from his body, and there was *no* expectation of his survival. It was my own interference that offered a tiny *sliver* of hope that he might be restored to us, but that was *not* the determination of the Cletus Seniors.”

The room was very silent while they all stared at her for several seconds.

“But ... but we heard him *coughing* and ... and *groaning*,” Nathan finally said, breaking the room’s silence.

“Yes,” Ralph added. “And ... and then he started, you know, *mumbling*... I think.”

Stephanie began nodding her head rapidly, but slowed when Sai raised her hand in a placating gesture.

“We heard ... *something* that sounded like a cough,” Sai stated slowly while twitching her hand slightly with her words. “And then we heard something that *maybe* sounded like mumbling. But no one actually saw *who* was doing the coughing and mumbling ... and *THAT* is the *ABSOLUTE TRUTH!*”

Absolute silence returned at the ridiculousness of Sai’s pronouncement.

“You ... you’re not going to *kill* Ronnie, are you?” Stephanie asked timidly, which brought a frighteningly familiar titter, but from *Laisee* this time.

“You cannot *kill* a person who is already *officially* dead,” she declared. “I don’t know the name of *whomever* was stuffed into that box, but it *couldn’t* have been Ronnie, because Ronnie was already *dead*.”

“Which brings us back to the *truth*,” Sai continued the thread. “The truth is that Ronnie suffered a *fatal* training accident while in orbit over



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Vanaheim. The Seniors from Cletus have *confirmed* his status, and declared him *dead*. The fact of the matter is, they have also *denied* permission for Lili to try and *recover* him.”

“But if ... then ... how did ... *the kids*?” Stephanie asked, but slapped a hand over her mouth.

“You *see* our difficulty,” Laisee muttered mirthlessly.

“Yes,” Sai continued somberly. “Ronnie is *officially* dead, and we’ve all just participated in his Remembrance. That’s *all* it was, and that’s all that it *CAN BE* ... because if word got out about anything that *REALLY* happened here, there is a good probability the Commonwealth would suffer a significantly *destabilizing* event that is best left *UNDISCUSSED!*”

She looked around at the faces looking back at her, some of them calmly, some of them stoically, and a few still racked with confusion. It seeming out of place, she even saw a silly grin on Larl’s face. She let out a despondent sigh, then sat down so she could try again.

“Look. We’re *all* family here. You, me ... Torga and Manya. Even Samuel and Sally,” she said while gesturing to the Dreds and Vanir. “We’re *all* part of Ronnie’s family, and that is the *literal* truth. He adopted each and every *one of you* ... including me and Déjà, and my boys and their wives.”

She turned to the reporters in their midst and addressed them.

“Ralph ... Stephanie... What is the crest on your marriage rings?”

They looked at their hands and blushed, remembering the day he’d given each of them their rings.

“Nathan... Dorcas... Ronnie was late, but you wear the crest of House Caldaraus as well. Torga, your father fostered you to Ronnie, and on *that day*, you and Manya became part of House Caldaraus. *All of us here are in the Imperial family of the Kantite throne of the Commonwealth* and it is up to us *not* to disturb that stability for ... for...”

“A mere *accounting error*?” Radatel suggested, just as he and Petrus stepped into the room and shut the door behind them. “My family, it pains me to say it, but those naughty scamps have caused a potential *rift* between the Kantite and Cletus Elders.”

Shocked looks came from several of the Senior wives, while most of the rest of the group remained clueless. Petrus settled on a clear spot on the floor off to the side, while Radatel took advantage of the silence to pour himself a crystal of ambrosia. He downed it quickly; afterwards looking around for a place to sit, but before anyone could move, he settled for an open spot on the floor next to Maya, and plopped himself down while letting out a tired sigh in the process.

“The currently *unidentified* person who was *masquerading* as my little brother seems to be resting – not quite comfortably,” he said quietly, before letting out a tiny chuckle when he reached beside him and gave one of Maya’s breasts a little squeeze. “When Maya awakens, she can probably be convinced to attend to his needs ... *whoever* he turns out to be...”

He paused to glance at Sai.

“Sai, you have our permission,” he said, then clarified it. “Both mine and Lili’s. Tell them the *true* relationship between Cletus and ... *us*. He presented a weakly raised gesture with his arms, indicating the extended family in the room, before adding, “In the *meantime*, I have a few tasks to set into motion. If you’ll excuse me.”

Before anyone could move, Radatel got to his feet and simply walked out the door – leaving them all in stunned silence. When everyone started to relax again, Sai got comfortable and began to speak...

She spent the next thirty minutes lecturing them on the political structure behind the *Kantite* Elder and how it was related to the *Council of Elders* living on Cletus, along with their overall need for secrecy. By the end of her lecture, things had become *much* clearer ... *despite* their futures becoming much *bleaker*.

She’d reinforced this was a strictly *family* matter, and that the missing men would be returning soon and must be properly indoctrinated into the truth as it had just been defined before they blabbed to anyone else – including servants and anyone *not* in attendance during the event in question. She’d also mentioned the rim guards were probably far enough away not to see any details, but just to be sure, Lili would be interviewing them *personally* to insure their memories of the event matched the intended reality.

They’d all taken a moment to consider the implications of that, then wondered again how badly the First Lord’s recovery could *possibly* affect things.

### *In the Children’s Suite*

The kids were getting ready for an early bedtime, and were currently in the group shower; washing the sweat and dust of the event off their bodies. Josie was scrubbing herself with a vengeance because of her anger over Lili’s shouting at them. Jaiying in particular was feeling very confused, and Walter was picking that up from her.

Finally, he couldn’t wait any longer...

“Jaiying ... are you *sure* Grandfather came back to us?”

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He'd caught her open-mouthed, and she sputtered a bit while blowing out a breath of wet air before responding.

"I-I *feel* him in there," she finally said. "He might not be fully integrated yet, but he *did* come back."

"They said his *brain* was pretty messed up by that nasty powder," Josie muttered irritably. "It might even be missing a few pieces by now."

"At least it's not as bad as what happened to Aunt Xiaoli," Cathy reminded them. "She's not much older than Mama Shay is now – *mentally*."

"Now that you've given him enough time to Heal, the more *critical* issue is will his brain make the corrections to his body," Walter continued. "If it won't, then you'll have to keep giving him life force until we can figure it out."

"I'm not sure yet, Walter, but I'll keep checking. And now we can ask Aunt Lili–"

"Nope! Aunt Lili's hands are tied," Walter told her bluntly. "While you were reaching out to Grandfather, we were listening to Aunt Lili. What she's decided to do is distance herself from what's happened and hope that no one from Cletus looks into it too deeply."

"That's gonna be *real* hard once Grandfather is up and about again," Josie said dourly.

"I think that's what Aunt Lili is planning to prevent. She's probably going to–"

"*NO!*" Jaiying shouted at Walter, but sputtered when water shot into her mouth again.

Walter took the showerhead off its holder and sprayed Jaiying down to get the rest of the soap off her. Then he started on himself. The others took his clue, and rinsed themselves off before grabbing their towels to dry themselves and each other. Walter was drying Jaiying's back when he continued with his unspoken thoughts.

"What I was *starting* to say is that Aunt Lili does not know who was *really* in the EMTU because we know the Elder's Council had *already* declared Grandfather dead – and ordered that he *stay* dead."

"Therefore, the *body* in the EMTU must have been an *imposter*," Cathy continued smoothly, spelling it out for her, "So the sooner we convince ourselves of our *new* reality, the safer we'll *all* be."

Josie let out a disgusted snort and started putting her nightclothes on.

Rose wasn't as skilled as the others, but while they'd been walking back to their quarters, she'd reached out to Ronnie when Jaiying had. From her quick look, she didn't think a whole lot of Ronnie had come back at all.

"That might not be so hard, Jaiying," she finally suggested. "I think Grandfather is *really* messed up."

"Well ... maybe after a good nights *sleep*?" Josie suggested flippantly.

Jaiying wrapped her towel around her small frame while her cousins finished drying and started getting ready for bed.

"Walter... Thank you for holding your shield for as long as you had to," she said quietly, and he turned and smiled at her.

"Rose helped me do it," he said, causing a blush to rise on Rose's cheeks before he stepped out of the facilities for a moment.

"And Cathy and Josie helped me with my task as well," Jaiying continued, and saw the corresponding smile from Cathy, but only got an irritated glare from Josie.

"Here, Jaiying," Walter called out as he tossed her underwear to her. "Well, it's still early. What shall we do until the duty parents show up?"

"Oh! A \*musical!\*" Rose eagerly suggested, and the supporting cast wandered out to consider their options, while a still pissed off Josie reluctantly followed along.

Instead of joining her cousins, Jaiying got ready for bed, before reaching out to her Grandfather to poke around a little more. She found him breathing regularly, which was *always* a good sign. She supposed it was better than being *dead*. His systems seemed to be stabilizing, and she was tempted to go and monitor him in person, but a wider search of his room found Daddies David, Andy, and Nathan standing by for ... *something*?

She knew Aunt Lili *should* have been there but she wasn't, nor was any other Senior. She cautiously reached out and skimmed the thought streams of her Elder Aunt, only to find that what Walter had said was true. Aunt Lili could not expose *herself* to the reality of the situation, but would be sending Maya and probably Spring Blossom to take care of him – if they ever woke up.

### ***In the Family Lounge***

Her head was pounding, and she kept hearing her name being called. It echoed repeatedly, and was *really* beginning to irritate her. Before long, her inner eye detected a bright flash of white, and she jerked and opened her eyes ... finding herself staring at a fuzzy ceiling in what looked like

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the family lounge. As her vision cleared, she saw that she was surrounded by the rest of the family, and her head was resting in Amy's lap. The flash of white was probably from the cloth Amy was wiping across her temples and around her eyes.

"Welcome back, Maya," Amy said quietly, while smiling down at her. "Feeling better?"

"I – I thought I heard Jaiying call... Jaiying... The children were... *WHERE IS HE? WHERE'S MY RONNIE?*" she blurted out, having suddenly caught up to the present.

She started to struggle against Amy's hands, but her mother came over and squatted down next to her to bring her up to date.

"Hold on, sweetheart. Lili has a job for you," she said, while placing her hand on Maya's shoulder and watching the confusion overtake her daughter's face again. "There is a gentleman in Ronnie's old room who needs the care of a Healer," she continued slowly, while watching Maya's eyes carefully.

"Ronnie's room? W-Who ... who is it?"

"Lili is not quite sure just *who* he is, but he'll need constant observation and care for the immediate future. If you're feeling up to it, then we'll have you escorted to him."

"B-But..."

"Shhhh... He is a client in *need*. I believe you may have even helped him once *before*," she said quietly, then whispered, "Lili would consider it a *personal* favor if you would help her out with this, Maya."

"I – I..." Maya stopped and looked at the assemblage around her – many of them smiling and nodding their heads at her. "I... I hear and ... obey," she finally said, then let herself be helped to her feet.

Someone handed her a cup of ambrosia to help steady her nerves, and she sipped it gratefully while her eyes wandered around the room but stopped when she reached the twitching body of Spring Blossom. She started to go to her, but Sai blocked her path.

"She's still having a few problems waking up. She's reliving a very shocking event in her mind, but we think she'll come around soon. She may even want to help you ... *later*," Sai said pointedly.

The door opened, and Nathan stuck his head inside, then looked around, and smiled at Dorcas before continuing his search, and stopping at Maya.

"Lady Tal... Lady *Maya* Tal, I am to escort you to a client who needs your care."

Nathan had not a *clue* of what was going on but David and Andy had told him to expect the inexplicable, something the Royal Household dealt with on a *regular* basis, they'd said, and to keep his mouth shut about this evening. After Lili's silent order, they'd sent him along to fetch Maya, while they would remain with "the body" until he got back with her.

"Diane... Shay," Sai paused and looked around. "Dorcas?" She paused again until she had their attention. "Ladies, I believe it's time to recover your husbands and explain the situation to them – *in private*. Everyone *else*... you're free to return to your quarters. I'm sure Lili will express her appreciation for your discretion in this matter *however* the pieces may be assembled."

Amy made a beeline to Larl and hugged him tightly, saying, "C'mon, lover! We got *parent's* duty tonight!" before breaking away and grabbing his hand to drag him out of the room.

The rest of the party continued to break up, with Diane, Shay, and Dorcas following Nathan while he led Maya back to Ronnie's quarters. Being *intimately* aware of the situation they'd been forced into by those "naughty scamps," none of them said anything along the way.

Once they arrived at Ronnie's suite, Maya keyed the door with her palm and led them in. She paused at the outer room, where the EMTU was shoved to one side, with its lid tilted at an angle on top of the darkened box.

"He's inside," Nathan said, and pointed to the bedroom.

Maya took a few tentative steps before extending out – pausing for only a moment before rushing in and nearly knocking David out of the way while he was coming to see who was at the door. Diane gave out a quiet laugh, while Shay followed silently until she saw her Andy, and gave out a happy squeak while rushing to join him. Diane followed along sedately, but wrapped her arms around her husband and kissed him thoroughly before dragging him back to the outer room.

The body on the bed looked *awfully* familiar to Maya, but she couldn't be sure if it was the *same* Ronnie she'd seen a few days earlier or not. Of course, *that* Ronnie had been in stasis at the time. Still, the hair wasn't *nearly* as gray, and the lines in his face weren't *nearly* as pronounced. She bent over and touched him, then felt him jerk in response. She went on to smooth out his hair, and heard him mumble incoherently at her touch.

"He looks rather well ... for a *dead* man," Diane said from the doorway, startling Maya, and causing her to gasp while looking intently at the body before her. "He ... he's *alive*!" she said, while trying to keep her excitement in check, but jumped again when Diane settled her hand on her shoulder.

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“Come with me, sweetie. Let’s go to the outer room so I only have to say this *once*,” she said, then directed Maya to the bedroom door so she could join the others for a short conversation.

### *In Ronnie’s Room*

It was nearing midnight, and the others had left long ago. Maya was lying beside her “client” and keeping him comfortable by her presence...

Earlier, Diane had clarified the rather duplicitous conspiracy being sought from every member of the Royal family regarding the currently “unknown” person she found herself lying next to...

On the face of it, it seemed absurd. *She* knew it was Ronnie. Everyone *else* knew it was Ronnie, and she seriously doubted the Elder’s from Cletus would *not* know it was Ronnie – but that was the lie everyone would have to maintain in order to keep him alive ... at least until they found a good enough argument *not* to kill him if the secret ever came out. Diane had explained that Lili was “looking into it” and left it at that.

Maya looked over at the couch where Spring Blossom was currently sleeping...

Sai had brought her in about an hour after Diane, Shay, Dorcas, and the men had left, then held her shaking body when they’d approached the bed where Maya was feeding him to relieve both his hunger and his pain. Spring Blossom had reached down to touch him, finding him both real and alive, then fallen to her knees and began a long chant in her native Apache for her son, who had been returned from the dead.

Afterwards, she’d had Sai help her move a couch in from the outer room, then simply sat there and watched as her son nursed while he replenished his strength, and deadened his pain...

Maya had felt that – the level of his pain decreasing as he fed from her. She’d wondered if Spring Blossom had been able to produce Healer’s milk in the past, but considered it really did not matter any longer. Their Ronnie was home and under their care once again. Between the two of them, they would make him whole.

She suppressed a giggle, not wanting to wake Spring Blossom again when she remembered what Diane had first said earlier that evening. She looked him over again and gently touched his face. He *did* look rather well for a dead man ... *whoever* he was ... or ended up *being*. She decided not to dwell on it, and just enjoy the warmth of his body pressed against hers once again...

As he’d fed from her, his color started coming back, and she’d sensed his relaxation when he had eventually fallen into a deep sleep – so much so, that he accidentally peed the bed. That was when she’d yelped and

awoken Spring Blossom. His mother had gotten towels from the facilities and draped them over his waist, while Maya held his penis clamped shut until she brought them there to contain the rest.

Afterwards, they'd stripped both him and the bedding, then wiped down the waterproof outer cover of the sleeping pad before reassembling the bedding; rolling the now comatose Ronnie from side to side, as they did so...

Looking down at him now, she remembered the last time she had a client with this problem – Meela on the platform. It was not a *pleasant* memory, as it reminded her of when he'd ripped life force from Meela, which had caused *all* the Seniors aboard to feel its affect. She wondered if that had happened earlier this evening? Did the *children* steal life out of someone for Ronnie? She had heard the Vanir were *extremely* long-lived by nature, but both she and Spring Blossom had not felt *anything* when Jaiying had done that.

She looked at the room's clock and extended through Ronnie again, monitoring his bodily processes and finding them within nominal standards. His bladder was going to need draining in a few more hours, but there was a pile of towels ready to replace the ones they'd wrapped around and between his legs earlier.

The only thing that still worried her was his disjointed memory sequences. She'd kept poking around inside his head, and triggering his neurons to fire, but the results often seemed chaotic and unrelated.

She'd heard from the children that he had been saving blocks of memory in special nodules down in his pelvis; then actually looked for and found them, but he seemed to be very confused at the moment. That worried her. She remembered how Xiaoli had come to them – a five-year-old, Relative, child in a hundred-plus year old, Standard, body.

She snuggled a little closer to him, and linked his body sensations to hers – something Lili had taught her how to do a while ago. That way, when he needed to go, she would wake up – *hopefully* – and be able to deal with the outcome. She almost laughed again, thinking that she had wanted to have a *baby* with her Ronnie, and here she was treating *him* like a baby. That made her think of her little stepsister, Déjà, who was carrying Ronnie's children. Sai had told her she'd been put to bed, but with the knowledge that things were no longer as dire as they'd seemed before the Remembrance. Déjà's pregnancy was still an issue, but at least this latest shock hadn't caused any immediate problems for her, or the unborn babies.

In fact, she no longer felt jealous of her, and was now looking forward to welcoming *them* into the world. Her thoughts drifted off, now thinking of them all serving the Commonwealth together, somewhere as a bonded



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family ... maybe even back on Earth, or somewhere *else* far away from Cletus.

She felt something ... a tingling in her groin. Did he have to pee so *soon*? She suddenly recognized the sensation for what it was, then reached down under the towels to confirm it.

She smiled, then glanced over to the couch where Spring Blossom still slept. She decided she could apply a little therapy without *too* much disturbance, so she unfolded the towels, then slid down and rested her head on his stomach to take care of his tingle. In just a few minutes, she'd been able to reset a few of his aging triggers, then considered how much she had missed even this *one*-sided expression of their love for each other. She folded the towels back around him just in time, and waited until he was done; glancing over at the couch and seeing the grinning face of Spring Blossom staring back at her.

Ronnie's mother got up and visited the facilities, bringing back a warm washcloth to wipe off her son. Between the two of them, they replaced the wet towels with dry ones, and got him settled once again.

Spring Blossom bent down and kissed her little boy on his forehead, before leaning over and sharing a deep kiss with Maya; tasting him on her tongue, before they separated. She ran a hand through the hair of her son's lover, before returning to the couch to rest once again. She smiled at Maya, getting a smile in return, before closing her eyes.

With the very late evening dragging on, the last thought Maya had was of looking forward to the surprise in his eyes when he finally awoke to find himself in her arms once again, just as they had spoken of.

### *August 11, Damage Control*

"Oh man, he is *really* messed up!" Josie proclaimed aloud, but snapped her head towards the duty parents closed door.

"Shush!" Cathy shushed her quietly. "Mama Amy and Daddy Larl are still asleep."

"Not for *long*," Josie snickered. "Daddy Larl is waking up – at least *part* of him is!"

They all suppressed their giggles so they wouldn't disturb their overnight watchers.

It was still in the pre-dawn hours, but they were awake anyway after having gone to bed right after the "*\*musical\**" from last night was over. Walter looked around for Rose and found her sitting on the floor by the window. He could see Jaiying resting her head in her lap. A faint glow was just beginning to show over the rim of the canyon above them and lighting up the very top of the canyon wall across from them.

*'Rose ... is Jaiying all right?'* he pressed to her softly.

*'She's just feeling sad'* she shared, and ran her hand through her cousin's hair again. *'We really made a mess out of last night'* she added.

*'You THINK? Aunt Lili went NUTS after what we did!'* Josie shot back.

*'You closed yourself off, Josie'* Walter told her. *'You didn't hear her thanking us for what she wasn't allowed to do'*

*'She ripped into us!'*

*'No... Really listen this time'* Walter pressed at her, then shared the memory of Lili's praise with them all.

*'But she SCREAMED at us!'*

*'She HAD to ... publically. What if the Elders were listening? What if they decided Aunt Lili screwed up?'*

Josie fumed – still angry over their very public rebuke – and failed to find consolation with Lili's tiny bit of praise. They'd brought their Grandfather BACK!

*'What Aunt Lili has to do now is even more dangerous'* Jaiying somberly shared with them all. *'She has to hide Grandfather and erase any knowledge of his recovery from the Elders. If she does not, then she'll be replaced – or worse. And they will kill Grandfather'*

*'They MIGHT kill Grandfather – if they LIVED long enough!'* Josie asserted angrily.

*'If you hadn't been sulking last night, you might have followed along with the rest of us'* Cathy told her older niece. *'Uncle Emperor called us "naughty scamps" ... whatever those are'*

*'Oh... I like the sound of that'* Rose offered. *'It doesn't seem as harsh as some of the other words we've been called'*

Walter looked over at Rose, and smiled in agreement with her.

*'I suppose I could be a scamp. I could even be naughty'* he concluded, which finally got Josie to giggle a little.

*'Has anyone besides Josie looked in on Grandfather this morning?'* Cathy asked the group.

*'I did'* Jaiying's silent whisper came from the window. *'It's like Rose said ... he's not all there'*

*'Jaiying, you're not responsible for how he came back'* Walter pointed out reasonably. *'You told us earlier that he was confused and needed to make up his mind'*

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*'Well ... maybe. If I wasn't just imagining those things'* They heard a tremulous sigh coming from Rose's lap, and saw Jaiying's body shaking with silent sobs.

As a group, they all got up to comfort their cousin – even Josie – and they all sat down around her, and passed their love and comfort to her. Josie even bent over and kissed her cheek, then ran her hand through her hair a few times for good measure.

"You done *good*, Jaiying," she said. "Grandfather was *dead*. He may not be *all* back together, but at least he's *alive*."

They all agreed with that assessment, and told her so. A flicker of light distracted Walter for a moment, and he glanced outside ... then *froze*, it taking several seconds for him to find his voice.

"Uhhh... Guys... Have you looked outside yet?"

### *In Radatel's Suite*

Lili was resting uneasily while staring up at the ceiling as her husband lay next to her and snored quietly. She glanced his way for the tenth time, then summarily shoved him away from her onto his side, eventually causing his nasal sallies to subside for the time being – that time being approximately thirty seconds. In frustration, she reached out and smacked the side of his head, which startled him awake.

"Huuh ... wahh?" he mumbled incoherently, then struggled to roll back in her direction.

"I said you had an *insect* on your head ... but I chased it away," she lied adroitly, which was easy to do when you're the sole witness.

"I shall have to tell ... tell the grounds ... keeper," he mumbled, then started to drift off again, but she had other plans.

"*Come*, my husband! We must be *up*!" she said loudly. "We have *many things* to do!"

He opened one bleary eye and glanced at the curtains – which remained a shade or two dimmer than suitable for getting out of bed.

Another glance at the room's clock confirmed it.

"Lili, it's barely morning yet. Besides, we've *already* set those things in motion which were needed."

"At the *TIME*, my husband!" she persisted, becoming more frustrated as he continued to ignore her demands. "Now it is *later*, and we must go and water our garden to see that our seedlings are well underway. I shall go and join the other Wives, while you manage your ablutions," she told him, while beginning to reassemble her sleeping clothes around her.

He looked at her, then at her general dishabille, which made her look absolutely *delicious* this morning.

“Would you rather not *join* with me, my love?”

She looked at him in shock, then reconsidered her timing ... for just a moment.

“I would dearly love to, my darling,” she said softly, before hardening her words. “But there is *work* to be done! *Up!*”

She rolled out of bed, and headed to the facilities. He heard the shower turn on, and moments later, her sleeping clothes came flying through the door. After hearing her savage splashing, and a string of muttered imprecations, he decided he’d already lost, so he got himself vertical and then stood up – stretching and twisting carefully to get the kinks out of his body.

He supposed he shouldn’t complain. After all, he might be the *Emperor* of the Commonwealth, but she was the *Elder* – and when it came right down to it, *he* really worked for *her*. Of course, it naturally followed that she worked for somebody *else* – the committee from *Hell*, it would appear – so he dropped his sleeping clothes, and wandered over to greet the early morning, which was just now glowing behind the curtains.

He pulled them back to share his naked visage with the reflection of the dawn – but stared blankly at the absolute *herd* of grounds-keepers running around in a panic.

### ***The Head Groundskeeper’s Quarters***

As usual, Head Groundskeeper Octavius had woken up early and cheerful, as was his nature. He sat at the breakfast table this morning, and considered his very comfortable and rewarding life, while his loving wife, Priscilla, warmed his very early meal.

He *loved* what he did, even though it was rather trivial in the great scheme of things. Not for *him* the thrill of combat or adventure. Never had he *ever* considered going off to help develop a colony planet; instead staying close to home and plying his simple talents to tend the gardens around his family’s small estate. That talent grew, and his name became moderately recognized – so much so, that he’d gained this position at the Royal Homestead nearly five decades earlier, and been a successful contributor ever since.

It hadn’t *always* been easy, though. The last several years had seen the valaet’s activity schedule shuffled, along with the *increase* in the number of the beasts that could be stumbled across while his workers were tending the gardens. And *then*, of course, there had been the absolutely *disastrous* invasion by the vicious Drecks army that had laid

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*waste* to several planting beds, and torn up some of the Royal Wives' favorite garden spots. Why, it had taken *days* to smooth things over and remove the telltale signs of battle.

"Your *breakfast*, my husband," Priscilla cooed lovingly into his ear, getting a wandering hand up her robes in return that made her giggle.

"You take such *good* care of me, my girl," he said, but reluctantly withdrew his hand in favor of feeding his gullet.

She walked away within his view, swaying suggestively in anticipation of his return for lunch – an *extended* lunch, she hoped – and caught him leering at her for her trouble. She smiled her secret smile while she put the pans to wash, and tidied up their small kitchen.

She enjoyed her life at the Royal Homestead and found the company of the other residents entertaining. She'd been surprised at the lack of gossip shared by the interior servants, but learned that a *high* level of responsibility came with the honor of serving the family of the Emperor.

Their credit balance also showed the *generosity* of serving the Emperor and his family. They could leave now and retire as a young couple almost *anywhere* on Kantor, let alone anywhere *else* within the Commonwealth, but she liked it here, and her husband *loved* his job. She was looking forward to the next three days. The weekend could not come soon enough for her, as they'd been planning this little vacation for a while now, just as soon as her loving husband finished with the day's work.

"I'll see you at *lunch*, my girl!" Octavius called out to her. "And Remus and Rufus will *NOT* be joining us for lunch!"

She smiled at that, now having it confirmed they *would* share an extended lunchtime together. She thought they could start with a warm bath...

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Octavius left their quarters and worked his way through the hallways to the lift that would bring him to his office. He missed not having a window in his quarters; but that was the privilege of *Royalty* – at least on *these* Royal grounds.

The lift stopped three stories up at ground level, and only a few steps away, he entered what he considered the *backside* of his workplace, and saw the dim glow coming from the windows on the other side of the open area.

The grounds keeping staff was located at the "drain" end of the canyon, just one story below the landing bay for the Emperor's transport shuttles. It included an extensive equipment room housing both manual and powered machinery for garden maintenance.

He grabbed his data pad from where he'd left it the day before and headed to the outer door, but as he got closer, he could see his two lead men standing, outlined by the glow from the windows.

Curiously, they were standing motionless. As he quietly walked up behind them, he wondered if the valaets were out and about early this morning.

"Good morning, boys. Is it a beautiful day, or do we have a hint of clouds?" he asked them jovially, startling them both as he broke their concentration from the view outside. "Boys?" he prodded again, and it was Rufus who simply pointed out the window.

In the Family Dining Room

Lili wasn't the only person to arrive early for breakfast. Diane had beaten her and Radatel by a few minutes, as had Shay ... although Amy still appeared to be under the spell of her husband's magic wand at the moment. While the Emperor's Wives were slowly arriving, the Emperor was getting fed up with the early morning situation, but no one was paying any attention to him, anyway.

"What would you have us do, Lili," Diane asked her. "We could move him below to the bunker, but he'd still be here. The possibility of his detection could increase as his health improves."

"No. No, Diane. I don't believe we can keep him here for very long," she muttered. "And if the *Elders* find out, there will be consequences ... *unpleasant* consequences."

"But my Lady, he is much *weaker* than before," Shay pointed out. "And he has lost his *abilities*, has he not? That is what we were told."

"Yes, my girl, but the Elders will *still* consider him a threat!"

The door opened, and Lili turned to look at the new arrival, being pleased to see Spring Blossom strolling into the room with a smile on her face.

"How is he, my lover? Is he awake? Is he *talking*?" she asked immediately.

"He ate well last night," Spring Blossom shared, smiling at the memory of it, while holding back a positive observation for the moment. "Maya's bounty fed his hunger, and eased his pain. He has little control over his body, but it seems to be healing ... *slowly*," she added, while joining them at the table.

"But is he *awake*? Has he *said* anything?" Lili persisted.

"He is confused, Lili. Even this morning, his mind was scattered and difficult to sense." She glanced away and gave a tiny shake of her head.

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“But Maya reset his triggers lightly last night,” she casually mentioned, getting a shocked stare from the Ladies.

“Oh, *he* was still asleep, but his *body* ... it made a *sleeping* demand,” she explained to a round of knowing giggles, which Radatel merely commented on with a disgusted snort.

“Then it would appear my little broth–” he stopped at the glare from Lili.

“Yes, my Lord Husband. It would appear the *mystery* person is reacting as *any* man would, to food, comfort, and a warm female body lying next to them,” she said demurely, then turned her attention back to Spring Blossom.

“He spoke no words?”

“No, Lili. Maya searched, and I listened in, but his mind... If not for *your* situation, I would suggest that you take a look yourself.” Spring Blossom’s look turned apologetic, but there was nothing either she or Maya could do at their levels.

Lili looked down at the empty table, then pressed her hands to her face. It was all happening so fast...

“*Sai!*” she suddenly said. “Has Sai left yet? Is she still here? She is *still* assigned to the *Kraken*, and technically still a *mercenary*. She’s worked with Ro ... someone who looks like our mystery guest, and perhaps might be more attuned to him,” she suggested, then turned aside while considering other options, before turning back. “And *Sally!* She’s *very* powerful, and not part of the Commonwealth at *all!*”

The room was silenced by a knock at the door, and all looked forward to the arrival of breakfast.

Unfortunately, it was merely the household Majordomo, accompanied by Yin-Yin and Laisee. They bid him wait outside while they conveyed a message to the family.

“There’s been an incident in the groundskeeper’s workshop,” Laisee told them. “The head groundskeeper collapsed this morning, and Mei-Mei was on the schedule. She has gone to see to him.”

After what he’d observed from his window this morning, the first thought Radatel had was that perhaps the stress was too much for old Octavius, and he’d not taken it well.

“What? Is he *sick*? Why would...” Lili stopped when Radatel rested his hand on her arm.

“Lili,” he said quietly, then stood and walked over to the patio windows before pulling the curtains aside...

He'd closed the curtain back in their room, knowing Lili didn't need anything else to set her off further, but the sun had been making a progressively wider intrusion into the canyon since earlier that morning, and a collective gasp went up as soon as everyone got a good look outside.

Lili, Diane, and Spring Blossom rose and drifted over to the window to get a better view.

"Well... That explains *where* she got the life force from," Diane muttered, while nodding her head slowly.

While the women were looking at the devastation outside, Radatel had gone to the door. He spoke quietly with the Majordomo, who'd taken notes on his data pad, and promised to return with the information requested. The serving staff – usually a skeleton crew this early in the morning – were just pushing carts down the hallway towards him, so he opened the doors wide for them.

"Ladies, we have a light breakfast this morning," he quietly announced, then stood aside to let them in.

Once the table was set and the food deposited, the staff left them alone and withdrew to the kitchens. While the Ladies were returning to the table, Radatel closed the curtains, but settled into one of the lounge seats in the room, intending to put off a too-early meal to his digestive schedule. Just to help tide him over, he poured a small measure of the family label and sipped it while considering the situation.

"As for our little *problem*, we have Taldus Remy in agreement to become *formally* adopted into the Royal family," he said pleasantly. "Taldus has been responsive to my training, and seems to fit in well with the departments he is managing."

"But what about ... you know, that *guy*?" Diane asked him awkwardly, which he rewarded with a chuckle.

"Ronnie never wanted the job to begin with, and in truth he made a *much* better First Sword for me, anyway," he told her, then glanced at Lili. "Besides, Lili is not done *punishing* Taldus for his little *indiscretions*."

That brought a coughing laugh from Lili, as he'd timed it perfectly with her next bite of food; then he continued by casting out a potential solution.

"My First Sword, due to his age and declining health, *might* be persuaded to retire somewhere with Maya – *other* than on Kantor," he suggested. "The children will miss Maya, of course, but they're growing up quickly and not as needful of her."

"Not after last *night*," Diane muttered to no one in particular.

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“He could return to his Cluster on Earth,” Spring Blossom suggested, but Lili let out a negative grunt before responding.

“Uh-uh. After here, that would be the *next* place they’d look for him. Somewhere out at the *Fringe* would be better ... if he kept his *pants* on.”

“Or the Demon’s Realm,” Diane suggested, but Lili shook her head.

“That’s got his fingerprints all over it, too. He’d be better off some place that’s *totally* off the books. Maybe someplace new. Somewhere–”

“Well, the Vanir Prime was talking *asylum* back on Vanaheim,” Laisee interrupted her. “But they’re moving somewhere else now. Someplace *livable*.”

“*Asylum?*” Lili could not imagine the circumstances that brought that about.

“Yes. It was considered when Ronnie’s probable reward for his services was revealed to the Vanir Prime,” Laisee said somewhat stiffly. “*You* remember how he was, Lili. Certain that he labored under a death sentence, *regardless* of how things turned out?” she asked her, and Spring Blossom paused from eating to look at Lili accusingly.

Lili met her gaze for a moment, before looking away. Now was *not* the time, but she was sure it would need to be addressed later.

Instead, she focused on the present.

“Actually, that is not a bad idea – asylum among the Vanir, where he has won favor and friends. Likewise, he has built up friendships within a small portion of the Hegemony. A very *small* portion, to be sure, but they no longer live on Eke.”

“Midgard!” Radatel blurted out. “He’s not really known there at all. Change his name, and modify his appearance. He could disappear from notice all together.”

There was a tap on the door, before Maya walked in and closed it behind her. Her face didn’t look all that happy as she walked to the table and leaned down to hug Ronnie’s mother. They made room for her, and she sat down and took a drink of water to wet her mouth.

“Cletus. If he does not recover as himself, they would *never* look for him on Cletus,” she said quietly. “I was listening on my way...” she paused when she noticed they were all staring at her. “Oh. Mei-Mei stopped by after taking care of Octavius. She is staying with ... that person, while I have come to eat.”

“How is Octavius?” Radatel asked her. His concern was valid.

Octavius was a *genius* in the garden.

"He suffered a seizure of some sort, or perhaps a psychic break? Mei-Mei is not entirely sure," she explained. "He looked out the door this morning, and ... it was very upsetting for him."

"Yes. I can imagine," Lili murmured.

"They moved him down to his quarters, and Mei-Mei has given instructions to his wife for his care," Maya continued.

"I'll go and see him in a little while," Lili promised.

"He is awake now. He ordered his assistants to survey the grounds to determine the extent of the damage," Maya said, then stared off into space for a moment, before beginning to chuckle, causing everyone to look at her again.

When she finally noticed them, she stopped and dipped her head for a moment.

"I was just thinking. Perhaps it is time to add *Jaiying* to the schedule?" she suggested lightly. "After all, if she could bring *Rondal* back, then she is *much* more skillful than *me!*"

Her look turned stricken, before she got up and dashed out of the room. Spring Blossom got up to follow her, but halfway to the door, she stopped and came back, then grabbed a napkin and loaded it with bread, before following after Maya.

"What in the *world?*" Diane murmured, and Lili explained it to them.

"I felt her, and then read her. He woke up. He spoke to her," she said quietly, "...but called her *Yandi...*"

In the Gardens...

Remus and Rufus were leading two separate groups of groundskeepers on a tour of the disaster area. The devastation hadn't been *total*, but it might as well have been...

Thankfully, they'd left Octavius in the hands of his wife, and made their escape before his anger caused him to have a relapse. As it was, they'd endured his curses at all things unholy, until the lift doors closed and they'd started back up with their instructions. They almost missed the quiet that had accompanied them when they'd carried the comatose body of their supervisor back to his quarters down below.

Priscilla had been panic-stricken, but the good Lady Mei-Mei arrived and ran her hands across him, assuring her he would be all right ... eventually. She'd *glowed* – a reassuring sight, for sure – and he eventually *did* come around, then tried to sit up; but the good Lady gently held him down and ordered him to remain in bed. She'd then given his wife a short list of instructions, then bid them goodbye, with a

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reminder that he was to *stay* in bed until told otherwise. Too bad she'd not told him to keep his *mouth* shut.

Once the door closed behind her, he'd exploded with a list of demands – beginning with an *immediate* survey of the grounds. They were to include soil and water samples, along with clippings, and even cross-sections of some of the trees to try to find the root cause of the blight. Despite the good Lady's instructions, he'd become increasingly agitated until his wife had applied the first medicinal procedure on her list – a *full* cup of ambrosia. That had been followed by *another* full cup, which finally seemed to mellow his professional concerns as he devolved into the metaphysical arena by producing a litany of blame towards Gods of all sorts for this terrible blemish against his finest work. That's when they'd left...

The team Remus was leading was taking soil samples from the areas closest to their shop, while Rufus had his troop hike to the opposite end of the disaster zone to work their way back. They started at the dead zone closest to the household walls – the patio outline, that is – then worked their way around the edges to determine the extent of the loss.

The area of disaster seemed to curve gently towards the edge of the river and finally met it at one point, where they simply walked along the shoreline until it started gently curving back towards the groundskeepers' workshop. Along the way, they'd taken samples every twenty feet or so. Rufus had been updating his data pad and marking the limits, becoming relieved it might not be the *complete* disaster they'd suspected – depending on who you spoke to, of course.

Up on the Rim

Aquila was back on watch this morning, but his nephew had been temporarily relieved of duty while he underwent a period of mandatory rest. His partner today was Septimus, who normally patrolled the opposite canyon rim, but had been reassigned to join him this morning. Things promised to be more relaxed today, but not for the groundskeepers running around below them. Septimus, too, had observed the light show yesterday, but from the vantage point of the other rim. It had been *much* more exciting close up.

"So ... how is Philo feeling?" he asked, and got a rueful snort back from Aquila.

"We had a nice long talk with Lady Lili last evening ... right before she took him aside for some *private* counseling," he muttered. "The Emperor was there and assured me he'd be all right in a few days ... probably."

Septimus stifled a laugh, having gone through the same process himself in the distant past.

“Well then, Marcus and I fared rather *well* in comparison,” he offered gently.

“Children...” Aquila’s sigh was soft, but his disappointment was still audible. “He’ll be all right, though. Once he’s seen it all, *nothing* will bother him,” he said, but then looked down at the devastation below.

“Not like those poor devils down *there*.”

Neither of them would speculate aloud about what had happened to the gardens overnight, but from the shape of the blight, it was rather obvious to both of them. Whatever had happened, seemed to have its epicenter at the patio where the *Remembrance* had taken place, and Aquila *seriously* doubted it had anything to do with the valaets, who had, so far remained absent this morning.

In the Groundskeeper’s Workshop

After two hours of diligent work, they had a rough estimate of how much damage had taken place, but not a *clue* as to what caused it.

Rufus was compiling the information from the soil and water samples, while Remus was updating a more detailed physical map of the gardens to provide a visual reference of the damage. Several of their workers were still examining core samples of several dead trees and mature bushes that had previously provided shade over several walkways, or privacy shielding of areas that were more secluded.

Fortunately, what had initially appeared to the head groundskeeper as *total* devastation, was merely a blocking row of tall dead hedges, with an even *taller* smattering of dead shade trees further behind them.

From his point of view, the entire *canyon* appeared to have been destroyed, when in reality it was just a more or less radial area that extended out from a central location. It was still a huge area, but didn’t encompass the entire canyon. In fact, if everything didn’t have an overall grayish *cast* to it, then probably no one would have noticed until they actually walked onto any of the fields, or touched any of the plants.

“Rufus ... we got *nothing* here,” one of the workers told him while approaching with a core sample in hand. It was a sample from one of the planting beds taken three feet down into the soil.

“No live bugs, no bacteria. No microbes of *any* kind, really. We even found a few of the *burrowers* who were caught by whatever killed off everything.” He gave him a blank look while shrugging his shoulders.

“What ... what about those creatures of Lord Andrew’s?”

Remus had told him one of his team had discovered the creatures sitting on the rocks in the center of the pond, but they’d initially

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appeared dead. Then one of them farted, and left an unusually large pile of feces on the rocks before struggling to get back into the water.

“No idea. Maybe the *rock* protected them? From the amount of floating swimmers there were, they might have simply gorged themselves until they couldn’t eat anymore.”

Rufus pursed his lips as he thought about that. The swimmers had all died, and yet the aquatic creatures had both lived and made a hearty meal out of the dead floaters? Maybe because they were from Earth? He shook his head distractedly while his man continued with his report.

“The plants all look like they simply dried up ... almost like we didn’t water them at all,” his man continued. “From his view at one of the patios, Felix said they look like they’d been in a dryer for a couple of weeks – not that he’s suggesting that’s what *happened*. It just looks like it. And everything is fragile, even the *hardwoods*. One of the men leaned against a tree, and it snapped and fell over.”

“Did you...” Rufus stopped when his man raised a hand.

“Sent teams out to tape off the areas, and sent word to security to notify the household that the grounds aren’t safe. Probably why the valaets haven’t come out to play.”

“Kailas saw one on the far side,” Remus called out to him, pausing from taking a stylus to the large document spread out on the work table. “Says the big one took a sniff, then sneezed several times before walking away. The female and the kits are staying on the upstream side of the grounds.”

Remus focused back on the drawing, but the only tale it told was where the damage started and where it ended. He began making notes on his data pad, but already knew Octavius was going to have another fit.

Another twenty minutes later found them both reporting to the household Majordomo, Felix, with their initial findings, having bypassed the head groundskeeper in the process.

That had been at the orders of the First Wife, who’d made a surprise visit all the way to the workshop to learn of their initial results. The fact that she’d arrived almost immediately after they’d returned from the grounds was a surprise.

Her instructions aimed at keeping Octavius out of the loop for the time being was just a bonus. As an *added* bonus, and truly one they’d never even considered, were her assurances that the grounds were safe for humans. After she’d left, they’d looked at each other and shared the realization that they’d *both* screwed up by not considering a lingering hazardous situation for *humans*.

The Majordomo Plots...

The Majordomo was finally seeing a *bright* side to the unexpected blight shadowing the household this morning. In chaos, there was *opportunity*, and he intended to make the *most* of it.

As Felix strode along the hallways, he remembered dreams of sharing his vision of the canyon with his charges, but his vision had been *stifled* by that arrogant Octavius with *his* bland vision of “calming fields” and “structured beds of angular precision!”

After several decades of frustration, the mere *mention* of a “*prayer labyrinth*” by Lady Diane had given him his first wedge. He’d queried the good Lady and learned of her desire – and what a “*prayer labyrinth*” was. Then he’d proceeded to design an intricate maze of enticing features.

She’d been delighted, and given her approval, and he’d taken it *literally*, as had been established by precedent with the creation of a “*playground*” for the Prince and Princesses by prior authorization of the Emperor himself – just like the Lady’s “*strawberry*” garden, or Lord Andrew’s “*turtle*” pond.

He finally reached the proper hallway, then stopped and faced one of many doors along it. His query to security had informed him the First Wife was behind the door in front of him, and he paused to compose himself before knocking politely – allowing the customary five seconds for non-family intrusions into family spaces, and being rewarded by seeing the First Wife as soon as he opened the door.

They’d all turned expectant eyes to the door, but it was Lili who smiled and called to him.

“*Felix!* Please come in and share your news!”

Cletus, The Council of Elders

The end of the day was fast approaching, but Ju remained pensive for some reason...

They had joined with Xue in the very early hours of the morning, as she’d extended out to Kantor.

The goal really wasn’t to *spy*, but rather be sensitive to the *emotions* of the Royal family while they’d held the Remembrance for Lord Caldar – specifically, the *Elder*, Lady Liling. Of course, as a *by-product* of that sensitivity, they would then be aware of any *untoward* behavior by Liling that might suggest she was less than trustworthy.

Both Ju and Rong had insisted Liling was not to be trusted, while Wen and Daiyu told them their suspicions were groundless. Indeed, from what they’d felt, it seemed like a proper Remembrance for a deceased family

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member – even continuing with the proper respects accorded to a deceased *Senior*, as Lord Caldor had been.

It was what had happened at the very *end* of the ceremony that remained in question. There was some brief excitement, but then there was *nothing*, almost as if someone had put a lid over a boiling *pot*...

“Xue, you should contact Liling,” Ju pressed her again. “Find out what *really* went on.”

“You *know* what really went on, Ju,” Xue reminded her once again. “Lord Caldor was loved by his family, and there are *many* Healers and Seniors in that family. They are grieving for their lost son, brother, and companion. I will speak with Liling tomorrow after we’ve *all* had a chance to rest.”

“Come, Ju. Let us eat, and then retire for the night,” Rong prompted her. “Remember you promised to help me with something this night,” she added teasingly.

Ju gave out an exasperated sigh, but smiled at her companion, just the same. Rong had remained by her side after Yanmei had left them all those millennia ago, even as Ju was still missing Yanmei and wishing she’d *never* had that argument with her. She was *sure* that’s what had prompted her to leave them for the Kantite visitor – the ruse of drawing lots regardless – although why she’d ever agreed to have a half-breed *child* with the beast was quite beyond her.

Ju gave her faithful lover a hug, and walked from the chambers with her, followed by Wen and Daiyu.

“Xue, aren’t you coming? You can almost smell supper from the doorway,” Daiyu called back to her.

“In a few minutes. I have a few things left to file away. I’ll be along shortly.” Once the door closed, Xue finished updating her data pad, then sat back in her chair and sighed.

She looked around the ancient chambers, and remembered how austere it used to be in the beginning. Over the centuries, the paneling had been upgraded and replaced dozens of times, and the furniture had become more comfortable and elaborate. She ran her hands along the padded armrests of her Council seat, relishing the softness of the leather, and how it conformed to her body when she sat there for hours at a time. It was so comfortable that she’d even fallen asleep upon occasion, only to be awakened by the cleaning staff, who came by after hours to tidy up after a day’s session.

The visual displays above the wainscoting had been a good addition. They eliminated printed charts and graphs, in favor of visual aids that

moved and spoke when required. Those were put in *how* many millennia ago? She really could not remember, which was something that pushed her into the one area of her life she was beginning to regret.

In the beginning, the Elders, *all of them*, had agreed that continuity was a *requirement* for the stability of their new creation – the Commonwealth. Without stability, the Kantites would eventually run rampant over their creation, and drag everything into ruin – just as they’d done every five-thousand years or so for as long as any records could be found. Unfortunately, maintaining that continuity required sacrifices, and one of them was nearly eternal life.

On the face of it, “borrowing” a body for a rather short length of time hadn’t seemed to be a terribly burdensome task. It provided a way for the donor to gain a *huge* amount of skills and experience, yet kept the Elder fresh and present to help maintain the Commonwealth. What she was finding, though, was that she was missing what life was *really* about.

She would *never* have children, instead having a “silent” partner for a period of years, but eventually she would age, and then she’d acquire *another* volunteer body and start the process over. And *really*, didn’t there come a time when you simply wanted to give it all up and *retire*? This wasn’t the first cycle she’d felt this way, and if things progressed as planned, she’d move into a newer body in another hundred years and start all over again – just as Ju had recently done.

Ha! That investment just *never* seemed to work out with Ju, and this time had been no different. One of the *downsides* of continuity was Ju’s *constant* hatred of the Kantites they managed – or *all* men when it came right down to it.

Maybe... Just maybe it was time to bring some *new* blood into the Council?

She closed her eyes and remembered the events on Kantor very early that morning. It had been evening on Kantor, and the gathering was large, for Lord Caldar had many members in his family. She’d watched through the eyes of a Healer, or perhaps a lesser Senior? She wasn’t really sure. What she *was* sure of, is that she couldn’t tap into Lili or Sai ... or *Laisee*, for that matter. The one called Diane was also unavailable to her, as was the daughter, Amy. Not even *Maya*, his former lover. Instead, she’d watched from the vantage point of Lord Caldar’s mother, Spring Blossom, who’d seemed wide open to her.

The prayer circled the body, followed by the calling of the names. She’d been surprised at the intensity of some of them, particularly the *Earthlings* among them. What had *astonished* her, though, were the *children* who’d stood up and begun to speak. Then it was as if a *blanket*

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had been thrown over her eyes, but not before she saw one of them begin to *glow*...

Kantor, The Royal Homestead

Felix was striding down the hall, and humming to himself. The First Wife had listened to his report, and suggested that he handle the restoration as he saw fit. Then she'd suggested the garden might be better served if the revisions were more *regular* in area, rather than the rather oddly shaped blight that was currently the case. He'd shown her his plans, flashing them on a wall display, and providing an overall impression of the combination of garden and water features he'd longed to implement for so many decades.

He'd thought he'd gotten away clean until she'd asked him about the cost. Then he'd reluctantly shared his estimates for the work – updated annually, just in case – and she'd suggested that it might be paid for out of Lord Caldar's share of the household account. He'd beamed at that, then bowed, promising he would work diligently with the grounds keeping staff to ensure that his vision for the enjoyment of the Royal family would come to pass. Now it was just a matter of convincing that *blowhard*, Octavius!

In Lili's Suite

Evening had finally arrived, and Lili was lounging in her suite. Her ambrosia had been chilled to perfection, and she sipped it gratefully, while considering the results of the day, and how it reflected the *truth*, as it had been determined *later*.

The unexpected blight had been caused by a fast-acting *herbicide*, which had *obviously* been left behind after the Drecks assault many weeks ago. Upon *further* reflection, it had probably been triggered by the energy released during the *Remembrance*. Restoration plans had already been implemented.

Both Maya and Spring Blossom had fainted during the Remembrance, but that was simply due to their grief over their lost lover and son. Even now, Maya was back on duty and tending to an injured visitor whose identity remained unknown for the moment. He had suffered a disfigurement somewhere, but it was decided not to try to correct it until he could give an accurate explanation of how it had happened. It wasn't *that* disturbing an injury, and had only taken Sai a little over an hour to accomplish.

Afterwards, she'd seemed in a rather *good* mood about it – almost as if she'd *enjoyed* doing it.

Spring Blossom's mood had improved *immensely*, which made the prospect of this evening without her husband somewhat tolerable – *if* she

decided to return to her bed later on. The stranger seemed to enjoy her company quite well, but not as much as the Healer, whom he'd mistaken for someone else.

The children were... Well, they were *children*, but trapped within the household for the time being. The grounds were off-limits until the dangerous trees could be felled – apparently by simply *leaning* against them, she'd been told – and all the dried vegetation removed.

That last promised to be easy, as it appeared that it simply washed away with a stiff stream of water. The current delay was from the groundskeepers, who were still running tests on the debris to see if it would be toxic for the down-stream ecology of their river, but initial tests seemed promising.

As for *Jaiying*... She'd noted Jaiying's unusual behavior later that afternoon. The child had isolated herself, then lain down and closed her eyes. At first, she'd thought she was simply tired, but the amount of *energy* she was expending seemed to preclude that.

Rose had been loitering nearby, and explained that Jaiying was still "Looking for Grandfather" – which seemed rather silly as everyone else seemed to know *exactly* where he was. Then she'd whispered that she was looking for "the *rest* of him," which had piqued her interest. She'd considered the possibility of it, then gently probed Jaiying's mind, finding it more open than ever before.

The probe she'd extended produced visions that had confused her, but then she'd seen the *Visitor*, and quickly left Jaiying's mind. Obviously, the child had capabilities that were beyond *anything* she'd ever heard of, or perhaps that was an example of a *Vision*?

Rather than dwell on the possibility of being replaced by a six-year-old child, she sipped her drink and decided to relax while anticipating the arrival of her lover later this evening. She'd promised to return after checking on Maya and their mystery client.

Of course, nature abhors a vacuum...

'Hello, *Liling*. Do you have a moment?' Elder Xue called out to her.

In the Children's Suite

Diane and Shay had parent duty this evening, but it was *anything* but relaxing.

The children were on edge, as Jaiying had been in isolation for most of the afternoon, and long into the evening. She'd even refused to break for supper, instead insisting that she continue looking for something.

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What that was, Diane suspected, was not going to be found. She and Shay knew, like everyone else, that the kids had brought Ronnie back ... *mostly*. However, the problem was probably related to *brain damage*, rather than metaphysical missing chunks of memory. That's what had happened to Xiaoli, but Jaiying remained focused on finding a missing chunk of Ronnie and sticking him back into his head. Diane had suggested researching how to restore memories from his "back-ups" would probably be more productive, but Jaiying seemed determined to look elsewhere.

Diane had finally put her foot down and ordered her little cousin to wash up and get to bed – which she'd reluctantly done, but not before complaining that, "He's still out there. I can *hear* him."

Somewhere Else...

"My – my – my ... isn't she the **persistent** one," Destiny muttered, having observed Jaiying's search all that afternoon and evening.

"She loves Lord Caldar," Faith voiced very quietly.

"Yes ... and look at what he's done about **that**," he grumbled, his face making a distasteful frown at the mere thought of it.

Lili's Aftermath

As unexpected night calls go, it hadn't been all *that* bad...

She'd been asked to confirm the Remembrance had taken place, which she'd done. Then she'd been asked about the disposition of the body.

That had been a little awkward, as she'd had to explain how Rondal's mother had intended to have him placed on a framework exposed to the sky, and then left to rot – although not in such blatant terms. The final arrangement was interment on his home planet in accordance with the deceased's wishes, and the native customs of his social grouping – which currently did *not* include mounting him to a trellis until total decomposition had taken place.

She'd told her they tentatively planned a trip to Earth later in the month when the schedule opened up a bit ... perhaps in another three weeks or so.

Xue had extended her condolences for their loss, and expressed her hopes for the Gods' graces for her departed brother-in-law. Lili had thanked her, then reminded her that the Emperor would be introducing the Vanir and Drecks Ambassadors to Court in two or three days, depending on the Tier One staff's recommendation.

Xue had been eloquent in her praise for the implementation of such a robust body of workers, then ended the conversation on a friendly note,

but upon closing, Lili had immediately smacked herself mentally for making promises she'd not discussed with anyone else yet...

For sure, although *Maya* might not feel comfortable around her former lover, Spring Blossom had absolutely *no* intention of letting her son out of her sight. That meant they needed to put him somewhere else where he wouldn't be found, along with a reason to keep himself hidden.

Unfortunately, he still thought it was one-hundred eighty-six years ago and he'd just been injured in a shipboard fire. He was in pain, his Senior Yandi was missing, and he didn't understand how he'd returned to Kantor, when he thought he was still lost in the void. To top it off, he didn't even know *who* he was, and *no one* was going to tell him.

Cletus, Early Morning, The Council of Elders

Liling's pre-bedtime report had been succinct but somewhat melancholy, as would be expected for a family member's Remembrance. They'd ended on polite terms, and Xue had just shared the report with her companions this morning.

Afterwards, she looked on in bewilderment as the other Elders talked quietly among themselves. Something was going on, but she couldn't quite put her finger on it. At the moment, Ju was pontificating about the events on Kantor.

"You know, I hardly felt anything at *all* during that Remembrance," she said to the group.

"You're right," Rong quickly agreed. "It was *very* much different than the one held for Kita back in the Death Void."

"My Ladies, Lord Caldar *was* merely a man," Wen spoke up, her voice almost chiding them. "What did you *expect* to feel?"

"I hardly felt anything," Daiyu muttered. "Xue, are you *sure* you were in the right place?"

Xue looked at her companions, and nodded her head slowly. Something was off, but she didn't want to push the issue ... not just yet. Instead, she offered placating words.

"It *was* different. Rondal Caldar was immediate family with *all* of them so there was a lot of personal anguish involved. Perhaps their *combined* sorrow affected the ceremony?" she suggested, following that statement with a couple of slow nods of her head.

Ju gave out a disgusted snort and shook her head slowly.

"You're probably right, Xue," she finally said. "Besides, the only *real* Senior there was Liling, and she was probably just as distracted as the

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rest of them. They're sending the body back to ... to *Earth*? Isn't that rather *extreme*?"

"It was at the request of the deceased," Xue told them again. "His mother offered an *alternate* Earth ceremony, but Liling insisted they follow Rondal Caldar's wishes."

"Well... Done and done," Rong muttered almost cheerfully. "What is *next* for this morning's requests?"

As they settled into the day's tasks, Xue kept her thoughts to herself.

She felt that something odd had happened, but for the life of her, she couldn't quite figure out what it was.

Kantor, Late Evening, The Children's Suite

The Senior Staff stopped holding hands and sat back to review their apparent success. Through a *great* deal of effort, the Elder's Council appeared to have been sufficiently flummoxed by their clandestine efforts to alter their memories of the previous evening. Even Xue, who felt like the strongest among them, seemed to have some lingering doubts about what she'd observed remotely. That had been a chance discovery on Cathy's part when she'd been looking in on Grandfather through his mother's eyes, and caught the silent shadow memory of another presence from the previous evening.

They'd banded together, and reached out to Cletus, tapping into each Elder in turn, and making tiny adjustments to their perception of the Remembrance. From the conversation they'd just heard, it seems to have paid off nicely. Now they just needed to seek out everyone *locally* and make sure they were *absolutely* trustworthy – or in *compliance*, as Aunt Lili had done to the guardsman, Philo.

Cathy had initially voiced concerns over altering memories like that, but Walter had gone through all the negative possibilities, just as he'd gone through all the positives. If they wanted to keep their Grandfather safe, then they needed to limit the number of individuals who might divulge the *real* truth to the wrong person. Not of least importance was the fact that if the *real* truth ever got out, then fingers might point to *themselves* as the instigators of the subterfuge.

Mama Laisee, who was duty parent for this evening, had agreed with that possibility, saying they needed to grow and mature towards adulthood before they would be ready to defend themselves from people like the Elders.

Walter had shared their opinion that she, Aunt Lili, and almost *any* of the other Wives and family who'd spent time in Grandfather's bed was more than likely stronger than any of the Elders; but she'd countered

that they'd been active for nearly ten *millennia*, and experience like that was *not* to be trifled with.

Then she'd reminded them that Lili was to be kept out of the loop in regards to *exact* details of their actions, or of them even having conversations with her that exposed the *real* truth about the occupant residing in Lord Caldor's quarters. This was to protect both Lili and themselves from reprisal. They'd all reluctantly agreed before heading to the facilities to wash and get ready for bed.

For Jaiying, she was exhausted, as she'd spent the majority of the day in yet another fruitless search for lost pieces of her Grandfather. It was maddening in that she could *feel* echoes of him, and they felt relatively close by, but she couldn't narrow down their specific location just yet. It was almost as if he was there, but slightly out of phase. Searching through the adjacent "phases of reality" as she considered them was becoming frustrating.

In Ronnie's Suite

Maya looked down at the sleeping figure on the bed, and frowned. On the plus side, it was no longer a look of *total* dismay, as he'd become more coherent since his awakening. Unfortunately, he still had trouble stringing an entire sentence together. At least he'd stopped calling her "Yandi" every few minutes. Now it was just "Lady Tal" whenever he had a specific need, or sometimes even just a grunt.

Whatever pain he was experiencing was not from that imaginary fire, but his body struggling to recover from the effects of the Vanir infusions he'd suffered. The injuries her mother had inflicted upon him were merely superficial, and only to obscure his features from the casual observer. Considering that he'd been housed in an EMTU since leaving Cletus would seem to make that superfluous, as he was surrounded by family and staff who could easily recognize him *despite* her efforts.

Plus, there were already very slim excuses for a household *full* of Healers and Seniors in *not* effecting repairs to his face to begin with.

The latest information from Lili also held an interesting revelation, though. She had reported discovery of his "true" identity – one "Donald Cato" – but with no background details as yet to establish his providence. Since they were still going with the fiction of him being a recovered crewman from one-hundred eighty-six years ago, the amount of *further* confusion for this "Donald" person would be tremendous.

Lili's current orders had been specific. He would be identified as "Donald" while on Kantor, and if he needed to be convinced, then the effort would be made to make that happen. However, since Maya had already experienced a *similar* event of that nature, she wasn't all that

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thrilled with the prospect of being involved with it. So far, the one saving grace was that he didn't seem to remember who he was to begin with.

Maya heard the outer door open, and walked towards the outer room; seeing the smiling face of Spring Blossom greeting her, and gesturing for her to leave the bedroom and join her in the outer room. Casting a single glance back at "Donald", she reluctantly joined her, but left the bedroom door ajar so she could listen for unexpected problems.

"Lili sends her thanks for staying with ... *Donald*, is it?" At Maya's frowning nod, she continued. "Lili and Radatel have talked it over, and were reminded that the commander of the *Microcosmus* had been censured and relieved of command. If *Donald* remains at that point in his memories, then that is the reality which will be presented to him."

"But – But he *overcame* all that! He *saved* us all from–"

"It will facilitate his banishment from Kantor, and allow him to restart his life somewhere else," his mother calmly reminded her. "And Radatel no longer feels the anger he once harbored against him because of his sons. It will merely be the Emperor's punishment for the unfortunate result of his failure at Zarox ... the *old* Emperor."

"Still, that is cruel," Maya stated somberly.

"It was cruel *before*," Spring Blossom muttered angrily. "I was forced to watch it happen, yet had to remain silent *throughout*. This time Donald will have the *support* of his brother, and the *rest of his family*."

Spring Blossom leaned in and hugged Maya tightly, but kissed her gently before releasing her to go look in on her sleeping son.

She stood in the doorway and shook her head slowly, before stepping back and returning to Maya.

"Not much of a disguise," she said. "I'd thought Sai would have put more effort into it."

"There are changes to his cheekbones, and the bridge of his nose," Maya said quietly. "The cuts will heal with tiny scars, and the swelling will go down after a while. The *rest*... It may fool one who has never seen him before."

"As long as it maintains the illusion," Spring Blossom said, then smiled before hugging her again. "If you have need of me, I will return."

"Sleep well, Spring Blossom ... when Lili finally *lets* you sleep," she teased her, as she walked her to the door.

After Spring Blossom left, Maya returned to the bedroom and contemplated the remainder of her evening, finally letting out another sigh before getting ready to embrace the solitary comfort of the smaller

bed they'd brought in for the visiting Healer's use while maintaining watch over the injured client.

"Donald" had developed a tendency to thrash in his sleep, and there was a concern of possible brain injury or degradation being the cause, although nothing conclusive had been determined as yet. Still, the visitor's bed was close by, so she settled upon it to rest for the time being, while facing "Donald" where he lay on his bed by himself now.

Cletus, Evening, The Council of Elders

Xue was relaxing with a contented smile on her face. It had taken her most of the remainder of the day, but she'd *finally* pieced together the tiny clues she'd found in the broken memory chains of her companions. It had not been an *easy* task, though...

She'd been the one to extend out to Kantor, while the rest of her companions observed locally from her perceptions. It was her strength and skill that had allowed her easy access to Spring Blossom's mind during the Remembrance, which had gone rather well at the time until the children had left their seats and approached the Vanir box. She distinctly remembered – *now* – the beginnings of a glow about one of them before her senses had been cut off.

They'd discussed her sudden disconnection at the time, but passed it off to the strange mixture of Healers, Seniors, and the new aliens at the gathering. Incidences like it had happened before, and most likely this was merely one of them. After planning a follow-up conference with Liling for the next day, they'd continued with the tasks for that morning and left it at that.

One thing that set Xue apart from her companions was a strong belief in her *own* limitations; one such result being the keeping of a log where she recorded her perceptions of an event – especially when something unusual had happened. As this had obviously qualified, she'd jotted down her observations, and made a special notation about the way she'd been forced out of the link, along with everything leading up to it.

When she'd gotten up this morning, she'd followed her routine and reviewed her data pad for items scheduled for the day – including the notes she'd made previously but which didn't seem to match this morning's memory of the events referenced in them. That had caused her to question herself, and forced a period of intense introspection and self-examination.

She'd remembered the connection to that Healer on Kantor, and remembered most of the ceremony. The thing she *didn't* remember was any perception of the children glowing – or even *standing* during the Remembrance. In fact, she couldn't remember many details about the ceremony at all, other than by the notes she'd left for herself.

An Unfortunate Decision

She'd pondered this, then almost panicked. Could this be the handiwork of Lord Caldar? He'd done it once before with that Healer, Maya Tal. She remembered that, upon occasion, Elder Ai had also allowed him to affect Hegemony citizens with altered memories of events to evoke confusion and panic in pursuit of his stated goals.

She'd made the call to Liling about the Remembrance, and received confirmation of its completion, ending the connection after a suitable amount of pleasantries had been exchanged. She'd then shared the message with her companions, which had later triggered another bout of confusion within her.

While they'd gone about their daily tasks, she'd extended out to her companions and delicately searched through their memories. What she'd found was definitely *not* the work of Lord Caldar – not unless he'd become *incredibly* skilled in the last few years. Instead of the hash he'd made of Maya Tal's memories, what she'd discovered were very intricate and *minute* excisions of memory chains that slightly altered her companion's perceptions of the events they'd witnessed from her mind.

With that clue, she was able to carefully trace her *own* memories and found the tiny broken links she'd been subjected to. She knew her companions would not be involved in such, so that left the participants on Kantor. Liling had not been accessible at all. Neither had many of the family Healers and Seniors, which was why she'd chosen Spring Blossom to observe through. Once reconnecting those links, she started running through her memory of the events from the *beginning*...

The ceremony went smoothly, followed by the calling of the names. Liling had seemed disappointed at one point, but the ring had continued around, even to the little Kee changeling, who'd been bathed in a warm golden glow.

When it was almost over, she remembered feeling chaos from somewhere; then the children had risen as a group, and then ... then she'd been *suppressed!* *That* was the action which had taken place!

The rest of her afternoon involved a very covert and painstakingly difficult effort on her part to track down the culprit involved, and with ten *millennia* of practice behind her, she had the requisite skill set to figure it out. It had still taken hours of careful poking and prodding, but tantalizing tidbits of thoughts kept teasing her from a few sources until she was able to piece several of them together at last.

Liling had *not* lied. *She'd* not tried to bring Lord Caldar back, but someone else *had!* That is, if that bundle of confusion she'd discovered was truly him, then someone had brought that body back to life, and was *still* working on making it whole.

She briefly contemplated the future. It might play out poorly for everyone and everything. Of *critical* importance, the safety of the Commonwealth was *paramount*. She considered for a moment advising her companions, but immediately threw that idea away. It would surely cause chaos in the near term and probably even *more* chaos in the future. No, this was a delicate task that needed to be handled with *exquisite* finesse. That automatically left out Ju and Rong, and by extension, Wen and Daiyu.

Three things came to mind. First, she needed to identify who had actually brought Rondal Caldar back – *if* that was truly him – *and* establish that she wasn't a threat to the Commonwealth. Second, Liling had promised to send a body to Earth for disposal, and she doubted a *living* body was a suitable candidate for the task. Third, she needed to confirm exactly *who* those confused thoughts were coming from, if only to explain why such a violation against the Council of Elders had taken place to begin with.

Of the three, the easiest was acquiring the body of an elderly deceased male. Even when practicing extended life skills, people still died.

Obviously, it would be much easier to determine if Rondal Caldar *had* been brought back to life, and then simply *terminate* that life. Of course, that might involve repercussions she currently did not want to contemplate – such as triggering the aforementioned near term chaos. So ... *no*. She would have to procure a spare body – just in case.

It was settled then. She would *personally* visit Kantor under the guise of observing the presentation of the two new Ambassadors. Then she would visit with the Royal family at their canyon Homestead, poke around a little, and perhaps give Liling a gift to deliver to Earth.

She thought it through once again, but paused ... having overlooked the obvious. What if Rondal Caldar *had* been brought back, and was eventually capable of resuming his activities? According to Elder Ai, he'd been a barely fettered, wild talent who'd paid only lip-service to the restrictions she'd laid upon him – right up until he'd driven her mad.

That triggered another thought. *Was* Caldar responsible for Ai losing her mind? Not only her mind, but also her *Senior's* talents?

She sipped her drink while contemplating what she was getting herself into.

Finesse?

The problem had suddenly jumped *way* beyond finesse. Perhaps a visit to Lady Ai would be appropriate as well? She wondered just how far she was willing to go to discover the truth, then thought perhaps Lord Caldar had faced *similar* conflicts when burdened with Ai's curse.

An Unfortunate Decision

A tiny smile pursed her lips.

She'd been contemplating separating herself from the Council of Elders for centuries now, and if this little jaunt she was planning contributed to that result, then so be it. She drained her drink, then leaned back and stretched. She'd forgotten the excitement that actual *hands-on* activities could bring to her otherwise dull and staid lifestyle. She almost envied Liling her position, and looked forward to seeing her again in person.

August 14, Kantor, The Capitol, Reflections on the Day

Torga accepted the goblet of ambrosia from his loving wife while considering how beautiful she remained with only ten weeks left to her pregnancy. Ten weeks *Standard*, he corrected himself.

It was yet another accommodation they'd had to make, but one his ship had already made to their clocks before leaving Zarox. He still smiled as she left the room to pursue some trivial domestic task, walking awkwardly but steadily with the extra package she was carrying.

He'd thought the presentation at Court had gone surprisingly well. *Much* better, in fact, than expected. The Emperor had been polite, and the reception from the other ministers and representatives had been uniformly warm – not that it would actually be anything *other*, considering the incredible amount of *power* the Emperor held in his hands.

He'd been on Eke when videos of that incident regarding an errant planetary leader had wormed their way to them. Lord Radatel had played the fop, an act that had been obvious to his father, then summarily *executed* that arrogant buffoon who'd abused the gifts of their Kantite masters.

They'd all laughed while replaying that fools' end, over and over, and several of his father's staff had lamented the loss of such a succulent meal. His father had commented that it couldn't have been *that* tasty if even the *valaet's* hadn't bothered to stay and eat him, and everyone had laughed even *harder*.

That memory gave him a bit of homesickness, something his Healer-wife immediately felt, before returning while smiling lovingly.

"How did father take the news?" she asked him quietly.

"Hmm? Oh, he was quite pleased that we are now on a *formal* stature with the Commonwealth, although it remains questionable what possible trade negotiations we might become involved with."

She saw his distant look, and still felt his persistent somberness. Fortunately, she had a cure for that.

“Come, my husband. Come with me. I want to show you something in the bedroom,” she said, then took hold of his hand and tugged on it gently.

He looked up at her, and remembered something Lord Caldor had told him one evening – “Let your women have their way. If they’re wrong, it’s not *your* fault.”

He put a smile on his face as he got up and followed Manya to the bedroom.

The Vanir Ambassador’s Quarters

Samuel was looking down at the extra nest Sally had prepared in the second sleeping room. She hadn’t specified *what* she’d prepared it for, but he had a pretty good idea. He was considering how they were going to corral eleven wild hatchlings, when she snuck up behind him and wrapped her arms around him.

“You were most *eloquent* today, my love,” she told him. “Lili said your translations came out *beautifully*.” She ran her hands up and down his abdomen before lingering a bit lower than expected.

“The system they installed is a duplicate of the one aboard the *Kraken*. The new translator is good, but the enhanced library available from the extended ... storage ... unit ... makes ... it...” he slowly faded as she continued her intimate massage of his lower body.

She started slowly rocking him from side to side, before working her way around to face him, keeping her arms around him as she moved. She finally pulled him towards the new nest and started to settle into it.

“Come, my love. Come lie with me,” she murmured, her eyes staring into his and her tongue lashing out against his lips.

“Sally, I...” He stopped when her tongue launched itself into his mouth and she began to flood him with a flow of Healer’s energy.

They almost melted into the nest and curled around each other – Sally having made up her mind that *now* was the perfect time, and *this* was the perfect place.

The Elder’s Offices

Lili had been shocked when a surprise visitor from Cletus arrived and sought seating at the Royal Court for the presentation of the new Ambassadors. Xue had been apologetic for her very late arrival, saying it had been a very “spur of the moment” decision to send a Senior representative from Cletus to observe this historic moment in Commonwealth history.

An Unfortunate Decision

Afterwards, Lili had politely offered her the hospitality of the Elder's suite at the Capitol, while she returned to her offices to address the Tier One staff. She'd intended to reward the success of their preparations for this event, and Xue had asked to come along and view the staff – saying they'd heard so much about them but never actually encountered them in person before. Their visit to the Elder's offices was an exceptionally enlightening one for Xue, as she'd never expected this many ordinary individuals could work together so smoothly and efficiently.

The highlight towards the end of that visit was the sharing of a rare delicacy from Earth – a *pizza* party for the entire staff.

When the party was over, Xue had casually mentioned she would be on Kantor for a few more days to observe the public reaction to the new Ambassadors.

Then she'd suggested that she might visit Lili at the Royal Homestead before she returned to Cletus. Leaving Lili in a mild state of shock, Xiu and Fan escorted Xue to the Elder's quarters, while Molara stayed behind and orchestrated the cleanup with the section leaders of the Tier One staff.

August 16, Up Close and Personal

The prospect of hosting a visiting Cletus Elder at the Royal Homestead was met with a chilly reception. Lili had *immediately* contacted her husband and co-Wives, but there was no other way to get around the situation, save for avoidance.

Radatel would be staying at the Capitol with Mei-Mei, while David and Diane would be sharing quarters with Andy and Shay in the same Imperial suite at the Capitol. Nathan and Dorcas had already taken Rose with them, and would stay in the quarters assigned to the colony administrative offices. Shay and Diane would watch over Rose, while her parents were dealing with the colony offices at the Capitol.

Lili would remain at the compound and try very hard to insure that the *only* exposure to potential witnesses would be those already "sanitized" with the *correct* truth. Amy and Laisee would have parent duty for the duration, and *above all*, "Donald" would remain sequestered during Xue's visit, and access limited to Maya and Spring Blossom.

Xue's arrival was formal. She stepped out of the transport, to be greeted by Lili, Yin-Yin, and Laisee. It was noted by Yin-Yin that Lili had presented her *left* hand to Senior Xue, which told her *exactly* who and what they were up against.

After an early dinner, Lili was apologetic that a tour of the gardens was impossible due to the implementation of the new grounds layout. She explained it was something that had been considered for several

decades, and their recent loss had only reminded them that life was fleeting and should be celebrated while it was still being lived. Xue stepped to a patio window and observed the workmen in action, large earth machines and dirt diggers prevalent as they re-sculptured the grounds with a new design.

Also from that window, she noticed an assortment of structures that were not a part of the groundwork, and turned a questioning eye to Lili.

"Those are the children's play equipment," Lili told her quietly, not missing the thin smile spreading on the Elder's face as she looked back at the playground.

"Oh yes. I remember now. Lord Caldar had grandchildren among his Earthling family," Xue murmured, then turned to face her. "I would very much like to *meet* them, Liling, if only to express my condolences."

In the Children's Suite...

"Oh-oh," Walter muttered, and opened his eyes.

"She's the one," Cathy murmured. "I felt her in Grandmother."

"Spring Blossom should be all right," Jaiying said. "We already gave her a better block."

"Let's not panic everyone," Amy told them. "If we have to meet with her, then just be on your best behavior."

"I'd rather have *Boots* in here to protect us," Josie muttered.

"At least Rose is with her mother," Walter murmured, but sighed at feeling alone for some reason.

Amy made a quick pass around the quarters, while the children helped straighten things up. The kits, having picked up their agitation, started circling the room in anticipation of an attack against their family members. Amy finally noticed their antics, and tried to remember how they'd gotten in there that morning.

"You know, we're really gonna have to *name* them one of these days," she muttered distractedly.

"They aren't old enough to earn a name yet," Walter explained to her, then called the female over to sit in his lap. The male noticed that, then zeroed in on a spot between Cathy and Josie.

"I donno," Josie said, and reached out to scratch the male's ear. "This one could be 'Burrower Killer'."

"No," Walter said, "*This* one would be 'Burrower Killer'. *That* one could be '*Turtle* Tormenter'."

An Unfortunate Decision

“He should be ‘The Shadow,’” Cathy suggested while scratching his other ear. “Earlier this morning, he showed up in Grandfather’s quarters again.”

They were still laughing when Laisee arrived in advance of Lili and Elder Xue.

Laisee’s lighting blip of mindspeak brought them up to speed, before she opened the door to allow Lili and Xue to enter. Amy walked over immediately and bowed to their guest.

“Hello, my Lady Lili. You have brought a guest for us to meet?” She walked forward and politely raised her left hand in front of Xue.

“Amy Linn Lane se Earth ne Tyler,” she said proudly, and waited as Xue introduced herself again.

“Senior Xue,” she said, leaving out anything more enlightening than her name and title while pressing her palm against Amy’s.

Amy had already met her before, but went through the motions for the benefit of the children.

“Amy assists in the Elder’s office, along with her husband, Doctor Larl Riker,” Lili reminded Xue, then gestured to the children. “These are the Royal children. Laisee, would you please introduce them?”

“Certainly, my Lady.” Laisee drew the children towards her and started with the young Prince.

“This is Walter, the son of Lord David Lane and Lady Shay Daishi,” she said, then drew Cathy over.

“This is Cathy, the daughter of Lord David Lane and his wife, Lady Diane Lane.”

Josie needed no prompting and walked right up to them.

“This is Josie Lane, the daughter of Lady Amy,” Laisee said, then stopped, drawing Xue’s attention to that abrupt ending, while allowing Amy to fill in the missing chapter.

“Her father was a poorly-behaved scoundrel on my home world,” she said. “He knows nothing about her, and in truth, he thinks we are all dead.”

“How unfortunate for him,” Xue offered sadly. “She seems like a beautiful young woman, with a tremendous future before her.”

Josie held back her smirk, while Jaiying jostled their elbows together. Laisee beamed at the mediated byplay, and introduced her last.

"This is my daughter, Jaiying Caldarous. Her father is Lord Andrew Lane," she said proudly, then turned a smiling face back to Xue.

Xue looked down at the children and smiled warmly at them.

'Welcome to the Commonwealth, my young Prince and Princesses' she sent to them silently, then waited for a response ... which was not forthcoming.

She finally gave up waiting, and let out a heartfelt sigh, instead. Looking out the patio window, she spied a table and some chairs sitting outside.

"Liling, I believe I would like to step outside for a short while," she announced quietly. "Please accompany me."

She didn't wait for an answer and headed straight to the door, and waited there. Lili rushed over and opened it for her, then followed her outside, before closing it behind them.

"Uh-oh," Walter murmured.

"We are soooo screwed," Josie muttered.

"Shhhh..." Jaiying shushed them quietly.

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After sitting at the patio table, Xue turned to Lili and patted the seat closest to her, where she reluctantly sat.

As Xue looked at Lili's face, she had an inkling of what the Kantite Elder was most concerned about, and it *wasn't* herself. Finesse, indeed...

"Liling, you were ordered to attempt no recovery of Lord Caldor ... and I am assured that you kept that promise," she told her calmly. "Although, there appeared to be an unfortunate *disruption* at the end of the Remembrance for him." She left that hanging, but when Lili was too wary to take the bait, she decided to try a different approach.

"You know, when the Staff contacted us about Elder Ai, we were most concerned that the Visions had been lost to us. As we explained to you once before, the Visions are what determined who the Kantite Elder would be."

"I understand that, my Lady," Lili said softly. "I understand that it was the *Elder's* staff who recommended me for the position – even though I am married to the Emperor."

"Yes, even though that was the case," Xue murmured.



## An Unfortunate Decision

The seconds ticked by, until Lili finally blurted out, “My Lady, I will *gladly* step down from the office and give my support to whomever you choose to replace me with.”

Xue’s face was stone for several more seconds, until she cracked the tiniest of smiles, followed by a very light titter.

“No, Liling. It is *much* too soon, and one of your most *likely* replacements will need to mature for a while longer – if they don’t become too *arrogant!*” Her words had ended harshly, but were spoken softly, just the same.

Turning her head slightly, Xue viewed the grounds while taking a closer look at what remained of the plant life. She closed her eyes and extended outwards, searching through the fragments of debris while fitting yet *another* piece into the extremely messy puzzle before her. It suddenly dawned on her what had *actually* happened, and she now knew for a *fact* that neither Liling nor any of the other Seniors had been involved that night – which confirmed only one other conclusion.

She suddenly felt very thirsty, and wondered if they could call a servant out with something to drink.

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Walter headed to the facilities and filled two cups with water, while Jaiying turned to her mother.

“Mother, the Senior is thirsty. Will you please take those cups out to her and Aunt Lili?” she asked while pointing behind her.

Laisee looked at her, then turned to see Walter walking back with two cups. She shook her head slowly, but followed him to the patio door, then opened it before accepting the cups from him and heading out to Lili and Xue. Walter stayed by the door and waited for her return.

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“My Ladies?” Laisee offered, and handed them the cups.

As she headed back, Xue called out to her, “Please thank the *children* for me.”

Laisee stopped cold for a moment, but then continued slowly, making it back inside before Walter closed the door behind her.

Xue sipped her water appreciatively, while Lili merely grasped hers tightly. Upon becoming refreshed, Xue noted Lili’s posture, then reached over and patted her hand gently before resting her fingers on Lili’s wrist.

“My dear, it was a very *bold* move those little scoundrels pulled with the Ladies, but it will *not* be repeated. Are we *clear* on that?”

She focused tightly on Lili, taking advantage of her physical contact to read her reactions.

“W-What ... What hap... T-The *Ladies*?” Lili was too confused to even formulate the question, which told Xue all she needed to know.

“You must keep them under *control*, Liling! If the others found out, there would be *no* place in the Commonwealth to hide them, or even the *Hegemony*. Perhaps not even with the *Vanir*!” At Lili’s continued look of confusion, she let out a disgusted sigh and spelled it out for her.

“I visited *Ai*, Liling. She had the *same* disruptions in her memory patterns the *rest* of us had on the morning after the Remembrance! The *only* reason I discovered it was that I took *notes* after the ceremony to record my impressions of the event. By the next morning, those impressions had been *excised* from my memories! It took me all that day to discover what had happened to myself and the others.”

Lili was still looking at her in shock, then glanced at the tiny faces looking back at her from the window. She looked back at Xue, then down at the fingers still resting on her wrist, and jerked away.

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“Okay, in hindsight maybe that wasn’t the *wisest* thing we’ve ever done,” Cathy muttered.

“You *THINK*?” Josie blurted out, then turned away in disgust to go sit down.

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Lili was still sitting there – alternately looking at Xue’s face and then down to her hand. She was on the third cycle when Xue raised her palm up to stop her.

“Liling, I understand these talents are very fresh and new. What *you* must understand is this is not the *first* time it has occurred. You must nurture and *protect* them, Liling, and guide them *away* from the edge of the dark path ... although it *was* rather clever what they’ve done with the garden. Did it really work?”

“I – I... Xue, I wouldn’t really know *what* to say at this point,” she admitted quietly, causing Xue to let out a quiet sigh of resignation.

“Well, perhaps we’ve had enough fresh air for the moment. Let us go back inside and chat for a while.” Xue reached out to Lili, and waited for her hand to make its fearful way to hers before they both stood and started back to the children’s quarters.

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An Unfortunate Decision

“That is so strange,” Jaiying muttered. “She seemed to know what we were talking about but I couldn’t feel her touching *any* of us.”

“No,” Walter agreed. “We’re all too well shielded against her. Even Mama Amy and Mama Laisee.”

“Maybe she’s more powerful than we... *Wait!* Here they come,” Cathy whispered loudly when she saw them approaching the door.

A Valaet on the Prowl

Faithful Daughter had entered the corridors to recover her siblings and return them to the den for their afternoon feeding. Finding it distasteful to traverse the dusty gardens, she’d entered from a remote access point, and traveled through the corridors in search of them. She had tracked their scent to a room occupied by three of her two-legged family, then bumped the door several times until the younger female opened it.

Without sharing a word, she slipped inside and searched for her younger siblings, but found only one of the older females and her sick adult kit. She listened for a few moments but didn’t hear anything addressed to her, so she made her way out the door and continued down the corridor where the scent was getting stronger.

In the Children’s Suite

Lili and Xue came back in before the Senior Elder summarily plopped herself down onto one of the floor cushions to lower herself to the children’s height. This time around she decided to waste no time, and dug right to the core of the situation.

“Children, I am so very sorry the other Seniors and I failed to determine a suitable solution to your grandfather’s dilemma. It was our genuine feeling that bringing him back would only extend his life for a very short while.”

She looked at each of their faces, and was easily able to read young Josie’s. Looking down for a moment, she suffered a few silenced spasms of laughter before looking up again.

“From the looks of the gardens outside, I am under the impression an *alternate* solution may have been worked out, and perhaps *might* have been found useful – but I have no *direct* knowledge of this, so I cannot *truly* say.”

She let that sit for several moments, before continuing again.

“Elder Song has the full faith of ... well, at least *three* of the Elder’s Council members, and I would *personally* appreciate nothing untoward happening to *remove* that faith.”

She didn't think it came out as a threat. Gods knew, she wasn't really sure that she *could* threaten them in any significant fashion. Her attention was drawn to Laisee's little girl when Jaiying walked over to stand in front of her.

"Aunt Lili works to maintain stability within the Commonwealth. Grandfather successfully resolved the Drecks issue, and then he discovered the Vanir and befriended them as well. It is the duty of the Crown to preserve the Commonwealth, and we *all* do what we must to honor that duty."

Xue looked at her for several seconds, split between accepting it at face value, or interpreting it as a threat ... in the end, deciding to remain neutral.

"I thank you for your contributions, Mistress Caldarous," she said politely, then looked around at Cathy, Josie, and Walter. "I thank you *all* for your efforts to support the Crown and the Commonwealth. I'm sure you will find your efforts rewarded as you continue to mature and develop your skills."

The male kit suddenly decided to check out this new visitor and walked up to her and sniffed her legs. He let out a tiny sneeze, which got a round of giggles from the children, before he decided to climb onto Xue's lap and let himself be petted by her. His corresponding purrs filled the room.

"Valaets are the most *intriguing* creatures," Xue said while continuing to pet the kit. "Not many people know this, but you can sometimes almost *hear* what they are thinking," she added in a loud whisper.

She continued to pet the kit, then closed her eyes for a moment. Opening them again, she looked up at Lili, and asked, "Who is Donald?"

Lili almost visibly began radiating stress, which Xue easily felt.

"Come, Liling. Tell me your truth, and let us see if it needs adjusting," she asked lightly. "The 'truth' is *key* in a situation such as this, and I've always found that a *simple* truth is much easier to maintain than a *complicated* one."

After a delay of several seconds...

"D-Donald ... Donald Cato is ... he was injured, and rests under our care," she said lamely.

"Interesting... Donald *Cato*," Xue mused aloud while observing memories of what the valaet kit had seen and heard while roaming the corridors and halls of the household.

An Unfortunate Decision

“Liling... You’re getting *sloppy*. You don’t just pick a name at *random*. It must have substance ... texture ... *background*. Moreover, if the recipient is mentally impaired, then it could do more harm than good to try to get him to *work* with it. It might almost be better to claim his *insanity*, as perhaps he has claimed the name of a dead Kantite *Lord*?” she suggested while looking at Lili meaningfully.

“That’s *true*, Aunt Lili,” Josie piped up. “Didn’t we hear a story about someone *claiming* to be Grandfather a while back? You know, when he’d disappeared from public attention?”

“Probably a *mercenary* of some sort,” Walter supplied. “Some of them only use *numbers* instead of names.”

“He could have been a lesser ships steward who’d been injured and now *thinks* he is Lord Caldar,” Cathy suggested. “Weren’t there two or three independent contractors who’d stayed behind on the *Kraken* after everyone else left? Wasn’t there one who got *injured*?”

Xue looked up at Lili and shared a slight smirk.

“You *see*, Liling? The truth almost writes *itself*,” she said smugly.

Lili was about to say something, when a persistent thumping began at the door. Both kits jumped up and slipped into the visiting parent’s room, while Laisee walked over and opened the door.

Faithful Daughter calmly walked in and sniffed the air, before stopping to look around at all the faces paying attention to her.

Her attention focused on Xue for a moment, who raised her hand and pointed to the other room. The older valaet let out a grateful chuff, followed by a low mowl, followed in turn by the sounds of quiet footpads approaching the inner door before stopping. Two little black faces could be seen poking around the edge of the doorframe.

Faithful Daughter made another quiet mowl, then turned towards the outer door, followed by the chastened kits. Laisee held the door open for them and closed it after they left. Xue glanced up at the room’s clock and let out a tiny smack with her lips.

“It appears it is time for them to eat,” she said, then looked back to the children.

‘Your Aunt Liling and I ate a bit earlier, but we didn’t see you there. Would you like to have dinner now?’

She’d sent it widely enough for everyone it the room to hear, but was still stymied by their obstinacy and let out a resigned sigh.

“At least they’ve learned to do *one* thing well, Liling. I compliment you on their *blocking* skills. See that they have opportunities to receive *proper*

training from now on. It would not do if the other Seniors become aware of them before it becomes necessary.”

Walter looked at his cousins while they shared several blips of mindspeak, taking just moments to come to a consensus.

He got up and faced Xue before bowing politely.

“Senior Xue, we thank you for your consideration. Proper boundaries might have been exceeded in the past, but we assure you that our priorities have *always* remained the same – protect the family, protect the Commonwealth, and protect the Crown. Our Grandfather is ... *was* a part of us, part of our *family*. We will insure that his legacy will not endanger the family, the Commonwealth, or the Crown.”

The adults stared at them incredulously for several seconds; Laisee being worried about their safety, as was Lili, while Xue was impressed at the way their *non*-admission of guilt was phrased.

“A very astute *observation*, Master Walter,” Xue told him, before turning to face Lili. “Liling, I have no doubt that a detailed study of your methods have provided these students of yours with an *exceptional* skill set.” She turned back to the children while letting out a soft sigh.

Xue stood up and faced the children again, before gracing them with a polite bow, and returning upright. “Master Walter... Young Mistresses, there are five of us on the Elder’s Council, and we’ve tried to guide the Kantite Elder from the beginning.”

She turned slightly to include Lili and Laisee, then stepped over to sit in a chair this time before shifting around until she faced all of them again.

“From the beginning, the Seniors of the Council have strived to guide the Commonwealth to stability. We’d thought to directly control the Kantite Lords so their exceptional ambitions would be moderated, and we were doing well. Our sister Yanmei was assigned to manage the most notable Kantite Lord.”

She glanced out the patio window, becoming lost in her memories for a moment, before shaking her head and turning back to them.

“The *Visions* ... they did not exist in the beginning. They first came into being after the death of our sixth, Senior Yanmei. She was the wife of the first Emperor of Kantor – Aquintus Tiberious Rakel Caldarous. She ‘gifted’ him ... but not in the way your Aunt Lili devised. She fell in love with him and decided on her *own* that he should be *enhanced*, much as we were.”

Josie raised a hand, and Xue stopped and nodded at her.

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“You’ve *always* been like this? Able to do things like ... like Seniors and stuff?” Xue let out a chuckle, and smiled at her.

“Oh no, child. This has taken several *millennia* to develop. We were mere Healers back then. When Yanmei left to become our puppet master over Aquintus, we were no more skilled than a simple Healer – very *good* Healers, but not as good we are today. Back then, we could not use our minds to speak with each other. Providing guidance to Yanmei was a matter of sending someone by transport to deliver instructions to her in *person*.”

She paused and closed her eyes, remembering those days once again. She didn’t bother to block her mind when she told them of their loss.

“Back then ... back then we were not as we are today,” she repeated slowly. “The Kantites were different ... almost a *species* apart from us. We had no idea of *how* different they were, and how that would affect a woman during pregnancy. As it turned out ... it was not a good difference. We lost Yanmei in childbirth. Even if only one of us were there, it still might have turned out poorly for her. You see, we did not have all the skills we have today.”

They could see a thin line of tears begin to trickle from her eyes, and Jaiying got up and walked over to hug her – flooding her body with love and energy.

Her glow started to brighten the room, and Xue gave out a startled gasp before looking at the tiny Senior hugging her, then returning the hug.

“You, child. You are the *next* to come,” she whispered, then looked around at the others with a big smile on her face.

“*All* of you. We’ve relied on the Visions for all this time, but without the Visions, there is no sure way to select the successor to Liling Song. It has been *much* too long for us, and I can feel no other solution to our safety. There are four of you and five of us. When the time comes, you should be the ones to take over for us.”

Walter cleared his throat and raised his hand slightly.

“Umm ... make that five. We got another cousin,” he said, causing Xue to smile even wider.

“Then the Council will be complete,” she whispered, but began to softly cry.

Xue had remained wide open; with the children reading her since she’d dropped her guard. Even Lili and Laisee were listening in and taking advantage of those talents gained from exposure to Ronnie. Xue seemed genuinely grateful for this turn of events, and was determined to

see it through – even at the dissolution of the existing Council. Lili stepped over and crouched down to hug her.

“Come, Xue. Come along, Xue. Let’s go have dinner,” she said, then began gently pulling her to her feet and slowly guiding her to the door. Along the way, she tapped into a little secret, and gently confronted her.

“The *valaets*? You used the *valaets* to spy on us? That ... that is just so *clever*!” she said, following it with a round of titters.

Xue ducked her head and nodded. Then she thought to mention the gift she’d brought them.

“I - I’ve got a body on the transport. Someone you can use on Earth,” she whispered. “In case Donald makes a full recovery.” She let out a tiny shudder, but Lili just hugged her a little tighter.

“Oh, Xue. That is just so *sweet* of you. And I didn’t get you *anything*.”

During the remainder of the walk and dinner, a long conversation took place that included the remote observations of the rest of the Wives. Although “real” reality remained a distant cousin to the discussion that took place, a general group perception was visualized for Xue to retain and share with the remainder of the Elder’s Council should such become necessary.

In a Storage Room...

It was much later in the evening, and they were gathered in a room not too far off the docking bay.

Lili was looking down at the body and considering how good of a substitute it would be.

Maya was frowning at it, but mostly from the odor.

Sai was standing over by the door away from it, with Petrus and David alongside as menial labor.

“It favors him, does it not?” Lili murmured.

“It smells...”

After its relocation from her transport, Xue had performed a superficial reconstruction of Ronnie’s face on the dearly departed, before leaving to return to Cletus to report compliance from the Royal family.

Before she’d left, the children had asked and been given permission – from *her* – to have her mental shield enhanced, then threw in the bonus of blocking accidental discussion of the details of her visit with anyone not already part of it.

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Xue had even tested it on two of the husbands, and it worked perfectly. Now those husbands were standing by to move a body.

“Sai, do you think we need to change his finger prints?” Lili called over to her.

“Depends. He gonna be *cremated*?” Petrus asked from several feet away, and Sai turned to frown at her snickering husband.

“What do you think, Maya,” Lili asked her quietly.

“I do not really... It seems so *barbaric*,” she finally said, while David walked over to stand next to them.

“I’m sure there’s *somebody* on Earth who’d like to get their hands on an alien body,” he said. “If he’s cremated, then it will keep the Earthlings from trying to dig him up.”

“They would *do* that?” Maya’s face had a look of dismay on it.

“Xue said this guy’s from Cletus,” Petrus called out from the wall. “They’re pretty close, but their blood markers are off from Earthlings. Ronnie and I might pass, but not *this* guy. Want me to call the kitchen and arrange for a midnight barbe – *OUCH!*”

The three of them turned to see Petrus rubbing his arm where Sai had punched him, then just barely heard muttered imprecations of his eminent death.

“Well, let’s get him packed up and ready to transport,” David said loudly, helping to draw Petrus out of harm’s way.

They each took a side, while Sai rolled the EMTU over to the head of the table. David began to chuckle, and Petrus looked up at him in concern while tilting his head over at Sai a couple of times – not that it affected David any.

“This reminds me of what Ronnie once told me,” he muttered. “He said a friend will help you move, but a *true* friend will help you move a *body*.”

He slid his arms under the shoulders and hips on his side, while Petrus mirrored him on the other. Sai and Maya each held a leg, while Lili kept the box in position and waited as David counted down.

“On three... One... Two... Three.”

All four of them lifted the body, then Lili pushed the EMTU underneath it, forcing the wheeled table out of the way. The body was lowered into the EMTU, then David and Petrus lifted the lid and settled it into place before Sai triggered the stasis and locked everything up tight.

“Why don’t they put that lid on a hinge or something? Seems like a pain to deal with every time you need to dig out the groceries,” David wondered aloud.

He was appreciative the smell would be going away, but wondered how advanced the Vanir really were to leave out something as simple as a hinged-top lid.

“Something to do with the way it seals,” Petrus told him. “They’ve tried hinges before, but then the stasis doesn’t work right. Something about interference of the stasis field with the hinge in place.”

“I’m sure *somebody* can figure it out. Maybe Donnel?”

“Ha! Donnel made one of his own, and discovered how to make juice in about a *second*,” Petrus told him, and laughed.

Sai made a few more selections on the EMTU panel, then turned on the internal light before looking through the viewing window.

“Good enough, I suppose,” she muttered, then moved out of the way for the others to take a look. “He’s locked up tight and the combination is set. We’ll secure him here until we leave for Earth and no one should be the wiser,” she added, then turned to look at Lili. “You might consider putting an honor guard outside the door – just for effect.”

“That could be arranged. Oh ... and periodic visits by grieving family would add another layer of ... oh, what was that word?” Lili muttered.

“*Artistic verisimilitude,*” Petrus and David said together, then shared a laugh afterwards.

“Ah, yes! *Artistic verisimilitude* as was spoken of in that play,” she said, and smiled. “I shall have to observe that performance once again. Sai, are you and Déjà returning with Petrus to the *Kraken* this night?”

In the Children’s Suite

A sleepy Walter raised his head and looked over at the parent’s door, insuring it was closed. He still remained cautious, however, and reached out on their higher band.

‘*How was the body?*’ he asked Jaiying, and heard her turn over to look at him.

‘*Aunt Lili looked inside while Xue was changing it. She didn’t find anything implanted, and neither did I. Uncle Petrus was right, though. That body should be cremated once it reaches Earth. Then the Earthlings will leave it alone*’

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'Maybe they could bury the ashes with his children on Earth?' Josie suggested sleepily. *'That should help with that *artistic* ... something or other'*

'But it's not really him' Cathy pointed out.

'It could become a symbol for the Cluster on Earth. Maybe an urn – like Grandfather Rakel had? Stick it in an alcove at the Cluster?'

'That sounds nice, Jaiying' Walter agreed, then settled back to finally sleep.

August 22, A Bit of Subterfuge

The script had been prepared in advance, and the curtain was about to rise on Act One this very morning.

The stage for this act was Lili's bedroom, and it would start just after Spring Blossom left to grieve over the stranger in the storage room, yet again.

Lili was waiting for her co-star, the Emperor himself, to come and share center stage with her. Their target audience, in the supporting roles of housekeepers and guardsmen, were either already in the room, or approaching with the Emperor.

There was a light tap, tap, tap on the door, and the Emperor entered, leaving the door wide open with his guardsmen standing outside.

"Welcome, my husband," Lili greeted him somberly, then glanced away for a moment to the inner room. "Will you not change your mind?"

Radatel walked over and glanced at the servants straightening the bedcovers through the bedroom door. They bowed and moved to leave, but he gestured for them to continue while he approached his wife.

"Lili, it is what he desired. It was his last wish. It will be honored," he told her, then drew her into his arms.

"Then ... it shall be done *properly*," she finally acquiesced. "Our little Ronnie will be buried on *Earth*."

"I thought perhaps at the Healer Cluster, my love," he muttered quite loudly.

"I will tell the Wives," she said.

"Yes. We will all be going," he agreed, and caught the startled look in her eyes. "Oh, the boy seems to have stepped up in the last year or two. Taldus should be fine, and if not, the Lady he was assigned will straighten him out, I'm sure," he said with a chuckle, knowing the girl in question was a *special* student of Lili's at one time.

“My Husband, do you think ... the *children*?”

“Do you *really* think we could just leave them here on their *own*?”

He smiled, and she just nodded in agreement, so he hugged her tighter, and drew her towards the door.

Act Two involved the breakfast room ‘reveal’ to the other Wives; then Act Three would take place in the storage room, with Spring Blossom and Maya as co-stars.

It was a childish effort on all their parts but complied with the suggestion by Xue to “make it as real as you can” so the *uninformed* would remain in doubt – which included at least four members of the Elder’s Council back on Cletus. The only thing lacking was a melodramatic sound track.

August 25, The Kraken, In Transit to Earth

The two youngest Imperial princesses sat vigil near their Grandfather’s EMTU. Outside the Medical Wing corridor, both of their guardsmen and the two honor guardsmen stood relaxed and talked quietly.

The likelihood of someone interfering with Lord Caldar’s EMTU was practically nil at this point.

The fact that both the Emperor and the Elder were *both* on board just about *guaranteed* it.

Accelerated jump rates would put them over Earth in less than a week, and the body would likely be interred following a simple ceremony.

For even *this* short a voyage, additional staff had been brought aboard, along with additional guardsmen for the security of the Royal family members. Those new to the *Kraken* had already found the delights of the little woman named Kiki to be unsurpassed.

The family themselves seemed to be in relatively good spirits, except for the pregnant daughter of Lady Sai Tal, who seemed concerned with the recovering crewman from one of the *Kraken*’s previous duty sections. Not much was known of how he’d been injured, but at least it explained how he’d ended up at the Royal Homestead for treatment under the watchful eyes of the Elder’s co-Wives.

There’d been some concern about the Emperor and the Elder actually *landing* on that barbaric planet they were headed to, but Captain Petrus had informed the Security Leads that an Imperial garrison was *already* in place dirt-side, and the Emperor’s safety would be guaranteed by warriors as dedicated as themselves.

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Rose and Jaiying looked at the compartment's timer, and decided their vigil was over for the day. Besides, they were getting bored.

"Let's go check on 'Donald'," Rose suggested, and Jaiying nodded and stood up to stretch before heading to the door.

Rose joined her, and they closed the compartment door behind them, leaving the Honor Guards in place for the faux First Lord while heading back to the big compartment they shared between Jaiying's mother, and Lady Lane and her husband, David.

Nathan and Dorcas had been given the choice to participate in the subterfuge but the needs of the colony were very real, compared to participating in a charade for the benefit of invisible observers. While they were indisposed back at the Demon's Realm, Rose had accepted the offer of a short vacation with her previous traveling companion, and gladly joined them.

It was a new experience for Walter, just as it was for his father and mother. Andrew and Shay were aboard as navigator and guest, and David and Diane were aboard as relief pilot and guest. Cathy had seldom been on a long journey before, and was relishing the freedom the huge ship offered them. All of the children explored it either together or in groups, followed along by their teams of guardsmen, many of whom had already traveled aboard once before.

Rose and Jaiying approached the door where Spring Blossom and Maya stayed. Two guardsmen stood outside on watch and smiled down at them when they stopped in front of the door. Rose pointed to the door, and one of the guardsmen tapped lightly on it and waited. Moments later, the door was opened by Maya, and she ushered them in.

Jaiying asked, "How is Donald today?" before the door was closed, thus preserving the illusion.

"He slept well last night," Maya told them as she walked over to the bedroom with them.

'Donald' was still sleeping, but Jaiying could see his eyelids ripple from the dreams he was suffering from. She let out a sigh, before pulling a chair over to the bedside so she could sit and study him.

Rose was content to sit with Spring Blossom in the rocking lounger, which had been returned to Ronnie's outer compartment after it was relocated from Laisee's compartment.

"This is a very nice space," Spring Blossom said quietly. "It is small but very comfortable." She nodded while looking around the outer room, her eyes stopping at the portable bed they'd moved in for a third party to sleep on.

“Grandfather didn’t think he needed a big space,” Rose whispered to her. “He only needed a place to sleep, and a place to wash.” She paused for a few moments before adding, “And a place to listen to music and watch his programs.” Spring Blossom smiled at a memory of him doing just that, then wondered if it might help.

*‘Maya, should we add music to his treatment?’* she asked silently.

*‘I do not... Jaiying, do you think that would help?’*

She looked down at Jaiying and watched as she laid a hand over his lower abdomen and closed her eyes.

Jaiying reached up blindly and grasped her hand, and the sound of music was suddenly pushed into her mind.

*‘He did this... Added it to his important memories’* Jaiying whispered silently over the melody being shared with her. *‘I feel him more here on the ship than I did back home’* she added. *‘I don’t know why he isn’t all here, though. I’m sorry, Milk Mother’*

Maya bent down and hugged her, then walked over to the dresser and brought out a change of bedding.

She’d sensed an impending physical void that would need maintenance in a little while, and was getting ready for it.

*‘I’m sorry, Maya. Once we get him walking again, it won’t be so messy’* Jaiying promised her.

*‘If we get him walking again’* Maya echoed silently, but dropped her hands to her sides as her body started to shake. Spring Blossom left Rose on the rocker to go and comfort her almost daughter-in-law.

Jaiying turned away and looked back at her client.

She closed her eyes again before extending inside once more – following the pathways in his mind that seemed to be intact but completely *devoid* of data. That data had gone *somewhere*, but she couldn’t seem to find a trace of it *anywhere*.

It was *maddening*, as she knew her Grandfather’s brain had not *really* died in the sense of a complete neural collapse because of a loss of blood. That would be the *simplest* explanation, but the fact was that Commander Woldron had gone out of his way to *insure* the stability of the brain by feeding it with fresh, oxygenated blood the moment it was decanted.

She’d gone over Grandmother Sai’s memories of the event, and it seemed to her that she’d acted in plenty of time. Even the research by Woldron, which had reported recoveries of persons nearly frozen and clinically dead for much longer times being brought back to life,

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supported her beliefs. Her Grandfather's brain was there, and it was *intact*. The neurons weren't dead, so much as just *empty*. The data was still *out there ... somewhere*. She could almost *feel* it.

### *In Petrus' Compartment*

"How are you feeling today, my girl?" Sai asked her sleepy daughter.

Déjà staggered from the door to her room, and waddled across the floor before settling into the comfy chair that had been installed just for her. She was still tired, and even *more* tired of the extra load she was carrying.

As a parting gift, Lord Caldor had graced her with not one child, but *two* – one of *each*. As someone had once warned her, "Be careful what you wish for."

"I feel tired ... and achy ... and hungry," she finally said.

"Do you want me to bring you some food, or would you like to lie down with me for a while?" Sai asked her, then patted her breasts lightly.

Déjà looked up and considered either adding more solid mass to her body, or simply accepting an easy-to-dispose-of liquid meal. The thought of making her mother bring something from the kitchen didn't appeal to her, but the sight of the bed, and the comfort of her mother's arms offered a welcome and comforting diversion.

The milk would just be a bonus.

She pushed herself up and waddled over to the bed, where she worked herself down into a somewhat comfortable position. Sai came over and dropped her robes before propping up some extra pillows and flipping a light blanket over the both of them. Sai finally got Déjà into a nursing position and had her latch on – the milk coming quickly, as she'd waited several hours for her daughter to wake up from her uncomfortable sleep. She knew she was due in just a few weeks now, and hoped it would be an easy delivery for her. This would be a human-Standard and/or *Kee* baby – *two* of them, and she hoped she and Maya were up to the task.

### *On the Bridge*

Endo, Petrus, David, and Andy were on the bridge, while Edna, Gaia, Lili, and Diane were catching up on family and children back at their crew's quarters.

David was surprised at how nice the control layouts were, and Endo pointed out the ship could be handled by one person if necessary. He also noted that when they'd first shipped out with Lord Caldor, it often was. Back then, they hadn't known Captain Petrus was the First Officer of the

*Kraken*, or that he was the “someone” his mother had been searching for, for over a couple of centuries.

They shared a laugh over that, and also after Endo told them of when Lady Sai had finally learned that Petrus was still alive.

The com circuit called them, and Endo answered it.

“This is Endo of the *Kraken*. Go ahead.”

“*IRS Sectorus here. Just making sure we really found you,*” came a familiar voice, and Petrus killed the drive and took over the com.

“Is that you, Talon? I thought you’d be *retired* by now!”

“*Zickgraf? What the devil... No, don’t tell me. You shipped out with the boy, and now you’re taking him home,*” Talon said with his voice becoming somber.

“That’s true enough, Karl. At least we’re not headed back into that *Death Void*.”

“*Then you haven’t heard? The Death Void is GONE. At least the probes go in and keep reporting now. I don’t suppose you know why?*”

“Honestly, Karl, this is the first I’d heard of it, but I wouldn’t be surprised if *Tank* had something to do with it! Gods know, we spent enough *time* out there!”

“*True enough, Petrus. Hey, you planning on maintaining accelerated jump rates? Just asking, because we can follow your current track to keep up. Otherwise, we’ll be a week behind you.*”

“Take your time, Karl. We’ll be on Earth for a week or longer. We’ll probably be planet-side, so check in with the Ambassador when you get there. He’ll contact the garrison dirt-side to let us know.”

“*Right. Safe journey, Petrus. And please extend my condolences to the family. Ronnie will truly be missed. Sectorus One, out.*”

Petrus wasn’t sure, but he thought Karl had gotten a bit weepy at the end.

“*Kraken One, out,*” he sent, then closed the com circuit. “Endo, please get us back into transitions,” he muttered, then left the bridge to go grab an early dinner so he could come back and relieve Endo for his dinner break.

### ***In the Crew’s Quarters***

Lili and Diane were enjoying the companionship of Edna and Gaia inside their large accommodations in one of the crew areas.



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The spaces were *huge*, as would be necessary for the Drecks crews, but what had surprised Lili were the conjoined facilities between the compartments. With a smile on her face, Edna had explained that it wasn't the *only* things that were shared between the couples. This gave Diane pause, as what she'd learned of Drecks societal norms was quite different.

"Please excuse me, but ... it was my understanding the Drecks held strong feelings of ... '*proprietary rights*' between partners. Is this not the case?"

Gaia and Edna both giggled, then Gaia reached down to pat Diane on her shoulder.

"It is true that *most* Drecks typically treat their women as a lower-class piece of property," she said. "Over the years, and especially during our visit to Kee, Lord Gagsa had extended some rather *enlightened* privileges to the unnamed females in his pack."

"Yes!" Edna shared enthusiastically. "He'd studied how women are raised in the Commonwealth, and decided that mere food girls should not be denied the simple pleasures of life. Rather than eat one more of *us*, he ordered his men to dig a hole inside the Kee compound, and then we had *all* the fresh meat we needed!"

Both Diane and Lili were struck silent for a moment, with Lili finally putting together another piece of the puzzle regarding her little brother's last visit to Kee.

"We were still unnamed women, but allowed to join with them in play, and we did so – *willingly*," Gaia continued.

"We had hopes of impressing suitable men," Edna admitted somewhat shyly. "We had no idea of how *well* our efforts would turn out."

"What about ... what if you became pregnant?" Lili asked curiously, and Gaia looked away awkwardly, while Edna spoke quietly.

"It has happened before," she said somberly. "But an unnamed girl may not carry children. If she has no name, then she has not yet been found worthy in the eyes of the pack leader."

She looked over at Gaia and rested her hand on her shoulder while rubbing it gently.

"It really depends on the pack leader if it was a fortuitous event or not," she continued. "It may also depend on if the father is suitable – or if he was even known."

They watched Gaia while she closed her eyes and composed herself before finally turning back and facing them with a grim smile on her face.

"I was with child the year before Lord Caldar found us," she said evenly. "It was born ... but I knew the father. *Everyone* knew the father. The baby died two days after his birth."

Edna felt their rising alarm, and raised both her hands to forestall them.

"The father's name was Drognax. He was an outcast among the Eke, but Lord Gagsa accepted his service with the pack as a - a *contractor*, if you will. He'd suffered deformities from his own birth, and lived apart from his pack on Eke," she explained, then turned at Gaia's sigh.

Gaia still looked at them but her expression had finally relaxed.

"He helped the pack settle on Eke," she said. "He knew everyone on Eke, because he'd been *everywhere* looking for a position - even one such as was finally offered by Lord Gagsa." She closed her eyes in memory while continuing to tell her story. "He was a good worker, and very honorable, but also very lonely. He always treated me with respect, even as an unnamed girl. I began spending my evenings with him, and ... and then we had an accident and made a baby."

When she stopped and turned away again, Edna continued the tale.

"Lord Gagsa was very angry at first but decided to let her carry the baby to the end. It might have been all right ... but it was not. It died two days after birth, and Drognax was sent away. Gaia was sequestered from us for three months. We'd thought her status might be ... it had been a long time between food girls."

The gasp from Diane caused Gaia to turn back to them with a raised hand.

"I was finally allowed to rejoin the unnamed women, but never chosen for play after that. And then ... then Lord Caldar visited Lord Gagsa. When it became known he was allowing his men to play with the unnamed ones, I was kept aside by our keeper. I was very sad when they left for that week, but when they came back; the keeper played a trick on Lord Caldar, and got rid of me by sending me with Edna."

Seeing her smiling face, and how she and Edna were now holding hands, Diane was very happy for her. She wondered what was next for them, then wondered if they had any disappointments.

"So... After all this time, do you have any regrets in being trapped here on the ship?" she asked, which caused both of the Drecks Healers to burst out laughing.

"Truly, Lady Diane, the only regret is that we must wait to have children of our *own*," Edna said, then gave a quick glance at Gaia to see if she'd upset her.

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“That is true, Lady Diane,” Gaia agreed. “It would be difficult to raise children on a combat ship, but ... Lady Laisee did not seem all that concerned, as she’d brought her young daughter with her.”

There was a pause after that, which Lili decided to fill.

“Well ... it was *supposed* to be a diplomatic mission, but alas, Ronnie always had a *particular* skill at knocking over *stinger* nests.”

Another pause followed, until Edna’s curiosity brought up a still-burning question.

“How is Manya’s pregnancy going?”

### *In Laisee’s Compartment*

Laisee was keeping watch over Shay, while Kiki was introducing the young Healer to the throes of Kee sensuality.

They’d been at it for more than an hour now, and Shay was just about spent. As Ronnie had done with *her*, Laisee had allowed Kiki to *completely* take over Shay without modification of her victim’s very willing receptors but it was approaching dinnertime, and Shay would need time to recover.

“Kiki, it’s time to let her go now,” Laisee whispered loudly, and was surprised at how quickly the Kee snapped her head around and shared her glittering eyes and bright smile with her.

Her smile began to relax, and Laisee could hear the young Kee give out a sad sigh when she withdrew her small hand from between Shay’s wet thighs. She leaned away from the panting young Healer and wiped her hand on a flap of sheet while looking down at Shay – who was still struggling to catch her breath. She finally turned around and smiled at Laisee.

“Lady Laisee would *you* like to play with me?” she asked politely.

“Not right now, Kiki,” Laisee said laughingly. “Perhaps later this evening ... *if* the guardsmen do not keep you too busy?”

“Oh! *Okay!* I see and let you *know!*” the diminutive sex machine said cheerfully, before scampering to the facilities to clean herself.

Laisee was surprised when she returned right away with a warm wet cloth, and a towel to wash and dry Shay.

“Lady Shay *fun* girl! She feel *good* ... *inside* and *out!*” Kiki exclaimed while washing her thoroughly, leaving Laisee confused again on just *what* the little Kee actually experienced during her rather one-sided sexual encounter with the Wilder Healer.

After taking care of Shay, Kiki glanced at the compartment timer, gave out a tiny squeak, then rushed back to run through the shower. Just about then, Shay was finally able to open her eyes and stared vaguely at the ceiling, before eventually lowering her point of view until she saw Laisee's smiling face.

"Oh my Lady," she murmured, with her eyelids blinking very slowly. "My Lord ... Andrew ... must share ... some ... time with ... Mistress ... Kiki... She is ... very..." was about as far as she got, before her eyes closed and her body *completely* relaxed.

A partially clothed, drip-dry Kiki ran out of the facilities while still assembling herself, but stopped by Shay to make sure she was still alive. Seeing the rise and fall of her breasts, she turned and pushed a quick kiss on Laisee's lips, before taking off for the door.

"Bye-Bye! Got to *eat!* Got next *appointment!*" she called out gaily as she pulled the door open.

Before the door closed, Laisee heard her rapid footfalls receding in the background as the starving Kee maneuvered for her assault on the commons.

Just outside the door, she heard the guardsmen chuckling over the *next* victim in the Kee's battle plan.

### ***In the Children's Traveling Quarters***

"Wow... I cannot imagine having *two* of them at the same time," Walter muttered, getting a laugh out of Josie for his trouble.

"I'm surprised your mother didn't have a *heart* attack," she said, then snickered.

"That's why Mama Laisee stayed with them. She'll..." Cathy paused while she monitored her remotely. "She's already put blocks on the receptors the Kee take advantage of."

"I hope she does that for Daddy Andy or I might *never* get a little brother or sister," Walter not quite grimly suggested.

"You already *have* a bunch of little sisters," Jaiying called out from the door as she and Rose entered their compartment.

"Except, pretty soon I will become your *big* sister," Rose teased him gently, then walked over and hugged him while Jaiying selected a comfortable place to sit and flopped down on the floor.

"Then we'll just have to learn how to slow down our aging ... like the *adults* do," Walter murmured, which triggered a round of giggles from the rest of the girls.

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“Plenty of time for that *later*, Walter,” Josie teased him. “Maybe in another couple of years.”

“No reason we need to rely on *physical* sex to make it work,” Jaiying considered thoughtfully.

“Let’s focus on Grandfather first,” Cathy suggested quietly. “How is he today?”

They gathered on the cushions while Jaiying caught them up.

“Well, ‘Donald’ is still pretty messed up. His neurons seem intact – no damage at all that I could see – and they’re the *same* neurons that he had to begin with – *I think*.”

“Then where did he go?” Walter asked her, while Rose grasped his hand and squeezed it gently.

“Look, we don’t know what happens when someone dies,” Jaiying said in frustration. “What I *do* know is that I spoke with Grandfather while I was ... not *quite* dead. He heard me, and I heard him, and then... I came back.” She followed it with a shrug.

“Walter, Jaiying was aware of Grandfather *after* his head was separated from his body,” Cathy reminded him. “For all intents, Grandfather was dead – his brain was inactivated and in stasis. Jaiying, you said he spoke easily when you saw him?”

“Yes. He seemed intact – conscious of his existence as a living person, but ... you know, not currently living,” she said, then expanded a bit.

“Maybe we don’t really have a good understanding of the death process? Not that many people come back from it, and if they do, who’s to say they were really dead? Plus his head was in stasis for *weeks*! Maybe there is a time limit to what the connection between the brain and consciousness can tolerate?”

“Sue seemed to come back all right,” Rose pointed out. “And she was out there for a *long* time. Of course, she was messed up after they brought her back.”

“Sue was messed up *before* she was stuffed into that box,” Jaiying muttered. “It took *weeks* before she got that stuff sorted out of her head.”

“Maybe ... maybe Grandmother Sai put his head into stasis too late?” Rose suggested.

“I don’t really know, Rose, but it’s frustrating,” Jaiying said with a frown. “What’s *really* maddening is that, now that I’m back on the ship, I can feel him here, and it’s *stronger* than it was after the Remembrance.”

They were silent for several seconds while that thought percolated through each of them. It didn't seem to make that much sense, but...

"Maybe... Maybe a part of Grandfather became attached to the *ship* when he died?" Walter suggested, but Jaiying just shook her head blankly.

She and Rose had watched a few of the "haunted" programs Grandfather had in ships data storage but the thought of his ghost actually *haunting* his ship didn't seem a practical explanation for what she was experiencing.

They stared off in the distance for a few moments until Josie's stomach growled to remind them what time it was.

With a glance all around, the same silent decision was made to head to the commons and enjoy the benefits of having kitchen staff from the Royal Homestead aboard to prepare a decent meal for them.

### ***The Kraken, In the Belly of the Beast***

Angus was somewhat amazed that the *Kraken* was in as good a shape as he was, especially considering the limited amount of details his distant cousin Petrus had told him.

He'd known, of course, that Lord Caldar was the *principal* behind the purchase of the *Kraken's* upgrades, but exactly where the ship had been, and what it'd been doing for the last several years was *anyone's* guess.

They finished the inspection of the lower machinery spaces and Angus made a few more notes on his data pad.

"You know, aside from that air hander, you haven't really put this thing through that much stress," he muttered while finishing his latest entry.

"Quality Krux craftsmanship, then polished to perfection by the artists of *Claxon Shipworks*, lad!" Petrus praised him jovially. "He be a *fine* ship, Angus. Been places only *dreamed* of, and *still* come back in one piece."

*'If you only knew,'* Petrus kept to himself while reaching out and patting a bulkhead, before starting towards the next section.

Petrus knew they'd been running a risk all these months – *years*, actually – but Ronnie had kept the ship intact, and gotten away without any major damage, or *minor*, for that matter. Still, it would be good to get the ship into dock and have a thorough going over before taking it back out and doing ... *whatever* his next employer wanted done.

They entered the engineering spaces, and Petrus turned on the lighting for the area. Displayed before them was a bright, clean space without a trace of debris or leaks of any kind. This was the beauty of a

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power generating system developed over centuries of engineering for consistent, reliable, and *maintenance-free* service. Petrus watched Angus as he selected the appropriate, checklist before heading to the far end of the compartment a few hundred feet away.

### *August 30, Still in Transit*

Radatel scanned through his data pad and wondered again if it were possible to go back to a hard copy just for *special* occasions like this.

He finally let out a disgusted sigh, and tossed the defenseless pad onto the desk in their compartment before standing to get himself another drink.

"Is it so terrible, my Husband?" Lili asked him from the doorway of their bedroom. "Lady Shan tells me the children are managing rather *well* in your absence."

His face broke into a smile when Lili graced him with her presence once again, and he walked over to lose himself within her arms.

"Oh, Lili. I wonder now if having *both* Ambassadors arrive in the Capitol at the same time was such a wise decision on my part," he lamented into her neck, then paused to nibble at her ear for a moment, before she gently shoved him away.

"It cannot be so bad, my love. Lifan says her husband and co-wife are both happy, and she reports the Drecks and Vanir Ambassadors are making friends among the ministers and their staff. The Tier One staff reports the results of their preparations have continued to demonstrate the effectiveness of their program. The populace appears to be accepting the situation calmly."

"Would that *outlying* member worlds treat it so calmly, Lili," he muttered, then turned away to pour her a drink and refill his own. While blindly handing Lili her crystal, he picked up his data pad to read down the list again.

"The Ambassadors from Loca, Balese, Blot, Grimmer, Nance, and Exeter are all worried about the *new* balance of trade within the Commonwealth, and how it will affect their individual standings," he muttered, then paused to take a swallow of ambrosia. "We've even had inquiries from Isca and Devon."

"Isca and Devon are still classified as *colony* worlds, my Lord," she reminded him gently. "They might as well be the *Demon's Realm* as far as their political influence goes."

He let out a chuckle, before taking another sip and continuing.

"The representative from Farman has *also* voiced a concern," he said while scrolling down the page on his data pad. "She expressed the opinion that, 'What in the *hell* were you thinking by making friends with the *Drecks!*' She actually *sent* that!"

"Was that *Morgan*? That *sounds* like something she would say," Lili murmured, but put her crystal down to wrap her arms around him, before nuzzling close to his neck. "Do not fear, my Husband. Everything will settle out ... eventually."

He finished his drink and set his crystal down, before turning in her arms and bending down to kiss her lovingly. Her lips worked their magic, helped by the glow from her arms surrounding him, and he relaxed in the comfort of her embrace for several seconds, before pulling away slightly and smiling down at his beautiful wife.

"Lili, I would truly be lost without you by my side," he said quietly.

"Of *course*, my Husband," she whispered softly, then added, "That is how we've maintained control over our Kantite overlords for the last ten-thousand *years*," while looking into his eyes and smiling demurely.

They looked at each other for a few more seconds, before *both* breaking into laughter at their shared reality.

Radatel held her with one arm and drew her with him to his seat – setting her on his lap where she could best advise him.

He reached for his data pad, and she leaned over and got it for him, before turning it around so they could both read it.

She read down along with him, and started putting this *new* puzzle together. On the face of it, it seemed somewhat scary ... like *most* new things were. She wondered if he needed a push in the right direction, but he leaned back and closed his eyes – nodding his head slowly for several seconds before a smile began to grace his lips.

"I suppose it could be worse," he said, then opened his eyes and looked at the data pad again.

"In fact, it *was* worse – back in the early days of my appointment as First Lord. I see nothing here that I haven't faced before."

"*Really*, my love?" she asked while following his thinking and becoming even prouder of her husband than before.

"It's all a matter of *balance*, Lili. Loca merchants are concerned about their market place, as are those of Blot, Grimer, and Nance. Exeter and Balese have *specific* imports they don't want to have affected. *All of them* will naturally be concerned about the value of the Imperial credit, of course."



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“Oh, of *course*,” she murmured, following along quite easily now.

“Yes. But my administrators will analyze the potential impact of new imports and exports, then determine a *proper* exchange ratio – just as they’ve done in the past. It will work itself out, being simply business as usual,” he said while nodding his head slowly.

“Umm, *new* imports and exports?” she asked, and he let out a sigh lacking emotional attachment.

“I think a period of market research will have to be undertaken. I’m sure Taldus is up to the task ... with the help of his staff.”

She settled more comfortably into his lap, rearranging her bottom across the lump growing under her, before sending out a silent message to Lady Shan at the Capitol.

“Umm, what *sorts* of products might be involved, my love?” she asked a moment later, then leaned back and kissed him under his chin.

“Well, the Drecks *always* like to eat. Protein products for certain. I’m even thinking of importing some of those \*cow\* creatures from Earth and growing them here. You know ... somewhere within the Commonwealth *proper*.”

“My love, would it not be better to have the *Drecks* raise them?” she asked sweetly.

“Perhaps later... When we’ve established what the Hegemony can offer to the Commonwealth.” He closed his eyes for a moment, then smiled and opened them again. “Rondal told me *Krux* has a fine shipbuilding establishment. That’s where *this* ship was constructed ... the *first* time.”

She watched him set down his data pad and observed his hands approaching her waist. He settled them there and held her snugly while moving slightly beneath her.

“The Vanir may take longer. We’ve no idea of what they need ... save for a healthy place to live,” he muttered while his hands started sliding upwards towards the bottom of her breasts.

“Mmmm, what ... what do the Vanir have that *we* would want?” she asked, then let out a tiny gasp as his hands cupped her breasts, and his thumbs and forefingers started teasing her nipples.

“I think the *stasis* box would be a good place to start,” he murmured, before beginning to kiss her around her ears.

“You know that ... Manya is due in another ... two months, my love?” she asked while squirming on his lap now.

“Oh, yes. I’m anticipating a celebration suitable for such a notable occasion at the Capitol,” he murmured, then tongued her closest ear.

“Oh! Oh, my *love*! Did ... did you also know that ... that Sally has laid her *eggs* at their *Embassy*?”

He stopped paying attention to his wife’s words, and simply picked her up and carried her to his bedroom. At the moment, he could think of *nothing* more important than making sure his sweet Lili was *thoroughly* pleased for the next hour or so.

### ***Kantor, The Office of the First Lord***

Lady Lifan Shan stood silently in the doorway and found her husband worrying at his desk – torn between the contents of his data pad, and the view outside the window directly in front of him.

Her orders had been clear, and she had enough experience to make the Elder’s desires a reality. Now she just needed Taldus to believe that it was all *his* idea. She quietly walked forward and paused a few steps behind him before suddenly remembering that Taldus was *not* Kantite and therefore not very dangerous to begin with.

It almost made her giggle, but she swallowed her pride and began to follow her orders. He was, after all, *only* a man.

“My Husband, you seem distressed?” she suggested, startling him and causing him to drop his data pad before he snapped his head around to look at her.

“*OH! Lifan!* I didn’t hear you come *in!*”

“My Husband, you really *should* rotate your desk to view the doorway,” she said with a sigh. “Perhaps just turn it sideways so that you may look out the window when you wish to, *and* see who approaches you?”

He stared at her a moment, then turned and looked down at his desk. A glance at the window in front of him had him remembering the several times she’d *already* made the same suggestion, as had his Mayella, then sagged in defeat.

“You’re *right*, of course,” he said, then pushed his chair back and pulled it away from his desk.

He looked at one side of his office, and then the other, then picked one, grabbed the corner of his desk, and gave it a healthy yank. That got him about a foot. Lifan came up to him and kissed him soundly, before moving to stand on the opposite corner and grabbing hold of it.

“Now, my Husband. I am ready when you say.”

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“Umm, all right ... now,” he said, and lifted his corner, while she lifted hers.

With one end in the air, Lifen was able to apply enough leverage to balance the desk on one leg while they pivoted it in a quarter circle and set it back down. Then they simply crab-walked it into a place where he had a clear view of the door, and still had a decent view out the window.

“Thank you, my Lady,” he said, then bowed his head, before recovering his chair and putting it back behind his desk.

She came over and hugged him warmly, then kissed him thoroughly for his obedience.

“That was *refreshing*, my Husband!” she said happily. “Would that we had a garden, for I miss being outside and tending to it. Now ... how may I ease your *distress*, my Lord?”

“Distress? I’m not distressed. Everything is—” he stopped while staring into her blindly accepting, yet disturbingly *knowing*, expression.

“I’m just ... concerned, is all,” he finally admitted, but turned away to avoid her look.

“Then let us put the pieces upon the table, my Husband, and see what picture it forms.”

By the end of ten minutes, she’d extracted his concerns, and asked him what his *staff* might recommend.

Upon further consideration, he admitted that his staff had likely done this same task at least once or twice, and determined the simplest solution was to have a staff meeting and kick around a few ideas. She’d subsequently praised him for his cleverness, and rewarded him with another passionate kiss, followed by a promise to engage with him and his First Wife for an evening of pleasure after work.

She left and returned to their suite on the Imperial floor, where she approached Mayella about her intention to play with the both of them that evening – if she was up to it. According to her latest reading of Mayella, she was due within mere days now – perhaps even *hours*.

As Lifen was a nursing Senior, the question of morning sickness was non-existent, and Mayella had already discovered the benefits of having a helper in the household, as well as in the bedroom.

Despite her current condition, Mayella readily agreed, and they planned a light supper for the three of them, before beginning an evening of raw debauchery in true Kantite fashion. Much to her surprise, it was something she’d discovered was quite enjoyable compared to her staid life back on Loca.

Lifen visited the facilities and reached out to her Elder, but found the Elder still distracted and smiled at the cause of it. Perhaps she would become available in an hour or so...

### ***September 3, In a Stationary Position Behind the Earth's Moon***

Preparations had been made while in transit, and the *Kraken's* transport had been loaded with its special cargo a full day before the passengers were ready to board. For this part of the journey, only human standards were coming along to avoid awkwardness among any of the Earthlings that might be encountered.

Maya had determined she would stay aboard the *Kraken* with 'Donald', which would allow Spring Blossom to attend the ceremony at the Reservation Annex. As Captain of the ship, Petrus would also remain on board with the rest of the crew, staff, and some of the guards while the family, save for Kiki, would take the transport to the Healing Center hanger. From there, they would move to the Center proper, and wait for the dirt-side family members to assist with moving the EMTU to the Center's large room, where they would conduct a simple service for the dead.

For the sake of space, the Imperial guardsmen were limited to one per adult Lady, plus the Emperor. The children had already pointed out how dangerous they were, even individually, and Lili had acquiesced in allowing only *two* guardsmen to keep track of them – so long as they remained in only two groups. The girls had silently cheered their attempted revolt, only to have Walter remind them that a whole *garrison* awaited them on the ground. Besides, there was nowhere else for them to go anyway.

At the appointed hour – midnight Arizona time during the new moon – the cloaked transport full of passengers and cargo drifted out the docking bay of the cloaked *Kraken*, and headed to a polar location far above the Earth. After arriving there, and after additional traffic scans, it began its weaving path through a cloud of orbiting debris, before descending into the atmosphere. Once below one-hundred kilometers, David put the transport on a gradual slope headed towards the continental United States.

Due to all the crap that was in the way, Andy had been frustrated at not being able to use his precise navigational skills to make the transfer in three or four jumps. Instead of doing that, he backed up his father with collision avoidance duties so nothing would be accidentally knocked out of place and leave a trail behind them.

An incredibly boring – for the passengers – two hours later, they made their final descent over the Healer Cluster, and settled onto the center of the strobe light blinking up beneath them within the hanger.

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While David shut down the systems, Andy enabled the outside microphones to listen in on their surroundings – a habit he'd picked up after refresher training with a recently retired tank pilot last year. They could hear the sound of the hanger roof closing, and of voices outside, the monitors showing the assembly of an honor guard for the Emperor lining up and waiting for them.

Radatel stood and looked around, seeing their guardsmen were already on their feet and ready to move.

*“That way, gentlemen,”* he said tiredly, and pointed to the rear of the transport.

While the rear-loading hatch was being lowered, he grabbed his kit, and took Lili's arm before heading to the rear of the transport, and walking past the EMTU. Glancing outside the hatch, he saw his instructions were being followed; there was *no* official receiving line to greet them, just the honor guard as would be expected at the very minimum. Once his foot left the ramp and hit the landing pad, the presumed Captain of the guard bowed formally and greeted him simply.

*“Welcome, my Lord Emperor. Quarters for you and your party have been prepared in the Center, and...”* he paused for a moment to count the heads lined up behind them, *“...we have enough space for everyone. Please follow me,”* Captain Anastasius said, then bowed once again before turning slightly and making rapid gestures to the arriving guardsmen.

His own men duplicated them while he led the Emperor's party across the parking lot, and into the Healing Center where they would occupy visitor's accommodations during the short amount of time they would be there.

As soon as they left the hanger, Lili separated from Radatel and looped her arm with Lady Ling Wen, who'd waited with Captain Aineias Anastasius, her bond-mate, for them to arrive. As Ling walked with them to the Center, she and Lili continued the silent conversation they'd started nearly ten minutes ago until entering the Center, when Ling began parceling out rooms to the Imperial party in the VIP wing.

### ***Mid-Morning, Reservation Annex***

The family had slept in that morning while enjoying the quiet of a *non-vibrating* environment for a change. As prearranged between Lili and Ling, a suitable selection of Earth-type clothing had been made available for each of them presenting the illusion of an Earth-type gathering of visitors for a relatively low-level Earthling funeral – *half* an Earthling, anyway.

While members of the Royal family were donning their rather familiar disguises – several of them having had previous visits to Earth over the years – the staff were up and about preparing a brunch that was compatible with the Royal digestion; in this case, an assortment of bacon, scrambled eggs, sausage, ham, both pancakes and waffles, fruit juices, and hot cocoa.

Lady Lili, if only to avoid accidental ingestion of it, had *specifically* banned that horribly vile fluid named “coffee.”

Besides, they already had enough trouble incorporating *other* addictive food staples from Earth – such as *pizza* – and adding a *highly* addictive substance like coffee to the list could knock the balance of society out of kilter.

As the family arrived at the dining room en masse, the smiling faces of Wilber and his wife, Lady Shu, greeted them.

“Welcome, my Lord Emperor,” Wilber said, bowing formally before straightening and drawing Shu forward. “I would like to present my wife, Lady Shu.”

Shu’s mind locked with the realization that – *standing right before her* – the man in the denim *work* shirt, and wearing a dark pair of *work* pants was the *Emperor of the Commonwealth!* The only part of his attire that indicated him being other than a common Earthling was the pair of slippers that graced his feet. Not even the fact that *Elder Song* – standing *right beside him*, and adorned in a *light summer dress* – had given her a clue.

Lili stepped forward, and grasped Shu’s face with both hands, before ardently probing her lips for several seconds. She finally let off and gently pushed her away, before turning a sad face towards Wilber.

“Oh Wilber! She *still* does not respond?”

Shu made a move to drop to the floor, but Lili caught her just in time ... all the while Radatel was trying to keep from laughing. He finally got hold of himself and stepped forward to hug her.

“Lady Shu Song, I am so *very* pleased to finally meet you,” he said, then stepped back and looked her over. His eyes caught the ring on her left hand, and he pulled it up for Lili to see.

“Look, my dear. *Another* one of Ronnie’s additions – *just* like our Wilber.”

He’d smiled when he said it, and reached out to shake Wilber’s hand, before turning his attention back to the terrified young Senior.

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“Shu – you are *family* to us, just like Wilber. Probably like *most* of the Senior residents of the Healer Cluster here on Earth. Oh! And my name is *Rad* while we’re among family ... and that includes the staff.”

“It is good to see you again, Sir,” Wilber said, then gestured to the table and bid them sit.

As the rest of the family came in, he caught sight of David and Andy – having formally met them during a few of their “shopping sprees” with the Wives.

He was surprised to see how beautiful Andy’s bond-mate had become, as Shay had never made the trip back to Earth since escaping from it.

The arrival of Diane, Sai, Lady Laisee, and the waddling ball of femininity that followed them in distracted his attention.

Sai, of course, he’d met once before, but could not believe the very pregnant visage of little Déjà – who wasn’t so little anymore, nor as short.

Beside her walked a serious-looking woman who’d dressed very atypically for the region by being nearly a couple of hundred years out of style.

“*Lady Spring Blossom?*” he asked, then stepped forward to get a better look at this older vision of an Indian maiden.

She smiled when he’d addressed her, and they shared a warm hug.

“*I am so very sorry for your loss, my Lady,*” he said quietly, then raised her fingers up to his bowed forehead, and pressed them there for several seconds, before drawing them back down. “*We all remember Ronnie very fondly. He took care of all of us, just as he took care of the Commonwealth. We shall all miss him,*” he said, before bowing deeply.

“*You are very kind, Wilber. My little \*TS’ILSQQSE BIYIGÉ\* was quite proud of his association with you. He often spoke of your devotion and support. I thank you for the countless kindnesses you granted him over the years.*”

“*Please be welcome here, my Lady. If you desire something different than what is offered, please do not hesitate to ask for it,*” he said, then stood aside to escort her to a seat.

“*I see something that is quite familiar already, Wilber. I trust the \*waffles\* on Earth are similar to the ones on Kantor?*” she asked, then giggled as she slid into her seat.

Wilber smiled, seeing how her demeanor seemed cheerful, even given the reason they were all here. Then he looked around and realized they were *not* all here, and started over to speak with Lili when there was a commotion at the door.

He could see several plain-clothed guardsmen had arrived with a contingent of small humans in between them. A smiling Lady Wen was accompanied by her bond-mate as he led the group of Imperial Marines and their charges to a separate table that had been delivered just the previous day; it being much shorter and matching the equally short chairs that had accompanied it.

A quick count confirmed that one male and four female bodies were present, and Wilber relaxed while internally expressing the hope that these children were well mannered, and not prone to causing a disturbance.

As soon as that thought crossed his mind, all five heads swiveled towards him, and five sets of eyes bored *straight* into his. That lasted for several seconds and gave him a serious case of the shivers, before they broke eye contact and turned back to each other. He shuddered in place for a second or two longer, before being called to Lili's side.

"\*Yes, my Lady?\*" he asked her.

"English is sufficient, Wilber," she said. "*Most* of us are conversant with it. The children promise to behave while they're here ... now that they've discovered how *well* they're being monitored by security."

"They ... they tried to get *away*?" he asked, now concerned for a whole *other* set of reasons.

"Oh, *no*, Wilber," she said with a chuckle. "We had an agreement they would stay together with at least one guardsman, but they seemed to have forgotten it by this morning. Josie and Cathy decided to explore the great outdoors ... by *themselves*."

"Oh... Oh, that would be *bad* if they came across a rattlesnake," he said, now thinking of the dangers here on Earth the children could fall prey to.

"Yes. So I just told them ... along with Ling *and* Aineias," she muttered, a frown appearing to visually announce her sour mood.

She fought it down, then let out a sigh to reflect her temporary victory. As she did so, she felt concerns radiating from him, and questions that he'd yet to ask about the ceremony.

"What troubles you today, Wilber?" she asked him quietly.

"Ahhh... My Lady, when we heard news of Ronnie's loss and his final return to Earth, many of our extended family had expressed a desire to come and pay their last respects to him, and to the family."



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She contemplated what issues could possibly arise if more of their Earthbound associates were present for the services, but nothing in particular came to mind.

It would be a simple ceremony, with the prayer for home, hearth, food, and time given by a ring of Healers and Seniors, as was traditional for the death of a commoner.

They had no intention of performing another calling of names, as only the children had had any success at that, and the Earthlings *definitely* didn't need the specter of five and six-year-old Seniors looming over their heads, so she smiled and turned to look up at him again.

"Wilber, we will accept a small gathering of natives for the Remembrance, and part of the ceremony will be conducted in English for their benefit," she offered him. "Do you have a list of those who've requested attendance?"

"Just a few of those already aware of our relationship, my Lady. Gray Feather, his assistant Lean Bear, and their wives. Constable Silver Wolf... Ah ... Doctor Wells, who Maya saved from his heart attack," he said, then remembered one more. "Sheriff Taylor would like to attend if she is able. She broke her leg a few days ago and is still not moving around much."

Lili looked at him and frowned for a moment before smiling again.

"Ah! I *remember* her now. She has the most lovely shade of skin that I've ever seen on an Earthling, but alas, Ronnie told me she was *hopelessly* in love with her husband," she said, then closed her eyes to enhance her memories of her. "I believe Deloris was the one who helped you and Nathan when that ill-fated incursion took place?" she asked, then opened her eyes and looked up at him again.

"Yes..." he said slowly, "She ... ahh, she's the one who suggested a reasonable bit of illusion to explain the damage to the living quarters."

She tapped the tabletop with her middle finger a few times, then smiled again.

"Please invite her at our request, Wilber. Arrange for her transportation if required. Loyalty of that quality should be rewarded. I'm sure we could find *something* suitable for that lovely lady," she said, then turned to glance at the children for a moment.

"There is one *other* thing I would like you to look into, Wilber..."

### *At the Children's Table*

*"This is NOT why we are here, Josie"* Jaiying told her.

*"It's reasonable, Jaiying"* Walter pressed, then suggested another activity for them while they were here. *"We should visit Grandfather*

*Walter and leave flowers for him and Grandmother Bessie. I'm sure Daddy David and Daddy Andrew will be doing that anyway, and we can go along\**' he added, looking at each of them and hearing their silent acceptance of that idea.

*"But what if someone recognizes us? Them, I mean?\*" Jaiying pointed out.*

*"Then we just make them forget\*" Josie sent, which pretty much ended that argument, save for one small detail.*

*"Just don't forget what Senior Xue warned us about\*" Walter reminded her, earning him a scowl that evaporated moments later when a hot tray of waffles was delivered to their table.*

Further discussion of possible field trips was set aside while the Senior Staff removed that empty feeling from their stomachs.

### ***Afternoon in the Center's Parking Lot***

The Lanes were making a field trip into town for a little shopping this afternoon and didn't need any prompting from the children to consider a *special* stop while they were out. Two official escorts stood by the children and kept them under watchful eyes – those same eyes having watched them skip down the new wheelchair ramp that had been installed at the urging of the local hospital director and his wife. For this trip, Mary and Kayla were accompanying them.

Wilber pulled the center's relatively new 15-passenger van up to the group that was waiting outside in the early afternoon sunlight. David turned at its approach and was pleasantly surprised.

"All aboard!" Wilber called out after he exited the driver's side and walked around to open the passenger side doors.

"This thing is *huge*," David told him, and Wilber just laughed.

"Just under five tons capacity," he said. "Makes shopping at the big box store *much* easier. 'Course, we usually yank out that last row of seats, first."

Two garrison guards escorted the children forward and directed the girls to the rearmost seats where they made sure they were buckled in properly. Then Walter was placed in the third row and buckled in next to the driver's side window, with Kayla seated next to him. One of the guards joined them, while the other guided Andy, Shay, and Mary to row number two. David and Diane were shown to row number one, before the guardsman closed the doors and moved up to sit shotgun in the front passenger seat.

"Where to first, David?" Wilber asked from the driver's seat.

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“Well ... I’d kinda like to drive around a little and see what things look like now,” he said. “Diane, you got anyplace special you want to visit?”

“I’d *like* to visit with a few of my friends but... How solid is our cover story, again?” she asked.

“Depends...” Wilber said, then paused for a moment. “You wanna make a miraculous recovery, we can certainly make it happen – if, you know, you keep it sufficiently vague. Otherwise, we go with amnesia for all three of you and just run with it. Besides, Lili said you’ll be leaving tomorrow night. If you want a *chance* meeting – like you’re just passing through town after your accident – then we can make that happen, too, but exchanging the annual Christmas letter will be somewhat awkward.”

“*\*Mother, we can make it go away afterwards\**” Cathy reminded her, which gave Diane enough reason to change her mind.

“*\*No thank you, sweetheart. I shouldn’t be selfish\**”

“Wilber, I think I’ll pass this time around,” she said. “If we meet someone by accident, we can chalk it up to being a lookalike or something like that.”

She glanced at David and Andy, suddenly thinking of how she could explain all three of them.

“Or they just might forget about us after we move on,” she added, now reconsidering what Cathy had just mentioned.

“I understand, my Lady,” Wilber said quietly, then started the van.

“Hey, Wilber,” Kayla called out. “It’s Saturday. Can we stop by the house to water the plants?”

“And feed the *rabbits!*” Mary reminded her.

“Bernard is still *alive?*” Andy asked while turning to look at her.

“*Bernard* turned out to be *Bertina*, and she’s getting *fixed* as soon as we figure out how to trick Lady Wen into *doing* it,” she said, and Kayla started to giggle.

“The trick will be getting her fixed *before* she gets pregnant again,” Kayla said, then giggled even louder.

“You girls can’t manage that on your *own?*” Diane asked them while Wilber headed the van down the *paved* driveway.

“Strangely enough, with our level of experience, we can Heal like anyone else, but when we try to *break* anything, it just doesn’t take,” Mary said with a shrug.

The two guardsmen digested that conversation and privately wondered if Lady Wen would actually *commit* such a harmful act.

“*Knew* we shoulda brought Lili with us,” Diane muttered, causing the guardsmen a moment’s dread at the mere *suggestion* the Elder would even *consider* ... then they both realized history had *already* proven what the Elder both could and *would* do under certain circumstances.

The drive continued in relative silence as they left the Annex proper and turned onto the main highway into town. Diane and David both muttered comments to each other at the developed tracts of land that had sprung up in their absence, and Andy pointed out what looked like a new school coming up on the left. Just behind it, they could see new housing, but then felt the van slowing for a previously non-existent traffic light.

“*This* is new,” David muttered, and Wilber chuckled.

“We’re becoming the next *boom* town,” he said. “Silicon Valley of Arizona. Or, you know, Silicon *Flats* of Arizona.”

“Manufacturing is moving in?” Diane asked him.

The light changed and Wilber brought the van back up to speed, but at a slower rate.

“Nope! Well, not so much, anyway,” he said. “Mostly it’s a couple of big server farms back past the ‘burbs on the other side of town, and some software types looking to escape from the California rat-race.”

“Huh,” Andy muttered noncommittally, keeping an eye out the window while Shay leaned over his lap to look as well.

“*\*It is so very hot outside, my Andy,\**” she said. “*\*Where are all the trees to shade the citizens?\**”

All three of the Lanes chuckled a bit, and were joined by Wilber, Mary, and Kayla.

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They’d continued to an older, tree-lined residential area, where Wilber pulled to the curb and stopped alongside a familiar dwelling sporting a new coat of paint.

“We did an overhaul on your old house last year; new paint on the inside and out, new roof. Even put in a small solar array,” Wilber told them. “The power company just about made us jump through *fire* before they let us connect to the grid, though. It took us four months to make it happen, but the amount of sun we get almost makes it a net energy producer. It nearly pays the bill in full every month.”

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The guardsman riding up front got out to open the side door for the passengers and stood ready to help the Ladies. While Kayla and Mary headed to the front door, Wilber checked the street-side mailbox and flipped through a handful of mailers and a few bills. Andy and Shay followed along, while Diane and David stood by the van and looked at their old home – suffering a small rush of nostalgia in the process.

“Still think we did the right thing?” David murmured as he side-hugged his wife, hearing the breath catch in her throat and feeling it when she took in a breath and let it out slowly.

They were both distracted at the sight of Walter running across the lawn and reaching up to take Shay’s hand, followed by Jaiying coming up behind him and taking Andy’s hand, with one of the guardsmen following along right behind them. Josie took David’s hand, and Cathy took one of her mother’s hands, with Rose taking the other one. Diane looked down at her daughter, then at all of her cousins, and her smile was genuine when it appeared.

“I’m *sure* we did the right thing,” she said, then stepped off and headed for the door with her two attachments, David and Josie, following along behind.

By the time they reached the door, Andy and Shay had followed Mary and Kayla inside and all the way out the back. The children let go and followed the invisible trail of their cousins to the backyard – something David and Diane had seen countless times in the past. No matter where they were or how they got separated, they all knew *exactly* where everyone else was and how to find them.

The house seemed smaller than they remembered, but to their surprise, the furniture was mostly the same, although in much better condition than they remembered. Wilber, slowly walking along while reading through the mail, finally caught up with them and gave out a short laugh.

“*Ha!* August was a *good* month!” he shared with glee as he waved a bill in their direction. “Got a net energy *credit* for the month!”

“But ... nobody *lives* here, do they?” David asked him while still turning in a circle as he looked over the almost pristine condition of the living room. He heard the back door close, and Mary walked in a moment later.

“Kayla will stay over a few nights during the week,” she said while brushing her hands on her pants. “Danny, too. Depending on the shifts they get, sometimes it makes more sense to stay in town. Sometimes I even join them.”

“Once in a while, Shu and I stay over, too, but that’s mostly for a little privacy,” Wilber added. “I converted the front bedroom to an office with a secure link to Washington.” He left the living room and headed to Andy’s old bedroom, while the Lanes continued to the kitchen and marveled at the new appliances that had been installed. Mary saw their surprise and explained what had happened.

“The kitchen plumbing had a little problem a while back. Then Kayla mentioned the hot water was getting iffy and the water pressure kept changing. Wilber called a plumber and the estimate kinda shocked everyone – except for Wilber. He said he’d sign for it, then asked if we’d like anything else done. New sinks, new dishwasher, new refrigerator, and a new stove – *gas* this time. Said he’d get it out of a special fund he’d been allowed to tap, but I forget which. Crapon Collector, or something like that.”

“The *Kraken* Collective?” David asked her, and her eyes lit right up. He was about to say something else when Wilber walked in with a small computer device of some sort.

“Logs of the ‘neighborhood watch’,” he said, then stuffed it into a shopping bag. “Keeps track of the neighborhood gossip. It’ll be interesting to read next weeks logs to see if anyone noticed our visit. Mary ... the rabbit doing all right?”

Mary was in the process of pouring water for all of them into a row of paper cups pulled from behind one of the cupboard doors. She handed one to both David and Diane, then grabbed another and handed it to Wilber.

“Bertina and her brood are doing well. We think we have homes for most of them. One guy said he wants *three* of them ... although I think he wants them for dinner,” she said with a frown before taking a sip.

“Chicken is cheaper,” Diane muttered, and Mary almost choked on her water.

“*Tastes* like chicken, too, but it’s greasier,” Wilber contributed.

“Had some in the service,” David admitted. “Never liked it.”

There was a short pause while everyone sipped their water.

“At least you can get a nice pair of *slippers* out of ‘em,” David considered, eliciting a dueling pair of “*Ewww*’s” from the Ladies just as Kayla walked in.

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The backyard was a lot lusher than Andy remembered it. The crack in the concrete patio had been repaired, and a brick barbeque had been

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installed on one side of it. Separated from it and further back across the lawn stood the rabbit hutch, with a large, hard-shell sunshade erected over it. He remembered when he used to hang a tarp suspended across poles to keep the hutch cool in the summertime. The pond he'd been digging for his Grandfather's turtles had been filled in and covered over by a small garden. The fruit tree in one corner of the yard was still going strong, and the other corner had several wire cages with red vegetables hanging from leafy green vines growing through them. He wondered who tended it all, until Kayla got done with the rabbits and turned a hose on the fruit tree and the garden.

Bernard ... *Bertina* ... was surrounded by half a dozen smaller versions of herself, but currently perched atop the hutch's enclosed shelter to give her some space from her bouncing brood. Andy wondered if Maya ever felt that way, with four toddlers tracking her down every time they got thirsty or needed some comfort.

*"She enjoyed us, Father,"* Jaiying said solemnly, with her little fingers linked through the chicken wire while she watched the baby rabbits jockeying for a position closer to their mother.

*"Maybe we could bring some of them back with us,"* Cathy suggested, which got a short laugh out of Walter.

*"I'm sure the gardeners would LOVE having much BIGGER burrowers to deal with,"* he said.

*"I think Faithful Daughter would enjoy the company of at least THREE of them – breakfast, dinner, AND supper!"* Josie chortled, and was rewarded with a chorus of groans.

Their guardsman stood off to one side, allowing them their relative privacy while still close enough to follow the conversation. He'd gotten used to their particular brand of humor over the last year or so, but had never met *any* children of their age with the same level of maturity they displayed. Probably something to do with who their parents were, he considered once again.

Jaiying kept her smile to herself, knowing the guardsman meant no disrespect, but simply hadn't taken it far enough. Her cousins had help from their parents. As for *herself*...

*"Time to go, kids!"* David called from the backdoor before turning around and seeking out Wilber.

"Backyard looks really nice. Who does all the gardening?" he asked just as Diane and Mary were coming in from the garage. Diane stopped and frowned at him.

"Looks better than when *we* were living here," she said after glancing out the window to the backyard. Her "dwarf" orange tree was almost twenty feet tall now, and that new tomato patch in the corner looked like it'd gone *berserk*. The strawberries, alas, did not seem to have survived.

"We all take turns," Mary told them. "Well, mostly Kayla and I take care of the rabbits, and water and pick the fruit." She looked out the back window and shook her head slowly. "The oranges will be ready sometime after the first frost in December but it seems to flower all year round for some reason. The *tomatoes*... They just kinda sprang up all the sudden, so we got some tomato cages and stuck 'em in the ground. I've never seen them grow so *tall*, though. That middle vine goes over the fence and grew all the way down to the ground on the *other* side. The neighbor says she picks the tomatoes every other day now."

"*Cherry* tomatoes?" Diane asked her, but Mary shook her head.

"No... They're *small* but they don't *taste* like cherry tomatoes," she said with a shrug. "They taste like, you know, *regular* tomatoes to me."

They looked out the window for a few seconds longer, but turned away when the herd of children and adults headed back to the house.

Diane noted that Andy wiped his feet on the mat, and each of the other adults and children followed suit. It was something she'd had to remind him of over and over when he'd come in from the backyard when he was younger. She smiled, recognizing *another* example of her little boy growing up, but caught herself. She'd momentarily forgotten that, along with the *rest* of them, he was a survivor of *death* space and a bonded partner and a father *himself*, now.

He wasn't a little boy any longer, but a strong young adult.

Diane stepped over to David and showed him the contents of a fabric shopping bag before folding it over and gripping it under her arm.

Mary walked over from the kitchen offering paper cups of water to the returnees, then waited near the recycle bin to accept empty cups back to dispose of them.

After everyone had a chance to cycle through the single toilet – something Diane had *constantly* lamented once Amy had reached her teenage years – they all trooped outside, joined the remaining guardsman at the van, and boarded for their next stop.

On the way to buy flowers, Wilber swung by an even *older* residential section, and turned a corner on a street very familiar to David.

"You know, starting back in '99, Ronnie spent over a *year* here waiting for his ship," Wilber said while slowing as they neared the middle of the block. "Ronnie... Well, you know what a *busybody* he was. Always needed



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to be doing *something*.” He stopped across the street from the house where David had been raised.

The house had been well maintained in their absence. There were a few cars parked on the street in front of it, and a couple in the driveway. David once considered selling the property after Walter had been killed but they’d never made much progress in dealing with it, other than cleaning out the food and garbage, and getting rid of some broken items his dad had hung on to for some reason. There was also the issue of the turtles Andy had promised to take care of after the pond he’d been digging was finished, but their Fourth of July picnic disaster had cancelled all of their plans.

“Ronnie may have been dealing with his demons, but he didn’t let it stop him from helping out when he could, so–” Wilber stopped as the door opened and a young man walked out, followed by a young woman carrying a baby.

The man walked to the driveway and opened the trunk of a car to retrieve a couple of bags of groceries before carrying them back into the house. He made two more trips, then went back outside to close the trunk, but not before three more women came out – two of them with babies this time – and waved goodbye to him. He waved back, then got in the car and backed into the street. When he pulled away, the driver’s side of the car was directly across from David, and Diane could feel him tense up as he recognized his daughter’s rapist – Josh Tyler.

Wilber could see David’s reaction in the rearview mirror, and closed his eyes for a moment before dealing with this accidental trauma.

“For some reason, Lili asked me to look into Mister Tyler and see how he was doing,” Wilber muttered. “I already knew. While he served his time in prison, he’d been ordered to counseling for his sexual misdeeds. Ronnie told me it’d actually started while he was under arrest in the county jail. Anyway, aside from having to register as a sex-offender for the rest of his life, Ronnie found a suitable way for him to pay for his past crimes.”

David was still tense, so Diane took it upon herself to ask *exactly* what Josh Tyler was doing with all those women and babies.

“So ... Ronnie sets him and his harem up in Walter’s *house*?” she asked sharply, and got a short laugh out of both Walter and the Center’s guardsmen sitting next to him.

“*Hardly*. As far as we can tell, Josh hasn’t found a woman *anywhere* who wants to be with him,” Walter said, “But he works a couple of jobs now, and part of his wages are garnished to help support this halfway house for women in trouble, mostly unwed mothers. We’ve monitored him pretty closely, and he even does things like this – shopping for the

house and stuff. I don't know what Ronnie *did* to him, but it seems to have stuck."

There were a few moments of silence until David finally said, "Well ... good... Where does he work?"

"Part time at the big box we'll be stopping at, and he also drives for the local para-transit. It's not much, but he can afford to live in a studio in old town and still make enough to eat," Kayla offered, causing Diane to twist in her seat to look back at her.

"Part of Ling's practice was to learn about Earthling's antisocial behaviors," Mary explained. "Before he left, Ronnie asked us to keep track of Josh and make sure he didn't backslide. We dragged him out to the Center on some pretext, then Ling worked him over *real* hard ... and that was on top of his *regular* counseling. He seems a lot different now. Part of that wage garnishment is restitution to his victims and fines to the court."

David remained tense until the glow from Diane's hand on his arm got him to relax, and he finally took a deep breath and let it out.

"Bad parenting," he muttered bitterly, and she patted his arm as Wilber started the van and headed them to the warehouse store.

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"Wow! Look at the *parking lot!*" Andy said in awe. "It's like everyone in *town* is here today!"

"Labor Day weekend," Wilber said dryly as they inched along through two signal changes before turning into the parking lot.

Shay had taken the window seat this time and was amazed at all the personal vehicles arrayed in neat rows and columns among the tiny little streets that surrounded the big building with the red and blue lettering on it. Here, *too*, was a definite lack of organic shade from the bright sunlight. At least they were cooled by the van's air conditioning system, but she dreaded leaving it again, as she knew it would warm up uncomfortably by the time they returned.

"And *why*, pray tell, are we shopping *here* instead of the grocery store in *town*?" Diane asked aloud, hoping there was a good answer.

"Competition," Mary said. "The grocery store dropped the flower section because they couldn't make their margins. They still got good deals on meat and produce compared to here, but some stuff we buy in bulk and it's just easier to come here for most of it.

Wilber had played this game before and maneuvered the van into an open space midway through the parking lot and adjacent to a cart return.

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Rolling the windows all the way down and making sure the wing windows in the rear were wide open, he turned off the engine and had everyone exit the van and assemble next to it.

"Okay, folks. This here's how it works," he said, then held up a couple of cards. *"These are non-member cards that let you shop here until the money on them runs out. I didn't know if you wanted to make any purchases today, but there's a thousand dollar limit on each of them if, you know, you see something you wanna take back home."* He handed one of them to Diane and the other one to Shay, before looking at the kids and counting noses.

"Children, I'd like you to ride in the shopping carts as passengers, and you don't have to sit in the kiddie *seats unless you want to. Lots of children don't because sometimes it's difficult to get in and out of them. I figure two of you to a cart.*"*

He pointed to a couple pushing a cart with a child sitting down inside of it.

"That should be all right, Mister Milton,"* Jaiying said very seriously, and reached out and held Rose's hand.

Cathy and Josie joined hands, and Walter rolled his eyes, then turned to Kayla and Mary.

"I guess you're both stuck with me,"* he told them, as he walked over and reached up to hold both their hands.

"Watch out! He likes big girls!"* Josie said to them, which caused them to burst into a short fit of giggles, but stunned the men in the group.

After forming a train of five shopping carts, the group proceeded to the main doors – sans one Imperial guardsman left to sit by the open doors of the van.

Although the parking lot had been hot, once inside the store, the air conditioning worked overtime to keep temperatures cool enough to make the shopping trip almost enjoyable.

Instead of heading right for the flowers, Wilber led them back towards the food chiller cases and stopped by a pile of packaged meats.

"Any dietary restrictions on meat or vegetables?" he asked them after turning around and looking at each of them.

"Are ... are those are precooked *pork ribs*?" David asked him, the gleam in his eyes being *obvious*.

"By a strange coincidence, yes they are," Wilber said. "I was thinking of ribs tonight, along with corn, mixed vegetables, and maybe potatoes ...

if that's all right with you guys? Oh ... how about Lord Em- ... ahh, how about Rad ... and Lili and Laisee?"

He knew the Lanes would already be familiar with his suggested meal, but the Imperials might not. Spring Blossom was a no-brainer, having been raised on the Reservation before she'd been taken away. He considered that Lady Sai was a fighter more than a Healer and would most likely eat anything dropped in front of her – just like the *first* time she'd visited – while *Déjà* ... *Déjà* looked like she was ready to pop and had not really eaten that much for breakfast to begin with.

"Rad and Lili will enjoy the meal, and I'm sure Laisee will, too," Diane told him firmly. "It's too bad the van is so full, 'cause I'd *really* like to take a couple of cases back to Kantor and stick 'em in the freezer for later."

"Not a problem," Kayla said. "After the service tomorrow, we can come back and load up. Lili said she wanted us to pick up a few things, too. She said Amy gave her a list."

"Oh Gods... *More* French fries," Diane muttered, getting giggles from both Mary and Kayla.

They made their selections for that night's dinner, then stopped at the flower display where David picked out a bunch of red roses for the cemetery. As Wilber headed over to wait in the check-out line, the ladies circled the piles of clothing and perused the possibilities. Mary and Kayla watched while Diane considered a selection of blouses and shorts before checking out the women's denim fashions. It seemed a strange choice for someone who lived at the seat of Imperial power, and Diane caught their impressions and smiled.

"Hey, it's not *all* robes and slippers out there," she said. "*I've* got a garden, *too!*" She paused for a moment, then muttered, "At least I *used* to have a garden," but didn't expand upon it.

Andy was watching Shay as she felt the fabrics, then lifted up pieces to hold them under her chin or down across her waist. He could see the beginnings of frustration starting to appear on her brow and gave her a hug before asking her what she would like. It turned out that she liked *everything* but didn't know which of these clothes would fit her. Mary heard that and tried to explain the size labels to her, but said they could go back to the Annex and take measurements, then come back tomorrow after the service and make some purchases then. That was met with agreement all around, so they headed past the check stands to wait for Wilber.

Shay seemed particularly interested in the sales transactions, and Diane explained how the retail function worked on Earth compared to what she'd been accustomed to on Wilder and Kantor. They watched as the items were scanned by the money-counting machine and totaled up.

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Wilber held out his card and slipped it through the little box, then squiggled something on the box with a leashed stylus. Then the lady handed him an exit pass for the door.

While that had been going on, the guardsman who'd been assigned to them had taken over Walter's shopping cart, while Mary and Kayla raided the food court for churros and chocolate vanilla swirls. David and Andy assisted with the trays of goodies Mary and Kayla were bringing back, and the entire party worked their way through the exit queue and headed back to the van.

As they walked back through the parking lot, the guardsmen signaled to each other and the man left at the van slipped inside and started it up. While Wilber and the two guardsmen loaded the food in the back and under the seats, Mary handed out churros, and Kayla handed out the swirls. Everyone ate while standing around, or in the case of the children, sitting in shopping carts. A guardsman pulled out one of several water bottles from the center console and handed it to Kayla, while Mary took napkins and handed them out, some of them being wetted by Kayla to wipe sticky lips and fingers.

With the air conditioner set to maximum, the inside of the van quickly cooled and became moderately comfortable before they started climbing back in. The guardsmen returned the carts to the adjacent cart corral and they all climbed aboard for their next stop.

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Shay had enjoyed the yogurt swirl, but Andy told her that ice cream frosties were *much* better – *especially* when dipped in chocolate. Wilber said he could look into sending a frostie machine to Kantor, but Diane complained that Amy had caused *enough* cultural damage with French fries and pizza. Shay then asked if they could maybe import *churros*, and Mary said she would look up the recipe and see how it was made. Then they could see about getting ingredients sent home with them. Both David and Andy thought that was a good idea, while Diane merely groaned. The conversation died down when Wilber turned up the driveway leading to the cemetery.

As they started moving towards Walter and Bessie's gravesite, a car approached from the opposite direction, and Wilber slowed and pulled over to let it pass on the narrow road. The driver seemed to be checking something in his hand, but he'd already slowed and managed to avoid them before passing by.

"Cell phones. They cause more accidents," Wilber said in disgust, then stopped the van while watching the car approach the gate in his mirror.

He watched the driver fiddle with the device as he stopped behind the gate, then saw him reach behind him and drop it onto the rear seat.

After checking left and right, the driver pulled the car into traffic and sped away.

"He's *learned*," Wilber muttered, then proceeded to the closest spot near the graves.

They got out as a group, and David led the way. Mary carried more napkins and Kayla carried a couple of water bottles, while Wilber and one of the guardsmen stayed with the van. David carried the bundle of roses and held Walter's hand as they walked along. Diane was walking with Cathy and Josie, and Andy and Shay were walking with Jaiying and Rose. As they approached the gravesite, the second guardsman held back to allow the family some privacy.

David was surprised at what greeted them there. Instead of dusty headstones covered with bird droppings, both Walter and Bessie's headstones had been freshly cleaned, and the two flower cups on each one held fresh flowers in them. There were still drops of water on the stone's base, and some had even puddled. Mary folded up the napkins and handed them to Diane, while Kayla checked and added water to each flower cup before they both withdrew to give the family privacy.

Diane took the flowers from David and opened the bundle. She split them between the four cups and tried to arrange them around the existing flowers, but the stems were much too long. Shay sat down on the grass and asked Andy for his knife-of-many-uses so she could cut the stems down to the proper length.

When she was done, Diane rearranged the flowers so there was a mix of roses and what looked like daisies fitted neatly together.

As David stood there looking down at the gravestones, Jaiying got a sense of what was going on in his head.

"*\*Walter ... I think we need your shield\**" Jaiying sent to him faintly, and he silently obliged.

"Hello Mom ... Dad," David said quietly. "It's been a while since I've stopped by. Sorry."

Diane reached out and held his hand while looking up at the tears streaming down his face. She moved the hand with the napkins closer and picked a couple out with her fingertips before handing them to him.

After he wiped his eyes, he continued.

"I've brought you some special visitors today." He stopped and looked around, gesturing for the children to get closer.

He held out his hand to Walter and brought him forward.

"This is your grandson, Walter. He is my child with Shay."

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Cathy moved on her own and came up to his other side.

"This is your granddaughter, Cathy. She is my child with Diane."

Josie slowly slipped up and stood next to Walter.

"And this ... this is Amy's daughter, Josie. Amy had to work, so Josie came with us this trip," he said, then gave out a half-hearted laugh.

Andy was standing with Jaiying and Rose, and Shay was right beside him. He stepped forward with his family and gave a half bow to both headstones.

"Hello Grandma ... Grandpa. This is Shay. She's my bond-mate," he said, bringing up their joined hands. "That's kinda like being married, but I have to work harder at it to keep her. This little girl is Jaiying, my daughter with Lady Laisee Caldarous. This *tall* little girl is Rose Thomas, the daughter of Nathan Thomas and Dorcas of Womak, and she's part of our family, too."

They stood there silently for several seconds until Jaiying came a little closer and bowed to both headstones.

*"Hello Grandmother ... Grandfather,"* she said, turning to address each headstone. *"I... We never got to meet you in this life, but we know your father, Rondal Caldar. You knew him as Ron Cal. He could not tell you when you were alive, but he was very proud of you both. He honored your friendship, and your loyalty to your family, and your tribe. All of us are here because of you. Your son, David, gave me a father. Your father, Ron, gave each of us a special gift to help the Commonwealth."*

She stopped and sniffed a bit, and Walter reached out and hugged her to his side.

*"Grandfather Caldar worked very hard and saved us from war,"* Walter said very softly, addressing his namesake's headstone. *"He discovered a way to make our enemies become our friends, and put us on the pathway to peace. We're here on Earth to bury a body, but don't think it's your father we bury tomorrow. Your father is still alive... He's just a little messed up right now."*

He felt Jaiying shiver for a second, and hugged her again.

*"Jaiying's still working on it,"* he added in a whisper, then hugged her a little bit tighter.

The children shared a blip amongst themselves, then included their mothers.

Shay and Diane took hold of Andy and David, and they all formed a half-circle in front of the headstones and held hands before Diane started them off...

"We honor the memory of our departed brother and sister, and we ask the Gods to grant them the shelter of a home, the warmth of a hearth, sustenance for their souls, and time to achieve their immortal growth."

The prayer circled around them until it was complete. Afterwards, David stepped closer and patted his father's headstone, then reached to stroke his mother's one time before turning away and heading back to the van, his extended family slowly trailing along behind him.

They had just turned onto the road and were headed back to the reservation when David finally relaxed enough to bring up the issue bothering him from the time they entered the cemetery.

"Wilber ... that was *him*, wasn't it." It was a statement, not a question. "Why was he there? Did he find out we were coming back?"

The question earned him a snort from Wilber.

"*Truthfully?* Even the *Ambassador* doesn't know you're here ... or *why*. If he finds out, it will be reported as a 'surprise inspection' and nothing more – although it might shoot his *diet* all to hell."

"*Really*, Wilber, what was he–"

"He's paying for his *sins*," Mary interrupted from behind him. "It's part of the program. He had to go to *each* of his victims – *and* their families – and apologize to each one of them individually. It was up to *them* whether they accepted it or not. Some did... A lot didn't."

"But why the *cemetery*? Why–"

"David, you're all *dead*," Kayla told him. "You, Diane, Amy, and Andy were lost in that Air Force training accident. They recovered your van, but they never found your bodies. He had *no one* to apologize to. Therapy taught him to make whatever accommodations possible to try and make amends, so the next best thing was to do what he could to help make up for your loss, and that meant coming by once in a while to clean the gravesite and leave flowers. He stops by about once a month, and we just happened to catch him at it."

It wasn't that satisfying to David, as he'd rather have a chance to punch his lights out, but he supposed it would have to do, and that emotion was easy to pick up on, even for Josie.

"*\*Don't worry, Grandpa. If we get a chance to check him out, we can always turn him inside out if he fails!\**" she said cheerfully.

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Upon returning to the Annex that afternoon, they were met by a visitor who David knew only professionally. After exchanging greetings with Constable Silver Wolf, they entered the Center and found the rest of their

An Unfortunate Decision

family in an animated conversation with two senior members of the local tribe and their wives. The very *elderly* Native American he knew of vaguely, and mostly only by rumor, but that didn't stop Gray Feather from standing up to greet him personally and shaking his hand. They joined the informal party in progress and got to meet Gray Feather's wife, and the tribal Medicine Man and his wife.

Lili and Rad asked about the shopping trip, and Mary told them of the supper plans for later that afternoon. Then Diane told Lili she planned to go back after the service on Sunday to pick up a few items to take home with them. Sai was noticeably absent, but Laisee explained that Déjà wasn't feeling so well, and Sai was staying by her side and feeding her when she needed it.

It was a pleasant gathering of young, old, *very* old and *incredibly* old individuals, which only became more interesting when Spring Blossom returned from sitting with Sai and Déjà, and began a seven-way conversation in Apache with all the Native American speakers in the room, plus Lili. It only lasted a few minutes and appeared to be limited to somewhat formal greetings and salutations, before the wives carried on with Spring Blossom and Lili, while the men continued with anecdotal stories of Ronnie terrorizing the tribal Elders or dealing with some of the various miscreants who'd unfavorably crossed his path during his last stay on Earth.

This was something both David and Diane missed during their stay at the Royal Homestead, back home – home being *relative* at this point in their lives. Andy was keeping pretty quiet while still thinking about the douche-bag who'd left his big sister pregnant and alone all those years ago. Shay seemed a little lost as she couldn't relate to the conversations between the Ladies, or what the men were talking about but she stuck it out beside her Andy, and enjoyed the company for its family value.

After their formal introductions, and after standing through the proud parent "oohs and awes," the children made themselves scarce by slipping out quietly but not before informing their parents they were leaving. Kayla had suggested the television in the living quarters was available if they'd like to watch it, but warned them to stay away from the gullies and bushes in case there were any snakes around. As soon as they stepped outside the door, two more garrison guardsmen joined them, but did the most *unusual* thing – asking *them* where they would like to go and what they would like to do.

That caught them pretty much flatfooted until Walter suggested a tour of the facilities. That began a half-hour long guided tour through the hanger area, down through the tunnels, over to the exciter and converter room located under the separate house across the parking lot, and then back to the hanger. While wandering back outside, Josie had asked

where the ladder in the converter room led to, but the guardsman told her that it led to private quarters for the residents and it wouldn't be proper to surprise them in their bedroom unannounced.

They continued around the Center and entered an area of older huts that the guardsmen explained were examples of the original living quarters for the local native tribe before the garrison was grounded and alternate accommodations were made available. They entered one of them and saw the rather sparse living space inside, but Jaiying had tracked their pathway and noted they'd bypassed a hut that was a bit taller than the rest, and mentioned it. The guardsmen looked at each other and sighed before escorting them right up to that hut.

Once they were up close, they could see the shabby construction was only camouflage, and the outer walls were solid. One of their tour guides pressed a palm to the door panel, and it beeped and opened for them. Entering the large space, they could see the bus bars and converters used to power and fire the particle beam weapon mounted several feet above them. Off to one side were the control stations that could aim at anything within visible range, all the way out to near Earth orbit, while an adjacent tunnel access ladder led down to the underground warren complex with links to everywhere else.

With nods and smiles, the children complemented the garrison staff on the tidiness of their facility, then were led back to the smaller living quarters.

Once there, they knocked politely and were greeted by Danny, who offered them the use of the television set and some juice and cookies.

They were told they had about two hours to kill before the evening meal, and one of the guardsmen suggested they all watch a recorded program on the television. The kids agreed, and all seven of them settled back with juice and cookies, while watching the animated adventures of a colorful fish looking for its lost child.

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After the evening meal, the children were trundled off to the Center's VIP wing to wash and get ready for evening downtime. They were accompanied by the senior Lanes, along with Andy and Shay, as they all got a chance to share the family "end of day" tradition they'd established back at the Royal Homestead whenever they could. In this particular instance, David and Diane were sharing their double-bedroom VIP suite with the children, who would have their own ensuite facilities for their own use, while Andy and Shay had the next suite down the hallway.

Laisee, Spring Blossom, and the Emperor and his wife remained behind with their guests and engaged in casual conversation for a while until the tribal members eventually asked about the plan for tomorrow.

## An Unfortunate Decision

Lili explained it would be a simple service for the dead as practiced on Kantor. Spring Blossom mentioned her original desire to have a traditional presentation of her son's body, but his being here required an alternate disposition because of both who and what he was.

At Gray Feather's request, Spring Blossom led him, Lean Bear, and Silver Wolf into the large room of the Center and showed them the EMTU containing the body lying in state. Laisee toggled the interior light so that when Gray Feather looked down, the somewhat familiar face of the First Lord could be seen within. He laid his hand on the lid and patted it a couple of times, then looked harder at the face below him and looked back at Spring Blossom questioningly.

"WHERE IS TSILSQSÉ BIYIGÉ?" he quietly asked her in Apache.

From behind him, he could hear a frustrated sigh, before Lili turned on her heel and exited the large room. He turned to watch her leave, before turning back to Spring Blossom with the question still on his face.

### *The Kraken, Behind the Moon*

Maya came back to bed after peeing, and washing the remnants of breast milk from her upper body. 'Donald' was a much sloppier drinker than Ronnie had been – especially when he was falling asleep. He also *snored* much louder, but that was probably due to whatever her mother had done to his face. She lay there with her head propped up on her hand, and contemplated the face that was turned towards her while he slept.

It no longer *looked* like her Ronnie – not exactly, anyway. Sai had revised her original efforts in disguising those features that cried out "Rondal Calder" to make it look more like the original face of the body in the box. It wasn't an exact match – either of them – but to the casual observer it should not be obvious. She reached out and pinched his nose shut, counting the seconds until he opened his mouth in a gasp, then rolled flat on his back and started breathing through his mouth. She counted out another half a minute until he automatically rolled onto his other side – just as he'd *always* done. Her Ronnie had been a side-sleeper, and apparently, Donald was, too.

She reached out and rested her hand on the back of his head while dipping inside only lightly to feel what he was feeling.

In his sleepy state, his confusion seemed to have taken a break – not at *all* like it was when he was awake. When Jaiying was working on him, his confusion was usually glazed with panic – even remotely. The child was *relentless*, determined to either restore her Grandfather, or drive him insane in the process. Perhaps there was a median they could negotiate?

If only Lili would deign to *recognize* him, but that was impossible. The risks they were all taking right now were bad enough, but if the *Elder* were to earn censure at the hands of the Elder's Council, then the stability of the Commonwealth would be brought into question.

Another thought struck her at that point...

How convenient would it be should both the Emperor *and* the Elder – along with the *bulk* of the Imperial household – become lost in the same “accident?” Politically, that would certainly be preferable to outright censure and punishment. A period of mourning would occur, while various factions jockeyed for position. Then the Elder's Council would vet another Elder to manage a *new* Emperor. It certainly could not be the *first* time it had ever happened in the last ten-thousand years.

She relaxed and lay flat on her back, determined to drive that displeasing thought right out of her mind. She closed her eyes and sent prayers to the Gods to grant favors for her Ronnie, so that he could someday come back to her. She was on the verge of falling asleep when her eyes snapped open at the sound of quiet snoring coming from beside her again. At least he was facing the *other* direction this time.

### ***Earth, At the Healing Center***

“WHERE IS TS'ILSQSQSÉ BIYIGÉ?” Gray Feather asked again.

“TS'ILSQSQSÉ BIYIGÉ IS ... NOT HIMSELF,” Spring Blossom told him quietly, then reached out to Laisee silently.

“THIS IS NOT TS'ILSQSQSÉ BIYIGÉ,” Gray Feather said just as quietly, as Laisee stepped up beside them.

“Ronnie's head was accidentally chopped off during a training accident,” she said in accented English.

She looked at the EMTU and placed her hand on it, then turned to face Gray Feather before glancing over to Lean Bear and seeing the shocked expression on his face.

“Chopped ... *off*? They cut off his *head*?” Lean Bear asked her, not quite believing what he'd just been told.

“It was an accident, but everyone tried very hard to save his life,” she said while still looking at their faces to gauge their reactions. Lean Bear was freaked out, but Gray Feather still had reservations about what he'd felt – or *not* felt.

“The body is in *stasis*,” she continued, sensing his concern while looking down at the EMTU. “Even if it was alive, you *still* wouldn't be able to detect it.”

## An Unfortunate Decision

Gray Feather looked at her, then back at the box. She was right. He *couldn't* feel Ronnie within the box they'd stored him in. He'd felt a part of him *earlier*, though. He looked at Spring Blossom again, searching her eyes for the slightest hint of anguish at the loss of her son, but found no sign of it.

Finally letting out a sigh, he dropped his head and turned and walked away. If there was a secret involved, they would either tell him or not, and considering the things TS'ILSQSQSÉ BIYIGÉ had been involved with over the years, it was likely not.

Silver Wolf had been a silent observer to all of this, even when Spring Blossom mentioned having her son's body undergo their tribe's old practice of presenting the body to the sky until nothing was left but bones for burial. Either that, or, depending on the character of the deceased, dumping it under a convenient fallen log.

He held a tight smile on his face and walked past Lean Bear to glance inside the box at the face not looking up at him. It looked like Ronnie to him ... mostly. He shrugged once, then turned to express his condolences to the mother of the fallen warrior, before both he and Lean Bear said their goodbyes and left the big room together.

*"I don't think they believe Ronnie is in there,"* Laisee murmured after the door closed, but Spring Blossom merely smiled.

*"No... But they will not say otherwise. Has Maya any news about my ... Donald?"* she asked her, and Laisee closed her eyes and reached out to the far side of the Moon to find out.

~~~

With their after dinner chores done, the Earthbound family members stayed long enough to say their goodbyes to the tribal members before they left, then said their evening farewells to their Commonwealth family before heading over to the separate living quarters for some private time. Wilber and Shu were staying over in the guest room tonight, while Danny and his wives hit the master bedroom, dropped their clothes, and headed straight in to shower. This being a weekend without shifts for either Danny or Kayla; they were looking forward to sharing whispered words of love with each other over the course of the next few hours. After their shower, they were helping each other dry off when Kayla got a call from work.

After scrambling to get dressed, Kayla kissed her brother and her co-wife goodbye – having been called in to cover the shift of a nurse who had suddenly fallen ill. Danny and Mary watched her leave, but not before telling her to drive carefully on the way in to work. After they saw the taillights of her car fade into the darkness, they hugged and headed to bed for some one-on-one play before getting some sleep. They knew

Kayla's shift should be over in about six hours, which would put her back in their arms just in time to help her get a few hours of sleep before the afternoon funeral service.

~~~

Everyone was noticeably absent when Laisee and Spring Blossom returned to the dining area. Save for a bottle of ambrosia and two lonely glasses, the table had been cleared and the remains of dinner had presumably been wrapped and stuffed into the Center's refrigerators.

Laisee gestured, and Spring Blossom nodded her head, so the slightly younger woman poured drinks for the two of them and handed one to Spring Blossom before she sat down. They both enjoyed a sip of this relatively fair vintage before Spring Blossom reached out and rested her hand across Laisee's.

*"We are alone now,"* she said. *"What does Maya tell you?"*

Laisee sipped her drink and looked at the door to the hallway, then the one to the kitchen. She decided to err on the side of caution, just the same.

*"Donald is sleeping quietly – except for a bit of snoring,"* she said, then followed it with a smile. She remembered how Ronnie used to snore sometimes when she'd slept with him. *"She says his mind is calmer now that he's sleeping, but anticipates it will become confused again in the morning. Especially if Jaiying–"* she stopped and looked around before facing Spring Blossom again and shrugging her shoulders one time.

*"But is he improving? Is there any progress?"* his mother persisted.

*"She said that she and Gaia managed to get him vertical and into the shower this afternoon. He was becoming quite ... fragrant."*

Laisee's eyes squeezed shut in memory of the smell that had surrounded him just before they left. She opened her eyes and saw the disappointment in Spring Blossom's.

*"I'm sorry, but he is still ... not quite himself,"* she continued very softly.

She watched the haunted look on Spring Blossom's face as she considered a rather bleak future for her broken son. They sipped their drinks in companionable silence, but she could still feel the turmoil rolling off the estranged Native American – brought back to her planet of birth to bury a son that was not hers.

*"Spring Blossom ... everyone has left and gone to bed, and tomorrow beckons with the promise of somber hours to fill. Would you care to share my bed with me? It feels very comfortable."*

## An Unfortunate Decision

Spring Blossom wasn't shocked so much as surprised.

As one wife of many, they had unselfishly shared their husband and themselves with each other, each supporting their husband and each other – with the exception of Second Wife and her daughter. That had changed somewhat once Meela had become reborn, but Laisee had remained reserved with the Wives, even with her own mother.

She smiled and reached out to the young girl.

*"I would very much enjoy your company tonight, Laisee," she murmured softly. "First Wife often monopolizes my time, but the situation we find ourselves in certainly allows some flexibility. I look forward to waking in your arms."*

Sharing smiles and comforting touches, they finished their drinks before heading to Laisee's guest suite for the remainder of the night.

### ***September 4, A Sorrowful Return***

Kayla returned in the pre-dawn hours on Sunday morning, but was despondent over a situation at work. Danny was sound asleep, but Mary had heard the front door open and went out to the living room to greet her. Instead of heading straight to the bedroom, they walked over to the kitchen table where Kayla sat down and wiped her eyes with a napkin. Mary poured her a glass of milk and put a few cookies on a paper towel in front of her before sitting down with her. It took half a glass of milk and two cookies before Kayla was ready to speak.

"You remember a few years ago when Cocheta went nuts over her daughter dating that white guy she met in college?"

Mary vaguely remembered the fuss, but couldn't remember the girl's name – some sort of bird, she thought.

"I remember how upset she was. Didn't she threaten to kick her out of the family? Can she even *do that*?" Kayla shrugged at her question, but continued the story.

"Nascha and Fred moved in together last year before he decided to take that Army commission from ROTC. First thing after he graduated, he gets assigned training somewhere, and then gets deployed to the Middle East."

"Oh no! He wasn't *killed*, was he?" If she was the same flake that she remembered, Mary was dreading what the girl might have done to herself.

"Not so much killed, but they misplaced him somewhere ... him and his whole squad," Kayla muttered. "She hasn't heard from him in a couple of weeks, and that's becoming a problem."

Kayla picked apart a cookie and ate the bits with a few sips of milk to wash them down before she continued.

“Nascha is about sixteen weeks pregnant,” she said, then glanced towards Wilber and Shu’s room. “Cocheta turned her away when she came home to grieve for her lost Fred. Don’t know if it’s because of the baby or because of Fred. Oh yeah – they’re legally married and all, but ... she’s got another problem.”

Kayla ate the last cookie, then drained the glass. After wiping her mouth, she reached out to hold Mary’s hands.

“The baby is sick and it’s gonna *die*. It has a tumor growing on it, and it’s sucking the blood from the baby’s body. It’s pretty much starving it to death. The doctors want her to have an abortion so it doesn’t risk *her* life as well.”

“Well, that’s ... sad. But if the baby is going to die *anyway*, then they should remove it,” Mary said softly, and Kayla shook her head slowly.

“And *that’s* the problem. She won’t give her consent because this is the *last* connection she has with Fred. She doesn’t even know if he got the letter telling him he was going to be a father.”

Kayla pushed away from the table and rinsed her glass in the sink while Mary came up behind her and wrapped her arms around her to try to comfort her wife.

“Maybe... Maybe *Ling* can do something?” Mary suggested, but Kayla just shrugged her shoulders before Mary continued. “We can ask Ling in the morning, or, you know, after you get some sleep. Nascha is *tribe* – one of *us*. Ronnie gave us leeway when a member of the tribe is involved. We’ll ask Ling, but first you gotta get some sleep. Come on, sweetheart. Let’s get you to bed.”

Kayla turned in her arms and hugged her back, her tears starting to run down her face again. Mary leaned in and kissed her cheek before walking her towards the bedroom – snatching a couple more napkins from the table along the way.

~~~

The skylights over the guest suite were just hinting at the impending dawn when Jaiying awoke and separated herself from the mass of children’s bodies on the large bed before wandering into the attached facilities. A glance to one side showed her a bathtub behind a transparent sliding door, so she turned to the other door that led to a tiny toilet room with an included sink and turned off the nightlight, but turned it back on, realizing in the sudden darkness that there was no skylight over the tiny room.

An Unfortunate Decision

She relieved herself while contemplating the purpose of the roll of soft paper hanging on the wall next to her. Ignoring the paper, she flushed the toilet and reached down to capture a handful of fresh water to splash against her vulva to freshen it. She got up, rinsed her hands in the sink, and dampened the smaller cloth, then further wiped herself with it before rinsing and hanging it back up. She dried herself with the larger fluffy cloth and hung it back up before getting her underwear sealed and heading back to bed.

The rest of her cousins were still asleep, so she considered her options and decided to grab a spare pillow and blanket before heading to the larger shared central room and settling into one of the cushy chairs located there. Once comfortably arranged, she closed her eyes and reached out to the backside of the Moon. She had some idle time before breakfast, and there always seemed to be something else to try in bringing her Grandfather back to sensibility.

Instead of his memories, this time she decided to focus on the area in her Grandfather's brain that seemed to have been broken by the powder the Vanir pumped into him. That was only one of *several* atrocities he'd been subjected to, but it was affecting his ability to stabilize his aging. She'd managed to grab a few decades from their friendly Vanir volunteers before they'd left, but she'd been rationing them out a little at a time to keep him from fading away entirely.

Using Grandfather Petrus as an example, she reached out and observed the similar section of *his* mind to compare it with her Grandfather Ronnie's. Them both being part Earthling, and either part Kantite or Cletus, she hoped their similarities were close enough to give her the right clues, then settled into the chair a little deeper and went to work.

The Kraken, The Far Side of the Moon

Petrus was having a difficult morning.

He kept tossing and turning, which seemed to coincide with the dreams he was suffering from for some reason. He was in that mid-state between asleep and awake; that place where time had no meaning, and the slightest noise would magically meld itself into one's dreams so smoothly that it became a unified part of the whole. After one particularly violent image, he abruptly sat up and looked around the dim room.

He felt the bed around him, but only found the warm body of Kiki still sleeping the sleep of the – *hopefully* – completely satiated. He looked down at her and almost envied her simple life: eat, sleep, and fuck. He glanced at the compartment timer and saw that it was more than three hours until he'd normally be getting up, but got up anyway and visited the facilities.

After voiding his bladder, he washed his face and looked at it in the mirror – the dark shadows under his eyes impressing upon him the lack of a quality sleep cycle. He was still considering that when he walked back to the bedroom and looked at the tiny woman still sprawled across the bed ... then *smiled*.

He slipped back into bed and positioned himself comfortably, then delicately reached out and pried Kiki's jaws open slightly ... just enough to slip his tongue inside her mouth. Then he pressed his lips to hers and extended his tongue inside to tease her tongue. The addition of his fingers between her sprawled legs provided the very small amount of stimulation necessary to trigger an automatic response that she simply could *not* resist, and he suddenly found his mouth invaded by a slithering probe leaving a trail of enzymes in its wake that relaxed him just shy of knocking him completely out.

When she woke up and began seducing him in *earnest*, he relaxed and let himself be mounted while his thoughts drifted away with very few concerns over the next couple of hours.

~~~

Maya woke up due to an errant elbow to her left breast. She raised an arm protectively, but realized Ronnie had simply rolled over in his sleep – except that he was *still* rolling, and then started making grunting noises. Her first thought was that his potential brain damage caused it, and she pondered the worth of trying to wake him, but a glance at the compartment timer suggested that waking him now would only extend the day for the both of them.

Instead of waking him, she bared a breast and tried to position his head close enough to her nipple for him to latch on and be quieted by her Cletus-based milk. It was a struggle, but she finally managed to mediate his thrashing long enough to get some milk into him, at which point he relaxed and simply nursed.

She considered the hour once again, then looked within him to determine the remaining capacity of his bladder and bowel ... not too good. After letting him take the pressure off her, and him settling down afterwards, she slipped out of bed and gathered several towels and positioned them both underneath and over him ... just in case.

She slipped back into bed and pulled him close enough to let him latch on once again before extending into him to feel what he was experiencing. She didn't get far before she felt a familiar intrusion – and then confronted her.

'Good morning, *Jaiying*. Have you made any progress?' she asked his hidden assailant.

## An Unfortunate Decision

*‘Good morning, Maya. I believe I have mediated some of the problem in this portion of his brain’ she shared, while dragging Maya’s perspective over to the area in question. ‘Here is where Kantite men naturally manifest energy to repair and restore their bodies. The Vanir damaged it with their powder and drugs. I have been trying to fix it. Please tell me later if his health changes any’*

*‘I will do so, but now I will try to get him back to sleep. It will help him to Heal. Goodnight, Jaiying’*

*‘Goodnight, Maya’*

### ***Earth, The Healing Center***

It was officially past dawn, and the guest suites were suffused with the rich glow of the morning’s first light diffusing through the overhead skylights. Jaiying opened her eyes to see the faces of her four cousins staring at her from where they stood in a circle in front of the chair she was slouched in.

“Good morning, Jaiying,” Walter said calmly. “Have you been a good girl, or will we have to deal with the wrath of the Elder’s Council in a few hours?”

Josie let out a few giggles for her benefit before launching a pillow in her direction.

### ***A Day to Say Goodbye***

The morning had started out slowly, with garrison staff acting as servitors for the Imperial family once again. Breakfast preparations were somewhat modest compared to the day before. Meals before funeral ceremonies were typically light, while the after service wake would celebrate the life of the deceased through good food and the sharing of stories and exploits.

The official visitors began arriving shortly after ten in the morning. Among them was a dark funeral hearse to carry the body back to town for an immediate cremation. The scheduling of the cremation had been rather peculiar, with the government man insisting that the body be cremated on the same day as the service.

On the whole, *renting* a casket was unusual, but the fact they would get it back after the service was a bonus – if they could figure out how to sell a used casket. The only *real* awkwardness was that the service was being held at the Reservation Annex and not at the chapel proper. That, and there would be two representatives going along to insure the body being cremated was the one they were providing.

They would even stay until the ashes were recovered and bring them back afterwards. As the check had already cleared, and everyone was

getting *triple* time, the director ran with it and smiled all the way to the Reservation before putting on his dour expression for the transfer of the body from that unusual storage container to the rental casket.

He was surprised at the condition of the body, but had already been warned. He still had a frown on his face when he whipped out the can of fabric freshener to spray the body before trying to make the minimum effort of improving its appearance. However, not much could be accomplished with the injuries the deceased appeared to have suffered, so he settled for placing a very thin gauze over the face and hands to soften the disgust of the beloved ones' family and friends.

In point of fact, the dead guy looked *terrible*, but he began to understand why they were only renting the casket if they couldn't even afford a decent mortician to bring the illusion of sleep to the dearly departed.

~~~

Sometime around eleven a.m. found David in the Center's dining area. He was snacking on cookies and soft drinks with their guests when he saw a Para-transit car show up outside. Through the window, he could see a familiar black woman being helped out of the back seat, then a pair of crutches being handed to her.

He bolted from the dining room and stopped outside the supply room to grab the wheelchair he'd staged there before wheeling it to the front door. David's arrival at the top of the ramp brought a delighted squeal from Deloris. She almost stumbled, but the driver quickly reached out to steady her.

Both David and the driver froze when they suddenly saw each other.

They stood still for several seconds until the driver turned away and got Deloris settled on her crutches, then waited by her side. David finally pushed the wheelchair down the ramp and locked its wheels so she could sit down in it safely before Josh Tyler helped Deloris into the chair, meeting David's eyes for a few moments afterwards before lowering his own and turning away to go park the car.

"Deloris, you look absolutely *beautiful*," David told her, despite noticing the recent scratches on her arms and face. After a perfunctory hug, he asked, "What did you do to your *leg*?"

"Compound fracture ... courtesy of the Arizona State *FUCKING* Troopers," she said bitterly. "We were coming back from giving testimony in Tucson when two of those assholes mistook our car for a stolen car and forced us off the road into a ditch. Henry was driving--"

"Henry? Was he all right?"

An Unfortunate Decision

"He got a scratch. When one 'o them trooper boys forced my door open, he started yanking me out of the car, and my backup service pistol fell out of my purse. Stupid son of a bitch stomped on my leg and left me screaming while he yelled at me to get my hands in the air. Took *forever* to get him to dig my badge out of my purse."

"Ouch!"

"No kidding... Say, David... Wilber said you might be here, and ... well, I'm sorry about Josh bringing me. It's Henry's weekend with the kids, and I can't exactly drive like this," she said, pointing down to her right leg.

"It's okay. We saw him yesterday at Dad's house and – and at the cemetery later. Kayla and Mary say he's changed ... a lot." David stood up and stretched before unlocking the wheels and pushing her up the ramp.

"Yeah, well... You know I'd *swear* Ronnie did something to him that first day he saw him in the lockup, but nothing showed up on the tapes. Josh served his time, and he got a lot of counseling – inside and afterwards. Them girls even dragged him out *here* one day, and he came back even better. Say, if *you're* here, did Diane and the kids come with you?"

"Diane is here. So are Andy and his wife. Amy had to work," he said, then stifled a snort. "We also have a few *new* family members we'd like you to meet." He pushed her through the door and wheeled her into the dining area where she was greeted by a squeal the moment Diane saw her.

David left the women alone and wandered over to the window. He saw where Josh had parked the car as far away from the building as he could, then rolled all the windows down before leaving it. He couldn't see him anywhere, then considered that he didn't really care if he saw him again at all.

He left the window and returned to Deloris and Diane, now joined by Andy and Shay. Off to one side, he could see Lili looking on – almost *hungrily*, it seemed – while the Emperor was standing with his daughter and Spring Blossom, all of them carrying on casual conversations with the visitors.

~~~

Doctor Wells had barely gotten out of his car when he was ambushed by Kayla and Mary.

"Doctor Wells! Have they operated on *Nascha* yet?" Kayla asked him.

"Good morning, Kayla. Nascha? Oh, you mean Mrs. Williams – that girl with the sick fetus? No, not yet. She won't sign the paperwork and

I'm worried it may be too late," he said, then paused for a moment to consider what his ethical responsibilities were when discussing a patient at his hospital with a practicing nurse, but a *non-practicing* Mary. "We really shouldn't be talking about this here, Kayla. You know the HIPAA rules," he said, then started towards the Center while the girls kept up.

"Doctor, if we can get *Ling* to come visit her ... at least let *Ling* look at her, then maybe—"

"Kayla, Ron Cal made it clear that certain things were *forbidden*," he said, while wondering if not pursuing the issue back then had been a bad decision at the time, as they could have certainly used the help on numerous occasions.

As Wells walked on, Mary grabbed Kayla's arm and began whispering to her before finally getting agreement on pursuing another tack. They rushed to catch up with him and made a suggestion.

"Doctor Wells, what if we could get permission ... from *our* side, I mean?" Kayla asked him. "Lili is here and she could decide."

"Lili? Who is Lili?"

"Lili is... Ah, Lili was Ronnie's sister-in-law. She's married to Ronnie's half-brother," Mary told him, which caused him to stop in his tracks.

"His brother's *wife*? Ronnie said that his brother's wife could—" his words stalled as he considered the possibilities. "Do ... do you think she might ... perhaps consider..."

"We can only ask!" Mary insisted.

"Yeah! She's right inside!" Kayla pressed, then reached out to her.

'*Lady Lili, can Mary and I bring someone for you to meet? He's the doctor that Maya saved*' she sent silently.

'*Certainly, dear. I would take the measure of the man whom Maya considered worthy of saving*' she immediately sent back.

"She'll see us! Come on!" Kayla said, then grabbed his arm to pull him up the stairs to the Center.

### ***In the Dining Room***

Lili smiled demurely, now considering the placement of two puzzle pieces while utilizing one unsuspecting player. The good doctor would be in a position to negate any evidence of a miraculous Healing with the luscious Deloris, while perhaps providing her with a suitable opportunity to examine the activities at the local center of medical treatment.

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From what Kayla had told her this morning, the young girl's unborn child was suffering from a birth defect of some type she'd never encountered before – certainly not as a Combat-Healer. It sounded absolutely *intriguing*, and the girl *was*, after all, part of Ronnie's tribe.

She wandered closer to Diane and her lovely dark-skinned friend before extending through the enclosed leg to see what these unwashed heathens had done to it. In mere seconds, she determined this would be a very *painful* Healing, with a few metal pins needing to be removed before she could finish the last touches. In her estimation, it would take at *least* twenty seconds to accomplish – twenty seconds of *anguish*, in fact. Fortunately, there was an adequate supply of ambrosia, and she silently reached out to Diane and asked her to provide a small measure of it to her wheeled visitor.

Not missing a beat, Diane begged off for a second to get her friend a drink for her leg “just to take the edge off” while David and Andy chatted with Deloris over what had been happening in town over the last few years. Shay, not conversant in English, tried to keep up by listening to Andy's emotional impressions, and managed to laugh at most of the right places. When Diane returned and handed the half-glass to Deloris, everyone looked at her expectantly.

“Bottoms up, Deloris,” David said quietly, then smiled and nodded his head agreeably.

After looking at all of them, and especially the smiling face of Shay, Deloris took a shallow breath before sipping delicately at the liquid – savoring the unusual flavor of the drink before tossing the rest of it back and swallowing it. It went down *very* smoothly and immediately warmed her stomach in a *most* agreeable fashion that slowly radiated outward to her limbs and face. She began to smile, and David caught her eyes and waved his left hand in front of her.

“Cut my *hand* off, right across the *palm*. Ronnie gave me three cups of that stuff and I fell asleep. I never felt a *thing* while Maya, Diane, Amy, and Shay were putting my hand back together,” he said, all the while wiggling his fingers in front of her face.

Deloris smiled widely and began giggling, then caught herself and looked around to see if anyone else had heard her.

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Lili felt Mary and Kayla before they entered the dining room, then turned to see them both practically dragging an older gentleman between them. They saw her and immediately headed in her direction before stopping within speaking range. Lili waited a moment longer, then stared pointedly at Kayla, which finally kicked her brain into gear.

“Oh... Uhh... Elder Liling Shan Ting Song se Cletus, may I present Doctor Howard Wells se Earth,” she said quietly, then glanced around to see if anyone else had noticed.

“Doctor Wells?” Lili asked, already knowing who he was from Maya’s memories. “Maya tells me you are a trustworthy individual. I would impose upon your trust this morning – if you will accept the burden of it?”

“I – I... Yes. Certainly ... ah, Elder L-Liling...” he stuttered, already having lost her entire name in his confusion.

“Lili is fine for now, Howard,” she said, then gracefully reached out her hand to him, allowing him to hold it for a moment before withdrawing it slowly. “I would reward one of our Ronnie’s friends, but I fear it may prove awkward should the ... *truth* become apparent?” She tilted her head towards Deloris, then gestured to Deloris’ leg.

“Ahh... T-The *medical* records, perhaps?” he suggested, and she turned a dazzling smile upon him that set his heart pounding for several seconds.

“Just so,” she agreed, then contacted Diane silently, and afterwards reached out to Ling.

“Let us find a suitable space to work, Howard,” she said, then looped her arm around his and slowly escorted him to the scene of the upcoming crime.

In a Treatment Room

Ling had scrambled to prepare a room for Lili to work in and had just finished setting it up when the leader of the procession knocked on the door.

Kayla opened the door, then stepped aside as Lili was escorted in by Doctor Wells – the head witch doctor from the local medical establishment. Kayla and Mary were right behind her, followed by Diane, who was pushing the local civilian law enforcement leader in one of their new wheeled-chairs. Behind them was young Shay, who, it would appear, would soon learn the sad state of the medical industry on Earth. Lili turned a beaming smile at Deloris and spread her arms out slightly.

“Sheriff Deloris Taylor, I am Ronnie’s sister-in-law ... Lili,” she said, stepping forwards and squatting down before reaching out and taking Deloris’ hands in hers.

She extended through her for a few moments and felt what her body had suffered in the accident that had broken her leg ... and the poor job of repair Ronnie had done on her hand ... and everything *else* that was not quite right, then raised her estimate to a whole *thirty* seconds.

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“Ronnie had always spoken highly of you, and we would reward you for all your years of support to my brother-in-law, and to my Healing Cluster here ... if you will *allow* me?” Deloris stared at the smile on Lili’s face and almost felt the sharp focus of her eyes on her.

“Ahh ... Lili... Thanks, but I – I don’t need a reward,” Deloris said while, thinking back on all the things Ronnie had mentioned about her; particularly of how she’d been enamored of her *personally*.

“A small *service* on my part, then,” Lili said, then reached down and placed her hand atop the thigh above her cast. “How is your leg?”

“I – I ... it doesn’t *hurt* anymore?” she said, then looked back to see Diane and Shay smiling at her. “That stuff you gave me... What *was* it?”

“Oh, that is called ambrosia,” Lili said, “In your language *and* mine. It has *amazing* properties. For example, should you direct the molecules to the *correct* places–”

Howard watched as Deloris’ eyes stared at Lili’s for a few more seconds before they closed and she slumped in the wheelchair. Diane, Ling, and Shay lifted Deloris up and onto the sheet-covered platform. Shay ended up holding Deloris’ head between her hands, while Diane and Ling removed her lower clothing to get access to her legs.

Meanwhile, Lili pulled over a chair for herself and indicated that Howard do the same.

“This should not take too long, Howard. She has no significant organ damage, and the leg is trivial,” she said while running her fingertips down each side of the cast, then removing the top of it, in the process getting a gasp from Howard and giggles from Mary and Kayla.

“Nothing of particular difficulty, Howard. You simply separate the molecules of that white material from the cloth beneath it. When I am finished, it will be replaced and no one will be the wiser,” she said, then pulled the bottom piece from under the leg.

“Mary ... Kayla, come and watch closely,” Ling instructed them quietly, *always* taking advantage of watching a skilled Senior whenever possible.

The women stood on the other side of the platform and closed their eyes, sending a familiar shudder through Howard’s body. For Ling, it was a treat. Watching Lili at work was a gift, and she remained silent as Lili began.

“You do see those tiny metal pieces in there keeping the bones aligned? First you must remove them or they will interfere when the bone tries to grow into the same position,” Lili said, then carefully unwrapped the bandaged wound to see the surface of the skin.

“Her skin is so pretty,” she murmured, then let out a quiet sigh as she carefully placed rolls of bedding under and around the leg to prop it carefully into the exact position needed.

“Now... I will pull the pins out so the bones can move back into the *correct* position,” she said, then exerted an effort of will to remove the pins – dissolving a thin layer of calcium around the threads of each one before causing it to withdraw towards the surface of the skin.

Howard watched in fascination as each Steinmann pin broke through the skin and fell to the sheet below. He noted they came out absolutely *spotless* without a trace of blood anywhere.

“Was there any K-wire in there?” he asked, getting a confused look from both Lili and Ling.

“It’s a thin wire they sometimes wrap around splits to keep them together while they heal,” Kayla said helpfully with her eyes still closed. “There doesn’t seem to be any in there.”

Lili looked back in, seeing nothing like what she’d described; shrugged, then focused on realigning the bone fragments *properly* before flashing them into a cohesive state. Then she triggered instantaneous regrowth of bone across and through the split, along the edges, and in the holes left behind by the pins.

When she was done, she raised the leg and twisted it, getting another gasp out of Howard, but finding nothing wrong with the structural integrity of her repair. Just for good measure, she flashed it once again, brightening the room once more, before focusing on the secondary damage to the skin that had fascinated her for so many years.

A few seconds later, she grabbed the hand Ronnie had worked on and realigned the mismatched tissue *perfectly*. Then she flashed her *entire* body to Heal every scratch, cut, and scar left over from both the accident, and a *lifetime* of law enforcement activities, before finally leaning back and looking approvingly at her work.

“Forty-five seconds,” Mary murmured after glancing up from her watch and smiling.

“That is *beautiful* work, my Elder,” Ling murmured, then bowed respectfully before taking her hand and drawing it to her forehead for a few moments.

“Practice, Ling,” Lili muttered, then turned to look at a very pale Howard. “It would seem that a reconsideration of priorities might be in order ... but not at this moment.”

She turned back to Deloris and indicated wrapping bandages across Deloris’ leg to Kayla. Kayla held up the used bloody bandages, but Lili

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gestured out, pushed the dried and sticky blood out of them with an effort of will, and deposited it on the sheet – leaving them in a pristine state for the non-existent wound and getting yet another gasp out of Howard.

“That’s *nothing*, Doctor Wells,” Mary told him cheerfully while Kayla was rewrapping the leg. “We cut the bloody clothes off that reporter guy who got stuck under a container box, and Ronnie fixed them all like new by the next morning!”

After Kayla was done, Ling and Lili repositioned the cast, and Ling held it in place while Lili bonded the edges of it. By the time she was done, there was no indication that it had ever been removed, and they finished by restoring her clothing.

“Ladies... Let’s get her up and back in her chair,” Ling ordered them, and Shay lifted her head and shoulders while Diane lifted her torso with help from Kayla, and Mary lifted her legs with help from Ling.

They got her upright and seated before Lili went through neutralizing the effects of the ambrosia to let her recover naturally.

While she was waiting on that, she turned back to Howard.

“Howard, Kayla tells me there is a tribal member at your medical center who has a problem with her unborn child. What is the condition of this child?” she asked him.

He looked at Kayla, then back to Lili, wondering if this was the foothold he should have pursued with Ron Cal. Taking a cautious breath, he nodded once and described the current situation.

“The child is at sixteen weeks of growth but developed a sacrococcygeal teratoma ... a tumor at base of its ... *tail bone*?” he said, hoping she would understand the terms he’d used.

“Coccyx,” she said evenly. “Most humans across the Commonwealth have one. I do not recall such a situation, but I was trained as a Combat-Healer and did not practice with children all that much. I would like to bring Ling, Shu, Kayla, and Mary with me, as they will be remaining here, while the rest of us will be returning home tonight.”

“*Tonight*? If you’re leaving tonight then how—”

“After the service, Howard. The service will take place shortly, and then we will visit your medical center. Meanwhile, Diane and Shay will go shopping for rare imports to take home with us.”

“I – I ... certainly my ... my Elder,” he murmured, then bowed his head to an absolutely *beaming* Lili.

The Service

The remaining guests had arrived and began gathering in the big room around the open casket provided by the funeral chapel. They'd noticed the gauze over Ronnie's face and hands but not commented on it.

Lili addressed the group and explained that the body would be taken to the funeral chapel for cremation immediately after the service and then returned to the center. Eventually an urn would be located in a place of honor in memory of the Founder of the first Healer Cluster on Earth.

Once everyone was ready, Lili cleared her throat, and the room was hushed.

"My Lords and Ladies, Healers and Seniors, and all of our collected family and friends ... we come together to honor the memory of Lord Rondal Caldar of the house of Caldarous. As is fitting, we will honor him with a traditional Remembrance, as is our custom."

She paused to look around the room, then considered where they were.

"It will be spoken in both English and the native language where he was raised. Only those within our immediate circle will participate."

She looked around at everyone again, before she began.

The prayer was repetitive and spoken one-by-one by all the attending adults of Ronnie's immediate family, both blood-related and adopted. The tribal members stood aside respectfully as the circle continued, switching between Commonwealth Standard and English, until it finally came around to Spring Blossom, who rendered an approximation of it in old Apache.

She was the last speaker of the prayer, and after she finished, she bowed her head, followed by all the others in the circle. Then they simply stopped holding hands and headed to the dining room.

Noticeably absent from the service this time were the children, who'd been sequestered in their assigned sleeping quarters for the duration.

Lili wasn't worried they'd make a scene – after all, it wasn't really their grandfather in that box – but they'd been through it all before, and there was no need to include them this time. Besides, she'd suspected they'd been observed before, and she really needed Walter to focus on blocking the Elder's Council *this* time as well – particularly from Spring Blossom, or so Jaiying had said.

With the Children

At the beginning of the service, Walter thought he'd felt the subtle intrusion of an outside observer, but skillfully opened a window for a few

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of those participants who had no clue that their Grandfather was still alive.

He was pretty sure it was Senior Xue again, as Aunt Lili had suggested that it might be she, but he'd kept a tantalizingly tenuous blanket over the proceedings, as limited as they were. After all, without the calling of names, no energy would have been manifested at all.

He noted the conclusion of the service and felt the intrusion fade away, even as he slowly lifted the shield.

Jaiying had kept her eyes closed and was still searching for the missing parts of her Grandfather. For some reason she seemed to feel him *really* close by, but couldn't pinpoint his location. What was worse, she couldn't feel him at *all* when she focused *outside* of reality anymore.

Cathy and Josie were torn between asking to go along on the shopping trip later or simply hanging out at the Center until their departure this evening. Cathy didn't really care, but Josie had caught her Grandfather David's angst when Sheriff Deloris had been delivered.

In the van, she'd listened when Wilber, Mary, and Kayla had explained what her birth father had been put through to make him a better citizen, then wondered if she and her Grandparents could be helpful as well. Besides, if he was still a dick, she could always turn him inside-out.

Rose caught that last fleeting thought and jerked around to look at her, easily catching her attention while shaking her head slowly at that horrible suggestion.

"I wouldn't REALLY do it, Rose," Josie said aloud. *"But maybe it would be good for him, and good for Grandma and Grandpa Lane? Besides, I'd kinda like to see his face when he sees me for the first time."*

She reached out to locate Diane and ask her opinion about it.

"Grandma, would it be proper for you, me, and Grandpa to talk to Josh Tyler and listen to his apology? Maybe even Daddy Andy?" she sent to Diane softly, then waited for a reply.

In the Dining Room

Diane had just taken a sip of juice to wash down a cracker, but almost choked on it. She struggled to clear her throat quietly while looking around for David and Andy, finding them speaking to Aineias and two of his guardsmen. She worked her way around several visitors before pulling them both aside for a quiet chat.

Only seconds into it, David turned to look out the window and saw the car still out there, but with Josh sitting inside the open driver's door now. He could still hear Deloris speaking to Doctor Wells about a planned

checkup to see how her leg was healing, but it didn't sound like she was making plans to leave real soon, so he let out a frustrated sigh before turning back to Diane and grimly nodding his head.

Then he turned away and grabbed a canned soda – popping the top and chugging down half of it to cool his temper.

“I think that will be all right, Josie. We’ll send for Josh and meet him within the Center. I’ll let you know” Diane sent back, then turned and sought out Lili.

There were several things happening in the next few hours that needed to be dealt with; Lili's shopping list, Lili's visit to the medical center, and now this special meeting with her daughter's rapist. It seemed like it was just like Ronnie had often said – “One damn thing after another.”

Prepping the Van

Wilber received the keys from the duty motor pool crew and drove the van over from the hanger. The two rear seats had been removed to accommodate Lili's shopping list, along with whatever Diane and Shay decided they just couldn't live without. He parked it in the spot vacated by the hearse and left all the windows open.

It would be just him, Diane, Shay, David, Andy, and a guardsman this time – unless the kids decided they would like another outing. He'd have to take it back to the motor pool to have the other seat installed if the kids went along again, though. As he turned to go and ask Diane about them, he saw Josh Tyler being escorted to the Center by one of the duty guardsmen, so he trotted up the stairs to find out what was going on.

With the Children

“We’re stuck here,” Cathy said. *“Wilber had both rear seats pulled out of the van for shopping.”*

“That’s all right,” Rose volunteered, then thought of something. *“Maybe they can get more churros?”*

“Ha!” Josie said, then stood up to head out the door. *“You guys coming?”*

“To help torment Mama Amy’s rapist? Sure,” Walter said, then got to his feet and helped Cathy up as well. *“You guys coming?”* he asked Jaiying and Rose.

Rose looked at Jaiying sitting there with her eyes closed, and silently shook her head.

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The other three simply shrugged and headed to the interrogation chamber – one of the private rooms in the center – to confront the abuser of Mama Amy.

In the Dining Room

With today's surprise update by Howard Wells, Deloris had gotten assurances that her *current* medical condition – due to the “accident” by that State Trooper – wasn't nearly as traumatic as originally diagnosed. Although she would have liked to have seen him hung by his balls, the political system probably wouldn't allow for it. Still, she marveled at the lack of pain that she was feeling since Diane had given her that drink of green liquor. David had even said it should last a long time, perhaps even until the bones got set up solidly. She wasn't exactly sure what had gone on while she was out, but she'd come to with Diane, Mary, and Kayla still sitting there with her, but with Lili and Ling nowhere in sight. According to her watch, just about no time had lapsed at all.

She was thinking about leaving early when she noticed Josh being walked past the dining room entrance and led down the hall. She hoped he'd not done something stupid after all this time, but remembered David, Diane, Andy, and Josh's daughter were currently in the same general location.

She crossed her fingers and took another sip of her juice, all the while remembering something Ronnie had once told her – “Hope for the best, but expect the worst, and you'll *never* be disappointed.”

In a Private Room

“Please wait here, Mister Tyler,” his escort instructed him before turning and leaving the small room.

After the door closed, Josh looked around at a room similar to the one Ling Wen had counseled him in. There was a small desk, a couple of chairs, and a sort of short couch or loveseat with narrow arms. He didn't have long to wait before someone knocked on the door and Ling entered.

“Hello, Josh. Aside from the circumstances surrounding your visit today, we have an excellent opportunity to continue with your program,” she said. “We have four more family members who might receptive to an act of contrition from you. Do you feel up to it?”

He stared at her and his suspicions suddenly slammed home. That man *was* David Lane. Specifically, it was *Sheriff* David Lane, and his wife was probably with him. Ling had said four, so that would mean he would have to face Amy and her little brother. It was a *lot*, but it wasn't something he hadn't done before. He just hoped he could convey his sincerest apologies to them, and to Amy in particular. He *never* should have hurt her like that.

“Sure, Ling,” he said quietly, but looked around the room like a trapped animal before turning back to her. “I’m ready,” he murmured, then stood up straight and turned to face the door.

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The assembled Lanes stood outside the door and waited for Ling to call them in. David wondered if he could keep his hands to himself, while Diane simply held one of his arms. As so much had changed over the years, Andy didn’t know what to think, but Josie was looking forward to taking the measure of her father.

In fact, she decided to share this event, and reached out to her mother back home.

*“Mama, if you have a few minutes, we’re gonna visit with Josh Tyler and see if he still gets to live!”* she sent gleefully, which woke Amy from a sound sleep and sent her into a quiet state of panic.

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It was twenty minutes later, and Deloris was saying goodbye to Doctor Wells, while Kayla and Mary were keeping her company.

“We’ll see you sometime next week, Deloris,” Howard said, then shook her hand before telling Kayla and Mary that he’d wait for them in his office at the hospital unless they called to tell him otherwise.

He took his leave of the Center and headed back to the hospital, wondering if this would turn out well or if he’d err on the side of caution yet again. As he exited the room, Wilber walked in and headed to the table to grab a drink. After quenching his thirst, or perhaps his *frustration*, he looked around the room and saw Deloris sitting off to one side, so he wandered over in her direction.

“Hello, Wilber,” Deloris called to him. “I hear you’re taking Diane on a *shopping spree!*”

“Well, there are *certain* delicacies that just can’t be found at their local markets,” he said as he got closer to her, then chuckled for a moment. “French fries and pizza being at the *top* of the list! David got all drooly over the pre-cooked barbecue pork ribs when we shopped there yesterday.”

“Oh, those are soooo good! Henry just–” she stopped before starting to think about him again.

“You guys are *still* ... you know?” he asked her, wondering how much longer this separation was going to continue. He saw her slow nod before she turned away.

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“Counseling didn’t take? You know, *Ling* is pretty sharp – once you get past her business face,” he suggested.

“It’s not that,” she said quietly, but reconsidered. “Maybe it *is* that. Not *Ling*, I mean, but this whole ... *you* know, ever since Ronnie came back in ... ’99?”

“Yeah. *Lots* of weird things happening out here then, and over in town, too.”

“And me being stuck right in the *middle* of it,” she said, but not all that bitterly. “My *own* damn fault. Henry found my copy of the NDA I took home, and I... You *know* I couldn’t really tell him about it.”

“Well, that’s ... really kinda *boilerplate*, Deloris. Not much real substance in there,” he said, then looked around to see who was too close for them to continue this conversation. “Besides, now you can tell him Ronnie’s dead and that all goes away.”

She looked up at him, then glanced around the room. Then she raised her arms slightly before throwing a smirk in his direction.

“I don’t think that will wash, Wilber, and ... and it’s just–” she stopped and looked away again before turning back to him. “It was pretty okay for a while, but then he tried to have the *other* sheets translated. I didn’t have an answer for that.”

Wilber stared at her blankly before it dawned on him.

“Ooh... You got the *original* set before we figured out that part,” he said, then hung his head and shook it. “I’m so sorry, Deloris. I wish there was something I could do about that.”

He tried to consider her dilemma. Having a non-disclosure agreement was routine for many purposes, especially regarding certain *government* programs and offices. What they’d originally included were the second-party sheets written in Commonwealth Standard that couldn’t be translated *anywhere* on Earth except at the Kantite Embassy in Washington. He was at a loss at this juncture, but realized who was visiting at the moment and thought – what the hell?

“Let me go talk to Lili for a minute and see if she has any ideas,” he said, then patted her shoulder before going to track down the Emperor’s wife.

While Wilber was off searching for Lili, Deloris wheeled herself over to the window and looked out at the buildings she could see.

It wasn’t just *one* thing Henry had objected to. It was the constant *stream* of things she couldn’t discuss with him that had gnawed at him

over the last several years, and it'd finally come to a head a few months ago...

Henry had asked her for full disclosure, and she'd said no.

She hadn't even made the effort to ask for him to be included in the big secret, and he'd finally gotten fed up and left – taking a single room in town while she stayed in the house with the kids. They hadn't talked divorce yet, but she was feeling it wasn't that far away.

They'd even driven to Tucson together, partly for her testimony at court, and partly to give them some private time together to see if they had *any* common ground left between them besides the kids, being civil and even friendly during the trip ... right up until the accident that had nearly totaled their car and could have ended their *lives* – all thanks to *another* law enforcement division. In some ways, she didn't blame him, but if he *really* loved her, he would *trust* her, wouldn't he?

She caught sight of the Lanes getting ready for their shopping spree; one of the garrison's guardsmen taking the driver's seat for this trip, with a second one seated next to him up front. She saw the Lanes being loaded by another guardsman, who made sure they were secure before closing the door. As they drove off, she considered if it was ultimately worth it having to keep all the secrecy about this place. Maybe she could get her family back together if they simply moved to another town and...

She saw the reflection in the window and turned to see Lili smiling down at her.

"Wilber tells me you and your husband are the victims of our *presence* here?" she both asked and stated. "We would meet with your husband and take his measure."

Deloris looked at her and almost trembled at the thought of this alien determining if they would stay on Earth or move to ... *wherever* they lived.

"Umm ... sure ... I guess," she got out, before Wilber caught her attention and nodded his head.

"Deloris, I paid Josh, and he's headed back by himself," he told her. "We'll take you home on the way to the hospital and have a little chat with Henry – he's home with the kids, right?"

"Ahh ... *supposed* to be..."

"Good! We have many things to do before we leave this evening," Lili said abruptly, then turned to Wilber. "See that she finds comfortable seating, Wilber. We will be along shortly."

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Lili turned back and patted her shoulder lightly before giving it a very gentle squeeze. Deloris could *swear* she felt a warm fuzzy feeling flow from her shoulder all the way down to her toes before Lili turned and walked away, with Wilber watching her go with a smile on his face.

“She goes to inform the Emperor of a *policy* change at his level,” he murmured very quietly, then chuckled before grabbing the wheelchair and directing Deloris through the thinning crowd to the exit doors.

At the “Big Box” Store

Half an hour later, the Lanes were pushing four carts through the pre-holiday shopping frenzy, as the entire *region* seemed determined to empty out the warehouse store before Monday morning found it closed for Labor Day. Walking up and down the aisles, Diane couldn’t imagine how anyone could *possibly* run out of toilet paper, paper napkins, or almost *any* of the other bulk items she was seeing piled onto other carts and flats while they worked down their individual lists. The two guardsmen had their own lists as well, loading what seemed like *huge* lots of meat, vegetables, and fruit for the Center, along with the relatively few items Lili had specifically requested onto their own flats.

They’d passed most of the hardware side of the warehouse before crossing in front of the bakery, which *almost* prompted David to spurge on fresh bread products to take home. As unappealing as it sounded, the EMTU would double nicely as a way to transport still-warm breads back to the Royal Homestead but then there was the issue of the frozen items they were taking back that needed to *stay* frozen once they got back to the Center. There would be a delay before they transferred to the *Sectorus* for their transport home, and if they missed a transit window, the Center would reap the benefits of a French fry feast.

They’d separated at some point, David and Andy going with the guardsmen, and Diane and Shay heading towards the piles of clothing.

Shay was excitedly subdued with all the bounty before her, and now she was armed with her measured sizes, to boot. Mary had told her to confirm with Diane, however, to make sure she was getting “*women’s*” clothing instead of “*young women’s*” clothing or even “*children’s*” clothing. It seemed that small, medium, and large actually changed by category and was not all that reliable.

As they browsed the selections, Shay became more animated and eventually chatted in Standard and a little broken English at the many offerings before them, each being discussed for its suitability for use in Kantite society, even as its proper purpose was revealed – such as work denim, silky eveningwear, or slinky bedroom attire.

By the time their husbands and the guardsmen worked their way up front to them, both of them had a pile of neatly folded clothing in each of their baskets.

The only thing that confused Shay at this point was the amount of heavy *outerwear* on display, as the temperatures during their short stay had been *extremely* warm.

Checkout had been a delight until the carefully folded clothing had been yanked out of the baskets, scanned, then tossed into *other* baskets for the trip to the exit queue. Shay had run around the end of the counter, then sorted and folded the clothes as they headed her way. At least they'd put flat boxes in the bottom of the carts first.

As the last of the items were loaded, one of the guardsmen went over to the food court and picked up several large flat boxes that he brought back and set on Andy's cart. Then he went back with an open box and was handed several bags that everyone could tell smelled of cinnamon. He brought it back and set it down in David's cart, where Andy reached in and pulled out a bag of churros and handed one to each guardsman before passing out one each to the rest of their small group. From the number of bags left, it would appear that a few of them might actually make it to the kids.

They shared smiles all around, and Diane grabbed a handful of napkins to tidy themselves with before they headed to the exit queues.

On the Way to the Hospital

Wilber and Lili had left Deloris at her home after her husband learned – somewhat *shakily* – that the scary lady with the oddly frightening smile had determined him to be a “somewhat suitable companion” for the local civilian law enforcement leader. He *was*, as she had so casually mentioned to him, “*merely* a man,” and would be monitored to see if he *remained* a suitable companion to her “trusted civil agent” in this region.

Otherwise, there were positions in other locations that would preclude his further association with her and “*her*” children, as she'd specifically pointed out. The requirement for both “relationship counseling” and “additional *sexual* training” had been stipulated, and both would occur under the watchful eyes of the staff at the Healing Center.

This *was*, of course, after he'd laughingly signed the mysterious “NDA” the foreign woman in the bright summer dress had promised would finally “straighten everything out.”

The *first* thing that got straightened was his right arm, which the surprisingly quick and strong white man had grabbed and held down to the kitchen table. The *next* thing straightened was the thin blade that

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was whipped out and sliced across his forearm – neatly severing muscles, veins and arteries – after which he was let go to see what he would do.

Wilber was impressed, as was Lili, when Henry had first grabbed his arm and clamped it tightly, then spun around and grabbed a dishtowel and twirled it with the hand of his injured arm in a vertical circle before awkwardly twisting the ends together into a knot. The last thing he'd done was rummage through a drawer and pull out a spatula, which he then slipped under the knot and slid the loop up his arm before twisting it tightly enough to stop the flow of blood.

Wilber had carefully watched his eyes while Henry looked at him, then back at the open drawer a few times. Wilber could see the handles of several large kitchen knives within and made a show of using a napkin to casually wipe the blood off his pocketknife and fold it before putting it back in his pocket. In the meantime, Lili was feeding a *huge* shot of energy through Deloris that was keeping her sitting still and silent – if not actually *calm* – about the sudden attack on her estranged husband.

After establishing that he had, in fact, *nearly* had his arm cut off, Lili had drawn Deloris to her feet to demonstrate that her leg no longer bothered her. This was accomplished by having her walk around the kitchen table without crutches once, then sitting back down by herself. Then Lili held her left hand out, palm up, and waited for him to give her his arm. It had finally taken a wavering plea by Deloris to get him to do it.

What happened next had left him even *more* shaken, as Lili had *slowly* sealed the damage to his arm from the inside out – her right hand simply hovering a few inches above his arm, being the easiest means to delay the Healing. Henry had watched as the blood on his arm slowly seeped back into his body until the only drops left were what had fallen onto the table, the floor, and whatever had soaked into the dishtowel.

At that point, he'd sat down – *hard* – a shaken man, and Lili had looked *within*, determining his emotional state and the likelihood of him suffering a breakdown from this simple exercise. She'd continued to observe silently while following his internal dialogue to see how well his pieces would fit the desired image. She was worried for Deloris' sake. It wouldn't be fair to lose her husband over the secrets she was keeping, while it *also* wouldn't be fair to Henry if his memories were wiped to remove this particular event, or even his objection to his wife's secrecy.

As a schoolteacher, Henry had not led a very adventurous lifestyle. Marrying Deloris had been unexpected for his family, as none of them leaned towards civil or military service; they considering the scholarly fields to be *far* more rewarding. What he was now faced with certainly *sounded* scholarly, but probably not publish-worthy ... not according to the NDA, anyway ... if it had actually happened...

Lili had watched him look down at his smooth and flawless arm, and smiled. She'd sat down at the table before him, and Wilber had offered her his cell phone. She'd merely pointed it at the table top, and then at Henry. The recorded video was played three times for Henry – each time showing his arm being held out to Lili, then magically Healed of all damage. Wilber had then pointedly tapped the erase function, and the video was gone.

The implication had been clear – *despite* the residual blood spots, this had *never* happened! Henry had taken a shaky breath and looked her straight in the eyes before extending his hand in her direction with his capitulation implicit.

She had taken it and solemnly pressed his fingertips to her forehead before letting him go and beginning the revelation of his *new* life as the newest member of a very select group of Earthlings. He'd taken it rather well, but only time would tell. Hopefully, Ling's counseling and sexual training courses would help.

Wilber had taken Henry's capitulation as his cue to call Shu and tell her that, now that their parents would be working things out, it was safe to bring the kids back from the ice cream shop. He'd heard the muted giggles from Kayla and Mary at the news, and was told they would be bringing back ice cream for Henry and Deloris to share.

At the Hospital

It was approaching evening when the party finally reached the hospital and joined Doctor Wells. The last scheduled rounds had already been made, and he informed them Nascha had been moved to a private room earlier in anticipation of their visit.

Kayla was first in the room so she could speak with Nascha alone.

"Hey, girl. How you doing?" Kayla asked her.

"I want to go *home*, Kayla! I thought they were gonna send me home but they moved me in *here* ... all by *myself*! I think they're gonna take my *baby* away from me!"

"Don't get all excited, Nascha. That will only cause more problems. Hey, we'll work this out. You remember when I got *burned*, right? I got friends, and they'd like to visit with you for a while. You can trust 'em."

Nascha looked at her warily, then turned away.

"They're right outside the door, Nascha. One of them is the one who set up the Healing Center. She wants to see if she can help you," Kayla pressed her gently. "She brought some of the staff to ... to learn how to help you."

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Nascha looked back at her, then at the door.

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Lili was standing outside the door with Ling, Shu, and Mary, while Howard was busy performing a diversionary action at the floor nurse's station.

Whatever Lili could accomplish would not take much time, but they needed to remain undisturbed while they worked.

Ling felt the girl's resolve falter, then danced on the edge by pushing it closer to acquiescence. She immediately felt it when Nascha finally accepted Kayla's suggestion, then complimented her internally for making the proper decision before nodding at Shu, who then lightly knocked at the door.

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Kayla heard the knock on the door and patted Nascha's arm.

"Please, Nascha. Hear what they have to say," she asked, and the suffering mother-to-be nodded her acceptance.

Kayla opened the door to allow the familiar faces of Shu and Mary to enter first, followed by the not-so-familiar Ling, and then the stranger who'd been the architect behind the Healing Center at the Annex. As the others surrounded the bed, Lili stepped forward and looked down at the girl lying there.

"My husband's brother was a member of the tribe," she said, and smiled politely at the nervous girl. "We conducted his funeral service this afternoon, but that does not change our relationship with him, or with members of his tribe."

Nascha looked up at her questioningly, and Lili shifted her language to prove her point.

"THERE ARE ALLOWANCES WITHIN THE TRIBE. THOSE ALLOWANCES WILL BE HONORED HERE," she explained in common Apache, surprising the girl with her skill for being what looked like a mixed Asian-white woman.

"This is Lili. She allowed the Center to be built," Kayla introduced her informally, then snapped around to see if she'd screwed up her introduction, but Lili just smiled at her and looked back at Nascha.

"I'm told your baby has a problem. I would like to see if it can be resolved," she said, then sat down in the chair Ling had thoughtfully pushed up behind her. "I brought Ling, Shu, Mary, and Kayla with me to see if this was a teaching moment we could all share. May I please try to help you?" She reached out and rested her hand on Nascha's while smiling politely, the calming glow hidden between their hands.

"I – I don't want to lose my baby," Nascha said quietly, with her voice wavering slightly.

"We don't want you to lose a valuable member of your tribe," Lili agreed softly, then closed her eyes and looked within. "This young boy of yours should be allowed to grow up strong and healthy," she continued, then tilted her head a few times as she pushed through the growth to determine its weak spots.

*"*Students attend... See the growth, and where it feeds. We will seal the arteries to starve the growth. Sealing the veins will further isolate it. Then it is a matter of reducing the molecular structure so that it dissolves back into the body and is disposed of*"* she quietly shared in Standard.

Nascha looked at the lady in the summer dress and wondered who'd told her she was carrying a boy. Kayla might have. She looked up at Kayla, but saw her standing there with her eyes closed. Looking at the rest of them, she saw they *all* had their eyes closed. Her anxiety began to shoot up again, along with her heart rate.

*"*Shu, you brought something to calm the girl?*"* Ling pressed at her, and Shu opened her eyes and dug into her bag.

She pulled out a thermos and opened the top, before pouring a large measure of fresh milk and offering it to Nascha.

"This is very nourishing," Lili said blindly, not paying any obvious attention to what Shu was doing. "It will also help you relax."

Nascha looked at the cup, then up at Shu. Shu sipped from it and licked her lips, then Lili reached out and took it blindly before sipping it as well.

"Very fresh, Shu. It tastes delicious," she said, then handed it back.

Nascha looked at the cup, then accepted it and tasted it. She tasted it again, and then drank it down, sensing a calming effect beginning to sift through her body. Shu poured her another cup, and she sipped at it while *calmly* watching what else the lady was going to do.

*"*Watch as I seal the smaller artery.*"* Lili said. *"*Shu, you will seal the next one. Mary and Kayla will seal the other two, and Ling, I want you to seal the primary artery.*"*

Nascha watched as Lili moved her hands and pointed her fingers over her baby bump while she spoke a strangely lilting language. It was the same language she'd heard the other workers from the Center speak during their Monday visits to the tribe.

She didn't feel anything, but noticed the lady's fingers seemed to glow in the indirect light of the room. Strangely enough, she wasn't worried

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about it, then noticed that Ling's hand was resting on hers and there was a hint of a glow around *her* hand, as well. Kayla patted her arm reassuringly when Shu leaned over and wiggled her glowing fingers over her tummy as well, followed by Kayla.

When Kayla was done, she opened her eyes and smiled down at Nascha, patting her arm again before turning to watch Mary begin her work by closing her eyes and nodding her head in time to a silent rhythm.

Nascha was startled when Mary suddenly gasped – but not in fright.

“Oh, *that's* how it's done,” she said clearly with her eyes still closed. Her head nodded a few times and her fingers moved slightly. “But how do I... Oh, I see it now,” she added quietly, then remained silent until pulling away with a big smile on her face.

They all watched as Ling began her work and easily sealed the larger artery before going around and sealing all the remaining veins.

When the last of the veins were sealed, Lili began instructing them in the delicate task of dissolving the excess tissue – starting with the junction of the tumorous growth with the healthy tissue.

*“*You must reach in and FEEL this, Ladies. It is a very delicate difference, and it changes with each client. Once you become accustomed to sensing it, then you should have no difficulty.*”*

She began by drawing a link to each of them and letting them share what she was feeling before letting them each work on a section individually. It was new for Shu, Mary, and Kayla, and she wasn't sure if Ling had ever needed to work on something like this before. It wasn't a *common* illness among the more advanced societies in the Commonwealth, but Earth seemed to remain the *cesspool* for corruptive diseases within the civilized sections of the spiral arm.

*“*Lady Lili, how is this different than the cancer Maya cured?**” Kayla asked her.

*“*Cancer appears opportunistic, while this particular tumor looks to be a genetically-triggered growth. It might not respond to typical remedies that are used on Earth – poison or radiation – but it could be managed by simple removal of the offending tissue immediately after birth. As it is very big at only sixteen weeks of growth, it would most likely kill its host before then. Of course, surgery on an incubating fetus is extremely difficult and dangerous. Miscarriage and fetal death would be expected.*”*

They each finished their sections, then Lili pushed in further and severed the final connection with the fetus. The mass just floated free now, not attached to anything.

“The option remains to either surgically remove the tumor or simply dissolve it. I would trust a Kantite doctor with the task of removal, but the easier path is to let the mother’s body dispose of the dissolved tissue,” she said, then reinforced their link before sectioning the tumor into five more or less equal parts and demonstrating how to make that happen.

They were just about done twenty minutes later when Howard knocked quietly on the door and was admitted by Shu. He caught the last bit of the Healing where Kayla’s fingers were glowing brightly while she reduced the last section of tumor mass into individual molecules for disposal.

“All done!” she said cheerfully, then looked over at the smile on Nascha’s face.

Nascha let out a big sigh and relaxed.

Whatever these ladies had done probably didn’t make a difference, but they’d gone through their heartfelt activities with a sense of determination that they were doing their absolute *best* to help her. All things considered, these women had shown her the *only* support she’d felt ever since coming home and being sent to the hospital where *no one* wanted to help her.

“Thank you,” she said, while looking at each of their smiling faces. “Thank you all for trying. Doctor Wells ... you can go ahead and schedule the abortion now.” Her resolve slowly faded and she turned her face away and began to softly cry.

“Hey! Wait just a damn *minute*, girl!” Kayla snapped at her. “We didn’t spend an hour fixing your baby just to have you throw it away *now!*”

Nascha turned back to look at them and saw the shock on their faces ... all except for Ling and the one called Lili. Both of their expressions had turned hard. Mary cleared her throat and tugged on Howard’s sleeve.

“Um ... Doctor Wells, do you have a sonogram staffer on duty tonight? Just to do a comparison? You know – a before and *after* sort of thing?”

He looked at her, then looked in the corner of the room. The machine was right where he’d ordered it, and he turned and picked up the room phone and made a call. Five minutes later, Nascha’s stomach was smeared with jelly and the sonogram wand was exploring the contents of her uterus. The sonogram technician was finding nothing unusual about *anything*, except for a peculiar haziness in some areas of the slightly enlarged amniotic sack. The tech wrote up his findings, then read the *previous* report, noting the serial number of the previous machine. Then he made a disparaging remark about crappy equipment maintenance producing faulty readings before signing off on his report. Before he left,

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he thanked the Director for saving him from the rerun he was watching, and Wells turned to the patient and smiled at her.

“Mrs. Williams, we’ll arrange for your discharge in the morning. We *would* like to track the rest of your pregnancy ... if you’re going to be in the area, that is.”

He turned to the ladies and singled out Lili.

“My... My Elder, she *does* understand that nothing has ‘officially’ happened here this evening?” he asked her, and got a repeat of her dazzling smile in return.

“Why, *Howard*. How can this child *possibly* forget that her family and friends shared their support during a very difficult and *stressful* time in her young married life?” She turned to Nascha and shared the radiance of her smile before turning to Ling.

“Ling, should Cocheta still be reluctant to receive her daughter, then you will find space for Nascha at the Center. You will observe her health and wellbeing. Cocheta will be receiving counseling for her emotional distress from whatever its cause. This will be *mandatory*. Perhaps Lean Bear or his wife could help bring results in that regard. I’m sure you will find a way to work it out.”

As Ling bowed her head, Lili turned back to Nascha.

“Nascha, there is little we can do about your husband, but your baby is safe now. Honor your husband’s memory by raising his son to be an honest and worthy citizen. You have family *and* a tribe. Do not squander opportunities that arise, and do not give up.”

Her eyes shared an extended blink before she turned back to the ladies.

“Time to go, my Ladies. Diane tells me our transport will be on time, and we must still pack,” she announced, then pulled Howard to her and quickly kissed him on the lips before turning back and waving goodbye to a bewildered Nascha.

At the Center

Diane was tired. Both she and Shay had spent a considerable amount of time cramming the EMTU with both frozen and perishable foods right up to its sixty-three cubit foot capacity, and they’d just initiated the stasis function. The rest of it, canned, dry-packaged foods, and all their additional clothing, had either remained in their original shipping containers or been repackaged using flattened boxes that were stored in the hanger area.

Shay had already headed back to help Andy with some things, while Diane stopped to accept a drink of water from one of the hanger staff. That was how Wilber found her when he came looking for her, and held out his cell phone to her.

"Deloris wanted to say goodbye. She also wanted to tell Lili that Henry has finally calmed down enough to talk to her again and it looks like he'll be all right... For a *while*, anyway." She looked at him as she took his phone, but he just shrugged. "Oh – speaker phone is activated," he added, and Diane nodded before she spoke.

"Hello... *Deloris?*"

"Hello, Diane. I just wanted you to know it was good seeing you and David again. I still can't believe how tall Andy has grown – and that he's married and has a child."

"Yeah, well... Sometimes travel ages you, I guess. I know those *first* two months took a toll on all of us until we worked things out," she said lamely, not knowing how much Deloris actually knew of their original departure. It would be nice, though, to be able to tell her all about it some day.

"Diane, Henry is... I think he's gonna be all right," Deloris said, still searching for the right words. *"It surprised him when Wilber did ... what he had to do. It certainly made a BELIEVER out of him. Lili signed us up for counseling with Ling and ... and SEX lessons!"*

She looked at Wilber, and he pulled out his folded knife and made sawing motions across his left arm before putting it away, causing her to nod in *total* understanding.

"Believe it or not, Ronnie did the same thing to *me* when I told him I didn't believe in Healers. He also gave *me* some sex lessons, too. I think you and Henry will find them quite enjoyable. They'll probably even make you feel *younger* the more you practice them."

"That ... that does sound like something Ronnie would have done," Deloris agreed with her, then let out an audible sigh before continuing. *"You guys have a good flight ... thing ... whatever."*

"You and Henry take care of each other, Deloris, and things will work themselves out. If he needs to talk, have him talk to Wilber if he can't talk to you. Wilber's the go-to guy for this kind of thing ... has been for over thirty years now."

"Thirty... Thirty YEARS?"

"Learn those sex lessons, Deloris. Practice them a lot. It makes a difference," she said, holding back her laughter at the eye-opening

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revelations headed her friend's way. "Gotta go, girl. You guys take care, now. Maybe I'll see you on the next shopping trip!"

"Looking forward to it. Bye." The phone disconnected, and Diane looked at it for a moment before handing it back to Wilber.

"Think they'll be all right, Wilber? You think Henry will be able to hold it together?" she asked him.

"Well, he *is* only a man, but ... who knows? Worst case? They get a change of scenery and retraining in a new language and skill set. I understand Stephanie and Ralph worked out all right. Henry should be all right, too, as long as he comes to me with his problems first."

A loud clunk distracted them both, and they turned to see the two back seats being refitted to the back of the van and locked in place.

"You know, David used to drive this *crappy* old Volkswagen bus back in the day, and *those* seats didn't require two grown men to pull them out or install them," she muttered distractedly.

"I remember. It only had six J-clamps to hold down the middle seat," he said, and she turned to look at him in surprise.

"I bought one – *new* – back in '67. Then I got *drafted* in '69. If I'd been born in '43 instead of '46, I would have been home free," he muttered in disgust, then turned and started to walk away.

"Wilber! *Wait!* Where's Lili and the girls?" she asked him.

"Lili sent me back by myself. Said she changed her mind about leaving immediately and decided a short tour of the hospital might prove interesting. She also wanted to talk to Doctor Wells for a few minutes." He looked at his watch and pulled out his phone again.

Diane reached out to Ling and found her still on the road with the other ladies and a guard.

"She's on the way back now, Wilber," she said, and he looked up and waved his thanks before turning away to leave the hanger.

At the Hospital

Howard Wells was cowering in his office and wondering what he'd let loose this evening. His fourth shot of bourbon wasn't doing a *thing* to calm his nerves, and not even a call from his wife had helped him resolve anything. Betty was at home with their daughter, and she wasn't about to wake her up and drag her out with her to pick up a husband who seemed to be overly anxious about something he couldn't quite bring himself to express. Not over the phone, anyway.

He looked at his empty glass, then at the bottle he usually kept in his cabinet. He considered his position and what would happen *when*, not *if*, all of this got out. It was a sobering thought, except that he wasn't particularly sober at the moment. With the reluctance borne of past experience, he put the cork back in the bottle. That physical action triggered a memory of the *first* time it had hit him so severely – back when Maya Tal had brought him back from the dead and then *continued* to Heal and help maintain his health until he'd gotten his life back under control.

He'd seen her, or rather, watched her surreptitiously when she'd perform some miracle of Healing while he was supposed to be acting as her lookout. It had irritated him at first, but became more and more humbling until he'd finally given up formal practice and stuck to administration instead.

Then he remembered the *second* time he'd fallen hard.

That was when Ron Cal had brought notice of irregularities to his staff, and even performed a partial diagnosis on one of their previous patients – the woman who'd subsequently become his wife. He'd thought long and hard about pressing for assistance from the Annex Healer staff, but eventually decided the risk was just too high. Ron Cal had even told him that men didn't make particularly good Healers to begin with; that it was mostly because men were *destroyers* by nature and not *life-givers*.

He looked at the bottle again, then got up and put it away. Turning his back to the cabinet, he walked across the room and checked the water in his coffee maker before preparing it to brew a new batch. After setting that in motion, he went back to his desk and looked down at the stack of medical records he needed to revise before the morning shift arrived.

He'd wait, though, as he needed to do this with a clear head – although he had *no* idea how he'd explain the missing tumor on Nascha's unborn baby ... or the failing kidney in room 423 suddenly becoming functional again ... or the blind gentleman in room 378 suddenly complaining about the brightness of the lights in his room ... or the woman in ICU bay 4 suddenly discovering that her arms, legs, torso, and head no longer suffered from *agonizing* pain because all the *severe* damage from her accident had suddenly gone away.

The *lesser* things – cuts, bruises, a cracked skull, concussion, only *one* broken bone, a previously undiscovered internal bleed, and the like seemed rather *trivial* in comparison. He let out a quiet giggle, but suppressed it as a not particularly dignified reaction to Lili's efforts on behalf of the hospital that evening.

His mind wandered as he looked over at the coffee maker, then he *did* giggle aloud as the mental image of the Elder dressed as a candy-striper

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suddenly came to him. His giggle ran down until it merely caused his body to spasm silently before it stopped altogether, at which point he got up and poured his first cup of coffee for the evening. It was still early, his wall clock showing it close to seven-thirty. He might sober up and make it home before midnight, but first he had to sober up enough to correct these patient files.

On the Way Back from the Hospital

Their guardsman and his companion were up front and driving them back in one of the Center's minivans. Lili was sitting in the middle seat with Ling, while Shu, Mary, and Kayla were in the back. They'd not spoken for the first twenty minutes of the ride back, the Ladies instead thinking of Lili's rather capricious actions during that forty-five minute "tour" of the hospital.

Ling had been very circumspect during the tour, not saying a word or expressing any doubt, while both Mary and Kayla had cleared their throats awkwardly and even gasped a few times when Lili repeatedly entered a patient's room, dallied for a few moments, then walked out before heading to the next room she'd felt drawn to. Only the fact that Doctor Wells was with them had kept the evening staff at bay.

Shu, Kayla, and Mary all held hands and kept their minds *tightly* locked, seeming to feel the need for respectful silence – both audible and otherwise. About ten minutes from the Center, Lili slightly turned in her seat and looked at Kayla.

"Kayla, both you and Mary were here when Rondal first came back to Earth. What allowances did he make for treatment of non-NDA clients?"

The girls looked at each other, and Kayla took the lead.

"Ahh, there was an accident on the road going into the Center. *Before* it was a Center, I mean. A woman drove her car off the road and she was hurt. Ronnie, he ... that's when he taught me my first lesson ... working on her," she said, hoping she wasn't going to be reamed for that.

"And did she recover?"

"Well ... yeah. She got banged up is all. Ronnie said she had a concussion, but he fixed that part himself. He showed me how to call the Healing and then let the client deal with it," she said.

"And did you let the client 'deal with it' or did he have you *direct* the Healing?"

"I followed my instructions. I let Lisa ... the client deal with it. It wasn't really that bad. Just a big cut on her head is all ... and the concussion."

Lili went silent for a few moments while looking at the memories she'd tricked Kayla into dredging up for her.

"What *else* did Rondal teach you before you sent that woman home?"

"We ... ah, we took her to the hospital ... to be checked out," Kayla stammered. "She wasn't *tribe*." The seconds ticked by until Lili pressed a little harder.

"And you learned nothing *else*?"

"I ... we ... h-he put the cut back on her head, but not as badly. Then he had me give him a bandage and some ointment for it and he bandaged--"

"So the client was *moderately* injured, but was then taken to Howard's hospital with *minimal* injuries."

"Ahh ... yeah. Yes, we did. He used to say something like – like--"

"Plausible deniability," Mary inserted strategically, and Kayla muttered an, "Um-hmm," to follow it. Lili nodded approvingly, then turned to Ling sitting beside her.

"Ling, I would hear your observations on our visit this evening," she said quietly, putting the Center's administrator on the spot this time.

Ling looked out the window to avoid facing Lili when she spoke.

"Nascha's child is no longer dying," she said flatly.

"Deplorable equipment maintenance that led to a false diagnosis," Lili muttered dismissively.

"Mrs. Lansky's kidney has been Healed," she said.

"Their treatments seem to have finally taken effect," Lili said quietly.

"Mister Davis was *blind* – until you hit him on the *head!*" she snapped, and turned her accusing face towards Lili.

"Mister Davis had a *poor* connection within his optic nerve that simply needed the correct *impact* to put it back into place. He might very well have done that *himself*. Even *Howard* accepted that ridiculous theory," Lili murmured demurely.

"What about that woman from the *car accident*? She was on the verge of *death!*"

"Not on the *verge*, Ling, but certainly she was suffering. We *all* know that pain is a deterrent to proper Healing, so now she no longer suffers. Once I'd made those few simple realignments, she should heal naturally, *and* with no further need of our assistance. She *still* bears all the cuts

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and bruises, as you saw. Howard could not find any *overt* signs of our interference, either.”

Lili moved her lips into a tight, self-satisfied smile, while Ling continued to simmer in silence ... until it boiled over.

“**What about all the OTHERS, Lili?**”

Lili turned to look at her, then felt the pent up frustrations Ling had to suffer from all the restrictions she’d had to operate under since she’d gotten there. She reached out and rested her hand on Ling’s arm.

“Ling ... we are Healers *first*,” she said softly. “As such, we all find it difficult to deny those who are suffering the help we can provide them.”

“Yet you let that man *die*,” Ling said, but not as angrily as before.

“You extended *within* him, Ling. I felt you. Even Mary and Kayla felt his condition. What would *you* have done, Ling? *Extend* his agony, while extending his life for a few more *days*? Perhaps a week or two? I did not *kill* him, Ling. I just gave him the strength to let go,” she whispered, then wrapped her in her arms and held her until she calmed down.

Both of them took a breath and let it out slowly before they separated.

“Ah ... Ling? We’re Earthlings here,” Mary said softly. “We *all* expire eventually – just like you do. We just don’t have the same life expectancy.”

“Elder Liling had started a new Healer Cluster for the sake of Rondal Caldar’s tribe, and eventually the *rest* of his Earthlings,” Shu said, finally joining the conversation.

“That’s very true, Shu,” Lili said. “A new Healer Cluster – yet *again* – but you know it will take decades, even *centuries*, before it becomes the norm ... providing the natives do not storm the walls and *burn* everyone to death,” she ended in an irritated mutter.

Ling gasped and stiffened when that forgotten bit of Earth history suddenly came back in a rush. Shu looked at Lili in shock, but both Mary and Kayla squeezed and patted her hands.

“We’ll take care of you, Ling,” Kayla said, then let go of Shu to reach out and rub Ling’s shoulder. She glanced out the window and saw the lights of the Center just a few miles away.

“Almost home,” she murmured, then patted Ling’s shoulder once again before sitting back in her seat.

The Kraken, The Far Side of the Moon

Kiki was helping Maya with Donald this evening, as without Gaia's or Edna's help, it was easier to simply leave him in bed and wash him there instead of struggling to keep him upright while he was in the shower. The boys had even offered to make a portable toilet for use *inside* the sleeping compartment but Maya had pushed them off, deciding he needed at least *some* minimal amount of exercise a few times a day to build up his strength. It was just too bad his *vocabulary* wasn't improving.

Once he was dried and put into clean underwear, she looked through him again and found he should be all right for a while. She told Kiki to watch him while she went in to shower, but not to *play* with him unless someone else was in the room with her. That was just in case he became unmanageable for some reason. Kiki reluctantly agreed, knowing Donald had been damaged by some accident (which no one seemed to remember) but he'd been granted Healer services on the *Kraken* for as long as he needed them. She watched Maya drop her robes and enter the facilities to shower, all the while wondering if *she* would like to play with her once she came back all nice and clean and *tasty*!

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Petrus was in his quarters and relaxing after having showered just minutes earlier. He was looking forward to Sai returning either tonight or perhaps tomorrow night. Kiki was fun, but he really liked *intelligent* conversation from his bed partners, and that pretty much left the little Kee out.

He stretched out and closed his eyes before thinking back to the price Angus had quoted for the *first* part of the work. On the whole, it wasn't that much. In comparison, the *Microcosmus* had required *huge* maintenance expenditures – it being a major weapons platform and all – but with the new converters and the simple fuel source on the *Kraken*, there just wasn't anything major to wear out. *Minor* stuff was another matter, however, the errant air handler being a somewhat more expensive example of failure to perform preventive maintenance on a regular basis. The rest of the items on the list were routine 'wear-and-tear' issues that wouldn't hurt the ship so much as produce a continuous series of annoyances that could eventually sap *anyone's* spirit.

### ***Earth, Back at the Center***

As soon as they got back, Lili headed inside to locate Radatel so she could let him know what her final decision had been. Halfway to his location, she diverted to the children's temporary quarters and sought out Jaiying. There were a few delicate restrictions she wanted her to install in Henry Taylor's mind to prevent him from speaking of NDA-related information to anyone not already involved with the reality of the Center.

## An Unfortunate Decision

She hadn't thought of it earlier until she considered easing Howard's anxiety over her actions this evening. She'd almost done it, too, but it would involve memory adjustments that would not be appropriate, not compared to simply *muting* the ability to communicate what must remain private. Besides, the children were so much *better* at some things.

After stating her request and sharing her tenuous link to Henry with Jaiying, she silently watched her effortless insinuation into his mind and observed her technique. She found it so very elegant, *much* more so than she'd expected, and praised her for her efforts before leaving to seek out Radatel.

### *VIP Guest Quarters*

Radatel was quietly perusing a data pad that was linked through to the local secure com center and catching up on what his stand-in was doing back home.

So far, things seemed to be moving along smoothly, with only the occasional multi-jurisdictional conflict popping up between different segments of the manufacturing and marketing representatives. In the details of the reports, he could tell which problems were based on a true conflict over a specific type of product line, compared to problems fostered by the individual raising the argument. In other words, it was business as usual, which was very fortunate, as Taldus and Mayella were now the proud parents of a little baby girl.

He gave a single thought if it would impact the efforts of Ronnie's replacement but dismissed it as currently not important ... not unless manufacturing, marketing, and distribution cabals suddenly took advantage of his youth and distraction while he and Lili returned via a leisurely two-week transit back to Kantor.

He finally tossed the data pad down with a disgusted sigh just before Lili arrived and cheered him with her smile.

*"Did things go well at the hospital, my love?"*

She didn't immediately speak, instead loosening the fasteners of her dress and letting it fall around her ankles.

He was delighted by the strangely seductive foundation garment that held her full breasts a few inches higher upon her chest than usual, along with the silky red undergarment that wrapped itself around her hips and groin so snugly.

She sauntered over to him and settled into his lap before reaching her arms around his neck and pulling him in for a very warming kiss. It was several seconds before she finally pushed away from him, then giggled

very softly at the expression on his face as he admired her *almost* nude body in front of him.

*"The Nascha child will survive, my Lord Husband,"* she murmured softly. *"As Nascha is tribe, so do I honor our Rondal's commitment to his tribe."*

He leaned back a bit, knowing there was more to come as Wilber had arrived almost an hour ago. She didn't miss his expectant expression and let out a sigh of her own.

*"That place was so dreary, my love,"* she said wearily. *"Pain ... suffering ... sickness ... sadness ... sorrow ... loneliness... It was very difficult for me to leave there without ... well, without making SOME things better."*

He hugged her, then kissed the ear closest to him.

*"And you couldn't leave them without extinguishing the agony in those of most immediate need,"* he whispered. *"I would expect nothing less of you, my love. As you are the Elder, there could BE no other outcome ... despite our worries."* He snuggled with her for a few moments more, but then pulled away slightly, asking, *"Ahhh, Lili ... should we worry?"*

She looked at him in faux shock, followed by a tinkling titter as she neatly slid from his lap to a standing position while slipping her hands down her waist and slithering out of her red satin panties.

*"We asked Howard Wells for a tour before we left, this is true,"* she said, then slipped her arms out of the brassiere's straps before grabbing hold of the complicated apparatus and rotating it around her torso until the catches were in the *FRONT* where she could easily reach them. Radatel merely looked on in fascination.

*"As I walked along, I was drawn to some clients in need, and remediated what I could without exposing ourselves. I believe it is much like Maya had finally admitted to doing when she was volunteering there."*

*"Lili ... Maya was merely a Healer,"* he said, while struggling to look up at her eyes instead of straight ahead at her impressive nipples. *"You, my dear, have Combat-Healer training, which is somewhat more difficult to overlook."*

*"Rad, you KNOW I can be most discreet when I need to,"* she said, then let out a short chuckle. *"Besides, I only flashed once ... no, twice. And only with Nascha. The others... While I was making subtle changes within them, they were distracted by Kayla as she asked how they were feeling. Oh, Rad! Everything is so very primitive here!"*

## An Unfortunate Decision

He watched her moves as she slipped into her robes for the transit to Sectorus and enjoyed every delicate motion she was making. It didn't distract him from his original question, though.

*"Were there any problems, Lili? Anything at all?"*

She let her robes settle around her, then slowly approached and knelt down to rest her head on his lap – waiting for and finally hearing his quiet sigh of despair. He rested his hand atop her head while she gathered her thoughts.

*"My love... I'm afraid Howard did not fare well this night,"* she murmured into his lap. *"He was most apprehensive after Nascha was dealt with ... and then we began the tour. I believe he worries about exposure, but I'm not sure if it is for his responsibilities to the hospital or his own fear of inadequacy."*

Radatel sat there for several seconds while dredging up conversations he'd had with Rondal about Maya's efforts at the hospital.

*"He did not pursue support from Rondal when it was potentially available, this is true?"*

*"No, my husband, although I felt an impression of that conflict as we were helping the clients,"* she said, now thinking back on it herself. *"It would be of benefit, of course. My Lord, there were clients in there who were TRULY in great need. There was one I could not save, so ... I helped him go."* She'd said this last in a whisper, then quivered a bit while he ran his fingers through her hair.

*"He was too badly injured? Helping him would have exposed us?"*

*"No, my love. He was old ... very old. Very old, very weak, and very sick,"* she murmured. *"He was in constant pain and they had nothing that would relieve him of it. I tried to relieve it, but it would not last. I looked within, found that he was all alone here, and lived poorly, such that even if he DID survive the next few days, he would most likely expire very soon and STILL be alone. I ... I asked Mary to hold his hand while I gave him the strength to let—"* She stopped and let out a sob while clutching her husband.

Rad rubbed her back while she quivered in his arms. He knew this was the *downside* of being a Healer, and even *more* difficult for a Senior – the inability of being able to fix *any* illness instead of just *most* of them was the hidden trap that shattered the faith of many Healer and Senior practitioners.

*"Lili ... there are always going to be problems that cannot be solved. You remember Rondal's testimony – the Grace pills? What you did for him was grant him Grace and made sure he was not alone when he passed. I*

*cannot imagine dying alone in such a cold and heartless place. Nothing more could have been done, and yet you made his last minutes tolerable by easing his pain and by Mary holding his hand. I commend you on your empathy, my love.\*"*

He pulled her up and kissed her on both cheeks before pecking her lightly on the lips.

Lili leaned back and sniffed a little, so Radatel reached out, pulled a couple of sheets of incredibly thin-sliced soft wood from a box on the end table, and handed them to her.

She smiled as she wiped her eyes and blew her nose, then looked at the tissue in confusion before remembering that it went into the trash receptacle on the floor next to the chair. Radatel stood and helped her to her feet.

*"If that was the extent of tonight's excitement, do you intend to allow Howard access to Kayla's skills?\*" he asked, and saw her turn her face away. He frowned, then sat back down to await the descent of the second slipper.*

*"My Lord, I did intend for Kayla to assist as she is able. She was initially trained by Rondal, and has also received his Gift – as has Mary, Shu, and Ling,\*" she said, but steeled herself for the downside. "Ling was not comfortable with our actions this evening. I'm afraid she might not have the requisite... Ahh...\*"*

*"She lacks a certain finesse in extrapolating a tale of plausible deniability from a paucity of observable facts?\*" he suggested dryly, and saw her reluctant nod of agreement.*

*"Very well, Lili. We need merely assign someone else to supervise interactions with the hospital – someone with impeccable credentials and the requisite skills. I don't suppose you know of anyone suitable? Maya, perhaps?\*"*

*"I believe Maya will desire to maintain supervision of 'Donald' for the near term, my husband. She has volunteered there in the past and with little comment by anyone, other than Howard, but I doubt she would be able to stand up to Ling should things become ... difficult.\*"*

*"Perhaps we should find someone more diplomatic then? Someone with a stronger personality like ... well, like Laisee?\*" He'd watched her face as he suggested it, and was rewarded with her brilliant smile.*

*"That would be good for Laisee, and Jaiying as well,\*" she agreed. "The daughter of the Emperor should find no difficulty managing this rather mundane task after having performed so well as the Ambassador to the Vanir. And she could continue to look after Donald – should you allow him to convalesce here instead of somewhere even more remote?\*"*

## An Unfortunate Decision

*“My Elder, I bow to your suggestions in this matter. Although, I wonder if you will miss Spring Blossom too much after we leave?”* He looked at her with worry on his face that she might balk at the notion of leaving Spring Blossom behind – a valid possibility for that worried mother.

*“Rad! I would not even consider asking her to leave her ... her Donald in his time of need! I would only worry that she not maintain her health and vitality – although I’m sure Wilber, Daniel, and their wives would find time to help in that matter,”* she suggested warmly, then stepped into his arms to hug him again.

### ***In the Children’s Room***

Diane was helping Laisee strip the bedding in the children’s room when David walked in and looked around.

He lent a hand by sloppily folding the sheets and pillowcases, while Diane and Laisee took a little more care and finished with the blankets before stacking them on the large sleeping platform.

“Have you seen Andy and Shay anywhere?” he asked while standing ready to carry the bundle of used bedding to the laundry room.

“Andy and Shay went over to the separate quarters,” Diane told him. “Mary was printing a recipe for churros for him. We got the ingredients when we went shopping, but I asked her for the cooking instructions.”

She finished just as Andy and Shay returned with a small brown bag in hand.

“Mary said to use this thing,” Andy said, and pulled out a small funnel with a bag attached to it. “Mix up the stuff and stick it in the bag. Then squirt it into a pot of hot oil and let it cook. And try not to burn yourself.”

Laisee laughed and took a closer look at the contraption.

“I’m sure the cooks will be able to manage, Andy. I look forward to their efforts, but we must be wary of excessive consumption.”

“Ha!” Diane cried out while patting her stomach, which contained an *extra* churro they’d brought back from the store that afternoon. “We’ll just have to work it off with our *usual* exercise!” she said, now catching the big smile on her husband’s face.

Diane took the kitchen tool from Andy and packed it with the children’s belongings, while David turned and headed to the laundry with Shay. Laisee was about to follow when she stopped and stared at the wall for a moment, then tilted her head and finally nodded.

“It seems that I have a *new* assignment,” she said quietly, before turning back to Diane and Andy.

*In the Residence*

The children were in the separate residence and had just finished an evening snack set out for them by Danny and Mary.

They had nothing else to do until their transport arrived, so they planned to watch another program or two while they waited.

*“Uh-oh,”* Walter said quietly, then quickly looked to Jaiying, who simply rolled her eyes.

*“At least you’ll still be here to take care of Grandfather,”* Cathy said, then slid off the chair and took her cup to the sink to rinse it before coming back to the living area.

*“What was that?”* Mary asked from the kitchen counter where she was putting back all the stuff she’d pulled out of the cabinets while looking for the pastry bag and all its tips to send with Andy and Shay.

*“Mama Laisee will be staying here to monitor the interaction between the Center and the hospital,”* Walter explained. *“Aunt Lili has concerns regarding Ling’s skills with subterfuge. Jaiying will most likely stay behind as well, but at least she can help Lady Spring Blossom take care of ... of Donald.”*

Mary stared at them in confusion. She hadn’t really heard them speak all that much, not even during the shopping trip. Now she was hearing a level of conversation that wasn’t exactly typical of five and six-year-olds. Her confusion turned to concern when they all turned to look at her.

*“Mary, you’ve had Grandfather’s Gift, haven’t you?”* Cathy asked her abruptly, and she saw a blush run up Mary’s neck as the question seeped past her confusion.

*“Kayla has, as well,”* Jaiying said quietly. *“Along with Shu.”*

*“Don’t forget Ling!”* Josie added.

*“You all know you’re different because of Grandfather,”* Walter continued quietly. *“Grandfather ‘Gifted’ each of our mother’s while we were still growing inside them. We’re a little different, too.”*

*“Even me,”* Rose said very quietly, and scooted sideways closer to Jaiying.

*‘We’re not gonna let them know about THIS, are we?’* Josie asked on their private band.

*‘Not unless Aunt Lili says it’s all right’* Walter shared with them all.

*“So you... So you’re all ... advanced?”* Mary asked, somewhat squeamishly, so Walter picked out the *least* dreadful option that was running across her mind at the moment.



## An Unfortunate Decision

*"We learn very fast, Mary,"* he said reassuringly, *"But we're not dangerous. Aunt Lili had us tested,"* he lied easily.

*"But we don't play well with others,"* Josie contributed.

*"That's true,"* Cathy said. *"They tried us in a ... a play group one time, but the other children were not as developed."*

*"They were stupid!"* Josie chided her, but Walter took exception to that.

*"Josie! We talked about this before. Those children were not like us because they were normal for them. They didn't have our advantages."*

*"At least THEY didn't have guards following them around all the time,"* she muttered angrily, before sparing a short glance at the guardsman sitting next to her.

Danny slowly stepped out of the hallway where he'd been listening to the conversation.

*"Ronnie did it again,"* he muttered. *"He mucked around, and this time he created a bunch of tiny little adults."*

He let out a breath, then wandered over to hug Mary, before heading to the refrigerator to grab a beer.

With their present company in mind, he thought better of it, and grabbed a juice carton instead.

*"Actually, Daddy David created me with Mama Shay,"* Walter corrected him. *"Then he created Cathy with Mama Diane. Daddy Andy created Jaiying with Mama Laisee. You all know how Josie got here."*

*"Yeah. That ASSHOLE who raped my MAMA!"* Josie spat out viciously.

*"JOSIE!"* Walter, Cathy, Jaiying, and Rose all shouted as one.

*"Well, it's true! I don't know why she forgave him anyway! We shoulda just turned him inside-out like I wanted to!"*

The room got real quiet and stayed that way for several seconds until Danny walked over and opened the refrigerator to put the unopened juice carton back inside and pull out a beer instead. He sat down next to Mary and twisted off the cap to take a gulp of it. Instead of setting it down, he handed it to Mary, who also took a drink.

*"Sorry,"* Josie said contritely, and the other three girls got up and surrounded her in a group hug.

*"Josie has some control issues,"* Walter said very quietly. *"We think it's because Mama Amy was so young when she became pregnant with*

*her. Mama Amy forgave Josh, but Daddy David didn't. I'm not sure which way Mama Diane is leaning.\*"*

Danny was listening, but having a hard time imagining this conversation as being real. Knowing what they knew about Ronnie, however...

*"\*So... What do you have in the way of\* musicals?"* Walter asked them pleasantly.

### ***Back in the Center***

After going through that mess at the hospital earlier, Ling had almost forgotten about Déjà's near term pregnancy. She knocked lightly at the room where Sai and her daughter were staying and heard movement behind the door before it opened.

*"\*Ling, we're about ready to board if that transport ever arrives,\*"* Sai muttered in frustration. Ling felt the frustration, but knew where it was coming from. Déjà looked *very* uncomfortable and *more* than ready to pop. It felt like almost any *day* now.

*"\*Sai, have you considered staying here until Déjà's children have arrived? Maybe stay a month or so to build up her strength and let her become accustomed to motherhood?\*"* she suggested. There was no mistaking the relief she was feeling from Sai since that was *just* what she was thinking of.

*"\*I-\*"* Sai stopped and turned to look at Déjà lying there so uncomfortably. *"\*Yes. I'll let Lili know ... and Petrus. He wants to take the ship in for service, anyway, and they won't need a new mother getting underfoot.\*"*

She closed her eyes for several moments, then turned back to Ling with a smile on her face.

*"\*Perhaps we can send one of the staff to replenish the\* churro \*supply tomorrow?\*"*

Ling smiled, then chuckled quietly.

*"\*I'm afraid the store is closed tomorrow, but it will open on Tuesday ... that's the day after tomorrow.\*"* Sai looked at her in confusion for a few seconds, but then her eyes widened in sudden memory.

*"\*EARTH! We're on Earth! All this time I wondered why... And now I remember! The Kraken's timer ... the whole damn CALENDAR ... it was all based on EARTH time!\*"*

It was Ling's turn to be confused, but Sai's words quickly sank in and gave her understanding. Ronnie had acted as a pirate and was officially

## An Unfortunate Decision

*independent* of the Crown. Following his *own* calendar was just an extension of that, and she turned her focus back to Sai with a smile.

*“Then you’ll fit right in. We’ll be glad of the extra company,”* she said, then paused and unfocused her eyes for several moments before blinking and looking back at Sai.

*“It appears we’ll have a few more guests,”* she said. *“Lady Laisee will be staying behind, along with her daughter. Lili said there is someone called Donald who will be joining us, as well. Do you know of him?”*

Sai rolled her eyes and let out a disgusted grunt.

*“Donald was a crewman who was injured very badly – in his mind, that is. A combination of physical damage and foreign chemical changes to his brain and body,”* she explained obtusely. *“He’s been coming along very slowly, but there has been little progress with his memories. They just don’t seem to be properly contiguous.”*

Ling’s face was shifting through several emotions, not the least of which included surprise, confusion, and no little bit of wariness. Brain trauma was probably the most *difficult* of Healings to accomplish. She’d heard the story of Rondal Caldar rebuilding a *physically* fragmented brain that had only retained childhood memories and hoped this wasn’t a similar case.

*“We should have enough support for him if he is not too physically disabled,”* she finally told her, and Sai shook her head in frustration.

*“He’s speaking again but it’s mostly just a few words and fragmented sentences. He eats well enough – milk, I mean. My daughter feeds him and sees to his needs. He is somewhat mobile, but MUCH better than he was.”*

*“How ... just how bad was he?”* Ling asked her.

*“Well... He WAS dead...”*

### ***In the Residence***

While the children were in the living room watching a random musical with their personal guardsman, Danny was in the bedroom hanging up his clothes and listening to Mary and Kayla. They were talking about Lili’s refusal to expend any effort on locating Nascha’s missing husband. He could understand why, as Fred had been lost weeks ago somewhere in Afghanistan, along with the *rest* of his squad. At this point, the odds of his survival were between paper-thin and non-existent, and he offered a counter-point during a lull.

“Girls, you know Wilber used to do that kind of work before. He told me about problems like that where you can’t risk going in to recover somebody if you have no idea where they are. And there’s the risk of *our*

exposure to think about, too. You said Ling got bent when Lili walked around fixing people tonight. Say Lili steps in and orders a recovery effort by some means that doesn't exist on Earth. What if *that* interference brings all this down around our ears?" he asked while raising his arms up slightly to include everything around them.

"You didn't *feel* her, Danny! Nascha is *lost* without Fred," Kayla insisted, which only stiffened his resolve.

"Thanks to Lady Lili, Nascha will have a healthy child," he calmly pointed out. "If you can get Cocheta to reconcile with her, then that would be great. If not, she'll just have to bunk here with us for a while, or maybe in the Center."

~~~

Shu felt the conflict from the other side of the house and extended herself to see if it was important to the family. It was, but mostly for the tribe they'd been allowed to support. She thought about it and considered a possible solution.

'*Kayla, do you have a moment?*' she silently reached out to her.

~~~

Wilber came out of the bathroom wrapped in a towel and quietly slipped into the bedroom. He saw Shu staring at the wall and knew she was busy, but just a few seconds later she relaxed and turned in his direction.

"Wilber, I have suggested a solution for what we talked about."

He stood very still and looked at her, not exactly sure which one of the *many* things they'd recently talked about she was referring to.

"That would be ... Howard having a nervous breakdown?"

"No. I mean a way of finding Fred. I believe Ling might be able to help find him," she said calmly.

"Sweetheart... Fred is halfway around the *world*. I don't really see how Ling could *possibly* find him," he told her, then unwrapped his towel and started drying himself with it.

"Ling could meet with Nascha and sense her impressions of Fred. Then we need only travel to this Afghanistan place and search until she feels his presence," she explained.

His shock was so complete that he almost dropped his towel.

"Okay... Two things come to mind," he finally said while fumbling to wrap the towel back around his waist. "One – that plan is *in*-sane. We would *never* be allowed to interfere with our host's political issues. Two –

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if we screwed up, it would come back and bite us – *severely!* Besides, we don't have the *resources!*"

"Sai's ship hides behind the Moon and carries a small craft that can remain hidden while in flight," she persisted, and was about to continue, but Wilber held up his hand.

"Shu, you know I love you dearly, but this plan is ill conceived at best. Besides, Sai will be involved with Déjà's baby pretty damn quick now and she won't be willing to leave Déjà and her grandchildren."

"But Wilber, this is not such a bad—"

"Shu! Ronnie is *dead* now and we are not about to follow in his *footsteps!* Whatever Sai does or does *not* do regarding this issue, is *not my concern*, but *whatever* it is, I cannot be *aware of it* so I *don't* have to report it to the *Ambassador! Or Lady Song!*"

He grabbed some clean underwear and his robe, then stormed out of the bedroom and headed to his office. He avoided slamming the door once he got there, but did close it before flopping down in his chair to let his anger subside.

He was upset at Shu, but more so at *himself*. They'd never really argued before, and to do so over something as *ridiculous* as this was uncalled for. The argument kept looping in his mind while he examined each element of it, then thought of how he should have *calmly* discussed it with her instead of simply blowing up at her.

*He* knew the restrictions. Hell, *she* knew the restrictions, *too*. *Non-interference* with planetary governments and policies to the extent that they didn't pose a danger to *Commonwealth security* – which did *not* include purely *planet-bound* activities between *warring governments!*

If Fred was lost halfway around the world, then it was up to his *own* government to find him and bring him home – or *stop* sending people to foreign locations and putting them in harm's way for purely *political reasons*. Sadly, it was most likely that Fred was *dead*, along with everyone *else* in his squad. He hated to think they were still alive somewhere, knowing they'd been missing for several weeks now and what kind of treatment they'd have likely been subject to.

He fumed a little longer before firing up his computer. He had a few contacts who might be helpful. If nothing else, they might be able to make discreet inquiries into the status of the missing Fred.

### ***September 5, Heading Home***

The *Sectorus* transport had arrived just after midnight and was loaded with the returning cargo, which included the grocery-laden EMTU. Once ready to transit, the passengers filed past Ling, Aineias, Spring Blossom,

Laisee, Wilber, and Shu, all saying their goodbyes and hoping they had an uneventful journey. The children, with the exception of Jaiying and Rose, boarded last, followed by the guard detail that had arrived with them from the *Kraken*.

At just after one a.m., the transport turned on its cloak and rose silently into the sky.

At just after *two* a.m., Déjà went into labor.

***With Sai and Déjà***

*'NOW, Petrus! You must bring Maya down NOW!'* Sai silently insisted.

*'She's asleep. Plus, there's already lots of Healers down there with plenty of experience. And she's taking care of ... Donald'* he tossed back sleepily.

*'PETRUS ALOYSIUS ZICKGRAF! You get your ass in gear and get my daughter down here RIGHT NOW!'* she shot back harshly before abruptly dropping the connection.

~~~

Wilber and Shu, having been alerted by Ling, were standing right outside Sai's door when Wilber saw Shu flinch, which explained the strange tenseness he'd just felt in his head.

"She sounds really pissed," he whispered quietly, and Shu looked up at him and smiled while nodding her head slowly. She reached out and wrapped her arm around his waist and he circled her shoulders with his.

They waited in the hallway for things to settle down, but she was just happy to be on good terms with her husband once again...

She'd been surprised at how quickly he'd turned on her after her simple suggestion, then stood there in shock when he'd left their room and gone away to hide in his office. Never before had he ever expressed anger at her, and she didn't really understand what had triggered it. In her confusion, she'd reached out to Ling, who'd suggested they meet in the Center's dining area to share some tea while they talked out the situation and tried to see how the puzzle had fallen to the floor.

While they went over her conversation with Wilber – with Ling listening to her mind's memory of it – Ling had been able to pick up the pieces and examine each one in detail. It quickly became obvious that Shu didn't have a solid grasp of the many conflicts involved should something go awry. Ling explained to her that the treaty restrictions were a *primary* concern, as they represented a fixed relationship between the Commonwealth and their host country. Overt interference into strictly

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internal affairs by the Commonwealth could possibly force the closure of the Healer Cluster and remove them from the planet entirely.

Although Ling had never attempted that suggested activity before, she did find the thought of actually locating someone she'd never met by interviewing the Nascha child, then extending out to search for her missing husband to be intriguing. Ling had even suggested that perhaps Sai or Lady Laisee might have developed that skill already, and be amenable to conducting such a search, but then turning over any positive results to their host country to act upon.

Shu had returned to the house and found an apologetic Wilber waiting for her, saying that he'd put out requests through his contacts to see if there were any updates available on Fred...

They heard a loud cry from within, and Wilber knocked on the door before opening it.

If Déjà wasn't in such agony, it would have almost been funny. Sai was just coming out of the small facilities with a handful of towels and getting ready to scatter them all over the floor.

*"*Wait, Lady Sai!*" Shu called out. "*Wilber will bring something for that.*"*

Without needing to be told, Wilber turned and headed to the supply locker to get the mop and rolling bucket. He put a small measure of disinfectant into it, then pulled the hose from the deep sink over its rim. After adding a couple of gallons of water, he made it back to the room just in time to see Sai backing around a chair to stay out of the shallow layer of ammoniac fluid Déjà had spewed just minutes ago.

Working inward from the doorway, he mopped up pink-tinted fluid from the floor until there was room for Sai to move around safely. Before he started on his second pass, Shu and Sai moved the bed far enough so they could put dry bedding under Déjà once he was done.

Then he went back over all of it one more time just to make sure, and on the way back from putting away the mop and bucket, he stopped by the laundry and grabbed several more towels to take back to the room. After that, he told Shu to reach out to him if she needed anything, before heading to the Center's kitchen to heat up some water – not for the delivery, but to have on hand for tea and hot chocolate.

Although very few and far between, labor and delivery seemed to have evolved into a spectator sport here at the Center, and spectators got thirsty.

In the Hanger

Wilber was in the hanger an hour later when an ultra-black object descended silently through the roof access before drifting sideways closer to the wall. He was having trouble recognizing it, but from its general outline, it looked like Ronnie's old ship – only *meaner*. Once it grounded, a portal opened on its side and a short set of stairs extended.

Only seconds later, he saw a person with a familiar face descending on them.

"Wilber? Oh my... It has been so *long*..."

"Maya, you look as *beautiful* as ever," he said, and reached out to give her a warm hug in greeting. "Your little sister is in the Center but she's not doing so well."

"Mother said she is in great pain. Perhaps my milk will help?"

"Let's go find out," he said, then directed her out of the hanger and over to the Center. Once they cleared the hanger door, he heard her gasp at the latest version of the Center and almost bumped into her when she stopped.

"This is the *second* one. Ronnie got the *first* one blown up," he muttered before he got her started towards the rebuilt Center again.

She hardly had time to look around as he took her straight to Déjà's room and left her there with Sai, Déjà, and Spring Blossom. Seeing she was in good hands, he turned and headed back to the dinning room.

In the Dining Room

Wilber was just setting out tubs of cookies and snacks when a duty guardsman showed up with a new visitor and pointed him in Wilber's direction.

"You are ... Wilber Milton?" he asked politely.

"Yes, I am. And you are...?"

"Lady Tal's husband," Petrus told him.

"Ah! Welcome back to *Earth*, Petrus!" he greeted him, then walked over to shake his hand.

As he did so, he looked him up and down and silently marveled at how well he'd recovered from all the damage Ronnie had dragged him through, which was something that brought a smile to Petrus' face.

"I see my reputation *precedes* me," he said, and Wilber gestured at the table and the pile of snacks.

An Unfortunate Decision

“I can fix you something more substantial if you’re hungry?” Wilber offered, but Petrus waved him off while slowly sitting down.

“Tea ... hot chocolate?” Wilber suggested.

“Ambrosia?”

He almost laughed at the pained expression on the man’s face, but walked over to a cabinet and pulled out a bottle that hadn’t been tapped yet. He opened it and poured them both a small cup, then walked back and handed one to Petrus before offering up a toast.

“To *Grandchildren!*” he said, then waited while that trickled through his visitor’s consciousness.

“Gods ... I suppose they *are*, aren’t they?” Petrus mumbled, then tossed it back.

After waiting for it to envelop Petrus with its beneficial effects, Wilber asked, “Early morning for you?”

Petrus looked up at him while trying to remember what Ronnie had told him about Wilber Milton. Then he noticed the ring on his finger with the Caldarous crest on it and figured – *screw it!* Wilber was *family!*

“I got a contractor on board who dragged my ass from *one* end of the ship to the other for a maintenance survey. Ronnie and I didn’t do too much maintenance over the years and he never bothered to take it in for service,” he explained. “Now Sai is abandoning me to stay here while Déjà gets used to motherhood. All she’s left me with is her sons and their wives.”

He reached out, popped the top on a jar of snacks, and started unwrapping one of them.

“You’ve *no* other crew? None at *all?*”

“They all left on the *Sectorus*, all the ones we brought with us from Kantor. But that’s the way the ship was designed. Still needs *some* maintenance, though, so I’m heading out to ... you know about the Fringe?” At Wilber’s nod, he continued. “We’re taking it out to a contract shipyard and have it gone over thoroughly. Don’t know what we’ll be *doing* with it, but it pays to keep it in good working order.”

“Makes sense,” Wilber agreed. “You need a bed for the remainder of the night, or are you headed back?”

Petrus’ eyes glazed over for a few moments, before focusing back on Wilber.

“Apparently, I’m being allowed a layover – sometime *later*. Sai wants me to go back now and retrieve one of our passengers and the other Kee.

You know about Kee? Oh wait. Sai's been here before. Anyway, she wants Donald to stay here, along with Kiki – that's the Kee."

Wilber reached out and grabbed a licorice whip from another snack tub, then remembered hearing the children mentioning a Donald once or twice.

"This Donald ... he's the one got injured aboard ship?" he asked, and Petrus slowly nodded.

"Yeah. Messed up his brain pretty bad and he's making a slow recovery. Maya... Sai... Even Spring Blossom has been working on him. Maybe he'll come around. Maybe not," Petrus said quietly, knowing that *some* things were restricted – even from family.

Wilber thought there was something more not being said, but they were interrupted by Spring Blossom coming into the room and walking towards them. She didn't say anything, but when she saw the bottle of ambrosia on the counter, she diverted and grabbed it, then came over and grabbed Petrus' empty cup and walked out of the room with them. Petrus reached out and danced around the chaos in the labor room before smiling grimly.

"There appears to be something Maya's milk *cannot* relieve," he murmured, then let out a sigh before pushing away from the table to stand up. "Wilber, if you're still up when I get back, I'll take your offer of a bed to sleep in," he said, then turned and walked out the door.

Wilber sat there feeling sorry for Ronnie's First Officer ... or was it Captain now? He finished his cup and rinsed it out before setting up the rest of the snacks for whoever showed up later. For himself, he headed to the labor room to let Shu know which one of the guest rooms he'd be staying in for the duration before contacting the duty security officer as well.

Around four in the morning, the duty officer contacted Wilber to let him know Petrus had returned with two more guests. Wilber thanked him, then got up and put his shoes on to go and greet them, finding them in the dining room, where the man – presumably Donald – was sitting quietly and looking around in confusion, while the little woman, Kiki, was chowing down on snacks at an *alarming* rate.

Petrus wasn't anywhere to be seen.

Wilber diverted to the kitchen and opened up a canned ham, slicing it into thick chunks before piling them into a bowl. Then he walked back to the dining room with the bowl of ham chunks and a loaf of bread, and placed them next to the voracious Kee.

"**You must be Kiki,**" he said, and she glanced up at him and smiled around a mouthful of red licorice before zeroing in on the bowl of ham.

An Unfortunate Decision

He watched her attack it, then made a mental note to have staff stock up on bulk quantities of an assortment of pre-cooked meats to have on hand at a moment's notice.

"*And you are Donald?*" he asked the man sitting there uncomfortably as he took a closer look at him. The man turned to look up at him, but his eyes couldn't seem to stay still for more than a few moments.

"*Don... Donnel... No. Not Donnel. Not... Not...*"

Wilber's attention was broken by the arrival of a few more bodies.

Maya, Shu, Mary, and Ling entered, followed by an absolutely *exhausted*-looking Petrus who stayed by the door.

Wilber raised his hand slightly and offered a wave that was barely returned.

"We will take charge of Donald and Kiki now," Ling told him, then mentioned the client rooms they would be occupying. "Put Petrus where he can get some sleep. He takes the large transport back to his ship tomorrow night and needs to be alert when he does so."

Petrus stayed where he was and waited for Wilber to join him. For Petrus, Wilber selected one of the VIP suites with the same Commonwealth amenities the Emperor and the Elder had enjoyed during their overnight stay. Petrus made small talk while they walked down the hallway towards it.

"Good call, that. *Always* make sure Kiki is fed before any assignments," Petrus muttered. "She's usually pretty good about it, but why take chances?"

"Is she *that* dangerous?" Wilber wasn't aware of any specific dangers with the Kee – not in captivity, anyway.

"Ronnie told me they can go about three days on water alone before they turn feral and forget everything. And I mean literally *everything* except how to entice someone to get within striking range. You know about the Kee *kiss*?" At Wilber's reluctant nod, he continued.

"They can also project a psychic arousal that will make a *dead* man hard. You get *close*, they get you *up*, and once they kiss you, you're a *dead man*."

"Their kiss ... it's *poisonous*?" Wilber had never heard this part before.

"No. But it renders you paralyzed, and then they eat you *alive*," Petrus said grimly, then turned to glance at him. "Chomp – chomp!"

Wilber was about to ask something else, but they reached the room where Petrus would spend the rest of the night and probably most of the day.

“Other than *that*, they make *great* comfort girls,” Petrus told him before opening the door to look inside. “Your garrison will be *quite* contented once she gets going.”

Petrus stepped inside to let Wilber show him the room’s features before selecting one of the two master bedrooms available. While Petrus was checking it out, Wilber was starting to worry about the little Kee – and about Déjà.

“Don’t worry about Déjà, Wilber,” Petrus muttered, having caught that impression from him. “Ronnie did something to *her*, too. *Besides* getting her impossibly pregnant.” He turned around and sat on the comfortable bed, while entirely missing Wilber’s shocked expression. “I’ll probably sleep for a while ... unless Déjà’s screams keep me up,” he said. “Wake me if there’s trouble. Or when it gets dark again.”

Wilber gave him a nod before turning to the door, but stopped to point at the light switch, getting a nodding understanding back from Petrus before he left the poor man to sleep.

Early Morning

Light was coming in through the skylights when Jaiying and Rose awoke together. They were in a different room this time, and this one didn’t have a timer in it, but the fact they were hungry told them it was time to get up anyway. As they were washing, Jaiying extended out and found a contingent of Healers sitting with a still pregnant and *very* weary Déjà. Searching around some more, she found Grandfather Petrus sleeping close by, then detected a familiar void wandering about. If *Kiki* was here, that meant...

“Grandfather is here somewhere,” she muttered in English, and Rose glanced at her before looking for him herself.

“There... He is sleeping, and Spring Blossom is watching him,” she said while pointing out his location for Jaiying. “Oh... What was *that*?”

“*That* is Déjà. She’s in labor,” Jaiying informed her. She dried her face and hands before returning to the bedroom to get dressed.

“I’m suddenly not so interested in having Walter’s babies,” Rose muttered when she joined Jaiying in the bedroom. “They should get Maya to nurse Déjà and manage her pain.”

“Grandmother Sai should be able to do it,” Jaiying murmured, then reached out to find out why she wasn’t, but the answer coming back was not a welcome one.

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“Grandmother says Déjà doesn’t get relief from Maya – *or* her. Not even Shu was able to help her. Oh... We’re to stop by the dining room to recover another bottle of ambrosia and bring it to Déjà’s room.”

They finished dressing and left the suite to make a quick pass through the dining room in search of another bottle of ambrosia.

Once located, they brought it back for the Kee-changeling, who was suffering from yet another sequence of labor spasms. At least they’d found *one* thing that would help her.

As they reached the labor room door, Mary was just coming out.

“**This is for Déjà,**” Rose said, and Jaiying handed her the fresh bottle, which she took back into the room. When Mary opened the door again, they could see Sai and Maya inside, along with several empty bottles stacked by the trash can in the room.

Mary stepped out and smiled down at them.

“**Thank you, girls. Have you had breakfast yet? Would you like me to cook you something?**”

“**Well... You don’t have a ships poop machine so I guess some of those crunchy flakes in that white juice would be all right,**” Rose suggested gamely.

“Cereal **and** milk,” Mary suggested. “**That, I can do. Let’s head back to the house and see what Danny has left us,**” she suggested, then escorted them to the exit, where they picked up their duty guardsman just outside the main door.

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It was nearly ten in the morning when Rose and Jaiying left the house and returned to check on Grandfather.

Jaiying had felt Spring Blossom and Shu radiating concern over him, while Ling was remaining divorced from their feelings as she was searching through their client’s broken memory links and trying to determine both how and *why* they’d gotten so screwed up.

It didn’t help any that Donald was becoming agitated for some unknown reason.

They followed Kiki down the hall to Grandfather’s room, but the girls were denied entrance after Kiki entered.

Rose took Jaiying’s hand and led her to an adjacent room that was open and unoccupied.

They entered and closed the door, then sat together on the bed with their eyes closed and minds focused on Donald in the next room.

### *In Donald's Room*

*"Really? THIS is how you treat a client in distress?"* Ling wryly asked Spring Blossom after Kiki had arranged herself next to Donald's waist and prepared to drain him for brunch.

*"It has the grace of working ... some of the time,"* she said quietly. *"He has become more active since coming down here. The environment is similar here, with the enclosed spaces and the rooms without windows, but I do not see a reason for his turmoil. Perhaps Kiki can provide some relief for a while."*

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"They're having Kiki play with him to tire him out," Rose said, then flopped back on the bed, with Jaiying joining her a few seconds later.

"I'll take a look inside and try to see what's going on," Jaiying murmured, then closed her eyes again.

She extended out and delicately danced around the edges of Donald's mind, finding Ling had withdrawn for the time being while Kiki was busy working on him.

Diving right in, she felt agitation in the background of his consciousness but couldn't determine a reason for it. An inventory of his memories found them to be just about how she'd left them earlier, so she started digging into his abdomen and pulling fragments up and tucking them away in likely empty locations.

Once the brain finally settled, it would hopefully link them all into a cohesive unit and be able to make practical use of them.

Somewhere Else...

Destiny was relieved. With the close arrival of these two new lives, the big wait was almost over. Once they were born, both he and his traveling companion could go back to their regular routines.

*At least, **he** would.*

"Faith? Why are you worried?" He was watching the little Fate while the labor progressed and wondered if she even had a clue.

*"I... He's just so **confused**."*

*"I'm **sure** those people will take good care of him," he said, but continued watching her stress over this most **basic** of life's events.*

*"But they don't know what he's **been** through all his life. There's no one there who really **understands** him. I just wish there was some way I could **help** him," she said sadly, while **completely** forgetting the **first** rule of being a Fate.*

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She never even got the chance to gasp before Destiny smiled and said, “Granted!”

*She tried to turn a panicked face towards him, but was **already** fading from non-reality.*

*“One down,” he muttered. “Now for the **other**. I wonder if that little devil will keep **screwing** with things...”*

The Center, With Jaiying and Rose

Kiki had taken her time and finished with Donald in just over a quarter of an hour. Afterwards, he'd fallen into a restful state and the Seniors let him sleep. Spring Blossom sat watch over him, while Shu and Ling took a break. Jaiying had ridden out the body's physical reaction before continuing with her work for another half hour until she was suddenly bombarded with a rush of confusion coming from *outside* of Donald's mind. She reached out and felt it coming from Déjà's room but couldn't pinpoint exactly who it was coming from. It felt familiar, though.

As she continued to monitor it, the sensations were becoming more distressing. She couldn't understand the reason for it until she sensed the matching stress from two other sources very close together – one of which was screaming. *Screaming?* She withdrew and sat up, hearing screaming somewhere outside in the hallway.

“Rose, something is happening!”

“I think that's Déjà. She must be getting close ... or they ran out of ambrosia again.”

They left the room and headed down the hallway, each step closer to the laboring Kee, sending stronger feelings of distress and panic from that now very *familiar* source.

“It's *Grandfather!*” Jaiying said loudly, and rushed up to the door, but stopped. She stared at the door before extending within looking for the *precise* location of...

“That's why I couldn't find him,” she murmured, then reached out and subtly lured the frightened essence with the enticement of a quiet and sheltered place within which to retreat.

She felt the panic recede after she broke through the confusion surrounding it, then felt it reach out to her. Smiling now, she carefully directed it to the sleeping man just a few doors down the hallway, and watched as it reacted with almost relief at finding a somewhat comfortable environment to rest in. She followed it as it fitted itself into the available space, then stretched out – stumbling over random bits of information that, for the moment, it was happy enough to ignore in favor of being safely out of harm's way.

Jaiying was feeling a rush of pride at putting their Grandfather back together, but that quickly faded when she realized the consciousness in Donald's mind had suddenly gone dormant.

"He's gone..." Jaiying slowly turned to Rose with a lost expression on her face.

"Maybe he's just resting?" Rose suggested.

"I – I don't know, Rose. He was... He was *supposed* to be in his head, but ... but part of him ended up somewhere else ... with Déjà," she said, then turned back to the door in front of her. A look of shock washed over her face when she realized what she might have done, then extended inside to confirm it.

"**Oh Rose! I killed one of Déjà's babies!**" she said plaintively, while slipping back into Standard in her dismay. She turned and ran back to their room, leaving Rose standing outside the door.

Somewhere Else...

*Destiny chuckled mirthlessly to himself while considering what **other** disasters might suddenly evolve to screw things up. So far, things were on a **roll** ... and that was **despite** the interference from that pesky little girl.*

*Still, he had to admire her **persistence**.*

*"Clever girl," he murmured to himself while looking over the **male** infant carefully.*

*"At least she got **most** of him..."*

The Center, Rose Tries Her Hand

Not *nearly* as skilled as Jaiying, Rose extended inside and felt the stress and tension while Déjà continued in the later stages of labor.

She could feel confusion within the tiny body rapidly approaching the end of its journey towards birth, but nothing much was coming from the other baby. She could hear muffled voices from behind the door as Maya and Sai coached Déjà. The female baby was past crowning now and on the way out of the birth canal. She felt the baby's disconnected emotional state that suddenly emanated feelings of distress that also seemed tinged with *betrayal*?

Those impressions continued while her tiny body wormed its way into the world and lasted right up until Maya brought her up to her mother's breast and lay her across her chest. Rose felt a momentary shock of recognition, then a vague sense of nothingness. The closest thing she could relate it to were feelings coming from the newborn she'd seen during the shopping expedition they'd had the other day.

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In Between Realities, Really Close By...

*He'd been waiting for this opportunity for **years** now.*

*What was it the Earthlings say? Payback's a **bitch** ... except the **bitch** was already **born**!*

Not to worry.

*He wanted his **revenge**, and it required a **male** body to get it. Fortunately, there was one handy, and the fact that it was **barely** occupied only made his revenge **sweeter**!*

*He had **time** now. He'd begin **over**. In five or six hundred years, he'd be right back on top and **running** things again!*

*When the opening came, he'd barged right in and shoved his ex-roommate to the side. It was **his** turn to drive this time!*

Healing Center, Rose Takes a Second Look

While joyful that the baby girl was all right, Rose was saddened at the loss of the baby boy. She turned to walk back and rejoin Jaiying, but decided to check one more time ... just to be *sure*. She extended into the tiny male body but still felt emptiness inside ... until suddenly feeling a rush of almost gleeful *joy*.

Was *that* the sort of thing that happened with unborn babies? She wondered if anyone had actually studied the phenomena in any depth. She'd already learned that, of *all* places, Earth probably had the most *divisive* mythology regarding the separation of body and spirit. She'd have to take it up with the Seniors one day, or perhaps even visit someone else in labor for comparison. She took another look, finding the *same* sense of completeness within, almost bordering on the sense of *housecleaning* from the impression of it.

Shrugging her shoulders, she decided to find Jaiying and tell her it was probably going to be all right.

Somewhere Else...

*It was usually hard to surprise Destiny in **either** of its aspects, but **this** surprise was enough to shock **him** out, and let **her** in for a visit.*

*"Who in the hell let **him** out so soon?" she muttered angrily.*

*Yanmei fumed silently while contemplating **future** possibilities. She searched through the vessel in question and determined that it had a **limited** life expectancy, so **that** was a definite plus. Apparently, the **male** provider had been wholly human at the time, and lacked the extra genetic elements that granted the Kantite and Cletus vessels their exceptional abilities. Interestingly enough, the **female** provider was still in a state of*

flux but **seemed** to be leaning more towards humanity when compared to her previously mutated state.

She thought it through and decided it was **not** worth altering reality anymore than it already had been. Letting out a virtual sigh, she relaxed downward and settled into a more **comfortable** version of the lounge chair than her **counterpart** preferred. She withdrew the cup of never-ending pleasure from its very **sensible** holder and waited until it filled itself to the top before taking a pleasurable sip from it.

At least he had not been wrong about **this** accessory.

That triggered her usually suppressed sense of loss, and she closed her eyes while letting her consciousness drift to the distant past once again...

She **missed** him. She really **did**. She supposed he really missed **her**, too. Unfortunately, Fate had played a cruel joke on them both by letting them **share** eternity together – but **never** at the same time. They'd tried so **many** times to get around it, but it was no use. The **best** they could manage was to leave messages for each other; but as millennia past them by, even **that** small bit of comfort was lost. Now they were usually left cleaning up each other's **messes**.

At least **this** time the mess was relatively minor.

She looked in on the little Fate and saw she had acclimated to her new surroundings quite nicely. She certainly hoped **regret** would not darken her errant wish later on.

The Center, Hoping for the Best

Maya remained focused on the male baby. If at all possible, she wanted him to *stay* in place. Ideally, the boy's placenta would remain attached and she could try to suppress the labor process so it would give the underdeveloped fetus more time to mature a little further. It was not very likely, though, as experience told her that once one placenta detached, the other one immediately followed. Based on his current apparent development, the only problem was that he could be anywhere between four and six weeks premature if he was born now.

"I am so proud of you, Déjà," Sai told her younger daughter. "She's just beautiful."*

*"*The ... the other one. The boy... Is he all right? Maya, is he all right? Mommy, I don't want to lose my little Ronnie!*" Déjà cried, just before another contraction hit her. Sai was caught between anguish over Déjà's labor pains and the sour feeling she got every time Déjà mentioned the baby's intended name.*

*"*Just try to relax, Déjà,*" Maya told her calmly, although looking inside, there was nothing to be calm about.*

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It had been less than five minutes, and she could already sense the girl's placenta was beginning to separate from the inner lining of the uterus. It was happening early, and she hoped it was because Déjà was still partly Kee inside. Otherwise...

*"*Oh! Oh, Mommy!*"*

Maya watched as the placenta began to slough off with a vengeance. Then she turned her attention to its companion. It *seemed* to be holding, but ... then it *wasn't*.

*"*All right now, Déjà. Time to have another baby,*"* she said calmly, then extended inside once again.

She started exerting gentle guidance to the tiny male body during the lulls between it being squished from contractions, but frowned when she realized it wouldn't be enough.

*"*Mother, I need some of that lube from the drawer, please,*"* she murmured, then checked her finger nails once again for sharp edges.

Reassured that she'd prepared adequately, she waited for Sai to squirt jelly lube all over her right hand and wrist, then held her palm up to receive a large dollop. She got into position and looked within one more time, before looking at Déjà's face.

*"*Déjà, I am going to reach inside you and straighten out little Ronnie,*"* she said calmly. *"*It probably will not feel as nice as it usually does but I will try to be quick.*"*

*"*Do you really have to--*"* Déjà had to stop during the next contraction before finally nodding to Maya when she was ready.

*"*Here we go then,*"* Maya whispered, then slid her hand up Déjà's birth canal and focused on getting the baby aligned for his big exit. From the ease of her access and the small size of the baby, she felt this should go fast, but found her hand trapped when the next contraction hit.

*"*Ow! OWWW!*"* Déjà cried for the duration of the contraction, but sighed when it was over. *"*That would have felt nicer if it didn't hurt so much,*"* she whimpered while Maya repositioned the baby and removed her hand.

*"*Almost done,*"* she said, seeing that the baby's head was ready and would probably crown with the next push.

To everyone's surprise, little Ronnie was completely expelled at the beginning of the next push, along with both placentas in rapid succession.

Maya handed the boy over to Sai, while she dealt with the support packages.

Sai wrapped the baby warmly, estimating that it was between a month or perhaps a little longer premature ... if it was fully human, that is. Right now, she was too busy making sure it was in one piece and had all of its accessories intact. She extended through and checked internally, finally determining that it at least *looked* human from the inside. The eyes remained closed, however, and they would probably keep them covered for at least a few days. She held him up for Déjà to see but couldn't set him down yet because Maya was still untangling his umbilical cord before wrapping his placenta.

"He's beautiful, Mommy," Déjà whispered to her, and Sai reluctantly had to agree that, *despite* his parentage, the miniature human in her arms was not an ugly child.

"All ready, Mother," Maya said quietly, then handed a wrapped bundle of placenta to her that was still connected to its parasite. She placed the other one on Déjà's lower abdomen and positioned it so it wouldn't fall off the platform and drag its parasite down with it.

"Déjà, do you know what you are to do?" Maya asked her, but got back a confused look from her little sister. *"Watch Mommy,"* she said, and they turned to look at Sai.

Sai sat down and held little Ronnie and the bundle close to her before closing her eyes. Both Maya and Déjà could feel the energy flow into the room as Sai drew it in and flooded the newborn with it. She glowed for several seconds, then opened her eyes and smiled at Déjà while it dimmed down and finally went out. She was still smiling when she explained it to her daughter.

"We are Healers, Déjà. We bring our love to our newborns, even as we give Healing to those in need. Hold your daughter close and relax. Call the energy to you and let it flood you and your daughter. It will calm her and give her strength. It shows her that you love her."

Déjà looked at Maya, who nodded reassuringly, then back at her mother. She settled herself and held the girl steady before closing her eyes and trying to remember what she was taught. She felt a trickle at first, then an even, steady flow. She smiled as she imagined the energy flowing down through the top of her head and passing from her arms and into her daughter. She didn't see it, but from her mother's and sister's perspective, the bed was aglow with a soft golden light that started to tint an even lighter shade.

'She's growing' Maya shared silently with her mother, and they reached out and held each other's hands while witnessing the incremental advancement of a Healer in progress. Déjà kept her eyes closed until she felt the energy fade away completely, and was then greeted by the smiling faces of her immediate family. She heard a tiny

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sigh and looked down at the sleeping baby in her arms ... then began to softly cry.

In the Dining Room

Laisee was in the dining room while meeting with Ling and Shu. She was trying to reassure them her presence there was *not* an indication of disfavor from either the Emperor's court or the Elder's office, presenting it as merely an excuse to decompress from their ordeals during the Vanir mission while still fulfilling a useful function in support of the goals of the Commonwealth.

She'd left out the part where she was keeping a watchful eye over the deranged First Lord, or the fact that he was even still alive.

They were about to discuss new protocols with the civilian medical establishment when Jaiying and Rose entered the dining area and waited politely to be acknowledged. Shu looked to where Laisee's attention had been drawn and rested a hand on Ling's arm.

"Hello, young ladies," Shu said cheerfully. *"Have you come to get something to eat?"* She glanced at the clock and saw it was about an hour until lunchtime.

"Um. Ah ... Déjà just had her babies," Rose said quietly, and got the appropriate smiles from the three adults.

"That's wonderful!" Laisee said, despite feeling the depression coming from Jaiying. *"Ladies, shall we go and welcome our newest family members? Oh! Has Spring Blossom been told?"*

At that last, she felt an even deeper sadness coming from Jaiying, and glanced at the other two adults to see if they'd noticed it or not. Meanwhile, Shu got up and entered the kitchen to prepare a plate of fruit for Déjà, while Ling stood up and stretched.

"Sounds like a reasonable excuse to break for lunch, my Lady Caldaraus," Ling said formally, and Laisee smiled at her while dancing over the surface impressions she was radiating, then stifled the sigh that matched her interpretation of them.

"You're quite right, Ling, but I look forward to learning your concerns of this experiment by the Elder," she said, then lowered her voice just a bit. *"I sometimes forget she is my stepmother as well as the Elder, and perhaps question which aspect is apparent more than I should."*

Ling was surprised at Laisee's expression of confidence, unknowingly letting it take seed just as Laisee had anticipated. Laisee felt the change in Ling's perception of her and relaxed. She didn't know the *exact* parameters they would have to deal with concerning the civilian hospital, but was looking forward to meeting Doctor Wells and taking his measure.

From comments made by Mary and Kayla, it would almost appear that he'd suffered from exposure to their presence despite Ronnie's casual comments about him in the past. Only time would tell as she continued to learn more about her stepbrother's birth planet. In the *meantime*...

"Jaiying, what is your concern?" she asked silently.

"I think I broke Grandfather" Jaiying told her on their higher band, then explained what she'd done.

Laisee didn't say anything, but reached out to Spring Blossom.

"Déjà has had your grandchildren, Grandmother Spring Blossom. I will come to relieve you so you may bask in their presence" she sent cheerfully, then reached down to take Jaiying's hand. *"Let's go and allow Spring Blossom to greet her grandchildren, Jaiying,"* she said, then saw Shu enter from the kitchen with Rose by her side. *"Rose, will you please come with us while we watch over Donald for Spring Blossom?"*

"Yes, Mama Laisee," she said, causing Ling and Shu to look in surprise at her familiarity with the Emperor's daughter. They watched as the little human-Drecks girl walked over and took Laisee's other hand before all three of them left the room to relieve Spring Blossom.

"I don't think they are particularly happy about us being here," Laisee muttered as they walked down the hallway.

"They don't really feel like family yet, but Shu is getting better," Jaiying said quietly.

"I like Shu," Rose considered. *"She takes good care of Wilber, just like Grandfather wants her to."*

"Yes, Rose. Ronnie always wanted the best for everyone," Laisee agreed just as they reached the room that held Donald.

In Déjà's Room

Spring Blossom looked down at the little face snuggled within the blanket in her arms and was hard pressed not to cry in joy. He was the very *image* of her TS'ILSQSÉ BIYIGÉ. Perhaps a bit paler than when she bore him so many centuries ago, but the features remained the same. She wondered if he would also share the same shade of gray in his eyes when he got around to opening them?

"He is beautiful, Déjà," she said, then turned to her pseudo daughter-in-law with a brilliant smile on her face. *"You bring new life to House Caldarous, and give me the grandson I've dreamed of for so very long."*

Maya felt the warmth radiating from Spring Blossom, but also some concerns from Déjà about her future. She pushed a chair over to the bed

An Unfortunate Decision

and directed Spring Blossom to sit there next to the baby's mother, while she thought of what to say to ease Déjà's mind.

She was reminded of the lessons her Ronnie had learned and decided the truth would have to suffice.

"Déjà, did you know Elder Kita had selected me to be Lord Caldar's mate? Of course, that was a long time ago and events prevented that from ever occurring," she said, then looked down at a beaming Spring Blossom, who was gently touching the cheek of her new grandson. She looked back up to see Déjà starting to worry.

"N-No..." Déjà said quietly, now wondering if this was the part where she'd lose her son and be cast aside as unworthy. She split her attention between watching Spring Blossom with baby Ronnie, and watching Maya as she walked around the other side of the bed and stood next to her.

"Déjà, you have given House Caldarous a new heir to the Imperial Throne, and this is a very important responsibility," Maya told her quietly, then looked across the bed at the baby and Spring Blossom. She could see Ling, Sai, and Shu looking back at her between glances down at the baby.

"It is now your duty to return to the Royal Homestead and raise little Ronnie there ... as is befitting a Princess who is the mother of the next heir to the throne," she said, then leaned down and kissed her warmly while running her hand through her hair. She finally pulled away and straightened up, looking over at Sai, before smiling down at Déjà once again.

"I'm afraid there will be no more adventuring for you until little Ronnie is old enough to attend academy," she continued. *"You will have to raise him and keep him healthy until he becomes an adult. His education will need to be monitored by you, and his acceptance of his social duties and responsibilities will fall upon you."*

She looked up at the group of women and smiled at each one of them.

"Of course, he is only a man, so that task may be difficult in the beginning, but we will all help along the way. Mei-Mei, Yin-Yin ... even Lady Lili tells of raising young Rondal and how they rejoiced at each of his successes, and how they supported him after his failures."

She looked down at a confused Déjà and prompted her with a tilt of her head.

"You mean I – I have to live on K-Kantor?"

"Why ... of course. You are Princess Déjà sai Caldarous se Kee ne Lady Sai Tal," Maya said, then followed it with another warm kiss and a flow of loving glow to back it up.

“*Maya...**” Sai warned her silently.

“*Lady Lili’s command, remember? Little Ronnie is a Prince of the house of Caldarous, just as your granddaughter is a Princess of the house of Caldarous. Lady Lili had already selected Déjà’s official title**” Maya sent back quickly, then withdrew from the kiss and smiled down at Déjà once again.

“**Have you chosen a name for the girl yet?**”

In the Hanger

Just past noon found the duty officer’s relief, Marcus, entering the combination motor pool/hanger complex, and the sight that greeted him shook him to his core.

He stopped in the doorway and looked over at the twenty-four-meter length of the painfully black object parked near an outer wall. It was poorly defined due to the nano-coating that absorbed much of the light in that section of the hanger.

The only edges visible were those that bisected it outside of any shadows. Urban was standing off to one side and watching his friend’s surprised reaction.

“**Commander Zickgraf brought it in late last night,**” he said, not quite catching Marcus’ attention.

“English,” Marcus mumbled absently, with his focus still on the vague outline of the Galaxy-class over by the wall. He finally stepped inside the hanger and closed the door before slowly walking over to it and taking a closer look.

“Have its beamers been disabled?” he asked, then turned back to see Urban grinning at him. “Urban – have the *beamers* on that *tank* been disabled?”

“Doesn’t have any,” Urban said cheerfully. “It’s a *special*. Only has a *projectile* weapon.”

Marcus stared at him stupidly for a moment, then turned to face the ultra-black tank again. “Did Commander Zickgraf leave us access?”

“Nope! And we’ve been told not to bother him unless we come under attack.”

That last got Marcus to spin around and face him, but Urban quickly raised his hand.

“*Wait!* He’s sleeping off three transits through the obstacle course above us after getting little sleep beforehand. Said to let him catch up on his rest and he’ll be taking it back sometime tonight.”

An Unfortunate Decision

Marcus relaxed, but only slightly. The defensive hut was *one* thing, but having an armed Galaxy-class on the planet was a *definite* treaty violation – although mostly because of the beam weapons. Still, if that thing held live rounds in its weapons loader, then it might be considered in violation of protocols anyway. At least it would be leaving in a few hours.

“Very well,” he finally said, then glanced at the much *bigger* vessel on the other side of the hanger that had landed earlier that week. “Are there any *other* surprises waiting for me?”

“Nothing to speak of. One of the vans is in town for routine maintenance, and Mister Milton ordered another grocery run to pick up a load of processed protein – a few *cases* of it. One of the new guests is partial to a protein-rich diet.”

Marcus tried to think of why that much meat would be needed, but only came to one conclusion.

“Did Zickgraf bring down one of his *Drecks*?”

“Oh *no*. It’s for a little woman. She’s about ... so tall,” Urban said while holding his arm out at just under shoulder height. “He said she’d be here for the duration and we’d get used to her pretty quick. She certainly *seemed* friendly enough.”

Marcus let that slip by while he glanced at the black outline near the wall one more time before accepting the data pad from Urban. He checked the status on three screens and nodded.

“Very well. I relieve you,” he said. “They’re having soup and some breaded-meats for lunch. There’s also leftover snacks from the birthing watch. Oh, and the Lady’s daughter had a girl *and* a boy.”

“*Good* for her! I’ll let some of the wives know and maybe they can throw a proper Mother’s Celebration for her!”

Marcus didn’t need time to think about that. He knew who ran things around here besides Wilber Milton.

“Let *Ling* decide. I’m sure she’ll want to be involved,” he said, and Urban gave him a nod before turning and heading back to his garrison quarters.

As Marcus was heading for the duty office, he was wondering just how much meat a small woman such as Urban described could *possibly* eat in a day.

In the Center

Laisee leaned back and opened her eyes to look down at Donald while he slept. Whatever Jaiying had done to him seemed to have worn off by

the time they'd arrived to relieve Spring Blossom so she could go and greet her new grandchildren.

At the moment, Donald seemed to be sleeping peacefully. He still had disjointed memory chains, but the underlying level of *chaos* usually present when he was awake was not there. That might return after he awakened, but they would have to wait for later to find out.

*"*Children, you may stay here with me, or you may find other things to occupy your time. I understand the guardsmen assigned to you have orders to provide both educational and entertainment opportunities,*"* she said quietly. *"*And while we are here, you might consider learning spoken* English, *if only to accommodate our hosts.*"*

Rose and Jaiying shared a look, then turned back to their communal parent.

"I think we'll be all right, Mother," Jaiying said in English, then smiled.

"We watched a lot of musicals with Grandfather," Rose said, then reached out to hold Jaiying's hand while a slight blush crept up her neck.

Laisee simply squatted down and gathered her extended family within her arms to share a hug with them before sending them on their way.

Nearing Midnight

Despite all the excitement of the late morning, the rest of the day remained relatively uneventful.

After waking him up a few hours ago and having her way with him, Sai had walked with Petrus to the hanger so he could transfer the current access codes for the *Kraken's Child* to her. For *whatever* reason, it had been determined by Laisee – and backed by his big sister – that the *Kraken's* primary nuisance weapon would remain behind on Earth for the duration.

He brought her inside and ran through the systems with her, insuring the tank was fully operational before he had her set her own codes into the system to secure it from unauthorized access. Afterwards, she helped him relocate several items from the tank over to the *Kraken's* transport shuttle.

After the shuttle was packed, they stood outside and hugged before sharing a somewhat chaste kiss in front of the duty hanger crew. They broke apart slightly, then touched their foreheads together, sharing a sigh that spoke volumes for its brevity. Before he turned to leave, she held him back while staring at the transport, then glancing back at the tank ... all the while nodding her head.

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“Petrus ... ask Clax if he could fabricate a Dreck-sized, Galaxy-class for us, would you? Endo and Gallus have outgrown the Orca, and that transport is not NEARLY as safe as we would like.”

He looked down at her, then spared a glance at both ships, before returning his gaze to her eyes.

“And how do you expect me to pay for it?”

“Ask your big sister,” she said. *“Her husband’s got a budget for that sort of thing. Have him tap Ronnie’s share of the household budget if he has to. It’s not like he’s gonna be using it anymore.”*

Petrus thought about it, then nodded his head. Giving her one more hug and a kiss, he turned and waved to the hanger crew before stepping through the airlock of the transport, then turned and paused to wave at Sai before shutting the door.

She headed to the personnel door of the hanger while the overhead lights slowly dimmed the closer she got to it. Just before she opened the door, the overhead lights went out completely and she could hear the overhead doors retract – opening the hanger to the midnight sky above. She stood outside and waited until the boxy shape of the transport raised above the roofline and held steady for several minutes while Petrus waited for traffic to clear.

“I’m off, my girl!” she heard in her mind, and sent a wave of desire his way to remind him that she expected him back in one piece when the job was done.

She could hear the hanger doors closing behind her on the way back to the Center.

September 6, A New Day

“They should be back soon, Kiki,” Mary assured her again, having successfully fended off the Kee’s advances for the last thirty minutes.

It hadn’t been terribly difficult so far, although watching the little woman lick the top of her nose with her own tongue a few minutes ago had actually made her quiver, and she’d felt her juices begin to flow from that point forward. She supposed she should be grateful Kiki had not demonstrated that feat when they’d *first* settled in to watch a sleeping Donald.

Kiki let out another dramatic sigh while looking lovingly into Mary’s eyes, but was distracted by a moan coming from the sleeping Donald.

“Maybe Donald will want to play with me!” she said happily, and almost jumped out of her chair before Mary caught her and held her back.

“Let’s just watch a while, first. All right?” Mary asked her, and Kiki shared a sad face with her that she *almost* wanted to kiss to make her happier. She compromised by hugging her and kissing her forehead instead.

“Okay! We watch! And then we play!”

“Huh?” came a voice from the bed.

Mary and Kiki turned to look at Donald while he lay there staring at the ceiling.

They watched as he slowly looked around, then turned his head and looked at them sitting there, looking back at him.

“Who ... who are you?” he asked them clearly.

“DONALD! DONALD! It’s ME! Kiki! Do you want to PLAY with me?” she asked cheerfully while nearly bouncing in her seat.

“Ling ... Lady Sai ... Donald is awake!” Mary pushed out strongly, hoping *someone* would hear her, then waited for him to make the next move.

In the Residence

Jaiying looked up at her mother’s surprised face and dropped her sandwich. She was about to bolt from the house, but Laisee caught her before she could leave her seat.

‘You can observe just as well from right here, my girl!’ Laisee shared on their higher band before extending out to Mary to see what was happening.

In Donald’s Room

“Ladies... Who are you?” Donald asked again, then began awkwardly struggling to sit up. Mary recognized the symptoms of excessive bed rest and stood up to help him.

“Move slowly, Donald. Just move slowly and try to keep your balance,” she instructed him while getting a grip on his arm and keeping him steady. *“My name is Mary and her name is Kiki,”* she added, knowing that he’d just keep asking until she told him.

“How... Where am I?” He looked around the unfamiliar room, then looked up to see a skylight above him. He was *planet-side*?

“You are in a safe place, Donald,” Mary continued while standing next to him and keeping him from falling off the bed. *“The report said you had an accident on board ship and you suffered some injuries to your head. They brought you here to rest and get your strength back.”*

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He looked up at her, then at the little woman sitting there beaming at him for some reason. He didn't see a window, just the skylight overhead, but there were two doors in the room. One was in the middle of a wall, and the other one looked like it opened into a closet – or perhaps...

"*Facilities?* I need to pee," he muttered, then pointed hopefully to the closest door.

"I'll help you," she said, and waited for him to get his feet planted on the floor before walking him to the door and opening it for him, but he shook her off at the door and closed it in her face.

"Kiki, I want you to find Lady Sai and get her here, quick," she said quietly, but got a confused look back from the Kee when she turned and faced her.

"*What?*"

"I said..." She stopped and turned to stare at the door before turning back to Kiki.

"*Kiki, please find Lady Sai and tell her that Donald is awake and talking... Talking NORMALLY,*" she said, then watched as the little woman zipped from the room to complete her mission.

Mary turned back to the bathroom door and considered the client in a slightly different light. Not that many aliens spoke both Standard *and* English. She gave it a little thought while hearing the toilet flush and the water start running in the sink before deciding things needed to be escalated.

"*Ling! Lady Sai! Lady Laisee! Lady Spring Blossom! Donald is awake and speaking clearly – and he also speaks* English!" she sent loudly, then sat down to wait for backup to arrive.

In Déjà's Room

Spring Blossom heard that last plea for help, so she carefully placed the baby girl in her crib before tucking her support package in next to her.

"*I have to go, Déjà, but I'll be back. I – I'll send someone to stay with you,*" she said, then abruptly turned and left the room.

She hurried to Donald's room but didn't bother to knock before entering. Mary waved at her from the side of the bathroom door.

"*He's in there,*" she said in a whisper. "*He said he needed to pee. He said it in* English."

Spring Blossom's expression was guarded while she pulled Mary away from the bathroom door.

*“*Will you please see that someone sits with Déjà and the babies? I will take care of Donald for a while.*”*

She directed Mary to the door, then leaned against it after it closed. Donald was awake and speaking recognizable sentences – at least *one*, anyway. She walked over to the chair and sat down. In the silence of the room, she heard the water in the sink draining out, and then a few heavy breaths coming from the room’s tiny bathroom. She could only imagine what he was experiencing.

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Donald was maintaining control, but just barely. He’d managed to avoid hyperventilating, at least. He was still looking in the mirror over the sink and wondering just who in the hell was looking back at him. Waving his hands around proved it was *him* he was looking at, but it was a him he didn’t recognize. Then he let his jumper fall to his waist and looked at his body in the mirror.

No scars, save for that old one. No *obvious* injuries, at least. His skin was ... it *seemed* like it felt like the right shade of ... *dark*? The hair on his head was between dark and gray, but ... shouldn’t it be *all* gray? Gray like his eyes?

He looked closer in the mirror. His eyes *were* gray. His eyes were gray, and yet ... it seemed *that* was right, too.

He stood up straight and raised his hands to his face, closing his eyes and feeling all around his face and head, but detecting strange lumps where they didn’t seem to belong. Of course, since he didn’t recognize himself to begin with, he had nothing to compare them against. He took stock of the situation and considered that, of all the *nasty* things that could happen aboard ship, being alive at the end of the day was a *definite* plus ... although it would be a lot better if he knew who he *was*.

He let out a sigh while pulling his jumper back up, but not before noticing that it needed to be changed. He’d have to mention it to his keeper... *Mary* was her name. And there was Kiki of the smiling face.

He shook his head, grateful that it didn’t hurt at all, and opened the door to ask his keepers some pointed questions – starting with...

*“\*Who are YOU?\**” he asked the stranger sitting at the small table in the room.

### ***Just Outside the Door***

Ling and Shu had been returning from the tribal center after an urgent sick call, and Sai had gone along with them to observe. They were just minutes away when Mary had sent out her first call for help, and their driver had stopped the van at the front of the Center to let them out.

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Less than a minute later, all three of them were standing outside Donald's door and extending within to feel what was going on inside.

### *In Donald's Room*

*"Hello, Donald. My name is Spring Blossom,"* she told him calmly, smiling while she remained seated. *"Mary and Kiki are visiting with another client at the moment and asked me to come sit with you."*

He stopped and stared at her, sensing something familiar about her but not able to figure it out at the moment. He nodded politely anyway, then shuffled back to his bed, where he sat down heavily, then wobbled just a bit, causing her to jump out of her seat to hold him steady so he wouldn't fall.

*"You've been out for quite a while, Donald. How are you feeling?"*

He'd not had time to react when she came at him, but didn't seem all that concerned about it for some reason. Her question finally managed to work its way far enough through his thought processes to let him formulate an answer.

*"I feel ... weak... And a little tired. How long have I been out?"*

*"Tell him almost five months, Spring Blossom"* Sai reached out to her from the hallway.

*"You were injured almost five months ago, Donald. I was not told exactly how you became injured"* she told him.

*"Where—"* His question was interrupted by the knock on the door.

*"Come in,"* Spring Blossom called out, and Sai was the first person to step into the room.

She carefully watched for any sign of recognition from him, but saw nothing to indicate he had the slightest clue as to who she was.

*"Hello Donald. I am Senior Sai Tal and this is Senior Shu Song,"* she said in greeting. *"Behind Shu is Senior Ling Wen. You are at a new Healer Cluster that was set up a mere five years ago by the grace of the Elder. Here is where you've been assigned for your convalescence."*

She waited to see if any of what she'd said got a response from him, and was pleasantly surprised to see him slowly nodding his head before he looked up at her again.

*"Senior Tal ... do YOU know who I am?"*

### ***End of Book Seven***

## ***Author's Afterword***

Yes – I cut his head off at the end of Book Six.

Things were relatively stable at that point. He was on his way out, and the story seemed at a reasonable place to *end* it, but the son of a bitch wouldn't stay *dead*!

At that point I'd simply given up and selected a convenient stopping place (well he was *DEAD*, after all), then let things progress on their *own* – ending up with Book Seven in all its very confusing glory.

Somehow (don't ask *me* how. Apparently, I'm just the convenient *channel*) he ended up back on Earth.

Of course, he's just not quite *himself*.

Also – “of course” – I'd run out of paperback pages to finish the story (yet *again*) and had to backtrack to yet *another* convenient stopping place so that Book Eight(!) could continue with this never-ending nightmare.

Never fear, for I have reached the *end* of Book Eight, and *FINALLY* arrived at a reasonable conclusion to this disaster that began life back in December of 2011.

Oh, and if you haven't already figured it out, the word "Pbbbt" (see page 236) is an onomatopoeia - in this case, the formation of a word based on the sound of someone's lips flapping around the tongue protruding from between them when expelling a volume of air from the mouth (kinda like a farting sound, ie: a Bronx cheer).

I hope *somebody* out there still enjoys the ride (that would make at least *one* of us).

-Floyde Leong

(Yeah, yeah ... keep flipping pages and you'll probably stumble over the beginning of the end, or Picking up the Pieces)



## Picking up the Pieces

### *Friday, September 9, Ambulatory Again*

Donald was being escorted by Mistress Kiki this early Friday morning while accompanied by Lady Caldarous and her child. For some reason they wanted him to walk out along the service road and back every morning to help him build up his strength.

Personally, he'd much rather spend his mornings lying in bed with Senior Maya Tal. He'd been drawn to her ever since she'd shared contentment with him after feeding him the morning after he *sort of* came to his senses. Then again, he hadn't been getting *laid* for almost five months, so that might have had something to do with it.

On *this* particular morning, there was an effort being made to practice a language he appeared to already know. The best reason he could blame it on was to help the cheerful little woman who was learning it from scratch...

"Rock," Jaiying said while holding out a fist-sized lump of hard stone in her palm.

"Rock," Kiki dutifully repeated.

There was a slight pause before he remembered his cue...

"Rock. Different than dirt in that it is usually very hard and not easily crumbled. It can be any combination of hardened materials, from compressed sand to granite," he muttered absently.

Jaiying dropped the rock, picked up a thumb-sized piece, and held it out.

"Pebble," she said.

"Pebble," Kiki repeated.

"Pebble. Hard like a rock, only much smaller. It sorta depends on your interpretation of size, I suppose," he muttered.

They continued like that, speaking the oddly barking sounds of the local native language while strolling along the driveway. At the head of the driveway, they stopped and watched the main road as a vehicle approached and passed in front of them.

"Truck," Jaiying said.

"Truck," Kiki echoed.

"Pickup truck. Think it was a Ford." Donald froze, then watched as the letters on the tailgate faded into the distance.

"Donald?" Laisee said quietly, then waited patiently for him to speak.

"I... It appears I can *read* this 'English' as well as speak it," he finally said.

"Yes, Donald. You remember what Lady Sai told you? You were here once before in a support role and had immersed yourself into the society. That was before you took up a *shipboard* assignment. It was while you were on the ship that you became badly injured and lost most of your memories. We were quite saddened when we researched the history of the Cato family and learned you were the last survivor of it."

That last was not exactly true, as there were several *thousand* members of the many different Cato families already living on Earth. The fact that the manufactured back story implied Donald was all alone was simply a means of keeping things under control; in this case, making sure his back story wouldn't be compromised by having him unexpectedly searching for relatives who might pop out of the woodwork before he could handle it.

Kiki was nothing if not unattendant to a man's moods – or a *woman's* for that matter – and picked up on his melancholy and suggested a simple cure for it.

"Donald ... you wan *play* wif me?" she asked hopefully while batting her eyelashes at him in accompaniment with her big smile.

Something *else* unexpected was how quickly Kiki was picking up a form of pidgin English in order to fit in. Lady Sai had said they were quick learners, and Kiki could already express herself well enough to seduce nearly half the garrison and their wives or girlfriends, not to mention the sexually mature offspring who were willing. That had prompted a general sick call to have individual enzyme receptors neutralized so that no one *else* experienced a catastrophic "lost time" episode such as had affected Mistress Mary the first time she'd dallied unsupervised with Kiki.

"Perhaps later tonight, Kiki. If you're not busy," Donald almost promised her.

"Oh! Oh *yes! Pese! Than you!*" she answered cheerfully, with everyone knowing she'd most likely forget all about it in a few minutes.

They turned and headed back to the Center while continuing their lessons with the flora this time. A short while later, a car passed them on the long driveway and stopped at the Center's parking area.

"That's Nascha," Jaiying said. "She's coming to talk to Ling and Sai about that special project."

Jaiying realized after the fact that she should have kept her mouth shut, but figured it couldn't matter to anyone other than her Mother anyway, and dismissed her concern.

## Picking up the Pieces

“What special project is that, Miss Jaiying?” Donald asked her.

She almost blushed at that. Grandfather had started using the Earth equivalent of the Mistress title with her just two days ago without having a clue of how close he was to reality. He was also paying *way* more attention than she thought.

“Ahhh... Nascha’s husband is missing, and the Ladies are thinking of how to find him to tell him she has a baby on the way,” she contrived clumsily. Even *she* recognized it was clumsy.

There was silence for several seconds until he let out an, “Oh,” before recusing himself into his own thoughts once again.

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