

# The End of the Road

**The Caldar Chronicles  
Book Six**

**Floyde Leong**



# **The End of the Road**

Books in the Caldar Chronicles Series

*Upsetting the Balance*

*The Wheels of Justice*

*Taming the Demon*

*Back to Work*

*Unhide the Past*

*The End of the Road*

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### ***Author's Forward***

It would be presumptuous of me to compare myself to the likes of Edgar Rice Burroughs or E. E. Smith. Likewise, in presuming to approach the talents of Arthur C. Clark, Robert Heinlein, or perhaps even Terry Pratchett. Without question, the dialogue of John Scalzi is much admired, as well.

For the more “licentious” among authors, I might refer to Andrew J. Offutt (writing as John Cleve) or perhaps even Joan Lee, wife of Stan Lee (you know, Spiderman’s daddy?).

And of course, who could leave out Agnes Nixon (nee Eckhardt), mother of ‘All My Children’? (R.I.P. Agnes)

All of these authors have influenced me to some degree or another, and I have to admit that I am a product of my experiences – as are we all.

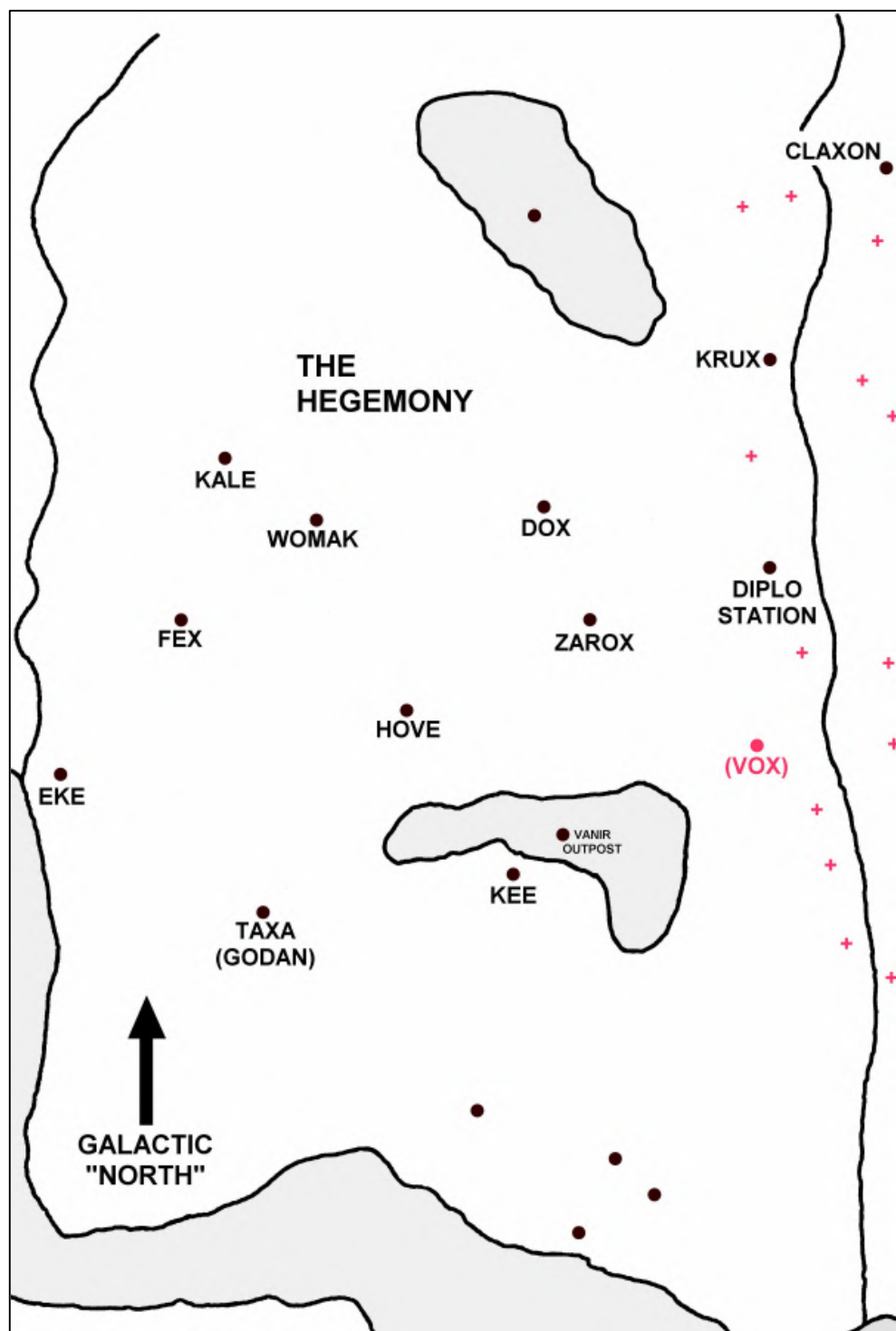
In that regard, whatever I’ve created has been extracted from a lifetime of experiences; in things that I have done, movies that I have seen, and probably most influential of all – books that I have read.

All of these authors and many, many more, have contributed to the stories that play out in my imagination, and it is to them that I dedicate this volume in the Caldar Chronicles series.

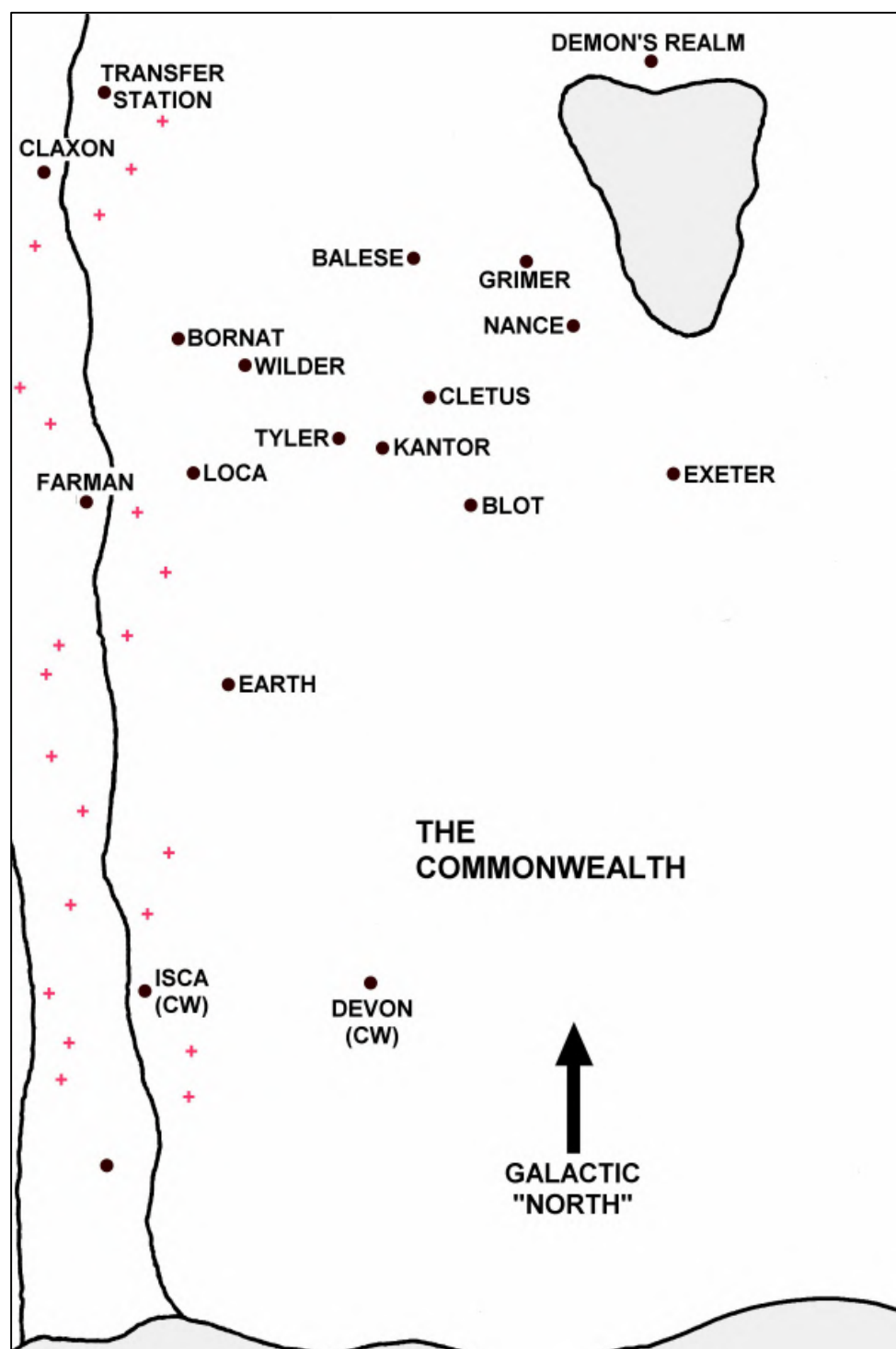
As an author myself (as my meager royalties would seem to imply) I sincerely hope no one will be terribly disappointed when this series eventually meanders to its end.

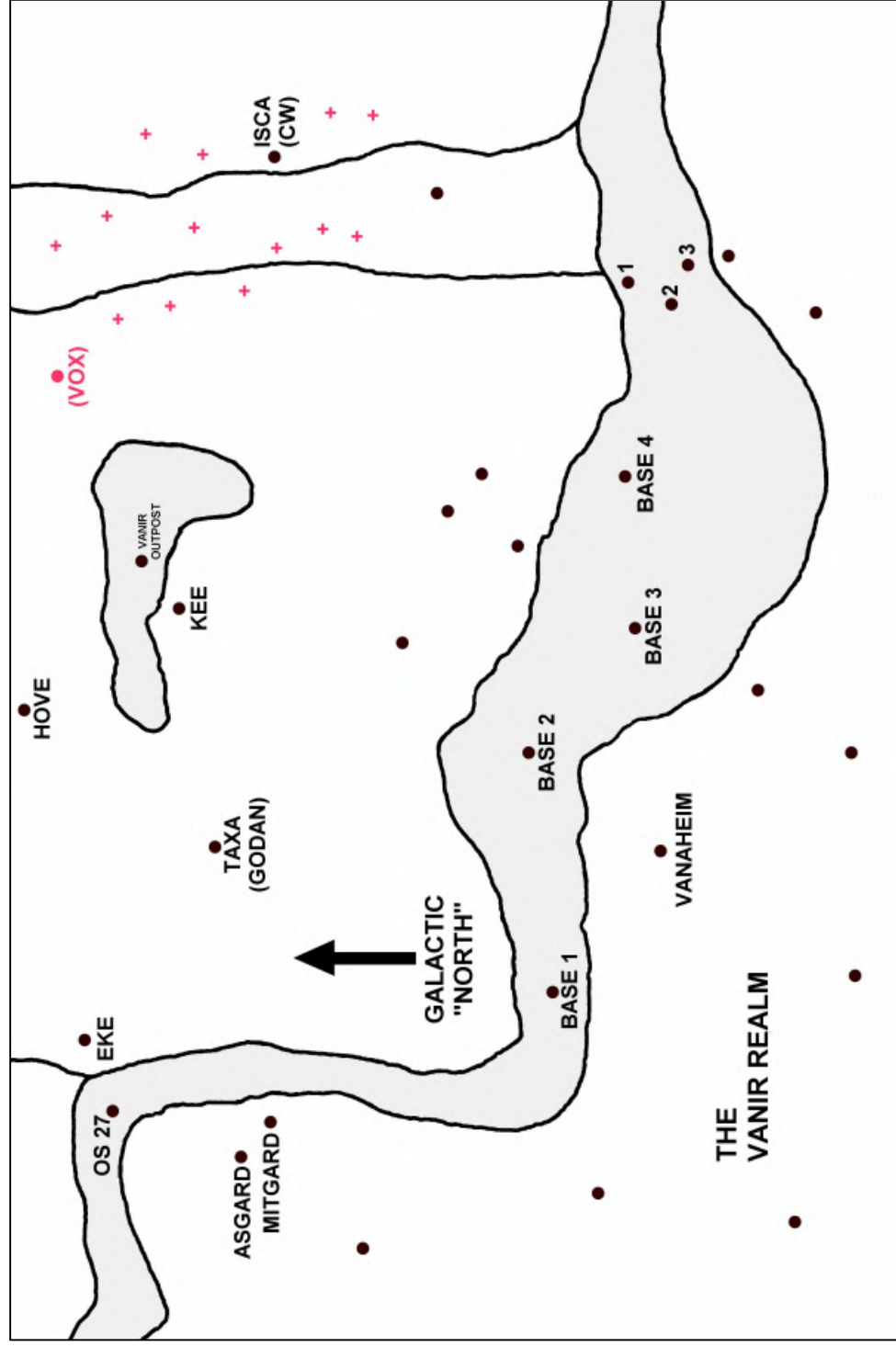
Of course, you’ll note that these authors (with the exception of Joan Lee) had all produced entire universes within which to plant their continuing stories, and like the man said ... you never know.

***“Red Sand Between My Toes...  
Summer Vacation in Outer Space...  
That was a Martian Haiku.”  
- Robin Williams  
1951-2014  
R.I.P.***









*Diplomacy is oft the more onerous of tasks faced by civilization.*

*It is usually easier to simply eliminate problem species, rather than make  
the effort to find a common ground for co-existence.*

*However, the Gods bless those who find peaceful means to achieve their  
goals.*

*Of course, one must always maintain a healthy sense of paranoia if one  
hopes to achieve any sense of security in one's life...*

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### **Prologue**

*Lord Rondal Caldar, the Commonwealth Emperor's First Sword, had followed the clues and discovered a new alien species that, for their own protection, was monitoring and manipulating the stability of Humanity.*

*Working carefully in secret, and with the help of his Senior Staff, he'd completed the delicate task of approaching and communicating with humanity's first true alien species – the Vanir.*

*After having successfully transported the new Vanir Ambassador and his assistant to a face-to-face meeting with the Emperor of the Commonwealth, he was now requested to convey both them and the new Kantite Ambassador on a return trip to meet with the Vanir Prime on the Vanir's home planet of Vanaheim.*

*Along the way, new information had become available of an internal Vanir problem that threatened the promise of peace between Humanity and Vanir.*

*Through his traditional yet rather dubious methods, Rondal Caldar and his Senior Staff had successfully resolved the mystery surrounding the confusion of his new Vanir crewwoman, S'Ahi'Ma 42491 (a.k.a. "Sue"), along with several Vanir crew from Vanir Base 4. Now hosting the successfully recovered Vanir victims, Rondal Caldar pointed the Vanir towards a continuing danger within their own society in hopes they could root out the problem in its entirety.*

*Knowing the enormity of the task before them, Rondal Caldar decided to delay his original transit time in an attempt to let the Vanir assess the depth of the problem and perhaps bend themselves to accept help from the humans if ultimately needed.*

### **Monday, February 4, 2005, The Wheel Turns**

*As they approached the cloud this morning, the Kraken was still at standard cruise, but Ronnie decided to stop.*

*Since their encounter with the Vanir Cruiser formerly commanded by S'Kala'Mak 32246 (a.k.a. "Sasha"), they'd shifted eight minutes to the Galactic "right" before turning course to head straight "down" for an additional twenty-four minutes for almost a month now. Sasha's old command was now escorting them to Vanaheim so the Ambassadors from both civilizations might complete their journey in safety.*

*The Vanir had even provided star maps for the immediate area that Sasha vouchsafed as being relatively accurate – considering the Vanir had only mapped this area of their realm once, but never really explored it. Those records being so far out of date, the Kraken would remain dead in space while he ran his own survey to confirm a safe passage through the*

cloud – at least until they reached more well-traveled transit lanes. It might take a few extra days, but they were in no rush.

The new captain of the cruiser had no problems sharing what should have been secure tactical information, since he'd received both in-flight refueling from the humans *and* a load of relatively "fresh" frozen food in the bargain, but had also declined a personal visit to the *Kraken* – citing the current problem Sasha was facing with regards to the incident on Base 4. At least Sasha was able to recover the rest of his and S'Kala'Mak 41631's (a.k.a. "Katie") personal belongings, and it only cost them a couple of days transit time – something they now had plenty of.

### ***February 12, Status Update***

From a security monitor on the bridge, Petrus watched Ronnie put a group of guardsmen through their paces. Alongside him stood Captain Teldrus Avitus of Laisee's "Royal Protective Detachment" – or rather, the leader of the Emperor's Covert Operations Team, composed of several select operatives weeded down through competitive training and experience. Teldrus and the remaining twenty-five members of his team were among the very best of the best.

Petrus had not only been surprised but delighted to see his former trainee in a position of responsibility, and it didn't hurt to have at least two squads worth of seasoned warriors assigned to the *Kraken* for the duration. Deciding "discretion" in this case was appropriate, he'd neglected to mention it to Ronnie, instead waiting to see if he'd figure it out on his own ... if he ever would. After all, it's not like a covert intrusion of this nature was expected.

The additional training for Laisee's guardsmen seemed to be going well. That was the "official" excuse. In reality, Petrus had watched Ronnie struggle against a Vanir simulacrum that one day and it'd continued to nag at his subconscious. Laisee's later report brought it back to the surface, so he'd decided to do something about it. He'd convinced Ronnie to work with Laisee's Royal Protective Detachment, and for the last five weeks he'd been in the gym with them almost every day.

"We didn't understand what you were talking about at first, Commander. The First Lord seemed well in possession of himself while he sparred with my men."

Petrus watched intently as Ronnie easily held his ground while a third warrior joined the two currently pressing the offensive on him. It was only seconds later that a sword went flying and Ronnie's immediate subtle shift opened a window for him to disarm a second attacker – leaving him facing the most junior guardsman alone.

"So he's back to normal then?"

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Teldrus looked at him in surprise.

“Commander ... I don’t believe Lord Caldor was ever *not* normal – not for him. It wasn’t until we remembered watching Lady Tal sparring with one of the Vanir that we got a clue.”

Now it was Petrus’ turn to stare at him, as Sai never mentioned sparring with *any* Vanir.

“It’s the Vanir, Sir. They don’t *move* like we do,” he said while getting a continued look of confusion from Petrus. “We stumbled across it when Mister Ardan showed us the simulacrum of the Vanir fighter. It was like going up against a Drecks ... for the very *first* time.”

It took a moment before the light dawned in Petrus’ eyes...

The Drecks were human – human-*BIG* – and they *fought* like humans. But Kantite warriors fighting them soon discovered that annoying little problem of not being able to *feel* their intentions. That was the edge the Kantite enjoyed over most every other human-variant in either the Hegemony or the Commonwealth – with the exception of the Drecks.

With the Drecks, you were either a quick study or dead meat...

“So the Vanir don’t... No... Lady Tal does not share the advantage we enjoy. I don’t suppose Commander Sasha would care to cross swords with any of us, do you?”

Teldrus looked a little embarrassed before explaining himself.

“Actually, Sir ... the *male* Vanir do not use swords – or not so much. The First Lord said their women won’t let them.”

The implication hit Petrus squarely where he lived – yet *another* society where the women were more dangerous than the men. Now it was the Kee, the Drecks, *and* the Vanir. He let out a quiet sigh before putting a smile on his face to help cover up the taste of this particular turd.

“Good work, Teldrus! I will report Lord Caldor’s continuing improvement to Lady Laisee. Please ... carry on,” he said in dismissal, before turning away to hide the roll of his eyes from the guard captain.

He paused to check their slow progress through the cloud with Torga before glancing at the ships timer. It was almost time for the department heads meeting, but it should take less than an hour today ... *hopefully*. Then he would head back to his quarters. Sai should be done with her duties by then, and he was looking forward to spending some *private* time with her.

He really missed his daily ration of morning sex, but she’d been sharing “morning-sickness” duty with Lady Qiaolian ever since she’d learned of Many’s condition. At least it wasn’t *every* morning.

### ***Dining at the Commons***

After morning practice had finally concluded, Ronnie stopped to freshen up in his quarters before heading to the commons for the mid-day meal, but he was actually looking for Sue.

Sai and Sally had both said she'd made huge strides in integrating her reality and controlling her behavior over the last five weeks, so he'd decided to put it to the test. Finding her seated and in the middle of a meal, he filled a tray and approached to stop just across from her at her table.

*'Hello, Sue. May I join you?'*

He noted it failed to get the usual disgusted reaction from her as she merely looked at him calmly while taking a sip of her drink. It looked like she was considering it, before gesturing to the seat opposite her with her other arm, so he set his tray down and joined her.

*'Almost forty days in transit, Lord Caldar. I'd almost forgotten how pleasant it feels to travel at a more sedate pace. We Vanir never dreamed you humans could put up with your usual, frenzied rate of travel'*

He smiled at her polite comment and observation.

*'We can suffer longer jumps when necessary, but it's nice to travel at a more measured rate ... if only to allow proper surveys along the way. Sasha tells me there are a few star systems near where we'd penetrated the cloud. Unfortunately, he has no other information about them'*

She continued to eat daintily while considering what she'd observed about him before.

*'Will you be taking time out of our schedule to survey those systems for planets?'*

He tilted his head in thought before sipping from his own cup – full of water this time.

Water...

The last tank measurement was sixty-percent of capacity.

*'We're down forty-percent of fuel capacity. It wouldn't hurt to wander on by and see if there's any free water sloshing about. Would you care to go on a survey team?'*

The question startled her. In fact, his whole demeanor was surprising to her. She'd avoided him astutely for the last several weeks, since collapsing at his feet in the commons.

Now ... now he was asking if she'd like to go on a *survey*? She wondered if he meant – with *him*?

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*'I... I would like that, Lord Caldar. S'Mok'Sak 40432 tells me he helped you survey a few stars while in your care' she stated wryly, and got him to smile in return.*

*'I'm afraid I didn't find out until later that he'd been awake for those surveys'*

*'Lord Caldar, you jumped whole seconds ... MINUTES, even. How did you manage to survive it?' she asked, truly curious about human stamina.*

*'Well, as S'Mok'Sak 40432 can tell you, it helps to have an empty stomach. For really LONG jumps, what helps us best is provided by our Healers'*

*'Healers? Like Sai and Sally?'*

*'Like Sai. Sally is not built to produce the liquid protein we can use for long jumps. A very useful byproduct of the Cletus females. Not only does their milk feed their children, but it's used to provide palliative relief for pain and nausea. How do you like it?' he asked, after glancing down at her cup.*

Eyes wide open, she stared into her cup; the thin, bluish-white liquid suddenly taking on the aspect of a singularly vile poison. Her mind flashed back to incidences she'd observed of Sai and Kiki together, or Sai and Déjà, where the Kee would suckle at the human's breasts. She suddenly realized they were consuming human *milk* – right from the *source*.

Ronnie watched as her rational mind fought the reactionary elements and easily won; after her shock, disgust, anger, and finally curiosity, played out their roles and came to a calm and rational decision within a very short amount of time, before she sipped a little more.

*'It is good. Can you tell who it is from?' she asked, then handed him the cup. He took a sip and swirled it around a bit before swallowing, then took another sip and swallowed again.*

*'Tastes like Dorcas, I think. Although I'm surprised Nathan and Rose left any behind for ships stores. We're always grateful when Healers are onboard, because ... well, you never know' he said, following it with a shrug.*

*'Dorcas is Drecks. You said only Cletus females produce milk like this'*

*'Ahhh ... sometimes... Depending on how a Healer is trained, it's possible they can provide substantially similar benefits to their milk. I was one of Dorcas' first trainers. I didn't know that would happen at the time' he admitted, but glanced aside somewhat uncomfortably.*

She sat still and stared at him for a full minute. Finally...

*'Lord Caldar ... is there nothing you cannot do?'*



He blinked before turning back and looking up at her.

*‘Well ... I can’t sing very well – not at ALL, according to some sources’* he offered lightly, before becoming somewhat somber. *‘I can’t keep people from fearing or hating one another. I can’t force anyone to be more concerned about their society as a whole, rather than their own petty desires’* he shared wistfully, now glancing away from her in human embarrassment.

*‘I can’t feed everyone, and I can’t make everyone feel safe. I can’t be sure if this trip will bring peace or war between humans and Vanir. I’m not one of the Gods, Sue. I kill quite easily, but I can’t bring people back from the dead...’*

He paused before looking up into her eyes again.

*‘At least... not all the time’*

She looked at him a few moments more, but finally nodded.

*‘No ... but you do what you can. I think I would like to join one of your survey teams. It may prove to be interesting’* she sent before taking another sip of Dorcas’ milk.

*‘They usually are’* he agreed before digging into his food.

### ***February 14, A New Day***

“How is Manya this morning, my love?” Petrus asked. He’d just come back from checking with Endo on the bridge watch, while she’d just returned from crews’ quarters.

“You’ll be happy to know...” she paused while stripping off her clothes, “...that Dorcas is now filling in for me in that department.”

After setting her clothes aside, she caught his look of disbelief.

“Whatever Ronnie did to her, it lets her make Cletus milk – or something pretty close to it,” she explained, before slipping into bed naked and looking at him expectantly.

“Well ... I guess you need someone to help you *out* this morning,” he teased her while standing still and enjoying the view.

“If you’re not *thirsty*, I’m sure someone *else* is – or I can send it to storage,” she suggested, before starting to sit up.

Before she could swing her legs over the edge of the bed, his clothes had left his body and dropped to the deck, with him joining her just moments later. Now snuggling together, she held his head and directed it to her fullest breast. She was tired of saving up for the pregnant and

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nauseated young Dreds wife, and missed him taking the pressure off her in the middle of the night.

### *In the Vanir Corridor*

Sasha was reading over the latest communiqués regarding that ‘special project’ they’d inadvertently triggered over a month ago on Base 4. The back trails from that one episode had meandered from Base 4, all the way to Base 1 and beyond. It seemed that whoever orchestrated the subversive plot, had started at the forward bases first; presumably because that’s where first contact with humans would be achieved. They were also bases having less oversight from more senior personnel, and subject to easier manipulation because of it.

Searching back through higher echelons didn’t produce *nearly* the same number of afflicted personnel, nor were they in very high places. Those doing the grunt work of the investigation were still working out the reasoning behind that – the current hope being that more senior officers were less susceptible to brainwashing. Neural implant victims were still prevalent, but Vanir Medical Technicians had failed to safely remove the implants during several attempts – many of them fatal.

Sasha reported up his command chain that the humans he was traveling with could safely disable and remove the implants, and had already admitted he and the humans had recovered the sixteen victims from Base 4 and extracted their implants safely. Subsequent video records of interviews with the survivors of the “destroyed” MEDPOD had convinced quite a few of his peers, but not all of them. The holdouts believed *humans* were behind the whole implant plot to begin with, which was the reason Ronnie had declined an invitation to return to any of the bases for a demonstration. That was despite the obvious inability of humans to create the fatally extracted implants to begin with.

“Any word on my request, Sasha?” S’Shac’Kah 38521 (“Sally”) asked.

“Not at this time, Sally.” He could feel his words fueling her frustration for yet another day...

A theory had been tossed around that the Prime might possibly have been afflicted, either by an implant, or by the more insidious brainwashing technique of their enemy – now presumed to be the S’Slich’Tah Warren.

If the proper urgency could be expressed, Sally had hoped confidential observational reports might be obtained from the Prime’s Senior Medical Technician. Depending on his observations, a better idea of the Prime’s *true* state of mind might be determined.

So far, they’d not convinced anyone of the necessity for this major breach of privacy.

Then Sally had asked Ronnie if he could look into the Prime's mind like he did the Commander of Base 4, but he'd explained that he'd never met the Prime *personally*, so he really couldn't get more than vague impressions from her, and only reason he'd been able to scan the Base 4 Commander was the fact that he'd been interacting directly with Sasha at the time.

As powerful as they were, even his Senior staff back on Kantor could only get impressions – *strong* impressions, true – but not dig down deep enough for detailed work. That was the reason he'd had Jaiying touch the Base Commander to make the *physical* connection that would allow her to peel away most of the layers of his mind.

At that figurative comment, her green tinge had paled a bit, but she'd quickly recovered and asked him how he'd been able to work remotely with her and Samuel. He'd explained it had taken a couple of days to work it all out, and he'd been sitting not a hundred feet away while doing so. Once he'd gotten them talking through their communicators, it was just a jump to cementing the silent connection between them so well.

Meeting Sasha for the first time was even easier. Samuel was with him and provided a Vanir reference for what he was first feeling and then reading from Sasha. Aside from that, once exposed to the concept, Sasha's mind had reacted surprisingly swiftly by pursing mindful communications on it's own. With Katie, it was just a slight touch while they'd passed in the conference room. Now, if Sally had ever met the Prime in *person*, they could then *both* go in search of her. With Sally's help, he could develop enough familiarity with the Prime to accomplish quite a lot – *maybe*. Unfortunately, Sally had never been in the presence of the Prime.

Likewise, Sue had never had reason to spend time with her mother; having been raised in a warren crèche and trained for her duties separately from the seat of power. Otherwise, she would have been the *perfect* conduit to connect them with the Prime...

~~~

Today, S'Ahi'Ma 41942 ("Silas") and S'Kala'Mak 41631 ("Katie") were in training under the guidance of Vanir Ambassador S'Shac'Kah 39496 ("Samuel"), and the subject was Humanity. Humanity as practiced by the Commonwealth and the Hegemony, that is.

Samuel was broadening their limited understanding of the social structures, politics, and interconnecting relationships within the Commonwealth, in comparison to the same relationships within the Hegemony. It was an uncomfortable contrast, as both Katie and Silas were getting an in-depth understanding of how the Vanir had so drastically interfered with the lives of so many humans on both sides of the split – the Fringe – and, thanks to their interference, how many worlds and *millions*

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of lives the Drecks had destroyed in creating it. It was a sobering lesson for both of them, and one that brought up worries in both of them, as well.

“Samuel, if we manage to arrive at Vanaheim unmolested, what assurances do we have the humans will not simply fire their weapon and destroy our Capitol?” Silas asked. “Katie tells me Ronnie once considered that as an option.”

Samuel blinked in temporary confusion, not realizing Silas had absolutely *no* concept of the power of the single weapon the *Kraken* wielded. A single shot at the Capitol would *not* stop at the surface of Vanaheim.

He took a breath and let it out slowly before answering.

“Yes. So Sally had told me. You have to remember that we have not been casual observers for many years, and this business of implanting weapons *within* human beings was a most distasteful decision – the origins of which we are still investigating. The Kantite Emperor has accepted the tracking implants as a reasonable ‘research tool’ – to use his words – but the bombs were tantamount to an act of *war*. It would be as if the humans had ships such as this hidden all over Vanir space and poised to strike at a moment’s notice,” he explained, now seeing them both shift their hue appropriately at the mere thought of it, before going on.

“Besides, Ronnie would not stop at destroying just the Capitol. He would eliminate the threat from us *completely*... Although I understand the Emperor’s wife has offered asylum to all of us currently associated with him.”

Katie momentarily froze at this comment, but quickly protested this questionable reaction by their host.

“But – but *would* he? Would he *really*? We’ve done *nothing* to him. We only–” Katie was silenced by a gesture from Samuel.

“He would not enjoy it. If he did it, it would not be something he desired. Petrus told me that Ronnie has been at war for most of his life – either fighting the Drecks, or fighting corrupt or inhuman regimes among humans of the Blight. That is the space towards the core from their territory,” he said, but saw their confusion.

He went on to explain how the scattering of humanity in collapsed areas had often fallen into despair, and how Ronnie and others had gone in, and either fought to restore order, or simply recovered all those who could be saved and brought them to safety.

Samuel had been impressed at Petrus’ description of those events, where both he and Ronnie worked together towards that end.

Petrus had avoided going into *too* much detail, which was probably just as well, but the fact that the Commonwealth put that much effort into restoring order and saving lives was indicative of a healthy society.

“Hopefully, Ronnie will listen to his Healers and follow their recommendations. No one on *either* side wants war ... with perhaps the exception of the S’Slich’Tah, and one or two other warrens. One of the reasons we are traveling so slowly is to allow time for the investigation to come to a conclusion. Ideally, it will not involve the Prime.”

“But ... what if it does?” Silas asked, which caused Samuel to look down at the tabletop for several seconds before he could muster his thoughts and raise his eyes to them again.

“Then, children ... then we might see another side of Ronnie that will not be all that pleasant to observe,” he finally said very quietly.

### ***Mid-Morning in Petrus’ Compartment***

“Where you *going*, my girl?”

“Things to do, Petrus. People to see,” Sai muttered while leaning towards the edge of the bed, but Petrus caught her and dragged her back.

“*Enough!* Let me *go* now!”

“Ah, Lass ... ‘tis no way to celebrate *this* auspicious day!” he teased her, then began tickling her mercilessly.

“Ack! Hey! *Stop it*, Petrus! *Stop*, or I’m gonna *hurt you!*” she cried out while struggling in his grasp; finally winning respite for a few moments, before he began nuzzling her neck, and working his lips up to her ear.

“*Enough*, Petrus! Not right *now!* Wait until *later!*”

“Wait? Ah, my love, you’ve no memory of this day at *all?*” he asked sadly, and she turned to look at him suspiciously. “It’s \*Saint Valentine’s Day,\* Sai. It’s a celebration of lovers on my *home* world.”

“Your *home* world? If you haven’t noticed, Petrus, we’re not *on* your home world at the moment!”

“And it’s our *anniversary*, my love,” he continued, then pecked her on the cheek. “Twas on this day we joined our hearts together, back there on Kantor.”

“Don’t be *silly*, Petrus. It was ... it was on the fifth month, during—”

“It was on \*February\* fourteenth, 1758 – Earth date. Today marks our two-hundred and forty-seventh anniversary ... I’m pretty sure,” he said, while flipping his fingers before nodding.

“And Maya was born the year after,” he added.

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“Oh Petrus ... you really *do* remember?” she asked while softening in his arms.

“How could I *not*, Sai? I remember *everything* we shared; all those days and *nights* together; that time on the beach on *Cletus*; all those attempts on my *life*...”

“I nearly *had* you when you and Ronnie stole that big gun, but you were too *quick*.” She smiled and sighed in sweet memory. “But I *never* suspected you were with the *Madman*.”

“The lad took pity on me and made sure our paths never crossed,” he admitted, before hugging her tighter. “*Oh Sai*...” he whispered, then began the gentle tickles that worked so well on her.

“*Oh Petrus*...” she murmured, and turned in his arms.

After all, it was only *one* day a year...

### ***February 16, Fueling Survey***

Endo was piloting the *Orca*, and Gallus was at the helm of the *Kraken's Child*. Both were about two minutes out from the *Kraken* and making long-range surveys of the two closest systems to the *Kraken's* flight path. Unfortunately, neither of them were getting readings of anything worthwhile from either system, and reported that to Ronnie, who was in the transport, which had been reconfigured from the faux MEDPOD.

‘*Rondal Caldar, should we not wait for them?*’ Sue asked. ‘*They are armed and we are not*’

‘*Ohh, the Gods hate a coward, Sue. Besides, it's not like we're gonna be shot at in space. Jumping in three, two, one...*’

The transport shifted, and two minutes later they found themselves at the outer edges of the third system. The preliminary scanner readings were already very favorable as far as planets were concerned, so he programmed in several micro-jumps to get them closer to the habitable zone.

Glancing over at Sue, he saw she was slowly regaining her composure after the jump, so he setup a slow survey pass with their passive sensors before taking a sip of Healers' milk, courtesy of Sai this time.

He sipped a bit more, then offered the rest to Sue, who gulped it down gratefully.

She closed her eyes for a few moments, then settled back; relaxed, once again, and muttered something under her breath.

‘*What was that?*’

*'If Mother only knew... The Prime! I meant the Prime'* she quickly corrected herself. *'Rondal Caldar, I meant no disrespect! I – I...'*

*'I am not of your warren, Sue, and I understand the difficulty of growing up as a mere tool among those in power. Sally tells me some warrens maintain close relationships with their offspring?'*

*'The lower orders, certainly. They have no–'* She cut herself off, her color shift indicating embarrassment as she continued to remain silent from then on.

After a short wait, the scanners picked out a reasonably-sized planet the sensors indicated had water on it, along with an atmosphere of some kind – *possibly* breathable, if he'd read the readings correctly.

Upon jumping the ship closer, he noted it had three tiny moons, along with a scattering of loose debris surrounding it, so he made a cautious approach and inserted the transport into a low orbit above it. Once in orbit, he could see it had a nice mix of land mass with water.

On the forward monitor, the bottom camera displayed the planet slowly rotating beneath them, and he smiled in anticipation before going on with what she'd been about to say a bit earlier.

*'The lower orders have no vast responsibilities and hold no important place in Vanir society? Humans often forget that even the lowliest of servitors are necessary to the overall maintenance of society. I'm sure the Prime would be ill-pressed to wash her own clothes, or cook her own food, or perhaps trim her own trees, while still...'* he paused, looking at her looking at him strangely.

*'All right ... perhaps clothes were the wrong example'* he said, noting her lack of any covering other than the slim shoulder strap carrying her small kit, and a few digital accessories.

Light reflecting from the planet's surface glared from the monitor and onto her face, and his return glance showed a stretch of rippled blue-green covering a goodly portion of the surface immediately approaching them.

*'Look! Water!'*

He dropped the transport from orbit and began a rapid descent to three-thousand meters before continuing.

*'My point is that everyone has a place in society. If you neglect to properly support those of a lower station, you often find that your lofty position is in jeopardy'*

*'How can that be? Those below us know their place, and if not, they can easily be replaced'*

## The End of the Road

*'And if you treat the replacements just as badly, then how long do you think they'll be content to be your whipping ... Vanir' he finished lamely.*

He ran through his memories but found nothing she could relate it to, and her expression of confusion only confirmed it. He decided on a different example.

*'Let us say you replace a difficult servant with another. And the second servant also fails to provide the level of service you need. Do you replace the second servant in the dwindling hopes you'll eventually find a servant who can support your needs, or do you examine your needs and discover what the real problem is?'*

*'You talk in circles, Rondal Caldar. What are you trying to say?'*

*'What I'm saying is you don't expect servants to build spaceships, and you don't expect engineers to sweep floors. If the task is too difficult for one person, then it doesn't matter how many times you replace that one person – the job will still not get done properly'*

*'Well ... certainly. That makes sense' she conceded.*

*'And it doesn't matter if that person sweeps floors or designs spaceships. They each still have a sense of self-worth, and an expectation of reward for work performed well'*

The distant shoreline was approaching slowly, and he dropped them down to a thousand meters.

*'So you're saying servants should be entitled to live in elegance and have servants of their own? That makes very little sense, Rondal Caldar. You, yourself, have servants on the ship who do your bidding, do you not? Sai Tal gives milk to ease your transitions. Donnel Ardan designs many interesting things for you, and yet lives in common accommodations, as do those who cook your food and clean the ship. The only individuals who seem to benefit greatly have been you, the Vanir, and the Human Ambassador – and she must share a compartment with her spawn' she said somewhat smugly, having figured she'd won the non-argument.*

*'I...' he paused, looking at her in frustration, while trying to figure out where he'd lost control of the conversation, before deciding to try another tack.*

*'Sue, can you please explain to me why the S'Slich'Tah Warren so desperately wants to destroy the S'Ahi'Ma?'*

*'Why? It should be obvious ... even to a simple human like you, Rondal Caldar. The S'Slich'Tah are wrong in their thinking, and the S'Ahi'Ma are right!' she declared smugly.*

The simplistic hubris of her statement amused him.



*'You're sure about that?'*

*'Certainly! Otherwise the S'Ahi'Ma would not have been selected to rule. That is why I felt it necessary to uncover their deception by joining the crew of Observation Station 6, and finding out for myself if the Prime had lied to her people!'*

*'Why didn't you just ask her?'*

He watched as doubt flickered in her hues, so he continued to press.

*'Seems like it would have been easy enough to go up to her and ask, "Hey Mom, are you working a side deal with the S'Slich'Tah that no one else knows about?"'*

*'One does NOT confront the Prime like that!'* she pushed strongly.

He picked up overtones of issues bouncing back and forth just under the surface; issues that probably shouldn't be brought up right now – as if he could stop himself.

*'No, I suppose one does not. Not even her loyal daughter. Still, it is the Prime's responsibility to lead and protect her people. It is her duty to guide them away from dangers, and support them in their endeavors to ensure a safe and healthy society. That's a big job for just one person. The Prime must also listen to her advisors, then balance and judge which suggestions can advance the Vanir, and which would cause them to weaken'*

*'That is what she does. Mother ... all day ... everyday. I don't see how she...'* she tapered off quietly.

*'And perhaps this isn't the sort of task you find yourself looking forward to?'* he suggested gently, and she turned a stricken look towards him.

*'My father was the Emperor of the Commonwealth, Sue. I saw him ... once in a while. While he was alive, he didn't even recognize me as his son. And he was so fearful of the Drecks' he mused while shaking his head slowly.*

*'Was he alone? The Prime is alone, except for her Senior Medical Technician. He ... he cares for her, but she doesn't see it ... doesn't see him ... doesn't see us – the REST of us'*

*'It sounds like the Prime could use a vacation'* he suggested, but an alarm sounded on the console before she could respond.

He checked the cloaking controls while shifting the transport up and sideways from the ocean's surface, before finally silencing the alarm.

*'Endo ... Gallus ... Surface contact, these coordinates!'* he quickly sent, then rattled off their location. *'Report in system!'*

They would be in system in less than three minutes; *hopefully* sooner.

## The End of the Road

‘What is it, Rondal Caldar?’ Sue asked during the lull.

‘Something down there is radiating. Interesting...’ He paused and checked the readings on the *modified* sensor detector Donnel had installed – *again* without asking.

‘It’s a tracking implant somewhere on the surface’ he explained, then fed the signal into the *modified* sensor analyzer Donnel had *obviously* also had his fingers into over the last month.

‘It looks like ... Vanir?’ he shared with her.

### ***Planet-Side, Research Station Alpha***

Director S’Slich’Tah 28476 knew it was a minor risk, but he *had* to get outside, if only for just a few minutes. Vanir were *not* meant to be kept cooped up like laboratory animals. He didn’t mind treating their *human* subjects this poorly, but after all, they were only animals. He stayed close to the walls while outside of them; believing in their ability to shield his essence while viewing the desolate seascape in front of him.

‘S’Slich’Tah 29531 was a fool! She *NEVER* should have pushed this far so fast. Now we’re *ALL* of us stuck on this barren rock; waiting in vain for a signal to return home,’ he thought to himself bitterly.

He slowly walked from one end of the railing to the other; each plodding step reminding him of what he’d given up for his warren leader. With a very heavy sigh, he turned and reentered the compound; sealing himself safely inside once again.

### ***The Transport***

‘It’s gone,’ he muttered aloud. ‘*The signal has gone silent*’ he silently repeated for Sue.

‘What does it mean?’

‘It usually means someone has died. I suppose someone could have been listening and picked up our sensors, but we’ve been mostly passive up to this point – and I don’t know why that would trigger anyone to ... well, terminate anyone – particularly a Vanir’

‘Are you sure it was an implanted Vanir?’

He turned and looked at her, before going back over the settings, and rechecking the biological readings off the sensor log.

‘Heart rate, breathing ... those could be similar enough to humans, but the emotional content is multiplexed compared to a human. It reads either angry or frustrated. It kinda fits the description of a Vanir; at least according to the sensor markings’ he pressed, then showed her the trace lines from the log.

*'I've never seen anything like that from humans. Perhaps it is another species of human?'* she suggested.

*'It would have to be something special. I've touched most every type of human out there since ... since I was able to ... except maybe for the Bornat. But I can't imagine them moving in down here, let alone letting themselves be implanted. They're very particular about privacy'* he shared, then sat back in confusion.

*'Ronnie – Endo and Gallus in system! Status!'* Endo reported.

*'We are here'* he replied, and fed them their current location. *'We performed a standard passive survey over the planet below until we reached this area...'* he paused, sending along another set of coordinates on the surface *'...where we picked up what looks like a Vanir hosting an implant of its very own'*

Ronnie thought he'd have to have another talk with Donnel about unreported modifications to his ships.

*'That doesn't sound like something a Vanir would do'* Gallus observed.

*'No, it does not'* Endo agreed. *'Your orders, Lord Caldar?'*

*'Leave the fuel pods in high orbit and go in with full cloaks and cycling shields. Endo – low approach with passive sensors over the suspect area ... full opticals, as well. Gallus – maintain high cover. Load number one's, but hold fire unless fired upon'*

*'Understood' 'Understood'* echoed from both of them.

Thirty minutes and multiple passes later, the boys had nothing substantial to show for it, and reported such.

*'Very well. Pick up the fuel pods and let's get a load of fuel while we're here. Ahhh, let's just go away from the suspect area to do it. I'll do a light active on the ocean to confirm a safe pickup area'*

*'On the way, Ronnie' 'Lifting now, Ronnie'* each reported, then left to get their empty fuel pods.

*'Well ... guess we can drop back down and see how deep that water is'* he muttered silently, before starting an active probe once he was in position.

With reflected depths down to three hundred meters or more, he relayed his location, and the boys brought the tanks down to refuel.

*'How long will it take?'* Sue asked.

*'We're down a little over a third ... about three trips each ... plus the refill. We'll be here for at least a few hours or longer. Would you like something to eat?'* he asked politely.

## The End of the Road

### ***Research Station Alpha***

“Director! Where *were* you? We’ve detected interference in the atmosphere, and our instruments are picking up very strong emanations on a band very close to the tracers!”

“Ridiculous! *Nothing* works on those bands except tracers, and we know all the *sub*-bands in use!”

“No – you do not *understand!* These are the *same* bands we’ve been working with in the lab with our *human* test subjects. They are close *by!* They may even be *here!*”

“*Absurd!* They don’t have the *technology!*” he shouted, but the readouts he was led to cooled his spirited arguments. “Check the main shield! Make sure it stays up! Shut down everything else! Is everyone inside? Are all the humans accounted for?” he got out in a rush.

“We did that as soon as the instruments recorded the *first* fluctuation! All are secure! What does it *mean*, Director? What are we to *do?*”

“We abide, my faithful companions, and if the time comes, we do what must be done,” he said with finality; placing a hand over his own personal implant – the one with a yield of only a few dozen kilos.

S’Slich’Tah 28476 thought it through a moment further, then added, “I believe it’s time to contact the warren. This intrusion must be reported. Encode and transmit all your instrumentation readings from the intruders. Perhaps it will be useful in tracking them. Perhaps even help to *destroy them!*”

### ***The Kraken***

Samuel entered the bridge, saw who was there, and nodded to the First Officer. Sasha followed him in and immediately noticed the large asteroid shell on the display screen in front of him. Apparently, they’d separated from the shell without comment to the passengers for the refueling evolution.

Sasha had never seen a human crew refuel a ship before and was curious as to their efficiency compared to the Vanir, so he’d been invited to observe from the bridge, and asked Samuel to accompany him.

“Any word from Rondal Caldar?” Samuel asked aloud.

“Ronnie says they found water in the third system, but they also found a tracking signal planet-side,” Petrus said in Vanir. “He said it gives off readings as if it were inside a *Vanir.*”

“*Really?* How *remarkable!* I can’t imagine *any* Vanir allowing something like that to–” He broke off at the look Petrus was giving him before continuing more sedately. “Yes, perhaps ... perhaps if the person in

question was not *aware* of it, I suppose that might explain it,” he considered, while still enjoying the break from using *mindspeak* to talk with a human.

“It *might*,” Petrus agreed. “Or it might be a special testing ground for S’Slich’Tah research.” Petrus turned and checked his instruments, then made a few fine calculations before making a ship-wide announcement.

“First Officer to crew. Stand by for a long jump – twenty-one seconds duration,” he announced, before turning back to Samuel and adding in Vanir, “You’ll probably want to sit down for this, Ambassador,” while pointing to a suitable Vanir accommodation – *new*, by the look of it.

‘*Endo ... Gallus, jumping to these coordinates*’ he reported, before sending them along.

‘*Received*’

“First officer to crew. Long jump in three ... two ... one.”

He sat still while the precision navigation system transitioned them to a precise location twenty-one seconds from their previous one, and brought them back into real space.

“And ... we’re here.”

Samuel watched him intently; looking for any signs of distress but not finding a single one ... unless you counted the evil smile he was sporting while viewing the navigation readouts and bringing up a sensor to scan for their fuel pods. Petrus was just as observant of him.

“Disappointed, Ambassador? We’ve made longer jumps than this, but we have a lot of academics on board whom we’d like to keep serviceable for the time being. And ... there’s Endo now,” his said quietly while reaching out and pointing to a blip on the forward screen.

Several minutes later, they all watched as Endo maneuvered the *Orca* into position with the oversized fuel pod attached via a tightened shield. The monitor flipped from camera-to-camera as the *Orca* slowly approached and passed under the *Kraken* to pause under the fuel access port. Petrus extended the hose and waited, while a crewman danced through a leashed-EVA exercise to attach the hose and empty the fuel pod of its contents.

Twenty minutes later, the load was transferred, the valves were shut, and the hose was disconnected; waiting for Endo to move out of the way so Gallus could take his place.

“One down and five to go,” Petrus muttered.

‘*Returning to pickup up point*’ Endo reported.

## The End of the Road

*'Hold, Endo. Let's have each of you fly cover for the other'* Petrus ordered.

*'Ronnie is still out there ... by himself ... in low orbit – or lower'* Gallus advised him haltingly.

This didn't take a whole lot of thought, so Petrus made the automatic decision.

*'Right... Endo, get back there and keep an eye on him. We'll jump closer when Gallus is done'*

*'On the way'*

Twenty minutes passed before Petrus made another ship-wide announcement.

"First officer to crew. Stand by for long jump – one-minute, thirty-seven seconds duration," he said while shaking his head slowly; knowing they'd have to make a few more trips back just to pick up the shell after refueling was complete.

### ***Planet-Side***

Ronnie had dropped the transport to wave height before pushing forward until just the edge of the coastline was visible. From that point, he crept forward until he was less than two kilometers from the shoreline; the cliffs overlooking the sea easily visible on the display. There he halted and set the controls for station keeping while reviewing the situation and talking it over with Sue during the process.

*'So we were about here when we first got the alarm. Then we proceeded to there...'* he indicated, drawing the initial point and termination point with a stylus on his data pad *'...before the signal suddenly cut off'*

*'That appears as the log suggests, Rondal Caldar'*

*'So, either the sensor is wrong and there was no tracer, or the tracer was there inside a warm body that, according to the sensor, was Vanir in nature'*

*'Or it was a tracer located within a species closely related to Vanir ... but no other species comes to mind'*

*'I suspect not'* he pressed, before reconsidering their current situation again...

He was alone with Sue, and the transport was unarmed.

Aside from the fancy cloak and the light-weight shields, they were vulnerable to *whatever* a planet-side base could throw at them, and at the moment, he'd just rather not find out...

Curiosity was still tearing him up inside, but he wasn't stupid; even knowing that Endo and Gallus had both done a full passive, plus a light active sensor scan of the area and reported nothing of note. He tapped the console in frustration a few times before getting up and pouring himself a drink from the small galley.

Having shipped with humans for the last few months, Sue easily picked up on his emotional turmoil and made a suggestion.

*'Rondal Caldar, can you reach out with your mind and sense anyone out there?'*

*'I ... good idea. I'll try'* he agreed, then sat down to concentrate on the image on the display, before closing his eyes and casting out for any loose tendrils of thought.

After several minutes, he pulled back with a sigh before sipping his drink and putting in more thought on the issue. After a pensive nod, this time he started slowly by reaching into the water just below them while trying to feel the essence of life around them. He was finally rewarded with impressions of aquatic life nearby, and followed what he now recognized as a school of *something* in the water that was headed towards shore, before abruptly turning at the shoals and heading away from the beach.

He let his mind drift on as he continued to extend, but found blankness shortly after hitting the edge of land. Casting about, he found *other* life forms, but nothing of significance until he pushed a kilometer further inland, and picked up the essences of more small animals.

Twisting left and right, he felt around the edges of the blankness, before picking up his stylus and manually sketching an area on his recorded map.

*'That's ... really weird'* he shared, then reached out again just to confirm what he *wasn't* feeling. *'Our survey shows plant life covering this entire coast, but there's a definite area here that doesn't have any life on it at all'*

*'You can feel the plants?'* she asked in surprise.

*'Not the plants themselves, no, but the small animals that live in them should be easy to pick up'*

He poked around again before giving up.

*'If we were better equipped, I'd be tempted to try grounding and snooping around a little, but ... let's get out of here'* he finally decided, then set the controls to reverse them away from the coastline while maintaining their low altitude for several dozen kilometers before returning to orbit to await the refueling crews.

## The End of the Road

They continued to monitor the situation passively while maintaining watch from orbit. Endo and Gallus continued their refueling cycles until the *Kraken* was topped off, then a spare load each was recovered for ready use. Ronnie followed them back to the much closer *Kraken* and docked, while Endo and Gallus continued to where Petrus left the shell so they could dock the spare fuel tanks by themselves.

Ronnie was hoping a more thorough examination of the optical recordings might shed some clues about the area in question, but planned to have Laisee's security team take a look at them with fresh eyes – right after they jumped back to get their asteroid shell around them again.

### ***February 19, Kantor, Radatel Keeps a Secret***

*'Lili, my love ... have you had any word from Rondal about that planet he refueled from?'*

She waited until the door closed after the departure of her latest visitor, before reaching out to reply.

*'No, my sweet. I understand Laisee's guardsmen are reviewing the information he's provided them'*

She closed her eyes and settled in her seat, before reaching out to see if her husband was keeping any new updates from her.

*'Ah, no matter. I'm sure my little brother will let us know of any important developments'* he shared, deliberately *not* sharing the contents of an encrypted message he'd just received.

She suppressed a silent chuckle at her sweet but clueless husband.

He'd held back this little secret of his; the deployment of a subset of his Covert Operations Team as Laisee's security detachment.

Lili had *her* minions aboard Rondal's ship, and he had *his*. He was very good at management, but she'd been his wife for over two *centuries*. She already knew most of the secrets he'd held back from her, and what few she didn't pursue, held no interest to her.

*'I will receive an update from Sai and Laisee later this evening, my Husband'* she sent with warmth behind it.

*'Then I look forward to our departure in ... two more hours. Until then, my Lady'*

*'Until then, my sweet'* she sent in closing, then glanced at the clock in her office; smiling serenely at seeing only two more hours to go.

Someone knocked at her door, and she let out a quiet sigh before bidding them enter.



***February 20, The Kraken, Survey Says ...***

It had been four days, and Ronnie was *still* wondering about that random signal they'd picked up at the refueling planet. He was hoping Laisee's contingent of spooks had finally picked out any details he'd missed. They *should*, considering how much effort his brother had expended in *getting* them assigned to his ship. Supposedly, they were along as Laisee and Dorcas' security detail for the duration, but had an *alternate* assignment, as well.

*That* little tidbit had revealed itself two days ago, when he'd finally put together all the tiny clues he'd witnessed among them; how they competed with a more professional attitude in the small gym; how they automatically sectorized and scanned a room when they entered it, and more *pointedly*, how they used obscure hand and eye signals when passing in the corridors. He'd also observed the elaborate dance they went through when watching the children; backing each other up, so the children were never really alone *anywhere* on the ship.

Hearing Petrus' knowing chuckle when he'd mentioned it to him just confirmed his suspicions, and Radatel had not been repentant when later called upon it. His argument had been that Lili already had *Sai* aboard and reporting directly to her, so he wanted someone aboard reporting to *him*. He'd asked Ronnie to keep knowledge of them from the Ladies, but then commented on how long it took his little brother to figure it out. The conversation had ended abruptly, with semi-rude comments being flung in both directions.

Thinking about it now, he chuckled at the memory of it, but held it in when someone knocked at his compartment door.

***In the Vanir Corridor***

Sue was quietly reading translations the linguistics technicians had programmed over the last several weeks, and was impressed with their complexity and thoroughness. They'd asked all the Vanir to take a look at whatever Commonwealth Standard documents were available in the ships' library – at their *leisure*, of course – and to please advise them if anything seemed awkward or outright improper on the Vanir-side of the translation.

They'd seemed quite pleased with themselves, and one might say justifiably so; given the differences in verb form and position between the two languages.

At the moment, she was almost done examining "*Observations of Fringer Reprisals During the Early Stages of Drecks Aggression*" but had stopped at the part where the Drecks had gone from raiding parties, to planetary siege weapons. Skipping ahead a few pages, she noted the listings of the planets subsequently destroyed, and the step-up in reprisals culminating in a full-on aggressive posture from the Commonwealth

## The End of the Road

Emperor. When the volume ended, it recommended its companion volume; *“Imperial Reactions to Drecks Genocide Attempts: Too Late and Not Enough?”*

She’d learned very little about Rondal Caldar, and that only from those already on the ship. Donnel Ardan had recommended she research some Commonwealth history, then accessed the library for her – suggesting *“Observations”* as a place to start.

As it scrolled on her data pad, the text presented a Vanir translation of the Commonwealth’s interpretation of the Drecks war.

From her position as an outsider, she could understand the confusion the humans must have felt with having the Drecks first attacking with raiding parties, then returning later with planetary crackers that destroyed entire *worlds*; almost *thirty* of them, according to the appendix in *“Observations”*.

Distasteful as it was, she finished *“Observations”* before searching for and finding a copy of *“Imperial Reactions”* in the digital library. It was somewhat bigger, so she poured herself a very watered-down juice drink before returning to her nest and beginning to read it. Somewhere in there she hoped to find a better understanding of Rondal Caldar.

### *In Ronnie’s Compartment*

Laisee watched quietly while Ronnie looked over the survey image on the room display. At a certain point, she both felt and saw his surprise at the vindication of his suspicions.

“Well no *wonder* we didn’t see it,” he said, while looking very closely at the display while just *barely* making out the broken outline of a walkway along the side of a bluff.

“Captain Avitus said he was surprised that you didn’t find it *yourself*, Ronnie. He said it seemed to leap right out at him when he first looked at it,” she teased him, and got a surprised look from him in return.

“Ha! *Got you!* My dear Teldrus says they would have taken a bit longer finding it, but the last thing Gallus did was shoot a ranging pulse into the general area after picking up the last load. Once he applied that echo to the map, an outline could be discerned. The search narrowed, and he reasoned that anyone stuck in an underground bunker might want to see the sky sometimes – and maybe an ocean view.”

“So there is someone down there!”

“There appears to be some sort of construction down there, yes. But we cannot imagine why a Vanir would be implanted ... or why they would be so far away from Vanaheim,” she said, then offered a shrug.

“Or how they could have managed to–” he halted before saying it out loud.

“Managed what, Ronnie?”

*‘Laisee... Walter, Lili ... kids!’* he sent out widely, and got immediate responses. *‘Does anyone know of ANYTHING that will block thought? We’ve found evidence of a void on one of the Vanir worlds that prevents passage of thought – or tracer signals, for that matter’*

The silence was profound for several seconds until Walter spoke up.

*‘Uhh, Grandfather... The Bornat have a means to block probes. I ... umm ... I was poking around their new ship, but couldn’t peek into the engine area. It’s a new drive type, but they didn’t want us to know about it, so they blocked it ... somehow’*

*‘A new drive type? And they blocked it?’*

*‘Yes, Grandfather’* Josie confirmed. *‘They want us to figure it out ourselves. That, and the mind shield they used to keep Walter out of it’*

*‘A mind shield? All this time, they’ve been sitting on this ... this....’* he was beginning to sputter.

*‘Yes, Grandfather. The Bornat were never into sharing too much’* Jaiying reminded him *‘But they’re leaving next week, so that will be one less thing to worry about’*

“Yes...” he muttered vaguely. “One less...”

*‘Rondal... Rondal! Pay attention, Rondal!’* Lili ordered. *‘You’ve found at least one instance of mind-shielding technology within the Vanir realm! Please transmit those coordinates to us for further evaluation. In the meantime, you have other issues to deal with – the most important of which is determining the reliability of the Vanir Prime! If the Vanir Prime is unwilling or unable to deal with Humanity truthfully, then steps must be taken to ensure the safety of Humanity! Laisee – I expect you to observe and report progress in this regard – or LACK, thereof! Rondal – continue your discussions with your Vanir associates, and work towards a suitable resolution. You may offer your assistance as you see fit. The optimum goal is peaceful co-existence. The MINIMAL goal is Humanity’s SURVIVAL!’*

*‘I hear and obey, my Elder’* Laisee sent.

*‘I hear ... and obey ... my Lady Lili’* Ronnie got out slowly, before she vanished from the conversation.

*‘Grandfather, where did you find the mind shield?’* Walter asked.

*‘Hmm? Oh ... ahh’* he quickly reviewed his memory and shared it with him, before grabbing the data pad, noting a few comments on the

## The End of the Road

information Laisee had brought to him, assigned a mailing header, and sent it off to be encrypted and transmitted back to Kantor.

*'Maps are on the way, Walter. And we detected a tracer with Vanir readings streaming from it'*

*'That isn't who they usually implant'* Josie commented.

*'No' Cathy agreed. 'Perhaps ... perhaps it's another exiled warren – like that group in the cloud above Kee?'*

*'Yes... Seems reasonable they'd want to put tracers into Vanir who fell from grace' Ronnie considered. 'We never checked on the Vanir in the cloud, but ... but they were in there before the technology was produced – or so I'm told'* He fell short of leaping onto that, but it did make sense of a sort.

*'Daddy Larl has one of the detectors in the lab. We can send a ship to the cloud and have them take a look'* Cathy suggested.

*'I ... yes... No! No more Drecks incursions for the time being! We've got enough going on without stirring things up anymore than necessary. Let things play out for a while, kids. Please!'*

*'Yes, Grandfather' 'Certainly, Grandfather' 'Let us know if you need anything, Grandfather'* came a chorus of voices that flicked out one by one, before Ronnie finally slumped into his chair in depressed dejection.

Laisee got up and fixed him a measure of ambrosia – a *small* measure – and brought it over to him.

Keeling beside the chair, she rested her hand on his arm and flushed a calming glow up it – noting that it wasn't rejected as Sai had reported that one time.

"Ronnie, I want you to drink this and then come lie down with me for a while," she murmured.

He took the cup and looked at her for a moment, before sipping from it; noting it was only partially full.

"Is this by your *order*, my Healer, or by your *command*, my Lady Caldarous?" he asked wryly.

"This is a request from your childhood friend ... for whom you were her first. I would share contentment with you, Ronnie," she said softly, then kissed the back of his hand.

"And I would be pleased at the sharing," he answered with a soft smile.

He stood and tossed back the rest of his cup, before setting the door to "privacy" for the time being.

### ***In the Vanir Corridor***

Sue put the data pad down and stretched.

It was a bit longer but much more informative regarding the “final” resolution to the Drecks problem ... at least as far as several years ago.

While it didn’t go into *specific* details of the Commonwealth’s failure at the Drecks home world of Zarox, it went on to suggest that the subsequent pull-back by the Drecks was most probably due to economic realities, more than anything the Commonwealth had done to the planetary seat of their power.

The appendix did mention in passing the loss of the Commonwealth Planetary Striker, and later recovery of the survivors by their own means after a period of six years. It also mentioned the court-martial, and cashiering of the commanding officer, one Captain Rondal Caldar sai Caldarous, at the hands of then Emperor, Rakel Aquintus Caldarous.

Nothing else about Ronnie was mentioned regarding that time period, and she searched the data-base for anything else on “Rondal Caldar sai Caldarous” but further searches only picked up a few random hits along the way.

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Sasha was going over the latest signals decoded from his ship – the ship he *used* to command – and considered both the source, and the implications of the request. It would not be an easy sell, so he decided to bring in the Ambassador and his assistant to consult with him.

Maybe even the local candidate for Prime.

### ***On the Way to Petrus’ Compartment***

A little later in the afternoon, Petrus walked along the corridor while having a conversation with the captain of Laisee’s guard and two of his guardsmen. They shared a quiet laugh, before turning their separate ways at a junction – they heading to the commons, and Petrus heading to the compartment he shared with Sai.

Petrus reached his door and felt within. He couldn’t do it as easily as a Healer, but was *very* attuned to Sai, and could feel her waiting inside. He smiled in anticipation as he opened the door.

“I’ve a request from Captain Teldrus, my girl! In addition to having Healers aboard every combat ship, he suggests we assign one or two *Kee* as well.”

She looked at him in surprise, but tilted her head in confusion.

There had been no reports of any problems with Lady Qiaolian and her small Healer staff.

## The End of the Road

“Are Mistress Yu and Mistress Ning less than accommodating?”

“He assures me those two are *quite* skilled, my love. It’s just that the Kee seem to have no problem keeping up with the physical needs of his *men!*”

“Ha! And how does he expect to pay for their *food*, one wonders?” she mused aloud, while slipping out of her robes.

“You know the Kee, my love. They can live on a *liquid* protein diet if necessary,” he teased her, while coming just close enough for her to strike out at him playfully.

They tussled for a while, before the giggling started, which was followed by heavy breathing and finally panting. At the end of the bout, they lay temporarily exhausted

“Ahhh ... and how was *your* day, my love?” he asked while basking in the afterglow of passion.

“It was going *fine* – right up until Ronnie told Lili the Vanir have a *mind* block. Or *something* like that.”

“A mind block? But we *all* have a mind block. I thought he wanted the Vanir to develop one anyway?”

“Not a *mind* mind-block. It’s a ... some sort of way to block a *physical* area kind of thing. Ronnie thinks they have some sort of technology that can block signals at that level – and *tracers*, as well. Walter said the Bornat already have that technology.”

“The *Bornat*? They *already*... No, they wouldn’t tell us anyway. They don’t play well with others, and they’re not into sharing,” he muttered with a half snort.

“And Jaiying says they’ll be gone in a week or so,” she muttered.

“Well ... good. One less thing to worry about, I suppose.”

“And Lili is upset with Ronnie – *again*. Petrus, I’m getting worried about him. I’m starting to think this is becoming too stressful for him.”

“Oh, you *think*? He’s got the future of the *Commonwealth* on his shoulders. The love of his life *rejected* him – *several* times. The Vanir have a *massive* internal security problem that he’d just *love* to get his fingers into so he could *fix it* – *if* it didn’t risk the possibility of an all out *war* with the Vanir – and he keeps getting *blocks* thrust before him every time he makes a little progress. Did you notice how *eager* he was to do something as trivial as refueling?”

“Petrus, I don’t know what else I can *do* for him. Laisee is with him now, but that’s only a distraction – not a *solution*.”

“But it’s a *worthwhile* distraction, my love, and I’m sure Ronnie appreciates it...” he paused and side-hugged her while considering something else. “Sasha and Samuel wanted to have a meeting with him, but his privacy marker was set, so they contacted me. They have a request for him ... something he *excels* at, I’m afraid.”

“Would it be *dangerous*?” she asked, but he just looked at her. “He’ll do it, won’t he?” she added, but it was mostly a statement

“If he could get his fingers into the Vanir problems...” he let it trail off, leaving her to fill in the blanks.

“He’d only go with assurances of safety for everyone,” she considered.

“We only have the one gun. But it’s a pretty damn good deterrent against *most* planetary defenses,” he reminded her.

“Let me guess ... the *implants*? Implants *and* brainwashing?” she asked, hoping that was *all* that was on the agenda.

“A little of both, I believe, but I’ll be going with him.”

“*NO!* You’re the *First Officer!* You *can’t* leave the ship when Ronnie’s *not available!* I won’t *allow it!*”

“Sai, you were First Officer for a *long* time. You’ll do *fine* while we’re out fooling around,” he assured her, but she rolled away from him anyway.

“Sai, you know I love you, but Ronnie needs a little extra help on this, and we’ve worked together for *years*. Besides, he *might* turn them down.”

She rolled back over and scowled at him.

“All right. Probably not, but it *could* happen ... *maybe*,” he teased her, and she reached out to hug him fiercely.

“It’s not *fair*, Petrus. I’ve just got you *back*, and now ... now he’s going to take you away *again*,” she murmured through her tears.

“I’ll be back, Sai. Ronnie’s always been good about that. At least he’ll bring back the *bigger* pieces,” he teased her again, but had to struggle between fending her off and holding her tightly.

“He’d better bring back enough for me to *rebuild!* And I want *this* back in *one piece!*” she insisted while reaching down and grasping him firmly.

“Not to worry, my love. If it gets misplaced, you can always grow me *new* one – a *bigger* one!”

He laughed, getting a squawk out of her and more struggling, which eventually degenerated into giggles and more heavy breathing.

### *On the Bridge*

It was early evening, and Ronnie was on the bridge checking their position and course. Glancing at the ship's timer, he noticed movement in the doorway. As Petrus entered the bridge, Ronnie turned his head and quietly asked, "It's early yet. Shouldn't you be abusing your *wife* right now?"

When the First Officer began to chuckle, Torga quickly looked at Petrus, then at Ronnie, while trying to put that comment into perspective.

"I leave that up to *you*, lad! With me and Sai, it's just like *old times!*"

"Still having to hide her *sword*, then?"

Petrus let out a guffaw that startled Manya, who'd been quietly sitting aside and reading a data pad. She looked up and saw the smiles on the First Lord and his friend, but noticed the confusion of her husband. Suppressing a tiny sigh, she decided to try and explain it to him later – if he would be willing to listen – before going back to her reading.

Ronnie gave out a disgusted sigh, then pushed away from the navigation console before updating Petrus on their current progress.

"Another sixteen days ... or so. Then we get back to 'relatively' known space where Sasha says we can safely crank it up to standard cruise again. That puts us in Vanaheim orbit in about seventy days."

Petrus waited a beat before testing the waters.

"Too bad we have to wait for the *Vanir* to deal with their problems. I don't mind going around making mischief, but these damn *pleasure cruises* can be a real bore – even traveling with the *Bitch Witch*."

Petrus let out a soulful sigh before settling into the seat next to the navigator's position; finally rolling his head to the side to stare at Ronnie wistfully. It was Ronnie's turn to laugh, and he did so with gusto.

That set the both of them off for more than a minute until they finally relaxed to the boring situation.

"You know, lad, I don't have any idea how to speed things up, but Sasha stopped by and–"

"GODS! Yes! Who do we have to *kill* to make this trip any *shorter?*"

Ronnie's outburst brought a delayed gasp from behind him, and he turned to see Samuel's panicked expression from where he was standing just outside the bridge.

"*Patience*, lad! The *Vanir* command has a little *request*, is all," Petrus told him, then tilted his head towards the doorway before Ronnie nodded and stood.



They made their way towards the door past Manya, but Ronnie stopped and looked at what she was reading on her pad. It looked like a Healer's volume on human gestation – with pictures and text in Drecks.

*“Looks like Lili's keeping the linguists busy,”* he muttered in Cletus. *“Surprised she's letting them translate and digitize that stuff.”*

*“One of the Seniors aboard, Lady Qiaolian, is working with one of the lady linguists,”* Manya said – in Cletus. *“It is supposed to be the child nurturing volume of the series.”*

“I remember *reading* it in Cletus,” he said, smiling and nodding at her in recognition of her new language skills, before taking a closer look at her. “You're about six ... *seven* weeks now? You're going to be a *beautiful* mother.”

She blushed a bit, but glanced over at her husband, who also shared a smile with her.

“But don't follow *this* guy's example for child rearing,” he said; tilting his thumb towards Petrus. “He's left kids behind all *over* the place,” he added, then moved through the door.

“Hey! *That's* not true!” Petrus exclaimed, and quickly caught up with him in the corridor.

“No? Maya on Cletus. Diane back on *Earth*...”

Their argument continued down the corridor; finally hearing Petrus disclaim any parentage of a daughter by someone named “Mallory” from a place called “Madame Caftan's” before the door shut behind them.

Manya had followed that conversation with a slight frown on her face, while Torga walked over to squat down and hug her.

“You are beautiful *now*, and you'll be even *more* beautiful when you bring my *son* into this life,” he murmured, before kissing her on the cheek, then going back to his bridge position.

She thought about it for a moment, but decided to save *that* bit of disappointment for a later date. Tonight she'd try to explain to him the relationship between the First Lord and Commander Zickgraf.

### ***Kantor, Elder's Office, Considering Her Options***

Momentarily relieved of the fairly constant stream of reports for her review, Lili sat quietly in her office ... which was a *rare* moment for her these days. Moments like this made her envious of her husband.

Radatel ran his offices like a regular *business*, with regular *business hours*, unlike his father, who'd micromanaged with a ferro-ceramic *fist* – right until his fatal split with reality.

## The End of the Road

Radatel had wisely withheld any suggestions on how to improve her efficiency, although she'd often felt his concern over her increasing stress levels – especially now that Rondal had reported a *new* situation with their neighbors down below.

She let out a calming breath before focusing on that new information, which had been of great interest to her and her immediate staff, but something that would put the *majority* of her management and operatives at a definite disadvantage if distributed wildly throughout the Commonwealth and Hegemony – *if* Rondal's suppositions turned out to be true. Hopefully he was wrong, and it was just faulty sensor readings.

Rondal was there, and would deal with it. With so much at stake, she knew *nothing* would stop him from dealing with it. The only question was, if he *should* deal with it. The fact that he was acting as a common carrier on this venture didn't relieve the Commonwealth from responsibility for his actions – *however* well-intentioned they might be.

The current situation was very fluid, as the ruling body of Vanaheim didn't seem to have a firm grasp on her government, or at least, certain subversive elements *within it*. Unfortunately, dealing with subversive elements was something Rondal *excelled* at – albeit somewhat *messily* at times.

She closed her eyes and fought off the dull ache threatening to form behind her forehead. First it was Vanir neural implants in their *own* people, and now *this*.

Lili looked up and saw her water glass was empty, but knew where to find a chilled bottle of ambrosia. She was about to get up and retrieve it, when she was interrupted.

'Lady Lili, do you have a moment, please?' Sai called to her.

### ***Cletus, The Elder's Council, Xue's Chambers, A Conundrum...***

Lady Xue had received the latest updates from the Elder's office on Kantor, but *hated* the role of being the bearer of bad news to the rest of the Council. The possibility of *actual* thought-blocking technology was bad enough, but that it might reside with their new enemies below them was *intolerable*.

Xue had her own thoughts on the matter. It wasn't as if they had any way to actually deal with the Vanir themselves, and the Commonwealth did not have the military means to prosecute a *successful* eradication program on their behalf. Basically, they were *stuck*.

While Wen and Daiyu had been ambivalent about the situation, Rong had been angry, but Ju had been just about *apoplectic!* I mean, *really?* They literally had *no way* to interfere with the Vanir. By the *Gods*, they

couldn't even figure out who this mysterious Senior Staff of Kita's pet *Man-child* was!

At least her personal level of stress might be lower soon – hopefully *after* Ju transitioned and became the new spokesperson for the Council. Then she wouldn't have to deal with it her herself, and could simply sit back and watch *Ju* go insane with the daily details.

That caused her to think of Meixiu; her current host. They'd been together for a little over three centuries now, and perhaps it was time to free Meixiu to start her life over again? The thought of a *new* untalented volunteer hosting her was comforting in its way, although the learning curve was always a trial in itself.

She flopped onto her bed and tried to relax, but Ju's behavior was simply over the *top*. They were on Cletus, but Liling was in the *seat* of political power over on Kantor. She supposed they could simply advise Liling *directly*, but then they'd have to actually *reveal* themselves to her – except that she was only “acting” as the Elder. Of course, now that the Visions were really *gone*...

She stopped at that line of thought. Seniors were still observing and seeking out any individuals who were experiencing the same kind of chaos Senior Kita had experienced when Kita's predecessor had passed so unexpectedly.

So far, no one had been detected, but they all remained hopeful.

As for the *other* matter, Liling still held great confidence in the champion she'd selected to enter the demon's den, so the Council had agreed to let it play out – for the time being.

Xue stared up at the ceiling for several seconds before closing her eyes and reaching out to see if she could gather any stray thoughts from their minion on Kantor; focusing intently while listening very quietly, as Liling seemed to be leaking more than usual with the *extra* stress she was now dealing with on a daily basis.

Afterwards, maybe ... maybe she and Meixiu could share a private interlude for *themselves* before submitting to slumber?

### ***February 21, In Vanir Space, A Plan of Attack***

Sasha and Samuel had presented the plan, the one that Sasha's superiors had agreed to, just the night before. It was conditional, of course, and only if it could be proven that humans had the *only* means to disconnect and remove an implant from one so afflicted. The *other* issue – reversing a *brainwashing* – was *another* container of burrowing dirt dwellers that *no one* wanted to be involved with; even as the evidence from Base 4 was being covertly disseminated to select inquiring parties.

## The End of the Road

As before, they'd come up with a script, then set a time to play it out that was scheduled for later this very afternoon.

### ***Kantor, Lili Makes a Call***

She'd thought it through, then consulted with the kids and the Ladies ... *most* of them, anyway. As the Senior Staff had assured her, it really was a suitable test to perform, and could reap potential benefits for the future if it worked as suggested. If *not*... Well, Rondal was there to deal with the results, and would make any adjustments to reverse them. She sipped her drink, settled back on the patio, then reached out nearly fifty minutes to find the subject of her request.

*'Rondal, do you have a moment, my precious boy?'*

*'Why, Lili! For you I have a whole minute!'*

### ***In Vanir Space, The Kraken, That Afternoon***

"The only question, Rondal Caldar, is if it can be done safely," the data pad's voder announced in Standard.

Ronnie looked down at the data pad while it was speaking, then back up at Sasha before responding to his statement...

They were back in the mode of documenting Vanir/Human discussions for the usual "cover-your-ass" purposes, but the audible translations were a suggestion from Samuel ... having received negative feedback from officials at Base 4 over some of their previous "text-based-only" recordings...

"The fact that implants can be removed without harm to the victim is already evident from the personnel recovered from Base 4," Ronnie stated tiredly. "However, there is a *valid* concern for the personal safety of the Commonwealth Healer who would be performing the removal."

There was quiet in the room while the data pad converted Standard back into spoken Vanir, before Sasha could reasonably respond.

"My superiors have promised the safety of you and your crew in return for your very generous assistance in this endeavor, Rondal Caldar," he said, then waited for the voder to finish his first comment, before continuing. "The goal is to return our afflicted Vanir citizens to a state of mental clarity by the neutralization of the implanted devices that currently reside within them. You have the means to—"

As scheduled at this point in the script, Samuel interrupted.

"If I may... Rondal Caldar, as before, we do not ask this with any other consideration expected from the Commonwealth or the Hegemony. We offer no concessions, nor expect any other considerations from you or your

crew – other than those from one intelligent species to another during a situation of difficulty, of which only *one* option has become available as a solution.” Samuel sat back after having leaned forward to press the issue. Meanwhile, Ronnie waited while the translator and voder did their thing.

“So we now have assurances the ‘safe passage’ *originally* granted by the Prime’s order – which had been summarily rendered *worthless* by picket ships sent from your Bases 1 through 4 to *intercept* me – is somehow *magically* reestablished, and we may now proceed to Vanaheim in *safety*?” he asked somewhat skeptically.

This was slightly off script, but Sasha took it in stride and pressed on.

“Rondal Caldar, I have presented evidence to you supporting the results of my superior’s investigation into the allegations of Vanir command problems that you, *yourself*, led us to discover on Base 4, along with the *remaining* bases, plus several other commands,” he said awkwardly, while trying to return to the script.

He wasn’t quite sure where Ronnie was going with this, but plowed ahead, anyway.

“The evidence shows that a person or persons currently unknown had caused unauthorized orders to be issued in conflict with the invitation of safe passage guaranteed by the Prime.”

Ronnie waited again while the voder finished.

“Commander S’Kala’Mak 32246, as the Ambassador can assure you, I do not take the safety of my crew lightly. Nor do I wish to incur the wrath of the Prime – or that of my Emperor.”

He waited for his translation to finish and for the Vanir to look up at him again, before going on.

“In that regard, I will say that I *could* allow certain of my crew to perform medical interventions to help Vanir victims of this terrible crime. However, any action from Vanir that brings harm to any of my crew or my ship will result in a grave response on my part. You are aware of the primary weapon aboard my ship, and you have notified your superiors of it.”

It was a statement, not a question – and both Vanir were stunned into silence. Finally, Samuel found his voice.

“Rondal Caldar ... the Prime has given me her word assuring your safety during this passage and your return home – *regardless* of the outcome of negotiations. The fact that certain unforeseen events have occurred – *unauthorized* events, I must add – does not negate the Prime’s word or her intent. You have every right to refuse us help in this internal matter, but we find that, *without* your help, we will most likely lose many

## The End of the Road

Vanir lives. Likewise, I understand your concerns for the safety of your crew and ship, and ... and I understand the ramifications of any attack on your crew or ship – something that *no* Vanir in their proper minds would condone or commit.”

Ronnie sat there and looked at both of them. He didn't like putting them on the spot, but needed to get the message back to Sasha's superiors that he would *not* accept any more interference from them – or from anyone *else* in Vanir space. He let the silence stretch out for a full minute before relenting.

“Very well, Ambassador. I will provide transportation and security for a medical team that will service the request of the Commander's superiors. I will require Commander S'Kala'Mak 32246 to act as liaison between the human transport pilot and the Vanir command. I will require Senior Medical Technician S'Shac'Kah 38521 to assist the human Healer who will be performing the extremely delicate work of disconnecting the device from the Vanir nerve nexus. I will expect her to follow along diligently, such that she learns how to perform this particular operation by *herself* in the future.”

“You ... you expect Sa... S'Shac'Kah 38521 to learn this procedure?” Samuel asked, somewhat surprised by this new twist.

“Yes. I have been informed that my earlier concerns regarding the transfer of certain Commonwealth skills and medical knowledge have been *overruled* by my superiors. I am to accept with ... *full confidence* ... the integrity of those Vanir chosen to receive this training,” he stated hesitantly...

That decision had come as a *complete* surprise to him, considering how much he'd agonized over his concerns that the Vanir would become even *more* dangerous if left to develop these skills in their own way once taught the basics. Lili's decision did provide a small measure of comfort, though. If things turned sour, it wouldn't be completely *his* fault any longer...

“I – I see. Do you have any other requirements, Rondal Calder?” Samuel asked, while trying to wrap all the segments of his mind around Ronnie's comments.

Ronnie could think of a great many things he'd like to stipulate, but they'd covered the basics – except for a few other little tidbits.

“Any of the recovering Vanir who wish to do so, may be repatriated at the first base on the schedule. Those choosing to remain behind for further treatment are welcome to stay. For the transport itself, I *will*, of course, be providing escort.”

“Escort?” Sasha asked, but Ronnie bared a grim smile at him.

“You've ridden in him before.”

Sasha's pause was very slight.

"Understood, Rondal Caldar. When may we set out for Base 3?"

Ronnie checked a window on his data pad to confirm the numbers.

"We are ... thirty days at standard cruise from Vanaheim, eighteen days from Base 3. We can jump the transport and escort to Base 3 in just under 4 days ... or about six hours, real-time – if no one objects."

He looked at Sasha and saw that he didn't flinch.

"Once there, we should be done in less than a day. Then we can head to Base 2. It would save some time if the victims from Base 1 were transferred to Base 2 for treatment, but it is not necessary."

"I'll make the request, but ... an injury of this kind ... involving the mind... I understand that extended jumps are not recommended..." Sasha trailed off.

"You are correct. Forgive me. I do not deal with many issues of this nature. As this is not an injury, but an unauthorized *medical* procedure, I will go along with the recommendations of your Senior Medical Technician." He paused for a moment when he thought of something else. "Ahh ... if any the Vanir aboard here wish to return with us, they will need medical clearance from your Senior Medical Technician."

"Thank you, Rondal Caldar," Samuel said. "I will ask S'Shac'Kah 38521 to evaluate them for transport."

"Very well, then. We can be ready the day after tomorrow," he said, then stood. "Will you require anything more, Commander? Ambassador?"

"Your ... escort. Will you require a translator to go along with the pilot?" Sasha asked.

Ronnie quickly danced over Sasha's thoughts. If the opportunity somehow arose, Sasha was thinking of getting Katie safely back into Vanir custody, but he was still ambivalent about it; *despite* what Lili had told him earlier.

"I had not thought about it," he said truthfully, but considered another option. "The data pads seem to work rather well, so far, but I will consider a volunteer from the available pool, should someone come forward."

He proffered them a slight bow before leaving the room; ticking off the recorders just before closing the door. Samuel and Sasha were left to stare at each other while wondering what he was thinking of, and why. Petrus figured he knew what was plaguing the boy's mind, but kept it to himself. It was not something to be shared in mixed company.

## The End of the Road

### *Late Afternoon*

Ronnie walked uneasily back to his quarters after a rather bland early supper. He didn't like what he'd been ordered to do, and technically, despite being the instrument of the Commonwealth in dealing with the Vanir to begin with on paper – or rather, the lack of it – he was *still* effectively a pirate working outside the boundaries of Commonwealth law. However, Lili was Lili, and now she was the *Elder*, too.

'*She must be mad!*' he thought, while reluctantly heading back to his quarters. He needed to wash and prepare for the next task on his list.

### *Early Evening*

Jaiying was helping her mother straighten up Grandfather's borrowed compartment, before he arrived for his assignment.

"Mother, may I watch while you and Grandfather–"

Laisee shushed her before she finished.

"Jaiying, you already know how delicate this topic is between human adults – even among those in the Kantite upper classes. What your Aunt Lili wants Ronnie to do is quite ... unusual. I'm surprised he agreed to it at all," she said quietly.

"Aunt Lili can be very persuasive. And she's the *Elder* now. Grandfather is *supposed* to obey her."

"Yes, Jaiying. Your Aunt Lili is the Elder now, but this is a *very* unusual situation she's putting him in."

"Don't you *want* to help Grandfather, Mother?"

"I will do my very best to help him, and Déjà will be helping, too. *You*, my darling, are supposed to be spending the night with *Rose*," she pointedly reminded her, before putting the cloth she'd used to wipe down the sleeping platform into the wash hamper.

She continued puttering around until a knock came at the door. Opening it, she found Déjà standing there beside a cart carrying a stack of towels, and an assortment of liquids. Outside the door, she could see both her and Jaiying's guardsmen quietly standing by. Déjà pushed the cart inside and rolled it into the interior room next to the sleeping platform. Jaiying helped her set out towels and oils, while Laisee waited for Ronnie in the outer chamber.

### *On the Way to His Assignment*

He'd washed, rinsed, dried, and dressed. Then he'd checked himself over, before reluctantly heading to his next meeting, but was almost immediately accosted by his First Officer.



“Lad! I hear you have a *special* assignment this evening!” Petrus prodded him jovially as he approached from behind in the corridor.

“*Gods!* Does the whole *ship* know?”

“Just the Healers ... *most* of them, anyway. And probably the kids.”

“Terrific...”

“Well, as long as *certain* parties don’t find out too soon, you should be all right! You need any *pointers*, lad?”

“No. Wait... *What?* Don’t tell me *you’ve* already–” He stopped and gave Petrus a skeptical look.

“Ha! No, lad. *Thought* of it, and the ladies are certainly *charming* enough, but alas, I’ve never had the opportunity. Besides, I’m sure word would eventually get back to Sai, and I’d *never* hear the end of it!”

“If she let you *live*...” Ronnie muttered.

“Well ... there *is* that, yes. Still, a woman is a woman, lad! Treat ‘em right, and they’ll take care of you!”

“That’s *not* exactly what I had in mind,” he muttered.

“Well ... *what* then?”

Ronnie told him ... somewhat awkwardly.

“So you’ll not even really need to ... *participate?*”

“*Hopefully*, no.”

Petrus thought about it while they walked along together, until they reached his corridor and stopped.

“Lad, do what is right and proper. And do what Lili *tells* you. If it doesn’t work, then fine – it’s been an interesting night. If it works, then *Lili* will have to live with the consequences.”

“We’ll *all* have to live with the consequences,” Ronnie muttered darkly.

“You’ve done it often enough *before*, lad! Once more into the *breach!*” Petrus laughed and clapped him on the shoulder, before turning towards the quarters he shared with Sai; with Ronnie staring daggers at him all the while.

He finally gave out an unhappy sigh before continuing towards his *own* destination until finding himself standing outside the right door – the one with two guardsmen standing by it.

He shook his head and knocked, then entered without waiting for an answer.

## The End of the Road

### *The Vanir Corridor, The Ambassador's Compartment*

"The meeting went *well*, my Samuel?" she asked him.

Sally was fresh out of the shower and still draped in a towel, while drying herself beside the nest they shared.

"Anything *but* well, my love. Ronnie seemed to have too much on his mind. He could hardly keep to the script. He was wandering all about it, and making such *provocative statements!*"

"Provocative statements? *Ronnie?*"

He was watching her with interest, and she *really* wanted to stay with him, but there was an appointment that needed to be kept.

"Yes. *Very* off-topic. And while the *recorder* was running. He agreed to the mission, of course, but then ... then he said *you* were to observe and learn to perform the procedure *yourself!* Do you... Sally, have they taught you enough skills for *that?*"

"Sai Tal says I am becoming much better. She's hoping Jaiying will be able to teach me how to do it by myself. I can almost see the implant clearly, but not the connecting filaments. It is much better than the *first* time I observed one within Sue, though."

He looked at his mate and admired her spirit, and determination – *and* her body. He wondered what it was like to be able to see the *insides* of a body; to be able to locate areas of damage, and then trick the body into fixing itself more quickly than it could naturally do so, on its own. To be able to *see* the eggs that his Sally carried within her body; merely waiting for a safe place to nest them in preparation for hatching.

Why, she could probably tell which ones were fertile even *before* they left her body!

*Humans!* So clever, determined, and capable. *Very* capable. And Ronnie was taking the *Kraken's Child* to fly cover for the transport. He dreaded the prospect of it – remembering the hole in the pad at Base 4 that had never been sufficiently explained.

He poured a juice drink and sipped it gingerly; sincerely wishing Sally had time to stay with him for a while. Duty called, however, and if she was expected to learn how to service Vanir as a Commonwealth Healer, then she needed to take advantage of every bit of training they offered her ... this time with Lady Laisee's help for the next several hours.

He sighed and sipped more juice, while Sally put away the towels and donned her kit. She slid her tail between his legs and pressed against his special spot, dashed her tongue at his lips, then hugged him tightly, before slipping away and out the door with a soulful glance at him in parting.

After the door closed, he sighed once again, then curled into their nest – relaxing and letting his thoughts drift for a while, as he wondered who Ronnie might choose to take with him as a translator.

### *At the Assignment*

“Ronnie! You look *absolutely* ... unhappy,” Laisee remarked drily as he entered the room.

He looked around, then remembered this compartment had a separate sleeping chamber in the rear. He could hear Jaiying and Déjà chatting away quietly in the other room.

Wait... Were they chatting or ... *chittering*?

He dismissed that thought with a shrug, then paid attention to Laisee, who'd poured him a short cup of ambrosia in honor of the occasion.

“I’m told Lili has informed *all* the Healers of what is supposed to transpire within these walls?” he asked obliquely, and she nodded gravely.

“*Wonderful*. Just ... just *wonderful*,” he muttered disgustedly.

“Come, Ronnie. It won’t be *that* bad,” she assured him, then had to suppress a giggle at her poor choice of words.

“Sai and I have played together while Sally was with us, *and* while Déjà and Kiki were playing with *her*. It all works as it’s supposed to, and Lili assures me Sally should respond just as humans do.”

He shot her a disgusted look, then backed it up with words...

“It was *never* proven conclusively that it was required for ... for what Lili wants to accomplish. And it seems to be–”

“Yes... A step *further* towards making the Vanir stronger against us than you’d like. This is *will* happen, Rondal. I will extract Lili’s Gift from *you*, and apply it to *Sally*. If it works, then we have gained a powerful ally within the Vanir society who can–”

“*Easily* spread the teachings to both female and *male* Vanir until it gets too far out of hand to *deal with!* You know how dangerous this is, Laisee! You know how dangerous it was for *us!*”

“You mean ... how dangerous it is for *you*, don’t you?”

“I... Yes! You know what I’m capable of! *Gods!* The kids can *vaporize* Vanir platforms from the comfort of their bedrooms back on *Kantor!*”

He looked at her serene expression as she reached out and rested a hand on his shoulder; she giving it a gentle squeeze, before he figuratively deflated with a shake of his head.

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"It's hard for you, Ronnie. I understand that. This is perhaps not the *best* utilization of your skills, but Lili needs this tested. We need to know how far the Vanir can be pushed... How far their limits *really* are."

He looked at her, and sipped a bit more, before asking, "And what if their limits are *more* than we can tolerate? What *then*?"

The silence hung between them for several seconds, until she dropped her arm and stepped away from him; he seeing her shoulders slump, and hearing the thin sigh she let out.

"You are First Lord of the Commonwealth," she said very quietly. "You will not let a tangible threat to the safety of the Commonwealth continue to exist. I know they are your friends, Ronnie, but I also know you will do the *right* thing if it comes to it."

He stared at her back, before tossing the rest of his drink down. Then he walked over and poured another one – *full* this time – and sat down in a moderately uncomfortable chair while staring daggers at her.

"So much for promises made... *Lili's* promises, anyway. Interesting how *your* perceptions have changed over the years. Lili really expects *me* to become their executioner?" he spat out bitterly; but before she could respond, there was a knock at the door.

~~~

Sally waited nervously at the door. She still didn't understand the reason for having two guards standing outside, but accepted it as a human custom for some of them of very Senior status – although Lady Laisee didn't seem all that Senior. The door finally opened, and Laisee greeted her with a hug before drawing her in.

*'Welcome, Sally! Everything is ready for you. Please come in and relax with us, and we'll go over this next part of your training'* she projected in a casual tone.

Sally came in and set her data pad on a table; knowing she'd not need it until she walked back through the corridors to rejoin Samuel later. She heard Déjà and another young voice from a side chamber, and called out a greeting to the Kee, while Ronnie stood and walked over to her.

*'Hello, Sally'* he greeted her, then slid a single arm around her in a gentle hug; his other hand being occupied with his drink.

Déjà squealed excitedly, and the sound of glasses and liquid pouring could be heard from the inner chamber, as Jaiying joined them in the outer room and greeted Sally in Vanir.

"Hello Sally! I have to leave now, but I'm sure Grandfather will take very good care of you. Aunt Lili *promised*," she said, before going to hug her Mother and Grandfather, then turning to leave the room.

She let out a short burst of chittering, which was echoed similarly from the inner chamber. Then she giggled before opening the door. They watched as she reached up to grasp her guard's hand, before he closed the door behind her.

Déjà entered and presented a chilled fruit drink to Sally, who eagerly accepted it and downed it slowly; shivering slightly with eyes closed, before handing it back and thanking Déjà for the service.

*'Did I hear correctly that Jaiying and Déjà spoke together in Kee?'* she silently asked, while looking down at Déjà with a smile. Déjà came close and hugged her leg.

*'I think she's been working on her language skills, Sally'* Laisee shared.

*'I thought they'd determined it was some sort of rolling code?'* Ronnie asked. *'As I recall, they said it changed every time they spoke'*

*'Oh, it does... but the kids figured out how it changes. I don't believe there is anyone else who can speak or understand it, though'* Laisee explained.

They stood silent for several more seconds, before Sally mustered up her courage.

*'I understand that I am to receive a Gift from Lady Lili ... as presented by YOU, Rondal Caldar ... Ronnie. It will also involve your reproductive essences?'*

He looked very uncomfortable, so Laisee jumped in and took over the conversation.

*'That is correct, Sally. We've discovered that Ronnie has a unique ability to enhance a Healer's capabilities by application of his ... essences, and the Gift of the First Wife. Actually, it was a rather HUMOROUS discovery at the time. You see, he—'*

*'It involves producing an involuntary response in the female sexual organs'* he quickly interrupted; then paused to take a sip from his drink. *'I sense and gauge the level of excitement a female is at, then attempt to increase it and cause it to loop until it becomes self-sustaining. This is how it functions in human females, anyway. From what we've inadvertently perceived between Vanir when they are actively mating, it appears to be a similar process. Lili developed this on her own, but it is best applied by a partner for ... well, to make sure the lady stays comfortable during the process'* he finished delicately.

*'So... So you will be engaging in SEXUAL play with me?'* Sally asked, while glancing down at his waist, before snapping her gaze back up to his eyes. Laisee caught her quick glance and rescued him from his embarrassment.

## The End of the Road

*‘Actually, Déjà will be playing with you, and Ronnie will be holding your hands. When your excitement level begins to peak, he will attempt to maintain that level for you and make it loop – give you continuous peaks, over and over’*

*‘Oh... Oh... Then I am to ... peak ... repeatedly. And ... and then...’*

*‘And then I will extract Ronnie’s essences and apply them to your reproductive orifice. We are still unsure of the mechanism involved, but in all other instances, it required both actions to garner the appropriate response. I suspect it involves absorption into the mucus membranes in our reproductive organs’*

*‘And Lady Lili thinks that Ronnie – who is a HUMAN – can have such an effect on a Vanir – a completely ALIEN species? Please pardon me, Healer Laisee, but Lady Lili IS aware of that fact, is she not?’*

There was a pause in silent communication for several seconds, until Ronnie audibly cleared his throat and brought up part of an unpleasant topic.

*‘Actually ... the Vanir are not that far from humans, Sally. Your chemistry and physical structures are similar to other life forms on my home planet. Your reproductive organs are not entirely mammalian, nor are they completely saurian. With a little filtering, the blood plasma that flows through your bodies can be used by humans. I understand there is some speculation by one of my researchers that your genetic make up is very similar to genetic signatures on my home world – much OLDER genetic signatures, but still ... very similar’*

Sally looked at him standing there with a strange expression on his face. He didn’t look very happy at all, and couldn’t meet her eyes for more than a few moments at a time.

*‘Does this task seem THAT distasteful to you, Rondal Caldar?’*

He quickly looked up at her, then came forward and hugged her again, before pulling back.

*‘Sally, I find that both you and Samuel – all of you that I’ve worked with – have been delightful companions, and you have tried to deal with me honestly. The problem is that ... that I am not sure this is a wise decision by Lili. At best, it might simply be an exercise in sexual pleasure that enhances your Healer abilities. At worst ... it might change your physical and emotional being to such an extent that the results would be something you might not care to live with. It might even result in a situation that could become detrimental to the Vanir society as a whole’* he suggested obliquely.

Throughout the silences, Déjà had taken Sally’s cup and refilled it. Now she handed it back to her, and Sally sipped from it nervously.

‘Yet... Yet Lady Lili would have you ... do this ... to me’ she stated slowly, and he nodded slightly while she continued to look down at him thoughtfully.

‘Very well. How shall we proceed?’ she asked, and he blinked his eyes in surprise.

‘I recommend a LARGE quantity of intoxicants’ he suggested, so she tossed back what she had and handed her cup back to Déjà, while he topped off his cup as well, before turning back to Laisee.

‘All right, Laisee. Let’s get this party started. You’re driving, and Sally and I are just along for the ride. How do we ... start?’ he asked, after pausing to drink deeply.

‘I believe Déjà brought oils and extra towels. We’ll warm up by giving Sally a good massage. Then you’ll warm up by presenting the Gift of the First Wife to me – but you will not finish within me. It will be instructional for Sally, and perhaps she will anticipate it more by seeing the results with me’ she instructed.

Then she took each of them by an arm and led them to the inner chamber, with Déjà following behind and closing the door behind her.

### ***The Vanir Corridor, Late Evening***

Sally had been gone for nearly three hours, but Samuel had been resting uneasily for the last two. He felt out of sorts and seemed to be picking up snippets of confused thoughts from her, but nothing solid enough to interpret. The data pad he’d been reviewing lay discarded beside the nest, and he finally got up and used the facilities; noting in embarrassment that he’d started protruding slightly during his rest. He calmed down and decided to shower, as he was feeling somewhat clammy for some reason.

It was when he was drying that he felt a flush of passion rush through his body – immediately engorging him and becoming obvious by the misshapen drape of his towel. Then a sudden release struck his senses, and he spilled himself into the towel and down his legs. He finally fell onto the floor in a *complete* collapse of relaxation, while his senses wallowed in confusion as the room spun around him just before he passed out.

~~~

“Katie, are you all right?” Sasha asked.

They’d been talking quietly about the upcoming mission, and his desire to have her go with Ronnie as his interpreter. In the middle of the conversation, she’d gotten a glazed look in her eyes, and her body froze for several moments. As he watched, she started to quiver, then took a *great* gasp of breath; her eyes snapping wide open and staring past him blindly

## The End of the Road

before she began to pant heavily. Her focus suddenly turned towards *him* as he became the object of her *intense* stare.

“Katie ... is everything all—*Awk!*” he sputtered, when she launched herself at him and flattened him in their nest.

“Katie!”

“*Now, Sasha! I want you now!*” she cried, then wriggled herself into his embrace while her hands covered his body seeking to arouse him as quickly as possible.

“*Wait!* What are you—” his voice failed when she attached herself to his face, as the humans did, and he nearly lost himself in the sensations.

After a very short struggle, he wisely decided to let her get whatever it was out of her system and hoped she remembered what had come over her later. If nothing else, it seemed like it might be something interesting to discuss during a more *leisurely* conversation.

~~~

Sue stared off in the distance. She’d been returning from a late supper and was planning to see if Kiki would care to share massages with her later, but the *strangest feeling* came over her, and she stopped to try and figure out what it meant. *None* of her segments could reason it out, but when one of them made a suggestion, the other eleven *immediately* agreed with it, and she changed direction and headed to the Vanir Corridor at a much faster pace.

She needed to find *Silas*, and she needed to find him *right now!*

~~~

Four of the implant victims were female Vanir, and currently resident in the Vanir corridor – sharing a joined set of compartments. For some reason, they all felt the *strangest feelings*, and looked around at each other while wondering what it was they were feeling.

One of them, a file clerk from Base 4 named S’Kal’Saw 42831, had a sudden inspiration, and said, “I need to find S’Mok’Sak 40432 ... *right away!*” and left the compartment.

The remaining three processed that statement, then came to *similar* conclusions; each blurting out other names, and quickly leaving their spaces, one by one.

### ***A Post-Assignment Recovery***

Sally lay exhausted, but still panting, while Laisee and Déjà slowly got themselves together. Ronnie slipped away and started water running in the facilities, before gathering several towels to dampen and start the after



party maintenance. While doing so, he heard an echo from Laisee speaking with Lili about the results, which he considered should still be a ways off.

Grabbing both wet and dry towels, he came back and watched as Déjà carefully wiped Sally's cloaca and adjacent area, before handing her a damp towel. With Sally in process, he pushed Laisee onto her back and spread her legs; pressing the warm, wet cloth across her groin and wiping away all traces of their play. After drying her, he went back and washed himself in the shower, and dried in the facilities room, before returning and getting dressed; noting that Déjà had already removed the cart and remaining supplies.

### *At Nathan and Dorcas' Compartment*

Nathan and Dorcas were sharing a quiet evening together after having played earlier in the other sleeping chamber. At the moment, they were snuggling in the outer chamber and relaxing with quiet music ... at Dorcas' request for a change.

Aside from the occasional Healer request, neither of them had a particular task for this trip, and as far as Nathan knew, this was simply their turn with the girls while Laisee was occupied with Ronnie and Sally on some "special Healer business." As for the girls, they were having a sleep-over in the other sleeping compartment of their quarters.

Their quiet was interrupted by a knock at the door; a glance at the compartment clock showing how late it was. Nathan glanced at Dorcas, and she shrugged before untangling herself from him and getting up to open the door.

Déjà stood there smiling while surrounded by guardsmen for both Dorcas and the children.

"Déjà? How may I help you?"

"Jaiying asked me to *bring* her something," she said, then waited expectantly. She saw Nathan sitting inside and smiled widely while waving to him happily.

"Please come in, Déjà. I'll see if the girls are still--"

"*Déjà!*" a somewhat flushed Jaiying called out as she rushed over from the girl's room. A sleepy Rose was standing by the inner door.

Jaiying took Déjà's hand and led her into the room, while chattering away in what Dorcas had come to learn was native Kee.

"Déjà can't stay long, Jaiying. You and Rose need your sleep," Nathan reminded her.

"Yes, Daddy Nathan. I promise!" she told him, just before closing the door between them.

## The End of the Road

“Was that... When did Jaiying learn to speak *Kee*?” he asked, but Dorcas just shrugged and pushed Déjà’s cart aside, before returning to his arms.

### *At the Scene of the Inter-Species Crime*

Ronnie looked down at the comatose Sally, while Laisee was still struggling to recover from their sexual adventure.

He was disgusted with himself, pissed at Lili for being the instigator of it all, and decided to comment on it.

*‘Tell me, Lili ... was it all that you’d WISHED for?’* he asked snidely, not even considering that he’d used one of his self-forbidden words.

*‘It remains to be seen, Rondal. However, you have followed my orders, and I thank you for that’* She paused for a moment, before continuing. *‘The other Vanir appear to be feeling some effects from your treatment. We cannot determine if it is because of the Gift, or because of your essences. Or the combination of the two’*

*‘The other Vanir... The MALES?’*

*‘No. The females. Katie has engaged Sasha – unilaterally, at first. Sue has just found Silas and will ... IS demanding service from him. The other female Vanir have tracked down suitable partners with the same intent. It would seem similar to what you did on the platform with Molara when we first found you in the Death Void – except that it only affects female Vanir’*

*‘It appears that Samuel has also been affected’* Laisee mentioned weakly, and Lili quickly looked within.

*‘They merely share the Healer’s Bond. I’m surprised she has not mentioned it. Or perhaps she was not aware of such? Both you and Sai are doing a POOR job of instruction, Laisee!’* Lili chided her.

*‘Perhaps, my Lady Song, a PROPER set of Healer’s Manuals printed in VANIR would be appropriate at some juncture?’* Ronnie suggested cattily.

*‘Marvelous! Out of the mouths of children! This is why our dear Rondal is held in such high esteem. I can hardly wait to see the results with her CHILDREN, Laisee!’*

They could hear Lili’s silent titter from nearly an hour away.

*‘Her ... what do you mean her children?’* he asked with dread.

*‘You forget so soon? She carries the fertilized eggs of Samuel within her. I believe there are twelve or so. Such a treasure to have twelve more precious children coming into the world, Rondal! And if they have shared in the Gift as well? Oh, the MARVELS they will present to the Prime!’*

*'Have you gone MAD, Lili? We can barely control Walter and the girls NOW, and you would have twelve more born – WITHIN the Vanir sphere, no less! – and JUST as uncontrollable?'*

*'That is not QUITE the way Walter presented it, but it is a possible outcome. This will come about, Rondal, and you are our representative on site to observe and report, as we will continue to observe from here'*

*'And if what I observe is so... WALTER? What does Walter have to do with this?'* he asked; very confused now.

*'And the girls, too. They are of the opinion the Vanir would be better served if they had counter-parts within their society to help manage it. It seems a very reasonable solution, don't you think?'*

*'WALTER! WHAT DID YOU DO TO LILI? WALTER!'*

*'I am here, Grandfather. I did nothing to Aunt Lili. WE did nothing to Aunt Lili'* he quickly amended, and Ronnie could detect no falseness from him. *'We merely suggested that a suitable balance of power between Vanir and Humanity might be broached with this particular act. The Bornat society operates well on this model. After careful consideration, we believe it is a suitable goal for us to pursue as a society'*

*'THE BORNAT ARE BAILING OUT OF THE COMMONWEALTH! By the GODS, Walter, you're scrapping ten-thousand years of effort on a WHIM! YOU HAVE NO IDEA OF WHAT YOU'VE DONE!'*

*'No, Grandfather. YOU have no idea of what YOU'D started so many years ago. We saw a great many things in the Flux before it was taken away, but this is the proper direction we must go. Believe me, Grandfather, the next steps are critical. Your actions will help determine the future of the Confederation. Jaiying will be there for a while longer to help you'*

Ronnie stopped his frenetic pacing to absorb that last, before suddenly coming to a frightening conclusion.

He quickly sent out a questing thought to find Jaiying, only remembering too late that Déjà had already left.

### ***In Nathan and Dorcas' Compartment***

Jaiying had drawn Déjà over to the bed, and they'd both sat while she asked in Kee quick-speak how the session with Sally had gone. Déjà had given a quick play-by-play of what she'd seen and the limited amount she'd understood. After one last question, Déjà smiled widely and showed her a waterproof container, before covering it back up to keep it warm.

She assured Jaiying that it was *very* fresh, and *delicious, too!*

*'Walter ... I am ready'* Jaiying sent out.

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‘*Gods be with you*’ he immediately sent back, with echoes from her female cousins as well.

She nodded to Déjà, and the container was brought back out. Rose sat beside Jaiying and held her hand, while Déjà opened the lid and held the base out to Jaiying.

“Are you *sure*?” Rose asked, while gently resting her head on Jaiying’s shoulder.

“This might be my only chance, Rose. I wanted Grandfather to be my first, but once he found out—” she stopped and shook her head.

She took a deep breath, then licked the sticky sample in the container, before playing back in her mind — the *Gift*.

### *In the Corridors*

‘*Jaiying! JAIYING ... DON’T DO IT!*’ Ronnie shouted silently as he ran down the corridor, but already knew it was too late.

He reached out to Jaiying and searched within; already sensing the changes that were beginning in her, and feeling her mind becoming confused and jumbled. He slowed to a walk, and then finally stopped; tears beginning to run down his face. He finally pushed himself forward again; composing his features and wiping his face, before presenting the image of the First Lord as he determinedly headed towards the compartment assigned to Nathan and Dorcas.

### *With Déjà, Jaiying, and Rose*

Déjà was in a *panic*!

Jaiying had asked her to bring a sample of Ronnie’s protein, and she didn’t think *twice* about it. After all, it was one of the most *prized* gifts the rest of the crew had to offer her and Kiki. It was no *wonder* Jaiying had been so interested in getting a taste of it, but *this*?

Jaiying lay in a heap on the bed. Her head was resting in Rose’s lap, while her eyes rolled around, glancing sightlessly at nothing. Her breathing was quick and labored, and her face was flushed. It was almost as if she was *playing*, but that was *silly*! *Human* children didn’t play at such an early age, yet *another* mystery to her mind. This was out of the realm of knowledge Mommy had imparted to her over the years, but she had one talent that was *always* available, and didn’t hesitate in using it. She bent over and danced her tongue between Jaiying’s lips; sending a bit of enzyme-laden saliva into her mouth that *should* have had the immediate effect of calming her down.

Instead of that, she felt an *incredibly* passionate feeling run through her body; much like when Mommy orgasmed. She remained locked to Jaiying’s

lips for almost a minute until struggling to pull herself away and straighten back up. In a few seconds more, Jaiying let out a deep sigh and closed her eyes, then rolled to her side and hugged Rose's waist while falling peacefully asleep with her head resting in Rose's lap.

Déjà stared at her in confusion. This was much *better*, but she had no idea of what just happened. She picked up the container and saw a bit of protein remaining, so she absently licked it clean and put the lid back on.

"Jaiying is sleeping *good* now! You watch over her, Rose? I have to go tell Mommy what happened," Déjà said, but had sudden a moment of clarity. '*Tell Mommy... Yes... Always tell Mommy when things are not what they seem.*' She seemed momentarily confused, but shook her head, then looked over at the door.

"I go tell Mommy," she repeated, then got up unsteadily and made it to the door, before turning back and looking at the girls. "I go tell Mommy," she repeated again, then left the room.

### ***In the Corridor***

"Good evening, Lord Caldar. Within are Lady Dorcas, her consort, Nathan, and the children, Jaiying and Rose. Also, Déjà arrived just a few minutes ago," the senior guardsman reported.

"Please announce me," he asked while trying hard to remain calm.

### ***With Nathan and Dorcas***

When she entered the room, Déjà smiled at Nathan and Dorcas, then walked over to them. They looked so *happy*, and Déjà was happy, *too*!

"Jaiying is *sleeping*! Rose will watch Jaiying *sleeping*! Do you... Do you want to..." she paused, while looking confused, then turned back to the children's door, saying, "Tell Mommy... I go tell Mommy..." then paused again.

"Déjà, is everything—" was as far as Dorcas got, before Déjà collapsed to the floor at their feet. A moment later, there was a knock at the door.

### ***February 22, Just After Midnight***

"Sally... Sally... Sally, how are you feeling?" Laisee quietly asked her.

With her eyes barely open, Sally slowly looked around the room and finally settled on Laisee.

"What did you vile humans *do* to me?" she asked, then winced.

Laisee handed her a cup of watered-down juice, and she reluctantly took it, then sipped it slowly.

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"I'm sorry you're feeling so ... distressed."

"*Hung-over*, you mean," she retorted, then wondered where *that* phrase had come from.

The segments of her mind were still getting themselves back together and taking stock. A few of them were reporting some new additions to her faculties, but weren't immediately sure of their purpose, or how they functioned. The rest of them were still trying to catalog the *huge* influx of sensations she'd experienced when Rondal Caldor had somehow stimulated her without penetration.

She felt a light intrusion, and it felt like Laisee. It was followed by another intrusion ... and then a *succession* of intrusions.

She shut them out solidly, then closed her eyes.

"*That's* an improvement," she muttered irritably, but suddenly reached up and felt around her head before relaxing back with a sigh.

Laisee had watched and understood.

"Nope! No ears yet," she assured her, and they shared a quiet laugh.

"Where is the *devil child*?" Sally muttered, then glanced around warily.

"Jaiying?" Laisee asked with some disappointment.

"*No!* That evil, nasty Rondal Caldor of yours! Does he *always* do that to you? How can you *stand it*? Or do you just get *used* to it after a while?"

"Sally... I'm sorry you did not find the experience enjoyable. In a human female, the reaction is very intense, but quite pleasant. I don't understand--"

"Oh I *enjoyed* it well enough. But whatever you finally applied to me, *burned* while shooting up inside of my body and landing in my *brain*, where it began *hammering* at me until I *passed out!*"

"That ... that is not like what we've experienced. Me, Sai, or any of the other Commonwealth women Ronnie has ... performed with," she said delicately.

Sally felt and read the truth of that from her, then accepted it at face value, before going on.

"It would appear there are *physiological* differences between us that make this method of ... enhancement – for *Vanir* – somewhat unpleasant. Perhaps too acidic ... or perhaps the opposite? Something to be studied ... certainly before selection of the *next* vic- volunteer. Otherwise, it was much like what Déjà and Kiki do to me, only much more so. I do feel a change in my mind, but I've yet to determine what it is."

She looked around, but didn't see Ronnie anywhere, and Laisee felt further questions about him on the surface of her relaxing mind.

"Ronnie... He's ... well, he didn't used to have that effect on women. Once he became a Senior, it gradually became obvious that he gained some ... *special* qualities. When his father died ... *after* his father died, he was cursed by our Elder, and some other qualities became apparent. He hasn't shared himself with anyone new since then ... unless it was carefully controlled," she explained, then watched as Sally took it all in.

She still looked unsettled, but seemed to be recovering quickly – unexpectedly so, in such a short amount of time, considering her reaction to the process.

"I take it this was ... *carefully controlled*, then? He's not – he isn't simply *infected* with something, is he?" she asked, while her mind was still cataloging what had been done to it.

"We discovered that when Ronnie has sex with a normal human woman in a certain way, she often becomes *enhanced* towards the Healer talents. This happened to me, and the rest of the children's mothers – Rose, Cathy, Walter, and Josie. After he was cursed, he left a trail of port girls with a *new* affinity towards becoming Healers. It's a long story..."

"So, Lili wanted to see what happened when he was with *me*? Except that he would not ... yet he *still* managed to. She was not *sure*?"

"We do not understand the mechanism ... exactly."

Laisee glanced aside and closed her eyes ... reaching out to Jaiying again, but finding her asleep and peaceful, which was *way* better compared to the fear and confusion she'd detected earlier.

"But you do *now*," Sally stated, and Laisee opened her eyes.

Laisee knew then, and it was just as Walter had predicted. Sally's perceptions had been enhanced greatly, and were integrating rapidly. Now it was a matter of trust between Vanir and Humanity.

"Trust..." Sally said softly.

"Yes... Trust," Laisee agreed, then felt around the fringes of Sally's mind, which was gradually opening to her, so she reciprocated and left Sally free to wander around her own thoughts.

They shared gingerly with each other; gradually becoming more and more open, until Sally opened her arms and Laisee joined her on the platform. Laisee stroked her head and felt the residual pain within – then made the offer.

"Thank you for your gift ... my Healer," Sally murmured, then scrunched down and delicately latched onto Laisee's exposed breast to

## The End of the Road

relish her first taste of fresh human milk, which *immediately* went to work at relieving her remaining aches and pains.

### *At Nathan and Dorcas' Compartment*

Petrus and Sai had arrived just after Ronnie entered the compartment. She and Dorcas went in to see Jaiying – closing the door in Ronnie's face – while Petrus squatted down with Nathan to check Déjà for injuries.

"Should've seen this coming," Petrus muttered with a shake of his head. "Girl probably couldn't *resist*, you being that *tasty* and all."

Nathan turned in confusion and watched Ronnie turn a darker shade of pink before he got it under control. He knew something was up, but Dorcas had assured him everything was all right – except for what happened to Déjà, apparently. That remained a mystery, and he supposed Sai would be asking some pointed questions about that next.

Dorcas returned to the outer room and glanced down at Déjà, while Sai followed her back and quietly closed the door behind her, before Ronnie turned on her.

"Sai, I can't believe you'd let this *happen!* Jaiying is just–"

"Jaiying is so much more than you expect, Rondal. *All* of the children are. Let it go for now and we can talk about it in the morning," she said calmly, then glanced over at Nathan, but saw his attention was still focused on Déjà and Petrus.

"The morning will be too *late!*"

"It was too late the moment it happened. *This...*" she said, pointing down at Déjà, "...was unexpected, but it will be an interesting development to follow."

"She said she had something to tell you, Lady Tal," Nathan offered.

"Yes. I imagine it was quite frightening for her," she said, then turned and interrupted Ronnie's next explosion before it started.

"There is nothing more to be done, Ronnie. You should return to your quarters and get some rest. I can come by later and we can talk – or play, if you're still up to it."

Petrus lifted Déjà and slung her over his shoulder. "Ready to go, my love?"

"I ... I should go back and check on Sally. I left them–"

Sai raised a hand and cut Ronnie off.



“No. Laisee is taking care of her, and we’ve dealt with anything else that needed dealing with. This is a *Healer* matter now, First Lord. We’ll advise you of any changes in the situation,” she said, then pointed to the door.

He stared at them and realized it was all out of his hands – for the time being. He turned to leave, but remembered something that had caught his attention just a few moments ago, and turned back.

“Nathan ... Dorcas, something comes to mind that needs to be corrected, and I apologize for not dealing with it in a more timely manner,” he said cryptically, then turned and left their quarters before getting a response from any of them.

“What was *that* all about?” Nathan murmured, but Dorcas just shrugged.

“He’s just slow to recognize his own failings. Typical ... and nothing to worry about,” Sai muttered.

She gestured to Petrus, and they left the room with Déjà still draped over his shoulder. Dorcas checked on the girls once more, then came back to join Nathan, who was still staring at the outer door.

“Sweetie, do you have *any* idea what...” was as far as he got, before she shoved her tongue down his throat and tickled his fancy.

“Oh ... *yes*. Let’s go back to *bed*,” he murmured when she finally let him catch his breath, and they wandered back to their own bedroom.

### ***Somewhere Else...***

*‘Bold move,’ Destiny thought, while watching the Fainting Fate shaking her head sadly as she was **still** trying to figure out where in the hell this was all going.*

*‘I wonder what Rondal Caldar will do **next?**’ it considered; then decided the **immediate** future was becoming very entertaining. It would be even **more so** if everyone survived, but he was certainly looking forward to meeting this **Jaiying** person. She seems **very** special.*

### ***Ronnie’s Compartment, Recovering Slowly...***

Ronnie cracked his eyes open and spared a glance at the ship’s timer; seeing that it was near the very *bottom* of the morning. He stifled a grimace, having slept *crappy* for what little sleep he’d gotten, and closed them again...

He’d had nightmares of Jaiying playing puppeteer over the Vanir and causing great engines of destruction to vaporize all over space. In one of those nightmares, he’d seen a dozen or so tiny Vanir playing in the stream of the Royal Homestead back on Kantor. That dream had ended with Puss

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and Boots biting off their heads while they ran, squealing, from the water. Another vignette had the Bornat returning and leading a convoy of Vanir to the core; leaving the remnants of Humanity to die in a war between the Hegemony and the Commonwealth.

In *none* of those dreams did any of his family survive, and in the end, he awoke with a shout when Maya – body broken and torn – was speared by crazed Drecks and ripped apart in front of him while he was held motionless and unable to help her...

Finally lifting himself from his sweat-drenched bed, he staggered into the facilities and rendered honors to the recycling system, before fumbling his way to the shower and taking a room temperature rinse to get the stickiness off him. Turning the temperature up, he managed to wash himself adequately and was mostly cognizant by the time he applied a towel to himself and returned; only to find his bed stripped down and clean clothes laid out for him on the one chair in his bedroom that was currently unoccupied.

“Good morning, Ronnie,” Laisee said quietly.

She’d seated herself at the tiny desk in his bedroom and sat with her hands folded in her lap.

He glared at her, then checked the ships timer again; Noon minus six...ish.

“How is Jaiying?”

“She’s still sleeping. Déjà is changing your bedding. It was very wet.”

“Is Jaiying all right?”

“Look *within*, Ronnie. She sleeps peacefully.”

“Good morning, Lord Caldar,” a subdued voice said from the doorway.

Déjà was carrying a fresh set of bed covers, and Laisee got up to help her make the bed.

“Leave it,” he muttered. “Just ... leave it. I’ll take care of it later.”

Déjà put her burden down and came over to him; dropping to her knees and putting her forehead to his feet.

“Please forgive me, Lord Caldar. I did not know what would happen. Jaiying never told me that ... that it was *special* from you,” she whispered.

“Déjà ... get up, girl.”

“Please, Lord Caldar. *Please* forgive me,” she whispered again.

*'Please don't kill me, Lord Caldar. I didn't know. I didn't know. Please ... Please ... Please...'*

"Déjà, I won't–"

He stopped cold and stared down at her, then looked up to Laisee, then back down at Déjà; still hearing her silent pleas in his mind.

"Déjà ... please get up. You may fix my bed, and then you may go... Go to your Mommy and tell her about last night," he finally said, but she started to cry.

Laisee came over and squatted down beside her while speaking to her quietly.

"Déjà, do as Lord Caldar has asked, girl. Lord Caldar will not ... he will not punish you," she said, then looked up at him while tilting her head down at Déjà's prostrate form.

"Déjà, I forgive you. Be a good girl now, and please make my bed. Then go tell Mommy all about last night so she understands everything that happened. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Lord Caldar. I will obey you. I will be a good girl," she promised, then wiped her face on the sleeve of her jumper.

She got up and started to make the bed, while Laisee stood aside and watched with Ronnie. When she was done, she turned and bowed, before leaving the room. They finally heard the outer door close before he turned to Laisee.

"Maybe it's just me, but ... does she seem a little bit ... off?"

"You *heard*?"

"Oh yes... I heard," he muttered, then rubbed his aching temples. "Laisee... We've got all these high-powered *smart* people aboard. I don't suppose we could get *someone* to run a before and after DNA scan of Jaiying – just to see if there are any alterations, could we? Grab some before samples from her bedding; some hair ... maybe from a comb or brush? Add in Déjà, Sally, and ... and I think that's it for *this* round – unless you want me to experiment on some *more* unsuspecting victims?"

She gave out an irritating titter of laughter, similar to that which Lili had mastered.

"I'll see what I can do, Ronnie. In the *meantime*, I want you to lie down right here," she said, then pushed him down on the freshly made bed, before lying beside him and opening her robes.

"Drink from me, Ronnie, and we'll start your day without that nasty headache. I promise."

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"Thank you, Laisee." He sighed and made himself comfortable, while she made his headache go away.

### *In Nathan and Dorcas' Compartment*

Jaiying was dreaming... At least she *thought* she was dreaming. There was a room with nothing inside it, nor any walls, or anything else she could see. She felt a presence behind her, but when she turned, it was gone. She felt nothing else, and heard nothing else – except for a quiet giggling, and a tickle next to her ear. The voice was familiar, and she'd felt the tickle before. She opened her eyes...

"Good morning, Jaiying!" Rose giggled, then sat back and looked down at her sleepy cousin.

"Mmm, Rose. Is it morning?" Jaiying mumbled, but in the saying of it, her senses quickened, and she *felt* it was morning... Noon minus five point five, *precisely* – and discovered she was hungry.

'Rose... Walter, Cathy, Josie ... *is there anything different about me?*' she called out quickly.

'*Not especially. You sound LOUDER*' Walter remarked, and she noted Rose held both hands up to her ears and was nodding vigorously.

'*Sorry... I feel ... different*' she continued a bit more softly.

'*Take it slow*' Cathy suggested. '*See what's the same, and what's changed*'

'*Yeah, and then tell US how to change, too!*' Josie tossed in.

'*Only if it's a GOOD change*' Rose added.

'*Something happened last night*' Jaiying continued; stating the obvious.

'*Déjà is really messed up*' Josie shared, '*She had the last bit of Grandfather, then fainted outside your door. Grandmother was trying to figure it out, but Déjà stayed asleep and they took her to bed. Now Déjà is at Grandfather's ... she just left. She's going back to Grandmother and is gonna tell her about last night*'

'*She didn't tell her already?*'

'*When she woke up this morning, she was terrified of what Grandfather would do to her because she brought a bit of him to you last night*' Walter explained. '*She left her quarters early and went to see Mama Laisee, before they both went to wake up Grandfather. She's different now, Jaiying ... listen right ... there*'

'*Tell Mommy ... tell Mommy ... Lord Caldor forgives me ... tell Mommy ... Mommy ... Mother ... Mother left me ... my Mother left me...*'

‘Wow! Grandfather did *THAT* to her?’ Josie asked. ‘What did he do to YOU, Jaiying?’

‘No. I think I did that to Déjà but I’m not sure how’

‘Well, we’d better tell Grandmother’ Cathy suggested. ‘She needs to know’

‘Yes. I’ll try to explain it to her’ Walter agreed. ‘Jaiying, are you feeling all right?’

‘Yes, Walter. I think I’m all right, but everything seems ... clearer somehow’

‘Good luck teaching Sally how to pull those implants’ Cathy shared.

‘Sally... Yes, I need to check on Sally’ she silently muttered, before sending her goodbyes.

She’d go and check on Sally ... right after getting something to eat!

### ***At Petrus’ Compartment***

“Lady Sai! ... Lady Sai! ... Déjà is *broken!*” Kiki cried while holding Déjà’s hand as they both stood outside the open door.

Déjà was still muttering tearfully to herself, “Mother left me, Mother left me,” over and over, after Petrus had opened the door for them.

Sai heard them from the inner chamber and slipped out of bed. She came out to her; squatting down to hug her. Déjà wrapped herself around her adopted mother and cried loudly, while Kiki let her go and went to stand next to Petrus.

“Kiki, what’s wrong with Déjà?” he asked.

“Déjà is *crying* and she won’t *play* with me to make her *happy* again,” she lamented while hugging his leg tightly.

“All right, Kiki. Come inside and tell me *all* about it,” he said, and they proceeded back to the bedroom where they could try to figure out what was going on.

Thankfully, Petrus’ involvement was interrupted a few minutes later by a call from the bridge, so he dressed and left to deal with a shipboard problem, while Sai stayed behind to deal with Déjà and Kiki.

### ***In Samuel and Sally’s Compartment***

Sally moved slightly and felt her Samuel still cuddled up against her protectively. She settled back and felt his thoughts drifting in his sleep – concerns about their future, concerns about his eggs – *his* eggs? She felt questions about Rondal Caldar and what he may or may not do to all the

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Vanir if things go wrong on Vanaheim. They skittered around a bit, but were mostly concerned about those three key elements. She was gratified that two out of three of them were about the two of them and their pending family ... *his* eggs?

She relaxed and extended herself *into* him; surprised at the clarity of her senses in seeing his interior physical construction in much greater detail than she'd ever seen before. She spent a short while doing that, then pulled out and looked within *herself*; taking a close look at her *own* organs and finally examining the eggs she carried – all but one of them fertile with life, and only needing a place to lay them so they could finish developing into their own little Vanir.

All the fertile eggs looked healthy – which was surprising for a Vanir, when the usual clutch only produced one or two viable eggs out of perhaps a dozen. They were usually culled for the healthiest and most likely to survive, but *her* eggs ... her eggs were *special*. She wondered if *all* Vanir females felt that way, or was she becoming even *more* human than Sue suspected?

She pulled out and thought for a second, before reaching out to the other Vanir aboard – shifting into each one, one at a time, and looking at the locations where Jaiying had pulled apart the implant tendrils. She could now clearly see the nerve fibers and actually see the broken bits of filament where the implant had attached itself to the nerve. Aside from a bunch of fragments, they all seemed to be safely neutralized.

On a hunch, she zeroed in on a particularly long filament and focused on the center of it – exerting the tiniest bit of stress on either side of it away from the center. Despite her delicate effort, it remained intact, and rather than try harder, she decided to wait until Jaiying could work with her and show her the technique she'd used.

Thinking of her, she reached out tentatively and discovered Jaiying was up and walking towards the Vanir quarters.

*'Good morning, Sally'* her remarkably clear voice arrived in her head.

*'Good ... good morning, Jaiying'* she replied, not quite as clear, but *much* better than she'd been able to project previously.

*'Ah! Good morning, Sally!'* came the clarion call from Lady Lili. *'I see our little adventure has improved your abilities, somewhat'*

*'I...'* Sally stopped; suddenly realizing this was the *first* time she'd heard Lady Lili directly without being joined with one of the local Healers.

*'Yes, Sally. It seems a fundamental change has occurred. I am truly sorry for any discomfort you experienced, but even as a Healing is often painful, growing as a Healer can be difficult as well'*

*'This ... this is what you expected?'*

*'This was something to hope for, yes, but a favorable end result was foreseen by Walter many weeks ago. This was a step towards the most stable relationship between Vanir and Humans. We await further developments – hopefully of a peaceful nature between us all'* Lili assured her.

*'Walter... Walter predicted this ... this headache and ... and everything that will come to pass?'* She felt some very intense probing that happened too quickly to block, before Lili spoke again.

*'Let me provide you with a little bit of Healer history, Sally. It is really quite fascinating'* she promised her, then began her instruction – from the first male Senior, down to the Kantite/Cletus relationship over the last ten-thousand years. Then she dipped into the quasi-reality of the Flux and its impact on the stability of the Commonwealth.

It wasn't a *short* history lesson.

### ***Leaving the Medical Wing***

A rather embarrassed group of Vanir ladies trundled back to their shared quarters in the Vanir Corridor while avoiding direct eye contact with each other.

Something had come over them last night – something important and somehow *wonderful* ... right up until they awoke in the arms of different male acquaintances from Base 4. After a panicked moment or two, they'd managed to disengage themselves and leave the rather large and hastily constructed nest where they'd gathered to spend the late evening; the remainder of the night, and the early morning with their chosen male companions. None of them knew *why* they'd done what they'd done, but none of them were terribly upset about it, either.

### ***In Sasha and Katie's Compartment***

Katie opened her eyes and stared at the ceiling. She felt Sasha's arms around her, and it felt right and comforting, so she closed her eyes again and extended out, as Sai and Sally had taught her, to feel the surface thoughts of her companion, which she found were simply blank as he still slept the sleep of someone who had been *totally* drained the night before. Her color flashed through several shades, before settling back to normal, and a smile curved her lips as she remembered the night before. She wondered if Sasha's family group would make room for her and her offspring. *Offspring?* Where did *that* thought come from?

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### *In Petrus' Compartment*

"I remember... I remember now, Mommy. My mother left me. She fed me and played with me, and ... and then she *left* me! But I don't understand *why* she left me," a tearful Déjà confided to Sai while reliving a more *detailed* memory of the beginning of her life on Kee.

It was approaching Noon minus four, and Sai was sitting beside her on the bed. Kiki was sitting on her other side; her duties forgotten this morning because her friend was suffering so much and needed her help – her "moral" support she understood vaguely – while Sai was still trying to ease her tears.

"Déjà, we know very little about the Kee in your native society. You grow up *very* quickly, and you *learn* very quickly. You also *forget* very quickly unless you practice what you know, over and over. Maybe *that's* why you're so good at playing!" she teased her.

"But ... but what's the *point*? I – I don't want to just *play* all the time! I ... I want to ... to learn to do something *useful*! I'm not just a – a *toy* to *play with*!" she lamented.

"I never said you were a toy, sweetheart. You're Mommy's beautiful girl, and I *love* you," Sai murmured, and Déjà looked up at her, but with shock on her face now.

"You *hit* me! I *remember* now! You *hit* me when I... Oh..."

"Yes. You tried to *eat* one of my boys. I couldn't allow *that* now, could I?" Sai reminded her teasingly.

"And you – you didn't *kill* me. Why didn't you just *kill* me?"

"Well, I thought maybe you were just so hungry that you thought you needed something *big* to eat ... and you were such a *pretty* little girl that I just *had* to bring you home with me."

"Oh *Mommy*! Why am I *feeling* this way?" she mumbled loudly while Sai continued to hug her. She was still cooing to her when the knock came at the outer door.

### *Outside Petrus' Compartment*

Ronnie was hoping Sai was making headway with Déjà, but the chaos radiating from within their compartment somehow didn't feel like it. He stood outside for several seconds, but decided he *still* needed Sai's interpretation of last night's event regarding Déjà, so he went ahead and knocked on their door, and it was shortly opened by Kiki.

"*Hello*, Lord Caldar! Lady Sai and Déjà in the *bedroom*! Déjà won't *play* with me! Do *you* want to play with me?" she asked, then smiled prettily at him.



He smiled back and patted her head while walking in, and Kiki closed the door before looking up at him hopefully.

"I'm afraid I don't have the time right now, Kiki, but I'm sure that some of Lady Laisee's *guardsmen* would like to play with you after they get off duty," he suggested, and she gave out a tiny squeak, then left the compartment – her dear, troubled friend already forgotten.

After a shake of his head, he searched and found Déjà and Sai sitting in the bedroom.

"You broke my little girl!" Sai quietly accused him; fixing him with a baleful glare.

"No, Mommy. Lord Calder didn't break me. Lord Caldor ... he ... he *forgave* me. He – he ... woke me *up*."

"Is that how you feel, Déjà?" he asked softly, and she let go of Sai and looked up at him.

"I ... I never thought ... I never thought of anything but playing – and eating." She half-laughed and sniffled a bit, but her jaw was still quivering.

"Déjà, there is nothing wrong with playing. I like to play, too. It's a lot of *fun*," he assured her, but she just looked at him and shook her head.

"You – you *humans* like to play, but – but not *all the time*! Not like *Kee*!" she cried, then turned to hug Sai again.

"Honey, it's all right to change your mind," Sai told her softly. "You don't have to play all the time if you don't want to. Remember what I taught you? You can't *make* someone play with you if they don't *want* to, remember?" There was the sound of a caught breath, broken seconds later by a suppressed sob of anguish.

"Yes ... unless you order me to *torture them*!" Déjà wailed, then hugged her even tighter while Sai just rolled her eyes.

Ronnie folded his arms while letting one hand slide up to rub his eyes. They were getting nowhere, and a resolution was needed *before* he left on the mission. It wouldn't do to discover a *new* Kee personality trait that promised to get out of control in this setting, and he didn't want to just lock her up for the duration.

"Lock ... lock me *up*?" Déjà whimpered quietly as she turned her head and looked up at him sadly.

"No, Déjà. I don't want to lock you–" he opened his eyes and looked down at her in shock.

"Ay-yah," both he and Sai murmured together.

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He sat down next to Déjà so she was between him and Sai, then put one arm around her shoulders and held one of her hands in his.

“Déjà ... during certain sexual acts with me, human women, and I guess we now know that *Vanir* women, too, can have their Healer skills enhanced. If she is not already capable of Healing skills, then she may become capable. If she is *already* a Healer, she becomes much *better*. For *some* reason, you seemed to have picked up some of that effect last night – probably around the time you were leaving Jaiying. Did anything *special* happen to you when you were with Jaiying?”

Déjà avoided his eyes and stared at the wall in front of her, while recounting what happened last night.

“I remember ... I remember Jaiying asking me to bring a bit of you to her after you were done with Sally. I just thought ... I really didn’t know – I didn’t *understand*, Lord Calder!” she said, and hung her head as he hugged her and waited for her to go on.

“I brought it to Jaiying, and she licked it, and ... and then she fell over and got all excited and wiggling. I was afraid. I thought she was hurt, so I helped her like we help Sue, and I ... I *kissed* her. Then she calmed down and fell asleep.”

“Then what did you do?”

“Then ... then I took back the container, and there was a little bit left, so I cleaned it. I licked it up and cleaned it. Then I walked out and saw Lady Dorcas and her Nathan, and asked them if... I – I don’t remember after that until I woke up this morning and I went to see Lady Laisee.”

Ronnie and Sai looked at each other over Déjà’s head, their thoughts flashing back and forth between them. Déjà looked up at both of them with a curious look on her face.

“Umm, Déjà... Did Lord Calder ever give *you* the Gift of the First Wife?” Sai asked her.

“No... *Wait*... I *think* he tried to a long time ago, but Kee... We don’t respond like humans do. I only feel that when *you* share with me, Mommy.”

Ronnie looked at Sai with raised eyebrows, but she frowned at him and shook her head dismissively. Then he looked down at Déjà.

“Déjà, when I was with Laisee and Sally last night, you were playing with Sally, while I was giving her the Gift. Did you feel anything inside of you like, what *Sally* was feeling? Like what you feel with Lady Sai?”

“I felt ... I felt her squishing around my hand *really* hard. It made me feel good inside – not as good as when I kissed *Jaiying* last night.”

“Wait. You felt good when you kissed *Jaiying*? When she was *wiggling*?” he asked.

“Yes...”

*‘By proxy? She feels it from Jaiying, and then takes an oral dose of me?’*

*‘But why would Jaiying go into such a frenzy? I know the kids can feel us and respond like we do, but... Do you think she may have been remembering it?’* Sai asked.

*‘I wouldn’t put it past them. I was already on my way to stop her, but I was too late’*

*‘But why Déjà? You’ve been with her before and nothing happened!’*

*‘No, but I don’t recall ever giving the Gift during oral sex before, either. It could be somewhat hazardous’*

“Mommy, what does ‘proxy’ mean?” Déjà asked, and both of them looked down at her ... letting the seconds tick by while they were lost in their own thoughts, until he finally broke the silence.

“What proxy means is ... maybe ... *somehow* Jaiying was reliving the effects of the Gift while sampling me. When you kissed her, she may have passed the feeling of the Gift on to you, and then you sampled me as well. Now it seems like you’re no longer Mommy’s little girl, but you’re growing up into Mommy’s young woman.”

He felt ridiculous in the saying of it because he knew Déjà must be close to two-hundred years old by now, but *still*, it was almost as if she were leaving adolescence and becoming a teenager overnight. He didn’t envy Sai’s new responsibility, but knew that, between her and Laisee, they should be able to handle it. He wasn’t so sure *Kiki* would understand, so he tried to offer some operational guidelines for her.

“Now Déjà, you must remember that Kiki loves you very much, and she’s still just a young girl who likes to mostly eat and play. Be kind to Kiki and be a good big sister to her. She still needs your love, and she needs to play with you sometimes. You talk it over with Mommy about what you want to do when you don’t want to play.”

“I don’t have to play if I don’t *want* to?” she asked him – hopefully, he thought.

“No, my girl,” Sai told her. “You *never* have to play if you don’t want to. But if you’re ever lonely, you know I’m here for you.”

“I love you, Mommy,” she said, then turned to Ronnie. “Thank you, Lord Caldar. I ... I’ll *try* to be a good girl.”

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“Thank you, Déjà. That’s all that I can ask,” he said, then gave her another hug before getting up to leave. “Sai, you’ll have the ship after we leave tomorrow. At the first sign of trouble, drop the shell and head back to Kantor in as few jumps as you can personally stand.”

“What about—”

“I’ll be watching over them like a mother valaet. The *Kraken’s Child* is armed. Nothing short of a direct hit by a Vanir cruiser can get through his shields – *if* they could even find us. Keep in touch. Remember – protect the family, protect the Commonwealth, and protect the Crown.”

“I hear and obey, First Lord,” she said quietly, before he turned and left the room.

Moments later, they heard the outer door open and close, and she turned and hugged Déjà to her.

“Mommy, why can I hear you talk sometimes when your lips don’t move?” Déjà murmured into her robes.

### *A Visit to the Lab*

With Laisee’s help, Ronnie’s headache had left him over an hour ago, but after leaving Sai and Déjà, it was threatening to return in full measure. It was getting help from all the chaos he was feeling throughout his ship – mostly from the participants of last night. He’d *really* wanted to lay into Lili for yesterday, but she’d successfully avoided a confrontation with him by simply blocking him out. As for the others ... they were as much a victim of Lili’s plan as he was.

Despite his anger and frustration, he needed to distract himself to the point where he could focus on the mission they were beginning the following morning. To that end, he’d called Sally and Jaiying into the lab and was having them look over the recovered implant samples.

At the moment, Jaiying was showing Sally how to sever the fibers without severing the nerves.

As he watched from the side, he noted that Jaiying seemed all right after her ordeal, but was still wondering why she’d responded to his essences the way she had. None of the other women he’d been with had experienced *that* much change while also receiving the Gift, so he was at a loss as to what had actually occurred.

As for Déjà – he had *no clue* as to what she’d done to get so messed up. Correction ... she wasn’t so much messed up, as she’d experienced a bit of personal and emotional growth ... *and* picked up a bit of telepathy along the way.

All right – she was messed up and *not* just a bit.

He wanted to lay it all at Lili's hands, but suspected it had something to do with Jaiying ... *somehow*. Except he'd *never* had sex with Jaiying, *never* given her the Gift, and yet he'd had sex with Déjà on *numerous* occasions with *no* ill effects. It just didn't make *sense*.

### ***Late Morning at the Commons***

"Rondal Caldar, I understand you wanted to speak with me," Silas asked aloud.

He and Sue had come up behind him at the commons, and found him head down over a bowl of ships gruel and poking at it listlessly. He'd looked up and around when Silas had addressed him – getting better at recognizing his spoken name in Vanir ... almost – then listened to the translation from his data pad.

"Yes. I will be covering the medical mission tomorrow and would like to have a Vanir translator aboard," he said, then waited for the data pads while they both spewed it out in Vanir.

"I would be honored to accompany you, Rondal Caldar," Silas offered, but Ronnie heard a quickly hissed objection from Sue.

"Actually ... I would like *both* of you to consider coming with me. Perhaps there will be situations where your combined understanding of Vanir protocols and society will be needed to smooth out any bumps during the mission," he suggested.

"Like that hole you left back at Base 4?" Sue threw back at him.

"That's a good reason, right there. I think you have an idea of what I want to avoid."

"We won't condone any attacks against Vanir ships, bases, or persons!" she quickly said, and Silas nodded agreeably while waiting for the translation to finish.

"I wouldn't expect you to. However, I would like you to point out anything you would consider a threat to the crew in the transport so I may act accordingly to protect them. I'd much rather minimize any collateral damage to Vanir during our 'humanitarian' mission, but I will *not* tolerate interference."

"You seem very *sure* of yourself, Lord Caldar," she said somewhat coldly, and Ronnie stared at her for several seconds before responding.

"S'Ahi'Ma 42491 – you have absolutely *no* idea what I'm capable of. Be assured that, if we are attacked again, there will be very *little* remaining of the aggressor this time," he promised her, and the determination she saw in his eyes seemed to suppress her anger.

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"I – I believe you, Lord Caldar. We will both come with you to assist, as you request," she said quietly; now thinking of the history she'd read about him.

He noted that she'd decided for the *both* of them, and they both turned to leave.

"Mission briefing in the morning. Noon minus five, recreation room off the hanger deck," he called out loudly, before they got out of earshot.

*'Understood, Lord Caldar'* came back somewhat faintly from Silas.

He gave out a silent snort, wondering what *else* she'd been teaching him. No doubt he'd learn more over the next few days.

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

It was early afternoon when Petrus finally returned to his quarters.

"How is Déjà, my love?" he asked quietly.

Sai looked up at him as he closed the door to their compartment, then raised a finger to her lips while pointing to the other bedroom door. He nodded his head, slipped off his jumper, then tossed it onto one of the chairs on the way to close their own bedroom door behind them to give them a little more privacy.

*'She finally fell asleep about an hour ago. What did Torga want?'* she asked silently.

*'Truthfully? I think he just wanted to comply with standard procedure by updating the Captain or First Officer of the ship's morning status. We're still here. Sasha's old ship is still out there. No other ships in scan range. Nominal amounts of supplies, weapons, and fuel ... close to ninety-eight percent on fuel, he said. No alarms, no emergencies, and all crew accounted for. Oh ... security took note of the Vanir wandering about the corridors very late last night'* he shared with her.

*'That would coincide with Sally's training session, I would presume?'*

*'It would appear so. They monitored corridors only. No compartments'* he assured her, before sitting down next to her.

She looked at him expectantly and he let out a short sigh.

*'Yes... I took the opportunity to do a walk-through of the ship. We leave tomorrow morning, and I wanted to make sure that everything was exactly where it's supposed to be. Ronnie will expect everything to be exactly where it is when we get back'*

*'Petrus, I want you to be–'*

*‘Very careful. I know, my love. And Ronnie is covering us so we should be just fine’*

With a resigned sigh, she let herself be comforted in his arms.

It wasn’t but ten minutes later when he had most of her robes pushed aside and was working her up to her second peak of pleasure in as many minutes.

### ***Mid-Evening***

Ronnie had spent the remainder of the day preparing for the mission, and his kit was finally packed, and his ship was ready to go – with a full load of Healer’s Milk in both the transport *and* the *Kraken’s Child*.

After preparing for bed that evening, he suddenly remembered his comment to Nathan and Dorcas, then searched through the stash of personal items in his compartment to find something suitable for what was needed. Once found, he relocated that particular bundle to his most frequently used drawer and placed it right on top of the *next* set of underwear he would be donning right after they returned from their mission.

It was too late to do anything about it now.

### ***February 23, On the Way***

The launch took place at ship’s Noon, with a calculated arrival at mid-morning, local time, on Base 3. Roughly four and a half hours of transit time was involved – including recovery between jumps.

The early morning briefing had been simple; a review of the overall plan and end goals, coupled with a few simple strategies should difficulties arise. Sasha, Sally, Jaiying, and Petrus would be traveling in the transport, and Silas and Sue would be riding with Ronnie in the *Kraken’s Child*.

Interestingly enough, *none* of the Vanir aboard had accepted the invitation for repatriation at Base 3. Ronnie wasn’t sure if it was because of any inherent fear of reprisal, or the fact they wouldn’t be taking their time getting there.

Once clear of the *Kraken*, the *Kraken’s Child* maneuvered close to the transport, locked on with shields, then jumped a mere two minutes towards Base 3 and stopped for a thirty-minute recovery period. It was at that point when everyone discovered just how much Healer’s Milk was necessary to quell a very upset – and *empty* – stomach. The thirty-minutes was a kindness, but mostly for Jaiying’s benefit. Not that she’d needed it, as she’d topped off from her mother just before leaving.

## The End of the Road

At the appointed time, Ronnie jumped them on the next leg of four minutes duration and waited until all crew and passengers had recovered enough for the *third* leg of their journey – which would grant them a full hour of rest at its terminus a mere six minutes later. Ronnie had to admit that both Sue and Silas were holding their own during this trial, with them drinking sparingly and resting quietly for the entire hour of their transit pause.

Two more jumps of four and then two minutes duration were made with the appropriate dwell time between transits, which found them a few seconds off to one side of their target planet within easy micro-jump distance. At that point they separated, and Petrus reported the transport inbound, while Ronnie cloaked and followed along at a suitable cover distance. With any luck, the rest of the evolution would be routine, and every one would go home alive.

### ***February 28, The Kraken***

Sai was on the bridge with Torga this morning and looking over the star charts. She finally called up the tactical plots and ran some quick numbers in her head, before settling back in her seat for several minutes. She was having an uncomfortable feeling and couldn't quite place her finger on it, but there was one thing she *could* do about it.

"Torga – course change. New course is here, above Base 3. Turn at the mark and continue to Base 2. New speed ... Ronnie's accelerated jumps – five hours per minute. Execute and log it in the book under acting First Officer's orders."

"Yes, Lady Tal," he said, and noted she stayed just long enough to see his course and speed change before leaving the bridge.

He duly recorded the new orders and contacted his watch relief early to let him know.

### ***March 4, Down to the Wire***

Things had gone smoothly. Too smoothly in Ronnie's mind.

During the last ten days, they'd visited Base 3, and then Base 2. Petrus, Sasha, Sally, and Jaiying had made their planet falls and performed the required removals in the local base dispensaries.

The only issue at Base 3 was Jaiying teaching Sally in exacting enough detail to perform the operation by herself – which she finally did on the last ten patients. That had taken a total of three days on site but Sally had received enough training and practice to perform the nerve tendril severing, along with the implant removal, and Jaiying had transferred to the *Kraken's Child* before leaving Base 3.



Upon leaving Base 3, Sai had contacted him and informed him of her decision to accelerate their jump cycles to meet them closer to Base 2. He was about to chastise her over it, but felt her hidden fears and simply accepted it at face value, before relaying it to Petrus.

On Base 2, Sally's counterparts were amazed but not fearful while watching her perform the removal of the implants, if not the actual disconnections of them, over the course of four days of treatments. Of what they'd witnessed, *all* of them had asked how they could receive similar training. Sally had forwarded that request back to Ronnie – still in low stationary orbit overhead – and he'd allowed her to mention it was part of the treaty negotiations between the Prime and the Commonwealth; the *current* pacing item being the resolution of this little implant problem.

Silas and Sue had been exemplary crew members, and kept him and Jaiying company in the forward compartment during their wake cycle. After the third day over Base 2, Sue had finally questioned him about how he slept.

"Poorly," had been his answer, and she'd let it go at that. From what she'd occasionally overhear, she noted he did take long breaks, but never seemed to be out of contact with Petrus on the transport.

Strangely, he'd relied on encrypted voice communications with Petrus, but also continued to communicate with them through the data pads instead of simply mind-to-mind – after all the trouble he'd gone to in getting them *capable* of it!

This added a layer to Sue's frustration with him; not the *least* of which was that the local data pads were not able to access the *Kraken's* data base, but relied instead on internal memory and processing power. At least Jaiying spoke fluent Vanir, if a little high-pitched.

They were just wrapping up things on Base 2 when a *new* request came in.

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"Ronnie, *Sasha says they have a problem on Base 1 that needs a Healer's attention,*" Petrus reported via the encrypted short coms.

"More implants? I thought they shipped them all here for treatment?"

He quickly ran the statistics between Base 4, Base 3, and Base 2. Base 2 had roughly twice as many implant victims to service, but they were supposed to have been augmented by those from Base 1, so that should have explained it.

"*They have a senior officer who they suspect is either not who he seems or is acting out of character for his warren. They fear another situation like with the commander on Base 4,*" Petrus said.

## The End of the Road

Ronnie thought hard about that. Military secrets were the most fleeting of all, and this was a *huge* conspiracy with lots of loose ends and talkative mouths involved.

“No way to just pluck him out of the situation and investigate him individually is there?”

*“Not according to Sasha’s contact. He was thinking you and Jaiying could do that thing you did before and see what secrets he’s hiding.”*

“He *knows* about that? He *knows* how that was performed?”

*“Ahhh, no. My words, Ronnie. All they know is that the Commander of Base 4 got chatty all the sudden and they suspect there might have been an intervention of some sort that brought it about. If humans can determine if an otherwise healthy and non-implanted Vanir is plagued by a bit of brainwashing, then they’re all for measures being taken to correct it.”*

“Let me think about it for a while,” he transmitted, then settled back in his seat.

Silas and Sue were up forward with him and had tried to follow the translation on their data pads. They watched as Ronnie brought up a tactical display of their current surroundings and widened the field to include Vanaheim and Base 1. They were seeing the concentration he was putting into this next request and wondering what he would decide.

In their eyes, Ronnie seemed to be worried about something, and they couldn’t figure out why. Everything had been going well up to now.

“Petrus, I want you back on the *Kraken*. After we escort you back, I’ll take Sasha and Sally with me to Base 1. I want you safely out of the way while I deal with this,” he finally sent out.

*“You’re not worried about little old me, are you?”*

“No, but ... but something doesn’t feel right about this.” He wavered for a few more moments. “I’d feel better knowing there’s only *one* ship I have to worry about. And besides, I won’t have to deal with Sai in case it turns sour.”

*“You really think it’s going to go bad?”*

“I – I don’t know. It’s probably all right. The Vanir we’ve met so far are not the ones who’ve been messing things up.”

*“Do you want me to bring in the Kraken as back up? It wouldn’t take but a few hours, and you’d have all the resources available.”*

“No,” he said, after looking at his tactical display once again. “I’ll escort you back to the *Kraken*, then jump for Base 1 and do a quick look-see. The ‘new’ Jaiying should be able to assist us from the *Kraken* and back up

Sally with whatever needs fixing. Then we'll join up with you later while you're in transit to Vanaheim."

*"Very well, Ronnie. We'll lift in two hours, then long jump to the ship. Once we're out of short range, we'll keep in touch only as necessary. You really think we can be tracked – even with cloaking up?"*

"It's a logical extension of their technology. Once things settle down, I'd like to take another look at that refueling planet and figure out why I couldn't see much of that plateau. If it's something like a new mineral, then we're gonna have to reconfigure a *bunch* of stuff."

*"Yeah, and Donnel will have a field day doing it!"* He could hear the laughter in Petrus' voice.

"Contact me in two. Meanwhile, I'm taking a nap," Ronnie said, then settled back in his seat and closed his eyes.

Jaiying got up quietly, looked at the Vanir, then shushed them silently while pointing at her Grandfather, before leaving for one of the crew bunks in the back of the ship. Sue looked at him in amazement and motioned Silas to observe as well.

She reached out tentatively with her mind and found nothing at all surrounding Ronnie. He was well and truly blocked, and she admired the skill it took to do that. And ... he actually seemed to be sleeping.

They both settled back and chatted silently, very lightly, which let Silas get a little more practice with this whole mind-to-mind talking business. If things progressed as he suspected, Vanir society was in for a *serious* change in the near future – should they all survive the next few months of negotiations, that is.

### ***Above Base 2, A Vanir Raider...***

The S'Slich'Tah raider hung in a very high orbit; well cloaked and *very* well away from Base 2, but still in range for their widely-tuned implant instruments to detect the occasional bits of *mental* chatter that had at first been speculated, then studied, and finally determined to be a *factual* condition of certain of the human species; *and*, it would appear, some very special *Vanir*, as well.

"See there!" the Senior Monitor exclaimed. "Multiple elements among the pattern, much like we've found with those Vanir implanted on our research station but much more *powerful*! Those are Vanir speaking with their *minds*!"

"You're *sure*? This isn't just some malfunctioning *implant*, is it?" the Commander asked. "There are still a few down on the surface."

## The End of the Road

“No! These are in *orbit*! Their ship may be cloaked, but we can still detect them from their *emissions*! See? The direction does not intersect the surface but is slightly above it, and we have *nothing* on our screens!”

“Very well. Keep us informed if their position should change,” the Commander ordered before turning to another specialist.

“Any progress in breaking the human’s encryption scheme?”

“None so far, Sir. Quite frankly, without a native translation program available, we have no way to be certain we’ve decrypted something properly anyway. Although word has come up that the humans are using portable translation devices between them and their Vanir sycophants.”

The Commander pondered the situation. None of them spoke or understood any of the human languages, so it was anyone’s guess as to what they were chatting about – supposedly their successful removal of his warren’s skillfully crafted nerve conditioners. The more he thought about it, the more he believed S’Slich’Tah 29531 had been right – blow up several thousand humans, then lead the vengeful creatures against their Vanir outposts. Maybe *then* the Prime would see the only *real* solution to the human problem was to *eliminate it, once and for all*!

“Contact our operatives planet-side and have them attain one of the translation devices for study. Failing that, see if they can plant a tracer on their transport,” he ordered, then settled back to wait it out...

It was the very sensitive instrument readings from their remote research center that had led to the frantic retuning and amplification of tracer monitors to pick up actual *human* thought transmissions – and now *Vanir* thoughts as well. It was unfortunate they had no means to *decipher* them, but given enough time, the raider ships of the S’Slich’Tah would be well prepared to deal with this *new* human threat – and perhaps the *Vanir* one as well...

It was a rather ironic situation, this human diplomatic mission. If they hadn’t stirred things up at the research station, the secret base would have maintained communications silence and never learned the humans had been *invited* to visit Vanaheim – by the *Prime*, no less – and were now wreaking *further* havoc with his warren’s master plan.

He considered that – the Prime’s involvement. Apparently, if she’d allowed this type of formal intrusion from the humans, the conditioning his warren leader had subjected the Prime to, didn’t seem to be holding very well. He wondered if it was a failure of the technology, or if her Senior Medical Technician had somehow blundered in its application. No matter. Once things were sufficiently chaotic, it would be a simple matter to free S’Slich’Tah 29531 and get things back on track for his warren’s ascension to power. There were just a few matters left to deal with first.

*Planet-Side, Base 2*

The S'Shala'Doc walked out with the Vanir crew of the Medical transport and carried a ships tablet containing a list of the base crewpersons who were operated on successfully – *all* of them – while chatting amicably with Sally about the results of each surgery. He also had questions about the incredibly complex devices removed from each patient – seemingly magically – and the chance of being allowed to discuss the possibility of medical training for other Vanir medical personnel with the Human medical staff aboard their Medical transport.

Sally repeated her statement that it was under consideration and would be part of the Vanir/Human treaty negotiations that would soon take place, but noted that *she* was the only medical person aboard the transport for this run, and the only *human* aboard was their pilot.

He sighed in resignation, then appeared to consider something.

“Senior Medical Technician S'Shac'Kah 38521, would it be possible to get a list of the *other* Vanir you've treated before you leave? I would like to compare their results with what we've observed today.”

“I believe I have those results aboard our transport,” she said, and guided him aboard at the rear service entry.

Sasha went forward and disappeared behind the forward hatch while Sally stayed behind; minimizing Petrus' exposure to an unknown Vanir while the S'Shala'Doc looked around curiously.

“This ... this isn't a *regular* MEDPOD, is it? It looks bigger.”

“Correct. It is a modified human transport that was refitted to support Vanir needs. Good range, reasonable capacity, and suitable facilities... Ah!”

She found her records container and linked it to her own ships tablet for a moment, then unplugged it and presented a cable end to the S'Shala'Doc.

He took it and gingerly plugged it into his tablet; wondering at the novelty of using the obsolete but still-retained 'backup' data port to transfer data between ships tablets as he received the data package she was sharing with him. It took a moment to open and confirm the contents, before he was thanking her profusely and wishing her a safe journey back to their main transport vessel.

The S'Shala'Doc left quietly; displaying a smiling admiration at the Senior Medical Technician and an amused look at the transport, before walking down the service ramp and seeing it close behind him. He walked away casually; all the while wondering if she'd notice the small tracer he'd planted under one of the shelves when her back was turned.

## The End of the Road

### *Aboard the Kraken's Child*

"Ronnie, *we're ready to go*," Petrus' voice reported from the speaker.

"Follow local control until the departure point, then report your jump. I'll shift and follow you."

At the appointed time, Petrus called out his jump, and Ronnie waited with sensors out; looking for anyone interested in following, before executing his *own* jump, which would bring him to within a few minutes of the *Kraken's* current position en route to Base 2. The Vanir aboard with him were anxious, and as far as he could tell, they'd remained silent ... but then again, he wasn't paying that much attention at the moment.

### *Aboard the Vanir Raider*

"There! There, you *see*? The human pod jumped, but there was a spike in abnormal tracer activity in orbit after they left. It ... it looks like *Vanir*! There is still a *second* ship out there!" the Senior Monitor cried out, just before his readings went blank.

They spiked again moments later, but at a significantly lower level, then went to zero. "They're *gone*!"

"The tracer on the MEDPOD?" the Commander demanded.

"It's still reporting, Sir! It must be heading towards a location to intercept their main transport en route to Vanaheim," the Senior Monitor reported.

"Very well. Keep track of that tracer. When it stops, map that location against a line to Vanaheim. We'll intercept them somewhere along that line!"

"What about the *second* vessel, Sir?" the Weapons Officer asked.

"It's following the first one. Begin short jumps parallel to the track of the tracer. When the tracer stops, the second vessel will be close by."

The Weapons Officer was no fool. The second vessel was cloaked. Not only cloaked, but it left no jump wake in its leaving. Once it arrived at their main ship, they were *still* going to be cloaked and impossible to find unless the Senior Monitor could get a solid line on them by their *mental* emissions?

As their Commander turned away to issue orders to the helm, the Weapons Officer pulled the Senior Monitor aside for a few moments and asked for a slave feed from the monitor system. If they *did* manage to approach within range, they would probably have only one chance to take out the human's main ship, before its primary weapon could be brought to bear. As for the escort vessel, they'd just have to take their chances, but he wanted to improve them a bit.

### ***Aboard the Kraken's Child***

Ronnie brought them out of their last transit one jump short of their destination, and stopped in space. Something just didn't feel right for some reason, and he didn't want to drag that problem back to his ship. Extending all his passive sensors to their maximum, he sat like a spider in its web and waited for something to happen. He *knew* something was going to happen – he just didn't know *when*.

### ***Aboard the Transport***

"And ... here we are," Petrus reported to his queasy passengers.

The rock around the *Kraken* blocked a significant portion of the view forward of them, while Petrus slowly continued his approach.

"*Kraken*, this is MEDPOD Sally returning from duty," he teased.

"*We hear you, MEDPOD Sally, and wel... Four, we have an alert close to you!*" Torga reported.

Petrus could hear confusion from the open mic on the bridge of the *Kraken*.

"*Four, did you bring anyone with you? We're reading a tracer of some sort – either close by, or on the transport with you!*"

"Torga, go to full shields – *NOW!* We're heading away! Tell Ronnie!" Petrus transmitted, then immediately keyed a micro-jump that launched them at a tangent from the *Kraken*.

### ***Aboard the Kraken***

'*Sai Tal! We have a problem!*' Torga sent out silently.

'*On the way!*' she pushed back, and left the Vanir quarters headed to the bridge at a run; demanding and receiving all the details of what had just transpired on the way. Even in the confusion of the moment, Torga noted the tracer had immediately moved off with the transport, and reported that to her as well.

'*Ronnie, something was stuck on the transport and Petrus has bolted! I'm jumping the Kraken!*'

### ***Aboard the Kraken's Child***

Ronnie heard Sai call out to him, but remained silent.

He was suspicious of Vanir technical capabilities to begin with, but it wasn't that far a stretch to imagine that not only could the Vanir track their *own* tracers, by this time they could probably also detect *human* mind-to-mind communications over longer distances – which would put a *huge* dampener on things if proven true.

## The End of the Road

He glanced at the tracer scanning instrument Donnel had added to his systems with a baleful eye; having neglected to enable it while in orbit, yet momentarily wondering if it was sensitive enough to detect raw thoughts. He doubted this was the time to test it, but turned it on anyway.

### ***Aboard the Vanir Raider***

"The tracer has moved off, Sir!" the Senior Monitor reported. "It jumped just a very short distance and ... it just jumped *again!*"

"Did it jump in the same direction?"

"Sir?"

"Did it jump in the *same* direction, or was it *random?*" the Commander demanded.

"It ... it *could* have been a course correction. It was ... it just jumped *again!* In a *random* direction!"

### ***Aboard the Transport***

It didn't take long to figure out the *only* visitor allowed aboard the MEDPOD had planted a tracer on it. At least Sally's quick scans of herself, Sasha, and Petrus showed them to be clean. Petrus had both Sally and Sasha in the back searching for the elusive tracer, with *all* of them hoping it was *inside* and not attached *externally*.

### ***Aboard the Kraken's Child***

'*Silas, what do you think is going...*'

"NO MORE CHATTER, SUE! Speak out loud, but keep your thoughts *blocked!*" Ronnie ordered. He could hear what was surely broken Vanir rasping out of his data pad.

"Rondal Caldar, surely you don't think anyone can really *hear* us, do you?" she asked aloud after waiting impatiently for his translation to complete.

"I think a *lot of things*, but right now I need to concentrate," he told her after her translation finished vocalizing. "Right now, I need *both* of you to sit down and belt in. If you want to help, then extend out and *passively* feel out any living forms beyond this ship. *Whatever* you do, *do not project!*"

He glanced to the side when Jaiying joined him up front and sat in the navigator's position. She tapped her forehead, then ran her fingertips across her lips in a zipping motion.

He smiled, then settled down to focus his efforts outward.



Someone was out there ... *somewhere*. What would they be doing right now? What would *he* be doing right now?

### ***Aboard the Vanir Raider***

"The tracer keeps jumping, Sir! They seem to be ... skipping randomly about," the Senior Monitor reported. "It's still ... it's *gone*, Sir!"

"It's *gone*? Did it make a long jump or..."

"It looks like it was shut off, Sir. There was a common delay between jumps, and the tracer died in the middle of the delay period," he reported while looking back over the trace logs to confirm it for himself. "I don't detect anything else around us, Sir."

The Commander contemplated that for several moments. He'd lost the transport, but there were at least two more ships out here, and he wondered where they went.

"Sir, in all the excitement... There is a residual transit wake in the *opposite* direction from the transport's departure vector," the Senior Monitor offered.

"The *other* ship?"

"A *large* wake ... a *very* large wake, and it ... it just fully dissipated," he said morosely.

"So the transport returned here and they somehow discovered the tracer. Then they jumped away from their *large* support ship to lead us astray, while the large ship jumped in the other direction. I wonder what their *third* ship is doing?" the Commander mused aloud.

### ***Aboard the Kraken's Child***

Ronnie was reaching out, but couldn't find anything, and Jaiying wasn't having much luck either.

"I know they're out there, Jaiying," he muttered.

"Yes, Grandfather, but I can't feel them. Perhaps they're not there anymore?"

"Perhaps ... or perhaps they have a ship built with some of that blocking technology they have on that refueling planet we stopped at."

"Are you *sure* about that, Grandfather? Maybe that area just had no animals on it? Or maybe the vegetation was dead?"

"Thought about that, girl. Animals would probably avoid a dead jungle, but the spectrum showed it was living plant life. Either the surrounding mineral blocked those sensations, or something else was driving away all the wild life. I'm going with the former because..."

## The End of the Road

"You never know," she finished for him, and he smiled grimly.

### ***Aboard the Transport***

'*Sai, are you all right?*' Petrus pushed gently into the void.

'*PETRUS!*' she shouted back anxiously, but quickly dampened her enthusiasm. '*Petrus ... are you safe? Is everyone all right?*' she sent out as a bare whisper of thought, while fighting back the chagrin of violating a simple mindspeak communications blackout as she waited for her husband to reach out to her again.

### ***Aboard the Kraken's Child***

"Well, if they were listening, they should have a good fix on Sai after *that*," Ronnie muttered darkly.

"I have both Grandmother and Uncle Petrus located, Grandfather," Jaiying said. She almost pressed it into his head, but he held up his hand.

"Let's listen in a while longer while I move us closer to the last position of the *Kraken*."

He made a few adjustments to his power settings, before starting them in the general direction of where the *Kraken* would have been if it hadn't jumped so precipitously; giving them just a nudge and letting them continue to drift in the right direction.

He also set up the visual detector and slaved it to the navigation system. That gave it access to all the known star maps, something else he'd been thinking of, and mentioned to Donnel late one evening.

Maybe it would finally be useful.

### ***Aboard the Kraken***

'*Petrus, have you heard from Ronnie yet?*' Sai asked very quietly.

'*Not yet, love, but he's a sneaky bastard*' he sent back just at the edge of detection. '*Lay silent now, with sensors out. Get the girls to listen as well, but don't project. Ronnie's got some strange ideas, but I've been with the lad a long time, and I learned to listen when he feels funny*'

'*Be careful, Petrus*'

'*I always am, love*'

### ***Aboard the Vanir Raider***

"Sir, just that one burst in the general direction of the large wake," the Senior Monitor reported.

The Commander paced slowly. He was considering all they knew, and all they'd supposed, while watching the screens for the tiniest bit of evidence to show where those detestable humans had wandered off to.

"Where are you, you devils... You're still out there ... *mocking* me..."

### ***Aboard the Kraken's Child, Two Hours Later***

Ronnie looked like he was sleeping.

Over the course of the last two hours, he might well have been – except when he sat upright and terminated their forward motion with the minimum amount of power necessary to halt them in space.

"Rondal Caldar, it has been so long... Do you think there is still a danger out here?" Sue asked quietly.

He sighed and checked his screens once again, before turning back to answer her after the voder got done with her translation.

"You've never fought in space, Sue. Sometimes it's a waiting game to see who radiates first. Silas should be aware of that," he said, and after several second's translation, Silas dutifully nodded in agreement.

### ***Aboard the Vanir Raider***

The Commander was getting frustrated, as was most of his crew. They'd been sitting near the last known position of the transport's initial location for nearly four hours now, but had gotten no closer to finding the third ship.

They'd even turned some systems off to quiet their electronic signature, but now it was time to call it quits.

### ***Aboard the Kraken's Child***

"Grandfather, did you feel..."

"Yes, Jaiying... Very faintly... Somewhere over ... *there*," he murmured, then rotated the ship towards the general direction of those unhappy feelings.

It was only ten minutes later when the visual detector pinged, indicating an occluded star had been observed within a few degrees of where he'd felt the Vanir.

"Got you!" Ronnie smiled grimly, but out of habit, forgetfully called out '*Ship Handling!*'

### ***Aboard the Vanir Raider***

The raider was just turning to recover to their secret base, when Ronnie's inadvertent outburst triggered a sensor.

## The End of the Road

“Sir! Contact *astern!*” the Senior Monitor shouted, and the Weapons Officer reported a fix on the target while keying in targeting commands to the weapon prepared to launch.

“Lock and *fire!*” the Commander ordered, and a self-guided weapon was launched, even as the ship was being slued around to bring their beam weapon to bear.

### ***Aboard the Kraken’s Child***

Immediately after calling out ‘*Ship handling*’ he’d reached out remotely; selected a number three round for the main gun, and began focusing on the probable target position. That position quickly firmed up when a missile launch was detected, and he got a solid lock on the Vanir raider.

“Aww, *crap!*” he exclaimed, then fired his gun.

The shell left with a thump felt throughout the ship, while he scrambled to setup the auto-loader sequence with a mix of number two’s and three’s, with a scattering of number one’s in the mix to round it out. He only carried one-hundred rounds, but didn’t expect to need them all – depending on the quality of the Vanir shields.

He turned his weapons system loose to start calculating a reasonable spread, then slaved it to the navigation console.

### ***Aboard the Vanir Raider***

“*Inbound*, Commander!” the Sensor Officer reported. “It ... it’s a *projectile* round, Sir!”

“Did you say ... *projectile*? How soon to impact?”

“Uhh ... three ... three and a half *minutes?*” the operator suggested.

“Helm ... shift position twenty kilometers sideways from the inbound round ... your choice of direction.” He almost laughed at the mere thought of it.

In less than five seconds, the ship had easily shifted while still bringing its main weapon around towards the human’s ship.

### ***Aboard the Kraken’s Child***

They had about a minute left before the missile would become a real threat to them, but that was *more* than enough time to get ready.

“Everybody strapped down tight? And tuck those data pads under your butts! Dropping gravity to ten percent,” he called out.

He sent a questing probe out to his target. Good! They appeared intent on prosecuting the encounter.

“Hang on, everyone!” he called out, then followed it with, “\*TAP DANCE\*”

### ***Aboard the Vanir Raider***

“Sir, the target just *jumped!*” the Senior Monitor reported.

“*WHERE!* Where did it...”

“*CONTACT!* One-hundred kilometers ... it jumped again ... *new* contact ... fifty-kilo- ... it jumped *again* ... ah ... ah, n-new contact, three-hundred kilometers and heading away ... no, it just jumped *again!*”

### ***Aboard the Kraken’s Child***

Ronnie and Donnel had talked over this business of having just the one gun aboard the *Kraken’s Child* during a tactical situation. While *definitely* useful for air-to-ground situations, most space battles occurred at ranges of *thousands* of kilometers. Projectile weapons had a definite disadvantage over distances that large, so were somewhat pointless when used against a target in space – *unless* you were right on top of your target.

After much drinking and anecdotal story-telling, what Donnel had come up with was a variation of Ronnie’s ice mining trip with Sai those many years ago. *This* time, however, the navigation computer would be used to close with a target and let the weapons system launch projectile weapons against it randomly – the thought being that, *statistically*, the target would be hammered enough times to break it enough to knock it out completely.

It worked well enough on asteroids, and it should work just as well on most ships – if they didn’t just simply run away. It only needed a deft touch from Ronnie to reach in and turn off their shields – provided he could actually get *in* to do so.

For right *now*, though, the system had taken three calibration runs against the target and now knew *exactly* where it was, and where it was headed, while the weapons system selected the optimum spread of shells to launch on the next run – which it then executed.

### ***Aboard the Vanir Raider***

“Sir, contact is ... *INBOUND!*”

The raider was hammered by a handful of two and three kiloton shells that, while they didn’t *penetrate* the shields, still rattled the interior of the ship severely and knocked several of the crew to the decks. Those downed managed to regain their feet – only to be dropped again when the *next* volley arrived from a different vector and caused more shaking and rattling, this time with a few non-essential systems being knocked off line.

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### *Aboard the Kraken's Child*

"Well, the bigger they are, the thinner the hull," Ronnie muttered as he paused the program for a moment, then sent them on a jump several milliseconds away.

He reached out with Jaiying and noticed he could feel the Vanir crew a little easier now. He still couldn't work through their shield, but their crew was coming through much louder now – or they were simply more excited.

An alert flashed on his display, and he jumped the ship automatically.

"\*SONOFABITCH!\* That damned thing is *still* following us?" he muttered angrily.

He observed the missile waver for a moment, before reestablishing its lock on the *Kraken's Child* and starting to close once again. At this distance, he had time to reconsider; then an *evil* smile came over his face.

### *Aboard the Vanir Raider*

"Damage control – *report!*" the Commander shouted, and received accounts of minor system upsets – the most notable being the waste handling system.

"Sir, contact is ... is out of reach ... I think," the Sensor Monitor reported, but the Weapons Officer noted the telemetry coming from their launched weapon.

"Sir, the missile is still tracking the human ship! Location is ... they just jumped," he got out, followed three seconds later with *another* round of hammering that shattered nerves and a few displays.

The next set after that knocked out a few more systems – including the active tracer shield.

### *Aboard the Kraken's Child*

"Grandfather!"

"I hear them, Jaiying!"

He smiled and almost forgot the missile.

Instead, he jumped to the far side of the Vanir ship, then reached out and started poking around inside to gather information where he could. He needed to find the Captain or the Weapons Officer – two shipboard individuals who would know *exactly* where the shield circuit controls were located.

"Jaiying, keep an eye on that missile. Warn me when it comes close again, and ... and see if you can *divert* it or something," he suggested, before dipping back in and hunting down his prey.

He found both officers in their logical locations, and quickly determined which systems needed their plugs pulled – then *did* so.

***Aboard the Vanir Raider***

“Sir! Shields just *failed!*”

“*WEAPONS – DO YOU HAVE A LOCK?*” the Commander shouted.

“Yes! *NO!* The weapons guidance console just went down! No ... wait – the missile is still tracking ... *TRACKING BEHIND US!*”

“*WEAPONS!* Con at your discretion! Extrapolate and fire the main beam at the probable location of the human ship!”

***Aboard the Kraken’s Child***

“What in the world are they doing *now?*” Ronnie muttered, then watched as the Vanir ship rotated in their direction. “Their shields are down and we’re still cloak...” he paused while quickly checking his instruments, “...we’re still cloaked. Silas! Do you recognize the configuration of that ship?” A smattering of Vanir hissed from a data pad as it struggled to keep up.

“No, Rondal Caldar, but it looks like a medium-size cruiser ... maybe two-thirds the size of the *Kraken*. They probably have several more missiles and one or two beam weapons. Turning towards us like that would indicate a beam weapon coming into play,” he said, then waited impatiently as the translation scrolled on Ronnie’s data pad.

“Noted,” Ronnie said quietly, then watched intently as the missile approached the Vanir ship while it continued to rotate in their direction.

Just before it lined up on them, he micro-jumped again to place themselves on the Vanir flank less than a hundred kilometers away. He watched as the missile broke lock and hunted for a while; trying to sniff them out.

He was very curious as to how they were tracking his ship with shields up and cycling, along with the cloak running.

The missile suddenly turned and headed directly towards them.

“Well ... *damn,*” he muttered, then jumped to the far side of the Vanir ship.

***Aboard the Vanir Raider***

“Sir! They just jumped again! They’re *opposite* us again!”

“Commander, we can’t get the shields back up, and the human ship is still cloaked. The missile ... the missile still seems able to track them but

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we won't have a chance to engage them with our beam weapon as things stand. I recommend we *withdraw*, Sir!" the Weapons Officer reported.

"Run away? *RUN AWAY?*" the Commander shouted; but then, with a *great* deal of effort, composed himself. "Very well... Helm, begin standard jumps – random pattern away from the area. Once clear, plot a course to return to our base," he said disgustedly.

"Sir! What about the *missile?*"

"Let the *HUMANS* deal with it!" he snapped, then settled into his command chair.

### ***Aboard the Kraken's Child***

"Grandfather, the Vanir commander intends to leave," Jaiying advised him.

"Ohhh ... we can't have *that*, now. This party hasn't even *started* yet," he murmured."

With their shields down, it was quite easy now to reach in and disable their drive system – and that's what he did.

Then he watched as the missile continued to hunt for them, while still pondering just how it kept finding them.

"Jaiying – do you have *any* idea of how we're being tracked?" he finally asked.

"We're not radiating ... maybe ... our *shields?* Could a sensitive detector feel our shields? Maybe they have something like your optical system? They couldn't just be *listening* to us, could they?"

### ***Aboard the Vanir Raider***

"Sir! The helm is not responding!" the Conning Officer shouted. "We have no *power*, Sir!"

"*ENGINEERING! WE NEED POWER RIGHT NOW!*" the Commander shouted.

### ***Aboard the Kraken's Child***

Ronnie checked all their emitters – which were all shut down – then cranked up his own sensors to maximum, but didn't hear anything except background noise. He continued to sit there with arms folded and chin resting on his palm.

A few minutes later the missile locked onto them again and started heading their way.



“Well ... enough of this,” he muttered, then dropped the *Kraken’s Child* to place the Vanir ship directly between the missile and them, causing the missile to break lock and start hunting for them again.

***Aboard the Vanir Raider***

“Commander! The missile! It’s headed *this way!*” the Sensor Officer shouted.

***Aboard the Kraken’s Child***

“Oh my... The anxiety level on their bridge just shot *way* up,” Ronnie muttered, then chuckled.

“Rondal Caldar, you disabled their ship. You do not need to kill them,” Sue pointed out, then waited in frustration for the voder translation.

“They shot at us, Sue. One of their party planted a tracer on the transport, and they actively engaged us. They intended to kill us. To kill *you*,” he said calmly.

“You have rendered them *helpless*, Rondal Caldar. By your own reported accounts, they are now non-combatants. Please let them live,” Silas asked him.

Ronnie stared at them while listening very carefully. Sue was silent, but the background chatter coming from Silas gave him a clue. On a very narrow band, he made a silent request of Jaiying, and she reached out and touched Silas – collapsing him in his seat.

“*SILAS!* What did you...” Sue stopped talking when Ronnie held his finger up to his lips.

While she focused on Silas, he returned his attention to the monitor; observing the powerless ship and approaching missile.

Then he moved the *Kraken’s Child* around to another quarter of the Vanir raider and watched as the missile continued to hunt for them.

As the missile hunted, it also approached closer to the Vanir raider. He could feel their panic begin to peak – which now seemed to bring *them* to the attention of the missile.

***Aboard the Vanir Raider***

“*COMMANDER ... MISSILE INBOUND!*”

***Aboard the Kraken’s Child***

“Grandfather...”

“On it...”

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‘HEY, YOU! WE’RE UP HERE!’ he shouted silently, and watched as the missile quickly swung around and headed straight for them.

“Well – well – well...” he muttered darkly, then jumped them several hundred kilometers away and held position.

“Jaiying, as tightly as you can, please update the staff about our *new* problem. The balance of power has just shifted significantly.”

“Yes, Grandfather,” she said, while Ronnie calmly turned his attention back to Sue.

*‘Sue, did Sally or Sai ever talk you to about the importance of BLOCKING your thoughts?’*

### ***Aboard the Vanir Raider***

“Commander, the humans just jumped away, and the missile is still tracking them,” the Sensor Officer reported, then sighed loudly with relief.

The bridge crew quieted down at that, but all knew they were still stuck in space with a human ship out there whose captain seemed immune to their repeated efforts to kill them.

On top of all that, he was probably very upset about it.

### ***Aboard the Kraken’s Child***

Ronnie couldn’t seem to stop chuckling, and Sue was beginning to think he’d lost his mind. She had no way to tell, though, because at the moment, his mind was completely closed to her. She noticed that even Jaiying seemed a little concerned about him.

*‘What to do, what to do... What do you think, Sue? Capture the crew and pull them in for questioning? Perhaps scan them for implants or brainwashing? You’re from the Prime’s warren. Perhaps it would be best if you talked to them?’*

*‘I – I would not know what to say, Rondal Caldar’* she sent weakly, but Jaiying piped up in Vanir.

“Sue, the Vanir never forget *anything*. You’ve had training in ship-to-ship communication protocols, and practical applications in them less than a Vanir year ago. I remember seeing that in your memories,” she said, causing Sue to let out a loud hiss. “You were confused before, Sue ... but no longer,” she added.

### ***Aboard the Vanir Raider***

“Commander! The missile just *exploded!*”

“The humans are dead?”

“No way to tell, Sir. Wait ... there is...” he froze as his sensors started picking up readings on the tracer detector from the direction of the explosion. Something seemed to be headed towards them on their flank.

He quickly enabled the optical systems and scanned that quadrant while the readings narrowed their distance to the ship. After several minutes, they could just barely see a faintly glowing image approach from the flank that eventually resolved into a glowing creature whose long tentacles crawled randomly about and pulled biped figures seemingly out of empty space and consumed them in the dark vacuum.

The composure of the bridge crew began to falter again, but the image slowly faded away as it reached just outside a hundred meters of the ship and halted. In its place was a flat-black solid that obscured the stars; showing that it was just a ship ... a tiny ship compared to the bulk of the raider.

Moments later, the communications system alerted them to an incoming message.

### ***Aboard the Kraken's Child***

*‘Sue, just keep them talking while Jaiying and I do a little digging. I want to learn more about their thought shield, and that detector used on their missiles’*

‘Yes, Rondal Caldar’ she sent quietly, then began the interrogation.

### ***Kantor, In the Royal Gardens***

“Well ... well ... well... Lili, it appears that fortunes have swung precariously in the *wrong* direction.”

The Emperor’s face held a disgusted look as he sighed.

“In truth, my Lord Husband, it was to be expected ... *eventually*. Although things could have *waited* a while longer.”

“No, my dear. It’s best we found out now. I suppose my dear brother is feeling somewhat *smug* about it, however.”

He glanced at her walking beside him and sighed again.

They continued arm-in-arm as they wandered through the gardens at a sedate pace. Along the way, they passed a new clearing with a series of concentric rings and pathways all laid out with stepping stones at ground level. The work was fresh, and the ground cover had yet to take hold between the stones. Radatel stopped to stare at it curiously.

“This is something Diane had suggested, my Husband. She called it a \*prayer labyrinth\* of some sort. Apparently, one walks along the stone

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path while considering a problem, and a solution may be revealed upon completion of the journey ... or so she suggests."

"My dear, surely Lady Diane does not believe in such ... such *primitive* rituals?"

"It was something she spoke of once before, my Husband. Her mother had been enamored of them in her youth. It is said to promote a calming experience, as one simply follows the path in front of them while leaving their mind free to dwell upon the issue that plagues them, or so she suggests. Perhaps it may assist someone, perhaps it is just an interesting idea."

"Well ... perhaps a few flowers along the path would brighten things up a bit," he suggested, then continued their walk, before he remembered to ask, "What about that business of the missing housekeeper, Lili. Have there been any updates?"

### *In Vanir Space, Aboard the Kraken's Child*

"Well, that certainly could have gone better," Ronnie stated calmly.

He slowly approached the remains of the raider ship and encompassed as much of the debris field that he could with his shield. This was a much *bigger* kit than the one Station 6 made, and most of the pieces were smaller, too. He started tightening his shield to see if anything was recoverable from the explosion.

Sue was still in somewhat of a state of shock, but he could feel her coming back to reality.

*'I ... I don't understand, Rondal Caldar. Why? Why did they do that?'*

*'You tell me'*

He'd sent it offhandedly while slowly pulling in the debris. When she made no effort to respond, he presented her with some suggestions.

*'Maybe they felt honor bound to never surrender? Maybe they were under compulsion to destroy evidence of their accomplishments? Although, they pretty much exposed everything they had at the last. Maybe ... maybe they simply didn't like something you said?'*

*'This makes no SENSE! You would not have HURT THEM! We would have recovered them safely and returned them to Vanaheim ... ALIVE!'*

"Sue ... they were of the S'Slich'Tah Warren," Silas reminded her quietly. "The Prime has placed their warren under censure."

They continued to discuss it between themselves while Ronnie gathered up loose pieces of raider ship for examination.

Unlike the disassembled Station 6, the raider had exploded violently. Aside from a small core of material that somehow managed to bundle together and was drifting away relatively slowly, pieces of it had scattered in a wide-flung ball.

While Ronnie was gathering pieces of evidence, Jaiying had gone to the crew bunk area to rest and bring the Senior Staff and the Crown up to date – *again*.

### ***March 5, The Kraken, Afternoon***

Sai was furious, but there wasn't much she could do about the situation now.

Ronnie had reported he was finally done gathering loose pieces and bringing them back to the *Kraken* at a somewhat more sedate pace, but going through everything might be a problem. Petrus had suggested they simply abandon the shell and park the ship outside, while the leftovers from the Vanir raider were stuffed into the shell and picked over by Donnel's crew and some of the guard staff.

It was a reasonable suggestion, and since they had plenty of fuel on board to run both shields and cloaking for the duration, she'd reluctantly agreed. They located a space outside of routine transit lanes, then parked themselves just inside the cloud as they waited for Ronnie's return; remaining a little over eight minutes away from Vanaheim.

### ***Late Afternoon...***

The bundle of raider pieces surrounding the relatively tiny black ship buried in the middle of it showed up later in the afternoon.

Donnel was on hand to supervise the unpacking of it by delicate use of the *Kraken's* shields, coupled with efforts by Endo, who was piloting the *Orca* for the occasion and keeping track of random loose pieces of ship. They finally managed to herd the majority of it into the shell and closed the door, but not without some concerns of being able to contain everything properly if the shell had to be moved, not to mention possible damage to the docking spindles during such movement.

Ronnie made the call, and the shell would be left behind for the duration of their Vanaheim visit, if only to maintain the illusion of them not having one at all. Tentatively, Torga would be supervising recovery efforts while using the transport as a center of operations for Donnel's staff and his Imperial assistants. While the recovery team picked through the debris and searched for useful intelligence, he would trade off with either Gallus or Endo.

It was an angry Ronnie who finally docked the *Kraken's Child* later that day and turned Jaiying over to her mother. Then he called on Petrus to

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arrange a meeting between the human and Vanir Ambassadors on the following morning. He'd just finished his shower and sought his bed for a moments rest when Lili reached out to him.

### *March 6, In the Shell, Afternoon*

Donnel's mixed crew was floating within the shell and carefully picking through the pieces, while Ronnie was in the transport with Donnel and updating him with details of the encounter, and the final result as displayed before them.

The blast had very quickly separated the raider into its component parts and expanded it in all directions – almost as if bombs had been planted throughout the ship. Ronnie had been stunned at the sudden explosion, and simply watched it bloom as if from a deadly flower.

It had taken him a few minutes to come to his senses before calmly maneuvering the *Kraken's Child* into its nominal center, then extending his shield out far enough to gather evidence of Vanir technology.

Unfortunately, out of all the junk Ronnie had brought back, most of it literally *was* junk.

No manuals, no computers, no data storage devices of *any* kind, and no bodies ... just bits and pieces of control panels, torn harnesses, and a variety of hull sections of both common and unfamiliar composition.

Something they *did* recover was one severely damaged missile that Donnel had summarily neutered, then sent the tracking head and mechanism to the lab for further analysis.

A big item on their list of concerns was that the Vanir had found a means of detecting human *thought*. Not only that, but they'd managed to develop a *homing* device and attach it to an active weapon – presumably in the one headed to the lab. That it was sensitive to both human *and* Vanir emissions was proven by the behavior Ronnie had reported of that one missile that had locked onto the Vanir raider when their bridge crew had become panicked.

The last big item on the list was the fact that neither Ronnie nor Jaiying could reach inside the raider's shields. That he'd had to hammer the ship considerably to cause a fault in the shield system told them it was electro-mechanical in nature, but that didn't provide any further clue as to *how* they did it. Ronnie left unsaid the fact that both he and Jaiying had somehow felt the Vanir crew's emotions even behind their mind shield ... something which neither of them should have been able to do unless their multiple projectile attacks had actually degraded their mind shield enough to allow it.

*Late Evening...*

It was a couple of hours to midnight, and Ronnie's stomach wasn't happy with the supper he'd gulped down earlier, followed by the planning meeting with the Vanir he'd scheduled for later that evening. While wandering back to his compartment, he was running through the events of the last two days...

He'd been slightly less than livid when they returned safely back to the *Kraken* the day before, but managed to calm down somewhat in the last thirty hours. The meeting held between the humans and Vanir just this morning had threatened a flare-up, but he'd suppressed that, too.

Instead, he'd let Silas and Sue give a somewhat unbiased report of the encounter with the raider – tentatively identified as S'Slich'Tah from Sue's impression of that commander's accent – then added his own suppositions as the narrative had played out.

Out of that meeting, it had been decided that a visit to Base 1 was currently out of the question. He'd requested that Sasha relay his regrets to the proper Vanir command; suggesting instead that a "change-of-command" might be an appropriate solution in the short term.

Samuel had promised to update the Prime immediately after the morning meeting; emphasizing that the humans had accomplished the goals of the Vanir's urgent medical request, only to be attacked by an apparent rogue vessel under S'Slich'Tah control. They'd gone their separate ways after that and arranged to meet again later, after supper.

This evening's meeting brought up several issues for consideration before proceeding with their Ambassadorial mission to the Vanir.

For *whatever* reason, the Vanir aboard the raider had decided to *destroy* themselves rather than accept Sue's promise of a safe journey back to Vanaheim. He suspected there was a little bit more to it than that, but they'd recovered no intact bodies, and very little intact debris.

Donnel and his assistants were having a field day in the spaces they were using for a lab. Donnel's excitement was primarily focused on the missile guidance system they were reverse-engineering; his feelings easily detectable by all the Seniors aboard if they chose to focus on him. Otherwise, nothing else they'd found could point with any assurances to the mind-blocking technology the Vanir had discovered.

Before the meeting broke up, an appropriate informal script had been devised for the "official" meeting on the following morning; the one that would be transmitted to the Prime and indicate the human's intentions – still friendly, but guarded...

When Ronnie finally reached his compartment door, he was relieved there were no Imperial guardsmen standing beside it. Apparently, Laisee

## The End of the Road

had taken the hint and would leave him alone this evening, as he already had too much on his mind. He'd been worried enough, and Lili's earlier comments just made it worse.

They had no idea how the Vanir mind-blocking technology worked, but he had a pretty good idea of where he might find *out*.

### *Vanaheim, The Prime's Advisors*

They'd gathered in the morning, as usual, but today's current topic was the latest intrusion into internal Vanir issues by the humans, and as before, there was no immediate consensus on how to interpret the human's actions.

From the evidence submitted by the military advisor, it would appear that a valid medical crisis had occurred – instigated by Vanir and *not* the humans, as originally suggested by elements from Base 4. Those from the industrial sector most familiar with the construction and manufacturing of the current tracer technology had tentatively agreed.

The Vanir Ambassador, he whom the human's had so cavalierly renamed "Samuel" (purely for their *own* convenience, one supposes) had submitted a recording of the original Vanir request for medical intervention from Bases 2 and 3, which had been met with resistance by the humans. By the end of the recording, the humans had begrudgingly allowed a medical team composed of one human and one Vanir (in training to apply *human* medical techniques, no less) to attempt medical interventions on the afflicted Vanir on Bases 2 and 3.

That had occurred, and independent reports from both bases indicated the afflicted crew and staff had all survived. A sample of the removed devices had been analyzed by local technical experts that seemed to confirm earlier reports the devices *were*, in fact, manufactured by Vanir ... which would seem to point straight back to the *original* tracer developers – the S'Slich'Tah.

Although a few advisors still felt somewhat ambivalent about them, the S'Slich'Tah had been censured, and for many good reasons, as evidenced by the loss of Stations 6 and 23. No one had survived from Station 6, but the humans recovered those from Station 23 and turned them over to the Prime's representatives – *unharméd*. Not a particularly *vicious* act considering the fact that they were *humans*.

What was confusing to *most* was the Prime's very "progressive" punishment of the S'Slich'Tah by banishing them to their historical enclave. All things considered, it was like sending someone home – to a self-sustaining society of close to thirty-thousand individuals who were quite capable of living independent from the *rest* of Vanir almost indefinitely. As most Vanir preferred living within their own warrens, this was not so much a punishment, as a vacation.



The destruction of a Vanir ship, tentatively identified as S'Slich'Tah by a currently unidentified Vanir observer, was dismissed after much discussion. The truncated recording of communications between that ship captain and the observer indicated reluctance by the captain to capitulate during a dire situation. Their choice to self-destruct – although *insane* by Vanir norms – was accepted as a potential result of anyone foolish enough to violate one of the Grandmother's directives.

They were *all* aware, of course, of the line of defensive battle platforms pulled from reserves and placed along the Vanir/Human borders.

That only made reasonable sense. They were dealing with *humans*, after all, and *none* of them believed the Prime had issued any orders contrary to her explicit invitation to the human representatives at the request of her assigned Ambassador, "Samuel."

Eventually, the human intervention was accepted as positive – by a margin of seven to three.

It was silently noted by a few that the recent addition of another S'Shala'Doc advisor, in replacement of the *previous* S'Slich'Tah advisor, had caused a divided vote between the two S'Shala'Doc.

In most situations, members of a warren would work in *consensus*; not vote *against* each other. Granted, some of the issues were contentious, but not enough to cause genuine concern with the majority of the advisory staff.

The events, and their interpretation of them, would be presented to the Prime at her afternoon consultation.

### ***March 7, The Kraken, A Checkpoint in Space***

"Ambassador S'Shac'Kah 39496, what did the Prime say?" Ronnie asked stiffly; continuing with the current cumbersome, but audible means of documenting their conversations for the Vanir Ambassador's official records.

He waited impatiently while the translation echoed from Samuel's data pad, even though he already knew what the answer would be. Sasha and Sally waited as well. Laisee was sitting quietly, but feeling an undercurrent of anger welling up within Ronnie, while Petrus and Sai were contemplating what *new* hell he was going to unleash on them all.

"Lord Caldor, the Prime sends her assurance that the Vanir raider tracking the transport – and that also attacked your ship – was acting *outside* the official command structure. This was partly based both on your description, and the visual records of the vessel in question, before its unfortunate destruction. She suspects there are still elements of the

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S'Slich'Tah who remain unaccounted for, and who could possibly be the source for such actions."

Ronnie paused and waited an appropriate delay, before asking his next question.

"Ambassador S'Shac'Kah 39496... Samuel, what was the Prime's response to our actions in defending ourselves?"

Samuel listened to the translation, but froze at Ronnie's drop of pretense over his title. He quickly gathered his thoughts, however.

"The Prime understands the necessity of your actions. She is also aware of your offer of leniency and transport for the raider crew. She also ... she can understand *no* reason for the reaction of the raider crew."

"She understands that I requested that a member of my crew make contact with the raider ship, a crew woman known by the Vanir birth name of S'Ahi'Ma 42491, but after a short conversation, the raider decided to self-destruct, rather than accept our offer of safe transport?"

'*Rondal Caldor, do you really wish to press this?*' Samuel asked silently, only getting a hard stare in return.

"Lord Caldor, I – I do not believe the Prime has been made aware of that detail of the encounter. I will present that to her in private at a later time."

"You will present it to her as a detail of *this recording, Ambassador!* Along with *this* understanding! It is obvious to me that the Prime is *not* in control of a few 'rogue elements' of her *own government!* My understanding is there is at least *one* Vanir warren making a concerted effort to bring down these peace negotiations – negotiations which will determine how well and how long *each* of our societies will continue to *exist!*" he said harshly, then stood while looming over the table while propped on his hands.

Ronnie circled the room with his eyes, drawing the full attention of everyone in the process.

"My task is *simple* – I am to ensure the *safe* passage of the Commonwealth Ambassador – both to *and from* the Vanir Realm – and return the Vanir Ambassador and his party safely back to *Vanaheim!* In *good faith*, I have offered the assistance of our Commonwealth Healers over these past few weeks in order to assist the Vanir with a strictly *internal problem!* I consider it a matter of *conscience* that I have done so! I consider it a matter of *honor* that I *continue* to ensure these negotiations proceed in a safe and timely manner! To do so, I will endeavor to eliminate *any threat to my passengers and crew* ... and also to the *Vanir Prime*, should our actions find the *cause of such!*"

"I – I ... Lord Caldor, surely there could be no..."

“Samuel, my understanding is that warren leader S’Slich’Tah 29531 is currently a guest of the Prime. Upon arrival at Vanaheim, I would like an opportunity to meet with S’Slich’Tah 29531 – *personally* – to discuss issues related to our mutual difficulties. Do you think the Grandmother would allow such?” he asked coolly, then waited while Samuel caught up with his vicious diversion from their script.

“I ... it will certainly be no problem to *ask*, Lord Caldor, if the Prime should think it might help resolve these difficulties.”

“Very well,” he said brusquely, then turned his attention to Petrus.

“*First Officer!* Make headway towards Vanaheim at standard cruise. We will arrive in due time, which *will*, no doubt, allow the Prime to prepare a suitable welcome for us,” he said, then straightened stiffly and turned back to Samuel.

“Ambassador... Good day to you, Sir,” he said politely, then turned and left the room. After short delay of astonishment, Petrus got up and left the room as well; leaving everyone else behind.

Sai ended the recording, then checked the lead in and ending – clipped and titled, but not edited in the tiniest bit – then she sent a copy to storage, and another one to Samuel’s inbox for later transmission to the Prime, which promised to raise some ocular ridges in high places. Laisee had waited until the recording was done before she also got up and left.

Samuel, Sally, Sai, and Sasha continued to speak silently among themselves, before all four of them left to go their separate ways.

While the Vanir headed back to their compartments, Sai headed off to track down Ronnie – finally catching up with him in the labs, where he was accosting Donnel over the lack of progress on the recovered debris.

### ***In Laisee’s Compartment***

‘Walter, do you have a moment?’ Jaiying asked very quietly.

The new rules called for deftness of touch in all mindspeak communications for the time being.

‘Jaiying ... how did it go?’ he replied just as softly.

‘Grandfather is very angry. I’m afraid he will do something stupid this time’ she pressed, the overtones of worry apparent in her silent voice.

‘So, when did that ever stop him before?’ Josie chided with equal softness; a novelty for her.

‘They SHOT at him, Josie. They shot at Sue’ Jaiying persisted.

‘Someone is ALWAYS shooting at Grandfather’ Josie pointed out.

## The End of the Road

*'They shot at you, Jaiying'* Cathy observed calmly.

*'That isn't ... It won't make a ... it doesn't matter'* she finally pressed. *'Grandfather is going to be HURT this time!'*

*'Grandfather is ALWAYS getting hurt'* Walter reminded her. *'That's why he's careful'*

*'I don't... I don't think he's going to be so careful this time'* Jaiying insisted in a whisper.

*'Jaiying ... are you seeing the Flux again?'* Walter asked very faintly.

*'The Flux? Jaiying is this true?'* Cathy asked anxiously.

*'No. It's just ... I have a feeling that ... that something bad is going to happen'* she shared faintly.

*'Where? On the Kraken?'* Walter asked.

*'No. But ... somewhere here ... someplace. And somewhere ... somewhere around all of you. Be extra careful, Walter. Something ... something is not right. I think we are at a turning point, and Grandfather is the pivot'*

*'Gods grant us the wisdom to act accordingly'* Walter shared, with the girls echoing along faintly.

### ***Just Leaving the Engineering Lab***

*'I've no time to discuss this now, Sai. You and Petrus have a ship to run, and I need to talk to Laisee about her security detail,'* Ronnie said in dismissal while pushing past her and heading into the corridor.

He was still ticked Donnel had made no progress on his request. *One* of them, at least. The other had been rather simple, really...

Say you wanted to track something. There were any number of ways, even something as simple as following a set of foot prints. Active radar systems bounced electro-magnetic waves off a target, and listened for their return, as did laser systems, but you could get by with simply *listening* for things if it were possible.

Unfortunately, to detect the incredibly awkward frequencies involved with *mindspeak*, you needed some pretty complex manufacturing techniques, coupled with *extreme* sensitivity – something difficult to come up with on short notice. Or you could find something that *already* worked, and apply that knowledge to your needs ... which is what the Vanir had done.

Donnel had found an organic component within the sensor module of the disabled missile.

Rather than touch it or sample it himself, he'd contacted the bio team leader and asked them to take a non-destructive look at it.

They, in turn, had asked Lady Laisee to offer an opinion on it, and after she'd suffered a bout of fainting, they'd brought in Jaiying, who'd confirmed Laisee's identification of the tissue. After a quick conference, Laisee had Jaiying choose a portion to sample for DNA analysis so they might eventually identify the name of the victim from where it had come.

That had been *yesterday*. *Today* was not slated to turn out any better.

### ***In the Vanir Corridor***

"Samuel, you *know* the reaction this will trigger once the Prime receives it! *Everyone* will know of our intended arrival, and we will be as fenced grail waiting for *slaughter*!" Sasha pressed him.

"Sasha, Rondal Caldar assures me the amount of anti-matter weapons carried onboard this ship will *preclude* any unfortunate attacks upon us. The *last* time this much anti-matter went off, it created a small star on the order of twenty-thousand kilometers in diam--"

"*TWENTY-THOUSAND?* The S'Slich'Tah would *gladly* suffer the damage to Vanaheim if it rid them of the Prime!"

Sally thought it was not very likely, and said so.

"The S'Slich'Tah might not be so eager to lose their warren leader, and my understanding is that Vanaheim would not survive..." Sally paused while looking between Sasha and her mate before going on.

"Although ... it would be prudent to *confirm* S'Slich'Tah 29531 is still in residence on Vanaheim," she suggested.

"I – I will follow up the meeting recording with that question for immediate confirmation," Samuel said. "I will also mention to them in the most *strenuous* fashion that it would be unfortunate for *all* of Vanaheim if this ship were to be attacked while in orbit – particularly if it were attacked to *destruction*."

"*Unfortunate?*" Sasha asked in astonishment. "*Stupid*, you mean! This whole *thing* is stupid! *Gods!* How did we *get* to this point, Samuel?"

Sasha suddenly froze, then reached up and felt the sides of his head.

The outburst had caught both Samuel and Sally by surprise, as did his action, before they both broke down in hissing laughter, followed shortly by Sasha.

"Not *quite* human, Sasha," Sally assured him. "Not *yet*."

"Yes. We are changing," Samuel said.

## The End of the Road

“No, we are growing as a *people*,” Sasha offered.

“Just as Ronnie *hoped* we would,” Sally agreed, and they reached out to each other in a very human group hug.

“I just hope Ronnie finds what he’s looking for,” Sasha muttered.

Samuel leaned back and looked at him questioningly, before he explained.

“He won’t take me, or Silas ... or Sue. Said it would be counter productive, and ... and might become difficult for us.”

Samuel contemplated that with ten out of twelve segments of his mind, while the remaining two decided to reserve judgment for the moment. Then he nodded and leaned into the hug, but certainly didn’t envy what Ronnie was planning.

### *Outside Laisee’s Compartment*

“Laisee, I need six of your men. I would prefer the most experienced warriors. Petrus said he would be happy to pick them for me,” Ronnie stated quickly.

The guardsmen standing next to the door darted their eyes at him before quickly snapping them back to the front. They hadn’t been on a ground deployment for a few decades, but each of them was ready for a little action. They both wondered if they’d get picked for some playtime.

“Won’t you come in, Lord Caldar? Would you like something to drink?” she asked politely while leading him over to a small table.

She didn’t miss the flush of attention from her and Jaiying’s guards, so she deftly maneuvered him into her quarters before things got out of hand. Once the door swung closed, she turned and confronted him.

“Rondal! You must *not* abandon us at this critical juncture! Your duty is *here* – as you so carefully pointed out during our *meeting*!”

He passed her a wan smile and casually leaned against a table.

“Yes ... that *was* rather clever of me, wasn’t it? While everyone on Vanaheim thinks I’m sitting up there with my finger on the firing button, I’ll be thirty minutes *away* – poking around that watering hole we found, and digging up secrets the S’Slich’Tah would rather keep buried. Do you have any ambrosia?” he asked, while looking around hopefully.

“I ... *RONNIE!* This is *insane!*”

“Ahh, but there is a *fine line* between genius and insanity. I’m used to dancing on the edge. Besides, who wants to live forever?”

“Ronnie, *we need you!* The *Commonwealth* needs you! You don’t need to *do this!* Let–”

“Let *who* deal with it, Laisee? Who is more prepared to deal with this than me? The S’Slich’Tah are very few steps away from bringing down the Vanir Prime, and she can’t seem to deal with it herself. Look – I’ll go in, take a look around, take a few notes, and I’m out of there. If the Vanir have any honor at all, they’ll do their *own* house-cleaning from then on.”

“And what if they *don’t*? What if... what if the Prime *doesn’t* believe you?”

“Then... I suppose I could bring back some witnesses. Someone willing to testify to that affect. In the *meantime*, Jaiying can greet the Prime and peel her like a \*grape\* – figure out if her mind has been warped at all.” He paused, then nodded his head while thinking of someone else they were interested in. “With any luck at all, you might even get an audience with S’Slich’Tah 29531 and strip her of all *her* secrets, too.”

“And you’re willing to bet our security on *luck* and the good nature of the *Prime*?”

Ronnie sighed, then sat down in a chair before continuing.

“Laisee, you’ve been on Kantor *all* your life ... *certainly* long enough to know how the game is played. We don’t place bets on *anything* unless it’s a *sure thing*. If this business can be resolved with a little subterfuge on *my* part, then...” he paused, and ended it with a half-hearted shrug.

“You don’t place *BETS*? What do you call that business with Lord *Gagsa*? What about you wandering through a *Death Void* looking for *dead bodies!*” she shouted, her composure completely lost now.

“Don’t forget playing tag with Drecks cruisers and getting them to shoot at each other,” he added quietly. “Your father was very upset about that; although I’m not sure if it was the cost of the anti-matter loads, or the fact that I survived,” he muttered while reaching up to scratch the side of his head.

Laisee stared at him in astonishment, then screeched loudly before slapping him fiercely across the face. He caught her hand on the back swing and held her at bay for a moment, before dragging her struggling form into the chair with him.

She continued to struggle for a time, before finally breaking into sobs.

“Oh, Ronnie... I don’t want you to go. This will end *badly*. I just *know it*. Think of *us*, Ronnie. Think of your *family*. Think of ... think of *Maya*,” she managed between short sobs while curling his arms.

## The End of the Road

“Laisee ... I *am* thinking about my family. I protect my family with my *life*.”

“And ... and what about *Maya*?”

“Maya... Maya and I have an understanding. If everything works out, then we’ll consider a reconciliation – maybe go back and work reclamations again. If not, then I’m sure your father will need *someone* available for odd jobs ... ones that are off the books.”

She sat there, letting herself be rocked in his arms for a minute more.

“And if it *doesn’t* work out?” she finally asked.

“Then the Vanir better be ready to placate the kids, ‘cause Walter and the girls got a *pot* full of issues,” he murmured while catching a glance at Jaifying looking out from her sleeping chamber.

He saw her nod, before she turned and closed the door.

“Your guards, Laisee. I need about six. You know ... just in case.”

### *In Petrus’ Compartment*

“*Petrus!* You have to convince Ronnie *not to do this!*” Sai insisted, while the flush echoed in the facilities of their compartment.

Petrus stood and stripped off the rest of his clothes, but continued to ignore her while he turned on the shower. Then he turned and sidled up to her.

“*Shower* with me, Sai,” he teased her while sliding his naked body up against her and slipping his hands under her robes.

“*Petrus!* I’m *serious!*”

“And so am *I*, lover,” he murmured while tweaking her nipples and sliding her robes to the floor with well-practiced skill. He bent down to tease a nipple with the tip of his tongue while pulling her over to the shower.

“*Petrus*, stop fooling *around!* This is *not* the time to *play!*” she persisted, but he picked her up and rotated her under the spray, joining her while she fumed and sputtered.

He pulled her back to clear her face, then got a handful of hair cleaner and began rubbing into her scalp.

“Just because you got me all *wet*, don’t think for a second I’m going to let you get me all *sticky, too!*” she said defiantly, but let herself be catered to.



She maintained a sullen silence while he lathered her hair and rinsed it, then followed up with a body washing that covered her from top to bottom, front to back. She'd expected his groping of her breasts, but the slippery thumb he slid into her from behind was a complete surprise. He held her in place with one arm around her waist while his thumb pressed and manipulated her sensitive vaginal walls from within; his finger tips making lazy circles over the hood of her clitoris, which only amplified the sensations she was experiencing from within.

"Petrus ... this isn't fair..." she murmured while he continued the firm internal massage that was rapidly bringing up her arousal and finally produced an unexpected climax.

He unplugged from her and raised his other arm from her waist to her breasts, where he cupped one breast so he could tease that nipple, while she was being held under the warm, running water.

"Petrus ... oh, Petrus..."

He may not have the benefit of the Gift, but didn't lack for a *lifetime* of technical skills, and he soon had her moaning in pleasure that ended in sharp shriek ... followed quickly by several more. After another few minutes, he withdrew and began rinsing her off, and then himself, before turning off the water and getting them both towels. He took care with drying her, then quickly did so for himself.

He got her to their bed and under the covers before he went back and picked up the clothes and towels. When he was done, he found her sitting up in bed and watching him, while he pulled out underwear and clothes for the both of them. Done with that, he slipped under the covers and went to wrap her in his arms, but she pushed him away.

"What are you planning to do, Petrus?"

"It should be *obvious*, lover," he said, while looking down where the covers were currently tented over his crotch.

"No, Petrus. What are you planning to do with *Ronnie*?" she asked pointedly.

### ***In the Guard's Compartment***

Noon plus six. Only four hours after he'd dressed and left Sai in tears, Petrus was going down the duty roster with Laisee's lead guardsman while selecting six seasoned warriors for the upcoming mission. Unlike Ronnie, Petrus had known from the beginning *exactly* who these men were and what they were capable of, and made his selections based on the best recommendations of their captain.

Those selected were called into the room and questioned as group in their ability to work together. He also asked if anyone had any special

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problems with the Vanir as individuals or as a whole, which prompted one man to disqualify himself, and another warrior was vetted and substituted in his place. Then they were asked if they were *truly* aware of the identity and history of Lord Rondal Caldar, which, almost foolish to conceive otherwise, they all were. These were the six warriors he and Guard Captain Teldrus Avitus presented for Ronnie's briefing at Midnight minus four.

### *In a Conference Room*

The men had gathered in the larger planning room with Petrus and their Captain; none of them aware of what the mission was, but knowing it was important to the security of the Commonwealth. The idle chatter dropped immediately when Lord Caldar entered the room, and all rose automatically until Ronnie worked his way to the head of the table and sat down while motioning the others to do the same.

"Gentlemen, my First Officer tells me my brother has placed his full faith and confidence in each of you, and I thank you for your loyalty to the Crown," he said, making a point of catching each of them with his eyes, one by one. "As you know, the Vanir we stumbled across have been keeping a wary eye upon us humans, and – *just* like humans – they have various factions and feelings regarding us ... just as I would imagine many of *us* do, regarding them," he said pointedly, then paused to look at them again, before going on.

"Even with that in mind, the leader of their society, the Prime as she is called, has been willing to host a meeting between herself and the Kantite Ambassador. As I'm sure you're all aware, there have been a few stumbling blocks placed to deter that – ostensibly from one or more of their family associations, called warrens. Our equivalent would be a clan ... or a Drecks *pack*."

That got a few chuckles and some knowing nods among the men, and he let it continue for a moment more, before going on.

"We encountered an unusual ship on our last 'mercy mission' near one of their bases, but the Prime claims no knowledge of it. Our resident Vanir military liaison did not recognize it, either. One of its weapons had the ability to track a *fully*-shielded and cloaked ship through multiple micro-jumps."

That statement got their intense focus.

"Fortunately, it was a missile, and we had little difficulty avoiding it before finally disabling it after several tests confirming its mode of detection. The Vanir themselves *declined* our kind offer to escort them safely to Vanaheim, and instead – self-destructed their ship."

That last comment had several of them shaking their heads. Fanatics of *any* breed were a bad risk. They were *totally* unpredictable.

“Gentlemen, this mission is intended as a ‘look-see’. Unfortunately, I’ve nearly filled this ship to capacity on *similar* ‘look-sees’ in the past. I’ve also had to *level* various parcels of property. At this time, is there anyone here who would like to disqualify himself from this mission?”

At their silence, he turned his attention to the guard captain.

“Captain Avitus, you may withdraw.”

“Thank you, my Lord. Gentlemen, your legacies?” he asked, then held out his hand. One by one, each man passed over a data tab for his family – just in case. “Gods grace on you all. By your leave, my Lord.”

After the door shut, Ronnie pointed to the display, and brought up maps and a tactical image of the plateau on the refueling planet.

“I believe the Vanir are hiding something ... somewhere in *here*,” he said, while pointing to the plateau. “Detailed photo analysis by your group discovered a hand rail ... here. I’d very much like to take a look and see what *else* they’ve got in there since sensor scans tell us there is *nothing* there,” he said, then spent the next two hours going over their previous visit, the sensor readings they’d picked up, and the extrapolations they’d explored because of them.

After the meeting wound down, he stood up and stretched ... then felt the small bundle still in his pocket. After the last of his selected crew left, he sent a silent request to Dorcas to bring herself and Nathan to the smaller conference room for a private meeting with him. Grabbing his notes, he checked around the room once more, before heading to the other conference room.

### ***Vanaheim, the Prisoner’s Compartment***

The midday meal brought a stir of excitement to S’Slich’Tah 29531; still a prisoner of her Prime at the administrative facilities on Vanaheim.

Her warren had succeeded in planting a mole in the kitchens several months ago, and a secretive message system had finally been implemented by way of the daily food trays. A message at midday was cause for surprise.

Reading the note, which had so *cleverly* eluded the bored guards, she seethed with expectation, as the target of one of her long-sought goals was *finally* within grasp. When this Rondal Caltar arrived at court, it would be but a moment’s effort to destroy both him *and* the Prime with one of her implanted victims – and blame it all on the *humans*!

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That suddenly gave her a moment's pause, as she wasn't quite sure just exactly *how* far away from the blast she would be. She penned a quick message and secreted it in the outgoing tray. It wouldn't do to *defeat* yourself on the cusp of your own *triumph*!

### *Kantor, The Royal Homestead, The Emperor's Suite*

"On the whole, Lili, this is what makes Rondal so valuable to us ... he's not afraid of making the extra effort in order to accomplish his goals," Radatel told his wife. "Besides, this is not that much different than what he's done before, and with fewer eyes looking out for him."

"True, my Husband, and he has Petrus with him, as well."

She sighed while pulling down the bedcovers on her side of the bed, before going on. "Sai was *very* upset about that – until he asked that she watch over his *daughters* should his absence become extended."

"Certainly he'll return, Lili ... at least the *bigger* pieces, anyway. And we're already keeping a close eye on Maya..." he paused, and then asked, "His *daughters*? Oh ... my..."

"Yes. Sai was *quite* displeased at that revelation, but we are in a position to watch over *her* as well," she said, then stretched languidly while watching with half-closed eyes as Radatel waited with anticipation for her answer.

"My Husband, I must admit that I'd *never* suspected that of him, but it made many things so much *clearer* with ... Lady *Diane*."

"Our Lady Diane? Oh. So the missing father was our *Petrus*? How ... how *curious*. What is that saying? Six points of separation? Does the child know?"

"She does not. She seems very *fond* of him, but then, most women *are*. I'd suspected something when we visited on the *Microcosmus* – the *first* time – but never followed up. I noticed he paid particular attention to her during his Healings, and I now suspect he was seeing her mother in her features. I was curious at the time and noted their similarities, so I checked his itinerary and found him visiting Earth during the proper time frame. It was a simple step from there to confirm it, and it certainly explained such a rapid development of her Healer skills. Her Healings are very pure, and of Senior quality, if not training."

"When do you plan to tell her?"

"That is not *my* truth to tell, my Husband. Petrus is concerned that her father be revealed as a \*philandering scoundrel\* and fears it will upset her." She paused curiously, then said, "It must be a concept from *Earth*."

“Well ... given his background, *\*philandering\** might not be such a stretch, but a *\*scoundrel\**? Commander Zickgraf is *hardly* a *\*scoundrel\**. Why, I wouldn’t *tolerate* such in my service,” he stated with mock indignity, then turned a wide-eyed appraisal to Lili.

A moment later, they both broke into chuckles. They were still sharing the moment when the children came to their door and asked for formal admittance.

### ***March 8, In Vanir Space, The Kraken***

Only one day later, Sai was maintaining – barely. She and the boys and Torga were going over the Vanaheim mission plans on the bridge.

As it was Torga’s watch, Manya was there as well, but had given them privacy while retrieving refreshments for what looked like an extended, serious discussion.

“Lord Caldar has departed and left us with his orders. The First Officer has decided his presence was *also* needed and taken the *Orca* to act as back up to Lord Caldar.” Sai couldn’t even bring herself to say his name. “Before his departure, the First Officer ordered the remaining hot loads recovered from the *Kraken*’s shell and placed in the holding armory, where they will be guarded by Lady Laisee’s security forces – *continuously*. This is a standard security measure. We do not anticipate any of our crew or guests attempting to tamper with them. Ten rounds will be placed in the auto-loader that feeds the main gun room.”

This was a *serious* step up, and something that had *never* been done since they’d joined the crew. Torga was the first to question it.

“Lady Sai, has this been tested ... loaded like that ... in *action*, I mean?” he asked, with Gallus and Endo nodding in curiosity as well.

“Pet... The First Officer has informed me that test firings have been accomplished, and the system appears stable, but also insisted that only *one* live round be within the gun room at any time.”

“Flash-over,” Gallus said.

“The Dreds still haven’t mastered that, yet,” Endo added; *neither* situation helping Torga’s state of mind.

“Still, to have *all* the rounds ... *inside* the *Kraken*...”

“One round or twenty, we’d never know it if they went off,” Endo stated, and Sai nodded in agreement.

“Lord Caldar suggested it might act the deterrent,” she said wryly. “He made it plain in a message Ambassador Samuel sent to the Prime.”

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“Unless there is someone out there willing to take out the Prime,” Endo said.

“And they were willing to lose *Vanaheim* in the process,” Gallus added.

“And we have no line on who or where that person or group is?” Torga asked.

“The leader of the opposition is supposedly a guest of the Prime on Vanaheim. That was confirmed by the latest communication to Samuel ... Ambassador S'Shac’Kah 39496,” she corrected herself while trying to maintain formality.

“Well ... let’s hope they’re very fond of their leader, then,” Torga said quietly.

“Then our most dangerous time is during the approach to Vanaheim,” Endo continued.

“Once within...” Gallus paused; fingers flipping up and down rapidly, “...about five-thousand kilometers, our destruction would take out the planet ... and our attacker, presumably.”

“Yes ... that’s reassuring ... I suppose,” Sai slowly agreed. “In the meantime, I’ve had Sasha contact his old ship’s new captain to find us a better place to stash the rock. Naked like we are allows us full use of our shields and speed. The closer we get to Vanaheim, the less food I recommend you keep in your stomachs.”

She got a chuckle from both Gallus and Endo, but a questioning look from Torga.

Endo noticed it and made a mental note to bring him up to speed after the meeting.

“The remaining shells for the *Kraken’s Child* – the *special* ones...”

Sai gently cut Torga off.

“Lord Caldar transferred all *ten* of the cannon hot loads to the *Kraken’s Child* before he left. He thought he might find a use for them. Now, for our approach, what we’ll do is...” she paused at the intrusion of Lady Laisee and Jaiying.

### ***The Kraken’s Child, In Transit***

‘You were SUPPOSED to stay on the SHIP!’ Ronnie sent in a furious, yet subdued, tone.

*‘Lad, in all good conscience, I couldn’t just leave you out here all by yourself. Besides, those boys have never WORKED with you before. They’re like to die of FRIGHT!’*

*'I thank you for your underwhelming confidence. So ... you got a plan?'*

*'Cover your exit. Bring back the stragglers ... if any. The usual'*

*'Very well. Just don't get caught. I'd NEVER hear the end of it from Sai'*  
He sighed externally, with the essence of it still being passed along silently.

*'Good on you, lad. Take care and give a shout if need be!'* Petrus sent before dropping out.

*'Gods! What I would give for a SQUAD of Zickgrafs right now,'* he thought to himself, before turning back to his crew.

"Gentlemen, we appear to have *additional* cover for our retreat. That transient on our tail is the First Officer piloting the *Orca*. His code name for this trip is ... Four."

His crew nodded in sudden understanding as to why the First Lord – 'Tank' as they'd been told to call him – had numbered them from One to Seven, skipping over Four. Four obviously held a special significance to him, and it appeared he'd invited himself to the party.

Tank paused to check his settings once again for the second jump.

"Standby for transition ... two minutes. In three, two..."

### ***Research Station Alpha***

Director S'Slich'Tah 28476 paced his quarters slowly.

Their spy's report that one of their raiders had self-destructed rather than be escorted to Vanaheim was disturbing. He was still curious as to how they'd been detected when he'd thought their mind shield, in which he'd played a *principal* role in its development, should have prevented the humans from finding them, let alone allowing them to pry *within* to disable their shields and engines.

At least, that was what their *final* transmission had suggested. He'd disregarded the hammering the ship had sustained as a possible cause, since the engines and hard shield were *designed* for that sort of environment ... although perhaps the new mind shield was a bit more *sensitive* to violent percussion?

He made note of that, and added it to the list of improvements for the other three raiders – a poor showing for the once mighty S'Slich'Tah. He hissed a dismissive sigh, before turning back to his current task.

The missile that *should* have taken out the human ship had kept breaking track. The data indicated the sensor should have remained on target the whole time.

## The End of the Road

Perhaps the humans – these *new* humans – did not use their minds like the current crop of samples? Time to head back to the lab and run some more tests.

### *The Kraken, On the Bridge*

“You ‘*anticipate*’ Rondal will experience significant problems on his current expedition? You have nothing more than *that*?” Sai asked incredulously.

“That is the best I can offer, Grandmother,” Jaiying said. “As we’ve approached Vanaheim, I’ve picked up more impressions from the Prime. I do not believe she is a willing party to what has been transpiring, but also feel she has been compromised.”

“Well ... that is just so reassuring,” Sai muttered, before turning to Laisee.

“Recommendations, Ambassador Caldarous?” she asked; stating it formally.

“Lady Tal, our mission remains the same. Safe passage to Vanaheim, and proper negotiations for peace – or at least, non-interference. Use your best judgment on how to get us there and back safely,” she said formally.

Sai thought it over and nodded.

“Thank you, Lady Laisee. Lord Caldar wants us in Vanaheim orbit in eight days. He feels it might throw off any offensive efforts they may have planned.”

“Eight days ... with him loose on a *hunting trip*?” Laisee was *less* than thrilled with the prospect of arriving late to a party after Ronnie had already blown *holes* in the invitation.

“Better make it *five* days. We’ll all be miserable enough as it is,” she decided. “We will abstain from any large meals,” she added unnecessarily.

Sai looked at her and nodded again.

“We will do our best.”

At that, Laisee gathered Jaiying and left the bridge, while Sai turned back to her crew.

“Donnel got everything he wanted from the shell, and it shouldn’t take more than a couple of hours to empty it out completely. Then we can grab it and park it somewhere safe. After that, we’ll resume our approach to Vanaheim with full shields and cloaking – such as it is,” she said, then paused before continuing. “However, we will *not* maintain a straight-in approach to their system. Each bridge watch will be augmented by Donnel Arden or one of his assistants to help man the ship’s sensors. Recent



developments suggest this will be prudent, and Mister Arden is *particularly* interested in testing new detector designs while in transit.”

“Our estimated arrival at Vanaheim?” Torga asked.

“You heard the lady – five days. That will give Ronnie five days to sort things out before we arrive. After that, we’re on our own,” she said firmly.

*‘And Gods help him if he screws this up!’* she thought to herself.

### ***Kantor, The Royal Homestead, On the Patio***

Lili sat on the patio and sipped her drink in the late afternoon of the canyon. She was all alone outside, it not being particularly warm at the moment, and the children were inside with the kits for a change.

She contemplated the situation playing out at the refueling planet while trying to put the children’s comments into perspective. The more she thought about it, the more she considered her *original* idea was suitable – send a back-up ship to support the Ambassadorial mission to Vanaheim. But it couldn’t be a war ship. Use of the *Kraken* had *already* produced reports of fear and distrust, even though it was only the Galaxy-class tanks that had taken any action against individual Vanir elements.

So ... *not* a war ship. She needed something suitably civilian and more general purpose, but *still* capable of defending itself without a primary weapon ... or *any* weapon, really. It took another half a cup of ambrosia, before she smiled and reached out to Amy. She needed to learn Larl’s current schedule.

### ***March 10, In Vanir Space, Research Station Alpha***

There was a flurry of activity as the station became abuzz in anticipation.

An atmospheric anomaly had been detected in the late afternoon, and although nothing *positive* had yet been determined, it was similar to that earlier business when *someone* – probably *humans* – had dropped into the atmosphere and dipped low over the oceans to refuel, as was suggested by their repeating pattern.

They’d already sent a message to their one ship in orbit – the *only* raider left behind to watch over them – and hopefully they’d remain hidden until a *definite* target was found and eliminated. With great good fortune, the *last* two raiders would find their targets and *remove* the heads from the human beast, which should drive their society into *chaos*!

### ***Kantor, The Capitol, Some Extra Precautions***

Radatel sat at ease in his office at the Capitol. As the seat of the Commonwealth’s ruling body was well protected, both within and without

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– out to a planetary *diameter*, at least – he felt very secure here, but had also ensured the security apparatus surrounding the Royal Homestead had gotten an upgrade.

The canyon shields were up and cycling, and the *hard* shields, located at every service entrance to the compound, were being tested daily ... just in case. The regular security force had been augmented by half again as many, and the environs out to twenty kilometers from their canyon Homestead had been surveyed and spotted with pressure and motion sensors in concentric rings that all reported back to the Homestead security center.

Even the point defense systems hidden at either end of the canyon had extra live rounds called in from storage and placed in ready access lockers close to their weapons.

The two existing defense systems were considered adequate for suborbital intrusions, but staffing had been augmented by half, as well.

Overhead, a cadre of Lili's finest, had been paired with some of Radatel's most skilled aerial units, and now cruised above the planet in a set of orbits hastily devised by planetary security.

The units were composed of experienced pilots and fighters burdened with many of the same talents his little brother had developed over the centuries, while Lili's Seniors were contemporaries of Lady Sai Tal and had performed many of the same tasks.

*None* of them were troubled at the thought of eliminating threats to the Commonwealth, and in the case of Lili's Ladies, *all* of them were hopeful they would finally discover who or what had taken their five missing sisters away from them over the last several months.

As their ships circled the globe – all of them Galaxy-class tanks outfitted for special operations – the specially-trained Ladies reached out and searched for any anomaly, or any tiny bit of errant or erratic thought, Drecks or Vanir, which might give them advance warning.

The mysterious "Senior Staff" had predicted trouble was headed their way and wanted to head it off.

### *In the Elder's Office*

Lili looked over the secure message she'd received, and sighed in resignation. The last of those passengers not wishing to make this historic trip would be leaving and returning to Kantor, Tyler, Balise, and Blot. At least the contingent from Cletus would remain aboard for the duration.

Her inquiry through Larl had brought quick assurances from Granger Deltec and Lon Tannis that the chosen ship was quite capable of making the journey and returning safely.

It wouldn't be traveling nearly as fast as a Galaxy-class could, but she'd been assured that Donnel Ardan had modified the engines to the point that, provided nothing was in the way, it could transition a whole minute over a period of less than ten hours; only *double* the time needed in a modified Galaxy-class. What he'd done with the *shields* of the otherwise unarmed ship was *frightening*.

The protests from the lessees promised to be politically unappealing in the short term – the ones she couldn't buy off, anyway. They'd all been warned, however, of the penalties involved for violations of the non-disclosure agreements they'd had to sign before leaving the ship.

Fortunately, out of all the rest, they'd had only two holdouts, and as it turned out, their specialties promised to be helpful once they arrived over Vanaheim. She looked over at the clock in her office. In just under ten hours, the Kraken Collective's *KS Microcosmus* would be leaving orbit and heading for Earth.

### ***In Vanir Space, The Kraken's Child, Approaching Station Alpha***

The last of the Healer's milk consumed, his crew of warriors finally relaxed for the moment while he moved them along below the surface of the ocean as they headed towards their target...

Of the two options – air or sea – arriving *underwater* held the most promise for an uncompromised approach. After a rather leisurely cloaked drop on the *opposite* side of the planet – thus minimizing suspect atmospheric disturbances – they'd dropped to ground level until reaching water, where they immediately submerged.

The best compromise was to approach underwater, beach a quarter-kilometer away from the complex, then work their way to it overland, although the chance of exposure would ratchet up once they scaled the cliffs to gain entry to the complex. With any luck, they would find a suitable entry point via an unguarded vent or access portal. You just didn't go underground like that without *some* means of recycling the air ... if someone was, in fact, underground at all...

Several hours later, they arrived at the coast and surfaced just far enough for the forward camera to confirm the location of an overhang he could hide the ship under; considerably *closer* to the outside walkway than he'd wanted, but they could make do with it. It would still let them park the ship away from overhead eyes while not requiring Ronnie to use his extra abilities to remotely pilot it back under the waves. That would also avoid dissemination of previously unknown and highly *illegal* behavior by him; behavior worthy of *sanction* if done without permission – or a really good block from the Elder. Under the current circumstances, having it available by any of his team was more important anyway.

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They stayed several hundred meters off shore while two of the men observed the forward display as the rest used seatback displays to search for any telltales of observation tools, pathways, or other indications that this particular stretch of beach was of interest to anyone. A few hours later, the consensus was that this was no vacation or patrol spot. Ronnie raised the ship out of the water, slid it in sideways under the overhang, and grounded it. They now had two more hours to dusk before their deployment, and the men started going over their equipment once again.

More than anything else, the equipment they'd brought along assured him these were experienced field men, as it was very top-of-the-line hardware. They each had light armor that was dull black and unadorned by any markings. Helmets had integrated cameras with adjustable night vision that streamed to their personal recorders; allowing them to record everything a man saw or heard. Man-to-man communications was standard compressed-burst technology and well maintained.

Each man carried a power sword, and he noted with satisfaction the first time they Fired their swords in his presence and heard the unique 'voice' of each sword. He realized only then that *none* of these men were among the common rank and file, but full-blooded Kantite warriors of one Royal family or another; *each* of them having chosen this lifestyle on purpose.

An assortment of pellet throwers and handheld beam weapons were in their kit, along with hand-thrown grenades and breaching charges. The door knockers drew a startled glance from him, but the warrior in question simply said, "Well, you never know," so he nodded in agreement, then smiled; feeling *much* more comfortable from then on.

Into this mix he introduced a *new* toy – a compact voder of Donnel's hasty construction that translated Vanir to Commonwealth and back. He had four of them and handed them out to the three teams who would be exploring, then gave one to the rear guard who would cover their exit.

Unable to work directly with the computers on the *Kraken*, it would be a somewhat clunky way to eavesdrop, but lessen one of the disadvantages they'd be facing.

He had each of the men exercise them – speaking Commonwealth Standard, then having them listen to the translated Vanir through another translator to hear the results from Vanir back into Standard. They quickly discovered which words were most useful, such as "you", "me", "come", "go", "stop", "up", "down", "stay", "silence", and "die".

There were other words and a few abstract concepts available, but with any luck, they wouldn't need to carry on a more difficult conversation than that.

An hour before deployment, he shifted over to red interior lighting as the men made their rounds of the facilities before consuming a high-energy, low-waste meal of combat rations – not noted for taste, but guaranteed to supply your needs for the next twenty hours or more.

Hopefully, they'd need less than that, but each carried a couple of extra rations just in case. Dressed out and ready to go, he gathered them in the rear by the assault hatch, where he shook hands with each of them before addressing them all.

"Gentlemen, right now this is a look-see. These Vanir have secrets regarding mind control and thought blocking; *both* of which play hell with protecting the concerns of the Commonwealth. On top of that, they are using it against their *own* people as well," he said, again glancing at each of them in turn. "We will proceed as planned. One, you're with me. Seven, you have rear guard. If any of you get separated or injured, return to the ship if at all possible. If I fuck up and get lost, wait two days if possible, then lift and return *home*. I do *not* recommend radiating until you reach the Commonwealth. The Gods grace on us all."

Then he darkened the rear and dropped the hatch, letting in a cool sea breeze that washed over each of them. They all took a deep breath and headed out; enhanced night vision sets on each of them clearing the way.

*'On the move'* he sent into the void in subdued mindspeak.

*'Watching'* came back softly from Petrus, who was locked in a stationary orbit overhead.

### ***Over Research Station Alpha, A Vanir Raider***

The Sensor Officer in the raider overhead noted a tiny glitch in his enhanced tracer detector. Since he'd seen real tracer and thought emanations before, he decided it was just a glitch, so he neglected to mention it to anyone while continuing the search for evidence of traffic around the planet. He doubted anyone could actually get past them, but the station had reported atmospheric anomalies, which, what with all the loose rock floating about, could have easily been a meteorite burning up in the atmosphere.

The raider Captain sat uneasily. His duty was to protect the research station, but from what? Atmospheric anomalies? He'd seen no evidence of them after that one alert from the surface, and now wondered if there had actually been one.

They'd also not reported any corresponding tracer emanations – communication by *mind*, if you could believe it – but then again, the things he'd heard and seen when ordered to report directly to Director S'Slich'Tah 28476 down in the research station tended to weigh heavily for that conclusion.

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He shuddered a little at the memory of that. It was bad enough what they were doing to some of their fellow Vanir, but what they were doing to the *humans!* *Horrible, simply horrible!* If the humans ever found out, they would react exactly as *he* would if he learned humans were treating *Vanir* like that.

He honored his warren and worked to save it from obscurity, but felt that *some* individuals in it had gone over the top. He just hoped it wouldn't come back to destroy them all, and certainly hoped *he* never got on the wrong side of Director *S'Slich'Tah 28476!*

"Captain, recommend orbital adjustment for the next pass," his helmsman announced.

"Very well ... make it so."

### ***Over Research Station Alpha, In the Orca***

The console alarms went off, and Petrus almost wrenched his back when sitting up to cancel them. He scanned the sensors and found the opticals had caught an occlusion occurring off to one quarter of the *Orca* that seemed to be moving.

It was just a moment's decision to ease on the power and follow along quietly.

### ***The Vanir Raider***

"Captain! Drive emanations close by!"

### ***The Kraken, En Route to Vanaheim***

Sai was on the bridge and working on the next course change. She was still pissed at Petrus; not so much for leaving her, but for taking the only other tank they had available to run cover for them.

It hadn't been an active concern until their Vanir escort reported trace engine emissions in the area while they were separating from the rock.

She'd reached out, then Jaiying had reached out as well, but neither of them felt anything around them on the bearing the Vanir escort had reported. The transport was next to useless for cover purposes, and that left Sasha's old ship and the competence of its new captain ... and she'd made comments about it.

Sasha had been quick to come to his defense as an adequate ship handler, but Sai pointed out that 'adequate' was hardly enough, considering what they now had to deal with.

She'd hardly noticed when he left the bridge in a huff, but Torga did and considered if he should say anything.

Instead, he put it aside until he could talk to Endo and Gallus about it ... and maybe speak privately with Sasha later.

“Come to new course. Make the jump two point five minutes ... execute *now*,” she ordered.

The ship transitioned – leaving *everyone* with an upset stomach, but hopefully losing the shadow that was *possibly* a Vanir raider trying to follow them to Vanaheim.

### *A Vanir Raider, In Transit Below Earth*

The Vanir raider danced around the edges of the reported Death Void. Its Commander had no understanding of the *mechanism* that killed Vanir, and yet allowed humans to live, but considered the humans he carried would do very little good if the Vanir crew were all killed in passing.

They cleared their circuit around the newly mapped void and continued into the Commonwealth at an accelerated jump rate.

### *Somewhere Else...*

*The Fate on Duty was in a **fit**. The Vanir had made **rapid** advancements, and her human champion was in **real** jeopardy this time – not that he couldn't have already died in many more ingloriously **stupid** ways, but **this** time the odds seemed stacked against him.*

*She watched as he led his men inland. She was **about** to give him a tiny shove away from a certain pressure sensor, but suddenly found her actions frozen.*

*“I think we will observe this Rondal Caldar and see how well he functions **without** anymore help from **you**, little Fate,” a hollow voice echoed behind her.*

*“Who – who is...” she stammered, but couldn't even turn to face it ... whatever it was.*

*“Destiny will observe – along with **you**, of course – and we will judge how well this Rondal Caldar has learned his lessons,” echoed chillingly from behind her.*

*“As for **your** lessons ... perhaps there is a **better** place for you – after all of **this** is resolved?”*

*Even immobile as she was, she knew that Destiny was right behind her, and had caught her in the act. That realization nearly caused her to faint again, but the fact that she was still frozen in place made it seem somewhat superfluous to her mind, so she settled herself, still frozen in place, and continued to watch helplessly as the play unfolded.*

## The End of the Road

### *In Vanir Space, Research Station Alpha, On the Plateau*

Ronnie had taken his men on a circuitous trek while approaching their target, but they finally reached the edge of their goal. The hardest part had been finding another way up the cliffs; the first one chosen from the water having been found blocked halfway up.

Eventually, they'd discovered an alternate route and hauled their bodies thirty meters up along a very steep and rock-lined vertical gully.

A hand-held sensor sweep detected nothing radiating, but that didn't eliminate passive opticals or heat sensors. Still, they'd gotten this far without raising any alarms, and had enough firepower to allow them to retreat from most encounters, so they continued slowly and quietly.

Still muddling over the end goal instead of focusing on his immediate surroundings, Ronnie was about to take a step, when One grabbed his arm.

He froze, then looked down at the circular outline being pointed out to him that was just barely visible in his vision set. He glanced behind him and set his foot down in the clear, before adjusting his vision set to maximize the display for non-living objects, and tone down the plant life just a bit.

He looked all around as One passed word back with standard hand signals that a sensor had been found. Now they would *all* be on the look for them. A quick question and answer with gestures – audio, pressure or vibration – got back an exaggerated shrug from One, so they maintained silence and gave it a wide berth, while continuing somewhat slower than before.

### *Over Research Station Alpha, The Orca*

Petrus was being very sneaky. Although not nearly as talented as Ronnie, or even *Lili*, for that matter, he stretched his senses out as far as he could, but did not detect any living thing around him; thus proving Ronnie's assertion that the Vanir had a mind shield – if he really *had* detected another ship by that distorted star occlusion. The very faint drive signature he'd detected seemed to confirm it, though, and he kept the *Orca* drifting in its wake at a fixed distance.

He set his sensors to maximum sensitivity, then sat back to listen and observe. He hated these waiting games, but at least he wasn't slogging it out down there in the weeds with Ronnie.

The *last* time he'd grounded with Ronnie, he'd come back missing two eyes and a pair of *legs*!



***Over Research Station Alpha, A Vanir Raider***

“Any change on our transient?” the Captain asked.

“None, Sir. Just that one short pulse, and it died down immediately,” the Sensor Officer reported.

“Your best interpretation?”

The Sensor Officer paused for a long moment before answering.

“The transient pulse could indicate a drive reflection from *our* own ship – which we’ve *never* experienced before on this particular ship. Its short duration could also indicate the vessel is smaller than us ... if it were trying to maintain a constant observation distance to us. We only noted it after we moved first. It could also be a slight course correction on a much larger ship to match us, or perhaps line up on us?”

“Weapons ... any targeting information inbound?”

“None, Sir! We detect no active devices scanning for us. I would currently recommend we remain silent until we have a positive fix on a possible target!” the Weapons Officer eagerly suggested.

“I hate these waiting games,” the Captain muttered, then ordered, “Maintain course and speed. Next course adjustment in three units. All stations – maintain full alert status.”

“Yes, Sir!”

***March 11, The Kraken, En Route to Vanaheim***

Sai was still making nominal headway to Vanaheim by way of a random set of jumps intended simply to delay their arrival for another few days. She thought they’d finally managed to lose their shadow, if there really *was* one, but they’d also lost their Vanir escort vessel. Expecting something like this to happen, she’d given them instructions to meet them near one of the Vanaheim moons at a certain time and date – and for security reasons, told them not to tell anyone *else* about it.

The jump durations had been cut way back to accommodate the digestion of the crew and passengers, which was just a well since they had no where *near* enough Healers aboard to provide relief to everyone.

Back on the bridge for the watch change, Sai studied the chart tank with Torga and Sasha, and was looking at some of the closer Vanir stellar formations.

“How about that one? Anybody been by there in the last thousand years?” she asked Sasha through a voder, while turning to glance up at him over her shoulder. She was pointing to one of two relatively close stars

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on the chart – further away than Vanaheim, certainly, but they had time to kill.

“One of them has too much radiation. However, if I recall correctly, the one just off to the left has a pair of planets in the habitable zone – habitable for *humans*, one supposes. And it’s closer. No one’s been there for several thousand years, though.”

“Very well. Torga – second star to the left. We have another day to kill so let’s use one of them to practice your planetary surveys. How are the sensors, Mister Arden?”

“Not a beep from *any* of them, Lady Tal. I think you might have outdistanced them ... for a *little* while, at least.”

“Let’s hope so, Mister Arden.”

Sasha looked at the humans while shaking his head slowly.

In the midst of a difficult and dangerous approach to Vanaheim, Sai Tal had taken them on a tour of local Vanir space that, *now*, if he’d understood his translator correctly, would include a *training* session for one of the bridge crew in planetary *surveys*!

Suppressing a sigh – one that would have garnered *way* too much attention from the humans – he settled back on the modified seating they’d provided him and quietly looked around the bridge.

Torga, the Drecks foster child of Rondal Caldar, was programming the navigation system for a gut-wrenching approach to the target star – someplace that *no one* had visited in millennia. His mate was sitting off to one side of the bridge and studying something on a data pad with one of the Kee by her side... Déjà – the *defective* one. The other two humans were discussing the latest improvements to the tracer detection system – one that should be able to pick up both tracer and thought emanations from a relatively short distance away. How they expected to make it useful with all the mind-speak occurring on board was problematical, in his opinion.

His eyes looked up at the ship’s bridge clock – a full display showing the time of day, and a calendar breakdown of days into weeks, and larger blocks of time. By that calendar, they were scheduled to arrive in Vanaheim orbit sometime during the thirteenth day of something called “March,” and he suppressed another sigh as that awkward revelation by Sai Tal came to mind...

All Vanir vessels were locked to Vanaheim Standard Time, referenced from the Capitol of Vanaheim. Even when attached to a remote base, Vanaheim Standard Time was the norm, *regardless* of planetary rotation to the contrary. Since everyone was used to it, it didn’t seem awkward to anyone.

In a recent private discussion with Sai Tal, the question of when they were scheduled to arrive in orbit around Vanaheim was broached, and she'd given him Lady Caldaraus's target date – which naturally brought up the question of when that was on the *Vanir* calendar. They'd calculated the timing references together, but she'd seemed disgusted with the effort, causing him to question her distress over what should be a common practice. She'd quietly related in mind-speak simply *dripping* with venom, of Rondal Caldar's insistence that the native calendar of his *home* world be the standard reference aboard his ship.

She'd gone on to explain that – acting as an “independent interested party” – Rondal Caldar effectively had no *official* standing with the Commonwealth during this mission. He'd merely “volunteered” his ship and crew to transport the Commonwealth Ambassador to Vanaheim and back. Samuel and Sally were along for the ride simply as a “favor” to the Vanir Prime.

Subsequently, for all *practical* purposes, Lord Rondal Caldar, brother of the Commonwealth *Emperor* and *First Lord of the Commonwealth*, was operating as a *PIRATE*, simply because he had *nothing better to do!*

She'd casually watched until his color shifted back and he'd started breathing once again, before blithely explaining that, as the Emperor had once mentioned to her while in orbit over Kantor, *some* things required a paper trail, but this was one thing that obviously did *not*...

Sasha suppressed his sigh, and the associated color change that would have revealed his emotions, but couldn't contain the tiny shiver felt after going over that memory. Luckily, no one was paying any attention, as Torga was in the process of making a ship-wide announcement.

“Standby for transition, duration thirty-seconds ... in five ... four ... three...”

### ***Inside Research Station Alpha***

By the middle of the night, Ronnie's team had worked itself over the plateau and discovered a series of vents in a regular grid pattern. That had given them an outside guess as to the size of the complex beneath their feet.

The density of the venting indicated the majority of the underground facilities were situated closer to the sea cliffs, while a gradual narrowing of the hidden vents led back from the cliffs towards a sharp drop off just over a hundred meters away and ending in what looked like a packed-dirt roadway that was obscured under the trees at ground level.

The width of the construction looked to be about a hundred meters across along the cliff face. They'd also found several access points; presumably for maintenance.

## The End of the Road

They'd used tiny listening devices at the vents and portals to determine the least used areas, while also identifying areas where sounds of life occurred – some of them sounding not so pleasant for the occupiers.

While Ronnie could sense the men around him, he was getting *nothing* from below ground level. The sounds they'd heard indicated occupied versus quiet spaces, and they planned their entry accordingly.

In the later part of the evening, they'd dropped into a curiously unalarmed access trunk in the narrower portion of the complex in hopes that most of the occupants would be resting in their quarters by now.

Just before descending into the darkness, Ronnie had softly contacted Petrus and learned he was tracking a ship overhead – presumably a Vanir ship – and told him to avoid contact with it so that no alarms would be raised.

He'd also reminded him they'd be unable to communicate once they went underground, then suggested he find a safe place to lay up and rest – just as long as he'd come running if they called for help.

Once inside the complex, they made their slow way towards the occupied areas; separating into two-man teams to explore and record their findings. Ronnie had sent One and Two out, followed by Three and Five headed down a different corridor. Six was with him, and Seven was the rear guard, carefully hidden within the exit shaft.

Back on the *Kraken*, each team had gotten a quick lesson in recovering data from Vanir-type tablets by learning how to open and remove the memory devices, as instructed by Sasha. Sasha had warned them, however, that if the device was turned on, it could either corrupt the data, or set off an alarm on a wireless connection.

They were to remain *very* circumspect in that regard.

### *In the Corridor...*

It was still between midnight and dawn when Ronnie led his man forward through the complex towards the occupied areas near the sea side. As a matter of habit, they swiveled their heads smoothly while walking along the corridors. Should anyone catch a glimpse of them, it would make their passage appear less furtive – not that their short size and armor wouldn't otherwise give them away. Ronnie was alternating between focusing on the search process, and reaching out to try and sense any of the occupants, but those few he felt seemed very far away.

The corridor "You-Are-Here" maps located at major junctions were a gift of the Gods, and each team member spent a few seconds to pause and take a still image of one. They took note of what looked like offices and storage rooms along the way, and slipped inside several of them to quietly

rifle through office files; viewing what few documents they found and recording them with their cameras for later translation.

The night remained quiet, aside from the occasional sound of air handlers behind equipment room doors, and an annoying *tinny* sound Ronnie had picked up the moment they'd entered the complex. This late at night, or rather, early in the morning, they hadn't come across anyone until they paused by an open door to a large work room. The worker inside was hunched over a lab bench and delicately tweaking his instruments; being so engrossed that he didn't notice the tiny flicker of movement when the men paused by the door.

### ***Inside a Lab...***

S'Slich'Tah 42126 was tired and mad.

This detector the Director had ordered was *not* going to make a difference. The Drecks had never displayed *any* abilities like the smaller humans did, and this effort was a *total* waste of time – and of that Drecks body lying partially alive over in the corner. If the Drecks simply didn't emanate, then *no* amount of detection amplification was going to allow him to sense the Drecks female in the other room.

The quicker the Director got his head out of his fecal orifice, the better off they would *all* be. After all, it's not like they hadn't *already* been leading the Drecks where they'd wanted them to for all these centuries.

### ***In the Corridor...***

Ronnie slightly pulled them back and kept out of sight while, extending into the room and feeling around the mind of the Vanir worker ... a scientist, he discovered. It was much easier at this closer distance.

Quickly dancing over his surface thoughts, he reached out and fused a link inside the equipment package, which caused a sharp snap and a curl of smoke to waft out from behind a panel. He heard the scientist utter a rude Vanir exclamation, before slamming his hands down on the lab bench and abruptly standing up to lean forward and examine the offending bit of hardware.

### ***In the Lab...***

Slich 42126's eyes caught a tiny twitch on the monitor, but then he heard a sharp crack and observed a curl of gray wafting up from the front panel of his display. He vented angrily, then stood to examine the faulty monitor.

A reflection danced across the darkened display face and he turned towards the door.

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### *In the Corridor...*

Ronnie had taken that moment to motion Six forward while he'd held back. While Six made it past the doorway unnoticed, he was halfway to joining him when the Vanir suddenly turned – staring in frozen surprise at Ronnie's armored visage.

### *In the Lab...*

Slich 42126 froze in consternation. There was an armored figure out there, shorter than him and armed with what looked like something harmful to Vanir. He gave a fleeting thought that the *only* alarm in the room was the fire alarm by the door, so he considered that his *best* chance of survival was to emulate a common human behavior under similar circumstances.

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Ronnie swung carefully into the room, followed by Six, while the Vanir stood very still with both hands raised. He made a decision, then silently reached out to engage the Vanir.

'S'Slich'Tah 42126... *I have questions I need answers for*' he told him silently.

While Tank continued staring at the Vanir, Six closed the door and completed a sweep of the room – discovering a lobotomized Drecks male in the corner who was hooked up to several machines. Six finished visually recording everything, before going back to stand beside Tank.

As he approached, the Vanir appeared to be having a one-sided conversation with Tank. When he got closer, his translator started picking up his hissing speech, and stilted Standard drifted faintly into his earpiece. It *really* sounded like Tank was having a one-sided conversation with the scientist, and at one point, Tank looked over at the Drecks while Six covered the Vanir.

A few moments later, a gasp came from the Drecks, and several alarms went off in the corner. The Vanir slowly lowered his arms and walked over to shut off the alarms and examine the body, before returning to his spot; walking slowly and listlessly while his mind considered the last moments of his life...

*'The human – this human – is going to kill me, and for nothing more than doing my job ... doing what I was told...'*

*'That excuse is not exclusive to Vanir, S'Slich'Tah 42126! Just doing your JOB? Just doing what you were TOLD? Those doing OTHERS bidding always seem to fall back on that excuse! GIVE ME A REASON TO SPARE YOUR LIFE!'* the silently shouted words rang inside the Vanir's mind, and Slich 42126 collapsed to the floor – a suddenly very *open* book.

***Inside the Director's Sleeping Compartment...***

An alert flashed beside S'Slich'Tah 28476's nest, and the Director's mind allocated one segment to it in response. The indicator triggered a multi-segmented response, and the Director abruptly got up and gathered his segments to put the puzzle together.

"A very strong emanation from *within* the compound? Did one of the human women get *loose*, or perhaps it is like before, when one of those special women suddenly became much more *powerful*?" he muttered to himself. "But ... *outside* their shielded enclosures?" he considered loudly. "We must *respond*!"

The Director triggered the call that would wake his assistants, and met them just minutes later in the conference room to apprise them of the situation. One of them had failed to arrive, but he knew Slich 42126 often worked late and into the early mornings, so dismissed him from his mind. They had to discover this *new* talent and get it back into its enclosure!

***Inside the Lab...***

Ronnie heard a muted beeping, and the Vanir slowly swiveled his head to see what it was before turning back to face him.

"Human, the Director has called an alert. I fear something has been detected. Perhaps..." he stopped talking and weakly pointed to the corner.

Ronnie read this in his mind, and the underlying resignation of his impending death, if not by the human's hands, then by the other Vanir staff to eliminate a "contaminated" warren member.

"Tank, motion in the corridors," Six quietly reported, having picked it up in a com burst from One, who was further up in the corridors.

"Damn! This party is over before even getting *started*!" Ronnie muttered angrily, then went out on the coms in a data-blip.

"All teams – Cover-Cover. Wait it out. If unable, retreat," he ordered, trusting the stored and compressed audio sent out to everyone as an encrypted data burst would make it to them, before turning back to the Vanir.

'*Slich 42126 ... what is the technology behind the mind shield! Quickly, now!*' he ordered, and got all the Vanir knew about it directly from his mind, from the physical make up of the element discovered on this particular planet, to the excitation equipment used to make it work.

He verbally repeated the salient points to Six, who hadn't picked up most of it from his translator, and Six relayed Tank's words as a burst to the other recorders in the squad so that everyone had a copy of it. At least *one* of them might survive to report it.

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“Do you – do you want to know how the detectors work?” Slich 42126 asked quietly, hoping against hope he wouldn’t be yelled at again. Ronnie told him that he already knew, but wanted to know how many *other* humans they had down here for experimentation.

The answer made him close his eyes in pain, as he knew some of the names that went with the images he was seeing in the Vanir’s mind.

*‘The mind control devices ... do they originate from this facility? The designer is here?’* he asked, finally getting back on track.

“Yes. That was the project that got S’Slich’Tah 28476 promoted to the Director of all of us here at Research Station Alpha,” Slich 42126 admitted freely. “He was also working on something he’d learned about from studying humans – something to do with convincing someone to believe something that isn’t true. He claims he was successful in several cases, and bragged that it went all the way to Vanaheim; although I personally find that hard to believe.”

Time was running out, but Ronnie needed to know a few more things.

*‘The control for the mind shield over the whole facility. Where is it?’* he asked, and got a quick image of it in the same room that controlled the shields for all the Healer and Senior prisoners. He locked the location of the room in his mind, which then brought him to a decision point.

*‘S’Slich’Tah 42126, you do not seem to enjoy the actions of your warren leaders, but I am torn between letting you live to serve the Prime, or killing you here to protect ourselves’*

“I – I understand ... Sank,” he said in an approximation of the title he’d heard the other soldier use to address his leader; his shoulders slumping in resignation before he sagged backwards onto the floor.

“Six ... Slich 42126 here is about to change sides – providing he can find us a place to hide,” Tank muttered.

*‘Slich 42126, I give you a choice – find us some place to hide while we wait out the alarms ... or I can leave you here like...’* he paused and pointed to the corner.

“I – I know of empty storerooms. I will take you,” he volunteered, hoping the humans would not want to be locked up with a *dead* Vanir.

*‘Show us!’* Ronnie ordered silently, and Slich 42126 got up to lead them out of the lab and back down the way they’d come. He paused at a junction and checked the map, but Ronnie stopped him before he could move off.

*‘Which one?’* he asked, and Slich 42126 pointed out their destination, which was annotated in Vanir.



Ronnie rolled his eyes before nodding. ‘*Any more good places?*’ he asked, and the Vanir pointed out three more. Ronnie conferred with Six and assigned numbers to the recorded image for the corridor map, before sending it out. Then he went back on the coms.

“Hidey holes – B53, B63, and A45,” he sent, hoping the teams would figure it out. “Lead is at C40.”

They quickly moved down the corridor and finally ran the last twenty meters to where the Vanir stopped and pointed to a door. Ronnie motioned him away and pulled out his sword, while Six covered the Vanir and the door.

Cracking open the door to a darkened space, Ronnie turned on his infrared emitter, and the vision system showed him storage racks that were mostly empty of items, while some large crates were scattered randomly along one wall.

He looked around and found a light switch, flipped it on, then closed the door – seeing light seep out from underneath it. With a sigh, he opened the door again to allow them all to slip inside, then closed the door behind them. With the overhead lights off, he pulled out his hand flash, and had Six and the Vanir shuffle the crates in such a way they could hunker down behind them out of direct view of the door. With the lights out, he and Six could rely on their helmet cameras, while the Vanir would be at a serious disadvantage – unless Samuel had been holding out all this time.

### ***In the Orca, A Visit to a Small Moon***

Petrus was getting tired.

He’d matched the Vanir ship for several more orbital adjustments, then considered he could just as easily wait it out on one of the loose rocks floating about in near space, or on one of those three tiny moons circling this outpost’s planet. Ronnie had told him to avoid contact, so he’d waited out the Vanir’s next orbit change and just stayed in place for several hours before slipping off towards the largest moon.

Once there, he drifted in a low orbit until finding a promising parking spot. It was in the edge shadow of a crater, and he grounded the ship, then shut the systems down to a partial standby – the only things left running being life support, shields, the optical cloaking system, and the passive sensors. Yawning and stretching, he got up and fixed something to eat before returning to the console to keep an eye on the neighborhood.

The outside view was stark. Everything in shadow was *completely* hidden, while everything exposed was evenly lighted. Looking at a bit of disturbance nearly a hundred meters away, he wondered at the strange pattern in the dust lining the crater’s bottom. With a shrug of his

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shoulders, he stepped back and folded flat two of the rear-most seats before awkwardly stretching out on them and settling in to get some rest.

### ***Research Station Alpha, In the Storeroom***

“Sank ... I have been ... thinking...” Slich 42126 said haltingly, and Ronnie waited for him to continue. “When you ... when you speak to me ... in my head ... perhaps that set off the alarms? We have sensors inside the facilities to detect our...” he paused there, remembering the look on Tank’s face – the one of hatred and disgust he’d seen before.

Ronnie closed his eyes and drew himself inward. He’d never considered they would have active detectors scattered around *inside* their facility. The alarm was *his* fault! He looked over at Six, who was over by the door and listening for traffic in the corridor.

“I’ve fucked us over, Six,” he said darkly, with the translator Six wore picking it up and hissing out a quiet Vanir translation, as it hadn’t been shut off after they’d moved the crates.

Six was sitting in the dark, but turned, watching his infrared view of Tank sitting there castigating himself over something. He thought about it, still confused by the last stream of translated Vanir that had trickled into his earpiece, but suddenly confirmed something *solid* about the First Lord. Ronnie caught the shock and realization on the surface of his mind, then tried to lessen the impact of it.

“I have an advantage over most other men, Six. I’ve had Senior training. It was necessary in order to control certain *other* aspects I was born with,” he said quietly, watching as Six slipped just a little bit further away from him.

“It’s been very useful ... especially since I’m not a full-blooded Kantite like you and the rest of the men. It’s allowed me to set Drecks against Drecks in hopes a more *companionable* relationship will develop.” He paused, wondering how well the *next* tidbit of information might change their suddenly charged working relationship. “I’ve also danced on the *wrong* side of the Forbidden Path a few times. I’d gotten a death sentence from the previous Elder for that, but I’m not sure what fate the *First Wife* plans for me,” he said lightly, his unseen eyebrows lifting in the dark.

“Tank... Sir... We *all* do what we must to protect the Commonwealth,” Six said quietly, before hearing a commotion in the corridor.

### ***Over Research Station Alpha***

The Vanir raider Captain was *done*. They’d circled the planet over and over, and not seen or heard *anything* since those first few blips.

As it was, his crew was tired and losing its edge, so he considered it was time to return to their staging area and shut down for a rest cycle, before resuming patrol once again.

He checked the boards, then ordered the helm officer to set course for the larger moon. They'd land, relax, then reload some supplies, before setting out again.

### ***Research Station Alpha, In the Corridor***

The two-man Vanir search team continued down the corridor; having rattled yet another door open and poked their heads inside long enough to turn on the light, look around, turn off the light, and close the door.

"This is a *foolish* waste of time! *None* of the females is missing, and the cages are secure," one of them complained.

"Slich 42126 is missing," the other said.

"Ha! *He* goes missing every time one of his *experiments* goes wrong! This time his subject *died* on him and his *test set* burned out. He's probably wandering around down here, either walking off his frustration, or looking for spare parts ... probably the former because we *have* no more Drecks males." That comment brought a grouching remark from his companion.

"*That* project will be nothing but a big waste of time! Conditioning all those Drecks males, and then just ... just dropping them on that *human world*! I doubt any will live long enough to do any damage."

A call tone went off, and they paused to listen to the announcement.

"*Cancel the search. The Director has concluded the defective test equipment most likely produced the pulse that set off the detectors. You may return to your quarters.*"

"*Finally!* At least *that* makes sense. Let's head back to bed."

"What about Slich 42126?"

"He can find his *own* way back! I'm tired. Let's go."

### ***In the Storeroom...***

Six had crept back to the door and listened through the cracks. He heard them walk away arguing, then heard them stop. The crackling of a Vanir voice came from some communications device, and he heard them continue to argue as they came back. He ducked behind the hinged-side of the door and waited, but they continued on past. Soon, the silence of an empty corridor was all he heard. He crept back behind the crates, gave Tank a thumbs up, then loosened his kit to pull out a meal packet and started tearing into it.

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“Damned Imperials... Always thinking with their stomachs,” Ronnie muttered, but pulled out a meal packet himself and shared it with the Vanir, who sampled it tentatively, then gratefully accepted part of it from his captor. Ronnie caught the fleeting thought across his mind that it was unlikely the humans would kill him if they thought enough to feed him. Afterwards, he and Six each took a shift dozing, while the other kept one eye on their captive and the other on the door. It wasn’t an ideal situation, but the Vanir had been cooperative so far. Ronnie accepted Six’s offer to take the first shift, but got up in two hours anyway to give the man a decent chance to rest.

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It was later in the morning, and as far as he could tell, Slich 42126 had been very accommodating – even to the point of helping create a waste disposal container out of loose packing and a sturdy crate.

During the quiet of the day, Ronnie had interrogated the Vanir – using the voder to quietly ask awkward questions, while picking the answers out of his mind, but having to keep changing or rephrasing the questions so the voder could better approximate the question he wanted answered. He’d never appreciated the ability to mindspeak more than during that session.

He’d learned how a chance accident in the lab had discovered a rare element found on this planet with the ability to dampen the emanation of mind frequencies when a certain excitation was applied. It was silly, really. Someone had gotten some dust on an experiment, and the results had suddenly skewed radically from what they’d been looking for. It pointed them in another direction entirely, with a completely *different* focus.

That had given them the technology to shield tracer signals from standard detectors. After the Director had acquired human samples who could actually transmit naturally on *similar* tracer frequencies, the push was on to research and develop an *overall* tracer frequency shield – effectively a *mind shield* from the humans!

That had led to *further* research on the human samples – all females from the Commonwealth – and subsequent research on *other* human physiology. This eventually led to research that had finally produced the Vanir nerve nexus implants. Unfortunately, the implants usually killed the humans they were inserted into, but the strength and multi-compartmented minds of Vanir allowed them to survive the process, and accept somatic and aural reprogramming of the Vanir memory – to a degree.

Then Slich 42126 had let loose a *bomb*. The Vanir had planned an intrusion onto the Commonwealth’s ruling planet to disrupt the governing functions by sending Dreck’s soldiers on a daring raid to kill the Kantite Emperor and his family. The Director and a hand-picked team had spent weeks programming at least a hundred Dreck’s soldiers into believing they

were on a mission from the Master Pack to attack and destroy the Commonwealth leadership at the source. The Vanir scientist didn't know when it was happening, but knew they'd left over forty days previously on one of the few raiders left in their very small fleet.

That knowledge chafed at Ronnie. He needed to either get outside, or shut down the blocking fields so he could warn Lili back on Kantor!

### *March 12, Kantor, A Vanir Raider in Orbit*

The Vanir Raider made the last jump while both shielded and cloaked, and successfully entered orbit in preparation for insertion. The pods would deploy first, and if their spy's reports had accurately described a hole in security for the Imperial household, at least *some* of them should elude the defensive systems with a little help from the ship's primary weapons.

To the Commander's mind, the plan was *entirely* too complex.

Dropping Dreds in pods for a ground assault on the Emperor's living quarters simply to point digits at the *Hegemony* was *beyond* foolish. It would be much easier to simply lob bombs and beams at them from a captured Dreds ship, and leave a few Dreds bodies behind to complete the evidence trail. Human nature would then take over.

He sighed at the stupidity of his masters, before considering that at least the conditioning of the captured Dreds soldiers was excellent. There was even an extremely slight possibility they *might* actually pull it off. At the end of it, there would be enough Dreds bodies lying around to convince the humans of the origin of their attackers, and they should respond accordingly.

He lined up for the final run, and had his crew check the status of the five-man pods once again. Statistically, dropping twenty of them should allow at least *four* teams to hit the ground still alive and functional. If only one team made contact with actual, living targets, then sobeit.

He settled in for the run, then called to his Weapons Officer, "Standby for the diversionary assault! Bombs and beams at your discretion ... on my mark!"

~~~

Anticipation was high in the assault capsules. The twenty Dreds squads were primed and *ready* for their mission! All were armed with swords and pellet throwers! Their pack leader had chosen them *specifically* for this task, and promised them glory and a *feast* from the flesh of their enemies upon their return!

The fact that all these orders were implanted in their minds was unknown to them, as they thought they were following orders to kill as many of the tiny humans they could and felt *honored* to be chosen for the

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task. *None* of them thought the likelihood of their almost immediate demise was eminent.

The warning lights came on, followed in a few seconds by the drop lights, and they all felt a shift in the capsules when they were flung into space.

### ***In Vanir Space, On a Small Moon, In the Orca***

Petrus was gratified to discover the harsh shadow had remained stationary around the *Orca* over the last several hours, effectively hiding him from the Vanir raider that was just *now* grounding about a hundred meters away in the general position of the odd markings he'd noted the previous day. Between the cloak, the shield, and the shadow, he thought he would be okay.

What was *not* okay was the almost *irresistible* temptation to wander on over and take a closer look at the raider ... maybe even attempt a little *sabotage*. Instead, he decided to set the recorders on it and trigger them with motion sensors in case he dozed off. They might just be taking a break to fix something, or maybe waiting for a delivery, but it wouldn't do to have them stumble across him while he was napping.

### ***Kantor, Over the Royal Homestead***

The house shields flared brightly under the night sky when vicious beams of energy lashed out from a previously hidden ship that had broken orbit and swept low over the surface of Kantor. Several missiles were launched from it, but were intercepted by the point defense systems of the Royal Homestead. They were followed by a rain of kinetic lances arrowing down and disintegrating – either by point defense fire, or the few impacts with the ground.

The attacking beams didn't affect the integrity of the shields, and the slowness of the missiles allowed their easy destruction. The defense Commander noted with humor that the ship's captain had apparently launched his kinetic attack too soon since all of the lances that actually *reached* the ground had impacted far too early on the approach side of the compound, with none of them reaching anywhere *close* to the canyon area where the occupants actually resided.

Of the six person crew who manned the Security Command Center, *none* of them noticed the twenty subsonic assault pods headed far away from the compound – their carbon-epoxy shells and sub-structures affording very little for most detection systems to react to.

### ***In Vanir Space, Inside Research Station Alpha***

Ronnie needed to get the word out quickly, and was willing to risk it all to do so.

The only problem was that it was daylight outside, and the corridors were no longer empty.

“Six, get status from the others,” he whispered.

He turned and slid over to Slich 42126 while waiting for Six’s report.

“Still hidden. He found them good places,” Six murmured, nodding to their prisoner, and Ronnie motioned him closer to Slich 42126 and himself.

Six knew what was coming, so he keyed his translator and waited.

“Slich 42126, I need contact my people, outside. Is outside hole close by?” Ronnie asked verbally, breaking it down to the minimum for translation purposes.

Ronnie could feel the map image flash over the Vanir’s mind as he reviewed his somewhat sketchy knowledge of the maintenance access ports. He knew a few of them, but they were much closer to his own lab than to their current position, and in an area more likely to be occupied.

This was driving Ronnie to frustration, so he started looking at other ways to make his call.

“We come over top of here. We come down hole. On top we see ... sensor ... listen box ... alarm? We find look like can in ground.”

He mimed coming over the roof and climbing down a ladder, then mimed finding an object in the ground.

“How work?”

“Pressure sensors, Sank. They had motion sensors at first, but animals would set them off, and the guards complained constantly.”

“Guards ... how many guards? How they armed?” he asked, mentally smacking himself that he hadn’t asked before now.

“Ten ... maybe twelve guards. Although we have little to guard against. I sometimes think they are here just to make sure none of us attempt to leave. They have shock sticks. I’ve seen them kill with them. Some also carry a shooter,” he said, followed with a note of bitterness felt from his thoughts.

“Workers ... how many staff ... workers, total?”

“Fifty-seven. Fifty-six... Slich 42138 came too close to one of the Drecks before it was fully suppressed,” he said, his body quivering slightly, while Ronnie caught images of Vanir bits flying about in an enclosed room.

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“How many family units? Mated-pairs?” he asked, but immediately felt the contempt flashing back that Vanir might allow diversions from their primary duty in such a facility.

“No females here. They are a distraction.”

“Well ... you friend of anyone? You have friend here?”

“Just one. A lab assistant. I thought I heard his voice last night – this morning,” he corrected.

“Would staff – workers – would attack us, or only guards attack us?”

“The guards. That’s what they’re for,” Slich 42126 said easily, and Ronnie caught the impression that he didn’t much care if the guards, or the Director and some of his department heads, ceased to exist in the near future.

Ronnie contemplated his answers and tried to come up with a plan to get them all out safely, but Kantor had to be warned, regardless, and it had to be soon. He took a chance and toned himself down, before sharing his thoughts again – very lightly this time.

*‘Slich 42126, the mind detectors inside the facilities ... can they track by direction?’* He watched as the Vanir thought about that, seeing in his mind the rather limited deployment of enhanced tracer detectors located around the prisoner holding areas.

“Only to the point the detectors are scattered,” Slich 42126 finally said, startled at the resumption of mindful communications. “We have neutralizing cages and other shielded areas that block the sensors, so there are just enough of them to surround the areas outside the shielded portions. We have just the one outside the containment facilities.”

“So... Line of sight,” Ronnie muttered aloud, now realizing that even if he got outside, he *still* might not be able to reach Kantor – or even Petrus, if the facility was between him and a straight line to his target. “Well – this just can’t wait. Six, update your records to include the information on an imminent attack against Kantor – the Royal Homestead – plus everything else up to now. Compress it and send it out as a blip – update *everyone*. Seven is going for a walk.”

Six did so, then settled back, waiting for Tank’s next move.

“Slich 42126, where guards patrol and where guards sleep?” he asked aloud this time, and Six grinned in the darkness.

### ***On Top of Research Station Alpha***

Seven slowly poked his head up and looked around. It was very late in the afternoon and not particularly sunny ... actually seeing quite a few dark clouds when he crawled onto the surface of the compound before



carefully looking around for pressure sensors. From where he was, it was a little more than sixty meters to the edge of the map they'd made on the way in, but everything looked different in the failing light.

For one thing, instead of darkness, there were no trees to give him cover, while the ground cover was literally that – foot-tall plants hugging the ground.

After confirming his course through the pressure sensor maze, he quietly closed the access hatch and lay down on his belly.

Taking a deep breath, he started off at a slow combat crawl and got as far as five meters before the first drops of rain tapped the back of his helmet.

The lightening strike less than a minute later missed him by a good twenty meters, but still sent tingles all over his body.

### ***Inside Research Station Alpha***

Ronnie was deep into planning their interior assault on the Vanir research complex. The goals would be to eliminate the guards, bring down the shields, rescue the prisoners, then make their escape – all while keeping Vanir scientists and workers out of their way as they trundled everyone else out the back door.

From there, they would hike to the hidden landing area Slich 42126 had told them about that was located another three hundred meters behind the complex and hidden by a simple cover of camouflage netting with living plants woven into it.

By then, Seven should have gotten the message off and brought the *Kraken's Child* over to the same landing area. Once there, he would pick up the survivors, and they would all make their escape – but not before Ronnie lobbed a few anti-matter rounds down on the complex to eliminate it as an offensive resource.

That last part he'd neglected to mention to Slich 42126.

### ***On a Small Moon***

Maintaining absolute circumspection with his observations, Petrus watched as the Vanir crew unshipped and casually walked over to a large rock outcropping before opening up the side of it. The hidden doorway uncovered a dark passageway that led deep into the side of the outcropping, and all disappeared inside and closed the door behind them.

He'd counted eight crew walking across the crater floor, and Ronnie had counted at least ten on the ship he'd encountered after leaving Base 2. That probably left two still on board the ship, provided this was a similar ship, which was becoming more tempting by the minute. After all, with only two Vanir on board, how hard could it be?

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He pulled out a fresh collar and replaced the one on his ship suit. Over that, he donned his combat harness, then tested the power pack in his sword, spending just a moment listening to the harsh, intermittent sound of a defective power connection before killing the sword.

Yanking the power pack, he noted a slight bit of corrosion around the terminals, then searched in vain for a spare aboard the *Orca*. Mentally kicking himself for never having Ronnie simply fix his head to let him call the Fire *natively*, he cautiously cleaned the terminals and slipped it into the charger ... noting again that Sai hadn't left a single power pack on board *anywhere* – not even in *there*.

He suffered the delay while the pack reached peak charge, but testing it later produced the sweet and slightly edgy sound of a pack-powered sword purring in the confines of the ship.

Humming jovially in anticipation, he headed out the airlock. If he hurried, maybe he'd get there before the ship cloaked again.

### ***Inside Research Station Alpha***

"I'm telling you – *forget* those alarms! The rain does that *every* time a cloud burst comes along!" the Watch Supervisor said angrily.

Being the Watch Supervisor meant that he had to be harsh, but even *he* wouldn't send anyone out in a rain like that! He remembered when Slich 41684 had gone outside on a day like this and gotten *nailed* by a lightning strike. He *still* didn't talk right.

### ***Outside Research Station Alpha***

Seven had finally managed to slither his way to the edge of the compound, and was working along the faint, and now very *muddy*, trail they'd followed to get there. He was trying to find the path leading back to the cove where they'd hidden the ship. The constant, hard rain wasn't helping any, and the muddy water runoff was just a malevolent bonus to the journey.

His slip-splat count was around ten when he noticed a familiar rock, and the rope tied around it. He let out a heaving sigh of relief and relaxed for a moment, before reaching for the rope. It was when he was bent over that his footing gave out, and he went down once again – face *first* this time – and slipped over the edge of the cliff.

### ***On a Small Moon, In a Tight Spot***

In *hindsight*, Petrus would probably agree this hadn't been his most spectacular decision to date, but he wasn't a stranger to danger. After several hundred years, you usually got pretty blasé about it. The thing was, though, that *before* you break into an enemy ship, you usually have a

pretty good idea of the *layout*. You sort of *know* where to find everything you want to disable ... and you can read the damn *labels*!

Fumbling along with pellet thrower in hand, he crept along the very well-marked, but *unreadable* corridor, and approached the two beings he felt were not too far up ahead – all the while trying to ignore the faint ringing in his ears.

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

"I *still* say it was closer to here," the Sensor Officer said. "And it was ... it was *strange*. Not a tracer, and nothing like the mind waves... Well, sort of like the mind waves. It was ... it was a discordant ... *hum*? A *tone* of some sort."

"A 'tone' of some sort? S'Slich'Tah 38796, do you even *hear* yourself when you speak? Perhaps you're reading a tracer that developed a feed-back loop," the Captain suggested.

"I've never *heard* of such a thing! Our tracers don't *do* that!"

"You've just never heard of it before. You should get some rest. I'll stay up here while you take a break. Someone will be back with fresh supplies in a few hours, and then we'll *both* get some rest," the Captain said.

The Sensor Officer looked at his Captain before finally shrugging in acceptance.

"My old clutch-mate, perhaps you're right. Searching for transients... Atmospheric anomalies... *Still* no reports from the surface?"

"None ... and I doubt there will be any. We'll rest, the men will bring in the supplies, we'll take and drop them off at the lab, then go back on patrol. Better yet, maybe we should go over to the depot at Station B and get our systems checked? It's not like anyone really *knows* we're out here."

"The *humans* do. At least they've refueled from here," Slich 38796 reminded him.

"Yes. But this is Station A. If they stumble across Station *B*, then it will be too bad for *them*!" The Captain laughed and clapped his slightly older clutch mate on the back before watching him make his way aft. Afterwards, he settled into his command chair and sighed in relaxation.

"A *tone*? Next he'll be hearing human *music*," he hissed derisively, then sent several segments of his mind into contented relaxation, while one was left to ponder the situation in solitude.

### ***Sneaking Through the Corridor...***

'Station B?'

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Petrus had picked that thought out of the rapid conversation these two officers just had, and considered the implications. He supposed it would have been too much to ask that the *entire* solution would be to take out just one facility, but *another* station? *Where?* Somewhere *else* on this planet? It didn't quite feel that way from the sidebands he'd picked up, though.

Hearing noises coming closer, he ducked into the closest opening and closed the door; hearing and feeling the Vanir coming closer and closer before stopping right outside the door. He set himself for an attack, but instead heard the door *opposite* him open as the Vanir officer entered the other compartment and closed the door behind him.

He took a breath, then shrugged his shoulders, before looking around the compartment he was in – only *then* discovering it was a private cabin. He paused to relax while beginning to think it through. There were only two Vanir on board – the ship's Captain and his head Sensor Operator. If he just hung out here for a little while, it should be easy enough to pick information out of their minds and select the most profitable locations to create some hidden mischief. He holstered his sidearm and settled into the rather comfortable nest on the deck to let his mind drift.

### ***Above Kantor, The Vanir Raider***

The Vanir raider had successfully launched its diversionary attack, and it looked like they would make good their escape.

What they didn't plan on were several *very* determined Seniors and experienced tank pilots waiting for something like this.

Once the alarms had gone out, five of the twelve tanks circling Kantor got close enough to read the weapons emissions of the raider directly, then plotted intercept courses accordingly. Having five experienced Seniors aboard allowed precision piloting to a degree never before available, and despite the raider's attempt to find a clean departure angle, those five tanks began unloading their complement of beams and other weaponry that brutally hammered the raider's physical structure.

### ***Kantor, At the Royal Homestead***

The attack died out as suddenly as it had started. Once word had gone out that the attacker was itself under attack, focus turned towards reloading, running system tests, and making head counts for missing or injured staff and guards.

No one looked for members of the Royal family because they, along with their personal staff and guards, were under lock and key in the very well protected and shielded bunkers located several stories below the level of their quarters and well away from the canyon floor.

At the very first alarm from security, the house staff and security forces had bodily gone into each apartment and pulled out the residents, before they'd all been rushed to one of several armored elevators and dropped into the security bunker for safe keeping.

The family was all gathered together, and either sat, stood, paced, or otherwise tried to keep themselves occupied, while Radatel and Lili conferred with staff outside the bunker – Radatel by wire, and Lili with mindspeak.

Right now, Lili was speaking with those Seniors prosecuting the attack on the offending ship, but was bouncing off the *same* barrier that was keeping them *all* out.

Maya was sitting in a corner surrounded by the children. Two of the valaet kits were in the room, as well, but not close by because of the anguish being radiated by Maya. The children were fine, but each of them knew what Maya was going through.

Maya could no longer feel Ronnie, not for a while now, and neither could the children. Or Uncle Petrus, for that matter.

### ***Over Kantor, The Vanir Raider***

“Commander, we’re losing our *shields!*”

“*Helm!* Find us a *hole!*”

“Trying, Sir, but they keep *blocking!*”

“Another three ships have just joined them!” the Sensor Officer reported.

The intense beating continued while an alarm sounded, and an indicator lit up.

“Sir! The tracer detector just went off the *top!*”

“The *mind shield!* Is it *holding?*” the Commander shouted.

“Yes! Yes, it’s... *No! No! It’s failing!*”

“DAMN YOU, S’SLICH’TAH 29531,” the Commander screamed, then keyed in the final command.

### ***Kantor, In the Royal Bunker***

Lili caught the most *tantalizing* tendril of thought... No, not a thought, but a ... a *concept* ... but then it was gone.

### ***In Vanir Space, Inside Research Station Alpha***

One and Two crept along slowly while approaching the guard office.

## The End of the Road

The lab schedule their “pet” Vanir had given them called for official down time starting just an hour earlier. Workers would be eating, sharing recreation, or just plain sleeping. The guards would most likely be in their quarters, with just a few regularly scheduled patrols until midnight. At midnight, everyone would settle in, and a skeleton watch would sit and listen for alarms.

The team composed of One and Two would take out the guards in the office, while the team of Three and Five would take out the guards in their quarters. All four of them would eliminate the remaining guards working as a group.

Tank and Six, with Slich 42126 leading the way, would head to the prisoner area and take out any roving patrols they came across. Ideally, they wouldn’t find anyone else outside the living and eating spaces. Once there, they would kill the mind shields, do a quick head count, then determine who would be walking out with them later.

### ***Kantor, In the Royal Bunker***

Lili stomped her foot in frustration. She’d *almost* made contact with the beings inside the ship, when their shields had failed, but either the constant bombardment by her Seniors and their warriors had destroyed it, or they’d self-destructed.

She thought hard about the situation. It had become known the Bornat had a mind shield, but they’d already packed up and left. They *might* have left a working shield behind, but the Bornat were *nothing* if not thorough.

They wouldn’t tell *anyone* about it before they left, so there was *zero* likelihood they’d just leave one behind, or on a ship for just *anyone* to find.

She considered that tidbit for just a moment. They’d left their old ships to the Demon’s Realm in care of the kids. After a few more moments, she dismissed that idea as well. Walter already told her the Bornat blocked details about their mind shield and their drive technology before they left. That meant there was only one other place to look.

She sent messages to her Seniors still in orbit and ordered the recovery of as many bits of debris as they could find ... and especially any *bodies*. They needed to define the providence of this mind-shielded ship as soon as possible, but she suspected it was a gift from their new friends down below them.

Lili was still mulling it over when compound security rescinded the alarm, and opened up the household for occupation once again.

Since Maya was temporarily incapacitated by her loss of contact with Rondal, Lili helped round up the children, but fumed inwardly at Maya’s

presumptuousness, since *she* would have felt it first if Rondal had *truly* left this existence!

***In Vanir Space, The Kraken, Approaching Vanaheim***

Sai had made all preparations prior to their next jump, and the ship was set for battle. Everything was tidied up in the labs, kitchens, and quarters, and all crew and passengers were either at assigned stations, or in their quarters and webbed in for violent ship's movement.

She *definitely* didn't want a repeat of the mess Ronnie had caused when he'd taken the ship swimming during a simple refueling mission.

With their wives sheltering as a group in Torga's quarters, Endo and Gallus had joined Sai and Torga on the bridge, along with Laisee, Sasha, and the Vanir Ambassador. Their Medical Technicians were monitoring the lockdown of the Vanir passengers personally, with the Kee assisting. Aiding them on bridge sensors was Donnel Arden.

Jaiying's attendance was a surprise, but Sai had allowed it at Laisee's request. The bridge was crowded, but everyone had somewhere to sit, and something to hold on to.

"Torga – Weapons protocol," Sai calmly ordered.

"Firing panel is locked out. Breach room is empty," he reported, while viewing the BFG's firing chamber on a display. "All access panels and portals are secured. Security is in place," he continued, viewing several displays, and seeing security guardsmen stationed at the breach room door and the weapons locker; all wearing armor and clipped by their harnesses to hard mounts near the portals.

"Very well. Load one round," Sai said quietly, and both Samuel and Sasha quivered intently when Torga toggled a control, and the visual display from the breach room showed a panel opening remotely with a single round lowering from it. It slid into an arm loader and was rotated into the breach – which then shut closed on it.

'*Lady Sai! What do you mean by–*' Samuel's outburst was cut short by Sai.

'*Ambassador, the Commonwealth comes in peace – but we're not stupid*' she pushed to Samuel and Sasha.

"All access panels and portals are secured," Torga reported, with the weapons indicators now showing eighteen anti-matter loads in split storage, with one live round in the breach of the BFG.

"Very well," Sai said smoothly; double-checking the display before turning back to Samuel and Sasha.

## The End of the Road

*'Gentlemen, the likelihood of being fired upon in orbit remains a possibility. Hopefully, our shields will protect us long enough to respond in kind in order to prevent an unfortunate loss of anti-matter containment – which would serve NEITHER of our peoples well'* she sent loudly, considering *this* breach of mindspeak silence might be the lure that would bring out their invisible stalker, if one was still lurking about.

Sasha prepared to contact his old ship in warning, and several minutes later, the *Kraken* dropped out of transition less than fifty-thousand kilometers from it. Once oriented to the proper solar plane, they started making position adjustments to match the current orbit of Vanaheim about its sun.

Once again, Sai marveled at the precision of Ronnie's navigation system. Sasha was already in touch with his old ship's Commander and getting them positioned for escort into Vanaheim orbit, some fifteen-hundred thousand kilometers away.

### ***Outside Research Station Alpha***

Seven finally woke up to discover the darkening sky ... at his feet. He looked up into the ocean until his mind finally wrapped around the concept of what his eyes were telling him. He was upside down. Not only was he upside down, but dangling from one leg – which had apparently gotten snagged in the rope halfway down the cliff face.

He slowly moved his arms and neck cautiously – noting immediately how easily his neck rotated. That was probably because he could just barely see his helmet down there on the beach another ten or fifteen meters below him. He was about to report his situation, but clamped his mouth shut when he realized his communications equipment was still attached to his helmet down there on the beach.

At least the *rain* had stopped.

He wasn't worried, though. This was actually a situation he'd trained for. You climb ropes – sometimes you get tangled in them. The solution was simple; remain calm, then use your arms to climb up the same rope your leg was tangled in. It would be awkward but easily doable, if a little painful to the captured leg.

In order to reach the rope, he gave himself a little twist – but it took several minutes to recover from the horrific *screaming* he'd let out when that slight motion awakened the nerve endings surrounding the dislocated hip joint on the leg that was still attached to the rope. After recovering his composure, he very gingerly began feeling around for his packet of pain suppressors. Once he found it, he opened it with all due caution – hanging upside down as he was – and managed to dry-swallow two of them.



Almost twenty minutes later, they finally kicked in sufficiently enough so that he could maneuver himself into a position to grab the rope and start pulling himself upwards towards his trapped leg.

It was a long, slow, awkward, and *painful* journey.

### ***Inside Research Station Alpha***

With the guards in the security office eliminated, One and Two had teamed up with Three and Five to take on the remaining guards in their quarters. For this they needed surprise and a quick resolution.

Unlike the standard combat knives they'd used with the office guards, they unshipped their power swords and stood ready to enter and eliminate all the Vanir guardsmen inside.

### ***Outside Research Station Alpha***

Slich 48698 had been *sure* something more was going on during the hard rain storm and finally convinced his clutch mate, Slich 48696, to go outside with him and take a look once the rain had finally stopped. They'd climbed up an access portal and almost immediately found a muddy trail. Then they'd followed as it wandered through the brush and trees until it reached the cliffs.

At the top of the cliffs, they discovered a rope leading down to the beach. Seeing nothing below, they carefully descended and followed the obvious trail until they found the human; discovering him crawling on the beach, but barely escaping with their lives when he shot at them with a hand weapon. They energized and tossed both of their electric prods at him, with one of them connecting successfully and setting the human to seizing uncontrollably, thus allowing them to approach him safely.

The reason he was crawling became evident when they noticed one of his legs did not bend in the proper direction at the hip. It looked like it had been dislocated. That was proven when they'd gotten him up on his feet and he'd collapsed in agony.

Since it had been Slich 48698's idea to come out there anyway, Slich 48696 volunteered to carry the human back for him in recognition of his correct interpretation of the sensors. The novelty of being outside for a change prompted the both of them to decide to spend some quality time in the fresh air while they slowly meandered around to the front entrance of the compound.

### ***Outside the Facility Control Station***

Slich 42126 had led Ronnie and Six to the control station for the facility's mind shield. Try as he might, Ronnie could feel nothing behind the door, but saw the guard sitting quietly off to one side through a tiny

## The End of the Road

window, and apparently all alone. Supposedly, once this station was shut down, *all* the mind shields would be off, and mental emissions would be set free to roam at will.

Slich 42126 was of the opinion the shield failure would immediately show up on the Director's system, then explained the alarms from unfettered mind emanations would trigger a chaotic response by the staff. He suggested it would be helpful if the first two teams could head off the staff, which would allow Tank and Six to start the evacuation.

All three teams were well aware of simple ways of blocking off access through a corridor as long as your power sword had a full power pack, which, as it turns out, none of them needed anyway.

### *Inside the Control Station*

The control station guard heard the faint tapping on the door, and saw a familiar face through the tiny window. He cast him a disgusted look for all the trouble he'd caused the day before, then got up to unlock the door and see what he wanted. He probably figured he was in trouble and was coming here to try and find out just how much trouble he was in.

As soon as the door opened, Tank shoved Slich 42126 aside, and Six slipped inside and took down the guard permanently. As Six stepped out, Slich 42126 was dragged in by Tank, who immediately demanded information on the system and what parts of it were deemed very important. Slich 42126 avoided looking at the widening pool of blood on the floor, and pointed to the various control panels – thinking that Tank would simply turn them off or perhaps beat them with a heavy object.

The loud keening of the human's sword drew his sudden attention, and he watched as Tank cut huge swaths through the control panels and worked his way back to the power busses until every control system in the room was disabled forever. After shoving him back out the door, Tank swiped around the door jam and adjacent walls, collapsing the section facing the control room and effectively blocking it off.

As predicted, alarms started going off all over the facilities, but Ronnie felt as if a great weight had been lifted from his head. He stretched out and felt the shock in the guard's quarters when the four Imperial specialists rendered the room in short order, leaving nothing but body parts behind. That room, too, was collapsed before they headed to block the corridors leading to the staff living area.

Freeing his mind, he reached further out but was unable to contact Lili or any of the kids back home.

There was *still* something blocking his efforts!

***On a Small Moon, In a Tinier Spot***

Petrus activated his ship suit for a moment and checked its status...

Since neglecting to bring along a spare charged collar, he'd reluctantly eased himself into the Vanir atmosphere inside the ship – the expectation of his available sabotage time being *vastly* underestimated.

He'd been forced to either risk leaving and returning – possibly getting caught – or just sticking it out and making do. He'd decided to stick it out.

He spent his time resting in the nest while poking and prodding the drowsy mind of the officer across from him, then that of the ship's Captain up forward. He'd learned quite a bit about the ship, but unfortunately the location of the mind shield controller was not included. Otherwise, he was ready to work his way into the bowels of the beast and cut some very important lines and power busses that should take, at *minimum*, a full-size depot to locate and repair...

With nothing else keeping him there, he got up and slipped out – working his way towards his entry point and the prime sabotage areas beyond it. He found the air lock and went past it, but heard a tiny noise and immediately stopped – turning around very slowly with his hands away from his sides. Seeing nothing, he figured it was just the ship settling, but at a suddenly much *louder* noise, he ducked into the nearest closet he could find.

With the mind shield still up, he hadn't felt anyone coming back to the ship until he heard a voice calling out that fresh supplies had finally arrived. The small storage locker he'd squeezed into was along the same corridor as the airlock, so he waited quietly to see if the Vanir was coming closer to him or heading forward.

He felt the mind move further away and took a cautious breath. He also picked up impressions that the rest of the crew was planning to stay inside the rock for the time being since they were tired of being cooped up inside the ship.

He relaxed, then looked around – finding a large maintenance access panel in the back of the locker.

*'Well ... time to switch to Plan B,'* he thought cheerfully.

***Kantor, At the Royal Homestead***

The family was secure within their personal quarters once again; the raider ship having been reduced to tiny pieces by their quickly improvised superior space and air cover. Lili and Radatel had sent out their sincerest thanks and gratitude to the crews in the tanks, and also to the rest of the security forces manning the house defense systems throughout the assault. A celebratory event would be scheduled once the grounds were

## The End of the Road

returned to normal, and the perpetrators discovered and brought to justice.

In the meantime, the family relaxed while housekeeping roamed through the quarters checking to see that everything was in place. Outside, additional guardsmen supplemented the single *valaet* on patrol – his mate being in their den and handling the *newborn* kits; *neither* of which having yet been seen by any human. It was a *valaet* thing.

After the excitement of the encounter, house security and defenses began relaxing, and things were beginning to return to normal. There were only a handful of detection devices left offline – those having been damaged by the few weapons that had actually landed on the surface. They would be dealt with in the morning, under daylight, while tonight, the augmented guard force would remain on a relaxed watch. Everyone was just happy it was over.

### *In Vanir Space, Inside Research Station Alpha*

The alarms had gone crazy, and the Director was seeing *huge* power surges in the detector grid within the facilities. His monitoring station showed the primary shield was down, but that could not account for the tremendous *spikes* they were still seeing in the detector grid. On top of that, he could not raise the guard station, or find any of the guards in the forward section of the facilities. He gathered his staff and sent teams out to find out what was going on.

### *Outside Research Station Alpha, A Walk on the Beach*

They'd taken their sweet time alternating between carrying the human and just sitting down to admire the view of the ocean and night sky while enjoying the fresh air – something they seldom got to do. This would normally rate punishment for being outside, but after all, they'd just captured an escaped prisoner ... or *something* like that.

They extended their time outside until the sun descended well below the horizon, before realizing they were getting hungry.

They paused at the top of the stairs and enjoyed the view of two of the moons overhead, before taking a long, last look at the ocean. Sighing in resignation, they opened the door and just barely heard alarms in the background.

Dragging their captive in with them, they came across a mass of terrified scientists and staff who were running around as if the world had come to an end. They finally caught sight of the Director and called out to him several times before finally gaining his attention.

*In the Prisoner Spaces*

Ronnie was busily performing triage on the dozen or so Commonwealth Healers who'd been captured and imprisoned at the facility. Given the location of their surgical bandages, of the three Seniors he recognized, he wasn't sure if two of them would want to live.

He wanted to spend the time to take a closer look into them, but getting them all out was the *first* priority, so he set Six and Slich 42126 to organizing everyone who was self-propelled into the corridor.

After several loud crashes, the first and second teams arrived. Ronnie set team one to guard, while team two started helping the prisoners. After a quick consultation, he had the two severely injured Seniors moved to gurneys for transport and headed them down the corridor to the rear exit, with Slich 42126 in the lead. One and Two stayed behind with Ronnie and guarded their retreat.

Ronnie had held back to make sure there were no stragglers, but while passing a blank stretch of corridor, he suddenly stopped and stared at the wall; getting feelings of anguish and despair from behind it.

'*Slich 42126! What's behind this wall?*' he shouted silently, causing the Vanir to rush back to him around the mass of evacuees.

"It is nothing. Just food for the Drecks," he stated, then lurched away from Tank when his power sword came up screaming.

Ronnie cut a portal through the wall big enough to walk through. To his dismay, he discovered nearly two dozen live Drecks feed stock chained inside a large compartment. It smelled foul within, and he could see a few bodies that were not going to be coming with them.

"*SIX! WE GOT MORE SURVIVORS!*" he called out, and Six stopped in his tracks, not quite believing what he'd just heard. "*ANY OF YOU GUYS SPEAK DRECKS?*"

One called forward, "We *ALL* do!" Ronnie nodded and made a quick count, before Six joined him.

"We got another twenty-one to go. Mostly young Drecks females – biggest about two meters tall," he considered, then turned to Six and the Vanir.

"Six, get that back door open, and get them headed to the clearing. Contact Seven as soon as you get outside. Maybe that's why we haven't been able to reach him. I can't ... I'm having trouble feeling anything out there."

"Will do, Tank!" Six said, and started the human line moving again, while Ronnie turned to this new problem, but paused and looked back

## The End of the Road

towards the living spaces ... getting some strange levels of excitement that seemed inappropriate.

“One ... Two, can you drop another corridor between us and them? I’ve got a feeling they are *way* too happy about something up front,” he said quietly, while pointing towards the populated areas behind them. They both nodded, before cautiously heading back the way they’d come.

“Three ... Five, let’s get the rest of this party rounded up and moving. Treat them as children. Be kind, but firm. Tell them... Tell them the Demon of the Commonwealth has declared them his new citizens, and ordered them delivered to a new home. They should understand *that*, at least. I spent enough time *reinforcing* it,” he muttered, before calling the *Fire* and cutting a bigger hole in the wall.

### ***Kantor, Upstream from the Royal Homestead***

The first ten combat capsules to launch had broken apart upon hitting atmosphere; their seals having failed because the Vanir really didn’t give a fecal dropping if the Drecks inside lived or died. Of the remaining ten, five of them had landed *hard* – *very* hard – and would provide ample evidence that Drecks were involved and probably responsible for the attack.

The remaining five actually had survivors inside – *mostly* – and three of them made a sufficiently soft landing by the simple expedient of getting their parachutes stuck in the upper branches of a grove of trees nearly fifteen kilometers upriver of the Homestead’s canyon. Those three squads managed to exit their pods and work their way down the tree limbs and trunks until finally setting foot on Kantite soil.

Looking up from the ground, none of them could see the pods hanging there only thirty meters above them, and after gathering together, they compared their hand-held navigational devices, then set out for what *should* be the river that fed the canyon stream for the Royal Homestead.

They needed to be in place well before dawn.

### ***In Vanir Space, At Research Station Alpha***

Slich 42126 had gotten the rear loading door open, before he and Six led the survivors out onto a damp, but hard-packed dirt path that was very dim in what little light there was from the two small moons orbiting overhead.

Six tried reaching Seven but was having no luck. He was still able to reach Ronnie inside and gave him an update.

Ronnie ordered them to proceed to the pick-up point and see if Seven was there with the ship. If not, they would need to send a two-man team to the ship and recover it.

***With the Prisoners...***

Ronnie observed the progress Three and Five were having with the Drecks, and it was much like he'd expected. At this point, they were willing to hold out hope that humans – *any humans* – were a better bet than staying with the Vanir; not that they'd had any choice in the matter until now.

Their chains were struck by simply cutting them with power swords, and they helped each other as they staggered out by twos and threes. As they passed, Ronnie glanced within each one – checking for any nasty surprises.

He'd been thinking of the torture Dorcas had been put through, but found nothing like the intestinal blockage that had tormented her. He did find that nearly half of them had tracking tracers installed – no *bombs*, thankfully – and made note of it to Three and Five that the Healers they were pulling out should remove them and discard them before they left the surface of the planet. He told them it was something they should be able to accomplish easily.

Ronnie was still waiting for One and Two to return, when the sound of an explosion was heard. He and Three ran forward to see Two staggering back with burns covering part of his face, and flesh hanging down from his chin.

"We heard ... we heard Vanir down a corridor, so ... set breaching charge ... wired it ... to a partition door. Th – they came through ... 'fore we got away," he got out weakly.

Three stayed on guard and reported their losses to Five, while Ronnie got Two down and looked him over. He lifted up the loose flesh and Healed it back in place, then followed up with a quick repair of the burned area. Knowing *exactly* what Two was feeling, he dug into Two's pill pack, split a pain suppressor in half, and stuck it under his tongue.

"Let that melt and swallow it down. It will just take the edge off. Three, take him back with the others. I'll go take a look at One."

Three glanced down, then looked closer. Two was in *much* better shape than he'd thought. He helped him up, while Ronnie went forward. Ronnie found the remains of One – in several places – and would *not* be putting this warrior back together.

He looked down the darkened corridor and felt feelings of pain, but also elation. It didn't bode well. He *really* wanted to go find out why, but there were people to recover, and places to go; so he drew his sword and brought down another section of corridor to block the passageway, before heading back to the exit.

## The End of the Road

He caught up with the tail end of the evacuees and walked out with Two, Three, and Five, with them taking up the rear guard position.

Once outside the installation, his mind seemed to expand further, and he reached out to feel Six at the clearing, but didn't feel Seven *anywhere*.

He had a sudden sinking feeling, but ignored it to report in.

*'Lili! Lili, the Vanir are sending an attack and using Drecks!'* he shouted out to the void.

*'You FINALLY decide to tell us about it now? No matter, Rondal. We've dealt with it already'*

*'You've ... is everyone all right?'*

*'Yes, Rondal. We are all quite fine. The ship we destroyed was mind-shielded, and we suspect it was a Vanir creation. The Drecks we found in various states of life, none of which created any problems for us. We believe most of them perished during their descent, and the rest suffered uncomfortable landings. We have the survivors secured, and they are most remarkable – many of them do not know how they got here, while the rest seem to be under some compulsion. Would you happen to know why that might be?'*

*'Yes, Lili. I've been searching where they were programmed. The Director of this facility – the secret one I told you about – programmed a bunch of Drecks warriors and sent them out to attack the Emperor. My inside man told me about it'* he explained, then had to make further explanations about the rest of it.

*'This "inside man" of yours – the Vanir. You are sure of him?'*

She was feeling something different from him and wondering if something else was affecting him.

*'He has been most accommodating. Of course his life has been in the balance. We will watch him closely'*

*'Well, then ... take care, Rondal. Do you require any assistance?'*

*'Ahh ... Petrus is out there somewhere, although I don't feel him anywhere. He's got the Orca'*

*'We've misplaced him as well. I do not feel he has passed, but it is much like you have been for the last few days. Maya is quite upset about it. May I-'*

*'She need not know right now, Lili. I have much to do'* he quickly interrupted her.

*'Very well, Rondal. Please keep us advised when you can. The children can feel you now, and they report that Jaiying is at the Vanir home planet.'*



*They are landing the Ambassadorial mission today, and she hopes to have news for us later this evening'*

*'Thank you, Lili. My love to you all'* he said quietly.

*'And our love to you'* she sent, before dropping the conversation.

Ronnie sighed, but continued walking to the clearing. Laisee just couldn't *wait*. Well, with any luck they would be up and out of here in the next hour or two – *if* they could cram everyone inside the *Kraken's Child*.

He hoped Petrus was close by.

### ***On a Small Moon...***

*Close* was relative.

Petrus was just passing overhead – creeping along within a crawl space located inside a mind-shielded Vanir raider parked on the surface of a small moon and surrounded by hostile Vanir warren members intent upon bringing down the Commonwealth.

He stopped where he was, and cut another bundle of cables.

So far, he'd disabled their drive system, cut off their communications, dropped their defensive shield, and disrupted their weapons control system. He also thought he might have damaged the cloaking system, but *nothing* he'd done so far had affected his lack of ability to contact Lili – or anyone *else* for that matter.

He was getting frustrated, and *almost* considered simply carving a hole in the hull of the ship, but paused for a moment of reflection.

*Internally*, the Vanir ship had a higher pressure – almost two atmospheres – and it would be *incredibly* stupid to cut a hole in the hull while standing right next to it; inevitably getting sucked out piecemeal onto the surface of the moon.

That settled, he crawled along a little further and looked for another promising bundle of connections to mess with.

### ***March 13, Over Vanaheim the Beautiful***

They'd made their approach as escorted by Sasha's old ship, and sensors never pinged on anything larger than a shuttle or small transport anywhere within standard weapons range. By this time, the Vanir Ambassador had been alerted and made his way to the bridge, where he was currently looking at the forward display monitor and staring at it raptly.

"It's so beautiful," he murmured, and Sai could feel the longing rolling off his senses, even without waiting for the translation from his voder.

## The End of the Road

Sai thought it was rather dark and plain – the red sun casting a dim light over the sunward side, and lighting up ... really very little of the planet's facing profile.

Instead of blue skies and seas, the atmosphere seemed somewhat dirty. She could see reddish glowing lights from the dark side of the planet's surface, but didn't think those were from cities.

*'Umm, Samuel ... we're going to need respirators down there, aren't we'* she silently asked. It wasn't a question.

She began a survey analysis from their current position, and even this far out she could see unpleasant markers in the planetary spectrum.

*'Ship suits, more likely'* she added.

*'Well ... yes. Our atmosphere is a little thicker than you're used to'*

*'The particulate count ALONE should be life-threatening to Vanir, let alone HUMANS. And the SMELL!'* she sent in disgust.

*'Ah, yes... The SWEET smell of home!'* Sasha gushed while hiding a tiny grin.

Sai shuddered and checked her boards; looking over the sensors, along with Ardan and her boys. Immediate space was clear, so she turned to Sasha.

*'Sasha, please contact planetary traffic control and arrange an approach vector for us. If at all possible, I would like to park us stationary over the Prime's administration building. That will make our transport time shorter, and allow a quicker departure if necessary'* she requested before turning to Samuel.

*'Ambassador S'Shac'Kah 39496, once we are in a parking orbit, the first part of my task is done. I will rely upon Sasha as military liaison between us and planetary traffic control. We will begin Vanir repatriation before sending down Ambassador Laisee. Ambassador Laisee will conduct her business, and be attended at all times by her personal guards, along with Jaiying and her guards. Once negotiations are complete, we will recover our Ambassador and return to the Commonwealth'*

*'I understand, Lady Sai Tal. We all thank you for your hospitality'* he sent formally.

Sai paused for a moment, before bringing up another issue privately.

*'Samuel ... the offer of asylum is still open until we depart – to any or all of you'*

*'And Sue?'*

*'Ronnie doesn't hold anyone against their will unless they become a threat. She's free to go'* she said, and he felt the truth of it. *'Some method of transferring her back pay will have to be worked out, though'* she added with a tilt to her head, and he let out a tiny laugh.

*'I am sure something can be worked out. Thank you again, Lady Sai Tal'* he sent, then left the bridge.

Sasha reported their assigned approach vector and parking orbit, so Sai ordered Torga to comply.

### ***On a Small Moon...***

"Captain, I just don't understand what's going *on!* The systems keep *failing*, and the errors seem to be *spreading!*" the Chief Engineer explained despondently.

The Captain considered the situation they currently found themselves in. They couldn't start the engines. They couldn't call for help. The weapons were out of commission – at least the controls between the bridge and the launchers. Their sensors were failing one by one, almost as if ... as if...

*"Vermin check! Everyone get tight! Vermin check in one minute!"*

### ***Outside Research Station Alpha***

Two, Three, and Five were watching over the evacuees, who were huddled just inside the tree line around the clearing – out of sight, but close enough to quickly get into the ship when it arrived ... *if* it arrived.

Ronnie and Six made their way back to the cliff edge, then followed the rope down to the beach. In their night-vision, they saw the helmet worn by Seven, and his power sword close by. Six grabbed the helmet, while Ronnie picked up the sword and flashed it once; confirming its integrity was intact, then added it to his kit before they continued.

They followed a slithering path that ended with a clear indication of some sort of struggle. Looking closely, they saw spent casings from Seven's sidearm and found that weapon a little further away.

From these indications, it looked like Seven had been attacked, and either driven away his attackers, or more likely been taken captive himself. He reached out again, but still couldn't feel him, so they continued on, now following large foot prints. Along the way, Six picked up a handful of pebbles and began tossing them towards the cliff face.

After another twenty meters, they heard the distinct change in sound as the pebbles hit armor instead of rock, and they reached out and felt their way around to the back of the ship, while looking at the sand for evidence of recent passage.

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The only thing they noticed was the track continuing well past the tank and curving around a bend further along the cliffs.

At Ronnie's hand signal, Six dropped the combat hatch, and they scanned the interior in infrared before cautiously stepping inside to examine the ship. Ronnie reached out with his senses and found nothing, so he closed the hatch and brought up the internal lighting to red, then went forward – casually checking each compartment as he passed. Six backed him up, and went forward to help get them ready to lift ship.

### *In Stationary Orbit over Vanaheim, Aboard the Kraken*

"Only *that* many want to go down?" Laisee asked incredulously.

"Ahhh, I believe the rest would *like* to go home, but ... let us say, they would like someone *else* to be the test subject," Samuel said in frustrated explanation.

Laisee slowly paced in her compartment, while Samuel and Sally watched, somewhat amused.

"We promised the Prime repatriation of her people would occur *before* I came down personally. The intent was to prove that your people were *not* hurt by association with us and have recovered from their treatment."

"I understand, Lady Laisee, but the crewmen... You must understand, Vanir have been taught from a very young age that humans are – well ... *deadly* to Vanir. The Prime knows this very well, and I'm sure she is just as curious as the *rest* of Vanaheim to see if this is really true."

Laisee considered that as she paced, then thought of something else.

"Is she? Doesn't she *already* know your people are safe with us? You say that Vanaheim is curious about us, but is the public even *aware* that we are up here?"

"Why... I – I don't..."

Samuel stopped and looked at Sally.

"Sally, have you had any contact with your Guild? Do they know we are here, and who we have with us? *Outside* the military channels, that is?" he asked her.

"I will check, my Samuel. Lady Laisee, we will research this at once," she promised, then turned to go, but stopped when Laisee spoke again.

"I will *not* send our passengers to their deaths. Guaranteed recovery to Vanaheim, and a *safe* return to their warrens, or – or they may choose asylum with *us* ... *all of them*."

"Understood, Lady Laisee," Samuel expressed somberly, and Sally took her leave.

He watched as Laisee still paced nervously and thought he knew what was on her mind.

"No word from Rondal Caldar?"

She stopped and turned towards him with what he thought was an awkward expression on her face.

"No... No word yet. It has been only five days, but he said it would take only four ... if they've arrived safely."

"He has not... No, he *would* not," Samuel considered.

"He would maintain silence. I'm sure he will exercise extreme caution, and they will leave as quietly as they arrived – once they find anything of importance to report to the Prime. Ronnie understands that."

She certainly *hoped* he understood that.

### ***On a Small Moon...***

Petrus felt a slight shudder in the hull, before his ship suit face shield automatically initiated as the suit started tightening up around him. After a very few minutes, the display on his face shield indicated a hard vacuum around him, and he figured his welcome was officially over.

Taking a moment to orient himself, he started working his way towards the lower portion of the ship and began searching for a relatively open outer hull space to make his exit. If anything, at least it would keep them planted on this moon until they patched the hole he was going to leave behind. They certainly wouldn't get far running on ship suit collars. Then he happened to glance at the indicator for his *own* suit collar and decided *this* was as good a place as any to make a hole.

Awkwardly bracing himself in the narrow crawlspace, he pulled and activated his sword. Grasping it tightly, he pierced the side of the ship and made an irregular, smallish round hole in it, before turning off his blade. Using his fist, he smacked the plug a few times and finally knocked it away to fall outside. Upon leaning in close, he saw it was nearly ten meters above the crater floor – still an easy drop in micro gravity – so he repositioned his sword, turned it back on, and made a bigger than man-sized hole in the side of the ship. Almost finished with the cut, his blade started misfiring, but he managed to keep it going by grasping the handle's activator switch tightly.

Once done, he began awkwardly kicking at the cut panel to dislodge it, but had to reactivate his sword, which began firing intermittently again while cutting around the tighter edges to ease its release. When it

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suddenly shifted and fell away, his off-balance stance and the awkwardness of his position forced his sword arm to shift, causing him to put a tiny nick in a pressurized line, which then blew – the result having him bouncing wildly off the inner hull before being launched through the new hole in the outer hull under a stream of compressed gasses.

To add insult to this unfortunate circumstance, his arm retracted when it scraped across the jagged edge of the hole; sweeping in closer to his body and bringing his sword – *still activated due to the tightness of his grip* – skipping along his thighs before slicing neatly thorough his ship suit somewhere in the vicinity of his knees.

His scream of anguish lashed out across the void, just before going silent; while his ship suit desperately tried to seal the massive air leak on its way to the powdered surface ten meters below.

### *In the Kraken's Child*

Ronnie was still checking the message logs; having come across an encrypted message from Petrus saying he was “taking a nap” on one of the moons above while Ronnie was “farting around” down below.

He was preparing a burst message to have Petrus come join them, when Petrus’ silent scream reached out, and struck him. He sat there in shocked silence when he felt it, then realized in that instant what had happened to him. He closed his eyes in anguish for several seconds before reaching out to Petrus, but no longer felt him; then let out a despondent sigh before turning to Six.

“Six, call the others. Tell them to make ready,” he muttered, then continued the ships check off list until Six reported back to him.

“They’re all ready. Hungry ... mostly the Drecks. It’s gonna be tight. Have you reached Four?”

“Four ... will not be joining us. He ran into some trouble on one of the moons. We’ll have to recover his ship later,” he said quietly.

Six paused for a moment, then said, “I’m very sorry, my Lord.”

“Thank you. Strap in for ships movement,” he said, then brought up the systems.

Lifting the ship and pulling in the landing struts, he brought them out over the water and stayed below the level of the plateau until he figured they were on an approximate line to the clearing. Then he headed them inland to make their pick up. He momentarily thought of contacting Lili and Sai, but just couldn’t bring himself to do so. Besides – they probably already knew. The issue of Seven was still nagging him, but the safety of the rescued humans and Drecks were now his *first* concern. He would

have to come back later and look for the remains of Petrus after resolving the issue of the research station.

### ***Kantor, In a River Cavern***

Three Drecks squads made their slow and cautious way as they waded through waist-deep, slow running water in the dark cavern that meandered for several kilometers before opening into a large underground pool. The water here was still, yet it flowed into the pool and left it somehow, somewhere *below* the still surface.

Spanning fifty meters across and nearly fifty meters wide, the rock walls were smooth from centuries of flowing water, and hand flashes revealed the water level was much lower at the moment – several lines along the walls indicating previous levels reaching almost ten meters above them.

The squad leaders conferred before sending one man along each wall and feeling for any openings where the water might be exiting. A short while later, the man on the right reported a grate of some sort at knee level, while the man on the left worked himself around the wall and ended up at the same place. They both confirmed water flowed out the grate by putting their hands close to it and feeling ripples as water slipped past them. Their squad leaders soon joined them and began searching for the easiest way to remove the grate without making too much noise.

### ***Vanaheim, At the Vanir Administrative Center***

As reported by Samuel, Laisee's concerns had been addressed by the Prime, and Sally's contacts within the medical profession confirmed that it was known – not very *widely*, perhaps – that humans had arrived and were bringing an official representative to discuss a peaceful relationship between humans and Vanir.

The Prime's *immediate* goal was to maintain public order and calm, with a secondary goal of having the humans return all of the Vanir passengers back into Vanir custody. Samuel relayed the Prime's astonishment that not all of her citizens had chosen immediate repatriation when offered, but accepted it at face value – for the time being. As it was, they'd only gotten one volunteer from each warren represented on the *Kraken* to accept transportation to Vanaheim at this time, and warren members were waiting for them on the surface.

Dropping through the muddy clouds, the transport crew of human-standard and human-Drecks watched anxiously as the monitors displayed their descent into the gradually thickening atmosphere of Vanaheim; each kilometer increasing in particle count until Laisee wondered that *anyone*, human or Vanir, could breathe any of it and survive.

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Laisee's guards, four in number and led by Captain Teldrus, were along in the back, with Jaiying, Samuel, Sally, and Sue ... and Kiki. Sasha was up front and acting as liaison for the transit, while Torga was piloting.

All of them were wearing ship suits, and they'd packed extra collars, even as Samuel had laughed and said their concerns would be baseless during their short stay. His meaning became clear to those watching the screens as they observed their approach towards a docking bay with a shimmering shield glistening across its opening.

"You have permission to dock, Torga," Sasha relayed, and a reasonable translation echoed in Torga's ear; courtesy of one of several more portable translation devices Donnel and his crew had thrown together for them during the *Kraken's* transit.

Two of the guardsmen each had one, and they were paired with one who did not, while Laisee, Jaiying, and Kiki didn't need any at all.

Torga brought the large transport in through the soft shield and set it down directly over a blinking circle on the deck of the open bay. Once powered down to standby, it was only a few minutes more until they were ready to meet their new neighbors properly ... but not before the Healers and the Senior Medical Technician gave them permission; which was why the transport shield was still up and tight.

As the ladies conferred, Jaiying stretched out and felt lightly among the minds in the immediate vicinity; finding nothing of note until she began a quick scan of those Vanir in the docking area and alerted her mother.

*'Mother ... they have implants. Dangerous ones'*

*'Can you disable them?'* Laisee quickly asked, while Sally turned to look at her in shock.

*'I ... yes, I can. Sally, watch with me and I'll show you how'* she directed, and they both proceeded to extend outwards; Jaiying stepping over to hold her hand before they jointly delved into the half-dozen afflicted Vanir.

Jaiying showed her the links to sever that would prevent their tiny implanted bombs from being detonated. Together they did four, then Jaiying watched proudly as Sally disabled the last two by herself, with no one being the wiser.

"Samuel, we must move slowly. We have discovered implanted bombs," Sally called out.

"What! How ... how is this *possible*? We had *every* assurance that—"

"Obviously, the Prime is not in as much control of her office as we had hoped," Laisee interrupted him. "If the S'Slich'Tah rely only upon



*implanted* bombs, then we may take certain precautions. Otherwise, I doubt even the *Emperor* would suggest we proceed if our safety cannot be guaranteed. Sally – your Medical Technicians ... do they have portable scanning devices?”

“Yes. We could scan for something like that, but it might force their hand into immediately setting off the bombs if it were known we were searching for them.”

“Mother ... Sally, I am feeling a certain amount of fear from those outside. We are wearing ship suits, and are self-contained. Sally, could you suggest that medical staff be present with scanners to detect anything contagious to you or to us. Perhaps some trusted staff could be warned to pull aside those in the area who might become infected? If they were infected with a bomb, I’m sure it might be bad for *all* our health,” Jaiying suggested quietly, and got quick agreement from Sally.

“I will put out the request,” she said, then went forward to speak with Sasha.

Captain Teldrus had been listening to this conversation, which had transpired in Vanir, and was translated by his device. He became gravely concerned that he would have to insist that this mission be scrubbed or moved to a different venue – somewhere *not* on Vanaheim. He hated to do it, but...

“My Lady, I cannot in good conscience allow you to leave the ship while an unknown assailant is plotting your destruction. My orders from the Emperor were quite *specific* in that regard.”

“My dear Captain Teldrus, we know *exactly* who set these machinations into motion and we will deal with her in good time. In the *meantime*, we must see to the health and wellbeing of the Prime, so that her people are not set adrift into a sea of chaos should these meetings go astray. I *will*, however, take your concerns under *advisement*.”

Her look told him his “suggestion” had been heard, but would *not* be allowed to interfere with her actions at this time.

‘Sally, were you able to make accommodations for our needs?’ she sent, while calmly staring down her guard captain before finally getting him to break his gaze.

‘Yes. I have Medical Technicians coming and will go out to greet them. I’ve worked with two of them before. Perhaps Jaiying can continue to search while I teach my technicians what to look for?’

They heard the passenger airlock cycle when Sally stepped outside.

‘Yes, Sally. Mother, I have found several more with implants. Four more bombs, and seven with the nerve implant. I believe one of them is the

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*Prime's Senior Medical Technician. He has both a bomb AND a nerve implant'*

*'That's WONDERFUL, Jaiying!' her mother exclaimed somewhat wryly. 'Have you a better reading from the Prime?'*

*'Now that we are this close, I feel that she is definitely not quite right. Grandfather is better at this, but I will do my best, Mother'*

*'Well, perhaps when we finally greet the Prime, you will have your opportunity'*

*'Ah, the introduction!' Sally exclaimed from outside. They could feel her giving her technicians instructions while she spoke with them simultaneously. 'I finally understand, Jaiying!'*

They heard the airlock cycle once again.

*'Yes, Sally. When Jaiying touches palms with the Prime, she will make a most intimate connection with her, although I don't know how she will react'* Laisee silently considered.

"Then this is fraught with danger for you ... and for us," Sally said aloud while returning from the front of the transport. "If Jaiying touches her and she falters, it might be taken as an attack against the Prime."

"I believe I can moderate that," Sue suggested while nodding slowly. "She *lied* to our people. She *knows* I was aboard the *Kraken* and tried to have me *killed*. Stand me next to Jaiying. If she falters, I can arrange for it to look like a stress-induced crisis."

"You would attack your mother's ... the Prime's *mind*?" Sally asked in confusion.

"Before I was severed from that nerve implant, I became very confused. If Jaiying finds a memory blockage that can be fixed – and it causes her much confusion – then I can intercede and simply say something stressful to her. Most likely they will believe it was caused by *me*, and her Senior Medical Technician will take her away for calming ... although I would appreciate it if you disable *his* bomb before you let him get close to us."

"It is ... done," Jaiying said, but remained in concentration while they all turned to her and watched her vacant stare for several more seconds.

"They're *all* done. They might bring more into the area, but I will keep checking. For safety, the nerve implants have to be done in *person*. The one that Grandfather had me try remotely just made the patient more confused, and he got sick from it."

"Thank you, Jaiying," Samuel told her, still amazed at the talents of this tiny human. "You ... *all* of you have been providing us with excellent assistance, and have displayed a great deal of forbearance toward the

Vanir. I only hope the Prime recognizes this fact and appreciates it – once she is back in her *right* mind.”

“Well, as long as Sally’s medical staff keeps checking for implants throughout the building, then maybe we’ll have a chance to fix things,” Jaiying said hopefully, but suddenly cringed in pain.

Laisee gave out a gasp and lowered her head, while Jaiying turned and rushed to her mother’s arms while crying.

### ***The Kraken, In Stationary Orbit over Vanaheim***

Sai was still standing watch, this time with Endo, while Gallus was doing system checks before turning in to get some rest before his next shift in ten hours.

She’d been trying to keep busy and avoid thinking about Petrus, especially since he’d gone silent after he’d chased after Ronnie so foolishly. It was hard for to sleep alone at night in that big lonely bed, and she couldn’t bring herself to share comfort with anyone else while her mind was in turmoil over his absence.

She’d never suspected she would fall *this* hard, this *fast* – *again* – for that arrogant, yet so, so loving warrior, and she hated that he’d left during their last argument – although not enough to go searching for his head again. No ... this time she would forgive him and welcome him back with open arms – and then maybe make him serve *her* pleasure for a few days until he got back into her good graces again. She smiled at that and let out a wistful sigh.

Getting up, she reached out and dragged Endo over for a kiss on the cheek, then bid him a quiet watch, before turning and heading out to get something to eat. She got as far as the bridge door, before curling over in pain and beginning a sharp keening.

She’d felt Petrus’ shock of agony, then felt him slipping away from her senses, before being completely silenced.

### ***Kantor, The Royal Homestead***

Night had fallen, and everything was quiet once again.

The activities of yesterday were still a conversational item, but the Royal family had brushed it off as “business as usual” and gone back to work. The Emperor and First Wife were spending the evening in the Capitol to reassure the people that both he and she were *still* in charge – not that security over the Capitol – or anywhere *else*, for that matter – had become lax in the least.

The guardsmen inside the Royal Homestead were still doubled and haunting the halls and corridors, while outside, the walls of the canyon

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were watched by extra pairs of eyes facing outward with night-vision systems to supplement the damaged sensor arrays covering above ground approaches to the complex.

At ground level, Boots made his regular patrol; happy to be outside since Puss had delivered her kits and was being *particularly* bitchy about him being anywhere *near* them – or *her* for the time being. The closest he'd been to her in the last four days was to bring food to the opening of their den for her, then stand guard over it while she attended to her toilet outside – the suggestion by '**Talking Man**' to learn to use a *real* toilet brushed aside as a foolish adaptation for their kind.

Boots made his lonely pass along the human-occupied gardens and glanced at each movement through the transparent windows, only pausing to watch as his older kits snuggled down in a corner inside the room housing the human kits – the '**Talking Kits**' as Puss had named them. He chuffed a quiet valaet laugh, then silently told his older kits to get some sleep before continuing on his patrol.

He reached the docking port and turned back, headed towards the other end of the canyon, but along the waterway this time – keeping his eyes open, ears up, and nose sniffing. He'd noticed a different smell in the air today, but thought it might be left over from the human activity yesterday. He'd mentioned it to the kits – valaet and human – and Puss, who'd brushed it off in favor of nursing her two newborns. Halfway down the canyon, he stopped to drink at the river and noticed the taste was a little different as well.

'**Humans ... so filthy**,' he thought, then sneezed once and continued with his patrol.

### *In the Children's Room*

'*Jaiying found more bombs*' Cathy announced.

'*At least she's not blowing them up anymore*' Josie quipped.

'*She taught Sally how to disarm them really quickly, too*' Cathy pointed out.

'*They're Vanir. They learn really fast*' Walter reminded.

'*Let's hope they learn not to piss off Grandfather*' Josie pushed forcefully.

'*Children, please quiet down. It is time to sleep*' Maya sent from the other room.

They could feel her drowsiness, but knew she had another reason for them to be quiet.

'*Maya, you just want to keep feeling Grandfather*' Josie teased.

*'Now that I know he is still alive, it ... it gives me comfort'*

*'Yes, Maya, but he still has a job to do, just like Uncle Petrus. Or should we call him Grandfather Petrus?'* Walter asked.

*'Grandfather Petrus. Father ... my father. You can call him Grandfather'* she allowed sleepily, while still feeling the faint tendril of her connection with Ronnie that had just been reestablished.

Lili had told her he was alive, but she'd felt it first and was hard pressed not to call out to him in joy...

They'd agreed they would wait and discuss future plans when things quieted down, but had somehow managed to reestablish the Healer's Bond despite being so far apart. It'd happened when she'd reached out to him that last time, and they'd spend an unimaginable six minutes in mindspeak together. After that, she could sense him – very *faintly* – but it was still reassuring to her that he was her Ronnie once again, and she knew – she *knew* he would return and claim her for his own. He just had this one, tiny little task to accomplish for his brother...

She'd almost drifted off to a comfortable sleep, when a sharp pain streaked down her thighs, and she and the children woke up *screaming*.

### ***In the Capitol, The Imperial Suite***

The Imperial couple were in their separate offices within the Imperial Suite and still looking over the reports of the recent attack.

Lili was contemplating the successful merging of Senior and combat units in a confrontational support role. The addition of Seniors to the orbiting tanks had enabled a *huge* improvement in tactical ability, and could not be shoved to the side lightly. She decided yet another report was in order. Her initial estimates called for further investigation and training, but she would pass that off to Molar and the rest of her Senior staff for evaluation, and potential implementation at some future time. In the meantime, she completed her initial report and sent it off to her staff, just as her husband entered her office with a weary look on his face.

"Ahhh, Lili ... will these troubles *never* cease?" he asked rhetorically, and caught her amused smile, just before her face darkened, and she curled over with a loud and heart-wrenching moan.

### ***In the Imperial Guest Accommodations***

David and Diane had settled in for the evening, having helped each other wash and prepare for bed – but not for sleep.

"You know, I'm *really* enjoying this arrangement we have with the other parents," she said while already anticipating the things she intended to do

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to her husband before sleeping. There were a few choice words she wanted to share with him, as well.

“Ronnie was very convincing that day,” he said. “It’s too bad he has to work all the time now. I’ll bet *Maya* is looking forward to his coming home.”

“Yes, she told me just the other day that–” Diane stopped speaking and stared past her husband’s head.

“Diane ... are you all right? Honey, what’s the mat–” he stopped at the pained expression on his wife’s face, but it was nothing compared to the anguished *scream* she let out only moments later.

### *In Vanir Space, Over Research Station Alpha*

They were packed in tight, but everyone was accounted for – except Seven – and Ronnie launched back into orbit while still making up his mind.

He hated to leave a man behind, but had a full ship as it was, and it would be a wonder if they all survived the jumps needed to reach Commonwealth space. It would almost be better if they returned to the *Kraken* that was now in orbit over Vanaheim, but there was another option that wouldn’t take them through so much occupied space.

“Six, who’s your best rated pilot?”

“That would be between me and Three ... now,” he said quietly.

“Good. The more the merrier. We’re going to go looking for Petrus’ ship and see if we can recover it. Then I’ll be sending you, Two, Three, and Five to take this lot to Earth. I have a Healer Cluster there where they can get help.”

“Sir? *Earth*? That’s a *protectorate*, isn’t it? Do they even *know* about–”

“Just a select few – mostly my family and some few in their government. I’ll make arrangements for your accommodation there, and see if I can get a ship to meet you along the way.”

He turned back to the console and brought up a star chart to plot a relatively safe course.

“You’ll transit along the far right side of Vanir and Commonwealth space ... along here,” he pointed out. “I’ll program the ship to make micro-jumps so you can all keep your stomachs intact, but the jump frequency will be upped to get you there quicker – my nav system is *very* special. Keep a communications channel open and listen for anyone headed your way. Let’s get Three over here.”

Once Three worked his way forward, Ronnie continued with his instructions to both of them. Then he reached out to a depressed Lili to arrange a suitable accommodation for them on Earth. He finished by asking Radatel if there were any ships available to intercept and escort his survivors back into Commonwealth space – especially ones with *Healers* on board.

That got him a promise to dispatch a Royal transport from Earth – the Earth Ambassador’s transport – plus a few ships they had extra for escort. Healers would be available. He thanked them, then promised to recover Petrus’ body if it could be located. After a few more moments of commiseration, he ended the conversation, and brought his new crew up to date.

They left the lower orbit and approached one of the moons; Ronnie figuring he could reach out and just feel the *Orca* from such a close distance. Spending enough time there, they moved to the *next* one, where he searched again.

“It’s on the last one,” Six murmured, and Three nodded in agreement.

“What makes you so sure?” Ronnie asked, but caught their bemused expressions. “Oh ... right... It’s *always* the last one.”

He quickly finished up, then broke away to approach the *larger* moon, where he almost immediately felt the *Orca*, even though they couldn’t see it. He maneuvered the ship in a wide circle around a crater, but *still* couldn’t see the *Orca* anywhere. He thought he saw something *else*, though.

“Well ... it’s down there, all right. But I don’t see where it might ... ahh... Petrus, you old fool,” he muttered somberly. He sat there with his arms crossed, then rubbed his face with one hand.

“What’s that ... that thing down there, Sir?” Three asked while pointing to a distortion in the dust of the crater.

“If I’m not mistaken, *that* is a Vanir raider. It looks like my First Officer managed to damage it a bit. The distortion you see is a cloaking shield with a missing piece of hull. Look *there*,” he said, having kept the *Kraken’s Child* moving slowly to get a different viewpoint.

They could now see an irregular hole partway up the side of what would be a ship – if they could actually see it. Against the light gray of the moon’s surface directly below it, they could now see a small patch of black in the rough shape of the hole in the ship’s damaged hull.

He turned up the magnification and examined the ship – what little he could make of it. At the broken part of the hull, they could see rough edges cut in the surface metal, but the further away from it, the more it disappeared. He could just make out two short sections of something

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black lying in the dust nearby, but suddenly realized what they were; thus explaining what he'd felt at the moment of Petrus' cry. He leaned back and let out a quiet sigh, hoping he didn't suffer long.

Looking around, he didn't see the body, so someone must still be alive down there. From the looks of the ship, they either couldn't fix it, or they were taking a break. Either way, the *Orca* was down there – *somewhere* – and he wanted to grab it before anyone else found it. He took the ship up further, and held them in place while he reached out to the *Orca*, inserted his mind into the console area of it, felt around, and...

*"There! There it is in the shadows!"* Six said.

Ronnie cut the marker lights and looked to where Six pointed, noting with satisfaction that it was in a shadow of the crater wall. Hopefully, no one had been watching from the raider ship.

"Bring us down to ... five meters," he said after checking the console gravity readouts.

He got up and grabbed a fresh collar for his ship suit, then gathered his kit, while Six brought them to a hover between the raider and the crater wall; getting as close to the wall as possible. He had an idea of what Tank was going to do, and rotated the ship so the airlock was facing away from the raider.

Ronnie squeezed his way back through to the narrow corridor and rummaged around in the weapons locker for a few minutes; finally returning with a small case that he set down by the air lock. Six blanched at the sight of it.

"Don't worry. I only took half of them. Someone get the Vanir up here," he muttered while strapping his combat harness back on.

Slich 42126 slowly came forward by carefully working his way around the cringing humans. Ronnie dug into the small closet by the air lock, and was rewarded with the discovery of a Vanir-sized ship suit – something they'd tried to stock since having Vanir as part of their crew.

*'S'Slich'Tah 42126, you have a rare gift'* Ronne sent formally, while turning his attention to the Vanir as he entered the forward section of the ship. *'I am convinced of your sincerity. The others in my party may not share my appraisal, so I give you the option of going back to Research Station Alpha with me, or going with them. What do you want to do?'*

"I ... if I return, then my life is forfeit. If I may, please let me stay. We have heard that ... that you have Vanir in your crew. If that is true, then our warren leader has made a *grievous* error concerning our compatibility as reasonable beings."



Ronnie stood there and searched his mind carefully, but found no falseness within. He nodded once, then turned to Six and Three.

“Disposition of the Vanir is up to your discretion ... based on his performance. Gentlemen, thank you very much – you’re on your own,” he said, then tossed the ship suit to the Vanir, before popping open the inner air lock door.

‘*Slich 42126 – do not disappoint*’ he sent familiarly, before grabbing the case and stepping into the air lock.

The inner door closed, and they heard the outer door cycle open. Six held them there, keeping an eye on the raider, while Ronnie made his way to the *Orca*. Four minutes later, a short burst transmission came up telling them to head home.

### ***Vanaheim, The Prisoner’s Compartment***

Warren Leader S’Ahi’Ma 29531 sat at ease in her rather comfortable cell. Her followers had informed her earlier that the human Ambassador and her Vanir sycophants would be arriving soon, and everything had been precisely arranged.

When the humans and the Prime held their first greeting together, the implanted S’Ahi’Ma surrounding her would be detonated as a *group*, and *all of them* – the *heads* of the Prime’s warren, the *humans*, and the *Prime herself* – would be eliminated all at *once*. Then it would be a simple matter for her control group of Vanir to release her and plant the remaining seeds of confusion against the humans and the obviously *corrupt* leadership of the Prime’s warren, such that the S’Ahi’Ma’s ascendancy was *assured*!

She smiled in contentment, and idly wondered what was for lunch that day – then remembered she would be dining out very soon and the menu would be *wide open*!

### ***In the Reception Area***

The Prime’s Senior warren members, all senior administrators within the warren, were assembled for this most unusual meeting between the two species. They each wore hastily ordered ship suits similar in nature to the humans they would be receiving. This was a recommendation by the Senior Medical Technicians from both human *and* Vanir parties.

They’d been assured the humans posed no danger to them, as evidenced by the video logs showing humans and Vanir occupying shared space, and breathing the same air, but to ease their cultural fears, the wearing of ship suits had been suggested, and gratefully accepted, as a wise precaution. These administrators all had their own Senior Medical Technicians in attendance as well, but all took note that only a handful of them bothered with similar protection – no doubt based on the assurances

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of Senior Medical Technician S'Shac'Kah 38521 from Observer Station 27, now of Ambassador S'Shac'Kah 39496's party.

As a group, they remained mostly quiet and reserved while they could hear the approach of the Prime's personal retinue as a slight disturbance echoing down the hallway. This was something *else* they'd recently commented on amongst themselves – the Prime and her immediate staff seemed somewhat disjointed at times. Not a good indicator of stability and order, and certainly casting this upcoming meeting in an obscure light.

Entering the reception area, the Prime and her staff took up positions as proposed by her Ambassador, S'Shac'Kah 39496. As he'd previously explained to her, she would greet the humans in their rather quaint manner. To prove a point about her faith and trust in his word, she forgo the wearing of a protective suit for herself. They waited, everyone in position, while the human party approached from the landing bay antechamber; being led by Ambassador S'Shac'Kah 39496.

*'Three more implants, Mother ... Sally'* Jaiying sent, and Sally quickly followed her lead and disabled the bombs located inside their hosts who were innocently standing behind the Prime.

Those affected shuffled in place slightly, as if having felt something disturbing in their insides, but otherwise remained immobile.

Jaiying, Sue, and Kiki had stayed behind everyone else, while their Vanir escort first led Samuel and Sally, then Sasha, and Laisee and her guardsmen into the reception area. A small contingent of the Prime's guards remained with them, and neither Jaiying nor Sue had expressed any concern over them. Sue even shared a startled greeting with one of them when he'd finally recognized her, after her having been missing for such a long time. This information was quickly whispered back to the other guards, but it could not be shared with the Prime for the time being without disturbing the ceremony in progress.

Sue could hear sighs from the guards when they suddenly realized this was likely to become something *more* than just a meeting between species. They'd all been aware of the flurry of activities involved with the missing heir to the Prime's warren, and now she was here, and in the company of *humans* – even holding naked hands with *two* of them!

### ***At Research Station Alpha***

Ronnie was of two minds about the matter. He'd brought anti-matter loads from the *Kraken's Child*, but Sai's *Orca* didn't mount a gun with the same caliber. Her main weapon of choice was a beamer. He could simply drop the rounds on the surface of the station and beam them from orbit. Maybe even reach out and break one of their containment fields, and let them destroy themselves, and everything *else* within several kilometers around them.

The only problem was that he hadn't yet accounted for Seven...

Ronnie was quite familiar with the "Aw, Shit" scenario – the one where you found yourself *completely* alone, *probably* injured, and pretty much *screwed* – and in all the decades he'd personally experienced *way* too many instances of it, he'd never once given up hope at finding a way out of it ... except for maybe for that *one* time, when ... well ... he'd survived *that* one as well. When it came right down to it, Seven might *still* be alive...

Instead of making a crater of the station about the size of a planetary striker on steroids, he maneuvered the *Orca* along the cliff side while following the path of foot prints that led past where the *Kraken's Child* had been parked. Now that he knew it was there, he delicately settled the *Orca* at the base of the sea cliff fifty meters away from the station's widow's walk, then shut things down to standby; leaving just the cloaking system up and running, before gathering his gear and making ready for his visit – via the *front* door this time.

He took a moment to update Lili with his immediate plans; mentioning the prospect of him contacting Sai at the moment as not a particularly *good* one. She agreed, then promised to relay his message to her when things calmed down – or after he failed spectacularly. He thanked her for her confidence in him, then focused on his task.

He paused at the air lock, then went back and got an anti-matter load and a timer from the case to add to his kit. After all ... you never know.

### ***Inside Research Station Alpha***

The Director was in his *element*!

Once appropriate incentives had been applied, their human captive had become *quite* talkative, and the discovery of a portable Human-Vanir translation device was a *delightful* surprise.

So far, he'd managed to discover the number of assault crew members, *twelve*, and what had likely happened to their human and Drecks captives; although why the humans had bothered to recover the Drecks was *still* a mystery to him. Upon learning about Drecks serving the humans – no, the Drecks were serving *with* the humans – he'd first thought they'd simply picked up some more food for their Drecks crew. Then he'd learned the Drecks aboard the human ship – the *Kraken*, he'd called it – did not eat other Drecks, but simply ate food like any other beings. This was *most* perplexing.

Continued interrogation revealed the human leader was called Tank, but was also the captain of the *Kraken* and known by another name – Rondal Caldar. Upon learning that, the Director had paused in wonder. Unknown to them all, the most *dangerous* human in existence had been

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within their very *midst*, yet left them alive while recovering all the *other* humans ... and even the *Drecks*!

Well, the *guards* hadn't fared too well, since there were only the two of them left, but still, the amount of destruction seemed somewhat limited considering the rumors about the voraciousness of this Rondal Caldar. Perhaps the rumors were merely that? Certainly *he*, S'Slich'Tah 28476, was no stranger to manipulation of a populace by rumor and subterfuge. Even before his breakthroughs with mental programming, the Vanir had successfully managed to maintain control over the Drecks for several hundred *years*!

Director S'Slich'Tah 28476 settled back during a break in the interrogation and pondered the situation briefly. Their captive had revealed that *five* cloaked and relatively tiny ships were operating nearby.

Since no one had been found in the transfer clearing, an assumption could be made that this Rondal Caldar had *already* made off with the prisoners and was on his way back to their Commonwealth. Of the other four ships, the captive had no idea – other than they were “around somewhere.”

The Director was hampered for the time being, as efforts to contact their support ship went unanswered. This was not a complete surprise, for if they were hunting human ships, they would not respond and give away their position. By the *same* token, the humans would most likely not be communicating as well – unless they were doing so with their *minds*, but the captive had reported only two other males were in each ship. As he knew the human males could not use their minds in such a manner, the Director reasoned that these would not likely be a problem in the near future.

He reported his suppositions to Station B, and they, in turn, would relay that information to their remaining ship that should be reporting soon with the results from their raid on the Commonwealth's home world. If his warren leader's plans held true, the humans and the Drecks should soon commence a *huge* interstellar war and effectively reduce their civilizations back to the bare minimums within the next one hundred years or so.

Of course, once *his* warren leader became Prime, that schedule would be accelerated, as the Vanir would then take an *active* part in eliminating the human infestation *once and for all*!

His attention was suddenly distracted by an outside alarm going off.

### ***Kantor, In a Rather Damp Cavern***

The Drecks squad leaders confirmed their plans and began moving towards the opening in the rock wall that led to the river feeding the

canyon garden of the Royal Homestead. Surprisingly, they'd found no blocking grate over the opening and pulled back to wait for the mid portion of the night to make their intrusion.

They'd successfully negotiated the short transition pipe from the rock cavern pool by sending one "volunteer" – secured by a rope – sliding through the smooth pipe that ended up in *another* series of open caverns. The tugs on the rope confirmed that man had not drowned, and everyone followed and gathered on the opposite side.

All was going according to plan.

### ***Vanaheim, Meeting with the Prime***

With all due precautions taken by both sides, the humans and the Vanir met in the large, open reception area adjacent to the Vanir administrative center docking bay. To help with the initial greeting, Samuel had approached and presented himself to the Prime first, before standing by her side to assist with the unfamiliar ceremony.

Both the human and Vanir contingents had arrayed themselves in Commonwealth fashion, that being a receiving line from highest official to lowest, where the human Ambassador would greet the Prime directly, followed by lesser and lesser individuals on both sides until formal introductions were complete. Once reaching that point, the arriving party would be expected to join them for a semi-formal meal.

It was nearly at that point when the human Ambassador's tiny daughter approached from within a cluster of Vanir guards and raised her left hand to the Prime.

The Prime looked down at the diminutive human and tilted her head curiously. In features, she looked similar to the human Ambassador, but with that peculiar difference that *all* humans shared – *none* of them from a family unit looking completely alike. In addition, she seemed rather small for such a serious gathering, and the Prime momentarily wondered if she had somehow found herself present in error.

Still, the child seemed to take this task seriously so the Prime extended and lowered her open palm to her.

"Jaiying Huiling Caldaraus of Kantor," Jaiying said in a high-pitched voice in Vanir, while firmly pressing her palm to the Prime's, before the Prime got a chance to speak.

"S'Ahi'Ma 31245 of Vanaheim," the Prime replied in Vanir, while staring fixedly into the eyes of the small human standing below her.

She tilted her head again – feeling somewhat confused for a moment – then heard the child continue.

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‘Greetings, Grandmother of the Vanir’ “Greetings, Grandmother of the Vanir,” Jaiying said aloud, an audible echo in Vanir of her silent greeting.

Seeing the features of her mother begin to change, Sue quickly strode forward and faced her with a raised hand.

“S’Ahi’Ma 42491! Known among the humans as *Sue*! Have you *missed me*? MOTHER!”

### ***Research Station Alpha***

Ronnie followed the trail of foot prints and slowly crept up to a large formation of rock, where they veered behind it; the rock obscuring a rough-cut walkway going up the face of the cliff. He scouted the walkway but noted no obvious signs of monitoring or traps anywhere. It would seem the Vanir believed no one would consider wandering about the shoreline in this particular location. Considering the planet was otherwise unoccupied, it seemed reasonable – aside from the fact they’d gone ahead and put pressure sensors on the roof.

He followed the walkway up the cliff side to the short widow’s walk that was hidden by the bulk of the rock face of the cliff. The door of the facility was not flat but rather lumpy and resembled the adjacent portion of cliff face. Even the latch mechanism was hidden, but seemed to be unlocked. Before making his entry, he paused and looked around.

He was under no illusions as to his own vulnerability, and considered his actions to be foolish in the extreme, but the fact that Seven was lost on his watch still galled him, and he just couldn’t rest without knowing if he was still alive or not. If Seven was dead, then he would back out gracefully and eliminate this reoccurring threat to the security of the Commonwealth once and for all. If Seven was alive, then he would be bringing him home and *still* eliminating this threat to the Commonwealth. If *he* couldn’t make it out alive, then he’d make sure the threat was eliminated *anyway*.

He looked around the walkway again, then decided on the cliff face at the hinge side of the door. The door opened outward, so anyone coming out would not be looking for threats behind the door. He checked his suit clock, then set the alarm to give him a reminder in twenty-three hours. Then he slipped out his handy little power knife and cut a hole in the wall at knee height deep enough to fit an anti-matter round and timer.

He set the timer for twenty-five hours, before slipping the round and timer into the hole, and packing it with loose rock and debris. With the round behind the door, anyone in a hurry would not likely notice it. *Whichever* way it turned out – *problem solved*! And now he had *incentive*!

### ***The Kraken, In Parking Orbit, At the Gym***

Sai was alternately grieving over the loss of Petrus, and seething over what she was going to do to Ronnie for letting him die alone like that!

It wasn't *fair*! It just wasn't *fair* that, after *all these years*, they'd *finally* gotten back together, and made up, and ... and now he was *gone again*, but *forever this time*! Someone had to *pay*! Somebody *would* pay, and she had a pretty damn good idea of who was going to lose his *head over this*!

She continued with her exercise session and launched another precise swipe at the neck of the simulacrum in front of her.

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

"She's still at it," Endo said quietly.

Gallus had just relieved him so he could go eat, but one of the system monitors was displaying the video feed from their small exercise room. They could see Mother dueling with a reasonable simulacrum of a Commonwealth warrior. Something they both noticed was that Mother was more focused than they'd *ever* seen her before.

"I hope she works it off before Ronnie comes back," Gallus muttered, and Endo turned to him in surprise. "He's the *only* one that can make her that mad – except for *Petrus*."

Endo finally nodded in agreement. "Then ... then let's hope he goes back and finds his body. At least he could give her *some* closure."

Endo watched for a moment longer, before heading out for his meal. No one who'd known Commander Zickgraf was particularly happy after news of his loss had quickly circulated around the ship.

### ***On Vanaheim***

The official greetings were cut short after Sue's confrontational outburst.

The Prime's Senior Medical Technician pulled the Prime away from the receiving line and whispered in her ear, all while the Grandmother was staring at her child in shock – and *further* shock when she noted her daughter held the hand of *another* human. As she was led away, the human Ambassador could be heard loudly berating S'Ahi'Ma 42491 for her impertinent remarks before offering apologies to the rest of the Vanir receiving line for the disruption caused by "Sue."

The senior administrators watched as the Prime was whisked away by her Senior Medical Technician. After a short discussion, it was decided that enough protocol had been conducted, and the humans were escorted to secure quarters for the night.

## The End of the Road

### *The Prisoner's Compartment*

S'Slich'Tah 29531 paced angrily in her locked compartment. It had been *hours* since the human ship had been reported in orbit, and surely *some* of them must have arrived on planet by now!

She wondered at the lack of alarms. Surely at least *one* of her minions had gotten close enough to both the Prime and the humans for their implant to explode? What in the world was going *on* out there?

She really needed to know, but it looked like she might have to wait until the evening meal to find out.

### *Research Station Alpha*

The Director was *gleeful*! The most *dangerous* human in known space had turned out to be nothing more than a rather mundane, clumsy individual who was easily subdued and now secured in one of his labs.

In response to an alarm – indicating a *huge* level of close-by tracer emanations had just occurred – he'd quickly devised a plan with his two remaining guards to set a simple trap for the unsuspecting human.

Having learned from the one called Seven that roof-top vents were their first entry point, he'd earlier ordered all the vents secured internally, followed by securing the loading dock door at the rear of the facility.

From the surviving guards' statements, a clear trail led from the cliff side, all the way along the narrow beach to the concealed stairway leading up to the front observation entrance.

It was a simple matter to conclude that any effort to recover their missing human would bring a recovery team through the front door, and that is precisely what they'd planned for – even going so far as to leaving the door *unlocked*!

Then it was just a matter of waiting.

In due time, a single human had breached the outer door and crept along a dim corridor, only to be met with a combination of suppressive gas and stun weapons.

It was then a simple matter to administer an injection that knocked him out, so they could secure him in one of the labs for interrogation.

If the suppositions he'd pried out of the other human were correct, he'd even get a chance to test out a *new* process intended to render a subject like him *helpless*!

The Director was looking forward to his interrogation, and further amused that one of his assistants, a companion to the still-missing Slich 42126, had argued loudly to be part of the interrogation team.



***March 14, On Vanaheim***

Sue paced nervously, while Laisee and Jaiying quietly sat with eyes closed; searching throughout the administrative center for more explosive problems.

They'd been sequestered overnight and had slept poorly, having taken turns staying awake – even Jaiying – while repeatedly scanning for problems. They'd even eaten sparingly from the rations thoughtfully provided by their guardsmen.

Their guardsmen had remained stationed near the only entrance to the room – bolstered by strategically rearranged furniture to maximize the difficulty of an external force rushing in to assault them.

At a knock on the door, Captain Avitus pointed to one of his men to answer it, while the rest pulled their weapons. Jaiying spoke up before they got carried away.

"It's only Sally, and she's alone," she said, and they cautiously let her in.

Sally's expression was neutral as she walked into the room and approached Laisee and Jaiying. Laisee watched curiously when she stopped and held out her hand – which contained a small neural implant in it.

"The Grandmother's Senior Medical Technician is recovering nicely ... although there might be a period of adjustment while he resolves what his actions *should* have been over the last several months compared to what they actually *were*."

Jaiying immediately updated Lili and the rest of the staff on a very tight band, before resuming her search for other problem implants.

"My ... Mother?" Sue asked tentatively.

"She's still messed up," Sally blithely tossed out, passing the implant to Sue before looking around and finding a suitable accommodation to settle onto. "Her technician was a key element in her reprogramming, but the Medical Guild has them *both* under their watchful eyes now. They were, shall we say, *astonished* when I demonstrated those skills you taught to me, Jaiying," she said, turning to face Jaiying and smiling grimly before going on.

"Unfortunately, I've been sequestered indefinitely while the Medical Guild deliberates the suitability of *human* Healer techniques becoming integrated into Vanir society ... *socially* sequestered, you might say."

"Oh dear," Laisee muttered, then looked around at their somewhat lavish accommodations. "Well, we appear to have enough room if you'd care to stay with *us*?"

## The End of the Road

“Thank you, Lady Caldarous. I would like that – provided my keepers allow it,” she agreed, which was followed by a quiet knock at the door that drew her attention. “That would be Senior representatives of the Medical Guild. They would like a word with us.”

“By all means, Sally,” Laisee agreed easily.

She knew it would be coming, but that it was happening so quickly was a surprise. She settled herself, then turned to Captain Avitus and spoke in Standard for his benefit.

*“My Captain, we have guests. Please bid them enter and have your men arrange comfortable seating for them.”*

At the sound of that word – *“guests”* – Kiki poked her head out of a bedroom door, but quickly ducked back inside as soon as she saw the serious faces on their “guests.”

### ***At Research Station Alpha***

Ronnie woke up feeling ... not so good.

For one thing, he was totally naked ... aside from being restrained in a vertical holding frame by an arrangement of clamps and straps that attached him to it. For another, he was *completely* covered in a thin layer of grayish dust. Small trails of blood crusted down his arms and around his ankles where metal bands held him tightly.

He tried to exert an effort of will to unlock the shackles holding him in place, but all he got from that was a massive headache.

On two tables and a work bench, he saw his clothes and kit, all laid out neatly from outside to inside. He could see his small power blade on the table, but – try as he might – could not reach out and draw it to him. He tried several more times, before stopping to reconsider his situation.

Looking down at himself, all gray and pasty-looking, he frowned and shook his head – minutely, due to the metal clamp fastened around his neck. He stretched his neck and was able to look around a little easier, but saw nothing more than the makings of a lab of some sort, lots of electronic equipment, and some antenna-looking things arrayed in his direction.

It took a while, but he finally remembered the tale Slich 42126 had told him about the discovery of the mental blocking element. It would appear that a batch of it had been powdered and sprayed on him ... which then made the antenna units the activating devices.

“Aww, crap,” he muttered quietly.

A few moments later, a door opened behind him.

### ***Kantor, At the Royal Homestead***

The combined Drecks squads slowly entered the canyon under cover of darkness; their progress taking them along the shoreline where they spread out to find covered positions from which to launch their attack. They settled down to observe the apartment patios, windows, and door openings, then match them up with the supposed occupants of each apartment.

They were very close now, yet their conditioning held as they waited to feel the environment and sense the security patterns of the canyon, for they knew there would be some for such a highly valuable set of targets.

Interestingly enough, none of them wondered that they'd been sent in without any explosive devices at all – just standard small-arms, and power swords similar to those used by Commonwealth warriors but quite a bit larger.

### ***At the Valaet's Den***

Boots had finished his patrol and rested just inside the opening of the den for a while, before standing up to stretch and make another pass. Once his nose got outside the opening, he immediately noted the strong odor of wet bodies in the air, and alerted his mate. A corresponding low growl echoed from within, and a silent order came from Puss to investigate quietly and report back.

He slipped away, then stood motionless, only swiveling his eyes slowly as his night-adapted vision brought him images in near total darkness that were equal to any humans' vision in full daylight. As he listened silently, his hearing started picking up slight noises of life that were not native to the canyon environs. His thinly held domesticated overlay faded away, as *Targa Slayer* came to the forefront in preparation for an encounter.

He stayed still for a few minutes while determining the probable locations of these intruders, then relayed them to his mate, Silent Hunter, and to their kits residing with the *human* kits. He sensed the human kits stirring, and warned them to stay in darkness and behind the walls, while he and his family dealt with the problem.

### ***In the Children's Suite***

Walter heard the call, and passed it along to their adult monitors for the evening. Then he got up in the darkness to make *sure* they got the message and kept the lights out.

Maya and Spring Blossom woke up together and stared at each other for a moment, before hearing Walter creep into the room on hands and knees while silently telling them *not* to speak aloud and to keep the lights

## The End of the Road

out. They dragged themselves to the floor and felt around for him, then followed him out to round up the girls and get them out of the room.

Once the children were all located and directed into the corridor, the kits turned back and went outside to join their parents. One headed to the den, while the other headed to join Targa Slayer, but *both* of them were eager to become *blooded warriors*!

### *In the Emperor's Suite*

Instead of enjoying a peaceful sleep after returning from the Capitol, Lili awoke at Spring Blossom's silent call, and roused her husband, who immediately contacted his security forces.

His orders were explicit – *no* lights, *no* alarms, and *no* obvious acknowledgement of the intruders. The canyon rim guardsmen were to scan the canyon bottom and locate their intruders, while the family sequestered themselves in the security bunker again.

Radatel wanted as many of the intruders as possible captured *alive*. They needed to garner intelligence as to *how* this breach was accomplished so easily.

### *On the Grounds*

Targa Slayer kept an eye on the canyon floor. He'd seen one of his kits slip into the den behind him, which freed up Silent Hunter to join him. His other kit had reported motion outside the human kit's quarters, and gone to investigate. Shortly afterwards, a bubbling cry of agony accompanied by a valaet scream split the air, and Silent Hunter launched herself after her wounded kit, with Targa Slayer pacing her from the side.

Things had just gotten *interesting*.

The Drecks team sent to kill the Royal spawn had instead been met by an adolescent house valaet who'd easily torn the throat out of the first Drecks it came across, but a power sword wielded by the *second* Drecks had flashed on and cut it in two. As that warrior looked over the body of his companion, Silent Hunter launched herself onto him from behind and locked all four clawed feet into his body, before separating his head from it with two quick bites from her savage jaws.

The body fell heavily, power sword down, and was neatly sliced in two by the purring weapon until the dead hand relaxed enough to release the power switch in the sword's handle.

Silent Hunter spared a quick glance at her dead kit, before disappearing into the bushes. A very short while later, a muted scream called out from one direction, followed by another disturbance in the opposite direction. There followed a progression of screams, and the sudden eruption of projectile weapons.

### ***In the Security Bunker***

“Aunt *Lili!* One of the kits is *dead!*” Josie wailed, getting Lili’s instant attention.

Lili extended outwards and felt things quickly spiraling out of control above. She thought she’d understood valaets, but the vengeful *bloodlust* she was now feeling was something she’d *never* experienced before. If she read it correctly, now that one of the pride had been killed, it meant there would probably be no stopping them until *all* the Drecks were dead ... *and any of the Imperial guardsmen who got in their way!*

*Much* more disturbing was feeling it from *Josie*, even though she was just a human child. She looked around to confront her, but Josie had already left the room. Lili contacted the security forces above and warned them about the valaets, only to receive word in return that a small force of Drecks had actually penetrated the living quarters and were loose *inside* the corridors. She reached out and found Sharla to let her know Josie was missing; maintaining a loose connection with her as Sharla found Vitas also searching for her, and joined him.

She was about to update Laisee and Sai so they could be aware of potential diplomatic repercussions, but was distracted by a thought from Sharla that Josie had been found, and they were returning her to the bunker. After a moment of relief, she turned towards the elevator, but curled over in pain when she felt Sharla leave her ... just before something *terrible* racked her nervous system, then dropped her to the floor in *agony*.

### ***In Vanir Space, At Research Station Alpha***

Since coming to Research Station Alpha, Slich 42126 had made only *one* friend in his life, and that friend was now standing face-to-face with a naked human male, and contemplating all the wonderfully *painful* things he was planning to do to him once he found out what he’d done to his friend.

“Human ... I know you can understand me,” he said slowly, then waited for the translator to work.

Ronnie looked up at him and grimaced before saying, “Yes. I can understand you a little. Wash this dust off my head and I’ll understand you a *lot* better.”

Slich 42130 looked down at the human while listening to the translation, then finally gave out a hissing laugh at his audacity. Perhaps it was true that *some* human males could use their minds like their females?

He glanced down at the human’s obvious maleness and shook his head.

“Where is S’Slich’Tah 42126?”

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Ronnie considered ignoring him, but thought he might as well get as much information from him as he could – at least until the bomb went off.

“The last time I saw Slich 42126 was when he asked to join my crew in transporting the humans and Drecks we rescued from this facility to a place of safety,” he said, then waited for the Vanir’s reaction.

It wasn’t long in coming.

Slich 42130 picked up a probe and jabbed him with it, leaving a new trail of blood seeping down from his abdomen. Ronnie groaned while trying to seal it internally, but found that he was having problems with even *that* trivial amount of Healing. Despite that, he grinned back at the Vanir.

“You *lie*, human! *Where is Slich 42126? Where did you leave his body?*”

“His body was alive and well, from the time we took him from his lab, and all the while he stayed in hiding with us in a storage compartment. He was still alive when we visited your moon base and discovered a Vanir ship on the surface that was sabotaged by one of my crewmen. I recovered his ship, then I sent everyone else away, while I came back here to look for my other man, Seven. Who are you?”

“You don’t need to *know*, human! Where is Slich 42126’s *body?*”

Ronnie gathered his strength and fought through his pain to give him a flippant answer.

“If you keep asking the *same* questions, this is going to take a *long time*. I imagine by now that he, and everyone *else* we crammed into that ship, are well on their way back to the Commonwealth and *safety!*”

“Ha! Then we’ll signal our Raider to intercept and *destroy it!*”

“And kill your *friend* in the process? Are you the friend he spoke of? We thought we heard you outside in the corridor on the first night we stayed here. Oh, and if that Raider you mentioned was the one sent to Kantor ... it was *already* destroyed – along with its cargo of Drecks. Actually, I was told it self-destructed in order to *hide* the presence of Vanir in Commonwealth space.”

Ronnie recognized a hit when Slich 42130’s color changed in consternation, so he kept up the pressure.

“I should think you would be more concerned about the *human* Ambassador’s ship that has arrived at Vanaheim. I understand your warren leader is a guest of the Prime. She is one of the individuals our Ambassador will be discussing with the Grandmother. Your warren leader is not well-liked on Vanaheim ... or within the Commonwealth.”

Despite the limitations of the translator, Slich 42130's color shifted even more deeply, and Ronnie was about to say something further, when the door opened again to admit the Director this time.

### *On Vanaheim*

Samuel and Sally spoke quietly with the senior Medical Guild representatives, while Laisee sat still and seemed to be listening intently to something far away. Jaiying had joined her and leaned against her, until she suddenly sat up with a muted shriek, then quickly covered her mouth with her hands before burying herself in her mother's lap.

"Samuel... Ambassador S'Shac'Kah 39496," Laisee rephrased formally while composing herself. "I have just been informed that a Vanir strike force composed of Vanir-manipulated Drecks has just attacked and breached the living quarters of the Imperial family on Kantor ... and taken the life of one of the Royal family."

She looked down at Jaiying while hugging her sobbing child, before turning her attention back to Samuel.

"I deeply regret to inform you that a technical state of war now exists between the Vanir and the Commonwealth. No doubt the Hegemony will wish to participate in some fashion ... although it is not yet clear which side they will support," she said quietly.

Samuel stared at her; completely lost at what she'd just told him. Sally confirmed it for him silently, and he finally found his voice.

"I – I don't know what to say ... or how ... or – or *why*..." He finally broke off; stunned at this revelation.

He hated to ask, but felt that he had to.

"Lady Caldarous ... do you wish to return to the *Kraken*?"

He could feel the distress radiating from both her and Jaiying.

"No... No, not at this time," she considered out loud, while glancing at the Guild representatives. "I believe it would be in the Prime's best interests if I stayed *here* for the time being ... else Lady Sai Tal might be tempted to resolve the issue in a more *permanent* fashion."

She noted Sally had reached out to Samuel before he had a chance to break down, while the Guild members looked on in confusion until one of them whispered quietly to the others. Their expressions flattened, while their hues shifted slightly, which was a testament to their personal self-control. A few of their male members felt the need to sit down, and were accompanied by some of the female Guild members. None of them looked very comfortable, but Samuel seemed to be holding his senses in check for the time being, while he finally found words to address Laisee.

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“Lady... Ambassador Laisee Caldarous... I had not heard any information about an approach or attack against the Commonwealth. The Prime did not inform me of such. How ... how may the Prime best proceed to resolve this issue with the Commonwealth?”

Laisee gently set Jaiying aside and stood awkwardly, her feelings still shaky from the sensations she'd felt, and the information Lili had just shared with her. She was very upset and tried to hold it all in, but it was difficult.

Still, she was the human representative to the Vanir and had a responsibility to continue with her mission.

“Ambassador S'Shac'Kah 39496... It is the First Lord's opinion that the Prime has been manipulated into allowing a clandestine program to operate against humanity. It is his determination that Warren S'Slich'Tah is behind the current set of difficulties involving neurological implants within Vanir citizens, mental reprogramming of normal thought processes in certain key individuals – up to and *including* the Grandmother – and implantation of tracking and explosive devices within both human *and* Vanir citizens.”

Most of the Guild members looked on in shock, but a few nodded knowingly. The senior representative among them stood and walked over slowly, her age apparent in her demeanor and slightly paler tint.

“Ambassador Laisee Caldarous, S'Shac'Kah 38521 has spoken to us of what you speak, and ... and what she withdrew from the Prime's own Medical Technician – yet it is very hard to imagine that this has gone on as might be suggested.”

Laisee felt her reluctance to believe that Vanir would act against Vanir in such a fashion.

“Senior Guild Member ... S'Ahi'Ma 27191,” Laisee said after quickly pulling her name out of her mind, “You have not been fully aware of such, because you were not looking for such. But hasn't the behavior of the Prime changed over time? Does she seem less attentive to her duties ... less conforming to Vanir principles regarding the office of the Prime?”

She looked at each of them while listening silently, feeling confirmation across the surface of many of their minds' segments, before going on.

“Ahi 27191 ... three of your *own* Guild members have been implanted, and one of them harbors a bomb,” she said, waving her arm towards the group.

She felt the Vanir stiffen at her familiarity, then her eyes opened wide as the implications ran around the segments of her mind.

“A – A *bomb*? Who ... *which of us*...”



“S’Ahi’Ma 38146 has a disabled explosive tracer in his abdomen,” Sally informed her while gesturing back to the sitting group. “Lady Laisee and I have been scanning for them, and disabling them since we arrived.”

“S’Ahi’Ma 27191, it would appear that your prisoner is still manipulating events from her holding area, even though I understand she has no means of communications,” Samuel offered gently.

“It would not be too hard to pass messages to her,” Sally suggested. “There are guards just outside her door, and someone must bring food to her. Speaking of which, are we to be fed *here*, or allowed to dine with the household?”

“The kitchen guy,” Jaiying muttered while her eyes slowly closed. “The one who brings her food. He is on his way now,” she said, then added, “There is a message in her food.”

Samuel quickly turned and left the room.

### ***Kantor, The Royal Homestead, In the Bunker***

Lili was still trying to recover, as were all the rest of the Seniors present. Something had gone *horribly* wrong above ground, and death had come swiftly and *painfully* to those remaining Drecks who’d managed to enter the premises.

### ***On the Surface***

On the canyon rim, surprised Imperial guardsmen had opened up with power guns and beamers on anything that stood higher than about seven feet tall, and laid waste to what few attacking Drecks had slipped by during the killing frenzy of the adult valaets. From the one breach into the household, they’d seen one of the valaets give chase, and heard screams and then shots being fired. It seemed like only moments later that a horrible agonized wailing had echoed out of the compartment, followed by bolts of energy which flashed randomly from within – the nature of that weapon not being known, but apparently very effective.

The grounds appeared quiet now, and almost no one missed the remaining valaet approaching the opening, only to be stopped by a small child walking out and hugging it around its neck. Momentarily alarmed, the attentive guardsmen aimed very carefully and waited for their chance, but the valaet was pushed away and seemed to be reluctantly headed back to its den ... followed by the child. The guardsmen watched curiously as the child followed along, the canyon lights coming up slowly to reveal the devastation left by the fire-fight.

Both child and valaet stopped by the opening of the valaet den, where they heard the adult valaet call out and wait. Shortly, the remaining kit came out with a small black bundle in her jaws and dropped it at the feet

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of the child, who immediately picked it up and cradled it in – *her* arms, they now saw in the better light. It returned moments later with another black bundle, before they all headed back to the household and entered through the blackened breach.

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Josie carefully walked around jumbled furniture so she wouldn't stumble and injure her tiny charge.

She was still coming down from the killing frenzy which had left four Drecks warriors dead in the corridor. She passed the first two of them and looked down at the bodies – one of them covered in blood from the rents Puss had torn into him before she was shot by the Drecks behind him. The next one she passed looked as if he had been frightened to death, at least from the expression on his face. The one furthest inside the dwelling *also* looked like he'd been terrified before dying.

The walls of the corridor had curious burn marks on it, along with some darkening on the high ceiling. At the end of the corridor, she stopped and looked down at the bodies of Lady Sharla, previously known by the name Meela, and her guard captain, Vitas Tomar. It looked like they'd been shot. She vaguely remembered seeing them as they tried to take her back to the bunker. That was the last thing she remembered until greeting Targa Slayer at the household breach.

She continued, and turning the corridor, looked up and saw her Uncle, the Emperor, and paused again. The bundle in her arms began mewling just moments after she stopped.

*'I have the kits, Uncle. They need to be fed'*

"Come along, Josie. I'm sure Maya will have some milk for them."

He led the small procession back to the bunker elevator, where Boots stopped and growled at them.

The surviving kit looked up at Radatel and stared at him intently.

"Certainly. Certainly ... Faithful Daughter," he said quietly. "We'll take good care of them."

He reached down and accepted the other black bundle into his arms while ignoring the saliva dripping from the tiny mass of mewling fur, before pushing the call button for the elevator.

~~~

The valaets retraced their path and exited the building, only to find the lighted grounds swarming with Imperial guardsmen searching through the bushes for other threats. They paused and listened attentively, sniffing the air as well. Targa Slayer let out a low growl, which got the attention of a

small Imperial squad that watched intently to see if *they* were the object of the valaets' attention.

Targa Slayer turned and slipped through the brush, headed towards the water. Faithful Daughter followed behind and to the side. The squad leader looked to his men and motioned them to follow. After a short pause, he sighed wearily and followed after the valaets, his squad trailing loosely behind him. They'd *all* seen what had gone on from the safety of the canyon rim, which had been a *very* good reminder of why *they* didn't patrol the grounds at night.

Targa Slayer stopped and sniffed the air while Faithful Daughter closed with him and stopped a meter back. The guardsmen decided to give them *several* meters of privacy. A very slight sound came from a bush in front of them, and the valaets' ears flattened rearwards as they started to tense.

"Uhh, the Emperor asked us to keep one of them alive," the squad leader quietly called out, while his men slowly fell further back with their sidearms at the ready.

Targa Slayer growled angrily, then looked back at him.

"Please ... just so we can *talk* to him."

Targa Slayer growled again, followed by Faithful Daughter. He looked back at the bushes, then looked at the squad leader again. He finally chuffed angrily before turning his focus on Faithful Daughter for a few moments to give her his instructions.

They both turned back to the bush, before deliberately walking around it from opposite directions. Moments later, there was a frightened wailing, followed by a loud crunch.

An almost inhuman scream sent chills up the humans' spines, before Targa Slayer returned, followed by Faithful Daughter carrying a Drecks arm in her mouth. She spared a glance at the squad leader again, before trotting back in the direction of the valaet den, while Targa Slayer chuffed once before slowly following after her.

The squad drew a collective breath, but were drawn to the quiet moaning coming from behind the bush. The squad leader directed a flanking approach, and minutes later, they had their prisoner secured for interrogation – minus one arm.

### ***Down in the Bunker***

Lili looked in on Josie and the rest of the children. They'd surrounded Maya while she gently washed the newborn kits and gotten them dried.

She still felt Maya's confusion over the agonizing shock that had laid them out, but the needs of the mewling kits were now drawing her focus.

## The End of the Road

Lili listened, amused as Maya considered the children's pleading that she feed the kits.

It certainly wasn't unheard of, and Lili danced along Maya's surface thoughts as she considered the presence, or *lack* thereof, of teeth, or how sharp they might be, and wondered if Maya would *actually*...

Lili felt Maya's let down, then heard her sigh before she opened her robes to expose her dripping nipples. She wetted a finger and drew it across the lips of one of the kits, and they all hearing the increased volume from it as dinner appeared to be closer than expected. The girls propped pillows around her, and she settled in to give it a try.

Moments later, one kit latched on – causing her to wince momentarily when it received a rather generous helping of milk and pulled away. It settled back in, and they handed her the second one, which was just as hungry. Within a few minutes, both kits were nursing, and the children were content with the knowledge that Maya would keep their young guardians healthy until a more suitable food source could be found.

Lili watched curiously while the kits got a quick filling. After a few more minutes, some muted purring could be heard, after which they both fell away, full, and content. It seemed like only moments later that they both fell asleep, before Maya carefully put them into a box stuffed with towels that one of the wives had provided for them.

Josie watched silently for a moment longer, then walked away into one of the sleeping areas and closed the door. Lili watched her go while listening intently, then finally let out a sigh while considering her rather awkward position...

Once she'd felt Josie's reaction to the attack, she'd sent the Wives to look for her, and alerted the guards. Vitas had noticed Josie pass him in the corridor, and he'd gone to check the facilities. In passing, he'd noted the elevator indicator going up. While he'd pressed for it to return, Sharla had caught up with him, and quickly checked the facilities – but not found Josie.

She'd alerted Lili, then waited with Vitas.

They'd both gone up in the elevator to recover Josie, *if*, in fact, she'd gone up to the living quarters, then confronted her standing at the edge of a turn in the corridor, and started directing her back.

Unfortunately, the Drecks had noticed them and fired on them, hitting both Sharla and Vitas. Lili had lost contact with Sharla, then been waylaid by a repeat of the intense pain she'd suffered at Ronnie's hands when he'd taken life from Meela back on the platform so many years ago – but intensified *ten-fold*.

*All* of the wives had been afflicted, and even a few of the Healers.

She suspected what had happened, but couldn't see any change in Josie, and was afraid to look any deeper. An uncontrolled, undisciplined, prepubescent *Senior – or higher* – was an unexpected problem, and it couldn't just be eliminated, as was usually considered. She simply didn't know what to do or how to handle it...

'Aunt Lili, I think perhaps we may have to have an intervention with Josie' Walter sent lightly. 'I don't think she realizes what she's done'

'I ... yes, Walter. Perhaps you are right. Perhaps she just doesn't understand the implications yet' she sent back just as lightly.

'I really don't think she knows what she's done' Cathy added. 'But we'll watch out for her'

'Thank you. Thank you, children' Lili sent weakly, then turned away with a sigh; already knowing Radatel will *not* like hearing about this development.

### ***In Vanir Space, At Research Station Alpha***

Ronnie was sagging in his restraints while trying to patch the various holes and cuts he'd been inflicted with. He'd thought it would be a simple matter, but his Healing skills had been *severely* depressed somehow – probably by the activated powder sprayed on him – and he was hard pressed to prevent himself from *bleeding* to death while still giving the illusion of a tormented victim, which wasn't that far from the truth.

It wasn't quite as bad as that time when the Drecks had shot most of his foot off, but his recovery efforts were pitiful and rapidly draining him of energy he would probably need within the next several hours.

Aside from that, he was biding his time – whatever little of it they all had left – and answering the Director's questions more or less accurately. He didn't much like the *methods* the Director used, however.

At least he had a lousy work ethic and took frequent breaks.

The mixture of lies, truths, and half-truths seemed enough to keep the Director engaged, but he figured he'd be stuck in this holding frame long enough for the timer to run out before he'd finagle access to a shower to get this damn dust off of him. He sighed and stretched carefully a bit, then licked his lips, which were *really* dry from the dust and his lack of water. He felt another trickle of blood escape from one of the dozens of small wounds the Director had inflicted upon him, and tried to seal it again. If it kept up, he was going to need water just to replenish his liquid supply.

Every so often he'd glance at his small power knife and try to draw it to him without result. He'd even considered trying to get the Director or someone else to just *hand* it to him. After all, it wasn't as sharp as a butter knife, but he didn't see how he could manage it. Though if he *did*, he'd be

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off this frame in a matter of moments. He licked his lips again and wondered if the Director would be coming back soon so he could beg for a cup of water, or watch him pour it out in front of him as Slich 42130 had done when he'd asked him for some earlier.

If he could get just a small mouthful of water and spray it into the *air* above him, it might rinse off just enough dust from his forehead to set him free – *maybe*. According to *his* understanding of how it all worked, anyway. In the meantime, he'd just have to wait.

His wait was shortened considerably when the door opened again to admit Slich 42130 for another round of torment.

### ***On Vanaheim***

The Guild members had been appalled, but quickly recognized the truth when they saw it with their own eyes.

They'd watched as the human Ambassador had removed a neutralized tracer from one of their party; then again when Sally removed the other two – one of them being the explosive device. All three devices were hurried off to a lab for examination, with specific instructions *not* to attempt disassembly of the one containing a radioactive component – the yield being something that no one within a hundred meters would survive.

While Laisee rested with Jaiying, Sue and Sally spent the rest of their time being debriefed by the Senior Guild members as to just what they'd been up to for the last several months. Out of the corner of her eye, Sue caught Kiki peeking at her from a narrow gap in the door jam, but she quickly ducked away, letting the door silently close in front of her.

### ***Kantor, In the Royal Bunker***

Josie sat alone in the dark. She remained quiet and still while thinking about what she'd done, and the errors she'd committed in the process...

Alone of all of them, she'd not only felt the alarm from the valaets, but also the stress radiating from the approaching Drecks. Even as she was being led to the bunker, she'd felt the need to stay behind and help protect the *family*, as only she and her cousins were *prepared* to do. At least, as *she* was prepared to do.

She'd felt the valaets as they'd silently approached their prey, and felt the minds of those Drecks they'd attacked and killed scream out in terror before suddenly shutting off. The accompanying screams of dying Drecks were silent to her, but the terror of death walking stealthily through the night had fired the imaginations of the surviving Drecks, and that was what she'd keyed on when she'd felt their intent to enter the premises.

The death of the kit had come unexpectedly, as had the death of Puss a few minutes later, which fired her emotions to a *fever pitch*.

Their Grandfather had constantly hammered into them their *first* responsibility – Protect the *Family*. On a certain level, she'd known the Imperial guardsmen would do their very best, but feeling the impending invasion of their household, she'd been almost uncontrollably drawn into the conflict, and proceeded up the elevator to confront their attackers. She knew there was nothing short of her immediate *death* that would stop her from stopping them, knowing that she and her cousins would be *incredibly* hard to kill if they knew it was coming.

She'd made it to the ground floor and positioned herself at a turn in the corridor; waiting with eyes closed and mind focused on the Drecks slowly making their way towards her, when she was suddenly grabbed from behind by Jaiying's Grandmother and her guard. In the scuffle that ensued, Sharla and Captain Vitas were exposed and took direct fire from the lead Drecks, even as Vitas had thrust her safely behind the turn of the corridor where she'd stood, shaking in fear and anger as she watched and felt the life drain from her cousin's Grandmother and guard.

Josie had stayed out of sight and unmoving – frozen between trying to save the lives before her, or eliminating the threat that had taken them. The red haze that washed over her was new and unexpected, blanketing everything that followed. Now that she had time to reflect on it, she realized she'd violated Commonwealth law by taking the life of the lead Drecks, then the follower behind him. She'd not even been *aware* of it at the time.

Once he'd gotten close enough to insure compliance, she'd intended to simply insinuate herself into the mind of the first Drecks and make suggestions that entering the premises was an incredibly *bad* idea – which it turned out to be. As members of her family lay dead before her, all her intentions washed away in a rage, and the Drecks died an agonizing and swift death.

Once the threat was over, she was back to normal, almost *numb*, even. She'd reached out and found the attack had faltered, and the young female valaet had taken over den duties for her mother, but was *aching* to engage with the enemy herself.

Knowing Boots was headed her way, she'd gone out to meet him, then walked with him to recover the new kits and bring them to the safety of the bunker. Once safely inside, she'd watched as her cousins had cajoled Maya into feeding the newborns, before she'd wandered off to be alone...

Josie had never been alone before. It was something new and unnatural to her, and probably something she would now have to get used to, but she didn't like it. She didn't like it at *all*.

### *In Vanir Space, At Research Station Alpha*

Ronnie hung alone in the lab while contemplating his long and busy life. All things considered, he thought things had been going rather well up until now – or a few more hours from now, anyway. Taking stock of his situation found him thinking positively about his chances – provided he grabbed Seven and got out of there before the bomb went off.

Looking around one more time, he finally closed his eyes and delved *internally* – going over *everything* he knew about how his body worked, and the supposed functioning of his telekinetic abilities. He was trying to figure out a way around what they'd done to him, because he knew, way down *deep* in his gut, that he was pretty much alone at this point, and didn't know how long they had left to make their escape.

He'd been deep into self-reflection for an indeterminate amount of time before the sound of the door opening drew him back.

### *On Vanaheim*

The Prime had been resting when her Senior Medical Technician approached her with a small contingent of Senior Medical Guild members, along with the Vanir Ambassador's assistant, S'Shac'Kah 38521 – the one the humans called "Sally." Last to enter her suite was the human Ambassador and her child.

"What is the *meaning* of this!" she asked abruptly, affronted by this intrusion into her personal living spaces.

"S'Ahi'Ma 31245, it gives me little pleasure to interrupt your sleep, but a matter of importance has occurred upon my home world," Laisee stated formally in Vanir; pausing to compose herself before going on.

"It would appear that one of your warren leaders has plotted – we believe *without* your direct knowledge or approval, of course – to begin a campaign to destabilize relations between our two peoples. A Vanir ship was engaged over the Commonwealth Capitol world, before it was either destroyed, or self-destructed ... but not before delivering its cargo of infiltrating forces to the Royal Homestead. Two members of the Royal families were killed in the attack, and I regret to inform you that a technical state of war now exists between the Commonwealth and the Vanir."

"*Ridiculous!* No one would *dare* such a thing! You are *lying!*" she said loudly, while rising stately from her nest.

"She is not lying, Grandmother," Sally said quietly. "We intercepted a note to that effect hidden in the midday meal being delivered to your guest, the S'Slich'Tah Warren leader, S'Slich'Tah 29531."

"How ... who would *do* such a thing? This is all *nonsense!*"



"It would not be a simple thing, my Prime, but it could be managed if done slowly and carefully – even as it was done to *me*," her Senior Medical Technician said quietly.

"*You?* Who said anything was done to *you?*"

"My Prime ... I ... We have not been ourselves for a while now, and I fear things have gotten out of hand. I have *failed* you, Grandmother. I beg your forgiveness," he said shamefully.

"*My* forgiveness? What *foolishness* is this you speak! You have *always* been beside me to support and protect me. Why do you say–"

*'Because he could not protect you from things he had no control over'* Jaiying pressed into her gently. *'Because he ... and you ... were not prepared to defend yourselves against the leader of the S'Slich'Tah'*

The most Senior Guild member stepped forward and placed herself directly in front of the Prime; distracting her shocked expression away from the human child.

"Grandmother, it has been known to us for a while now that you have not been yourself. Nor, it would appear, have many of our people. The means exists to repair this situation, but it may not be to your liking. We ask you in advance for your forgiveness," she said, then motioned for the other Guild members to approach.

"What ... what are you *doing?*"

The Prime reared back as the Guild members surrounded her, while her long time companion stood by her side and whispered to her, "This will not hurt, and you will be free once again ... as am I."

"*Free?* What ... what is that child *doing?* *No!* Keep her *away!*" she cried, as Jaiying reached out and gently touched her once again.

### ***At Research Station Alpha***

Slich 42130 had come back to torment him again, doing so with great glee, but he'd also relented, and allowed Ronnie a half-cup of water, before leaving him alone again. Apparently, not all S'Slich'Tah Vanir were assholes.

After holding the cup for him, he'd stayed just long enough to ensure he'd swallowed the water, though.

The water had been a kind gesture, considering all the bad things Slich 42130 had accused him of – from the *Vanir* point of view, naturally. At least it wasn't as if he'd physically tortured him again. He looked over at the sink where the Vanir had placed the empty cup, and was tempted to draw it to him, but didn't bother with the attempt. Still, aside from being

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secured naked to a vertical rack, the room was rather comfortable. After all, he may be in constant *pain*, but at least he wasn't hot and sweaty...

Sweaty ... sweat ... what makes sweat? Well ... *water*, for one.

He considered the problem and wondered if he could produce enough sweat to loosen the blocking dust from his head? Then he let out a loud laugh ... but paused. It *couldn't* be so simple, could it? He closed his eyes and settled into an introspective contemplation of *everything* he knew – or *thought* he knew – about the seat of his mental abilities...

The general assumption was that everything a skilled Senior did along those lines emanated from the *front* of the brain – specifically, the forehead. That would imply many of the techniques used in communication just couldn't work as everyone assumed. After all, who knew at any given moment which way to position your head to point to the target of your communication?

He couldn't communicate with anyone. Likewise, he couldn't reach out to his kit on the bench, but that was *different* than telepathy, wasn't it? The overall station shield would block any attempts at *outside* communication, but not every part of his body was covered by dust – his *eyes*, for example...

He turned his head and looked at the bench as he focused on the power knife laying there, then tried to pull it towards him. Failing to get a reaction, he stretched his neck a bit while examining exactly *what* he'd done, before beginning again; only this time focusing on what he was doing *internally*, and where he felt he was expending the effort. As if observing from outside himself, he slowly shifted the effort from his brain – from where he'd always *assumed* it originated from – to his *eyes* ... and saw the knife shift a tiny bit on the bench.

Heartened by this, he intensified his efforts and got the knife to drag itself across the bench, all the way to the edge – where it promptly fell to the floor. Then he rested; partly in relief, but *mostly* to let the stabbing *pain* in his eyes ease up before trying again.

His next effort got the knife closer to him, but he couldn't get it off the floor more than a few inches at one end – and he *still* needed to touch it to energize it. Or did he?

He thought about it, then remembered how Kantite warriors were taught to energize their swords; first with naked skin, then while wearing conductive gloves. In his case, he'd inadvertently rewrapped his sword handle with the wrong handle wrap one time, and discovered he didn't *need* a conductive connection to the blade.

Looking from where he was to the knife on the floor, he considered just how much of an insulating layer air would be, but let a tendril of desire for

the *Fire* to come forth. The knife glowed fitfully for several moments while letting out a tiny squeal ... until he tried to raise it up at the same time, and it powered down.

‘Okay... *Modified success. Baby steps,*’ he considered thoughtfully.

While giving his eyes a rest, he looked around and considered again what needed to be done. Cut his bonds, get the dust off his body, then escape with Seven before the bomb goes off. The *bomb*... While looking around again, he wondered how long he’d been hanging there, then noticed the power cables to the antenna stands lying on the floor. Well, if he couldn’t lift the knife and power it at the same time, then maybe there was *another* option?

He watched, eyes aching, as the knife slowly dragged its way over to one of the power cables and hunched itself across a loop of it – finally resting itself, edge more or less vertical, against the upper loop.

Holding it steady, he shoved a quick desire for the *Fire* at it, and the knife energized and dropped cleanly through the power cable with very little fuss before it extinguished. He felt an *immediate* bit of relief, then moved the knife to the other antenna power cable to repeat the task.

After power was cut to the *second* antenna, his head felt *much* better.

He looked at his metal bonds, then sent a push at them that snapped them open and twisted them away from his wrists. He carefully unbuckled himself and took his first shaky steps towards the bench, but stopped and stumbled over to the door to jam it tightly before returning to the bench to find his timer. To his relief, he found that he had plenty of time left – almost six hours – before the countdown completed and this lab disappeared in a blaze of loose atoms.

Turning to the lab sink, he opened the faucet wide and let it run free while splashing water onto his face and wiping off the powder; getting small handfuls of water down his throat in the process. He managed to duck his head under the running water and rinsed off as much dust as possible, then wetted a loose rag and started wiping down his arms and torso to get more dust off.

He tried patching internal damage again as best he could, but was still unable to make a complete Healing of himself. Ignoring the rest of his wounds for the moment, he started dressing, and drank some more water, before focusing on the next task at hand – which was finding Seven and getting both of them back to the ship and *off* this rock!

He finished dressing rather clumsily, then tried again to effect a Healing on himself, but with poor results. Either the dust had insinuated itself into his system, or he was too weakened to work without access to an external energy field. Ha! It seemed like he may have discovered proof that Healings

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relied on access to something *outside* the body that kept it from draining its *own* energy. All those Senior books might be right after all!

He was trying to extend himself and search for the taint of humanity when he heard someone returning to the lab. Stepping behind the door hinge, he freed the door and waited for his next visitor, with his power sword in hand this time.

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The Director worked his way through the hastily cleared rubble back to his quarters to freshen up, but was still quietly furious. Once he'd let it be known that a *second* human had been captured and was even now being interrogated and experimented upon, this *last* session with the first captured human had gone dismally.

Unlike the fountain of information that had existed previously, once that knowledge had been shared, any further enlightenment from the subject had been lost. *No* amount of painful inducement pried anything other than agonized moans from the human. Even his volunteer assistant, Slich 42130, had begged off and left the lab.

That didn't deter *him*, however, as he'd known the human would eventually give up and surrender his will – *and* his information – as long as he kept up the pressure.

It was unfortunate he'd never met an Imperial Covert Operations Team member before, or that the web of lies and half-truths he'd spewed earlier would turn out to be useless intelligence in the long term.

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"Welcome back, Slich 42130. Where is the other human?"

Ronnie had spoken quietly, and Slich 42130 listened to the translator while held at sword point. The blade was not energized but still intimidating to the unarmed engineer. Slich 41230 didn't know what came over him, but he somehow found a tiny bit of courage and confronted the human before him.

"He is ... why should I tell you? You're just going to kill me anyway."

He seemed as much surprised by his answer as Ronnie was.

"I promise not to kill you if you help me get my man and get us out of here," Ronnie pressed, aware that he could "hear" Slich 41230 with his mind, now, but not very well.

As the Vanir remained mute, he got frustrated.

"Time is of the essence! In about ... five hours now, Standard, this place will be *gone!*" he said after glancing at his timer.

“*Gone?* What do you mean, gone?”

“I mean *vaporized!* I set an anti-matter charge outside before I entered, and its timer is just about run down!”

The translation was iffy, but “charge” and “timer” were included, and the stress in the prisoner’s voice was evident.

“You mean ... you mean you were prepared to – to *die?*” Slich 42130 asked in astonishment.

“If I failed to recover my man and your Director managed to *kill* me, this place would no longer be a threat to the *Commonwealth!*”

“Then ... then we were *all* going to...”

“Yes! You were *all* going to die,” he agreed dryly, while rolling his eyes as well. “But not *now*. You have about four hours to clear out, before everything within six kilometers becomes dust! That happens *anyway*. Now help me get my man out, and we’ll leave you to clear out on your *own!*”

“I ... yes. He ... he is in another lab. But – but the Director...”

“What about the Director?”

“The Director has been ... working ... on him...”

He caught vague expressions from Slich 42130, and his attitude darkened considerably.

“Take me to the human – *NOW!*”

~~~

The Director was a proud Vanir, and liked to bask in the adulation of his senior staff.

The fact that they routinely sucked up to him to avoid his wrath was completely lost on him – especially now that the lab was in shambles. They were *very* relieved his attention had passed from them to the hapless human the wayward guards had stumbled over. The addition of the *second* human was another unexpected bonus.

As they gathered in his office to commiserate with their leader over his *latest* setback, they all hoped their decision to support their warren’s plans didn’t come back to bite them before they managed to escape from this forsaken rock!

~~~

Slich 42130 led him in a roundabout way along a path cleared through some of the rubble and destruction that One and Two had accomplished during their first escape. They ended up in a relatively clean corridor that

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had closed doors along either side. Most of the lights were out, but one door at the end of the corridor was partially open, and emitted a faint streak of light into the corridor.

Ronnie didn't feel Seven anywhere.

As they approached, the rank smell of death rose up and got stronger the closer they got to the open door. He didn't recognize the body language of Slich 42130, but felt tidbits of despair radiating from him. He knew before entering what he could expect to see.

Seven hung naked from a rack similar to the one he'd been in, but he'd been burned and severely cut in various places before being partially disemboweled. He reached out and touched him, still feeling the warmth of his body, as death had come only recently to him. The spirit of Seven had left his physical host and gone on, but he suppressed his rage while slowly turning to face Slich 42130, who tried to distance himself from the victim.

"I – I did not..."

"You did not know. I know the truth of it. He was alive the last time you saw him," Ronnie stated quietly.

"Yes. I ... the Director ... he was very... After you arrived, he did not get the answers that he wanted from ... him..." he said faintly.

"The Director... Where might I find S'Slich'Tah 28476?"

~~~

"Well, *that* one was a disappointment, but the *new* one... With it, I feel I can make some *new* discoveries!" the Director repeated unnecessarily.

S'Slich'Tah 28476 was still in his office and holding court with his few remaining sycophants, while lamenting the paltry amount of information garnered by his usually very effective interrogation techniques.

After giving up information almost freely, the first human had ceased providing any further information and held out firmly, even under the most painful inducements. It had been extremely foolish and could have survived for a *long* time as a lab animal, if it had only cooperated instead of refusing to talk at all. Something had definitely been *wrong* with that one. In hindsight, he probably shouldn't have mentioned the failed rescue attempt for it.

At least the *new* one promised him another chance at success. This time he wouldn't lash out in frustration and gut it like he did the *last* one. That had been a mistake, certainly one he'd reprimand a subordinate for making. At least the genetic make-up of the *new* one promised some interesting experiments to pursue, and he'd already started on one of them. He sipped from his drink and turned back to his small group of fellows; but his next comment was interrupted by a call from the door.

One of the two remaining security guards had stopped at the door and leaned in.

“Director ... the last subject has escaped! He’s gone with all his equipment! There is no sign of—”

That last was cut off when the violet blade of a screeching Imperial power sword protruded from one side of his waist and slid out sideways – the top half of his body slumping over before beginning to collapse. The sword gave a quiet pop as it powered down and disappeared back into the corridor.

As the body settled to the floor, Slich 42130 was roughly pushed through the portal and stepped over it awkwardly. He moved to one side as Ronnie came in behind him and stood opposite the other side of the door with his back to the wall. Ronnie looked around, then motioned to Slich 42130, who took off out the door at a run.

Ronnie picked out the Director and considered the amount of pain he’d inflicted in both him and Seven – then decided he could use a little extra “pick-me-up” to help his Healing process and set an example for the others.

*‘Your warren is not much admired by the humans ... or the Prime’* he sent forcefully to the room, but didn’t seem to get a reaction from any of them.

He repeated it with his translator turned up, before continuing.

“Even now, the humans have sent an envoy to convey greetings to the Grandmother, and they are attempting to negotiate a peace treaty between our peoples. Humans I have traveled with have acted to negate the effects of your warren’s nerve implants on Vanir citizens in a display of solidarity against your warren’s actions.”

Ronnie looked around; seeing each Vanir but feeling nothing coming from their minds. He had no idea how accurate the translator was working. Sadly, the station’s internal shields seemed to be suppressing him particularly well in this room. He couldn’t even read the *surface* thoughts running across the Director’s mind, but his stance and posture confirmed that he would remain a threat no matter what – which made his decision that much easier.

“Director S’Slich’Tah 28476, I have been remiss. I did not consider your cleverness in defending this research station. Rest assured that I shall not do so again.”

He watched as the Director’s colors shifted wildly after his words were translated. It appeared that enough of them had gotten through the translator’s reference tables.

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"You will never get out of here *alive*, human! My people have been managing humans for *centuries*! Even now, my guards are gathering and they easily have the strength to manage just the one of *you*!"

The Director turned away; shaken by the escape of this "helpless" human while he reached for his drink. He could hear the barking sounds as the human's tiny box converted his words into something the human could understand. Cautiously, he slipped one hand down to press an alarm, which also triggered a recorder, then drew a weapon with his other.

"There is no one else to help you, Director. Slich 42130 has sent them all away. There are just you and me ... and your friends here," Ronnie informed him while gesturing with a hand.

"So *familiar* are you?" he said to the wall. "S'Slich'Tah 42130 is a *traitor* to his people, and he will die with *you*!"

The Director spun and fired at him, but Ronnie's sword was already up and screaming – easily deflecting the few shots the Director had fired, before he reached out with it and deftly sliced through the hand weapon with its tip before shutting off with a pop.

"You've never faced a Kantite male, have you? We train all our *lives* for situations like this," Ronnie spoke almost casually. "You know, we have so *many* restrictions on our behavior, and I must admit it is most chafing to us. It's our *women*, you see. They don't like us having so much power at our disposal, so they limit us whenever they can."

He took another step forward while sheathing his sword.

"Sometimes they even *kill* us when we step out of bounds."

The Director backed away a step, but was stopped by the edge of his desk. Ronnie continued forward until he was just within reach, then stopped while looking up at him.

"Now me, I'm just a Kantite *half*-breed. I was born on Earth and adopted by my father's Kantite family. A lot of what I've done has been *forbidden* ... punishable by *death*, even. But ... I'm also the First Lord of the Commonwealth, and as such, they allow me a little leeway when it comes to threats to the Commonwealth."

Ronnie stood there and felt the disgust and contempt radiating from the Director at this simple human who dared to confront his masters.

He thought of Seven, and all that he'd been forced to endure. The Director's fate was sealed. He'd see just how far he could push him into old age and leave him there to die of it – if the bomb didn't take him first.

"So what do you plan to do *now*, human? *Talk* me to death?"

"No. I think I'll just reach out and *touch* you..."



~~~

Slich 42130 was almost at the back door when he doubled over in pain.

The agony running around his head caused him to stagger the few meters that were left to leave the compound, and he bounced off the walls until he made it safely outside and felt the pain recede. The human had told him to leave in a hurry and get far away, but not mentioned *this* part of his plan. He stopped and looked back fearfully, but didn't see anything.

Rather than take any chances, he kept going and caught up with the tail end of the other escapees as they continued into the forest well beyond the landing area. They wanted to be several kilometers away when the bomb finally went off.

~~~

Ronnie sat up slowly – barely moving his pounding head – and looked around in shock at what he'd done. Scorch marks covered the ceiling, walls, and floor, and bodies lay where they'd dropped like piles of puppets with their strings cut.

"Aww, crap... Lili is *not* gonna like this," he muttered; looking around slowly while trying to deal with the pain in his head.

He ached all over and had difficulty getting back to his feet; finally having to shakily grab the furniture to help him stand while loosely cataloging the carnage he'd caused. He'd only intended to age S'Slich'Tah 28476 severely, and burn a horrifying memory of the event into his followers. Then he was going to drag their asses back to Vanaheim as expert witnesses to the S'Slich'Tah's treasonous actions. Unfortunately, it looked like something in the make up of the Vanir had linked them all together, and the Director's inadvertent death had been shared by *all* the Vanir in the room.

He looked around once more, then half-shrugged, noticing he *still* ached when he moved. He glanced warily at his hands, noting that nothing significant had changed, age-wise. At least it was one less thing for Sai to bitch about. He dismissed that thought, as Sai was *already* pissed off enough about Petrus. He began rummaging around the Director's office while picking up likely bits of files and a couple of tablets, before heading towards the cliff-side exit to return to his ship.

~~~

As Ronnie left the facility, a small hatch opened in the roof top, and an antenna extended from commands issued by the Director's security station. An encrypted burst of data containing the last few minutes of activities in the Director's office was broadcast to a warren communication satellite circling the planet. Once recorded, it was redirected to Station B, and several other warren enclaves, including one on the Vanir home world.

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As a matter of security, the Director's implant recorded his death, then subsequently reported it up the chain of command, along with a visual record of the events leading up to it, as recorded by the Director's triggering of his office alarm.

### ***On Kantor, In the Bunker***

Lili stood outside the closed door behind which Josie lay in the dimly lit room.

The girl was sobbing quietly, and surrounded by her cousins who were still trying to console her. She'd violated the Elder's law, and killed with her mind – removing life from the hapless Drecks, as if simply stepping on a handful of bugs. She didn't know how she'd done it or where the energy had gone afterwards. For certain, she didn't feel any different – other than this intense sadness at her failure to protect the family.

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

Lili stiffened at Ronnie's call. He sounded different, coming in very faintly, and *felt* different. She quickly flashed through her recent memories and wondered how she would tell Ronnie about...

*'What's wrong with Josie?'* Ronnie's weak question teased at her consciousness.

*'Rondal ... the household was attacked. After last we spoke...'* she stopped when she felt weak tendrils of his essence reach out to her memories. *'Rondal! You presume too much!'* she protested, then clamped down on her mind, easily blocking him out now.

*'I ... please forgive me, Lili. I've had a rather busy day'*

*'As have we, Rondal. The household was attacked by a ground force of Drecks. They came in by the river – through the mountain. We never suspected. We had all gone into the bunker to let the valaets deal with the problem, but Josie ... Josie was connected to the valaets, and she went back up to help'*

*'To help? The valaets need no help. Why would she ... ah ... Protect the Family, Protect the Commonwealth, Protect the Crown'* he whispered across the void.

*'Yes, Rondal. Of them all, only she obeyed your primary orders, and placed herself in harm's way for the family. As it turns out, we should not have worried about her, but we set out to search for her at the time. Vitas and Sharla found her at ground level, where ... where they were killed by the Drecks. Afterwards, Josie just snapped. She – she TOOK them, Rondal. She removed their life – just as you have done before ... but COMPLETELY'*

*'Then she has followed my orders, and should be commended. Treat her as such, but remind her that she must work in concert with the Emperor, and not assume independent action without proper consultation' he suggested flippantly.*

*'THIS IS NOT A LAUGHING MATTER, RONDAL!'*

*'And no one is laughing, I assure you. Speaking of which, when you take the life of a Vanir, all the OTHER Vanir in the room die as well. Something about their brains, perhaps? Maybe something about being in the same warren? I shall have to ask the children about-'*

*'RONDAL! You have NOT!'*

*'I am afraid that I have. In a moment of weakness, I allowed my anger and frustration at the torture and death of a crewman to affect my judgment. I accidentally eliminated the Director of the research station located on that planet I mentioned. I had intended to set an example of him, but unfortunately, no one was left alive to report it. The rest of the station has been evacuated, and the survivors should be safe – as long as they manage to get at least six kilometers away from it in the next ... three hours or so'*

He wondered what feather had gotten up Lili's butt to agitate her so.

*'Rondal ... you have violated the Elder's law' she sent quietly.*

*'I do not take kindly to being captured, stripped naked, questioned, and tortured. At least I let some of the Vanir live – those who chose NOT to oppose me. What of the ship I sent to Earth?'*

*'It is still en route. We have a ship stationed to meet with them and off-load passengers to take them to safety. Lady Trenka is aboard and will assume command of it when they meet up. Rondal ... you have violated the Elder's law, and I can no longer protect you' she stated flatly.*

He heard the words, and thought about his situation. He couldn't easily block Lili now, and there would probably be others involved at some point ... but he wasn't through yet.

*'Understood, my Lady Song. Yet I would suggest that you let me complete my task for the Emperor, before executing my sentence. Also ... I take full responsibility for Josie's actions. She is not to be harmed!'*

*'It shall be as you say, First Lord. Gods grant you success ... and forgiveness'*

*'My love to you all, Lili' his response whispered back across the void.*

*'And our love to you, Ronnie' she sent back faintly.*

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### *With the Kids...*

“Walter, did you hear?” Cathy asked quietly.

“Yes. Aunt Lili has sentenced Grandfather to die.”

“She can’t *do* that!” Josie protested. “We can’t let her *do* that!”

“She is the Elder. She can do as she wishes,” Cathy pointed out.

“Well, she *can’t* kill Grandfather! I won’t *allow* it!”

“Josie, Grandfather took life again – *all the way* this time,” Walter said quietly. “That violated the Elder’s law.”

“That’s *crap*, Walter, and you *know it!* Grandfather did that on *Kee*, and she didn’t punish him! I did that upstairs and she didn’t punish *me!*”

“Uhh, Josie ... I don’t think Aunt Lili knows *how* to punish you,” he pointed out. “I think she might even be afraid to try. Besides, Grandfather took full responsibility for you – said you did the right thing.”

“Well ... I *did!* And if Meela and Vitas had stayed down here where it was *safe*, then they’d still be *alive!* *What?*” Josie said in exasperation at their looks. “She *was* Meela – we *all* knew that!”

“Yes, Josie ... she was your Grandmother Meela,” Lili said quietly from the doorway, before entering the room and joining them. “And yes, as you suspect, I do not see how I can punish you for following your Grandfather’s orders. He is ... *proud* of you – but bids me remind you that you must always work with us, and not run off without telling anyone what you plan to do. We could have sent guardsman with... Oh, *Josie!*”

Lili finally broke down and drew the child into her arms; both of them sobbing now. Walter and Cathy sat there a for moment, before joining them in a group hug.

~~~

Later, Lili sat alone while silently considering the situation.

She was the Elder, and to her fell the responsibility of keeping the Elder’s laws – and Ronnie had broken a *major* one; leaving her very little leeway within which to act. She could do it herself, of course, but then her life would be most unpleasant ... most unpleasant, indeed. Sai was ready, and certainly *more* than willing, but it would ruin her relationship with Maya.

She considered her options, then came up with the most reasonable one at the moment.

*‘Lady Trenka, do you have a moment, please?’*

*Somewhere Else...*

*"NO! She **CANNOT!**"*

*The Fainting Fate was beside herself with trepidation, but there was nothing she could do since Destiny had taken a stance beside her and she was **still** frozen in place – just as she'd been since the beginning of this sequence of events. At least Destiny had allowed her to **speak** once again.*

*"Remember, little Fate, humans have to grow on their **own** or it would be pointless. If she follows through, then the paths will change," it said as it looked off into the void. "It may be for **better** ... or it may be for **worse**. Either way, it will be **their** path, and no longer one of **your** choosing."*

*"But – but what is the **point**, then? Isn't it our job to **guide** them into the correct path?"*

*"No. Your job is to provide them with **opportunities** for growth – **reasonable** opportunities. And it is **their** decision that determines the outcome."*

*Destiny almost sighed. "It's **my** fault, really, leaving all of you **alone** for so long."*

*It observed for a moment more, before considering several of the many possibilities – and maybe a **different** reassignment for this "Fainting Fate" should one ... or perhaps **two** of the many become a reality.*

*March 15, On Vanaheim, The Grandmother's Quarters*

Her reintegration had passed successfully, and the Prime was feeling much better now.

Her mind had cleared considerably after being assaulted by the human child. With the help of her Senior Medical Technician, the Ambassador's assistant, and several of the Senior Guild members, she'd been able to recover her independent objectivity, and remembered her actions from when they'd first deviated from her norm.

She'd been *appalled* at the contrast in her memories. The actions, or *inactions* she'd taken had brought the Vanir to near ruin at the hands of a traitorous warren. She was prepared to eliminate that threat for all time, but had been advised by both her Ambassador and the human Ambassador that a short delay might be appropriate to ascertain the extent of the problem. Her counselors had reluctantly agreed, and now sat in meetings with the Prime and both Ambassadors to hear what they might suggest.

Surprisingly few arguments cropped up, but one sticking point kept returning – the issue of genocide, or rather, warrencide. Both the human and Vanir Ambassadors suggested that eliminating an entire warren for

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the actions of its warren leader were counter-productive to the Vanir society as a whole. It was their contention that valuable knowledge and resources would be forever lost in such a situation, not to forget the dampening effect on other facets of Vanir society.

At one point, the human Ambassador had even suggested that a relaxing of *certain* restrictions – such as matings *outside* of one's own warren – would be beneficial to the Vanir gene pool to help ensure the vitality of their entire *species* ... which is where discussions broke down for the day.

### ***The Orca, En Route to Vanaheim***

The ship was relatively quiet in its emptiness. Ronnie had gotten used to having traveling companions over the last few years, and the silence ate at him while fast-cycling his transitions on the way to meet up with the *Kraken* over Vanaheim.

He'd been at it for about five hours before deciding it was time to peel off the bandage.

*'Lady Sai, do you have a moment?'* he reached out softly.

*'What do you want, Caldar?'* was her abrupt reply to his curiously weak call.

*'I would report actions at the Vanir research outpost have been completed, and the facilities destroyed. Personnel lost include crewmembers One, Four, and Seven. The rest of my crew is on the way to refuge at the Healer Cluster on Earth using the Kraken's Child. I am returning in the Orca'* he summarized.

*'How many survivors?'*

*'Ahh ... approximately two dozen Healers, with a small handful of Seniors. There were also several young adult Drecks recovered from food stocks and sent along for repatriation. Crewmen One and Seven lost their lives at the research station. Crewman Four... Petrus... It looked like he decided to sabotage a Vanir raider that had grounded on one of the moons. He managed to disable it quite well before they caught up with him'*

He waited as she tempered her anger before responding to him.

*'He's dead. I felt him die. We ALL felt him die'*

*'I felt him as well, just before we lifted ship from the research station. We were not in a position to assist him. We were unable to warn Kantor about the Vanir strike force in time because the research station was mind-shielded completely. I understand Lady Sharla and Captain Vitas are now gone from us as well'* he added faintly.

*'Petrus followed you, Caldar. He TRUSTED you'*

*'He did nothing to my orders. He was supposed to stay on the Kraken with you. Once he showed up here, he was supposed to stay in orbit and observe. Instead, he—'*

*'He DIED making sure you would be safe down on the PLANET!'*

*'He died because he did something foolish all by himself – probably with no thought at all to—'*

*'YES! He DIED because he acted just like YOU! Doing something STUPID AND DANGEROUS! AND YOU LEFT HIM THERE!'*

*'We traversed to the moon where he landed, but only saw a portion of his remains – but now is not the time to debate Commander Zickgraf's motivations. Please provide me with an update on your situation'*

His request hung in the void for several seconds while he was barely feeling the raw emotions leaking from her, and only that, due to his familiarity with her. She finally relented and got him up to speed. After thanking her, he ran new calculations and planned to rendezvous with the *Kraken* during the morning after next. After her curt dismissal, he settled back and fumed silently.

It wasn't *his* fault Petrus had bailed on her, and it wasn't his fault that he'd managed to get himself *killed* during that bit of mischief on that moon. Sai was a problem for later, though. At least his headache had subsided for the moment, but his back still didn't feel right, not to mention a good portion of his hands, arms, legs, and torso. He thought about it for a moment longer, before finally settling back and considering his next order of business.

He checked his position on the chart, then shook his head. He was five hours out from the Vanir secret lab and still had twenty-four minutes of transit time left to go. That was almost five days at accelerated jump rates – and without Healer's Milk.

A shower ... a shower and a shave? If only... *Sleep* would be better ... but first, something else to eat.

Ha! *Imperials!* ... Always thinking with their *stomachs!*

### ***On a Small Moon***

The crewmen were still working on the patch to the side of their ship.

The microgravity was helping, but they were running low on sealer. Even if they managed to repair all the damage the human had done to it, it would *still* be a risky trip that would require being suited for the duration just in case the patch blew out.

Communications, weapons, shields, and other facets of ship control had been effectively neutralized by the intruder who'd crawled through

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their access tunnels and wreaked havoc with nearly everything. At least he hadn't physically destroyed anything *important* – anything, that is, which couldn't be fixed with several hundred meters of cabling and fiber.

And *lots* of vacu-seal.

"Captain, I think we've got a connection up to one of the antennas!" the Communications Officer reported.

"Can we call for help?"

"No Sir, but I think ... yes, the receiver is working now," he reported while carefully listening to a repeating message that was coming in faintly.

His color drained as he verified the source and content coming from the decryption system and turned to his Captain.

"I – I think we may have another problem."

After several minutes, and a much quieter conversation, the Captain came to a decision.

"Tell *no one* about this for the time being. Our situation is bad, but not hopeless."

"What about the prisoner?"

"Him? I'm thinking he's gone from a potential information source to a bargaining bit – possibly bargaining for our *lives*. If he lives, we may be able to use him to gain our freedom," the Captain considered.

"And if he never wakes up?"

"Slich 38156 is very good with a ship's doc, and they are surprisingly similar to our structure ... aside from being weak and scrawny. This one came inside and effectively grounded us all by himself. One wonders why he did not simply *destroy* us."

He paused and considered again that question; trying to understand the human's motivations behind *not* destroying them when he had the chance, but coming up blank. "If he lives, then we try to use him. If he dies ... then we distance ourselves from him. If I understand their social structure correctly, they will be back for him eventually – if for nothing other than to recover his body."

"But – but they must believe him *dead*!"

"Certainly. Or they would have spared *nothing* to recover him alive, as did their man at station Alpha. You heard the report. You saw the recording. I think we have underestimated the human's determination to protect their own species."



***March 16, Vanaheim, the Next Morning***

The S'Slich'Tah enclave on Vanaheim was in a state of agitation.

A report had come in overnight, and news of it quickly fired the warren staff into a frenzy of both fear and righteousness. They'd wasted no time in disseminating the video from that report both within and without their own warren, hoping this would be the *final* proof of humanity's treacherousness.

Perhaps they'd inadvertently been gifted with the means to restore their warren's honor and *prove* the Prime's policy was damaged and dangerous?

~~~

Laisee awoke to feelings of distress surrounding their quarters. Both she and Jaiying looked at each other in confusion, but decided to wait until someone volunteered what was happening in the building.

A quick call to Sai gained them no further knowledge, other than Ronnie was on his way back and would be arriving tomorrow – probably intending to park on the *Kraken* and resume command for the remainder of negotiations.

Having taken all their meals in the quarters provided to them, they expected the knock on the door to announce the arrival of the morning meal, but instead, in walked Sue, Sally, and Samuel, followed by several Senior Guild members who were now armed. Laisee's guardsmen closed ranks in front of them, but Laisee waved them back and went to greet their visitors.

"Good morning, everyone. I feel there is tension in the building this morning. Would someone care to tell us what is going on?"

"Ambassador Laisee Caldarous ... a data transmission has surfaced," Samuel informed her formally. "A video record of an event at a previously undisclosed Vanir research facility. I – I'm afraid it shows humanity in a rather dim light," he said, as he held up a Vanir data tablet.

"Please come and sit, Samuel. May we please see the recording?"

She was trying to gently push for a more informal interaction while they gathered around a table. Samuel set the tablet up at an angle so all of them could see it, before he started playback.

Laisee watched it silently, listening to the Vanir speaker, but not hearing Ronnie's responses. They watched the short confrontation between Ronnie and a male Vanir. She let out a short gasp, along with the other humans, as he recoiled when lightening seemed to leap from the Vanir towards him – followed by lightening striking all over the room and hitting the other Vanir present several times. She watched when Ronnie was knocked to the ground, temporarily stunned, and then as he sat up

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and looked around in what appeared to be pain and confusion at the results of his actions. She observed his difficulty in getting to his feet; his final shrug, then his search for material before leaving the room.

They watched it three more times in total, each pass seeming more horrific than the last. During the last pass, Laisee silently reached out and contacted Ronnie to question him about the Vanir deaths, and gotten his faint response; yes, he'd killed the Director, but no, he'd not intended to kill him and everyone else. Oh, and the base has been destroyed as planned – *after* they'd rescued all the humans left alive, and sent the remaining Vanir running out the back door for their lives.

She was still much too disturbed by the video to note his responses were severely weakened, but sighed wearily and stood to face the group.

“Samuel ... Senior Guild members ... what you see here is true. Or rather ... it is a *portion* of a truth. It is taken ... *out* of context and it would need to be fully evaluated *within* context to find the true meaning of it,” she said slowly while feeling somewhat subdued, before identifying him to the watchers. “The human visible in the report is Rondal Caldar, First Lord of the Commonwealth. He has always counseled cooperation between species; even among the many human factions within our two major groupings.”

She felt their concern and continued in explanation.

“What you see here appears to be the end result of his investigation into the S'Slich'Tah's activities against the policy of the Prime, and against humanity as a whole. I would advise you to send a ship or two out to the planet in question to recover Vanir survivors – particularly one named S'Slich'Tah 42130, who had extensive conversations with Lord Caldar, and eventually helped him to escape his capture.”

“Ambassador Laisee ... it is *true* ... that humans can kill with a *touch*?” one of the Senior Guildsmen asked warily.

“It is true that ... very *few* human males have the capacity to kill in this manner. It is not something we are proud of, and we have laws against injudicious application of it,” she said, gently dancing around the legalities of Ronnie's actions while trying to plant seeds of mitigating justification to help ease their worry when she continued.

“My understanding is that Lord Caldar had been captured and tortured by the Director ... and one of his crewmen who was captured with him was tortured to *death*. Even in such a instance I cannot condone his actions, but I can also understand them. It would be well to remember that *this* S'Slich'Tah Director was the architect of the implantation programs against both humans *and* Vanir ... and the *mind-control* efforts against your people as well. Perhaps a consultation with the Prime would better establish the appropriateness of Lord Caldar's actions?”

“Ambassador ... can *you* kill with a touch?” pressed another Guildsman.

“I am forbidden by my Elder. It is the Elder’s law.”

“But can you ... can *any* of you here ... can you kill with just a touch?”

“I – I do not know. I would like not to be pressed about it,” she said quietly, but Jaiying was not so quiet.

“I can do it, but it is *forbidden*. Grandfather said we are to protect the Family, protect the Commonwealth, and protect the Crown. Josie stopped the Drecks this way – the ones this Director of yours trained and let loose on our home world.”

“Josie?”

“My cousin ... my – my *clutch-mate*? We have different mothers and fathers, but we were raised together. We serve the Emperor, and the Imperial household. I was the first one to successfully disable an implanted bomb.”

As the Guildsmen and Guildswomen stood there, about half of them – the men – began slowly backing away, while Laisee attempted to change the subject.

“The Emperor’s First Wife has allowed us to teach the Vanir females our primary talent – that of Healing. Whether we negotiate a peaceful co-existence, or an armed and blocked border...” she paused while looking at each of them slowly, “...that is a gift we will leave with you. Sally – S’Shac’Kah 38521 – has the necessary skills to begin the teachings with you. We are trusting it will be used as such, and not applied to aggressive activities against us,” she suggested with an open gesture, while waiting out the seconds until someone offered a response of some sort.

“Ambassador Laisee, we will need to consult among ourselves, and discuss the situation with the Prime. The S’Slich’Tah ... they have much to answer for, but *this*...” the Guildswoman gestured to the tablet, “... *this* is most disturbing.”

Laisee nodded her head slowly in understanding.

“No less so to us, I assure you. Oh ... I should probably mention that Lord Caltar will be arriving sometime tomorrow morning. I believe he will dock at the *Kraken* in orbit. I do not know his further plans.”

A general shudder rippled through the assembled Vanir. As a group, they all made their way back to the door, with the men glancing back fearfully at Jaiying every few steps. When the door closed, Laisee turned to Jaiying with a frown on her face.

## The End of the Road

"I know, Mother. I probably should not have volunteered that information."

"Yes, but we should also probably not *lie* to them," she said, then squatted down to hug her. "There's been just too much lying all around, I'm thinking. How is Josie?"

"She is pretty messed up but Aunt Lili told her it will be all right."

"I hope so, Jaiying. I really hope so."

Though they'd remained silent throughout the entire visit, Laisee's Imperial guardsmen had seen the First Lord in action, and appreciated the results – *despite* the punishment he would suffer because of it.

Laisee took no notice of them, but easily felt their sentiments. She accepted their loyalty to the Imperial household – even when stepping over the line as he'd done. She also felt no surprise at their learning of Jaiying's abilities through their translators, and suspected they were privy to *much* more information about the First Lord and the Senior Staff than anyone would expect.

### *Approaching the Kraken, Still En Route*

He'd slept lousy up front while scrunched in the modified pilot's seat, and upon awaking, discovered the shower was *off-line* for some reason – probably due to low water levels, according to the console readings. Apparently, Petrus had been in a rush to catch up with them, and neglected to top off the tanks. At least he could still flush and wash his hands and face.

Likewise, there was no working laundry, and certainly no clean change of clothes. Like the *Kraken's Child*, the *Orca* was configured for combat, and the system locked out unnecessary resource usage when resources were low.

On top of all *that*, every effort towards patching the holes in his body seemed doomed to failure. Whatever the Vanir had done to him was keeping him from Healing himself, and whatever had happened back with the Director had failed to gain him any extra life energy. In fact, he felt even *worse*. Effectively, he was back to square one in regards to his ability to Heal his own wounds. Maybe it was only temporary, though. Maybe once he got cleaned up a little, things would get back to normal. For right *now*, he'd had to apply a few combat dressings to keep the larger wounds sealed.

Aside from his *physical* problems, in general, he was feeling ... *weird*. He'd been out of sorts ever since he'd tried to suck life force out of the Director – restless, angry, and unsure of what he wanted to do next. He'd

even had problems talking to Lili, Sai, and Laisee, and could barely hear them unless he concentrated *really* hard on it.

That was his greater concern. He'd come to rely heavily on the ability to communicate with his crew and family at any distance, and the thought of losing that hit him pretty hard. It was an advantage he'd taken for granted over several years now, and it made his actions extremely effective. If he lost it forever, it could greatly impact his results.

For sure, the Vanir situation needed to be settled one way or another, but he was feeling less inclined towards conversation, and more like slapping them down once and for all.

Ha! That *last* business of finding out every Vanir seemed to be connected to the other was very helpful. Kill one and kill them *all*? Or maybe not? Maybe it was just the Vanir in the same room or general area? Or maybe just the same *warren*? He wondered if the other fleeing Vanir had been affected, but had never gone back to check.

He could test it easily enough, though, once he got to Vanaheim.

For that matter, from what Sai had told him, they still had Vanir on board the *Kraken*. He *could*... He stopped at that and tried to determine where *those* thoughts were coming from.

*'An aspect of the Demon,'* he thought, then wondered where he'd heard *that* from. *'Gods ... maybe I've been infected with Vanir? I wonder if this is how Sue and Silas feel about us? What an ultimate joke on me.'*

As he continued to dwell on the possibilities, his incoming com indicator beeped.

*"Lord Caldar, this is the Kraken. Please provide your current status,"* Torga's transmission came through his receiver.

### ***Vanaheim, In the Prime's Quarters***

"Ahi 42491, you have been with the humans for many cycles now. Please give me your assessment of them," the Prime requested.

Sue nearly smiled at her mother's familiarity; never once given to her before. She contemplated the answer her mother wanted to hear while carefully considering her response.

"The humans are very much like us. They live, they breed, and have aspirations of racial security. When attacked, they defend. Like us, they will try to preempt dangerous situations from getting out of hand – such as Vanir intrusions into their space and society. They were not pleased to learn of our implants. They were angry to learn of the *explosive* implants. That is the issue which prompted me to investigate on my own."

She watched her mother's composure remain stable, so she continued.

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“They were somewhat understanding about the Aesir and Midgard situation, but I suspect only because it happened so long ago and did not affect their current society. I understand they are determined to bring them back into their society as ‘lost colonies’ of *theirs*, rather than stolen colonies of *ours*.”

The Prime rose and paced her quarters, with the eyes of her Senior Medical Technician watching her closely. He’d been chagrined to learn how easily he’d been taken by the S’Slich’Tah and subverted to their purposes – even to including an internal *bomb*. He could have been used to kill the *Prime*, and all without his knowledge.

The Prime stopped pacing and turned to face her daughter.

“What will the humans do against us?”

“Mother ... they will do whatever they feel is necessary to *protect* themselves – just as have *you* have done ... just as *all* Prime’s have done over the years. But the S’Slich’Tah have exposed us as never before, and we now face *extinction* as a race because of them. The humans outnumber us by many hundred-thousands to one, and even if we were fortunate enough to remove their most powerful and dangerous leaders, the remainder would not rest until we were *eliminated* from this reality.”

The Prime stared at her in disbelief, until overcoming her shock and considering her options.

“Do you think ... would they be appeased if we eliminated the S’Slich’Tah?”

Sue blinked in surprise, then laughed.

“Were you not *there*, Mother? Ambassador Laisee counseled *life* for them! They *attacked* the humans, and the humans plead to retain that warren *intact*! They have some demented notion the S’Slich’Tah still offer *value* to our society, yet they are all *corrupt*! It is *obvious*, isn’t it? They conspired to *destroy* the humans and take over your *office*! They should all be put to *death*! Every last *one* of them should be ... they...”

Her rant stalled while memories flashed through her mind of a young S’Slich’Tah who’d befriended her on a small observation station.

“Are you well, Sue?” the Senior Medical Technician quietly asked.

The Prime turned to him in shock. His position was to be *silent*, unless directed to speak, or something was needed by the Prime.

And to address her daughter by her *human name*...

“I – I...”

“She has been around humans *too* long,” the Prime declared. “She takes up their unnatural interpersonal behaviors that are abhorrent to her nature – her nature as the next Prime.”

“I don’t believe so, Grandmother,” he said. “She was thinking of a young S’Slich’Tah when she faltered. He showed her kindness, and she felt he would have ... well...”

“What? *Mated* with her? What abominations do you suppose *that* would have produced?” she snapped angrily, then thought of something else.

“Wait ... how did you know she...”

Sue laughed aloud at her mother’s confusion, while the Prime and her technician looked on. The technician’s color changed just enough to show that he *knew* she’d realized what he’d done.

“Oh, Mother! Change is all around us, and *still* you do not see? The S’Slich’Tah would have *destroyed* you and taken your place, yet the humans have *already* insinuated themselves into your house, and taken over your staff without your knowledge or *approval*.”

‘*As they have taken over ME, Mother, although I seem to have just as much ANGER against them as I started with*’ she continued silently, while pressing this into her mother’s mind.

She felt the Prime’s shock and confusion, but also recognized Jaiying had not done a *complete* readjustment of her mother’s segments to allow *full* integration with the gifts the human had provided her.

‘*And now it is YOUR turn,*’ she considered internally, while deciding her mother’s immediate fate.

Sue advanced towards her mother, who started backing up, then clumsily fell into her nest. Her technician followed to lie with her and offer his support. Both he and Sue would work with the Prime – *his* Prime – and see that she received the skills she’d need to lead her people safely into the *future*.

### ***On the Orca***

“*Lord Caldar, this is the Kraken. Please provide your current status,*” Torga’s request came through again, and Ronnie’s glance at the chart showed only five more transition minutes left to reach Vanaheim.

“Umm ... ahh, make it ... another twenty-five hours ... or so. Standard,” he transmitted, coming back to the present after a moment.

He’d already worked out the required number of long jumps to get him to the *Kraken* by the morning of March 17 – ideally of sufficiently short duration and long enough delay between transitions to keep his stomach settled for the remainder of the transit. Laisee’s question and answer

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session regarding the Vanir base intrusion had arrived and been dealt with during the last transition dwell. Now that he was this close, he could drop back down to “merely” accelerated jump rates and give his stomach a rest.

While he was in the middle of the last transition dwell, he’d again begun running things through his mind at what had gone wrong at the Vanir research station. Once he’d answered Laisee’s questions, he’d started reviewing the issue yet again...

It felt like his memories were intact, but his impressions of them seemed to be colored by his exposure to a Vanir *almost* life-transfer, and was starting to consider “infestation” was not too strong a word to describe it.

It had never happened like that before. It had always been a transfer of relative *aging* between individuals – a year or more, either taken or given. Humans could extend their lives with intimate congress between trained men and women, but by using more *invasive* techniques, could even age or achieve youth by force or exchange.

Between slightly disparate races, like the Drecks, the transfer was somewhat unequal. Case in point, his gift of ten years to Gagsa had gained the Drecks Lord an additional two or three *decades*, Relative. When he’d killed hundreds of Kee, it was like taking the lives of small animals. But with the *Vanir*...

The Vanir were naturally long-lived, and he supposed he should have been happy at not being reduced to the age of an infant – not that it would have happened, even between humans. The conservation of mass was a constant in that regard. With the Vanir, his attempt at a little premature aging for the Lab Director had backfired on him, throwing him to the floor and leaving him weak, in pain, and tired...

He suddenly looked around and remembered where he was, then killed the previous navigation program and set one up using accelerated jump rates that would put him in the Vanaheim system by morning. Afterwards, he glanced around and saw the forward compartment was still secure, before drifting off a bit while lamenting the fact that he’d not brought along a spare change of clothing. At least he could change once he reached the *Kraken*, where he had fresh clothing he could put on over a freshly-washed body...

He caught himself, gathered up his thoughts, and ... and *compartmentalized* the issue for the time being, then settled back in the oversized pilot’s seat of the *Orca*. He set proximity sensors and alarms to wake him if he got close to anything big enough to present a problem, then risked taking a nap.

He had to get to the *Kraken*, dock the *Orca*, then get down to the planet and see what Laisee was up to. They needed to resolve this, one way or



another. From what Sai had told him, he could easily accomplish that from orbit, but it would send the surviving Vanir into chaos. That would *not* be helpful, and probably cause *millions* of human lives in the process. He called that Plan *B*.

### ***Vanaheim, In the Prime's Quarters***

It was late afternoon, and the Prime was resting comfortably. Her mind felt relaxed ... almost as if expanded in some regards. She rolled over and looked at her companion. He was observing her carefully, even as he gazed at her ... *lovingly*?

"Ahi 32898 ... What *are* you doing?" she asked, curious as to his thoughts she was feeling just faintly.

"I – I am *observing* you, Prime. You seem to be quite relaxed at the moment, and your color reflects an inner calm that I have not seen for–"

'*What are you thinking, Ahi 32898*' "What are you thinking, Ahi–" she suddenly stopped.

"Do not fear, Prime. Sue ... S'Ahi'Ma 42491 warned me it would take some little while to separate internal and external conversations." '*It will be all right*' he added silently.

*'It will be all right'* she echoed silently.

"Yes, it will take some getting used to, but it will be all right," he assured her.

*'It is change'* "It is change," she said stiffly, then sighed.

"Yes, it is change ... but perhaps change is unavoidable at this juncture. Prime ... in order to survive, sometimes a species must change ... grow. Perhaps that time is finally upon us?"

The Prime looked at him intently, before finally rising from her nest to pace the room. He could feel her mind going over the situation repeatedly, and playing out all the ramifications that would affect, first, the Vanir as a whole, and second, her own warren. *None* of the end results looked promising in the least, and most of them included the destruction of the S'Ahi'Ma as a whole. Ahi 32898 felt her distress.

"Sue said you would have conflicting feelings, Prime. She went through several stages of confusion, fear, anger, understanding, and finally, acceptance of her new potential. She had the added difficulty of having been acted against by the S'Slich'Tah – as have we. Now that we have clarity of the situation, we can take advantage of the new tools at our disposal to help guide Vanir into a safe future."

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‘A *safe future?*’ “A safe future?” she stopped for a moment to settle her mind. “A future dealing with *humans* – humans, who I now understand can kill with just a *touch?* Perhaps ... just a *thought?*”

“And yet we live...” he whispered.

“Yes ... and yet we live. To what purpose, I wonder?”

“Perhaps... Perhaps when the human male arrives, he will share his thoughts with us?” he suggested.

“Yes... No doubt he will provide us with the terms of our *surrender!*” she said bitterly.

‘*Giving up so soon, Mother?*’ came the teasing thought from her well-traveled daughter, as she pushed past the threshold of the sleeping quarters. “I’d thought my people’s Prime to be of *sterner stuff!*” Sue shot at her.

“*You!* You come back to offer me *more torment!*”

“You tried to have me *killed!*”

“I did *not!* I – I... I guess I did, didn’t I?” she quickly relented, then sank back into her nest; her companion staying close by her side.

“You were not yourself, Mother,” Sue conceded, while casually looking over at the technician and thinking of something else.

“Mother ... was *he* the one?” she asked, pointing to Ahi 32898.

“Was he the one what?”

“The biological provider of the *male* half of my genome sequence, of course!”

“What ... what could *possibly* be your concern with that?” she asked, while Ahi 32898 quickly considered the dates and times, before shaking his head no ... somewhat *sadly* in Sue’s opinion.

“The humans seem to mate randomly, and their issue derives elements from both gene providers – oftentimes providing extremes of either benefits for, or detractions from survivability. They do not tend to ... to ‘inbreed’ I believe is the term they use. Certainly not like *we* seem to.”

“What are you saying? Our breeding is carefully controlled *within* the warren so that only the *best* possible specimens are conceived and raised to adulthood. My clutch has produced–”

“The most *interesting, adventurous, and daring* young Vanir ever to have graced a Prime’s line in *centuries,*” Sue interrupted her. “Likewise, our Vanir breeding methods have brought us examples like the S’Tak’Sah – now *banished* to the cloud above the Kee world, and the S’Slich’Tah, who

have made it their life's work to *destroy* our warren, and bring the anger of the humans down upon *all* Vanir."

"You would suggest that *thousands* of years of successful progress be thrown away for ... for *what*? Random *chaos*? Fighting between the *warrens*? The destruction of the stability of our *society*?"

"Our *stable* society? It's more *stagnant* than stable, Mother! We've watched the humans for *thousands* of years, and yet they've caught up with us and *surpassed* us in many ways! Fighting between the warrens *always* happens. The situation with the S'Slich'Tah has gone *far* beyond civil complaint. Considering the amount of structured effort *most* Vanir apply to programs they wish to pursue, I once doubted random chaos would occur – but *no more*. With the new tools the humans have pushed on us, we have a chance to make *meaningful* changes to our society and lead it safely into the *future*!"

"*Humans*! Perhaps I should have listened to my counselors *before* I took my position so strongly. I promised to protect the Vanir *from* the humans – and *now* look at us!"

They stared at each other, each breathing heavily, but not stooping to present postures of affront as male Vanir were prone to do. Finally, Ahi 32898 spoke up diffidently.

"Grandmother ... and daughter of the sitting Prime..." he began respectfully; waiting to be chastened, but went on when it wasn't forthcoming. "May I offer *my* observations of the situation?"

While neither of the women spoke to him, neither of them said no, so he continued quietly.

"We have, as a *warren*, the responsibility to serve the Vanir people. We *have* had, as a warren, our efforts sabotaged by the S'Slich'Tah. This is a fact, and something which has historical precedence in regards to dealing with. The humans... In *my* opinion, the humans have acted most interestingly. They recognized a threat – *us* – yet did not immediately *attack* us."

He watched as they processed his words, but then cut off their objections before they managed to surface.

"The humans did the *correct* thing. They *investigated* the threat – *us* – *evaluated* the threat, and they *appear* ... appear at this *time*, to be willing to *work* with us in *resolving* our differences. And they did all that, even while having ample proof of Vanir actively working towards their *destruction*. In point of fact, they successfully fought off an attack by the S'Slich'Tah, and then calmly informed us that a 'technical' state of war now existed between them and *us* – yet did nothing else *about* it. It appears as merely an 'administrative disagreement' to them, yet from the

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*direct* knowledge of Sue, the humans have an anti-matter weapon orbiting above us that is capable of *splitting our planet apart* – but they *did not use it!*” he said with impassioned urgency.

“Not with their *Ambassador* down here, they wouldn’t,” the Prime mumbled irritably.

“Perhaps,” Sue offered. “But Lady Laisee decided to *stay* down here, even knowing that her home world was attacked. She didn’t want to allow an escalation between our peoples.”

“And she offers her *insane* suggestions to let the S’Slich’Tah *live*, and ... and *other* unspeakable actions,” the Prime muttered dourly, while looking pointedly at her daughter.

“Well, they *are* humans, Mother. After all, they can really only think of *one* thing at a time.”

The Prime pondered that concept, before reviewing all the rest she’d just heard.

It was difficult to comprehend, but Ahi 42491 had actually *lived* with the humans. The humans had even brought her back from the *dead* – although they now claimed her as *property*. No ... the human male claimed her as *family*, if she fully understood the context it represented to them. They’d even given her a *human* name ... Sue.

The human *male* – he who killed with a *touch*... She shuddered at that, and saw her technician flinch slightly, but held up her hand to ward him off. She would have to deal with that human – in *person*. She almost shuddered again, but the look on her technician’s face calmed her down.

He looked at her with such caring ... such ... such *love*?

“When the human returns, I will have an audience with him. The Ambassadors will be present, as will my daughter ... Sue,” she told them, then rounded on her medical technician.

‘*You will be present as well, so that I may seek your counsel*’ she pushed at him.

‘*I ... yes, Grandmother. Of course*’ he sent with bowed head.

### ***In the Human’s Quarters***

“That didn’t go as bad as I thought it would,” Laisee considered aloud.

She and Jaiying had listened silently, while the Prime first had her crisis, then ran through her options; watching as she considered life *before* and then *after* a human invasion, but seeing things spiraling out of control, either way. Her technician had performed a masterful job of counseling, considering what little he’d had to work with.

She'd thought about commenting on it, but decided the Vanir had had enough shocks to their systems for the time being.

Certainly, the *Prime* had been put through the wringer – *several times* so far.

*Hopefully*, Ronnie would behave himself when he arrived tomorrow.

***Opposite Earth Orbit, In Transit to the Microcosmus***

'Lady Lili, do you have a moment?'

'Yes, Trenka. Have you found it?'

'As you suggested, I have been in contact with Lady Jia Huan. She has alerted the ship's captain that I am inbound. I should be docking in ... oh my – it's much bigger than I remember it' she sent faintly.

The *Microcosmus* loomed in her view screen once she'd come out of a micro-jump almost too close to it. The last time she'd been there, a lot of it was not.

'Yes. We spent a considerable amount of credit repairing it' Lili shared wryly. *There is a rescue mission we wish you to be involved with. Lord Caldar lent his ship, the Kraken's Child, for the use of returning Commonwealth and Hegemony citizens to our safety. I also understand there is one Vanir aboard. They are currently twenty-four minutes below you, and will meet with you in three more days, Standard. I would like you to interview the crew and passengers of that ship to evaluate their physical and emotional state. There is also Healer staff aboard the Microcosmus to assist you'*

'A ... Vanir?'

In all the excitement over the last few days, Lili suddenly realized that she'd forgotten to mention the Vanir situation – most *importantly*, that the Commonwealth has been involved in diplomatic discussions with them.

'Yes. Our new found ... acquaintances. After you dock, Lady Huan can provide you with a basic background of the current situation, and I will be available in ... three hours to give you more details, and instruct you in the basics of their language and thought band'

With nothing else to share, Trenka thanked her and ended the conversation, then got up and savored a small measure of fresh Healer's milk – courtesy of the Elder herself – to settle her stomach after the *last* multi-minute jump. As the milk eased her nausea, she reached out to her passenger and found she was still safely unconscious.

The sleeping drug suggested to counter the effects of the long jumps was still working, but she decided to check the woman's bedding before docking to make sure she hadn't had an accident.

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Three hours later, Trenka contacted Lili at home and began her correspondence course in Basic Vanir. She did so well that Lili brought her up to date on the Drecks thought bands, as well, which was much easier since Trenka already spoke fluent Drecks.

### *March 17, In Vanir Space, Docked on the Kraken*

Sai had contemplated meeting Ronnie with a drawn power sword, but thought better of it at the last minute. Her time would come ... as surely as the red sun rose over this *hellhole* they continued to orbit.

Instead, she stiffly received him at the docking bay and greeted him – if not cordially, at least not aggressively – then walked with him to his quarters while he gave her a more detailed recitation of his actions before receiving updates of the Ambassadorial mission in progress below.

She managed to suppress her anger at the fact that he'd left Petrus' body on that airless moon – presumably to be recovered later when "matters were less pressing." She'd also been informed about Ronnie's other actions at the research station – even seen the video – and considered that, should the Elder give her permission, the current resting place of her husband would be suitable enough for the body of the First Lord as well.

Ronnie walked along beside Sai, listening carefully to her spoken words, while only vaguely feeling her *unspoken* words. His recent employment as a Vanir experimental subject seemed destined to leave him at a disadvantage, but he'd spent most of his life that way before becoming a Senior, so he would simply have to fall back on experience for a while. Still, he was picking up quite a bit of stress from her. Of course, her *current* mindset might have something to do with the sloppiness of her internal shield.

He arrived at his quarters and immediately began stripping to wash, and change into some clean clothes – ones *without* splatters of blood all over them.

Instead of leaving him to himself, Sai followed him into the facilities and watched as he continued to undress. She was curious as to his latest rejuvenation, but shocked at what she saw.

He noticed her reaction, but thought it was for the obvious.

"Really, Sai, this is nothing you haven't seen before." He looked down at his scarred body, and added, "I'm sure you've done worse in getting information from a subject." He winced a bit when pulling the field dressings from the bigger wounds.

She continued to stare at his wounds, before looking up to meet his eyes. "You haven't Healed *any* of those wounds. Why?"

He thought back to the efforts he'd expended just keeping himself functional, while the Director had bled and burned him in his quest for knowledge.

"I didn't have the *time!*" he snapped angrily. "I was too busy trying to extract myself from a *torture rack!*" He struggled to dampen his anger, before somberly adding, "Seven wasn't so lucky."

He continued to shed himself of his underwear while Sai persisted. "You had plenty of time on the way here."

He groaned, then muttered, "It was too late then. I think something about a Vanir life-transfer screwed up my Healing. Maybe it's all this damn *powder* they covered me with. *However...*"

He paused, then forced himself to calm down before he recovered his small power blade and laid it on the open palm of his hand.

He stared at it intently while holding his arm straight out, and the blade slowly rose into the air above his hand.

"*This is new,*" he said quietly, and the blade flashed to full power; glowing a bright violet, and giving off a tiny shriek for a few moments before popping silent and dropping back into his hand.

"How ... how did you do *that?*"

"Necessity. They dusted me with this *mind*-suppressive crap, and I had to learn how to work through my *eyes* if you can believe it. But don't do it unless you're *horribly* desperate. Hurts *really* bad. And the shower on the *Orca* is *broken*, by the way."

He finished undressing and turned towards the shower.

"*Stop!* There's something lodged in the middle of your *back!*"

"Huh?"

She approached warily, then carefully probed around the small flat object while trying to peer within it, but didn't recognize anything she saw. She let out a quiet snort before backing away from him.

"What is it?" he asked while twisting awkwardly and trying to reach around, but not quite touching it. He reversed himself and looked over his shoulder at the mirror.

While he was doing all that, Sai mentioned the obvious.

"I don't know, but we should probably remove it."

"You *think?* At least it explains that *ache* in my back."

"What? You really didn't know it was *back there?*"

## The End of the Road

“Hey, I’ve been *busy*! I’ll get cleaned up and have Donnel take a look at it!” he snapped again, then turned away from her.

She watched him walk into the shower; leaving her alone with his bloody, filthy underwear. His armor had been left on the *Orca*, and the crew would recover it for reconditioning and service. She thought about calling housekeeping to come and pick up after him, but instead, pulled out a clean change of clothes for him and set them on the sleeping platform before leaving the compartment.

She had to let Lili know about this new situation. Probably Laisee as well. And Mister Ardan. She let out a loud sigh, before focusing on the latter.

*‘Donnel – Lord Caldar will need to be seen in ships doc. He’s come back with a metal pad of some sort attached to his back’* she sent in a directed, loud thought, then listened when Donnel focused a response in his mind for her, which she acknowledged, before switching to the duty officer.

*‘Torga – when Lord Caldar is refreshed and has visited with Mister Ardan, please have him come to the primary meeting room to receive further updates’*

*‘Yes, Lady Tal’*

A moment later...

*‘Lili ... Laisee ... do each of you have a moment?’*

### ***In Ships Doc***

“You don’t know what it does?” Donnel asked calmly, while silently accepting the daggered looks Ronnie was sending him in the mirror.

Donnel considered the *only* reason Ronnie hadn’t snapped at him was the fact that Doctor Milsie Blanaid was standing right beside him and grinning like a child on Founding Day morning.

As a xeno-biologist, this wasn’t exactly right up her ally, but it was close enough to intrigue her interest – especially since the *last* several weeks had been pretty dull for her once she’d finished analyzing the Vanir visitors and crew.

“Ahh ... nope! Didn’t notice it when I was on the rack, didn’t catch on my clothes when I got dressed, and I didn’t feel it when I was sleeping in the pilot’s seat on the *Orca*,” he said with a faux veneer of cheerfulness. “Only found out when Sai pointed it out to me on the way to the shower,” he added. “Thought it’d be safer if *you’d* take a look at it first, before she ripped it off, and pulled out my *spine* along with it.”

Milsie let out a tiny gasp that got a quiet chuckle from both Ronnie and Donnel.



“Well, before I do that, let’s have you get up there and we’ll scan it and see what it’s attached to,” Donnel said. “Then I’ll tie a cord to it, get behind a door, and give it a good *yank!*”

“*Donnie!*” escaped from Milsie’s lips, and Ronnie caught the embarrassed look in Donnel’s eyes.

After throwing a smirk in his direction, Ronnie got up from the stool and positioned himself facedown on the scanner bed, while Milsie and “Donnie” positioned the scanning equipment around his upper body. His professional staff, although not exactly trained in the medical field, had experience with the equipment in use. Donnel had had at least *six* solid years of experience with similar systems in the past.

He lay still as they worked while listening to their quiet comments; feeling strangely safe and relaxed during the procedure, which eventually caused him to zone out in a semi-sleeping state that finally brought on quiet snores that first startled, then amused these two seasoned professionals.

### ***In Nathan and Dorcas’ Compartment***

*‘I hear and obey, my Elder’* Dorcas sent in closing, before turning to ask Nathan to watch over Rose for a while. She gathered herself, kissed her husband and daughter goodbye, then headed to ships doc.

The task she was to perform didn’t sound all that onerous. As Lili had explained, she wanted one of the Healers or Seniors on hand to observe and advise Donnel while he was examining some mysterious package that was attached to Lord Caldar’s back. When asked why Lady Sai was not selected for such a delicate task, she’d been reminded of the recent loss of her husband, Commander Zickgraf, and Dorcas flushed in embarrassment at momentarily forgetting Lady Sai’s dangerous capacity for anger – something that was *currently* focused on Lord Caldar.

As a member of the Royal family, Dorcas’ part in all this was very simple. She was to be Lili’s private eyes and ears in ships doc. No one outside the immediate caregivers and local family were to know the details of Lord Caldar’s current medical condition; *whatever* it ended up being.

She arrived outside ships doc and lightly extended within – finding only Mistress Blanaid and Mister Ardan inside. When she quietly opened the door, Donnel motioned her over to a sleeping First Lord.

### ***On Vanaheim***

Jaiying was currently resting ... until Walter reached out to wake her.

*‘Jaiying... Jaiying... Grandfather is back and has a problem’* he called out to her.

## The End of the Road

*'Hmmm... What? Did Grandmother try to kill him already?'* She stretched out her senses and found Sai at the bridge of the *Kraken*, but didn't feel her Grandfather *anywhere*.

*'He's in ships doc ... asleep. He has something on his back. Aunt Lili is using Mama Dorcas to look through it for her'* Cathy sent. *'Reach out to Mama Dorcas and look at what she's seeing'*

Jaiying attached to Dorcas and watched as she looked within the device clipped to his back. It was thin and squarish, with smoothly sloping sides and corners, and seemed to be held to the flesh by several retractable hooks that were currently embedded into his skin. As Dorcas focused on it, she could see three liquid reservoirs, and three injection points – the largest of which was draining into a vein in his back. That one seemed to be nearly empty, while the other two had maybe half of their contents left to go.

She listened as Lili gave Dorcas specific instructions on how to remove the device, and at Lili's direction, Dorcas disabled the locking latches internally and lifted it straight off his back, before handing it over to the scientists.

As Milsie and Donnel turned away with their prize, Dorcas immediately opened herself and directed Healing to the several new holes in his back, but with little success.

Not missing a beat, she grabbed a container of disinfectant and a clean cloth to wipe down the area affected, then ended up washing off another layer of gray powder in the process.

*'Don't let the powder touch you!'* Lili quickly pressed, and Dorcas dropped the cloth and cautiously stepped away. *'The powder somehow prevents Healings from being effective. We don't know what affect it will have on anyone else'*

As a concerned outside observer, Jaiying decided a comment was appropriate.

*'Aunt Lili, you should have Mistress Milsie clean the wounds, as she is not a Healer'* Jaiying suggested, and Dorcas, in the loop with both Lili and Jaiying now, responded by calling Milsie over and requesting help with cleaning Ronnie's wounds; and told her why.

After a suitable cleaning – with Milsie wearing protective gloves just in case – Dorcas tried another Healing, but with similar results. She finally bandaged his back with thin combat dressings for the time being.

Throughout it all, Ronnie never stirred – his exhaustion over the last several days having finally caught up with him in the security of ships doc while surrounded by friendly staff.

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

Lili brought her husband up to date remotely, before making her immediate staff aware of the current situation over Vanaheim.

Then she got back to what seemed to be a steady stream of reports from the Tier One staff.

She was a few hours into it when she was interrupted by Dorcas.

*'Lady Lili ... do you have a moment?'*

*'Certainly, Dorcas. Does the First Lord still sleep?'*

She sensed when Dorcas turned to look at a sleeping Ronnie, but resisted the urge to look through her eyes without permission.

*'He slept throughout the procedure, and has been asleep ever since. I will return to my Nathan as soon as Mistress Milsie returns from dinner. Lady Lili, I – I wanted to ask you about ... the FORBIDDEN act you bid me perform'* she asked diffidently.

Lili had to think back to what they'd accomplished until she thought she knew what Dorcas was talking about.

*'Using your mind to unlock the latch? That fell into a difficult area for us, as Healers do not normally use our minds for such'* Lili admitted candidly. *'However, as it was both necessary and expedient to affect a MEDICAL procedure, it found approval under the Elder's purview'*

*'Lady Lili... What if ... what if an issue came up that required another intervention of that nature – one that you were NOT available to authorize?'*

Dorcas waited as the moments stretched, before sensing the slight echo of a sigh from over an hour away.

*'Dorcas ... we – Healers – try to maintain purity in our actions and deeds. If such actions and deeds were not worthy to be reported to us, then a Healer would lose their ability to perform Healings with proper intent, and chaos would ensue'*

*'Yes, my Lady. But ... but Ronnie has...'*

*'While utilizing the gifts of the Seniors, the man you see before you has always TRIED to maintain purity in his actions and deeds. Granted, sometimes he follows the "spirit" of the law, rather than the law of absolutes. We know ... we USUALLY know, when Ronnie treads on the edge of the sword. Both Elder Kita and Elder Ai granted him leniency with his gifts...'* Lili let it trail off while considering his latest gaffe.

*'Lady Lili ... d-do you know about the gifts he gave to me and Nathan?'*

*'Before he left on his mission? Yes. He told me of his intentions'*

## The End of the Road

*'And it met with your approval?'*

*'You and Nathan are family, and it was a gift born of love'*

*'And the ... the Vanir ... at the research station?'*

The pause was considerable this time, making Dorcas sorry she'd asked.

*'Dorcas, it is difficult to understand a situation without having experienced it personally. One is coming to act as my eyes and ears – as you have done this day – to bring understanding out of darkness. My current understanding is that the result was UNEXPECTED. It does NOT excuse the action, but a number of mitigating factors may be involved. It will be resolved in due time'*

*'But, my Lady. Ronnie is ... Lord Caldar is ... he has ALWAYS...'*

*'It will be resolved in due time. Our love to you, Dorcas, and please extend our love to your Nathan and Rose'* Lili sent in ending.

*'I – I hear and obey, my Elder'*

Lili opened her eyes to see two members of the Tier One staff politely waiting for her to return from her remote chat. The senior of the two stepped forward and placed a data tab on the edge of her desk.

"A few more reports for you, my Elder."

"Thank you, Kashia," she said, while looking over her and her companion curiously as they bowed and left her office.

She noted they'd reached out and held hands just before turning out of sight, then considered that she hadn't shared the Gift with *anyone* in the office of late. Perhaps it was time to rearrange her schedule?

### ***In Vanir Space, The Kraken, Donnel's Lab***

It was late afternoon, and Ronnie had been jostled awake before being escorted back to his compartment by two of the guard staff to continue sleeping off the stress of his last encounter with the Vanir.

In his commandeered lab, Donnel and Milsie were bent over a bench and testing samples of the liquids remaining in the injection device. So far, they'd had no clue as to what any of them were for, or what they'd actually done to Ronnie. Milsie was taking the lead in this because, between the two of them, she was the actual biologist, while Donnel was able to help out with any of the equipment she needed, and usually very quickly.

He watched her while she worked and took quiet joy in it – especially when her concentration peaked and her tongue slipped slightly between her lips while pondering the readings before her. A glance at the timer

showed it would soon be supper, and he looked forward to sharing a meal with her before returning to the lab to conduct more research together.

### ***March 18, The Kraken, Ronnie's Compartment***

Dorcas sat quietly in the outer chamber while reading a data pad at the desk that was offset from a direct view of the dimmed inner chamber. Through its open door, she could occasionally hear quiet snores coming from Lord Caldar.

Mistress Yu had left an hour earlier, but reported Ronnie had slept through the night – never seeming to notice her lying beside him. Dorcas remembered the whimsical glance she'd spared him just before leaving his chambers, and suspected rumors of the First Lord's application of Lady Lili's Gift were partly the cause of it. She was of Senior quality and could have pried, but, outside of speaking to the rest of the Senior Staff and their mothers, she hadn't yet developed that level of comfort with the other Healers on board.

A little while later, she heard stirrings from within, followed by the sound of feet moving across the floor. A glare of light came through the door, accompanied by a loud groan; Ronnie apparently having triggered the lighting sensor in the facilities.

She waited patiently while hearing the sounds of him making the rounds before shuffling back to bed and settling in with another groan.

She closed her data pad and went to check on him.

"Good morning, Ronnie. How are you feeling this morning?"

Even though she'd enabled the room lighting at a low level, she could see the discomfort visible on his face. Not wasting a moment more, she dropped her robes and started removing her ships underwear.

"What ... what are you doing here, Dorcas?" His voice sounded dry and raspy.

"It was my turn to watch you," she said, before dropping her underwear and coming over to the bed. She pulled the covers down and slipped in beside him before arranging herself higher up to make it more convenient for him.

"You know, Ronnie, I never dreamed what life could be like before you rescued me back on Earth," she murmured, while pulling him closer to her. "I was a food girl, and I was going to die. Without you..." she paused and looked away from him.

"Dorcas ... I'm fine. You don't have to be here. Go back to Nathan and Rose. I just need a little more sleep and--"

## The End of the Road

“And you’re in *pain*,” she interrupted him. “I have something for you. A gift of my *own* for you.” She rolled him towards her breast and lined his head up with her nipple. “*Drink* from me, Ronnie. You made me what I am. Let me ease your pain,” she murmured, then sighed when he latched on and began nursing from her.

In just moments, the Cletus-similar milk she produced – a Gift of Ronnie’s from their first few times together – was easing his pain. She could hear his contented sigh, and see the lines in his face relax as he closed his eyes and settled in to drink from her for a while.

### *In Donnel’s Compartment*

Donnel had let Milsie sleep in after they’d crashed together in his compartment late last night; mostly because his compartment was closer than hers. Besides which, as a junior staff member, she shared her compartment with another woman, and neither of them were up to sharing the evening with anything other than a warm bed where they could simply sleep together in peace. The memory of her hair scattered over his pillow warmed his heart, but did little to bring any joy to the notes he’d be presenting to the acting First Officer this morning...

They’d been able to extract and begin analysis of the contents from that strange package attached to Lord Caldar’s back, but so far, *neither* of them had any clues as to what they could be specifically used for.

One of them seemed to be a chemical lubricant of some sort. It appeared to be medically “neutral,” as in not having any apparent properties that would seem to affect the human body – not unless it was meant to affect a *specific* organ.

One of the other two seemed to contain genetic markers of some sort, but Milsie was unable to match them in the current medical data base aboard the *Kraken*.

The last one contained somewhat familiar indicators that Milsie seemed to think were related to cellular structures.

The words she’d thrown around were unfamiliar to him but she’d seemed positive she could identify the function of at least one of them if given a little more time and access to a bigger medical data base.

It was little enough to go on, and he hoped it was enough of a preliminary finding to present to the acting First Officer.

### *On the Bridge*

Endo was standing the bridge watch relief so Torga could go eat. After making the rounds of the systems, he switched one of the security monitors to the gym and observed while Mother sparred with one of Laisee’s Imperial guardsmen.

The way these guys moved, it seemed almost unreasonable that one of them had been bested by the Vanir back on that refueling planet. When Ronnie entered the bridge, he made mention of it to him, and was answered with harsh reality.

“Endo, they got *me* because I was *stupid*,” he said. “They got *Seven* because he was *unlucky*.”

They continued to watch while Sai was hard pressed to keep up with her sparring partner.

“Seven... What was his name?” Endo asked him.

“He was ... I think it was Hadrus... Hadrus Martus? Hadrus *Markus*? Something like that,” he said while shaking his head slowly.

They watched until Sai was disarmed by a brilliant move from her opponent, and Ronnie let out a sigh before going on with Seven’s unfortunate tale.

“He was going to send out the alert about Kantor, but had to crawl across the mud through a storm. Looked like he slipped and fell a few times, before falling over the edge of the cliff ... or maybe he went down the rope too fast. We found his stuff on the beach at the bottom. Saw where he crawled some more, then saw foot prints of the Vanir who found him. Slich 42130 said his hip was displaced. I can reset a dislocated shoulder by myself. Take enough pills, and you can run with a broken leg – or with a *foot* blown half off. Dislocated *hip*? *That’s a tough one.*”

The monitor showed one of the guardsmen demonstrating a disarming move, then stepping Sai through it. It was not a *classic* move – as in *everyone* was aware of it. It was something taught by Special Ops, and worked almost every time. *Almost* – as in, if you screwed up, you usually ended up *dead*. Ronnie shook his head slowly while sighing disgustedly.

Just one *more* thing for him to guard against with Sai.

He turned back to Endo and got a rundown of ship’s status, just before Torga returned from dinner. He stayed to chat for a while, then headed back to his compartment to rest again. He still didn’t feel quite right.

### ***In Petrus’ Compartment***

Sai was properly exhausted after her time in the gym. Laisee’s guardsman had really put her through her paces, and even taught her a few new things. She stood under the hot shower in her deceased husband’s quarters and relished the thought of showing the First Lord just what new tricks she’d learned.

She’d have to wait, though. It wouldn’t be fair to take him out “accidently” since everyone knew he was pretty messed up right now.

## The End of the Road

Ardan hadn't sounded all that hopeful this morning when he'd reported their lack of progress. Maybe the First Lord would die slowly and *painfully*?

Not *nearly* as satisfying as taking his head, but sometimes you take what you can get, right?

### *In Ronnie's Compartment*

Ronnie settled into his easy chair and contemplated what he should do next. He still thought about going down to Vanaheim, despite it being the toxic cesspool the sensors said it was. He somehow didn't believe Samuel when he'd waxed poetic over the "warm mud baths of home" and the "sweet smell" of his warren's hereditary enclave. After the impression he'd picked up from his mind, the best he could consider would be the "sweat" smell – if even *that* mild.

His head started to ache, and he began wondering if a personal visit was really necessary.

### *In Donnel's Compartment*

"Donnie! You let me *oversleep*!"

Donnel had just returned from the lab to see if Milsie was still in bed. She wasn't, but her current state of dishabille told him she'd just gotten out of it.

"Ready to eat, girl? Can't have you waste away on me now that you're all rested up again," he teased her.

He saw the shock on her face slowly curl into a smile, before she welcomed him with open arms.

"How did he ... Lady Sai, I mean. How did she take our report?" she asked while standing in the middle of the room and hugging him.

"Not all that terrible," he murmured. "I got the feeling she'd like him well enough to be ... well, on *even* ground, at least. I don't think she'd mind terribly much if he *died* from it, though."

"Donnie!"

"It's all right, Milsie. She's just pissed right now. She'll get over it. Hell, she was out to kill *Petrus* for the last two-hundred years!"

"No! She – she really *was*?"

He walked her back to bed where they could snuggle together comfortably, while he related tales told to him by his former shipmate about how often his *almost-ex-wife* came *almost* close enough to take his head.



***In Ronnie's Compartment***

Ronnie steeled himself, before reaching out to Vanaheim; now being thankful it was so close.

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

*'Ronnie... You sound very weak. How are you feeling?'*

*'I hurt. All. Over. But tell me what's going on down there'*

*'The Vanir are concerned about ... about the actions you took at the research station'*

*'The fact that I was tortured after freeing the Commonwealth and Hegemony prisoners, or the fact that their research station is gone?'*

*'They fear the way the lab director was ... killed'*

*'Would it help if I presented myself for punishment?'*

*'Ronnie! It – it would probably be helpful if you were available to ... to answer questions directly'* she suggested; stopping short of asking him to come down in person.

*'Tomorrow. I'll come down tomorrow. I just have to–'* he stopped as a stabbing pain lanced through his head.

*'Ronnie ... Ronnie, are you–'*

*'Tomorrow, Laisee'* he sent, but quite a bit softer than before.

***The Microcosmus, In Transit***

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

*'Certainly, Lady Lili. How may I serve?'* She could feel the silent titter coming across the minutes all the way from Kantor.

*'It's come to my attention that Lord Caltar has suffered some injury at the hands of the Vanir. We wonder if the Vanir you have on board may be of some assistance'*

Trenka didn't give it a moment's thought.

*'Certainly, my Lady. I'll have my ship serviced and leave immediately'*

There was a slight pause before Lili presented a juicy alternative.

*'The Kraken's Child is now available and has many of the same capabilities you currently enjoy. It would be beneficial to take advantage of it as you fast jump to the area. If you have the opportunity, I would consider it a PERSONAL favor if you would recover my little brother's body. It was lost on the larger moon orbiting that planet. Please take along the surviving*

## The End of the Road

*guardsmen, as well. They know the planet involved, and the area where the lab used to exist'*

Trenka could sense the somber note from Lili's heart.

*'Yes, my Lady. I will have it provisioned immediately and made ready to go. Should I bring along that woman you sent with me?'*

*'Not at this time, Trenka. There might be complications en route. However, you might consider additional Imperial traveling companions'*

*'Understood, my Lady. I know of several who are returning to the Kraken upon arrival. I will hasten their journey'*

*'Thank you, Trenka. Travel safely'* Lili sent in closing.

Trenka left her quarters and immediately headed to the *Microcosmus*' bridge. Once there, she asked the watch officer for a clear route to the target planet. Getting the course transferred to a data tab, she quitted the bridge and tracked down the senior guardsman from the surviving party to have him gather his men for the return trip. Then she set out to meet her Vanir passenger and try out her new language skills, courtesy of Lili's crash course.

On her way back from Slich 42126's quarters, she met Lady Jia Huan in the corridor and was told that an additional allotment of Healer's milk was being prepared for her imminent voyage. Jia's only query was how many bodies would be in transit. Trenka thanked her for her thoughtfulness, but Jia merely pointed out that Lili had just contacted her and suggested another small consignment of Healer's milk would be helpful to augment that provided by Lili just before she'd left Kantor.

It was Trenka's turn to smile at Lili's thoroughness.

She thanked Jia again, before returning to her ship to gather her personal belongings to transfer them to the *Kraken's Child*.

### ***March 19, On Vanaheim, Morning***

Ronnie's descent planet-side had gone smoothly ... at least to those around him...

During the ride, he was still internally processing the video Sai had shown him of his actions back at Station Alpha. Meanwhile, another part of his mind was considering how the fuck the Vanir had managed to survive in what was *obviously* a poisonous atmosphere, and why they didn't simply leave and go somewhere else. Along with that, a third and possibly *fourth* faction were considering the *dual* concerns that humanity was an extreme danger to all Vanir everywhere, but that likewise, the Vanir were an extreme danger to all *humanity*. Some undeclared part of him suggested to Sasha through a translator that their nominal escort be

*immediately* dispatched to the planet of Station Alpha to recover survivors, if at all possible.

The small package excised from his back was still being reviewed on the *Kraken*. Donnel had neatly disassembled it after examining it with the ships doc scanner and making sure nothing else had been implanted within his body.

It had appeared to be delivering a few metered-dosages of multiple *somethings* into his body, and would take some time to analyze them and what they were attempting to accomplish. He wasn't too enthused about the sections of *flesh* they'd later sampled – punched from the skin on his arms, legs, back, and chest – but those were just a few more insults to the many that already existed...

Docking revealed to him the Vanir secret of force bubbles surrounding their buildings to keep out the noxious fumes of their volcanic atmosphere. What he *now* understood was that, while the Vanir still chanced exposure to the *outside* air – usually no longer than necessary to get from one location to another – they otherwise remained *indoors*.

From Sai's quick briefing, he'd learned that very few outside locations were safe to reside in for any length of time. What little vegetation existed, survived only at the minimal level necessary to sustain life, and struggled even at that. As far as Sai could determine, the *only* reason the Vanir still occupied Vanaheim at all was for *tradition*.

Unlike other transits by the *Kraken's* utility transport, only one person was there to meet them. When he stepped off the ship, he recognized Sue walking forward to greet him.

*'Welcome to Vanaheim, Lord Caldar. Mother sends her hope that your journey was uneventful'* echoed faintly into his mind

*'Really?'* he sent back faintly.

She was hard pressed to hear it, so she reached down and turned on her translator, but saw the grimace on his face from embarrassment.

Either he hadn't really heard her all that well, or his ability to project had been severely limited due to his capture and mistreatment.

"No ... but I was told it is an appropriate salutation considering the circumstances," she admitted, then waited for the translation to finish.

"Well, then ... how does she *really* feel about me?" he asked aloud, to cover for his weakened mental efforts.

"I am sure Mother would have preferred you had died a rather quick and perhaps *painless* death – somewhere *well* away from Vanaheim and ideally by *human* hands – but I think she would take whatever she could

## The End of the Road

get at the moment. You have no idea how much fear and hatred you've created by killing the lead director of S'Slich'Tah research."

"Interesting. I suppose if it were *she* who was strapped to a rack and being tortured, she'd still prefer the *Director* had lived?" he cast out blithely.

It took a few seconds for the translation to finish, but before it did, he felt the faint echo of a gasp, before it was cut off in mid-stream.

It didn't *sound* like Sue, but he could make an educated guess of who it was.

"So you've infected your *Mother*, now? I wonder what the *rest* of the warren will think?"

His sniping stung her only slightly, but she could still appreciate the humor of it.

"I suggest you worry less about the warren, and more about the Senior Guild Masters, Lord Caldar. They are the ones who throw support either for or against the Prime. They are quite unsettled by the events at Station Alpha," she snapped at him.

"I have no quarrel with the Guild Masters, nor do I contemplate actions against the Vanir as a whole. However, there are some loose factions who need to be held accountable for their actions against us – both humans *and* Vanir."

"And that is for the *Vanir* to decide!" Sue said stiffly.

"Yes... That is for the Vanir to decide – as long as a repeat of their actions against humans is considered unlikely. And that is up to ... well, principally *me!*"

She considered his comment, then compared it against both what she knew about humans in general, and Ronnie in particular.

"We shall see, Lord Caldar. Your Ambassador awaits you," she finally said, before turning to lead him to Laisee's quarters.

### *The Human Ambassador's Quarters*

"Jaiying, something is wrong with your Grandfather's mind," Laisee muttered, after her quick perusal during Sue's meeting with him.

She'd felt something strange, almost *Vanir*-like, before the Prime had skittered away from what Sue was relaying to them.

"It is more than that, Mother. His *body* is not right. He has injuries he could not fix, and that Grandmother *would* not fix."

"Can you..."

"No. There is something blocking me as well. Maybe he will let us work on him before he meets with the Prime," Jaiying said, before letting out a frustrated little sigh.

"Perhaps..." Laisee muttered just as the knock came at their door.

***On a Small Moon Orbiting the Planet Where Station Alpha Used to Be***

The nagging sounds he'd been hearing finally woke him, but he kept his eyes closed and stayed limp. The pain in his legs wasn't *nearly* as bad as he thought it would be, although he couldn't seem to feel his toes any longer. Come to think of it, he couldn't seem to feel much of *anything* below his waist.

When the sounds finally quieted, Petrus cautiously opened one eye and looked around in the dim light. From his vantage point, it looked like he was on the floor of a ship's doc of some sort, but not actually on the treatment bed of one. He tested his arms and noted he was restrained, but not very securely. He could move his hips a bit, but his legs seemed a little weak and unable to provide him with any leverage. He finally noted the material he was lying on. It was the same sort of material Samuel and Sally slept in, only *flatter*.

"Aww, *shit*," he muttered very quietly.

***Vanaheim, The Human Ambassador's Quarters***

"You look well, Laisee, and as lovely as ever."

"Ronnie, you look ... terrible," she said evenly, and Jaiying came running forward to rush into his arms, with him bending in time to pick her up for a hug.

"Jaiying, you're getting taller every day! And *almost* as pretty as your mother!"

"Grandfather, you're *hurt*! You should let me and Mother *fix you*!"

"I'm afraid I don't have the time right now, sweetheart. Laisee, what's the current status between humanity and the Prime?" he asked, while looking around before settling onto a couch with Jaiying still in his arms.

As Laisee was bringing him up to date, Jaiying was surreptitiously probing all about his body, but being consistently blocked at what seemed to be the outer layer of skin. Even where an injury was exposed, she was unable to do anything more than observe the outer layer of damage.

What internal damage existed was left to her imagination.

Laisee eventually finished by describing the general distress the Vanir were feeling about his killing of the scientists at the research station. He countered with the predicament they'd put him in, and the extremes

## The End of the Road

they'd gone through to extract data from both him *and* Seven – including Seven's death by disembowelment. He was *still* more than a little pissed about it, but kept it to himself for the moment.

"So they're all right with torture and murder, but upset when a little retribution is enacted?" he muttered, then shook his head slowly at the speciest mentality of the Vanir.

"Not so much that, but in the *manner* in which it was applied. In the *meantime*, the Prime wishes to meet with you ... with *us* – as soon as you're ready," she told him.

He sat for a moment longer, then nodded before setting Jaiying on the couch and standing up.

"Let's go."

### *In the Prime's Quarters*

"What? He's ready *now*? He just *got here*!"

"My Prime, it would appear the human has had sufficient time to consider his options and would present them to you," her Senior Medical Technician said.

"*His* options? What about *our* options?"

"Grandmother, we need only *listen* at this time. We should have–"

"The S'Slich'Tah attacked *his* warren! What do you think his options will be?"

"We can only meet with him and ask," he suggested quietly.

The Prime paced her quarters and desperately wished she'd never *heard* of humans, nor been 'infected' by them, as had her daughter, her Ambassador, and several *more* of her people. She stopped pacing when one of the Senior Guild members came to her door.

"Ready so *soon*?" she asked.

"The humans are ... well ... they're *human*, my Prime. They wish to resolve several issues."

"No doubt," she muttered bitterly.

She glanced around her quarters, then briefly wondered who would replace her after she was found at fault for this fiasco.

"Very well ... let us proceed," she said with a resigned sigh.

At that, she gathered herself, and strode out with her Senior Medical Technician by her side, followed by the Guild leader. They would meet in the large receiving area with all parties in attendance.

***Meanwhile, Back on a Small Moon...***

He couldn't see much in the dim lighting, but heard voices behind a partition door, and closed his eyes down to a slit just before it opened. Two Vanir looked in on him and shook their heads, before turning away and closing the door.

Just before it closed, he thought he could see rough-cut rock that seemed to make up the wall of a corridor.

'*Well ... alive and relatively safe,*' he thought, then stretched out his mind, but immediately came up against a barrier; and something that vaguely sounded *tinny*.

He could feel Vanir minds close by, but that was all; thus telling him there was an active mind barrier he could not get through. He could move his arms, though, and managed to get them loose enough to get himself unstrapped and almost sitting up. *Almost* – because his balance was off for some reason.

He stretched sideways and reached down to his knees – where he found that his legs now ended – and shook his head in disgust.

'*AGAIN? FUCK!*' he silently fumed in frustration.

***On Vanaheim, Mid-Morning***

The Prime thought she'd handled things rather well...

"Ladies, *first*," Ronnie had quite politely said through a translator – a new one that had been considerably *improved* she'd been told – before proceeding to recite a summary of the chronological order of Vanir observation of humans over the last several tens of millennia.

She'd left out *nothing*; explaining in painful detail the thinking and decisions made by her and her predecessors over the millennia to keep the humans at bay and *away* from the Vanir. She'd made neither apologies nor excuses for their actions, other than the necessity of keeping the Vanir safe from humanity.

It had taken a little over two hours, and he'd been impressed at the vocabulary that had gotten translated. This had been *especially* gratifying considering he was getting only rather vague impressions from her mind during the telling of it, which seemed to get even less as time ran on until she finished...

He thanked her for her detailed analysis, before slowly pacing the room for a minute while pausing randomly to trade glances with Samuel. Then he turned and stood before the Prime, and presented his reply – which was short and somewhat rude.

"By the *Gods*, you people must be bored."

*On a Small Moon*

“There! He’s *awake!*” the Medical Officer said excitedly.

The monitor showed their prisoner to be lying on his back; with his hands casually folded behind his head, and his chin bobbing slightly to the rhythm of a silent tune.

“He doesn’t seem particularly upset about his legs. You’d think he would react more ... well ... just more,” the Captain said curiously.

“Maybe he thinks he was rescued?” his Medical Officer suggested.

“Oh, *please!* Look at the *size* of him! You think he didn’t notice the service table is nearly *twice* his height, and that he’s laying in *nesting material?* Humans don’t have facilities like we do.”

“Then why is he so calm?”

“If I understand our intelligence reports correctly...”

“As if *they* were reliable...” the Medical Officer muttered.

“As I was *saying...* Human behavior is not something that can be counted on. Perhaps he is satisfied with the knowledge he grounded us here so effectively?” The Captain thought his conclusion might have some merit to it, but then again, this was a *human* he was talking about.

“How would he *know?* How *could* he know?” the Medical Officer countered. “He’s been out since we found him outside the ship and dragged him in here. I *still* don’t know why you bothered keeping him *alive!*”

“Because, my dear clutch mate, we did not find out *how* he got here.” The Captain looked at his sibling before laying it out for him. “We found his foot prints and found the trail leading to a landing site by the side of the crater. What we *didn’t* find was his ship. If he had the accident while trying to get to his ship, then either someone in there watched him die, and left, or they waited for us recover the body, and *then* left.”

He paused and considered another scenario.

“Or ... someone came down and simply *took* it. We didn’t discover that trail until *long* after we’d recovered him.”

“Which do you suppose it was?” he asked, and his Captain tilted his head during a brief perusal of his question.

“His collar was almost out of air – what didn’t bleed out before his suit sealed itself. That implies his ship was grounded and cloaked at the time. Several hours later, a power spike was recorded close by. We have to consider that *someone* came down and took it, and that *same* someone ignored the fact that we were still down here.”



“How could they *know* that? We were still *cloaked*!”

“*He* knew it,” he said, while pointing to the monitor. “Besides, you didn’t see the *other* side of the ship. There’s a distortion field around the hole, but the hole itself is *obvious*. No. They weren’t concerned about us. They may not be concerned about *him* if they think he’s dead, but right now, I think we need to be concerned they will most likely come back for him, and ... and maybe *us*, as well.”

They watched the monitor for awhile longer, before the Medical Officer had another thought.

“Do you think they’ll send the Director’s killer?”

The Captain thought back to the video they’d watched and the analysis his mind had made of it.

“I think if they do – it would be best if he found this man *alive*, don’t you?”

### ***On Vanaheim***

Samuel quailed at Ronnie’s outburst, then shot a glance at the Prime, but was unable to read her reaction.

Sally had no problem, nor did Sue, or the Prime’s Medical Technician.

The Prime’s confusion was evident to them all, and they hoped Ronnie would make his meaning clear rather quickly, or this meeting would end badly. Almost as if on cue...

“You’ve been watching us humans for *millennia*, and this is the *best* you’ve managed to accomplish?” Ronnie sighed as he looked around at the Vanir, before stepping to the side and dragging a Vanir-sized stool to the center of the room to sit facing the Prime.

“S’Ahi’Ma 31245, I understand you have ruled your society for a rather short period of time compared to many of your predecessors, and yet you have been forced to face a most *disturbing* situation over the past several months – due in large part to *my* efforts. I cannot *apologize* for my actions as, like you, I am driven to protect *my* species against aggressive and invasive behavior from other species.”

He paused while waiting for the translator to complete his statement before going on.

“What I *can* do is analyze such behavior to determine if there is a *peaceful* way for humans and Vanir to co-existence. Towards that goal, we – my *researchers* and I – have spoken with, and studied several of your citizens, and your history.”

He paused again while glancing around, before continuing.

## The End of the Road

“As you know, we humans are a very inquisitive and *aggressive* species. We eat, reproduce, and do what we can to protect our society. Our *own* ancestral records point out the repetitive rise and fall of our civilization, just as you have monitored for the last tens of millennia. Samuel here tells me we missed our scheduled collapse by about five-thousand years this time,” he said amicably, with a gesture to Samuel.

“From discussions with Samuel and Sally, we’ve learned the Vanir are somewhat opposite of us in nature. Where humans reach a certain point in their development that triggers a rapid growth in technology and expansion, I understand the Vanir only pursued technological growth *once* – when ancient human relics were found and reverse-engineered ... so to speak.”

He paused, and after the translation was completed, got a human-like nod from the Prime to continue.

“I can well imagine the trepidation early Vanir experienced once the scope of the *insanity* of your human neighbors became apparent to them. Here were all these hairless apes fighting amongst themselves over land, space, resources, and even just over their own petty *differences*. My *home* planet, Earth, is a particularly *nasty* example. The people up there have a history of fighting over political or ideological beliefs – or just plain *power* – and most often to the detriment of those they would choose to rule.”

He paused and shook his head slowly at the complexity of the Earth issue.

“In the Commonwealth, we consider them somewhat *insane*, but believe they will eventually settle down. Perhaps if we provide them the right *incentives*...” he drifted off for a moment, before shaking himself, “...but that’s a topic for another time.”

He glanced at Laisee for a moment, then turned back to the Prime.

“At *this* point in time, the Commonwealth is relatively stable. Our particular mixture of racial selection and inter-breeding seems to have moderated our naturally-occurring tendency towards self-destruction. We continue to maintain administrative guidance and control over our sectors, and I have taken steps by which I hope to prevent any *further* aggressive behavior from the sectors under the Hegemony. The interference the Vanir precipitated between us is understood – from *your* point of view. We would appreciate that it *not be repeated!*”

He paused again while the translator caught up, before going on.

“Likewise, the S’Slich’Tah’s action against our administrative world was unexpected, but we understand it was not by *your* consent or control. We believe the *major* threat from S’Slich’Tah 29531 has been eliminated, and seek assurances that her influence will be curbed accordingly.”

The Prime sat very still after the translation finished, but looked at the human in confusion. Where were his *demands*? Why was he not *threatening* them?

He picked up the visual cues from her unspoken confusion, but didn't understand their basis. He plowed on anyway to cover what he thought her major concern really was.

"Grandmother, in order to protect my species, I was granted many favors from my Elder ... you *do* understand the relationship?" he asked quietly, and she eventually nodded silently.

"Given all that I had to do, and the responsibility I had to wield, there have been times when I overstepped even *those* bounds, and I will be called to task for it when I return home. For now, my goal is to leave this meeting with assurances that Vanir and humans will avoid further conflict during chance meetings, and that agreements are eventually reached that provide communication between our peoples so that further issues may be resolved peacefully.

"The Vanir are reasoning beings. Your minds are extremely capable, and the 'gifts' we've provided to several of you will help your society achieve many more things than you thought possible. We know both your 'public' and 'private' information about humans was tainted, but you now have *direct* knowledge from your representatives sent among us of what is truth and what is fallacy."

The Prime sat quietly for a few minutes while considering all that he'd said, but a nagging question still lingered.

"Rondal Caldar ... please explain what happened at the S'Slich'Tah research station."

### ***On a Small Moon***

The door opened quietly, and Petrus could smell the food before he could see anyone. As the lights gradually came up, he picked out the Captain and the person who should be the Medical Officer, if the reading of his thoughts was correct.

He smiled at them in greeting, following it in Vanir with, "I hope that's for *me* because I'm *starving!*"

### ***On Vanaheim***

Ronnie had stripped down to his underwear and stood in front of the Prime.

He'd also pulled down the torso portion of it so all the burns and cuts were easily visible. It was the first besides Sai and Donnel that anyone had seen of his treatment at the hands of the S'Slich'Tah lab Director.

## The End of the Road

Sally slowly walked forward and reached out to touch him; her hands already glowing softly in the light of the room, but despite her best efforts, she was unable to effect any of his injuries.

Laisee came forward as well, but could do no better.

“Your Director was quite clever. He discovered an element that can block our mind communications, and also appears to affect our ability to Heal. As for what happened to Director S’Slich’Tah 28476... I ask all of you who are able, to listen with me silently as we watch a replay of that video everyone is so concerned about,” he said aloud, then turned towards a large wall monitor. “I will both speak and try to project what occurred from *my* viewpoint. I apologize for my weakness.”

With the video paused, the spectators who were able, heard both his audible recitation and felt his reactions to what he’d experienced while being tortured on the Director’s rack. He related his treatment at the hands of Slich 42130, and how the eventual kindness of that *one* Vanir had changed his intention of killing everyone if he managed to escape. They heard his words, but also felt his anger, when he killed the Vanir guardsman reporting his escape before he’d pushed Slich 42130 through the Director’s door in front of him.

His pain, anger, and resolve played out in those minds capable of sensing it, as he remembered each second of it during his talk with the Director – up to the point the video recording started, and the Director was seen raising a weapon to shoot an armed Ronnie standing before him. They watched as the weapon was blocked and disabled, then heard the Director’s words echoing in his mind.

Each of them felt his anger and anguish over the lost of crewman Seven, and felt his resolve that the Director suffer for it immediately. They all watched and saw him fall backwards at the pyrotechnic display in the room, then felt his visible pain and confusion, and finally his dismay that *everyone* had been killed, instead of just the Director being severely punished. They finally felt his quiet resignation that he had things to do, and watched as he picked through the office before he left – no further thought given to the bodies left behind.

They also picked up a hope – curious to them, for he was a human – that his Vanir acquaintance, Slich 42130, had made it out safely.

### *On a Small Moon*

Petrus had enjoyed the meal, and was now sitting up and sharing his story.

“Actually, I was already parked when you landed, Captain. I’d been following you around, but when you didn’t make any moves towards the planet, I came out here and planted myself to get some rest. I figured my

Commander would call me if he needed me. I was quite surprised when you dropped down several hours later.”

“Yes, and you didn’t waste any time sneaking over to sabotage my *ship!*”

Petrus felt a bit sheepish at that.

“Well ... I didn’t plan it very well, did I? I thought it might be useful to keep you grounded for a while, so I snuck in to disable a few of your systems. Unfortunately, I forgot I couldn’t *read* Vanir, so I had to guess my way around the ship and do what little I could to keep you here.”

The Captain glared at him for a moment more, but a question was still burning inside him.

“Why didn’t you just destroy us?”

Petrus looked at him in astonishment.

“Why? Captain ... technically we’re not really *at* war, are we? I mean *officially*. So far, there have been little skirmishes between us, but that’s business as usual among strangers. No need to muster all the troops while we’re still dancing around the *real* issue, is there?”

“Real... *What* issue?” The Captain was somewhat confused by this talkative human, and that was *another* matter that confounded him. “And how did you learn to speak Vanir so well ... for a *human*?”

“I learned your language by listening and speaking with several of your citizens who travelled with us as guests. My sister also taught me a lot of it,” he said, pointedly *not* mentioning his ability to mindspeak.

“As for the issue; if you know our history, then you know what we’re capable of. The issue is basically whether we should make the effort to eliminate all the Vanir worlds at once and risk losing you as trading partners, or keep the offending warrens at bay while we offer peace treaties with friendly Vanir warrens. Am I correct in assuming you’re all from S’Slich’Tah?”

### ***On Vanaheim***

“I was not particularly proud of my last action at the research station,” Ronnie muttered in a half-hearted *almost* apology. “As it turns out, I will be punished for it ... in a manner of speaking.” He slipped his jumper back on and continued to dress, while the Vanir murmured quietly among themselves.

As he finished, he noticed the Prime looking around at her Advisors and Guild leaders. He thought he could just barely pick up her impressions of what they were talking about, but knew the final decision would come

## The End of the Road

from her. He hoped so, as she seemed a reasonable person once you got to dig around in her head a little – according to Laisee, anyway.

Laisee was nodding her head and watching Ronnie from the sidelines. She still couldn't believe he was nearly deaf to Sai and her, and after failing to hear her silently, she stepped forward in the quiet room and whispered into his ear, "Torga reports the Master Pack is in disarray, and Pack Gagsa is now consolidating their position."

"Thank you, Laisee," he said quietly, not mentioning her vocal comment over a non-verbal one.

He missed the significant looks bouncing between Laisee, Samuel, and Sally, before stepping forward to speak once again.

"Prime ... I've wasted enough of your valuable time. We have received envoys from you, and you have received envoys from us. Neither of our societies needs nor wants an aggressive posture against yet another neighbor we're just beginning to know as intelligent beings. On behalf of the Emperor of the Commonwealth, I seek recognition of a boundary between the Vanir and Human portions of the adjacent occupied spaces so that peaceful coexistence can be fostered – hopefully with an expectation of trade to follow at an unspecified time in the future. *Ideally*, monitoring stations would be established – trading outposts, if you will – manned by both Humans *and* Vanir at several points along the boundary lines."

This rather benign turn of events stunned the Prime – especially considering the continuing issue with the S'Slich'Tah.

"What of the 'technical' state of war that exists between us?" the Prime asked.

"Again, speaking on behalf of the Emperor of the Commonwealth, I warrant the attack against Kantor was led by a misguided, ultra-patriotic faction within your society that worked in secret to perform unauthorized intrusions, research, and interference with humanity – all without your direct knowledge or approval. For the benefit of *both* our societies, I have removed the major portion of that threat, and leave the rest up to you. I believe you now have the means to root out any further problems of that nature?"

"I ... yes. I have been so advised. You ... you have no demands?"

After the short translation, his head popped back and he blinked in confusion.

"Demands? What demands would you have me *make*, Grandmother? We're *humans* – hopefully not the *same* insane, hairless apes who invented planet-crackers and solar-dampeners. Likewise, I'm sure your scientists have the capability of doing something equally nasty to our worlds as well,

although I wonder why they haven't already performed a little terra-forming here on Vanaheim, itself. You don't really *like* living here, do you?"

He'd said this while glancing around at them all, but heard a collective gasp from around the room, and saw angry glares staring back at him; suddenly realizing he'd gone from casual banter to blasphemy in one sentence. It was strong enough that he felt it, even in his weakened state, so he pressed on to try and pull himself out of the pit he'd dug.

"Prime ... surely you know that Vanaheim ... you *do* know Vanir are not *native* to Vanaheim, don't you?" he asked quietly, while silently thanking the research Donnel had handed to him just before he'd left the *Kraken's* ships doc.

"Not ... not *native*?" He watched her anger turn to confusion in just moments.

"Your people are *transplants* ... like *most* of the Commonwealth and Hegemony. I can't imagine the nature of the species who dragged you here all those millions of years ago, but they *must* have thought you were worthy of saving," he suggested, "And so do *I*!" he added abruptly.

"Prime, I have a system tucked away in the Commonwealth where I've been stashing all the Hegemony human-standards and human-Drecks I've kidnapped over the years. A colony of Vanir would be a most *welcome* addition. The primary planet is nice, and we've been building another one that should be ready in another one or two-hundred years. We could even make it with a bit thicker atmosphere more suitable for Vanir if you're interested? Samuel?" he called out softly, and handed over a Vanir data tab, which he accepted with surprise.

### ***On a Small Moon***

Petrus was sweating profusely before waking up with a groan. He'd used up the last of his ship suit pills, and the Vanir pain suppressor had timed out, letting his legs ache *terribly*. At least his *knees* did. The leg pain was only phantom pain, but it didn't matter in the *least*, as it still hurt like a bitch.

Thankfully, it was enough to trigger the alarms, which brought the Vanir Medical Officer to the cavern ships doc.

"Sorry. I fell asleep," he mumbled, then reset the system's probes to counter the nerve impulses causing all the grief.

"Not... Not a problem," Petrus said with a grimace, which slowly faded as his nerves were deadened by the machine. "Thanks. My suit didn't carry *nearly* enough pills to last even this long, and I'm not sure I could have made it back to my people so they could fix my legs again."

"Again? You cut off your legs *before*?" The look given him was skeptical.

## The End of the Road

“Me? No, but the man I was *serving* with did. We got stuck down on Kee one time, and most of my legs were eaten. He cut them off and sealed them. I lost my eyes and parts of my face as well.”

“You lost ... they gave you new *eyes*?”

“They regrew them in place. That’s one of the skills our Healers are teaching the Vanir Medical Technicians aboard our ship orbiting Vanaheim.”

“Teaching ... it can be learned by *Vanir*?”

“It’s a *helpful* skill,” Petrus calmly assured him.

### *On Vanaheim, Afternoon*

Ronnie paced in Laisee’s quarters, while Jaiying sat on the couch. She was trying to analyze his wounds again, but could not push through his first layer of skin, and it was making her frustrated.

‘*Grandmother, how soon will the lab have results of Grandfather’s blood work and tissue samples?*’ Jaiying asked the void.

‘*They are not getting understandable results. Mister Ardan is still trying to sort out the chemistry of Lord Caltar’s implant device*’ was Sai’s curt reply.

Laisee was privy to them both, but said nothing to alert Ronnie. As long as he could not hear anything, there was no point in useless prattle – not in his present state of mind; which seemed very strange of late.

She’d been surprised to now have free range of his mind, and chanced upon his confusion over the changes he’d noted within it. She’d read the reference to a Plan B, but it didn’t really concern her, since he’d attended the meeting with the Prime and seemed content to settle for a trivial amount of cooperation in the near future – which he’d subsequently *trashed* by mentioning the Vanir protogenic assumptions were false.

Other than *that*, he’d made a somewhat reasonable presentation, yet made no demands – other than a not so thinly-veiled concern about further intrusion into human affairs. Planet-crackers, *indeed!*

The Prime was still in conference with her advisors, but aside from the initial concerns about a human invasion, his last comment about the Vanir being “transplants” from somewhere else was a hot new topic of discussion that promised to raise *more* questions than Laisee would be willing to provide answers for ... although *he* apparently could, if that data tab he’d handed Samuel held the information she suspected, which brought up the question...

“Ronnie, *why* did you tell the Prime that all of her people were transplants?”



“Hmm? Because they *are*. Donnel’s research team determined the Vanir are non-native to Vanaheim – wrong chemical make up and all.”

“But if they’re not from *here*, then where–”

She stopped when he grimaced again, then felt an echo of the pain shooting through his body. She watched him close his eyes for a few seconds until it passed.

“They are ... they are not genetically *compatible* with this planet,” he grumbled, then took a relaxing breath before going on. “They’ve been here for a long time – *millions* of years, certainly – but the *plain* fact of the matter is, they could not have *evolved* here. Milsie worked it out from geological samples brought up to the la–” He paused during another grimace, and waited it out before continuing. “The Vanir were brought here a *long* time ago by an unknown benefactor for an unknown purpose. Maybe by a species like ours who thought they deserved a chance to survive and mature? Anyway, Milsie confirmed they originated elsewhere...”

He paused again, as Laisee looked at him in shock. He didn’t need to read minds to know she’d already figured out where from.

“NO! You can’t tell them *that!*”

“Already did. Full disclosure and all, you know,” he said with a painful shrug.

### *In Sue’s Quarters*

“Sue! Sue! You’re *back!* These men won’t *play* with me! Do *you* want to play with me?” Kiki asked hopefully, while rushing up to Sue and hugging her leg excitedly.

Sue’s two Vanir guards gave her the funniest looks, before turning away in embarrassment and finding another location to stand. Sue took note of their behavior, but shrugged it off.

The little Kee was there at *her* invitation – not that she couldn’t have prevented it, but she’d gotten used to her company. Besides, Silas was still hiding out on the *Kraken* until the situation settled itself.

“Kiki, what did Lady Sai say about playing all the time?”

Kiki tilted her head way back and looked up into Sue’s eyes.

“She said... She said I need to learn ... waiting ... *patience!* I need to ant ... anticip ... *anticipate!* Waiting makes play more *good!*” she exclaimed happily.

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“Yes! That’s very *good*, Kiki. And do you know what? They *miss* you on the *Kraken*, and have asked that you return on the shuttle this afternoon. Is that all right?”

The little Kee’s smile stretched from one side of her face to the other.

### *On the Kraken, Nathan and Dorcas’ Compartment*

Rose snuggled with her mother and wondered what their future was going to be like. If Grandfather failed to bring peace between the Vanir and Commonwealth, there was a good chance all of humanity would go to war against the Vanir, and then *no one* would be safe – even on the Demon’s World.

She thought of going to visit Mister Ardan again, but he was still busy working on that problem Grandfather had given him. She worried about that, and hoped Grandfather would be cured of whatever was hurting him, but it didn’t sound promising from what she’d been reading from Donnel’s mind.

She couldn’t even talk to Grandfather after he came back from the Vanir station. She’d caught the anger and remorse from Grandmother when she’d first met with him and seen what the Vanir had done to him, but Grandmother *still* had not offered to help him, and he couldn’t help himself, either. Not even *Jaiying* could talk to him, and it was scaring her and the rest of the kids.

‘*Walter, what are we going to do?*’ Rose sent out on their very special band.

### *On a Small Moon*

“So you’re saying that humans are *already* on Vanaheim and negotiating a peace treaty with the Prime? Why should we believe you?”

“Because it’s *true*, Captain. *I’ve* no reason to lie to you, and you have the means to find out ... or you *will* when your technicians fix the communication lines.”

The Captain thought it through. If the human were lying, he could certainly die before any humans arrived here to rescue him. The downside was that – if he *was* telling the truth – they needed to keep him alive as a show of “good faith” as this Petrus person had suggested.

Wait ... did he just refer to him as a *person*? When did *this* philosophical transition occur? And there was one *other* little issue that should be discussed first.

“My Communications Officer got one of our receivers connected to an antenna. We were able to copy some message traffic from the research station satellite. Perhaps you might be in a position to explain it to us?”

"I would be more than happy to *try*," Petrus offered, but was confused at what this might have to do with him.

Confusion left him twenty minutes later as he lay there and shook his head in sadness. Ronnie had gone over the *top* this time, and Lili was gonna spank him for *sure* – *if* she found out about it. He let that hope drift away when he realized Ronnie had probably already told her about it. He needed to get out of here, go grab Ronnie, then hide him away somewhere, but *first* he needed to convince his capturers that he was a valuable commodity.

"Captain ... I think what we're seeing here is a man who's been pushed over the edge. I – I think what I need to do is go talk to him before he goes and does something *terrible* to Vanaheim."

### ***Kantor, The Royal Homestead, In the Children's Room***

Walter, Cathy, and Josie were back in their common suite again and silently discussing what to do about their Grandfather.

Letting the Elder pro tem kill him was out of the question, but confronting Aunt Lili about it was also a hard point to pass. Their best bet would be to influence the Emperor, but Uncle Radatel would have to come to a safe conclusion on his own without them forcing the issue or brainwashing him into it. They'd already influenced him once before, and danced on the hairy edge in doing so. They didn't need to set another dangerous precedent.

"But Jaiying and Mama Laisee said that Grandfather didn't *mean* to kill those Vanir!" Josie persisted out loud. "She said he looked confused when it happened, and he's *still* messed up! They *did* something to him, like ... like maybe that thing they put on his *back* made him do it?"

"Mister Ardan is still working on it, Josie," Cathy said calmly. "It may explain what went wrong, but certainly Aunt Lili will want Grandfather to return home before making up her mind."

"Unless she wants him to return home first so he'll have fewer chances of slipping away," Walter quietly suggested, which brought a gasp from the two girls. "Grandfather has run fast and loose with the rules for years. Jaiying foresaw his death a while ago, and maybe this is how it begins?"

"*Jaiying?* Jaiying hasn't been right in the head since that business with Grandfather and *Sally!*" Josie shouted, but the gasp from the other room had started moments before her outburst.

"Children..." Maya called shakily from the doorway. "Please tell me what is going on."

Maya came into the room while still cradling the two sleeping valaet kits. She stepped into the middle of a large floor pillow and formed a

## The End of the Road

pocket in the center of it with her feet; placing the kits in the middle of it before coming over and sitting with the children.

"I cannot hear my Ronnie, and he does not respond when I call to him. Do you know why?"

They gave her the highlights first, followed by the details. Then they called in comments from both Laisee and Jaiying. Sai they left out because of the Petrus issue, but Laisee was kind enough to let Maya see Ronnie through her eyes while they were in touch. Maya thanked her, but even remotely connected this way, she could *still* not reach him, or even sense that he was there.

*'It is similar for us, Maya'* Jaiying sent. *'We can hear him very faintly, but he cannot hear us at all now. I think he is getting worse, too. He-'*

Jaiying stopped when Ronnie bent over in pain once again, but Maya felt nothing at all during his episode, and nearly cried while watching him through Laisee's eyes. Laisee and Maya watched Ronnie take a tablet from a pocket and swallow it with some water, while Jaiying's sigh was felt across the void.

*'He needs to rely on medication for relief now. We cannot Heal him any longer. We cannot even see inside him to understand what is going on with him'*

"My Ronnie ... my Ronnie is ... *dying!*" Maya sobbed and slumped over in tears, not listening to anything else that was said, while the children crowded around her after Laisee and Jaiying broke the connection.

*'Grandma Blossom? Can you please come visit us?'* Walter called out.

### ***On the Kraken***

Donnel shook his head when Milsie presented him with the breakdown of one of the chemicals injected into the First Lord. Her look told him it wasn't promising.

"Honestly, Donnel, it was not very clear what I was seeing at first. I had to search quite a bit of the database to determine what it *might* be used for," she said, then brought up a few extreme enlargements on the lab monitor and pointed to one of them.

"These are human chromosomes. Those colored areas at each end are called telomeres. I wasn't really sure what I was looking for until I took samples of Lord Caldar's body – his skin and some of his blood."

She isolated two samples side-by-side on the screen, then enlarged them further to focus on the ends of the chromosomes.

"The sample on the left is from his skin – epidermis cells. The one on the right is from his blood. You're looking at white blood cell

chromosomes. In all instances, you can see the telomeres in the white blood cell chromosomes are shorter than those from his skin.”

Donnel looked at them, then looked at her expectantly. It took her a moment to remember that this wasn’t his regular field of study.

“Telomeres are necessary for normal cell duplication. When a cell duplicates itself, they act like buffers at the beginning and end of the chromosome. Without them, the cell would not properly duplicate and eventually die.”

At Donnel’s further lack of comprehension, she added, “Instead of losing bits of telomeres, you’d lose bits of chromosomes and the cell would become mutated. Replication of cells would degrade and eventually fail completely.”

He looked at the screen again but shook his head; prompting her to continue with a mini-lecture.

“Skin cells duplicate themselves every ten to thirty days – for someone like me from Tyler. The turnover for my white blood cells is between one to five days. The white blood cells from these samples have telomeres that are statistically *shorter*.”

“So ... you’re saying that stuff he was injected with is melting off the ... the *telomeres*?”

“No. Actually the telomeres are rebuilt naturally by an enzyme called telomerase reverse transcriptase. What I *think* is happening is that the injection is acting as an enzyme inhibitor and causing premature degradation of Lord Caldar’s cellular structure.”

He looked at the screen again with many thoughts running around in his head.

“But we’ve *removed* the injector! Can’t you ... I don’t know ... *reverse* the effects somehow?”

She looked down at her notes, but had nothing to offer him.

“Donnel ... you must understand that this is not my area of expertise. I – I *think* this is what’s going on, but we’d need a medical doctor – a cellular biologist, perhaps – to come up with a proper treatment plan for Lord Caldar. If not ... he’s going to die.”

Donnel stared at her for several seconds while letting his anger rise.

“I *won’t* subscribe to that! And that *doesn’t* explain why the Healers can’t see what’s going on *inside* of him, or why they can’t perform any *Healings* on him!”

She looked up at him with a little hope in her eyes.

## The End of the Road

“That ... that one was a little easier to figure out. From what we’ve determined, they didn’t just dust the First Lord with powder – they *blasted* him with it. There are even traces of it in his blood stream. It’s embedded deep into his dermis. To get rid of it all, we’d have to skin him alive.”

She’d said it flatly, but still cringed at her own words, and Donnel didn’t look particularly happy with that treatment plan, either.

“But that doesn’t explain why it’s still effective without the energizing radiation source, either,” she murmured. “I’m still working on that,” she added, but Donnel turned away in frustration, before rounding on her again.

“Tell me something you *can* do – *without* skinning him alive, that is,” he asked her, but nervously turned away again while she spoke.

“Well, he did mention using his *eyes* to move things. That implies we could ... you know ... open him up and work from the inside *out* – at least for his *wounds*. We’re still looking at a counter agent for both the enzyme and the powder, but we’d have better luck if we could get more information about them.”

He snapped his head around and stared her.

“And yes, we’re working with the Vanir onboard to translate the material the First Lord brought back with him, but it doesn’t look promising,” she quickly added. “It’s mostly reports and orders ... that sort of thing, but we’d be better off if he’d captured a lab guy or two.”

She looked at his sour expression, but it softened before he reached out to hug her, then gently rested his chin on her head while letting out a helpless sigh of resignation.

“Very well. Keep working on it, and keep me appraised. Good work, Milsie. I’m sorry, but ... I’m a little on edge here.”

He let her go and turned to stare at the monitor again while thinking about enzymes, white blood cells, and possible genetic mutations.

He watched Milsie turn to her controls and adjust the display resolution; backing out the view significantly until the cells began to resolve as unique individuals. He could see solid debris in the spaces between the blood cells, then turned away and sighed.

“A bigger sample of that *powder* stuff would be nice, too,” she muttered.

He looked at her for a moment, nodded, then headed to his desk. He sat down heavily and thought about what he was going to tell Lady Tal at the next update.

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

Sai watched from the bridge while Sasha contacted the planet and got clearance for the shuttle to depart the *Kraken* and land at the Capitol.

It was another routine personnel swap of Laisee's guard detachment, but this time they'd be bringing Kiki back with them. Apparently, the little Kee was freaking out every Vanir she chanced upon, and Sue agreed that she'd be fine planet-side without her.

She checked the manifest and noted it was Captain Teldrus Avitus who was headed down with his team this time. He was a good sparring partner, and an even better trainer, and she looked forward to the next time they got together in the gym. Letting out a sigh, she watched from the monitor as the shuttle exited the rear of the *Kraken* and slowly drifted into the gravity well below them.

### ***Ten Kilometers From Research Station Alpha***

"You know ... on the *whole*, this isn't so bad," Slich 42130 said from his relaxed position sitting at the base of a tree.

His small group of survivors was clustered at the edge of a clearing that was surrounded by a variety of brush and trees – many of which carried edible fruit and berries, according to their two botanist guys. They'd passed a potable water source less than a kilometer back towards the station – what was left of it – and considered themselves lucky so far. Last night had not been unbearable, but it hadn't *rained* – and they *all* knew what it was like when it rained.

"We *have* to go back, Slich 42130. No one knows we're out here, and we have no means of communication," one of the lab guys muttered.

"There's nothing left to go back to. Besides, there's probably radiation to worry about."

"The radiation was transitory. Even if the gamma rays didn't kill us, we'll probably die out here anyway," someone else suggested. "At least we can go back, and ... I don't know ... leave a *note* or something?"

As their semi-elected leader – simply because he'd gotten them all out in time – Slich 42130 nodded his head and stood up.

"All those in favor of going back and ... and leaving a note, come with me," he said. He was somewhat gratified they all chose to go with him instead of splitting up the group.

As they walked along, he wondered why anyone would consider still living on Vanaheim when there were so much *nicer* places to live on – like *this* one. He quickened his step, hoping to get there and then back to the water source before nightfall.

## The End of the Road

### *On the Kraken*

Sai understood Ardan's request for assistance from the Vanir but considered only members of the S'Slich'Tah would have any information they needed, and the likelihood of *that* happening was between slim to non-existent.

Besides, whatever information they'd receive would still be suspect.

She sent the request along to Laisee anyway, then sent crew to recover Lord Caldor's clothing and armor to see if there were any traces left of the powder.

It was a stretch, but maybe they would get lucky. As for the paperwork Ardan had left with her, she checked it over once again, then reached out to the Senior that Lili had introduced her to shortly after he left.

### *On Vanaheim, Late Afternoon*

Ronnie had finally been persuaded to rest, and found a place in a room off the antechamber. After he'd drifted off – somewhat fitfully – Jaiying had joined him. She'd persisted with her attempts at Healing him while trying to make sure she didn't disturb him in the process.

Laisee had contacted Samuel about the possibility of getting information about the chemicals used on Ronnie, then provided him with a breakdown of their elements to pass along to Sally for evaluation.

She'd also inquired about the possibility of getting samples of the suppressive powder from the research station when the rescue ship recovered the Vanir survivors – should there *be* any survivors ... or *samples* ... or any of the research station left to *glean* them from.

### *In Samuel and Sally's Shared Compartment*

Samuel paced back and forth, while Sally continued to review the data Ronnie had transferred to them. He shivered at every gasp and sigh she gave out while scrolling through the information and reading short parts of it to him. Whatever the net result ended up being, it promised to bring *chaos* to the stability of current Vanir society, and probably the downfall of the Grandmother and her warren. After more than an hour, she finally settled back and hissed out a heavy sigh.

"How – how bad is it? Is it *true*?" he asked faintly.

"Well ... I'm not a true historian, no more so than most, but the information they present is very persuasive ... for a bunch of insane, hairless apes, anyway."

"It's *true*, then? We *didn't* evolve on Vanaheim?"

"Their research seems to indicate that – yes. It gets *worse* though."



"How could it be any *worse*? We were genetically-engineered, I suppose?" He turned away and threw up his arms in frustration.

"No! Not *that* worse ... but we may well have been. They think they know where we originated – right down to a trail of genetic markers and a collaborative fossil record," she said, before finally letting out a disgusted sound, which caused him to face her once again.

She paused and stood to stretch while he stared at her in confusion.

"Well?" he finally asked.

She dipped her head, then shook it slightly; almost as if she were physically trying to settle this new information into her image of reality. Her expression wasn't quite bleak when she faced him again and told him the *new* origin theory.

"They *think* they traced our origin to a small, mud-ball of a planet in the middle of an obscure sector. It appears that our ancestral links got severed during a cataclysmic upheaval some time ago. We'll probably never know for sure, but the data is intriguing just the same."

"But... but it doesn't really *change* anything, does it?" he persisted.

"Only if you want us to stay here and *suffocate* in our old age! Samuel, I *don't* want to raise our children here on Vanaheim! I think we would be better off somewhere *else* ... somewhere *healthier* – with a *real, BREATHABLE atmosphere!*"

"That ... that's–"

"Yes, an unpopular sentiment, but you don't expect me to bring eleven new lives into existence and risk losing *most* of them before they mature, do you?"

"*Eleven*? There are *rules*! Offspring enter the crèche, and then ... then there must be a *selection!*"

"NO! My children will *not* be selected! I will raise them – with or *without* your help – but I will *not* let my children be sacrificed based on the needs of *society!*"

Samuel stepped back in shock. The concept was *completely* foreign to him. All Vanir sent their eggs to the crèche for hatching. The one or two determined most viable were allowed to develop, while the rest were discarded. It balanced the need for bodily replacements of those who died of illness, accident, or old age, but mostly it prevented over-population, and it sounded like Sally was going to violate that sacred construct.

"Samuel... I will do this *with* you ... or *without* you, even if I have to accept the hospitality of the *humans* to make it happen," she said firmly. "Will you come with me?"

## The End of the Road

"I – I – I..."

'*Samuel?*' she pressed gently.

"I – I hear ... and obey, my ... my Healer ... my love," he whispered.

"Very *good*, Samuel," she said, then stroked his lower abdomen with her tail. "Now let's go and see if we can soften the blow to our Guild members before we help the Grandmother make the *right* decision."

"Yes, my Sally," he whispered with a shiver. He was suddenly very glad *males* took the subordinate role in certain processes – *this* one included.

### *The Prime's Quarters*

"I will speak with the humans ... privately," the Prime said, but her Senior Medical Technician protested aloud.

"Alone? *All* alone? Surely a guard should be–"

"Very well ... *you* will be there, as will my Ambassador and his assistant ... and my *daughter*. The human male confuses me, and I would have further explanations from him – if he is able, of course."

"I – yes. I will send the message *immediately*, my Prime. I–"

"No! You will go in *person* and request their presence *here* ... in my *outer chambers*! I do not wish to ... to alarm the Guild Masters unnecessarily."

"It shall be as you say, my Prime," he agreed, then immediately left to make the arrangements.

### *In the Human's Quarters*

Jaiying heard the commotion at the door, but remained still while reaching out to learn what was going on. Her Grandfather groaned and sat up anyway, having heard it as well. He swung his legs out and planted them on the floor before searching his pockets for another pill and swallowing it dry. He grunted once, then stood up – remaining still until his balance caught up with him. He flipped on his translator, before heading out to see what was what.

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"And I am telling you the First Lord is still resting," Laisee was quietly explaining in Vanir. "His condition has worsened and he needs his rest–"

"And at *this* rate, I will never *get it*," Ronnie interrupted her, before the translator finished. He slowly approached from the sleeping chamber with Jaiying by his side, before asking, "How may I help you ... ahh..."

"S'Ahi'Ma 32898, First Lord. I am the Grandmother's–"

“Yes, you serve the Prime,” he interrupted again, before the translator finished. “She wishes something from me?”

“She would speak with you, First Lord. She requires ... clarification?”

Ronnie listened to the translation while looking at him, then glanced at Laisee.

“*\*Did the translator, you know, translate that correctly\*?*” he quietly asked her in Cletus.

“*\*Yes, First Lord. And it is gratifying that you still retain your language skills.\**”

“Never thought I’d miss *mindspeak*,” he muttered darkly, before turning his attention back to the Medical Technician.

“Please advise the Prime that I am available immediately.”

“Yes, First Lord. Ahh...”

“*Now* would be appropriate, if she is ready?” he suggested, and the Vanir quickly nodded and backed towards the door.

“Come along, Laisee. The Prime has questions. You, too, Jaiying. I understand she’s *easily* intimidated by you,” he said, then took hold of her hand as they proceeded towards the door.

At the threshold, they were met by Laisee’s lead guardsman, Captain Teldrus Avitus, who smoothly transitioned his contingent of men into escort mode, while the existing men took their kit and backed away. The outgoing section all breathed a sigh of relief they were being swapped out, and stashed their replacement’s personal belongings, while their immediate section leader updated Teldrus with the pass down information.

Once Teldrus was ready, he and his section assumed escort duties and took up positions around the humans, before following the one Vanir leading them into the depths of the Capitol structure. Teldrus checked their progress on the tiny heads-up display mounted on his helmet, while dividing his attention between a spoken commentary from the outgoing section leader, and the route they were following.

Back in the human’s quarters, the outgoing section gathered their cache of personal belongings, said goodbye to the lone man left on duty, then headed out as a group to the shuttle dock.

There they met the Vanir, Sue, and their little play partner, Kiki. Each of them smiled at her, and they could see the eagerness in her hungry looks at them.

It was a *happy* boarding party that lined up to enter the shuttle.

### *On a Small Moon*

“Well, Captain, I understand congratulations are in order. If I overheard your crewmen correctly, your ship has nearly achieved flight status,” Petrus commented.

“True. It *may* fly again – but without a proper navigation array, we’re still stuck down here. If you had just pulled *plugs* it would be one thing, but ... but cutting all those *cables*!”

“Believe me, Captain, I cannot apologize *enough* for that stupidity of mine,” Petrus said, before sighing at his own lack of vision. “It simply never occurred to me that your ships were built that significantly different than ours. I understand I was very fortunate that some of the cables I cut were not the ones located mere centimeters away from them.”

He *was* fortunate. Some of the data cableways were identical to the main power bus trays that fed the shield and projector assemblies. If he’d cut through one of *them*, not only would the ship be disabled, but he would have been fried on the spot. He was very lucky to have walked away from that accident with his life ... in a manner of speaking. With the situation he was currently in, he’d been a most polite prisoner while under their care; knowing just how precarious his position really was.

“How are communications coming along, Sir?”

“We are receiving well enough. Our *transmitter* lines took quite a bit of damage when you exited the side of the ship, but we’re getting there.”

The Captain paused for a moment, then looked at him laying there. “Too bad you aren’t like some of your women who can talk with their heads,” he joked, and Petrus smiled at the comment.

“Yes ... too bad I don’t have the Healer skills of some of our women,” he said; lying by omission. “It’s just as well, since we don’t know what the Prime has decided about your people – and *warren*, for that matter.” The Captain made a face that Petrus recognized as the equivalent of a grimace.

“Ahh ... Captain, if we may speak frankly for a moment?” Petrus asked, and received a nod to continue. “My curiosity begs the question of what your feelings are about humans – in *general*, I mean. Perhaps I am a poor example, but we seem to be getting along rather well ... considering the circumstances.”

The Captain stared at him, while memory sequences flashed through the segments of his mind of what he’d been *instructed* to believe, compared to what he’d experienced first hand – with at least *one* human.

“In general, I find humans incredibly unstable and dangerous – when pressed to defend themselves. I’ve studied your society from the time our Guild Masters approved the Prime’s plan to arm the Drecks and set them

against your stellar grouping. I have to admit that, given your technological advantage over them, your lack of proactive response was rather disappointing.”

Petrus let out a short laugh, then started to chuckle; finally winding down with a long sigh, before offering his own opinion about it.

“I must agree it was somewhat disconcerting. We’ve often wondered about that *ourselves*. I’ve served since before the first Drecks assaults, but *never* understood why we didn’t just go back in and eliminate the Drecks home world and be done with it.”

The Captain spared Petrus a wry smile before asking, “So you could then go in and conquer all the Drecks *subject* planets?”

“By the Gods, *no!* Why would we want to do *that*? We have enough trouble dealing with our *own* clusters. Believe me, you have *no idea* how hard it is to maintain a balanced trading structure, where one planet values water, and another one values precious metals – precious to *them*, anyway – or yet another one trades in agricultural products. It’s an administrative *nightmare*. I don’t know how Ronnie’s brother manages it all.”

“Ronnie?” the Captain asked.

“Rondal Caldar ... the First Lord of the Commonwealth? He’s the possibly-unhinged individual who killed the lab director and destroyed that lab down below us ... and cut my legs off a few years ago. He’ll be amused to learn that I did it *myself*, this time,” he muttered.

“That ... *that* man is the First Lord of the *Commonwealth*? What is he doing out *here*?” he asked, with panic rising in his voice.

“His brother sent him here to deal with the Prime. You know ... either negotiate a peace treaty, or ensure there won’t be anymore interference from the Vanir. With the research lab vaporized, I think there will be a lot fewer issues to worry about,” he considered casually.

“But – but if he can kill the Prime by just a *touch*–”

“I’ve been thinking about that,” Petrus interrupted him. “It seemed to me he wasn’t expecting that to happen – down *below*, I mean. In fact, it looked to me like he was *confused* about the whole episode.” He paused to think about it a bit further, then offered his own opinion about it. “But if that director was really as big a waste orifice as everyone *here* seems to think he was, I can certainly understand *why* he did it.”

The Captain nearly choked at that; both fear and humor, fighting to take control of his breathing, along with jumbling up his understanding of this conversation. Then he had another thought.

## The End of the Road

“Petrus ... can *you* ... by just a *touch*...” he asked while leaning back slightly.

“Oh, no! Not *me*! That’s a *capital* offense – a *huge* crime among my people. Ronnie was granted some leeway in his actions, but even *I* don’t think he’ll survive this error. I’m afraid my sister will order his execution when he returns to Kantor – *reluctantly*, of course. She was his stepmother for a while ... ahh, ‘adoptive crèche attendant’ I think is the closest equivalent. She cares for him a great deal, but ... he broke our laws, and ... well, she *is* the Elder,” he said very quietly.

The Captain remained frozen for several seconds while a few segments retrieved memories of the human political structures and started putting them into perspective.

Then he began trembling slightly, only to have it suppressed when another issue came to the forefront.

“She will *do* this? Even though your First Lord serves her *faithfully*?”

“You followed your warren leader’s instructions, and look where it got you,” Petrus countered gently. “Captain, the Emperor and the Elder do not hold anger against the Vanir. If they did, they would not have allowed him to rescue the Prime’s daughter from a Death Void – not that she was alive at the time.”

He saw the Captain’s confusion once again.

“But he brought her back to life!” he quickly added. “Nice girl. *Angry*... *Sullen*... A typical youth from almost *any* species.”

The Captain stepped back a bit further, then looked at him suspiciously while Petrus continued.

“To get back to my point, Ronnie spent the last several years arranging for the *non-destructive* collapse of the Hegemony by internal means, and that was *before* he discovered evidence of Vanir interference. He’s spent nearly another year working out the ramifications of it, and determining the best way to deal with it.”

Petrus waited for that to sink in before going on.

“After working with the Vanir Ambassador, he has decided the Vanir are worth *saving* – else he would have long-jumped in and *vaporized* Vanaheim *six months ago*! We’re tired of *killing*, Captain! We’re tired of *war*! And *that’s* why I need to get to Vanaheim so I can save my friend from doing something *stupid*, and hide him from my *sister*!”

### ***Vanaheim, A Meeting with the Prime***

“Do you *really* think we are descended from an ancient species from your home world, First Lord?”

Ronnie sat in her presence while Laisee and Jaiying stood off to one side with Samuel, Sally, and the Prime's Senior Medical Technician.

"Prime, I am no great scholar. I am merely a warrior. The data I provided to Samuel is the result of educated humans working from samples taken from my *home* world, from your citizens aboard my *ship*, and from both remote observations and surface samples taken from here. They seem to tell an incredible story of a species rescued from a doomed planet and dropped onto a suitable replacement – I'm *assuming* it was suitable at one time ... several million years ago."

She bristled at that, but allowed her many segments to consider all aspects of what her Ambassador and his assistant had earlier briefed her about the received data. It was *very* circumstantial ... but also remotely possible. It was certainly *well* before the development of the very capable memory of the average Vanir, however.

"And you are not worried we might choose to reacquire our ancestral home for colonization?" she prodded him.

"*Realistically?* You probably would not like it. It currently houses nearly seven-billion humans in various stages of civilization. From what Samuel tells us, your population barely tops the three-hundred million mark."

He watched as she shifted through quickly changing color tones while he tried to lessen the impact of his comment.

"They could probably not stop you from moving in, but the heavily industrialized zones are usually polluted ... hydro-carbon-based power sources and all. Still, there are areas that you *might* enjoy – if the natives don't *radiate* everywhere you land with thermonuclear devices."

"They ... they would *do* that?"

"Hey, like I said ... insane, hairless apes. They still think *they* are the center of the universe," he said, then followed it with a shrug.

He watched her colors change again while listening to her next question.

"You say your home world was 'doomed' but it still lives? Why exactly *is* that?"

Ronnie raised one hand and rubbed the side of his face while trying to remember all that Donnel's briefing had provided him about Earth's troublesome geological history. He decided to present the highlights first.

"I say 'doomed' as in *really* bad for living things. Asteroid strikes. Abrupt land mass drift. Catastrophic extremes of environmental temperatures..." He spread his hands slightly, then got down to what he specifically remembered. "Some sixty-five million years ago, an extinction-

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level event occurred that wiped out the major, higher life forms on the planet surface. All that was left were some plants, some sea life, and some tiny, furry mammals that eventually evolved into hairy apes – we *think*. We could have been dropped off as well, I suppose. It's not like it hasn't been going on for a long time. We've found matching genetic tracers among all the *human*-associated planets in our clusters. All except for the Bornat, perhaps."

"No, Grandfather. The Bornat are human ... *almost*," Jaiying piped up. "We *think* they were engineered, though. Almost like the *Kee*."

"Thank you, Jaiying," he said, then smiled, and nodded at her, before going on. "We do not truly understand our *own* origins, Prime, but I have seen the Blight, and recovered remnants of lost colonies core-ward from our own clusters. The evidence tells a tale of expansion and destruction to a much greater degree than the Drecks had *ever* conceived. These were humans who warred upon one another and vaporized entire *stellar clusters*. During the war with the Drecks, I destroyed..." he paused, and glanced aside in embarrassment. "Gods forgive me, but I destroyed entire *planets* at the orders of my commanders... I do not intend to add further to my sins."

With her new enhancements, she could *feel* his emotional state; the shame and embarrassment radiating from him.

"First Lord, you've said you want us to coexist peacefully, yet you've set no other boundaries other than our common border. I wonder ... do you *really* trust us that much?"

"As I said, Prime, I'm just a simple warrior. My job is to evaluate the security of my society by all threats from without – and then mitigate them. I understand the Hegemony has just learned that harsh lesson. Former enemies of mine have become allies and assumed control of their clusters. If they *remain* allies, then I have done my job."

"And if they do *not* remain allies?"

Her question was valid, and he gave her his honest answer.

"Then I will advise that they be replaced with others who *will* remain allies," he stated flatly, then waited while she digested his statement.

"So then ... that is your plan for *us*?" He watched as she shifted her arms out to encompass her staff, which made him smile.

"Prime ... it has already happened. I have suborned those you sent to spy on me," he said, while gesturing to Samuel and Sally, which caused them no little consternation. "I've removed the majority of external threats from the S'Slich'Tah, and I understand you now have the means to detect the truthfulness of those you rely upon for advice. In addition to that, I have allowed the transfer of knowledge of the Healing arts as taught by the



Healers of my people,” he said, but glanced down at his damaged hands. “And one of these days, maybe they’ll figure out how to fix *me* again,” he muttered, before dropping his arms in disgust.

He flinched for a moment, then straightened up as if nothing had happened, while digging around in his pocket, pulling out a packet, and popping another pill. A few seconds later, he sighed blissfully.

“You know ... you can run with a broken leg if you take *three* of these all at once.” He laughed while holding up the small packet before putting it back in his pocket. “Wish I’d brought some with me when I got my *foot* shot off that time,” he muttered, then rotated his neck stiffly. “Do you have more questions, Grandmother? Before I get all *silly*, I mean? Does that translate into anything understandable?” he asked, before looking back at Laisee and seeing her nod.

“I understand the concept,” the Prime said. “My daughter has been most informative. You seem unusually ... *content*, Lord Caldar. You are not under undue influence by those tablets you are taking?”

He laughed once and shook his head.

“Truly, they are wonderful, but it is also true – your daughter *has* been most informative. If you will forgive me, from her and many other Vanir that I have had contact with, I have seen a reflection of our *own* humanity. It shows me that Vanir, as a *whole*, are not excessively ambitious or dangerous ... certainly no more so than most humans. With your warren in charge, I don’t see any reason for worry in the near future ... although I can see a time where economic advantages might sway in your favor.” He nodded thoughtfully before continuing.

“You have the responsibility to ensure the survival of the Vanir, and we’ve suggested solutions and provided ways to help you in that task. All we ask is that you let us manage our *own* clusters ... and perhaps let us know when you think we need to make some adjustments. We might even request your help over ... something ... probably...”

Ronnie was beginning to drift, and Laisee was getting a little anxious. The Prime picked up on this, but she’d already made her decision.

“I accept your offer of peace, Lord Caldar, and I order my Ambassador to negotiate in good faith with your Ambassador, Lady Laisee Caldarous. I decree that Vanir recognize the Human clusters known as the Commonwealth and the Hegemony as friendly ... *acquaintances*?” she offered.

“That would do nicely, Grandmother,” he said, then stood to bow deeply. “As First Lord of the Commonwealth, I decree that the human clusters known in their entirety as the Commonwealth of Planets recognize the Vanir clusters as friendly acquaintances and potential trading

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partners. I order that our Ambassador negotiate in good faith with the Vanir Ambassador. I further stipulate that she investigate the possibility of a Confederation between the Commonwealth, the Vanir, and the Hegemony at some undefined time in the future. I will advise the Drecks representative on board my ship of this development, and see if the new leader of the Master Pack is agreeable.”

“You do not speak for the Drecks?”

“No doubt Lord Gagsa will wish to negotiate a separate treaty between the Hegemony and the Vanir, but he is in a situation similar to what you find yourself in. I suppose he could authorize his *son* to come down here and be his acting Ambassador,” he thought out loud, then turned to the side. “Laisee, would you pass this request up to the ship, please?”

“Already done, Ronnie,” she murmured.

“Very well,” he said quietly, before turning back to the Prime. “Grandmother, if there is nothing else...” he paused, and watched her look at him closely.

Her expression changed several times in as many seconds, but she seemed to calm down before shaking her head very slightly.

“Then ... if you will allow me...” he said, and walked slowly towards her, then stopped and reached out his hand – palm up – and waited.

He missed the moment of confusion and panic in her mind, but Laisee quickly jumped in and silently explained what he intended to do. The Prime relaxed and extended her hand to him, and he took it and gently pressed it to his forehead.

“Grandmother, thank you for your hospitality and understanding. I appreciate all of the trouble I have caused you, and I ask your forgiveness for being the cause of it all. Many of the Vanir I have come to know are as family to me, and I have offered several of them the hospitality of my home on Kantor should they choose to visit – or stay. You are *also* welcome, of course,” he added, then brought her hand back down. Laisee watched carefully, relieved that he didn’t actually *kiss* it. She’d heard an amusing story about that from Diane back on Kantor.

The Prime took her hand back and placed it in her lap, while looking down at him and considering this strange act of humility on his part.

“Your actions were understandable from your point of view, Ronnie. Let us hope our actions here today set an example for the future.”

At that, she rose and withdrew from the meeting; dragging her reduced staff with her into an adjacent chamber. Ronnie waited until she’d left the room, before turning back to Laisee and Jaiying with a smile on his face.

“Gods, she is so *hot!* I have this thing for *older* women, you know?” he said enthusiastically while starting to walk back to them, but only managed three steps before collapsing.

Jaiying rushed forward, while Laisee called out for assistance that came at a run. After being advised as to the *actual* situation, Teldrus and his guardsmen managed to carry him back to her chambers, where he was tucked into bed. Meanwhile, Laisee made arrangements to get him lifted back to the *Kraken* on the next shuttle.

While one man stayed in the antechamber to guard the locked door, Teldrus and the rest of his men sorted through their gear and began tucking things away in the room assigned for their use. Once things were settled down, Laisee entered the room she shared with Jaiying and saw that her daughter was already getting comfortable on one of the beds.

She plopped down on her own bed and wondered aloud, “Gods! What *else* can happen today?” Not realizing that a *certain* portion of her education was still lacking...

### ***On the Kraken***

Sai sat in her quarters and looked at the message she’d received on the data pad before her.

It had been relayed directly to her from Senior Jia Huan, who was currently aboard the *KC Microcosmus* that was en route to Vanaheim at accelerated jump rates, but still over twenty days away. They would likely have to slow down once entering the cloud at the Vanir border, but she was sure the current *Microcosmus*’ captain could compensate for that. She decided to keep that tidbit of information from their hosts down below, but would allow certain senior officers and crew to become aware of it...

The updates from the *Microcosmus* had confirmed – *tentatively* – that one of Ronnie’s infusions was an enzyme inhibitor of some sort. Another material, constructed of seemingly genetic origins of some sort, was currently unknown, along with the other unidentified crap currently floating around in his blood stream. That was the report from Senior Huan, who’d consulted with a Senior Fleet Medical Officer about it.

She’d also silently passed on that Lady Trenka Song was in transit to the refueling planet to confirm the destruction of the Vanir lab, pick up any potential mineral samples, and also possibly recover the body of a Commander Zickgraf from one of its moons; the Imperial guardsmen traveling with her knowing the location of where he’d been left behind.

Before closing, she’d mentioned that Lord Caldor would be recovered to the *Microcosmus* for “proper” medical treatment – in the words of the *Medical Officer*, she’d assured her...

## The End of the Road

Sai sat there and remembered that last bit of their conversation. Her lips tightened into a frown, while she considered how likely “proper” medical treatment would allow someone to recover from a severed *head*. She finally relaxed and transferred the basic information received into the *Kraken*’s data storage, then sent a message to Mistress Milsie telling her where to look for it. A glance at her compartment clock told her it was almost time for supper, but she just didn’t feel like it at the moment.

She enabled a security feed on the room monitor and checked the gym. No one was there, so she changed into something more suitable, and headed out to blow off some steam for a while.

### *In Donnel’s Lab*

Milsie laughed nervously while reading the message regarding a “proper” medical treatment. It sounded ridiculous considering the number of Healers and Seniors already on board the *Kraken*. Still, none of them had been able to effect any Healings on Lord Caldar. Donnel, reading over her shoulder, pointed out the ship and crew currently in transit would hold the best chance of finding a cure for Ronnie.

In the meantime, they were working on the problem of the powder, but both had to admit they didn’t understand how it was affecting the First Lord without a radiation source. They’d recovered a very small sample from the clothing and armor that had been exposed, then spent the majority of the afternoon running tests on a variety of energizing wavelengths. They’d just about given up, when Donnel started pulling at straws to see what other equipment might be useful for making the powder work. He was starting to think they’d need access to a mind-shielded Vanir raider to figure out what was needed, while Milsie was just about at her end.

“I just don’t *understand*, Donnel! We’ve tried *everything*, but we just don’t get a *reaction*!”

“Not to worry, lass. We still don’t know how it’s *supposed* to react, so we have no way real of telling if it *is* or not.”

He was in agreement with her concerns, though – both of them being unhappy at their lack of progress. Rather than sit and bemoan the fact, he offered to accompany her to supper before they began working on the problem again later that evening. After looking at the time, she agreed, and they soon found themselves on the commons deck and sharing conversations with others on the ship. One topic seemed to be on everyone’s lips, however – the video of the First Lord taking the life of a group of Vanir.

Neither of them had heard about it, and their table companions eagerly shared the details. They were both horrified at the capital crime committed, but Milsie was thoughtful as well. She quickly finished her

supper, then dragged Donnel back to the lab to watch the video on a lab monitor. Three passes later, she thought she had a clue and told him about it. He voiced his agreement, then contacted Lady Sai to ask if she'd taken a *detailed* debriefing from Ronnie beyond what he'd shared casually while on the ships doc platform. Sai had been less than enthused about it, but agreed to quit the gym and come and speak with them in the lab.

### ***March 20, Over a Small Moon***

Petrus had been drugged for the move from the cavern to the ship, and awoken strapped into a *real* ships doc this time. Hearing the ship sounds around him, he immediately reached out, but was blocked at the edges of the hull. The band of communication necessary for him to use was still being blocked, and he could do nothing about it from here. From the change in apparent gravity, at least they'd managed to get *spaceborne* again. It was just a short while until someone came in to check on him.

"Well, I see we're safely off that moon," he greeted his visitor cheerfully, but got no response. Instead, the crewman left and the Captain arrived a moment later, but didn't look so friendly this time.

"It seems there have been some *changes* on Vanaheim, human. The Prime has been removed, and *my* warren has been put into power. I don't think we'll be needing *you* much longer," he said stiffly, but Petrus had already read his meaning and started teasing with an alternate interpretation of the news.

"Interesting. I suppose there's been an *amicable* transfer of power between the S'Ahi'Ma and the S'Slich'Tah? All of the forward bases have been re-tasked to the S'Slich'Tah's orders and will no longer be hunting *your* ships?" The Captain paused to consider this while Petrus continued.

"I can imagine how relieved your *crew* is, Captain, knowing they can safely enter Vanaheim orbit once again and not fear reprisal. I suppose the *Commonwealth* ship orbiting Vanaheim has already been escorted back towards human-occupied space? I'm sure if it had been inadvertently destroyed in orbit, you would have been notified of it – just ... not by *your* warren leader."

"What do you mean, Petrus?" the Captain asked warily, while slipping back from his aggressive posture a bit.

"The Commonwealth ship – whose *primary* weapon is a breach-loaded, anti-matter charged, particle beam weapon capable of splitting Vanaheim in *two* – carries *multiple* anti-matter rounds in the loading rooms, any *one* of which is sufficient to destroy the entire moon below us. If it was attacked while still in *orbit* ... well, you would not be celebrating the ascension of your warren right now."

"How ... how do you *know* this?"

## The End of the Road

"I was *First Officer* aboard that ship until I came out here to make *your lives miserable!*" Petrus pressed harshly. "Make *no mistake*, Captain! Ronnie may have been angry over his treatment at your director's hands, but he had his *orders* – either negotiate a peace, or *eliminate the threat!* Since this is the *first* you've heard of it, I doubt what you've been told is the *complete truth* else you would have known that *all* of Vanaheim had been destroyed *earlier!*"

"That is *monstrous!* He would *not!* He–"

"He already *has* ... during the *Drecks conflict!* This is the *same* Rondal Caldar who attacked the Drecks home world and failed, but he has *much* better weapons now! Captain, for *all* our sakes, please allow me to contact my people and find out what is *really* going on! I can promise all of you your lives, and even find you a safe place to *live* if necessary!"

"*Silence, human!* That's *enough* of your interference!" he shouted, then turned and stormed out of ship's doc.

Petrus had gone over the top, but it was necessary, because what he'd read from the Captain told him enough. Something *had* gone wrong on Vanaheim, but it wasn't catastrophic – not *yet*. If Ronnie had died, Sai would have continued the mission, but if the mission had *failed*, he had no doubt at all she would not fail to *complete* the mission as Ronnie would have had to – *and lose no sleep over it!*

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

"*COMMUNICATIONS!* I need a *TRANSMITTER!*" the Captain shouted.

The Communications Officer quailed at his Captain's anger, but there was really nothing he could do about it.

They could either keep receiving or perhaps rewire the system to transmit, but not both, and transmitting without being able to hear a reply was foolish beyond belief.

"Still unavailable, Sir. If we could reach the support depot on B, they should have something in stock for repairs," he suggested.

"We can't get to the depot until the *navigation array* is back up!" the Captain replied in frustration.

Now that they were in space, his repair crew had a better chance to make temporary repairs to otherwise inaccessible areas of the hull ... at least according to his Engineering Officer. How any of his crew were expected to squeeze into some of the places the *human* had wormed himself into was still an open question, though.

"Sir, we could return to Station A and see if ... well, if anything were salvageable," the Communications Officer suggested.

The Captain stared at him as if he were the *stupidest* Vanir ever born, but considered his suggestion, none the less. They'd been on the moon for only a short while, but lost the majority of their mobility once that damned human had cut a hole in his ship. Now they were behind schedule on the replenishment run to the depot to resupply their base on the moon – not that it really mattered any longer. They were also low on food and water themselves, but couldn't really go anywhere for resupply without an active navigation array ... except maybe to the planet below them. And there was a very good chance the human was *right* – things may *not* be as they seemed.

The Captain took a breath, then forced himself to relax, before calmly issuing a new set of orders.

"Very well. Navigation ... place us in close orbit over the planet below. You know the approximate coordinates on the surface. Go to opticals, and ... and look for a big hole in the ground where the lab used to be," he ordered with a sigh, before dejectedly plopping down in his command chair.

"Yes, Sir."

### ***In Ships Doc***

Petrus was satisfied. He'd been following along remotely and hoped the Captain would make the right decision ... and also about keeping him around for a while longer. Now he just had to hope Ronnie had stayed true to his beliefs and avoided killing everyone else left behind.

### ***On the Kraken***

The ship had gone on full alert this morning when Sai discovered she'd lost contact with the Ambassador and her child. Probes to Sally, Samuel, and Sue also went unanswered, and she was left with Sasha acting as communications liaison with the Vanir administrative center. Unfortunately, he was having very little progress himself – being told they were having "technical difficulties" at the moment, but "things would sort themselves out" shortly.

The probes Sasha extended down revealed fear and confusion on those he'd read. Something had gone horribly wrong, and there was some rumor going around about escaped prisoners – presumably referring to the humans. If that were the case, it looked like he might have to choose sides rather quickly.

Sai glanced at him and felt his concern, then peeked a bit and understood his fears. She settled herself in the command chair on the bridge, tried to relax, then closed her eyes while focusing intently on the administrative center below them; letting her senses pick up the Vanir below them as they went about their morning duties. She also felt the fear

## The End of the Road

and uncertainty Sasha had picked up and followed several individuals, but nothing seemed to make sense until she caught part of a conversation between one Vanir and an apparent void.

She focused tightly on that individual while considering if it was merely a conversation occurring between mind segments, but caught the impression of an *external* conversation going on between that individual and someone else close by whom she couldn't detect.

She tried to use her subject's eyes, but had never tried that with a Vanir before, then felt the conversation end before she was even able to make a proper attempt. She took a breath while considering the implications of what she'd just experienced, but the only thing she could relate it to was talking to either Déjà or Kiki.

*'Sasha, it seems like there are Vanir down there who I cannot sense. This feels to me very similar to having one of the Kee standing next to me and not being able to sense them – almost as if there was a suppressive device in play down there. Do you know of any other warrens having that technology available?'*

Sasha blanched at the thought. The S'Slich'Tah had developed that technology, and their warren leader was being held under arrest below!

*'I – I fear we may be on the sidelines of a coup attempt, Sai Tal. I cannot reach anyone who knows anything about what is going on'*

*'Search around, Sasha. Feel around for individuals and see if they have any idea what is going on ... ESPECIALLY if they seem to be talking to others that you cannot feel'*

*'That ... that is so ... intrusive'*

*'And that is why we don't like doing it, but sometimes it's necessary, and you'll not likely find anyone down there who can block it'*

He sighed and closed his eyes, before descending his probe into the center and casting it around while peeking into random individuals he found. It was enlightening, but *very* distasteful. Sai grimaced at his naivety before joining him; eventually finding a few more interesting voids and wondering who they might really be.

### ***On Kantor, The Royal Homestead***

Sai had immediately reported the situation on the surface, and the children were concerned about the loss of contact, but even more so about their Aunt Lili.

Her mind was still considering the fate of their Grandfather, and they'd caught her thinking this would be an excellent time to eliminate the Vanir problem *completely* – along with taking out their Grandfather as collateral



damage. The only one standing in her way was the Emperor, who seemed to have an incredible amount of faith in his little brother.

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"We do not need to act *hastily*, Lili. The children have observation ships placed counter to the Vanir war ships, and we can simply wait and see what Sai discovers once Laisee is able to report again."

"They have *taken them*, my Husband! I cannot reach *any* of them, and they are probably *dead*! It is *well* within reason to take steps to eliminate the Vanir while they are in a state of *confusion*! It would take very little further action to remove the *rest of them*!"

"*Lili!* My Daughter and Granddaughter are *still down there*! Until we have *confirmation* of their demise, I will *NOT* allow Lady Tal to proceed with the *MISSION* – not *THAT portion* of the mission!"

Lili fumed, and he understood the other matter at hand.

"Rondal will return home to be judged, Lili, and it will be a *fair judgment*. *Everything* he has done ... every *liberty* he has taken, has been at *MY* request, and I will *NOT* see him punished for it if there are no reasons that *JUSTIFY IT*!"

"You *saw* the video, Husband! This was not a *pleasure* girl he traded credits for a few months of *life*! *HE RIPPED THE LIFE OUT OF THOSE MEN*!"

"They are only *VANIR, LILI*!"

"They are *PEOPLE* – *just as he told the children* – and by his *own* words he has *COMMITTED TREASON*!" she shouted, before storming away.

Radatel was left standing there shaking his head. He had no idea why Lili was on such a tear about this, and watched as she left through the patio door and headed out to the gardens. Waiting several seconds more, he slowly wandered out to follow her, wondering if she would reconsider discussing the issue once she calmed down a bit.

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Lili walked furiously through the gardens while still wrapped in her angry thoughts. She was avoiding the regular trails and other company while keeping a tight lock on her mind. She didn't even feel the male valaet pacing her, curious as to the cause of her agitation. She finally wound up at the edge of the river, before sitting down hunched over on the grass, with her knees up and her arms wrapped around them.

"Why can't anyone see how *dangerous* he is? I don't *want* to kill him, but what's to stop him from killing *again*?" she quietly asked herself aloud, while fighting back tears.

## The End of the Road

She rested her forehead against her knees and didn't notice when Boots padded silently past her to the water's edge. The valaet stopped and looked upstream towards the new permanent grating that had been installed, before bowing his head and lapping at the water; finally catching Lili's attention.

"Oh great. And you're *another* one!" she said loudly.

He ignored her while he drank, before coming back and sitting upright just behind and to her side, while still looking out over the water.

"At least *you* have it easy. All you do is eat, and sleep, and make little—" she stopped when he turned and looked down at her; his gaze seeming somewhat accusing to her.

"I'm sorry, Boots. I'm sorry you lost your mate when she was protecting us."

He stared at her a moment longer, before turning his attention back to the river, while Lili sat upright and stretched her legs out. A moment later, Boots paw-walked forward and settled down lengthwise beside her while scrunching closer just a bit. She reached over and idly began scratching between his shoulder blades, causing him to produce a rumbling purr from deep within.

"You know ... it's not as if I don't *love* Ronnie. I was his *first*, after all. But children ... children need *discipline*. They need to be taught right from wrong, and ... and we *failed* with Ronnie," she said quietly.

### ***'Talking Man'***

Boots chuffed and rolled to his side even closer to her, and she continued scratching until he rolled onto his back and let out a big sigh.

"Just like a man," she muttered.

### ***'Lonely'***

"At least you still have your daughter and the kits," she said, then daydreamed for a few seconds about the child she'd almost had with Petrus.

### ***'Faithful Daughter'***

"I can understand Sai being angry over Petrus, but I know he brought that on *himself*. Ronnie had *nothing* to do with it ... probably."

### ***'Family'***

"Radatel is just so *insistent*. He thinks Ronnie can do no *wrong*, but we've *seen it* – over and over. Sometimes ... well, *most* of the time it works out, but ... but I might have to *execute* him when he comes home, and I–"

She stopped talking when Boots quickly rolled, jumped to his feet, and turned to face her ... staring *deeply* into her eyes.

She suddenly realized that standing above eye-level in front of her was a four-hundred pound valaet that could turn her into tiny pieces quicker than she could snap her fingers.

She sat absolutely still while his eyes seemed to bore into her brain. Boots slowly stretched out, and – tilting his head sideways – opened his mouth wide and closed it over her neck, *ever* so gently ... letting her feel the hot breath from his lungs, and his raspy tongue when he bathed her throat with it, before slowly backing away and looking down at her intently.

***'FAMILY!'***

He backed further away, but then sneezed *loudly* ... looking quite surprised at that.

***'Stupid Deaf Human'***

Boots turned away and disappeared into the bushes, leaving Lili to wonder what she had just experienced – besides the puddle of urine she was currently sitting in.

~~~

Senior Guardsman Aquila Avitus had almost had a heart attack.

From their vantage point on the opposite rim, he and his partner, his nephew Philo Avitus, had gotten used to the comings and goings of the Royal family and their rather precarious interactions with the furry killing machines down below. Neither of them felt particularly comfortable when the creatures were about – especially when the Royal Prince and Princesses were playing with the new kits, and the younger female that kept watch over them.

Aquila finally let out a breath, followed by his partner, and both looked at each other. Even if they'd had some warning, there'd been no clean shot from this angle, and the First Wife would have been dead before they could alert their counterparts on the opposite rim. Even now, he could see the morning side rim guardsmen walking back from the far side of the canyon wall on their routine patrol – neither of them knowing how close it had come for one of their principals.

"D-Do we report this?" Philo asked very quietly while keeping an eye on the huge beast as it returned to its den.

Philo had been a quick study, as was expected from the son of Captain Teldrus, who was temporarily assigned to Lady Laisee's personal guard. He knew that what was seen or overheard within the Royal compound was *never* recorded, *never* talked about, and certainly never *gossiped* about ...

## The End of the Road

but there were certain security issues that *needed* to be reported. He was glad it wasn't his call.

"The Captain of the Guard," his uncle muttered. "We're off in an hour, and I'll tell the Captain of the Guard about the ... *suspicious* interaction. He'll inform the Majordomo, who will speak to the First Wife ... and he'll inform the Emperor."

"The *Emperor*?"

"My boy, this is *his* house," Aquila murmured, then started thinking of just *what* he'd be reporting in an hour and few minutes.

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"Wow, *that* was close," Cathy said.

"Yeah, I don't think he wants her to kill Grandfather," Walter suggested.

Josie looked at them and laughed. "You *think*?"

"Well, that ... or he wants another mate," Cathy considered.

"Too soon," Walter said. "Maybe in another couple of months. Long enough for the kits to learn to avoid a potentially jealous stepmother."

"You mean, *Maya*?" Josie teased, and they all laughed.

~~~

Radatel had watched the encounter from several meters away. He knew *exactly* what Boots had expressed, and appreciated the sentiment. Should Lili decide unfavorably, he would have to arrange for Boots to be transferred ... although he didn't know if he could tolerate still living with her if she had his little brother killed for – to *him* – insufficient reasons.

He slipped away quietly and returned to their quarters; leaving his First Wife to ponder her situation alone.

### *On Vanaheim*

Laisee woke up with a headache, and found herself bound naked to a vertical platform; nothing covering her other than an oversized helmet. Ronnie was next to her, along with Sally. On matching racks across from them were Samuel, Sue, and the Prime's Medical Technician – all similarly attired. There was no sign of Jaiying.

"Ronnie! *Ronnie*, WAKE UP! We're in TROUBLE!"

She didn't get a stir out of him, but her shouting got some movement from S'Ahi'Ma 32898. He opened his eyes and looked around, then sagged in his bindings and looked up towards the ceiling helplessly. She might have been tempted to laugh if they were in different circumstances.

"Do you know where we are, S'Ahi'Ma 32898?" she asked him.

"We... We're still in the building, but much lower down. Down where we interrogate those who offend the Prime," he murmured dismally.

"But – but the Prime accepted our offer of *peace!*"

"This was not her doing," he said morosely, while looking across from him at the unconscious Sally in her own rack. "When we returned to her quarters, her guards were missing. We found them inside – dead. Then we were surrounded by S'Slich'Tah wearing *these*," he said, and glanced up at her head. "I fear they block the ability of mindful communications."

Laisee hadn't even thought of that, but found it to be true. She looked around desperately, but saw nothing they could use to free themselves.

### *In the Prime's Quarters*

"You look *well*, my Prime," her helmeted lieutenant said.

S'Slich'Tah 29531 preened herself in front of a mirror; a rich luxury where everyone in a warren looked nearly identical to one another.

"I look *thin*, you mean!" she pouted, then walked back to the table that held a variety of foodstuffs she'd been denied during her confinement. "Where is that fool who was supposed to kill the S'Ahi'Ma?" she asked; neglecting to call her by her proper title.

"He is down in the interrogation room with the others, Prime. The humans ... they deprogrammed him somehow, and one of our *own* citizens managed to remove the device without setting it off."

"*Impossible!* That *should* have been impossible!" she immediately corrected herself. "They are properly restrained and screened?"

"Yes, my Prime. They are secure."

"Good! Now it's just a matter of convincing the S'Ahi'Ma that she *formally* steps down from power. Then perhaps I'll let her *live!* But *first* we need to find suitable leverage. Perhaps ... perhaps the humans and their *conspirators* will do?"

"As you say, my Prime," he said quietly.

He wasn't so sure any longer that this had been a particularly *good* idea – although that thought was immediately squashed by a rogue segment of his mind that promptly forced all the *other* segments to forget all about it.

"Let us go and see what we have to work with, then, shall we?"

"As you *say*, my Prime," he said faithfully.

### ***On the Kraken***

Sai, Sasha, Dorcas, and Lady Qiaolian were working diligently to locate mindless individuals or suspicious voids in the center below them, but were still having no luck.

That was the situation when Walter and the girls reached out to them.

*‘Grandmother, you have had no luck’* he stated the obvious.

*‘Oh, you think?’* she snapped back hotly.

*‘We are here to help, Grandmother’* Cathy sent. *‘Tell us what you need’*

*‘What we need is a map to the damn CENTER! THAT’S what we need! But no one up here has ever been down there before, except to the main floor!’*

*‘So BAG someone and make them SHOW you a map’* Josie suggested.

*‘If you haven’t NOTICED, little girl, we’re up HERE, and everyone else is down THERE!’*

*‘Then do it from up there’* Walter calmly suggested. *‘We did much the same thing when we were searching the archives on the Drecks home world from Kantor’*

*‘WHAT! You – you took over a human’s mind, and–’*

*‘It was necessary, Grandmother’* Rose shared timidly. She’d not been a part of it, but learned about it afterwards.

Sai paused for a moment, then saw the irony of it. A fitting means to an end, as it were.

*‘All right, everyone! Find someone that isn’t COMPLETELY stupid and see if they know where the BUILDING MAPS are located!’*

*‘Umm ... you might want to find someone from HOUSEKEEPING’* the ever practical Josie suggested.

*“Ai-yah!”* Sai muttered under her breath.

### ***On Vanaheim***

Ronnie groaned, then mumbled, “I thought I just *left* this party.” He didn’t even try to struggle in his bonds.

“Well, we’re partying in another place, and it’s probably going to get unpleasant,” Laisee snapped at him quietly; trying to get him to focus on the current situation. “You’ve done this before. How did you get out?”

“I pulled my power knife out of my kit, and flashed it on to cut some power cables.”

“You weren’t tied down?”

“Yes... I was. I used my eyes. But I don’t see my knife.”

He looked around, but didn’t see any evidence of his clothes, either, so he let out a soft sigh and closed his eyes again.

“*FOCUS, Ronnie! How did you escape if you were tied up and dusted with SUPPRESSIVE POWDER!*” she shouted, and he jerked his head around to look at her; his expression turning ugly.

“*I thought my way out! I examined the process of using my mind in relation to how I thought it should work, then I compared it to how it appeared to work, and then I discovered my original assumptions were in error! I was covered in powder everywhere – except for my eyes! I refocused my intent to pass my telekinetic efforts through my eyes, and it worked. Just ... not as well as I’d like,*” he finished softly while running down before groaning again.

“So you used your *eyes* because they were not embedded with powder? Did your open *mouth* work any better?” she chastened him, then had to wait several seconds for him to respond to her snarky chiding.

“I... I never thought of that,” he finally admitted quietly, then began to open his mouth, but the door opened to admit a stream of Vanir – both free and secured.

He didn’t fail to notice the light puffing of dust that drifted along the floor with them, then looked around and noticed a fairly universal *covering* of the stuff – plus some familiar looking antennas pushed off in the two corners of the room that he could see.

“Nice to see you again, Grandmother,” he said, somewhat dejectedly, but noticed that a translator had not been brought along during their capture, either. “All right ... this could *still* work,” he mumbled, then waited to see what was going to happen next, while stretching his jaw into a wide yawn to limber up.

### ***Outside Research Station Alpha***

Slich 42130 had been quite relieved when the Vanir raider had shown up, and he’d been able to relinquish command of the lab’s survivors to the Vanir Captain.

The Raider had gone back to what was left of the station, and found that it was now a bowl-shaped depression in a half-circle nearly six kilometers wide and filled with sea water. The plateau itself had been obliterated by the blast, and was replaced by a three-kilometer deep hole, while the ground cover out to a radius between four to five kilometers had been leveled as well. It looked to have been a rather simple matter to move fallen brush and form a huge arrow on the ground pointing to where the

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survivors would be bivouacking until someone could come along and rescue them – all in just a few days, as it turned out.

The Captain had been surprised at the number of survivors, and questioned him over and over about why this Rondal Caldar had let them all live, even as he'd killed the Director and his immediate staff.

Slich 42130 had grown somewhat philosophical after the station had gone up in a muted burst of radiation, and simply pointed out that, considering all the *trouble* it had brought down upon them, it really wasn't *that* big of a loss to his warren.

He'd even mentioned that he looked forward to *returning* to Vanaheim ... should the Prime allow them all to *live*.

That brought up the issue concerning the navigation array and its damaged wiring, which prompted one of the lab assistants to suggest they pull unnecessary wiring from somewhere else and substitute it for the navigation system needs.

After all, it was a big ship, and there was certainly *something* they could shut off for the duration.

After a quick discussion, it was down to which of the two shield systems they could live without for the time being – the *main* shielding not being one of them. That left the special tracer-blocking shield that did double-duty as a shield against human mind-talkers.

Slich 42130 pointed out that Ronnie was already gone, and all the other ones had left on the first human ship that had departed before the lab blew up.

The Navigation Officer had then very gently suggested that, at *worst*, they could still head to the depot at site B and drop down for a quick repair and get caught up on the official news about their warren's status. This argument won over the Captain, and he gave the order to cannibalize the tracer shield wiring and use it to power the navigation array once repairs to it were made.

### *In Ships Doc*

Petrus smiled and quietly settled back in his nest in ships doc.

It had to be subtle to avoid the whole “not-invented-here” syndrome. Making silent suggestions to the lab assistant was one thing, but he'd been pressing his luck by involving the Navigation Officer. If he'd spoken out of type, it might have come back to bite him.

Now it was just a matter of waiting until the mind shield went down, before he could scream out a warning to Sai and Lili that the S'Slich'Tah were staging a *coup*!



### *On the Kraken*

Sai paced thoughtfully while listening to the options the commander of Laisee's remaining guardsmen were presenting to her, all the while making a small circuit in the main meeting room as that took place.

They'd located what they *thought* should be the most likely place for the prisoners to be held, and were working from a diagram shared mind-to-mind with Sasha from one of the loyal housekeeping staff – someone who appeared rather *pissed* about the whole situation of a S'Slich'Tah coup taking place right under everyone's nasal orifice.

Sasha had quickly translated that diagram into a tablet-scribed graphic image that was now displayed on the wall monitor for all to see.

"We know who are missing. Sasha – is the space large enough for all of them?"

"The housekeeper seems to think so, although there were mixed reports of a few more prisoners being moved into the area after Lady Laisee broke contact with you."

"Second Romad – still no word from Captain Teldrus?"

Teldrus' Second-in-Command glanced at his section team leader, but got another negative response from him.

"Not yet, Lady Tal. Their kit did not contain telemetry, but we are hopeful they still survive."

Sai looked around at all of them and nodded, then focused on Second Romad.

"We leave in one hour. Fully armed and armored ... *and* with respirators. Sasha is going to drop us off somewhere *other* than the landing platform, and we'll be proceeding on foot to breach the center. Each of your men will carry translators, and they will be paired with one of the ship's crew, either human, Drecks, or Vanir ... and the Vanir will be capable of *mindspeak*, along with all the humans and Drecks going along for the ride."

She felt the reluctance of some of the men, understood it immediately, and was *disgusted* by it.

"Before you say *anything*... Yes, I understand some of your men have conflicts. Leave them to guard the child, Rose. Lady Dorcas will be going with us."

Romad was stunned, but knew the reputation of Lady Tal – also known as the "*Dragon Lady*" when she ran with the Madman. He briefly thought of who was going to run the ship in her absence, but dismissed that as beyond his pay grade. His immediate concern was recovering their

## The End of the Road

Principals – Lady Caldarous and Jaiying – then worrying about Captain Avitus and his men if there was time.

### *On the Bridge*

Torga was less than sanguine about his personal situation.

He was the resident representative for the Hegemony, at least according to Lady Laisee, but was being left behind to mind the shop – and *vaporize* the planet below if things turned sour. At least Endo and Gallus got to go down and play. From the way they'd quit their station-keeping posts, you'd think they were going to a *party*.

His musings were broken by Déjà showing up with Kiki in tow.

"Mother says I am to stay with you and help deliver messages if things get busy," Déjà said, then sat quietly in the corner.

Kiki joined her and they chatted quietly in Kee – much softer than the *usual* verbal barrage they were known for, he considered. He remembered the episode when Déjà had suddenly "grown up" and turned into a thoughtful and rather introspective young lady – for a *Kee*, that is.

From what he could hear, it sounded like she was working on doing the same to Kiki. He turned back to his console and waited out the shuttle's departure. Not for the first time did he wish Ronnie's ship had more than just the one BFG.

### *Somewhere Else...*

*The Fainting Fate caught her breath and waited, but Destiny seemed to have **missed** that reference by Torga. She slowly let out her sigh as silently as she could.*

### *On Vanaheim, In the Interrogation Center*

The tentative Prime paced among her captives; poking and prodding them as she pleased. She took *special* delight in tormenting Sue's mother – the *almost* former Prime. Aside from the *physical* reality of the situation, she wanted an *official* resignation from the S'Ahi'Ma's leader, and was considering what it would take to make it happen.

"S'Ahi'Ma 31245, it appears you have *weakened* over these last several months, and finally lost control all together. It would be a *responsible* act on your part to insure a quiet and *stable* transfer of power between your warren and mine ... if only to keep our society on a stable platform moving forward."

"It is too late, Slich 29531. I have already made agreements with the human clusters, and a peace will ensue between our peoples. You have nothing to—"

“Our peoples? *They* are not people! They are *animals!* Look at *them!* Look at *it!*” she pointed, waving an arm towards the humans and stopping to point down at Ronnie. “It *killed* my head of *research* – he who created all the tools necessary to *destroy* the human infestation *once and for all!*”

“Your head of research conducted obscene experiments on both humans and Vanir, alike,” the Prime countered calmly. “The Vanir forward bases were compromised by subterfuge, and Vanir were set against Vanir ... and some Vanir lives were forfeit in the process.”

The S’Slich’Tah Warren leader turned away; flipping an arm dismissively, before rounding on the Prime again.

“You can’t always make advances without *some* collateral damage along the way. What of your decision to send Vanir into *human* captivity – allowing them to become *infected* by their obscene ways and beliefs? My informers tell me both your Ambassador and his assistant – and your *daughter*, as well, now suffer *greatly* from their close association with these – these *animals!*”

“The only thing they suffer from is returning home to find no safe shelter among their own people,” the Prime considered somberly. “It has become painfully clear to me that our people have been living a stagnant existence. An existence which–”

“You would have us change so *WE* would have disastrous extremes of growth and failure? Is *that* what you truly want for all Vanir? I would hold us close to our *roots*, my *ex-Prime*, and insure the sanctity of our *culture!*”

The conversation had drawn them closer – as close as the S’Slich’Tah allowed herself to come, even as the Prime had been securely bound in an interrogation rack like all the others. They stared at each other until Sue finally spoke up.

“Slich 29531, our people are *stifled* on Vanaheim. Of the ten-thousand warrens still in existence, very few of them are allowed to reproduce in any number. This is not a natural situation for *any* life form. The humans have offered space within their clusters for the creation of a *Vanir*-habitable world – a world with clean air, clean water, and plenty of room to grow. I believe–*ACK!*”

Sue’s speech was stopped by a slap from the S’Slich’Tah.

“I do not recall offering such familiarity from *you!*” S’Slich’Tah 29531 said rudely; spitting it out like a curse, and catching the reaction from the Prime.

“Oh ... you don’t *like* your daughter being treated like the underling that she is? Perhaps if you’d taught her *proper* warren manners, we would not have found her hiding aboard one of our *stations!*” she declared gleefully, before going on.

## The End of the Road

“We knew ... we knew all *along*. One of my assistants even helped her transit and *board*,” she proclaimed, while turning to watch Sue for her reaction. “Your reports were *very* welcome, Sue. It told me my warren was carrying out their duties ... *just* as the Prime had ordered,” she said triumphantly, before the door opened, and she quickly turned to see more of her minions bringing in captured items.

Ronnie had been watching the discussion with interest.

Although he didn’t actually understand the conversation, he seemed to be getting the gist of it in a sort of “watch-the-foreign-movie-and-make-up-your-own-subtitles” kinda way. He’d gotten that the S’Slich’Tah was very excitable, and the Prime was maintaining her cool. Meanwhile, Sue had somehow pissed off the S’Slich’Tah and gotten smacked for it.

Of more interest, though, was the handful of Imperial power swords that had just been brought in and set aside on a table. He took note that none of them were equipped with power packs, nor were they able to utilize them. They were all versions used exclusively by Kantite Royals and could not be used by anyone else, other than as a blunt weapon. However, the number indicated that all of Laisee’s guardsmen were disarmed and probably dead. Still, all he’d need to do is just *touch* one, or given recent circumstances, maybe not even *that*...

### ***Over Research Station Alpha***

Petrus was anxious to get the word out, and hopefully it would happen in the next hour or two.

The ship had launched with the survivors, and once in a stable orbit, they’d begun working in zero gravity to make repairs on the navigation array. Once that was done, the wiring from the tracer shield would be pulled and applied to the navigation system, and the ship could then transit to the depot for further repairs. As soon as the mind shield was dropped, Petrus would hopefully feel it and call out to warn Lili of the S’Slich’Tah coup in process.

His reverie was interrupted by a visit from the Captain and Slich 42130, who wanted to talk about the human who had let him go. He was still trying to figure out why the human had not simply killed them all, and was hoping to gain some enlightenment from Petrus.

### ***Vanaheim, In the Shuttle***

Sai was watching from the compartment door, while Endo brought the transport shuttle’s rear close to the outer wall of the administrative center; his target being several floors lower than the official landing pad.

Once in position, he sent ‘*Ready*’ and turned the console over to the relief pilot so he could join Mother for the rescue mission.

Sai smiled grimly and turned to the rear, where she could already hear the loading hatch dropping; locking itself flat just before the door edge bumped against the tower wall. The shuttle pilot held it there while Imperial warriors approached from both sides of the loading bay and activated their power swords to cut an opening in the wall big enough for the Drecks in the party.

The first cuts were vertical, one on either side. Once that was done, a second pair was cut horizontally while the wall was already straining to move from the slight overpressure. Gallus and Endo leaned against it to hold it in place, before the final cuts were made. Once through, they let the wall push them back, then shoved it aside.

In a precise movement, enhanced by instant communications between all parties, they entered and spread out in a defensive pattern to cover all adjoining doors and corridors. Probes were being sent by the Drecks, Sai, the two Seniors who had gone along with them, and several of the Vanir who had been ‘infected’ with Jaiying’s gift.

Once their entry was cleared, they left a “mixed” two-person team behind to guard the hole in the wall, while the rest pressed on and cleared spaces on their way to the interrogation room.

### ***In the Maintenance Center***

The maintenance center was very quiet this morning as only the standby maintenance lead had been able to arrive very early to finish up his previous day’s task.

His own lead was scheduled to arrive in a few hours, but he’d been surprised by the missing night crew. In fact, he hadn’t seen *any* familiar faces that morning.

After giving out a reluctant sigh, he’d grabbed his kit and worked his way to the waste center; leaving the maintenance center quiet and empty – before a light began flashing on the environmental control panel.

### ***In the Interrogation Center***

S’Slich’Tah 29531 had tired of verbally sparring with Sue and the Prime, so she turned to Ronnie and berated him severely for his misdeeds ... to which he merely shook his head and laughed.

“He doesn’t understand you,” Laisee told her in Vanir. “He’s only a human male. He needs a translator to talk to you.”

There was a quiet conversation among the rest of the Vanir, resulting in the command, “Translate for him!”

Laisee spoke to Ronnie, and listened carefully to his reply ... *twice* ... before delicately presenting it to the S’Slich’Tah.

## The End of the Road

“He says ... ahh, that I am only a woman and do not have the capacity to translate his words in the full context of their meaning. I do not believe he trusts me not to moderate some of his comments,” she said, somewhat demurely.

Another hurried conversation had a helmeted Vanir leaving the room in a rush – apparently in search of a translator.

### *In the Corridor*

*‘Movement in the corridor!’* was passed silently among the intruders.

### *In the Visiting Ambassador’s Quarters*

The S’Slich’Tah messenger arrived at the human’s nesting space and began searching for the bit of human technology he’d been sent to recover. After spending fruitless minutes searching the human’s belongings, he started the distasteful task of searching the pile of dead bodies on the floor, before finally locating what had been described as a translation device.

As instructed, he enabled it and spoke a few words of Vanir at it – hearing an unintelligible sequence of barking noises in return. He flushed a slight tint of success and started on his return trip to the interrogation room.

### *On the Kraken*

Torga was fuming at his inactivity. Below him turned a cesspool of a world, brimming with foul-smelling clouds, and enemies of his people; yet he was stuck high up above and helpless to do anything more than simply monitor the situation.

Since the shuttle had left, a few more of the crew had arrived and staked out positions on the bridge. Donnel had taken over a computer station and was running various internal monitor programs, while sharing quiet comments with his new companion, Milsie.

Nathan and Rose had shown up, with Rose moving over to sit with the Kee, while Nathan tried to enjoin Torga in conversation about his early life with his father.

Two of the Imperial guardsmen had followed Rose and stood nearby.

Torga was about to order the room cleared, when a loud “HA!” came from Donnel as he watched a series of numbers streaking across the monitor in front of him.

*“Torga! We have an active translator down below! The new one! Please relay to Lady Tal that we have a location on a translator ... and it’s moving!”*

### ***The Vanir Raider in Orbit over Research Station Alpha***

The Navigation Officer was reassured by his technicians that the array was ready for wiring, so the Captain gave the order, and the tracer-shield was dropped. Then its cabling would be retasked for the navigation array.

#### ***In Ships Doc***

Petrus almost laughed out loud when the feeling of closeness disappeared from around him. He squelched that impulse, and instead reached out to Lili and Sai.

*'Lili! Sai! The S'Slich'Tah are planning a coup!'* he called out, before remembering his position. *'I'm being held captive in a Vanir raider in orbit over a Vanir research station! It was where Ronnie last...'*

He felt the closeness surround him once again, accompanied by tinny ringing in his ears, then sighed in disgust. He'd forgotten the Captain probably still had tracer detectors up and running, and had caught him at it. He thought about it, then decided the Captain could not *really* be sure, so he quietly lay there and pretended to doze. The pounding footsteps heading in his direction could be heard quite easily through the door, however, and when it burst open, his startled reaction wasn't faked.

The Captain was just beginning his interrogation when Petrus felt the shield drop away once again, but took no notice of it – even as both Lili and Sai bombarded him with questions. Instead, he maintained a straight face for a few seconds more, until word came through for the Captain that an accident had taken place in the access spaces; the technician ordered to cut and reinstall the cabling, being injured when he cut the *reenergized* cables to the tracer-shield system.

The Captain was stunned, before remembering he'd ordered the tracer-shield back on the moment the tracer detector sounded an alarm. He'd forgotten that someone was *already* in place and just waiting for permission to begin *cutting*.

His first impression had been that Petrus was somehow responsible, but he'd given no indication that it could be possible. Even the lab assistant, Slich 42130, had stated the human male they'd captured was the *only* one who'd ever shown the slightest ability like that, and very poorly compared to their women.

He left Petrus alone and headed forward to check on his injured crewman.

Petrus sighed, then very weakly sent out that he was all right, but had to keep quiet, since the ship he was on carried a detector for mind-to-mind communications. He softly updated Lili and Sai to explain what he'd learned, then gave a short synopsis of how he'd ended up where he was, and why they couldn't detect him until just now.

## The End of the Road

'*Self-inflicted*' was Sai's only comment, and he could feel her disgust rolling off her in waves. He also detected a degree of relief that Ronnie had not actually been *directly* responsible for his "accident" but still held some blame for it. Petrus dropped out since both Lili and Sai had things to deal with, but was pleasantly surprised to be contacted by *another* familiar voice.

### *In Engineering*

"He might live, but we've got to get him into ships doc right away!" the Engineering Officer said.

The circuit had blown out shortly after the Captain ordered it brought back up, and the Engineering Officer and his fellows had shut it, and adjacent circuits down, while additional crew went in to pull out the body, but were excited to find him still clinging to life.

"Take him to ships doc – *quickly!*" the Captain ordered, while thinking again that it must somehow be the *human's* fault.

He took reports and checked the ship's status, then sent in another pair of technicians to make the transfer – those worthies *personally* checking the power boards, and one of them *physically* attaching circuit tags-outs to both the navigation and tracer-shield array switches.

### *Aboard the Kraken's Child*

Before leaving the *Microcosmus*, Lady Trenka had gathered her personal belongings, passengers, and a small load of fresh Healer's Milk. She'd been appalled at finding the *Kraken's Child* had no beam weapons installed, but one of the returning guardsmen pointed out the small locked cache of "special" loads for the single gun. She'd then spent several minutes wondering if the First Lord really was that clever or truly *insane!*

The prospect of imminent vaporization had distracted her almost to the point of forgetting to pass out measures of Healer's Milk to her passengers. They had nearly thirty minutes to cover, and like most of Lili's agents, she didn't like to dawdle.

She'd made several extended jumps along the back track of the ship's logs, and ended up within half a solar diameter from her target and its larger moon. As the moon was closer, she'd set out to eliminate the Vanir raider left grounded on it, but neglected to mention that to her passenger, Slich 42126, or the Imperial guardsmen sent along with him.

She'd not found the ship there, so she stretched out her senses, along with the ships sensors, to see if it were anywhere around. They'd been in system for only a few hours when she'd heard the silent shout from Commander Zickgraf, and located him in close orbit about the planet. From there, it was a simple matter to stand off and observe while Petrus



chatted with her quietly. They eventually decided to allow the Captain to continue with his repairs, before she would approach in the *Kraken's Child* to confront them.

### ***Vanaheim, In the Interrogation Room***

Ronnie was bringing his most delightful conversational skills to the fore, and appeared to be having a wonderful time of it – *despite* the occasional flinch affecting the muscles of his face...

His attitude had changed as soon as the “enhanced” translation device had been brought into the room, and he noted the randomly blinking lights on it. They indicated it was still linked to the *Kraken* orbiting overhead, which allowed more precise translations available through the extensively detailed onboard library and processing power available.

It should have also flagged someone that it was still in use somewhere, and he was sure the translations could be tapped if necessary. That’s what *he* would have designed in, anyway, and he was stalling as long as possible to give Sai time to mount an offensive recovery effort – hopefully guided by his color commentary inserted into the conversation...

“Slich 29531, I must say that being here in the center’s interrogation room with you has been *most* informative. I had *no idea* the Vanir resorted to techniques such as these. Where *are* we? Several floors below the *landing pad*, certainly,” he chatted calmly.

“It *prattles!* You *see*, Ahi 31245? It assumes *familiarity* with me, and engages me *impudently*. It – *the killer of my mate!*”

“He was your *mate?* I am so sorry, Slich 29531. Slich 29531 ... that *is* your name, correct? How do you manage to remember all those *numbers*, anyway? Everyone with the same name and just a *number* to set them apart. I simply *cannot* imagine how–”

“Does it not shut *up?* I will *kill* you, human. You will *die!*”

“Thanks to your mate, I’m *already* dying. What did he *do* to me, anyway? I’m told I was *poisoned*, and then covered with powder that would kill me eventually. So what was the point? I mean, why bother when–”

“To make *sure*, you idiot! I *told* him to keep you alive, but make sure you would never escape *intact!*”

“As I was saying, why bother when you embedded that powder into my body, anyway? Good job, that. I had a *hell* of a time trying to stay alive while he was poking holes in me, and – *OUCH!*”

Slich 29531 withdrew the probe she’d jammed it into him in an effort to shut him up. She couldn’t tell he was trying to manage triage internally, but his groan and subsequent silence would do for the moment.

## The End of the Road

“Why do you bother with them, Slich 29531?” the Prime asked her. “It is *my* compliance you want, isn’t it?”

The S’Slich’Tah turned on her with a frown on her face.

“Then perhaps your *daughter* would be a better example to play with!” she said, and viciously slashed at Sue with the probe – leaving a bloody line through her softer scales.

Sue let out a quiet groan while trying hard to suppress the agony she’d felt when her scales were damaged.

“Sue, remember your training,” Laisee said quietly, then watched as Sue struggled in her bonds before quieting down and concentrating on her injury.

The bleeding eventually stopped and the wound began to crust over – something the S’Slich’Tah didn’t miss.

“*So!* You let your *daughter* be infected by them! Your crimes are *worse* than I thought!” Slich 29531 declared; her voice turning somewhat incredulous. “I thought at first if you couldn’t be controlled, I could at least replace you with your *daughter!* Now I see I was right the *first time!* Your entire *warren* must be sanctioned!”

Everyone could hear the gloating in her words, and almost see an inner glow coming from her at the prospect of so many deaths. She seemed lost in her thoughts of glory for a moment.

“What do you mean – replace the Prime with Sue?” Ronnie asked, still trying to keep the conversation going while prying more information out of the S’Slich’Tah leader.

She turned and stepped forward to examine the curious human, then decided to *explain* her brilliant plan to the creature before having him *killed*.

“That was my *plan* ... my *first* plan. With *contingencies*, of course! Convert the daughter, then arrange a *terrible* accident for the mother. The grieving daughter would *bravely* assume control of her warren, and proceed to wipe out the human infestation with a secret project her *mother* had started – all under *my* orders, of course.”

“But your scheme fell apart when we detected one of your observation stations, and it withdrew into a Death Void – where *it* fell apart,” he pointed out.

“*Yes!* Somehow you *destroyed* one of our ships, and the station *retreated!* We thought we’d lost *everyone* until it was reported that – that *this* abomination was somehow recovered and brought back here where we can *clearly* see she was corrupted *beyond* Vanir norms!”

“Oh, I wouldn’t say *that*,” he said lightly. “She seems pretty normal to *me* ... considering that she was *dead* when we found her. She even found a potential *mate* among the S’Slich’Tah crew. He managed to save her in a stasis box until we chanced across it.”

Slich 29531’s eyes bugged out as much as a Vanir could possibly protrude them.

“That is *insane*! No self-respecting Vanir would ever *consider* mating outside of their warren! That is – that is...”

“Quite unnatural,” Sue spoke up. “But I was considering it, even though I knew we would *both* be ostracized if anyone found out. He was ... he was *nice* to me.”

*“He was ordered to be!”*

“He *still* saved her life, Slich 29531,” Ronnie said, “But he was young.” He let out a heartfelt sigh before going on wistfully. “*You* know how the young are – all foolish and idealistic. Not at all like a *proper*, staid Vanir, like ... like *yourself*, for example.”

Slich 29531 bristled at his comment, coming as it did from one of the hated *lower* species.

### ***Vanir Raider in Orbit over Station Alpha***

Petrus wasn’t a Healer, and knew even less about Vanir physiology, but even *he* could tell the man just brought in was in dire straights.

He watched as the ship’s Medical Technician activated the scans and plied his craft, but also heard the disgusted sighs as the body continued to slowly fail.

“How is he?” he asked quietly, which drew the technician’s attention to him. His look was inscrutable ... not impossible since he was Vanir.

“Is it *true*, human, you can re-grow your legs?”

“The Healers among my people can do that, yes ... for *others*, I mean. I’ve had my legs re-grown ... and my eyes ... and other bits and pieces. It’s something they’ve been teaching some of the Vanir Medical Technicians aboard our Ambassador’s transport.”

The technician stared at him for a few seconds before giving the Vanir equivalent of a “Humph!” and leaving the compartment.

Petrus lay there and considered what his best options were, but it was really a no-brainer.

## The End of the Road

### *In the Captain's Quarters*

The Captain sat alone in his quarters and thought about all that had transpired since the first human ship had entered the system.

Perhaps ... perhaps if he'd simply engaged and destroyed it, then *none* of this would have happened? If he could have only found it in time.

He sipped his drink, then sighed deeply, thinking of his desire to return home one day and maybe ... just *maybe* be allowed to mate and have an egg allowed to reach the hatchling stage – *just one*.

But after *this*, it was all over. He would *never* be allowed to procreate; probably never be allowed to *mate*, even. He was beginning to seriously doubt he'd *ever* get his ship and crew safely to the depot on B, and was wondering just what *new* hell would be visited upon him next.

As a universal constant, that *particular* sequence of thought processes was prone to rather abject conclusions, and *this* sequence was no different.

A loud voice was suddenly heard inside his head.

*'Vanir raider! I am Senior Trenka Song of the Commonwealth of Planets! You are ordered to ground your vessel immediately for a transfer of prisoners!'*

### *On Vanaheim, In the Corridors*

*'Thirty meters ... twenty meters ... Stop! You're right there!'*

Torga had reported tracking information from the translator's location as it shifted around the building until it finally stopped at one particular location.

Sai muttered curses at the unmarked walls along the confluence of corridors. With no guards posted, it would be awkward to break into one of *several* possible openings, only to alert the enemy of their presence behind *another* one. Unfortunately, they might have no other choice.

### *Inside the Interrogation Center*

Ronnie saw that she continued to fume, so he sharpened his barbed tongue to irritate her a little bit further.

"Of course, he was a *young* man and probably attracted by her youth and *beauty* – and you know how active a *youth's* hormones can be. He probably fell in love with her at first sight, and just couldn't *help* himself – even if she *was* the Prime's daughter."

Her expression turned foul at the translation, but she maintained her composure for a moment more, until...

"I'm sure *you* remember those days in the far, *far* distant past," he continued, then began polishing his rhetoric just a bit more snidely.

"Of course ... now you're all ... well, not exactly *wrinkled*, but *still*, the luster *has* gone from your scales, and the tints are fading *ever* so slightly. Although I'm sure your recent captivity has had *something* to do with that. The Prime is not a very good *hostess*," he offered confidentially as he watched her colors shift rapidly, before kicking it up another notch.

"You know, I have a pair of *Kee* aboard the *Kraken* who can do *wonders* for an *elderly* female such as yourself. Why, with the right *oils* and *creams* ... well, under *their* talented hands, they could have you looking ... oh ... *centuries* younger in *no time!*"

As her tints became more prominent, he dropped his voice to a confidant's level again, before tilting his head forward just a bit.

"And I'm told they have a very *sensual* way about the *female* Vanir body that simply *has* to be experienced – at least *once* – to be *fully appreciated*," he whispered loudly.

He wasn't exactly sure how that last had been translated, but results were what counted. The colorfully bright flush to her scales told him he was getting real close, but he knew his task was accomplished when she picked up one of the swords and started beating him with it. Fortunately, she didn't simply *poke* him with it, since even a dull point would have killed him, but she seemed happy enough to punish him for the moment.

Other than a few grunts caused by cracked and broken ribs, he suffered without much further comment while waiting for her to run down. He managed to keep his mouth shut for the duration of his beating until she finally stopped to catch her breath and stood there in front of him; seething in anger and tightly gripping the sword horizontally in front of her – with *both* hands set widely apart on the naked blade.

"Well, human ... do you have anything *else* to say?" she asked politely.

Ronnie looked up at her with a grimace of pain on his face; before calling the *Fire*.

### ***In the Adjacent Corridor***

The inability to detect the humans or the Vanir had been a mystery until they'd heard that a Vanir messenger had worn a helmet of some sort – *nothing* that Vanir were noted for wearing, according to their Vanir companions. From that, they determined it must be a mind shield of some sort. While Sai once again silently cursed Ronnie for deciding to spare the Vanir civilization, they'd followed Torga's directions and now stood outside the area that was *supposed* to contain the translator – and anyone who would need it.

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Sai made a slow circuit of the available panels, then ordered her men to listen at each one – having the Seniors extend into them as well. Nothing was heard, but all agreed that one particular panel was *completely* opaque to them, so that was the one they were preparing to breach. They were just getting ready to proceed when they heard a muffled scream from within.

### *In the Interrogation Center*

Ronnie was still laughing manically when the outer panel burst open, and Sai and her troops swarmed in and took over.

The S'Slich'Tah minions dropped their weapons and stood very still, while power swords glowed colorfully and screamed ominously close to their necks. Drecks and Vanir patriots wandered carefully through the standing bodies and removed their helmets, while the Seniors made quick assessments as to their state of mind.

One *particular* Vanir's state of mind was obvious, and Sai was about to silence it *forever* when Ronnie cried out, "*No!*"

Before she could argue the point, Sue spoke up through the translator.

"With all due respect, Lady Tal, this is an *internal* Vanir matter, and will be properly handled by Vanir. We appreciate your assistance, and will take that into consideration during all future negotiations between the Vanir and the Commonwealth. Please express our appreciation to the Drecks Ambassador, as well."

That, coming from Sue; who was still trussed up and spread out on a frame, sounded a little pretentious, even to Ronnie – so he added to it.

"Yeah ... like what *she* said! And ... and maybe she knows how to *fix* me," he mumbled, while glancing down at the floor where the would-be Prime lay bleeding out.

He groaned again before settling a bit more; sagging in his restraints and putting more stress on his broken parts.

*'I know how to fix you!'* Sai sent viciously, but saw the blank look on his face and knew it hadn't reached him.

Rather than repeat it verbally, she let out a disgusted sigh, then started cutting Sue and the Prime loose to let them deal with their "internal" problem, while Dorcas moved to release Ronnie and Laisee.

"Ronnie, how are you?" Dorcas asked with concern; not knowing that he couldn't resist ... and didn't.

"Oh ... you know," he mumbled, "Just ... hanging around." He grimaced again when she wrapped an arm around him to support him while loosening his bonds.

“You’ve found Jaiying?” he asked, as she carefully lowered him to the floor.

“Jaiying! Where’s Jaiying?” Laisee demanded while being helped to the floor by Endo.

### ***Aboard the Kraken’s Child at Station Alpha***

“Petrus, you look *well*. Although the *last* time you were on Kantor, I seem to recall you were much *taller*,” Trenka teased him.

“Well, you know the First Lord. He likes to keep me in my place. Are they about settled up over there?”

Trenka had placed him in the small crew cabin and stretched him out on the middle bunk...

He’d been deliberately staying out of the flow of conversation since he was effectively in a *non-duty* status. Even so, he wanted to know what was going on; especially with what had happened to Ronnie...

He’d told Trenka about the video, which she’d mentioned already seeing, and about his concern that Ronnie might do something unforgivable if the Vanir failed to release the rest of his family. She’d agreed it was one of the reasons Lili had sent her along – to make sure things didn’t get out of hand with Sai in charge. He’d certainly agreed with *that*...

“Have some more milk, Petrus. Lili insisted it be packed along ... just in case.”

He sipped it again, savoring the taste of his older sister once more.

He’d seen Trenka pour it for him and appreciated the fact she’d saved some for him.

She and her crew had already consumed most of the milk from the *Microcosmus*’ Healers to help recover from the long-jumps she’d made from so many minutes out.

Slich 42126 entered the open bunkroom in the company of Slich 42130, while one of the Imperial guardsmen lingered by the door. The older Vanir seemed a bit fitter compared to his younger companion, but they both looked very happy.

“Human... Petrus... I want you to thank your Commander for sparing the life of Slich 42130,” he said while still marveling that, of *all* the humans he’d met, at least *three* of them could actually speak intelligently.

“I will be glad to, but perhaps you might help me in the meantime? Ronnie has a little health problem and he seems to be failing. Do either of you know what to do about it?”

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The Vanir looked at each other, then Slich 42126 nudged his companion and nodded his head.

“He was injected with something the Director came up with – a variation on the powder he was sprayed with,” Slich 42130 said. “He said it should prevent him from being as effective when using his mind for some things.”

“There was also something about an injector attached to his back,” Petrus prompted him again.

“That ... I’m not sure what that was. I was not included in the Director’s immediate circle of assistants, but there was another treatment of some sort he was working on. I am sorry I am unable to assist you, Petrus.”

“Just as well, Slich 42130. You might not be here if you were. Perhaps when we reach the *Kraken*, you could lend your assistance to our medical staff to help figure out how to help him?”

“I would be *glad* to. *We* will be glad to,” he replied, and they made their way back to the assault deck to bring each other up to date over their individual adventures; their Imperial shadow following along, before Trenka got up and closed the door behind them.

“Well, what do you think?” he asked, nodding in the direction they departed.

“They make close bonds, as do *most* males, but without the obvious advantages a *mixed*-couple may enjoy,” she said, then leaned against the bunk next to him.

*‘I meant are they a good security risk?’* he asked silently.

*‘They are as loyal to him as a valaet is to its milk mother’* she shared, before slipping a hand into his jumper and taking a firm grasp on the situation.

*‘Good. Ronnie needs all the friends he can get right now’*

*‘He certainly does,’* she kept to herself while working on bringing Petrus up to some measure of relief for all his aches and pains.

### ***On Vanaheim, In the Maintenance Center***

The standby maintenance lead finally returned from the waste center, caught a flashing light on the environmental panel, and brought up a display indicating a loss of building pressure.

After not finding an indicator pointing to the offending external opening in the building, he shook his head with disgust. Of *all* days, this had to happen *now*!



With reluctant but determined resolve, he penned a note stating he was making the rounds of the external building openings, then added a sincere desire that his relief try to call in more crew for the day; already knowing his *own* inability to do so would probably affect his relief – if he even bothered to show up; as apparently no one *else* had, either.

He left the maintenance center located in the bottom of the building and started working his way around to check the external openings. At only twenty stories, it shouldn't take him more than a couple of hours.

### ***March 21, On Vanaheim***

The first order of business had been finding the location of the missing Jaiying. Once released from her frame, Sally had removed her helmet and bent down to seal the bleeding stumps of the S'Slich'Tah. Then she'd bored into Slich 29531's mind until finding the location of Laisee's daughter, but the amount of crap in the way of that discovery was astonishing for someone familiar with the mind segmentation typical of all Vanir.

Jaiying had been found nearly lifeless in a small, almost air-tight, mind-shielded container located inside the S'Slich'Tah's previous quarters. She'd been drugged and nearly suffocated inside the box, while her cruel warden conducted her interrogations several floors below. Slich 29531 had either forgotten about her, or never considered her life had any value, and all had been grateful she hadn't been killed outright.

Jaiying was partially resuscitated by her mother, who'd inexplicably become unable to lactate, and instead been given milk from Dorcas through a tube while she slept. Once out of her confinement, her cousins had also sent her energy from the far side of the clusters, as did Rose from up on the *Kraken*. She was still sleeping, however, and nothing at all could be made of her brain patterns, other than random flashes. That worried everyone most of all.

"She-Who-Would-Be-Prime" was resting somewhat comfortably; having had traditional orthopedic surgery to fix one hand, while the other was reattached by apprentice Vanir Healers just learning their craft. That was the extent of her physical ailment, and the new treatment was recorded – as much as it could be – for further study. Her *psychological* problems, however, were only now being fully mapped out with the help of Sally and her new staff of assistants. Halfway through their evaluation, the Guild Masters had interrupted and questioned their results, before coming up with a chilling conclusion. The S'Slich'Tah Warren leader should *never* have been allowed to hatch!

There was no physiological damage evident that would lead to such a confused and disordered mind such as hers, yet there were significant changes in the normal physiological structure of her brain layout, as noted

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by Sally's comparisons between the S'Slich'Tah's brain and others she had been into since learning the Healer techniques of the Commonwealth.

The base conclusion was that she was the result of either a congenital birth defect, or that someone had *deliberately* manipulated her mind to screw it up so badly. One other thing was also clear. Not even the recent revelations of mind-washing and neural implants seemed to preclude the obvious – that S'Slich'Tah 29531 was so *monumentally* abnormal that it was a wonder *no one* had detected it before it had progressed so far. That she had advanced to warren leader was *unbelievable*. What did that tell everyone about their warren?

Their immediate solution? *SANCTION THE ENTIRE WARREN!*

### ***March 22, At the Depot on Site B***

The Captain sipped his drink in a silent funk, while ensconced in a planet-side dormitory room – having discovered his fortunes had dramatically changed, yet again. No only did his ship still need repairs, but the depot commander was reluctant to commit to them – referring instead to a “fluid situation” back on Vanaheim. In the meantime, he'd been asked to remain off his ship and within the confines of the base, while the situation back home stabilized.

Looking around at the blank walls of his room, he considered that his rank, being equal to the depot commander's rank, entitled him to do what he damn well *pleased* – within reason. He reasoned that relaxing would be easier if he was somewhere else, so he got up and left the room. A short walk down a hallway brought him to an outside door, and he found himself looking over an open field bordered by a grassy plain with very few trees scattered about it. A purple haze could be seen in the distance, which seemed to indicate the presence of mountains, or hills of some sort.

Glancing to the side, he saw the shops and other support buildings for this small base, and noticed a small group of his crewmen lounging in the sheltered patio area of the food dispensary.

They seemed cheerful enough, especially the crewman whose life had been saved by the human female, but he wasn't in a particularly joyful mood, himself. With no other place to go, he finally gave in and adopted a lazy pace in their direction while contemplating how they'd all ended up in this particular situation...

They'd been forced back down at Station Alpha by a tiny Commonwealth tank, before being boarded; not only by a Vanir wearing an unusual ship suit, but also a lone human female whose malevolent presence seemed to keep everyone at arms length while she'd calmly stalked his ship's corridors and unerringly found their lone human passenger.

He'd followed her at a distance; easily feeling the menace emanating from her, as she'd strode through his ship. As he approached within earshot of them, he'd slowed and listened to the two of them arguing. This was followed by gestures made at his injured crewman, then *more* arguing ... *vehemently*, it would seem.

Finally, he'd heard an angry growl from the female, before she'd turned to face his helpless crewman and began slowly circling him while trailing the fingers of one hand over his body. Then she'd stopped, given out a sigh, closed her eyes, then pressed down *firmly*.

Before he could react, a bright *flash* had erupted in the room, and his crewman let out a shout; then sat up, yelling, "Turn it *off*! Turn It *Off*! TURN IT OFF!"

He'd stupidly looked around at his location, then at the diminutive human female standing close to him. Then he'd patted his torso curiously. The female had reached out and patted his thigh before turning back to Petrus and levering him up over her shoulder to carry him out.

"Captain, I thank you for your hospitality," Petrus had said, with his head flopped over her shoulder and his voice bouncing along with her stride. "I've convinced Lady Trenka to escort you to the Depot so you can get there safely."

They'd continued along the corridor towards the airlock.

"I'd suggest that everyone sit tight once you get there until things work themselves out back on Vanaheim," Petrus added along the way.

They'd arrived at the air lock, where he saw *two* Vanir, the one in the Commonwealth-style ship suit, standing next to Slich 42130.

"Oh... If you should change your mind, contact any of the Commonwealth outposts and request a meeting with one of the First Lord's ministers so you can arrange to find other accommodations – just in case, you know, things turn sour on Vanaheim. Safe journey, Captain!" Petrus had cheerfully called out, then given him a short wave, just as the female, a Commonwealth *Healer*, he'd finally realized, cycled the lock with them, and the two Vanir inside, letting them step onto the ground near what was left of Station Alpha...

Once getting closer, the Captain acknowledged his crew, but his attitude didn't invite company. They left him alone as he wandered through their groupings towards an unoccupied table that gave him a view of the hills.

He sat there and stared at the hills for a few minutes, until one of the crew came over and handed him a drink – a sweetened fruit juice of some kind. He sipped it, then dipped his head gratefully, before the crewman retreated to his own gathering.

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He took a deep breath and let out a sustained sigh; closing his eyes and wondering what the future held in store for all of them. Opening them again, he caught sight of a flock of ... *something* ... flying low over the plains, alternately gliding, then suddenly swooping down to the ground to capture something for dinner ... or maybe supper. He'd never bothered to determine the local time references when he'd landed.

All things considered, at least he wasn't on *Vanaheim*. One part of his mind rebelled at that, but several other segments ganged up on it and beat it into submission. Here was just *fine*, they told it. Fresh air and clean water ... this place must have water *somewhere* ... and maybe a chance to settle down and raise a family. That singular part of his mind nearly raised an objection again, but reconsidered at the last moment and paused to take stock of the situation.

Perhaps Depot B wasn't such a bad place after all?

### ***Kantor, the Royal Homestead***

Lili paced her outer suite in frustration. Radatel had left for the Capitol without her, and she'd been avoiding the gardens ever since that little incident with Boots.

She was still torn about her orders to Trenka, but hadn't countermanded them yet – leaving Trenka with the task of performing a personal evaluation of Ronnie's mind-set, and doing an on-site investigation of the circumstances involving in his deadly attack on the Vanir.

On the whole, it didn't really matter whether you killed someone with a sword or by sucking the life out of them – they were still dead. The problem was that if it became *common* practice, it would likely lead to the *same* problems that had brought previous versions of the Commonwealth to *ruin* – Kantite males degenerating into their *baser* incarnations, and bringing death and destruction to *everyone*. *That* was why the Elder's law had made it a *capital* crime, and why the *previous* Emperor had died in office.

Ronnie had played fast and loose with some of the more trivial aspects of his mixed-breeding, such as playing with telekinetic events, but also some of the more *critical* aspects, such as taking *some* life force for himself, or even transferring it to others. Under normal circumstances, his escape using the telekinetic elevation of his power knife without prior permission might be grounds for censure, although common sense dictated it was a reasonable – if *illegal* – offense.

However, the *violent* destruction of life at the Vanir lab site appeared to be a clear and *capital* crime, and she was judge and jury concerning it.

She hoped Trenka took her time and made a *thorough* investigation.

As for *Josie* ... that was *another* matter on the sidelines that had to be resolved as well, which would make Lili's sleep restless for the remainder of yet another night.

### ***On Vanaheim***

To say there had been a purge would have sounded too harsh, although many household members were summarily sequestered for evaluation and reeducation – of a sort.

Once released from her bonds, the Prime and her daughter had gathered all loyal warren members – then verified the loyalty of each one of them *personally* – before setting up a process of scanning and searching for anyone or anything *else* that might pose a threat to the Vanir leadership or their human guests.

This process expanded outwards, as certain “specially-trained” Vanir applied their newly-gained skills to peek into the thought processes of an ever-expanding circle of support staff, guards, officers, administrators, and representatives from other warrens.

As problems were discovered, the suspect Vanir were directed to a pleasant, airy space where they were asked simple questions while their mind processes were observed, and bodies scanned for undesirable internal items. Remarkably enough, it turned out that very few Vanir were affected by the purge, other than those staff who'd had an obvious connection to the S'Slich'Tah, and a few other personages in positions with relatively easy access to the Prime and her advisors.

The process proceeded throughout the night.

The humans recovered their dead – Captain Avitus and his three guardsmen. The deceased humans and five dead Vanir were removed – the humans for recovery to the *Kraken*, while the Vanir were simply recycled.

Laisee remained on planet as the human Ambassador to Vanaheim, while Dorcas stayed behind and doted over Jaiying, who had not yet recovered consciousness, and Laisee would not let out of her sight without Dorcas watching over her.

Sai had escorted part of the remaining assault team back to the transport, which was now properly docked. They'd loaded the bodies and themselves before making an uneventful return trip to the *Kraken* after leaving a small guard force to watch over Laisee, Jaiying, and Dorcas.

Despite the recommendations of his Healers, Ronnie decided to stay on planet simply to be close to the S'Slich'Tah in case they pried some fairly important information from her mind – like how to fix him. So far, it didn't look hopeful, but word had come down from Milsie and Donnel that they

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were working on something that would let him keep *most* of his skin intact. He just couldn't bring himself to ask, though.

He did pass a request up to Donnel's team that had them begin a study of the Vanaheim planetary atmosphere, with a focus on concentrations of elements toxic to the Vanir, and where they tended to bunch up at ground level, and slightly above. Always the opportunist, he had a suspicion the S'Slich'Tah problem wasn't just a random event, and wanted some research to back it up.

### *March 24, Relative Stability on Vanaheim*

The Capitol had survived the failed coup attempt because quick steps had been taken to maintain order and stability. This morning found Sue and her mother arguing about the Guild Master's decision, and Ronnie's argument against it.

Ronnie had stipulated they'd already lost too many warrens to preemptive sanctions over the millennia, and it found a tiny toe hold in one or two segments of Sue's mind, which then nagged at her almost *constantly* to hold off until the human could present his reasons with greater information. It was something he'd promised his crew was still working on.

The Prime had a more pressing concern.

"What will he do if I simply *order* it without telling him? My advisors have made their decision, and I can find no reason not to comply with their recommendations."

"He has asked you to *wait*, Mother! There is no reason to rush to judgment when Vanir lives are in--"

"Vanir *lives*? What about all the Vanir lives that have *already* been sacrificed because of that – that *foul creature*!"

"Mother ... we are now aware of all the S'Slich'Tah Warren leader set into play. We got it all from her mind – as difficult as that was to accomplish. If Ronnie believes her warren can be saved, then *please* ... let us wait to hear him out. The S'Slich'Tah are going *nowhere*. Oh... What of the ship and port the new human reported over on the far side of our territory?"

No matter the reasons for Sue's adventure, the Prime was glad she'd survived her ordeal – even though they still found themselves at odds over policy. Despite this, the Prime was beginning to calm down and explore other arguments to present to her daughter.

"I've already ordered two ships from Base 4 to proceed to that location and make sure the S'Slich'Tah traitors do not leave the planet. But if they find no ship, then how will we ever know if we are truly safe? Perhaps we

can ask a favor of Lord Caldar and have him destroy that location for us? Perhaps it will show our good faith towards *peaceful* relations between our peoples?”

“*Mother!* All that will show is how much we are alike to the ... the *Drecks!*”

“Oh, you are *nothing* like the Drecks,” Ronnie commented by the doorway; his translator spewing out Vanir from where it hung from his waist. “You’re much shorter and have a *lovely* shade of green – well, *mostly* green, I guess.”

“Lord Caldar! How – how are you feeling today?” the Prime asked, being quite surprised to see him up and about so soon after his mistreatment at the hands of the S’Slich’Tah Warren leader.

He walked in slowly, and Sue brought over a seat for him to join them.

“Thank you, Sue,” he said, before turning to the Prime.

“Grandmother ... I feel bad. *Really* bad. My sleep was cluttered with dreams of death and destruction – both by *my* hands, and by Vanir against Vanir.”

He slowly settled onto the seat and relaxed uncomfortably while feeling his ribs trying to flex under the tight bandages Laisee had applied on the day of their rescue.

“Has your medical staff determined a proper treatment for your ... condition?” she asked politely.

“Aside from the one that requires removing all of my outer skin? No, not really, although my blood work suggests a proper filtering of my entire blood supply might help remove the majority of particles that prevent the Healers from fixing my *internal* damage. There was some other chemical they mentioned, but they’re still arguing over what it does.”

“I do not understand why the powder is keeping you under its influence without the radiation source, Ronnie,” Sue said, gaining a glare from her mother at her familiarity with him.

“Nor do I ... unless it had something to do with my foolish attempt to pry some life out of our dear friend, the Director.”

Just before he continued, he noticed the Prime quiver in response to that translation, and offered a theory for her.

“That has never happened before. It felt like I’d been *electrocuted*. I suppose it might have changed the molecular make up of the powder. I’ll have to ask Mister Ardan to try and duplicate that in his lab.”

“This ... Mister Ardan is one of your medical officers?” the Prime asked.

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“No, Mother,” Sue interrupted her. “Donnel Ardan is a military researcher, engineer, and designer. He has served Ronnie for many–”

“S’Ahi’Ma 42491! Please express proper respect to our guest,” the Prime interrupted in turn. “And please let Lord Caldar speak for *himself* – do not interrupt,” she added, which got a rolling chuckle from Ronnie that could have eventually taken him to the floor, if he’d had the strength to appreciate it in full.

Both Sue and her mother looked at him curiously, and after finally getting himself under control, he explained his amusement.

“Grandmother, it greatly eases my heart to hear you interact with your daughter with such care. It reminds me of how I was raised – with all the Wives working together to curb my enthusiasm, while trying very hard not to stifle my natural curiosity and thirst for knowledge. I have found that Sue possesses many admirable traits ... traits that made her a valuable crewperson aboard my ship. We will all miss her when we leave.”

The Prime remained calm, but Sue was startled.

This was *not* part of her plans! She’d expected to return to the ship and go with the humans when they returned to the Commonwealth.

She was still considering this while her mother continued.

“Lord Caldar, you asked that we suspend disposition of the S’Slich’Tah until you have had time to research something aboard your ship. Have your crew presented you with an update yet?” the Prime asked, while pointedly ignoring the agitation coming from her daughter.

“Not as yet, Grandmother. Your planet is very large, and conducting spectrum analysis from orbit is not as accurate as dropping a bunch of atmospheric probes to take samples directly. But then, we’re not exactly a research ship.”

“What are you trying to discover, Ronn ... Lord Caldar?” Sue asked, while sparing a sideways glance at her mother.

“Well ... it’s not uncommon on industrialized planets to find that pollution will cause significant – sometimes *major* problems with animal and plant life. Here in the administrative center for your warren, you keep the atmosphere out with force bubbles, and filter what outside air gets in to remove particles. I am curious as to the effect particulate matter – potentially genetically *corruptive* particulate matter – has on animals and plant life on Vanaheim.”

“You think our atmosphere might have *negative* effects on our citizens? But we’ve *always* dealt with the atmosphere this way. We spend very little time outside and seen no noticeable changes in ourselves,” the Prime stated.



“No... You’ve seen no changes in *yourselves*, but other warrens may have had a different experience. Anyway, it doesn’t hurt to look. On my home planet, there were manufacturing locations that spilled waste water into rivers, which then drained into oceans. The creatures in the ocean were caught and consumed by the people. Some of the people – usually during gestation – were genetically modified by trace elements that existed in the creatures they ate ... sometimes with chemical by-products, sometimes with excess heavy metals that built up in the flesh of the food creatures.”

“That sounds *terrible!*” Sue blurted out.

“Yes, it *was* terrible – it still *is* in some places. As for Vanaheim – your planet is basically one *humungous* active volcano spewing out particulate matter that swirls all over the place. I’m guessing not all of your warrens enjoy the same level of habitability as the S’Ahi’Ma?”

The Prime stared at him, and the longer she stared, the faster the information ran around the segments of her mind. She could understand the concepts from his statements and found they could be quite compelling, if *true*, but could conceive of no practical reason why *no one* – not one Vanir *anywhere* – had ever considered their planet in this light.

“How ... is there anything you need ... that we can provide you...” She got lost in her thoughts for a moment, before settling on a specific question for him. “Lord Caldar, what information could we provide to assist in this research?”

He gave his head a tilt as he mentally ran through the notes Donnel had passed down to him earlier, and she waited patiently while he worked through his list.

“The geographical location of each warren’s holdings on Vanaheim, for starters. And if it’s not too delicate a subject ... the reproductive customs of the Vanir? We already know how your eggs are fertilized, but the ... the *post-processing*, shall we say? Where the eggs are located prior to hatching. Their exposure to outside elements. That sort of thing.”

Sue jumped up, saying, “Ronnie, I will ... Lord Caldar, I know where that information is kept and I will prepare it for transmission to Donnel Ardan for his review!” She paused and turned to her mother.

“If that is acceptable to *you*, my Prime?” she asked, and got a silent ‘Yes, *my daughter*’ and a nod in return.

After she left, Ronnie turned back to the Prime and smiled, before broaching a question that had been on his mind for a while now.

“Grandmother, when I first met Samuel – S’Shac’Kah 39496 – I found his social conventions were dissimilar to those of humanity ... some of

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them, anyway. After a while, the way he interacted with me seemed, if you'll forgive me ... very human."

The Prime looked at him while examining that statement on many levels. She let her mind's segments run with it, while allowing one of them to search out the question in Ronnie's mind – entirely without resistance from him, she noted, but still very faint. She found a thought that was prominent along with his question – a concern that included a vague reference to something called Plan B – then considered what should be her answer – the truth, for better or worse – but then ignored it.

She deflected the question he appeared to be leading up to, and asked one of her own, instead.

"Lord Caldar, you've gone out of your way to protect the Vanir – and *me* in particular. Why is that?"

He blinked, then paused before saying, "Well, because it's the right thing to do."

"No, there is *another* reason," she pressed; letting that one segment dawdle in his mind while it kept taking notes for her.

"Well... Well, we've been alone out here all this time. I mean, the general consensus is that civilization – *humanity*, that is – developed further out from the center of this galaxy and started working its way inward while leaving traces of itself behind. You know our history. We rise, we spread out, we fall – it's like a never-ending cycle with us. Your people have been here and relatively stable for millions of years. You must have *some* lessons to teach us."

"You wish to know more of your own history?"

"That, and more about those who came before us. I've worked the Blight – those regions where humanity collapsed and left just scattered tribes behind. We've been pulling them out and adding them to our clusters as new colony worlds."

"That is very altruistic of your people. I'm sure their resources have added to the productivity of your society," she suggested.

"Only in the sense that they're on *this* side of the voids, rather than stuck on some dying world lashed by radiation or instability. The ones who came before us were really *violent* bastards," he said, which triggered a tiny hiss of laughter from her.

His look turned dark; his eyes becoming dead when he looked up at her.

"The Drecks took out *twenty-seven* of our colony worlds ... at *your* behest. We're still rebuilding from that."

She became somewhat somber at his tone, and it followed when she replied, “Your history seemed to suggest it was a prudent move on our part. I’m beginning to doubt such a move was in *anyone’s* best interest.”

She paused, then asked, “Do you *really* think Vanir originated on the source world?”

He paused to partly raise his arms in a silent shrug before letting them drop.

“Grandmother, I truly don’t know *what* to think anymore. My researchers think it’s a possibility – but it’s also a possibility we were *both* transplanted to there from somewhere else. Maybe you were there first and left on your own? Or maybe you were planted there, didn’t thrive, and were moved down here? I’m sure Vanaheim wasn’t always as ... well, as it is now,” suggested, and saw her slow nod of acquiescence.

“Our most ancient memories tell us the sky was once clearer – occasionally. But as for lessons ... what would you have us teach *you*?”

“Teach *us*? Ha! Like I’ve said, you’ve been a stable society for millions of years. You’ve been a technological society for twenty times longer than we have and you’ve not tried to destroy yourselves. How can you to teach us *that* type of stability?”

“Make that a *thousand* times longer than you, and there is nothing to teach. You must decide for *yourselves* when not to kill,” she said, and he raised his hands again while shaking his head slowly.

“That’s always the tricky part, isn’t it? Deciding when not to kill. It always seems that *someone* becomes greedy, or demanding, or ... or just angry when we’re on the verge of stability. Take the source world – my home planet. The people there kill on a whim – the color of one’s skin, the language one speaks, the control, or *lack* of control, the leaders have over the living conditions, or over the thoughts and hearts of the citizens ... sometimes those are enough excuse to start the killing.”

The Prime didn’t hesitate to admit their own dirty laundry.

“The Vanir ... we have similar problems, but eliminate them when they are identified. Something you *oppose*, I understand.”

“I can understand you isolating, or perhaps eliminating the offending party. The Gods know I’ve done *that* and more,” he muttered quietly, then voiced a question of his own. “What I don’t understand is why you would eliminate an entire *warren* for the actions of a few. You only have ... what, about ten-thousand warrens left? How many did you start with? And how many more can you afford to sanction before your entire *society* collapses?”

“That is an *internal* matter for *Vanir* to decide!”

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“That is a *moral* matter that needs to be studied so *prevention* can occur before *thousands* of your citizens are *needlessly killed for the actions of a few!*”

They glared at each other, each having risen to their feet. Their tempers may have flared, but they remained still and waited for things to cool before continuing; with Ronnie making the first gesture.

“My apologies, Grandmother. It *is* a Vanir matter,” he said calmly, then bowed slightly while remaining standing in front of the Prime. “I only counsel patience and examination of the facts so that a *root* cause might be discovered for the anti-social behavior of any particular warren.”

She stared at him a moment more, before resuming her seat; he waiting for her to sit before sitting down as well.

“Apology accepted ... Ronnie. Your arguments have merit, and *we* will take them under advisement. We will delay execution of our decision until you’ve had a chance to present the findings of your research team. Tell me, Ronnie, how would you handle the situation we find ourselves in?”

He didn’t miss the shift to the Royal “we” but ignored it anyway.

“Considering the scientific advances of certain warrens, I would recommend removal and isolation of the offending members of such a warren – perhaps relocation to a place where they may continue to live and be a productive, but *non-interfering* contributor to your society.”

“To our society ... or to *yours?*” she asked pointedly.

“You left the STak’Sah banished in a cloud above the Kee planet,” he countered. “Thirty-thousand individuals moved on a *whim*. Has anyone ever gone back and *checked* on them? They might consider accepting a move to a stable colony world in the Demon’s Realm if it meant belonging to a supportive society once again – even if it were run by humans.”

“You would *not!* *They* would not! That would be *insane!* I’m beginning to think *you’re* insane!” She stood again, and he struggled back to his feet to respond.

“Hey – you know that little *voice* inside your head that tells you not to say *stupid things?* Well, *I’m not Vanir*, and I don’t *have* one of those! Apparently, some of your *citizens* fail to have one *as well!*”

“Have one of what?” Laisee asked as she entered the room with Ambassador Samuel.

The Prime glared at Ronnie, then glanced at them, before turning and storming out of the room. Samuel looked stricken, while Laisee just shook her head and sighed loudly.

“I see you haven’t lost your *touch*, First Lord,” she muttered sourly.

### *In the Maintenance Center*

The *newly* appointed maintenance supervisor entered the center and found a rather curious note left behind by the previous standby supervisor; who seemed to have been misplaced. After an extensive examination of all the *usual* suspects for potential environmental instability, he'd found a rather large hole in one of the outer walls that was unaccounted for.

Upon further reflection, he'd decided that this was not a *regular* mechanical failure, written his report on it in detail, then considered the last day and a half to be worthy of some *serious* downtime. In that regard, he'd tried to contact anyone else in the maintenance hierarchy, but failed; thus the note left behind stating his intention to take the next three work cycles off while someone else higher in the responsibility chain determines the *next* logical steps to take.

### *On the Kraken*

"How was your transit?" Sai asked absently, otherwise ignoring Trenka while looking to the airlock of the *Kraken's Child*.

Trenka had docked and transferred her Vanir passengers into the care of, if she understood his mind correctly, the Vanir ships steward. She was still getting used to the multiple-conversations she was hearing every time she tapped into their consciousness to speak with them. It was disturbing on a whole new level, but maybe it could be a mitigating factor if applied to Lord Caldar's situation?

She shelved that thought and answered Sai's question.

"It went well. The First Wife was kind enough to send along some of her own milk to ease the transit sickness. With what was donated from the *Microcosmus*' Healers, there was more than enough left over for Commander Zickgraf. I was able to provide him some additional relief before we started the final jump sequence."

Trenka noticed Sai wasn't paying any attention to her; having her complete attention on the stretcher team approaching the *Kraken's Child*. She joined her in watching them enter the ship, then watched as they carried Petrus out and unceremoniously dumped him onto the stretcher – having lost their grip on him after beginning to laugh uncontrollably at something he'd said.

She felt the shock and surprise from Sai, followed by a little concern, but refrained from trying to read anything from her more deeply. That breach of etiquette was currently uncalled for, but remained available during the extent of her investigation.

Instead, she watched as Petrus was hauled off to the ships doc, with all three of them laughing insanely at whatever story he was telling them.

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“Oh, Petrus – you old fool,” Sai muttered, then remembered her guest. “Uh, Lady Song, we have quarters ready for you. Allow me to escort you,” she said, all business once again as she guided her to the compartment she’d been assigned, and gave her quick review of the information system on the wall that would provide her with an overall map to the ship, and high-level access to non-critical ships data.

“If you need anything, please do not hesitate,” she offered.

“A hot shower and something besides ships *poop*,” Trenka declared loudly, and Sai showed her the way to the commons on the map, and how to order food delivered to her quarters, if necessary.

Sai turned to leave as Trenka stripped down on the way to the facilities – clothes dropping right and left – before reaching the facilities and closing the door behind her.

Trenka looked over the rather complete facilities, then sat and gratefully voided herself while idly wondering if they had housekeeping services. Then she wondered if one of them would be *male*. Petrus had made it fun, but he wasn’t exactly *mobile* yet. She finished and rinsed herself, before entering the shower for a much longer for *thorough* cleaning.

### *In the Engineering Lab*

They’d both learned of it by rumor at the commons, and by his *own* admission, Ronnie had tried to take life force from a Vanir, but it backfired on him and made the suppressant *permanent* – for the time being, at least. That was Milsie’s reasoning, anyway, after having watched the incriminating video several times over the last few days.

“That *must* have been how it happened, Donnel! The infusion of that chemical, coupled with the injection of micro-granulated powder into his skin, acted as suppressant until the energy source was terminated. That’s what he told you. When he removed the power, he was released from its influence. The only other energy source he incurred was when ... when he tried to take the ... the *life energy* from that Vanir,” she insisted, while still feeling very queasy about the concept.

Donnel had no major arguments against her conclusions, other than there was no way to test it in the lab. The only Seniors available that could possibly emulate the process had absolutely refused, and for good reason – stealing life was a capital offense under the Elder’s laws.

Likewise, they’d yet to get any results from the sample helmets, antennas, and signal generation sets brought up from Vanaheim – again, because of the reluctance of Lady Sai to authorize help from any of the Seniors. They were still in a heated discussion about it when interrupted by a call from the doorway.

“Excuse me... I have some results for you,” Dolac reported quietly.

He’d paused at the doorway, being reluctant to interfere with what sounded like an intense conversation. Both of them swiveled to look at him, and Donnel spoke first.

“Anything useful?”

“Well ... let’s just say that no one in their right *mind* would want to vacation there – *ever*,” he asserted strongly.

“Let’s see if it helps Lord Caldor, then,” Donnel said, and beckoned Dolac to join them.

### ***March 25, On Vanaheim***

Donnel had transmitted his data down to him the night before. After checking how Jaiying had slept after awakening from her ordeal late last night, Ronnie called for a morning meeting with Sally and the rest of the Medical Guild. The Prime had delegated Sue to act as her representative, and Laisee and Samuel were also in attendance. They were meeting in a conference room with a large wall display, where Ronnie brought up the readings scanned from orbit that had been overlaid on a global geopolitical map of Vanaheim before beginning his presentation.

“Here you can see where Donnel and Milsie took the data from Dolac and overlaid it on the global map of Vanaheim. Then they added in all of the historical warren enclaves you provided them. From *here*...” he paused, pointing to a graduated shaded scale on the side of the display, “...you can see the relative concentration of pollutants that, if you were *human*, would have at least ninety-percent of the population in the areas of highest concentration either dead or dying within about a year, Standard.”

“But we are *not* human,” one of the Senior Guild members quickly pointed out.

Ronnie waited for the translation, even as he had an idea of what had been said.

“No, you are not human ... but you are made up of the *same* chemical combinations as we are, and you’re just as susceptible to toxic pollutants as we are... Okay, maybe a little *tougher* than we are, but still, they will eventually affect you, too – and not in a good way.”

He sat down after giving up listening when the translator could not keep up with the stream of chatter that erupted between the Guild members, Sue, and Sally. It was just as well, since he’d lost the ability to read their minds directly, anyway. Instead of worrying about it, he watched as the map slowly rotated on the screen.

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After the third or fourth rotation, he took note again of something no one had yet explained to him. The enclaves were all marked with boundary lines like those of small cities, but as the map rotated, he could see some of those lines were of a different color.

Comparing them to the density shadings, he had a suspicion of just why that was, and asked Laisee to address it when the chatter dropped back down to just a few argumentative voices.

After a few minutes of futile waiting, she finally stood up and walked to the display.

"I beg your *pardon*, please," she said loudly in Vanir. "Would someone please explain to me the reason some of the warren outlines are marked differently?"

She halted the map's rotation and gestured to several enclaves shown with a different color outline. The toxic scale showed they had *extremely* high concentrations of pollutants covering them.

She pointed to one of them and asked, "What warren lives here?"

The Guild members all looked at each other, before one of them finally answered.

"Those were the holdings of the S'Slak'Tak. They were sanctioned about ... eight-thousand years ago. No one claimed their enclave, so it is vacant."

"And this one here" she asked, pointing to another one of the same color outline.

"That was where the S'Kailik'Tah lived. They were also sanctioned," said another Guild member.

"And here ... and here?"

"The S'Masci'Sah and the S'Dalsik'Tah ... both sanctioned."

The room was becoming very quiet.

"What about this one over here ... with a *different* color?"

The room remained silent until Sue quietly spoke up.

"That was the traditional enclave of the STak'Sah. Their warren was not sanctioned. Instead ... it was banished to the cloud above the Kee world."

Laisee could not read Vanir, but noted there were two names for the same location.

"Did anyone claim it after they were forced out?"



“Yes,” Sue said. “It was claimed by the S’Slich’Tah. They expanded into it, since it was adjacent to their traditional enclave – which is just to the right of it.”

Now that it was back to give and take, Ronnie had been following the conversation easier. He noted the last two enclaves pointed out by Laisee were in a high-concentration zone for pollutants, then stood up to speak.

“So ... for all those enclaves falling into areas of *highest* toxic levels, what you’re saying is they have all been sanctioned for one reason or another?” His question was met with silence, and he frowned and turned back to the map.

He’d only glanced at them as he’d walked forward, but once standing much closer, he started the globe turning in a very slow rotation while counting the off-color boundaries. He stopped when it reached about fifty, but noted there were at least four or five *times* that number.

The Vanir were very organized, and their social structure was generally based on multiples of ten. The Prime administered to ten representatives, who each administered to ten groups, each composed of ten sub-groups. This continued until a total of approximately ten-thousand warrens were represented by a dwindling number of representatives, all the way up to the Prime. Themselves, the warrens were nominally capped at about thirty-thousand individuals, give or take a hundred or so – that being the base number of citizens deemed suitable for a self-sustaining, independent social group.

According to Ronnie’s estimates, the Vanir had summarily executed close to ten-*million* citizens – probably for the grievous errors of just a *few* – and it seemed there was an *environmental* reason for it. He was ready to pack up and leave, but turned to seek out Sue first.

“Sue, I have no words to express my astonishment at this *gross* oversight,” he said to her, while shaking his head sadly, before turning to the rest of the assemblage. “As stated previously, we accept the Prime’s agreement of peace treaties to be arranged between our Ambassadors. My personal recommendation regarding the S’Slich’Tah stands – and I am offering two of their warren asylum, if they so choose. They would be S’Slich’Tah 42130 and S’Slich’Tah 42126 – and a suitable mate for each, if they can find any who will accept them. Please give my kind regards and thanks to the Grandmother for her hospitality.”

He walked over and carefully bent down to whisper into Laisee’s ear, before heading back to their shared quarters to wait for the shuttle to return. He was disheartened and exhausted, but mostly disappointed in the Vanir for not picking up on something so *obvious* from the beginning.

Once the door closed behind him, Laisee tried to reach out to him; momentarily forgetting he was cut off from her by his problem. She sat

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through the meeting for several more minutes, but the Vanir were mostly talking in circles over statistics and potential pushback from the planetary population over Ronnie's simple proposal to relocate to healthier climes. She waited it out for another ten minutes before making her own excuses and following him out; leaving with a promise to make herself available once the Vanir had made their own determination of the presentation's validity.

On the way back to her quarters, Jaiying reached out to her.

*'Mother, Grandfather says he is taking me back to the ship'*

*'Yes, sweetheart, and I am coming to help you pack'* Laisee responded. *'Ronnie believes you will be safer aboard the ship'*

*'But what about YOU, Mother?'*

*'I have my guards; and the trust of the Vanir. I will be fine'*

### ***In the Meeting Room***

Sally was not stricken in the sense of feeling helpless to act, but upset Rondal Caldar had said his goodbyes so abruptly, then left. She glanced at Samuel; but sensed he was all right, if only a little melancholy about it.

That thought struck her as peculiar – *melancholy*. It was *not* a Vanir concept. Nor were *several* concepts she'd never experienced before meeting the humans.

Change wasn't just *coming* – it was already *here* and affecting *everyone* involved, it seemed.

She turned back to a strangely thoughtful conversation and rejoined the discussion – listening to the rather calm back-and-forth while issues were balanced against the Vanir medical areas needing expansion to test and evaluate this new line of study – and it *would* be studied, of course. The Vanir were nothing if not thorough once they discovered something *new* to study. It seems that they just needed a little *push*, sometimes.

She turned introspective once again, while the majority of her mind's segments jumped onto that concept, then started back-checking it against all the interactions she'd had with the humans, and particularly Rondal Caldar. He always seemed to be on top of things, and somehow managed to get out of every predicament he'd found himself in. She'd asked him about it once, and he'd said that if Plan A didn't work, he just fell back to Plan B.

Plan B?

Laisee had once muttered something about a Plan B, and later on, she'd sensed those same words from the Prime's semi-open mind – Plan B. What would Rondal Caldar's Plan B entail? It would be a fall-back plan if

the desired first result didn't come to pass. Lord Caldor had gotten everything he'd wanted here, hadn't he? The peace treaty was his desired first result, wasn't it?

She began to worry, then made her excuses to the group, before fleeing the room, with Samuel quickly following on her heels.

### *In the Human's Quarters*

Ronnie sipped a little water to wash down his last two pills, those having been salvaged from his clothing and kit they'd recovered from a corner in the interrogation room.

He looked around, then decided on using a large cushion on the floor, rather than lying on the bed where Jaiying was resting. It might make it harder to get up, but he didn't feel like being totally horizontal at the moment since it put too much stress on his ribs, even taped as they were. He made sure his small power blade was still secreted upon his person, though, before settling down to wait for his transport.

*'Mother, what is wrong with Grandfather?'*

*'He is very sick, Jaiying, and we don't know how to fix him'*

*'No. I mean he seems very sad, and his mind is very strange now. I can barely hear him anymore'*

*'Jaiying ... Ronnie has been injured by the Vanir and we can't fix him right now. He is taking pills from ships doc that will affect his mind, as well as his body. It is the only thing that will ease his pain right now'* she explained gently.

*'Don't you have any milk for him, Mother? I know Grandmother would not give him any'*

Laisee considered for a moment what little milk she was slowly being able to produce once again, but remembered she'd been rebuffed just the day before. Still...

*'I will ask him, my girl'*

She reached out to him from where she was in the corridor – *again* forgetting that he was deaf to her – but stopped where she was; startled to hear what sounded like music coming from him.

She listened curiously before sharing it with Jaiying.

*'What is that?'* Jaiying asked her.

*'That ... that is a mazurka as played on an instrument from Earth ... like my piano. It was written long ago by a man on Earth named Chopin'* Laisee told her in amazement.

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They both listened silently for several minutes as the melodies changed from song to song.

‘Jaiying... I – I never knew. Ronnie has *MEMORIZED* them. He–’ she stopped as the notes of the Tarantelle began a rapid beat that lasted for less than three minutes. They both felt his calm as the piece ended, followed by a swiftly gathering fuzziness indicating he was finally falling asleep.

Laisee got going again and turned the corner to be greeted by her guardsman at the human’s quarters, who was already opening the door for her before she entered quietly.

### *In the Corridor*

Sally and Samuel stopped several paces away from the door, neither of them daring to ask for admittance at the moment. They’d followed Laisee’s and Jaiying’s conversation remotely, then listened to Ronnie as well.

It wasn’t music as either of them understood it, but it was intricate and engaging on many levels – once you got past the strange sounding instrument, Ronnie was remembering it being played on. The revelation confused Sally for the moment, and after he’d fallen asleep, she debated possibly waking him up, or simply reaching out silently to Laisee and asking first. It was resolved for her when the guard opened the door and motioned them inside. Another guard waved them over to a room on the opposite side of the sitting room where they could talk with the human Ambassador in private. Once inside, they shut the inner door and began a quiet conversation with Laisee that didn’t ease either Sally’s or Samuel’s minds. Almost an hour later, they were still distressed.

“But ... but would he really *do* that?” Samuel asked once again; hoping somehow the answer would be different from what it was nearly an hour ago.

“Samuel, you must remember that Ronnie has gone to extremes to *prevent* execution of that particular resolution to the problem – by either human *or* Vanir standards,” Laisee pressed once again. “He could have taken down the Hegemony by force, but instead, he managed to set portions of itself *upon* itself. What he has accomplished *here* – strictly for the benefit of the *Vanir* – was determine if the Vanir would *remain* a threat to humanity ... and he thinks it does not.”

“But ... I was *there* ... on the *bridge!* Sai loaded that ... that *doomsday weapon*, and it’s pointed *right at us!*”

“Yes, and that was just a simple exercise – a simple display of force. Realistically, the weapon would never have been fired as long as the *Kraken* was never attacked. If the *Kraken* was attacked and *breached*, the likelihood of all the rounds going off was very high. Vanaheim would have

been *vaporized* – along with you, me, Jaiying, and anyone *else* in the neighborhood.”

“But that ... that’s *insane!*” Sally blurted out.

“As Ronnie said, ‘insane, hairless apes.’ *Believe me!* If Ronnie did not feel the Vanir were worth cultivating as good neighbors, we would not be having this conversation right now. The only really *big* concern – aside from the S’Slich’Tah – was what we talked about with Lili weeks ago on the ship. He was afraid the Vanir would adapt what we’ve taught you and use it against us in the future.”

She could see Samuel cringing at the mere thought of it.

“But that’s so ... *distasteful!* I cannot imagine *any* Vanir–” he stopped at a look from Sally, and his color shifted a bit.

“Exactly,” Laisee muttered softly. “*Most* Vanir would not. As humans, we can do things you currently cannot. Our males – *some* of them – can do *horrific* things, and they are constantly monitored and censured as they occur – or they *were*, under Elder Kita’s supervision. Lady Ai was still new to the position, before she ... stepped aside. Now Lady Lili is the new Elder and she has not yet settled into the role. So far, that has not been awkward because of the history Cletus has had of monitoring and controlling the Kantite males. Those males capable of such forbidden acts know a response is *always* imminent, and they *will* be punished – *severely* – although I have no knowledge of how often it has been applied,” she considered thoughtfully, while pointedly *not* mentioning the demise of the previous Commonwealth Emperor.

“But Ronnie! He’s done all those things you say are – are *illegal!*” Samuel pressed.

“And he won that right from the Elder, Lady Ai. But it was stipulated that his actions were to foster a resolution to the Drecks problem ... and the subsequent Vanir problem. Quite frankly, it was well that *Ronnie* was ordered by the Emperor to deal with you. If left up to Lady Ai, Vanaheim would have been destroyed months ago, and we would be going after pockets of hold outs until you were all eliminated as a *species*.”

Both of them let out gasps of dismay and turned several shades off-color from their norm.

“More juice, perhaps?” Laisee offered solicitously.

### ***In the Prime’s Quarters***

It was later in the afternoon when Ronnie finally caught his transport and left the planet’s surface; not that it made things any calmer in the Prime’s quarters, as Samuel was finding out this evening.

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“Truthfully, Grandmother, Lord Caldar’s concern is a very real one. We are very quick to pick things up...”

“Once they are pointed out to us,” she muttered.

“Yes ... once we know of something, then it follows we can learn how to do it as well ... and usually better than humans,” he offered half-heartedly.

“But he fears that we – *also* – will learn to kill with a touch, and there is no one to monitor us if we do,” she stated flatly, then saw the distress on his face and smirked. “I know *you* would not do such a thing, but your *mate* would – if sufficiently pressed. Given half the chance, I’ve no doubt S’Slich’Tah 28476 would have developed the technique in his labs and used it to *remove* us from power to put *S’Slich’Tah 29531 in my place!*”

“Yes... That would be a logical progression if it was developed sufficiently to work as–”

“Oh ... do be *quiet*, Ambassador!”

Samuel receded a step and gave her a slight bow, while the Prime turned to his companion.

“S’Shac’Kah 38521 ... Sally is the name given to you by the humans?”

“Yes, Grandmother,” Sally said quietly.

“Well then, Sally, for *all* his crimes, what punishment will Lord Caldar face when he returns to the Commonwealth?”

“It – it has not yet been decided. I would not like to speculate, but ... the current Elder is his brother’s wife, and of his family. She would normally punish Lord Caldar, but it would create problems within the family. There is the Senior Healer aboard his ship who could be assigned to punish him, but ... but she is the mother of Lord Caldar’s tentative mate, and it would be difficult for her to maintain her relationship with her daughter if she were to punish him. My understanding is the Elder has sent another Senior to the ship. She is the one who brought back the two S’Slich’Tah. Perhaps *she* could be assigned to punish Lord Caldar.”

The Prime held in her frustration while rephrasing the question.

“Sally ... I asked what *punishment* will be meted out for Lord Caldar?”

“Oh... He will be executed.”

At that, the Prime froze in confusion; *completely* unable to process the concept for several seconds. Finally...

“*Executed?* For ... for *all* that he has done?” she asked; astonished at the madness of the humans.

“No. For the deaths of the research station Director, S’Slich’Tah 28476, and ... and his assistants.”

The Prime locked up for several more seconds; not even *one* of her mind’s segments making a comment about it while they tried to wrap themselves around the concept. It just didn’t make any *sense*. She shook her head in confusion, before ordering her advisors to join them. Once they were assembled, she leapt to a new set of tasks.

“My reports ... where are my reports on that research station?” she asked, then looked around at her advisors, one of whom stepped forward.

“Grandmother, S’Slich’Tah Station Alpha was found – or rather, *not* found. Nothing was left of it, but a rather large hole in the ground that is currently filled with water from the adjacent shoreline. Ahh ... the repair depot identified as S’Slich’Tah Site B was located where the humans indicated. One ship was found grounded and in non-flight status. Both the base and ship’s crews were ordered to stand down and await further instructions,” he reported.

The Prime ran that around her segments for several turns until a few questions popped up.

“What was the ... the behavior of the crew? The ship’s crew and the base crew. Were they combative or compliant?”

“They offered no resistance, Grandmother. The investigating Captain said they were properly responsive to the orders given to stand down. He did mention the ship’s Captain seemed unusually distant from the situation.”

‘*Distant?*’ she thought to herself, then brought up the other question.

“Did the investigating ship perform the usual geological and environmental surveys of both planets?”

Another of her assistants brought up a record on his device and read from the report on it.

“The research station was located in a heavily organic area of the first planet. Jungle, heavy woods, and grasses were common. Water was just in majority of the sphere – close to sixty-percent. The repair depot was on a slightly dryer planet – plant life, with perhaps forty-percent coverage of water. Both planets had a curiously blue sky – probably from the lack of particulate matter in the atmosphere, coupled with the brighter star they orbited. Both sustained animal life and seem to be habitable for Vanir.”

The Prime considered that, and also the ongoing discussions of the information presented by the humans. The environmental connection between Vanaheim and those warrens sanctioned in the past was hitting

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home and starting to become accepted as valid, and she was beginning to think some major changes were coming to the Vanir. In the meantime...

"Very well. I want formal surveys conducted of both planets, with potential enclave sites identified and mapped. When that is accomplished, I want half of our border ships returned to Vanaheim for reassignment as transport vessels. I want them made suitable for moving large numbers of citizens with all their possessions. They will also be required to transport the necessities to establish residency in new enclaves, which will be assigned by lot. The warrens may perform any swaps among themselves."

While that was being digested, she turned to her military representative.

"I want the other half of our border ships to return to within one-half the distance between our most outlying planets to the nearest Commonwealth border. If challenged by humans, they are to provide identification, and relay my orders that they have been instructed to return closer to Vanir space."

"My Prime, the mapping ... how many enclaves to consider?" another advisor asked, and the Prime sought him out among the small crowd.

"At least five-thousand ... to start with," she considered. "And we will also choose by lot."

### *March 26, On the Kraken, in Ships Doc*

Aside from his merely broken ribs, Ronnie was still out of commission.

He was stuck in ships doc and hooked up to some exotic medical device Donnel had created after a consultation with the formal medical staff aboard the *Microcosmus*; said ship currently lumbering towards Vanaheim and escorted by a small fleet of Vanir vessels. With no further delays, it should reach the Vanaheim system in another ten days.

Petrus glanced over at Ronnie and frowned, before looking away again.

He was waiting for his next morning Healing session to begin; scheduled, this time with Sai and Dorcas working together, and Edna and Gaia along as eager observers. Manya had worked with Sai the previous day, and he'd recovered almost a whole inch at the end of nearly two hours of effort. It'd been like that for the last three days.

Petrus stared up at the ceiling while crunching another couple of calcium tablets and sipping water out of a spill-resistant container. Between monitoring Ronnie's progress, Milsie was over at a desk and researching something. When he forced the last of the calcium down, he chanced another glance at Ronnie, but quickly averted his gaze again.

His young friend looked like *shit*.



Ronnie was still asleep during the current blood filtering session that had his blood being passed through filtering lines going into and out of his groin. He got the willies even *looking* at him while they set him up every morning for the process that strained the powdered residue from his bloodstream.

They still had no idea why he'd not suffered a massive stroke from it, but it did explain his headaches since coming back from the research station. Thankfully, they'd stocked more medical supplies with all the new personnel aboard, and one of them was a strong sedative.

Donnel and Milsie had explained something about that business with an errant enzyme of some sort, but it would have to wait for the arrival of the *Microcosmus*' medical staff to fully analyze it and synthesize a counter to it. The powder embedded in his skin was another issue they'd been mulling over their options for until the *Microcosmus* finally arrived, and access to a fully-equipped medical center was available.

"Hello, Commander Petrus," Déjà greeted him sedately.

She'd come in quietly, and it was only when she'd spoken that Milsie noticed her and waved slightly, before putting her nose back into her research. Déjà stopped by Petrus' platform but seemed very reserved this morning. He really missed the *old* Déjà. This *new* one seemed to have lost all her zest for living, and it disturbed him that she now seemed so lifeless.

"Déjà! You look *lovely* this morning! Are you here to help *me* or Ronnie this morning?" he asked with a big grin.

"Kiki will be along shortly to ease your pain, Commander Petrus. You already know Lord Caldar is sedated for his filtering sessions. I am just here to observe," she said glumly.

Her dour countenance was bringing him down, so he decided to pry a little.

"Déjà, why are you so unhappy?" he asked, deadening the cheer from his voice. "I miss the *old* Déjà, who was always so happy and carefree."

She looked at him, before turning away to look at the First Lord; an oblivious silent companion to them both.

"The old Déjà was just a foolish girl. A *real* woman has responsibilities, Commander. I have to be a *real* woman now."

"You've *always* been a real woman, Déjà."

"No. I'm just a poor laboratory animal that got *loose*. A *tool* the Vanir created to torment the *Drecks*!" she said bitterly, then dropped her chin to her chest.

## The End of the Road

“You are a fine young woman who is growing up and accepting her place in the world, Déjà, and we’re all proud of you. That is nothing to feel sad about, and certainly nothing to be worried about. You are very much loved, Déjà.”

She let out a gasp, then turned and confronted him.

“How can a man *love* me, Petrus? There is no man of my race fit to be *around* me – or anyone *else* for that matter. The males of my species are just *animals*! I’ll *never* have a normal life. I’ll never even have children of my *own*!”

“Never is a very long time, girl. Things may change when you least expect it,” he assured her, then reached out his arms for her.

She reluctantly came closer before finally falling on him and hugging him tightly; her tears running down her face and falling on his chest.

“Oh Petrus. I’ve lived so *very* long already! I should be *dead* by now, but Mother ... she kept me young, and ... and I just don’t *know*,” she cried, now getting his jumper all wet.

He hugged her and kissed the top of her head while patting her back and letting her get it all out. She was still at it when Sai and Dorcas arrived with Kiki.

“Breaking another woman’s heart already, Petrus?” Sai asked ominously.

‘*Crisis of living, Sai. Our little girl is growing up*’ he sent softly.

‘*MY little girl is growing up!*’ she snapped, but caught the flinch in Déjà’s shoulders, then reached out and felt the chaos radiating from within her; no longer the empty void she was before.

“Déjà...” she paused while trying to keep her voice calm and low. “Can you please explain to me how you’re feeling? Do you need to talk with me after we get done with Petrus? Or would you like to talk about it now? I *love* you, my girl. I don’t like to see you so sad.”

“Mother, it ... it hurts so *much*!” she said, with her face still buried in Petrus’ arms.

Sai quickly scanned through her, but found nothing out of sorts.

“What hurts, Déjà?”

“Growing *up*! I don’t *want* to grow up! My life is *meaningless* now, and ... and I’ll *never* be a complete person among the ... the *humans*!” she cried, then hugged Petrus tighter.

‘*Sai, my love, do you want to cancel my session and talk to Déjà?*’

He got a scowl from her, but a questioning look along with it that he quickly answered.

*‘She’s feeling alone among the humans. There is no one for her to love or have children with. She sees the rest of us, and believes she will never fit in completely’*

She almost yelled at him for the absurdity of it, but then remembered Déjà’s rather recent drastic changes.

Déjà was no longer fixated on food or play, and was pulling away from Kiki, whom she used to spend all her spare time with in play or simply talking. On top of that, to everyone’s surprise, she could now achieve a limited amount of *mindspeak*. She’d become somber, and somewhat more serious and contemplative – all after the incident with Jaiying, and Lord Caldar, and his...

Sai groaned inwardly and sighed, flashing her suspicions to Petrus. He considered them for several seconds, before suggesting Déjà spend some time under the scanner to see if there were any *more* changes they’d neglected to look for. Sai turned to zero in on Kiki, who seemed to be staring at Ronnie with interest.

“Kiki, please find Edna and Gaia, and tell them Petrus’ Healing session has been canceled for the time being,” she said, pulling Kiki’s attention from her hungry perusal of Ronnie. “Tell them we’ll reschedule it for later ... maybe even tomorrow.”

“Oh! Oh *yes*, Lady Sai!” She squealed happily, then ran off, leaving the four of them in ships doc with the somnolent Ronnie.

Sai noted Déjà had watched Kiki’s leaving with a sad expression on her face – perhaps almost a longing for a simpler life once again.

*‘Donnel, can you spare a few minutes and meet me in ships doc? I need some assistance using the body scanner on one of the crew’* she pressed, then listened for his thoughtful response.

*‘Thank you, Donnel’*

Several minutes later, Donnel arrived from his lab and learned what Sai was looking for – genetic or molecular changes in Déjà that deviated from the Kee data on file for her. He and Milsie set up the scanner to have another look at her.

### ***On Vanaheim***

“I’ve got to admit it. When they make up their minds about something, they don’t waste any time getting right to it,” Laisee said, while presenting a skeptical Trenka with an offering from a bowl of native fruit. “Oh... This is not locally grown. It comes from another of their planets. It’s safe.”

## The End of the Road

Trenka smiled at that, even while trying to believe all that had been accomplished in just the few days since she'd arrived in system...

The Prime had ordered a pull-back of their planetary strikers, and all but two of them had complied. Those two had somehow been deflected from an insertion course into Commonwealth and Hegemony space, and instead, redirected into a direct jump through a star within their operational areas from which neither one had exited. Trenka suspected it somehow involved Lord Caldar's mysterious "Senior Staff" but she'd not been made privy to that information as yet.

The new crash program to survey and assign enclave spaces to Vanir warrens on both of the worlds she'd recently visited was another interesting development. It was a double-edged sword, in that it benefitted the Vanir as far as sustaining their citizens' health against a dying planet, but also prevented the humans from assuring themselves of their clean and total destruction – like the Drecks diaspora following Lord Caldar's failed attack against Zarox.

If they spread themselves out and occupied several worlds, it would be much more difficult to kill the Vanir all at once. At least they didn't have subject races to share worlds with like the Drecks – yet.

Trenka had also met with Sally, the Vanir equivalent of a Commonwealth Healer, and had been surprised, but also somewhat wary of her rather advanced skill set for a new Healer – easily working at a Senior level for all her short amount of experience. Sally's thoughts were clear and concise, and she seemed just as capable as any Commonwealth Senior – especially with that peculiar, multi-segmented operation of her mind. She'd even allowed Trenka to explore the surface of her mind and shared her memory of the great experiment Lady Lili had ordered from Lord Caldar that had rudely awakened the more Senior aspects of her Healer nature virtually overnight.

The meeting requested by the Prime did not go over very well, however. The very first question asked was if Trenka intended to execute Lord Caldar when she returned to the *Kraken*. This caught Trenka completely by surprise. Scrambling to assemble a suitable answer, she danced through recent interviews with Laisee to put together a politically neutral comment that it was "an internal Commonwealth matter" and the Prime left it at that – but then made an immediate comment to one of her aides that a bilateral asylum treaty should be discussed between the Human and Vanir Ambassadors should anyone from either side feel it desirable to seek safety among the other's society. Trenka hadn't missed the implications of it...

Trenka sipped her drink and took another tiny bite of fruit, before setting her cup down and catching Laisee's attention.

“Lady Caldarous, what is your impression of the Prime’s sincerity? And do you have any reservations at all regarding the role you are playing here?”

Laisee was struck by her slightly accusatory tone and answered accordingly.

“My reading of the Prime causes me to believe her desire for a peaceful outcome between Vanir and humans is true. My ‘role’ here was stipulated by order of the Emperor – my *father* – and was no doubt suggested by his wife – the *Elder*.”

“Not the Elder ... not *yet*,” Trenka countered lightly, causing a bit of confusion to flash on Laisee’s face. “Lady Song’s appointment as Elder has yet to be formalized ... as has her potential accession to the throne.”

“The Elder has *always* been our Queen. Lili is best suited–”

“Our Queen? *Really*, Laisee? Do you forget your mother was from *Loca*? Although my Aunt may have served Elder Kita faithfully all those centuries, she does not automatically step into place simply because Lady Ai suffered a breakdown and loss of her abilities – under very *suspicious* circumstances, one might add.”

Trenka stared at her, wondering if Laisee had any knowledge about Ai’s failing. She risked a subtle probe and found nothing apparent in her mind, other than a general affront at her rude attitude towards her, and a curiously defensive posture in favor of Lili.

Laisee’s inner walls came up faint as gossamer – until they suddenly slammed shut and blocked her completely.

“Did you find what you were *looking* for, Trenka?” she asked; letting a hint of steel enter her voice.

That set her back. She’d thought Laisee was a simple Healer, raised to the rank of Senior simply because of her position. The probe she’d used was delicate and faint, easily seeing what was at the forefront of Laisee’s consciousness, but was stopped by an inner strength which matched her own – or perhaps even Lili’s.

“My ... apologies, Lady Caldarous. I forget my manners.” She bowed her head just a trifle before continuing. “Lady Song is the Elder pro tem, but only because the Elder’s Staff had requested it so. Their office is still in turmoil. Lady Song’s suggestion of adding the Tier One staff was brilliant and I feel it is the *only* thing keeping the Elder’s office functioning – in my opinion, better than they ever had before,” she ended softly.

“Then her decision making should count well towards her appointment, wouldn’t you agree? You *are* of Clan Song,” Laisee prodded, though still a bit ticked.

## The End of the Road

“Yes... And we think it’s about time Clan Tal stepped down. Aside from all that, there is some concern the fact of the Emperor and the Elder being bonded could compromise her objectivity – should someone close to her require censure, or ... *sanction*. If the *Emperor* exceeded his boundaries under the Elder’s law, or–”

“Or if his little brother accidentally violated a capital restriction? Lady Ai gave Lord Caldar extensive leeway in many regards. Because of that, the Master Pack is under new leadership, and the threat from the Hegemony has now been mediated.”

“*What?* When did all *this* hap–”

“Just recently. Lord Gagsa of Pack Gagsa has successfully taken the Master Pack’s throne, and is now consolidating his position within the Hegemony. They stand ready to fight beside us should the Vanir become unworthy of our friendship.”

“Lord *Gagsa*? Gagsa *hates* Caldar! He would *never*–”

“He fostered his *son* under Lord Caldar’s care. Torga of Pack *Gagsa* – Master Pack Gagsa, now,” Laisee said smugly.

Trenka stared at her in shock, before sitting back dejectedly. Apparently there were a few *more* items missing from her briefing.

“Thank you, Lady Caldarous. There appear to be gaps in my information,” she finally admitted, somewhat sedately.

“We will be happy to apprise you of any missing data ... to the limits of our *authority*,” Laisee allowed, now feeling the power shift back into her hands for the moment.

Laisee was no fool and now knew Trenka was a risky element in their midst – not necessarily working for the Elder, so much as for the Elder’s *office*, instead of in concert with both her father and the Elder.

If Lili could not, or *would* not, personally follow through with a task, Trenka would be the operator on site. She probably had a specific set of orders regarding not only Ronnie, but everyone else as well. And now there was a concern that Lili might not succeed as Elder, which could throw everything into chaos should power fall to another clan.

As always, not everyone was happy with those in power, and the most powerful of them all had many enemies just waiting for them to fall, and a time of great change often left gaps in their safety.

### ***March 30, On the Kraken***

A few days later found Ronnie finally back in his own bed and feeling *much* better...

He'd spent a total of five days cycling on the micro-filtration system, and it seemed to have rid him of most of the suppressive elements in his bloodstream. It was to the point that Dorcas, and a somewhat less disagreeable Sai, were finally able to begin repairing some of the internal injuries he'd barely been able to contain by himself.

The only *awkward* part of that treatment was them having to extend through his open mouth for the duration of their efforts. It had been a process fraught with interruptions, since he frequently needed to close his mouth to deal with excessive dryness, until it finally dawned on Dorcas to simply kiss him and work through him in that fashion; something that Sai was simply *not* ready to do.

It worked for Dorcas and Ronnie, though, and made his last hours of treatment quite enjoyable, while making Petrus jealous.

Sai made up for that by experimenting on Petrus – engaging in oscular activities with him while flooding him with reconstructive energy. If anything, it made the process more pleasant, and she picked up a nice buzz from trace enzymes lingering in his mouth from Kiki's palliative kisses.

### *At the Commons*

Trenka was having an isolated breakfast at the commons, while surrounded by several of the crew at other tables; many of whom stopped by another table and chatted for a moment with the occupant and his two, much younger, attendants. She looked over at Lord Caldar and considered her next move. Considering the reports of his treatment at the hands of the Vanir at both the research station and on the planet below, he seemed to be in good spirits.

She'd been advised of his difficulty in Healing himself – an *unnatural* achievement for a male in her eyes – and found that his mind was a near complete void to her during any of her attempts to peek into it. It had been explained to her that the powder embedded into the deep layers of his skin was preventing that, although she could pick up stray impressions upon occasion.

In her opinion, the use of a suppressive agent of such effectiveness set a *dangerous* precedent – one which should be immediately rooted out and eliminated by *whatever* means necessary. Fortunately for Lord Caldar, Lady Tal and 'Lady' Dorcas (as if a Drecks actually *deserved* the title) had finally developed a technique to work on him, or rather, *through* him.

She updated her notes to include discovery of the source of the powder, and possible means of its total destruction. Then she added additional interviews to be taken with recovered Drecks, Vanir, and other crewpersons aboard both the *Kraken* and the *Microcosmus* – ideally those whose minds were completely open to her.

## The End of the Road

Her orders were specific. First – evaluate the Vanir situation and report independently from Lord Caldor’s chain of command. Second – evaluate Lord Caldor, and determine if sanction was warranted; and if so, be ready to carry it out.

~~~

Rose and Jaiying were once again inseparable. Now that Jaiying was back aboard, they’d made it their daily routine to drive their “keepers” – the Imperial guardsmen – bonkers with their efforts to escape constant supervision and monitoring.

This morning they got a partial pass when Grandfather had stopped by and offered to take the girls to breakfast. It was a win-win overall, as it gave Nathan and Dorcas some private time, and kept him from being dragged into deep conversations with others. The two girls would invariably disrupt most efforts to engage him any deeper than friendly greetings and updates by simply being their charming and irresistible selves.

That wasn’t by accident. Both Jaiying and Rose were actively scanning everyone who approached, and particularly the *one* person who pointedly remained apart – Lady Trenka. Jaiying had suspected Trenka was acting outside the Emperor’s venue, even before she’d gotten confirmation from the rest of the Senior Staff, and they’d only chanced upon it when Aunt Lili had slipped – literally landing on her *butt* – and her internal shield momentarily collapsed in the process. Once she’d regained her footing, her shield had gone back up very tightly – even more so than before. However, that one mischance had been enough, and Josie gleaned her intent, then immediately informed everyone else.

Already suspicious, Jaiying had focused more of her efforts on picking away at Trenka’s mind while trying not to alert her to the process. Trenka was a very skilled, very experienced operative, but didn’t have *nearly* the range of the Senior Staff. She took advantage of her deftness to pry into the “between-spaces” as Cathy had suggested. She just needed to make sure Trenka never tumbled onto her probing.

### *On the Microcosmus, Inbound*

Three master engineers were arguing back and forth; two on the *Microcosmus* and one on the *Kraken*. All three of them had different ideas of how best to fix Lord Caldor’s little problem, but all three of them scoffed at the Chief Medical Officer’s recommendation to treat it as simply as possible. At least in one respect, they’d all reached a conclusion – it required an *engineering* solution.

Unfortunately for them, the Chief Medical Officer’s recommendations had the force of law under certain circumstances, and this was one of them. Another couple of hours of encrypted, heated exchanges – including



participation by said Chief Medical Officer – got them all working on another line of attack that would take advantage of any progress the medically “recommended” plan would make.

After reaching a tentative agreement, Lon Tannis and Granger Deltec started refining the calculations Ardan had given them. Donnel suspected the “kickback” from Ronnie’s actions had made the embedded powder in his skin maintain its effectiveness. It sounded ludicrous at face value, but with nothing other than an interpretive assessment of the event, it was all they had to work with.

What they needed now was a sample of the powder, and a radiation source that would emulate the original charge that activated the powder so effectively. Then they could apply some sort of variation to it that might break down those bonds so the powder could finally be removed from Ronnie’s body completely. Unfortunately, they still had eight days to go before they’d get their samples of powder and equipment.

### ***On the Kraken***

Ronnie had retired to his compartment so he could let breakfast settle a bit, but the girls had eagerly followed along to keep him company.

The thought of spending some alone time with Ronnie was appealing – especially for Rose, who remembered a wonderful afternoon cradled in his arms while they watched an Earth movie with singing and dancing. She didn’t understand it, of course, but feeling Ronnie jiggle under her every time he laughed had made it a special memory.

This time they watched an animated movie, also with singing and dancing, but were horrified when the old crone had given that poor girl a poisoned apple. They crowded him on the bed until the handsome prince kissed her awake, and they all celebrated.

Afterwards, Rose asked if many of the animals they’d seen would actually be that helpful, but he assured her it was just an imaginary story that was made for very young children. Jaiying asked if any Earth animals could speak like the valaets, and he admitted that he didn’t know, but thought there might be a few who could be capable of it, if anyone took the time to research it.

The movie over, he got up and visited the facilities, while the girls looked through the onboard movie list. He took advantage of the break to check himself in the mirror over the sink and twist his body a tiny bit. The repairs Dorcas had made to his cracked and broken ribs seemed to be holding, and he found that his forced inactivity was gnawing at him. In fact, he was feeling so much better that he decided to get some exercise.

He gathered the girls and headed to the large compartment that had been converted back into a gym – after having been a storage area, then a

## The End of the Road

detention area, and finally a morgue. On the way there, he foisted the girls onto their guards, with orders to give Nathan and Dorcas until the afternoon to resurface and take charge of them again. Kissing the girls goodbye, he entered the compartment to find Sai already in there and sparring with Torga. Torga backed off and dropped to guard at his entry.

“A pleasant morning, Lord Caldar,” he greeted him formally. “Shouldn’t you be resting?”

“Ha! Any more resting and I might as well put down *roots!*”

He began the neck rolls and shoulder shrugs of his warm up routine and immediately noted several things amiss – one, being that mysterious crinkles and cracks were now heard, and another, that his range of motion seemed somewhat compromised at the moment. He slowed his motions and tried to relax and let the tension go, but it was difficult.

“Better take it easy, Caldar,” Sai told him. “We did what we could, but this is all new for us as well. We had a hard enough time trying to Heal you. No telling what that crap is doing to your internal Healing process. How are your headaches?”

“Much better now, thanks,” he murmured, while still doing careful neck rolls, before starting gentle torso rotations.

She watched intently and saw tiny winces flash across his face when he slowly stretched. She reached out to him internally, but was still blocked at his skin. Even his mind was still shielded, except for just once in a while.

“You should start out slow, Caldar.”

He noted she’d dropped formality down by just a notch, leaving formal and dropping to just a professional ‘neutral’ level. She’d also left off anger and accusation from her voice and simply stated a cautionary directive.

“Thank you, Sai. I believe I will,” he said, then grabbed a staff and began slow sweeps and jabs with it.

He continued working slowly and cautiously; metering out a gentle adrenaline flush in the process to manage the pain, while gradually bringing up the speed and violence of his routine until he was beginning to move smoothly through its steps. He finally flipped an end-under lunge at an imaginary sparring partner, which finished with a spinning retraction back to guard. He stood there, panting quietly with sweat running down his body.

Torga was impressed. Sai ... not so much. She’d seen too much effort coupled with too much pain during his movements, and despite the powder infusion remaining in his skin, she could sense a faint bit of confusion coming from him.

“Go shower, Caldar. I’ll send someone by to see to your contentment,” she ordered quietly, but caught a quick look of disgust crossing his features.

“Save the Healing for Petrus, Sai. My First Officer needs to be back on his feet so he can take my ship back home,” he said, then returned the staff to its holder before leaving the gym.

She watched him leave; having not a *clue* of what was going through his mind – not that it really mattered to her, but still, the First Lord had responsibilities, and *she* was responsible for making sure he was healthy enough to carry them out. She decided to stop by and talk to Ardan to see what the latest findings revealed.

~~~

Ronnie slowly walked the corridors of his ship; meeting the occasional crewperson and exchanging nods and greetings as they passed. He had no specific destination in mind and was just satisfied to be up and moving – even if he was laced with occasional twinges as he moved. As he walked along, absently noting the cross-corridors in passing, he came across one with a lone Imperial guardsman standing by a secured door. He stopped in confusion, before approaching to find out what was being guarded.

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

*“Lady Tal to the weapons locker! Lady Tal – Emergency at the weapons locker!”*

The ship-wide announcing system caused momentary confusion to nearly all aboard, but set in motion the remaining Imperial guards, who’d dropped whatever they were doing and converged on the ship’s weapons locker – the storage space for the anti-matter rounds that fed the ship’s primary weapon.

*‘Mother, someone has breached the weapons locker! The guard on duty pressed the alert, but we can’t reach him!’* Endo sent from his post on the bridge. *‘I can see someone inside on the monitor. It’s...’* Endo paused in confusion when the intruder turned and started typing at a control station.

The legs of the guard were visible on the floor outside the open door, and from the security monitor, he could see Lord Caldar calmly entering commands at the weapons control station. While watching nervously, he searched for and enabled the camera in the weapon’s breach room to see what might be happening in there. Shortly afterwards, another alarm went off, indicating the BFG breach was being opened.

*‘Mother, the BFG is being accessed! It’s Lord Caldar! He’s–’*

## The End of the Road

*'Unloading the BFG'* Sai sent calmly, now that she was standing in the doorway over the legs of the fallen guardsman. *'Continue monitoring us. Alert the guardsmen to maintain readiness, but have them stay back from the locker for the time being'*

He saw her glance down at the horizontal guardsman, then look up at the security camera.

*'Tell the guardsmen their man is all right – just got the sense knocked out of him, is all'*

*'Yes, Mother'*

Endo took a steadying breath while trying to relax, before passing those instructions along to security.

### *At the Weapons Locker*

Sai had taken a direct route to the weapons locker and beaten everyone else there. That was where she'd found the Imperial guard neatly laid out with the door hanging open. She'd heard a disgusted sigh from within and identified the potential assailant from that alone, then stepped over the guard and stood in the doorway; watching silently while Ronnie was typing in commands that would unload the breach and return the anti-matter load back into its holding bay in the weapons locker.

She waited patiently for the machine to finish cycling and the round to be locked into place before speaking.

"Never a dull moment, Caldar," she said calmly, satisfied with the slight shiver he gave at getting caught with his hands in the metaphorical candy dish.

"What in the *hell* were you thinking, Sai?" he asked loudly while turning and glaring at her angrily. "Loading this thing should have been a *last* resort, not a *bargaining chip*!"

"It was never a bargaining chip, Caldar. It was just insurance. Sally knew about it. Samuel knew about it. Laisee did, too. They were all on the bridge when I had it loaded," she said calmly.

"Sai, if anything had happened–"

"If we'd been attacked, this is the *only* weapon available!" she interrupted loudly, "Thanks to *you*, by the way. And if we'd been attacked and *breached*, the result would be the *same*!"

He shut up and stared at her, then nodded once.

"Where's the last round?" he suddenly asked.

"What last round?"

"When I left, there were twenty anti-matter loads in storage. You didn't leave one behind in the shell, did you?"

"Caldar, we brought over all the remaining shells and put them in here," she said while looking at him strangely. "We started out with twenty. You fired one over Asgard, and that leaves us—"

"I did *what?* Why would I fire at As... Asgu..." He suddenly stopped while a panicked expression came over his face.

His eyes closed, and he began nodding his head. Sai could almost hear the gears grinding in there but they were beginning to sound a little gritty. His face tightened, and he began making tight little shakes of his head that began to worry her.

"Caldar ... Caldar ... *Ronnie!*" she shouted, becoming somewhat alarmed when he seemed to sway a little on his feet.

He opened his eyes and looked around the room in confusion.

"Sai ... what's going on?" he asked while still looking around, before noticing the feet on the floor outside the door and pointing to them.

"What happened? Who is..."

"Come along, Ronnie. You've been injured. We need to go check on a few things," she said quietly, then reached out and took hold of his arm.

He resisted her pull as he focused on the man in the corridor.

"He's all right, Ronnie. He just had an accident," she said quietly, and turned to the door.

Raising her voice, she called out to the corridor, "Captain of the Guard ... you have a man down that needs assistance. I have the First Lord here who needs an escort to ships doc. Please come forward."

They heard footsteps outside, and the legs were seen to disappear when the guard was dragged away. Sword points preceded entry of two more guards, one from either side of the door, but both remained powered down.

"Status, Lady Tal?" one of the guardsmen asked.

"Stable ... but confused. The weapons locker is secure. Please help me escort Lord Caldar to ships doc. It seems his injuries are catching up with him."

"Yes, my Lady."

Two guardsmen escorted Ronnie and Sai down the corridor to ships doc. Sai hoped they would discover something they'd overlooked, hopefully before something *really* bad happened.

***Kantor, Afternoon at the Royal Homestead***

*'Thank you for the update, Sai. Please keep us informed'* Lili replied, before ending the conversation.

She greeted the news with conflict in her heart. On the one hand, if Ronnie survived, there would be the constant threat of a repeat of his inexcusable actions in taking all the life energy from that Vanir Director and his assistants, something that – as the *Elder* – she could not afford to let go unpunished. On the other hand, his deterioration and eventual death would hit the household hard ... especially the young woman playing with the children on the grass.

Lili glanced around from her seat in the shade of the patio while sipping her drink sparingly. The way it sounded, if his prognosis continued along its current course, Ronnie would not be a problem in the near future ... unless it could be reversed in time.

She let her mind wander; considering the actions she'd taken, and the steps that may or may not have to be completed as events streamed forward. It was too bad she couldn't simply prevent Ronnie from such precipitous behavior in the future, much like the Senior Staff had done to Lady Ai – or could she convince them to do it for her?

It *might* work – as long as Ronnie was strong enough not to lose his mind like Ai had done. Well, not that she'd really *lost* her mind. It was more like the road she was already on had come to an abrupt end, and she'd slammed into it head on and was still recovering from it – but with *permanent* damage.

She watched as Maya and the children stooped down to see some detail in the grass the surviving female valaet kit had brought to their attention; some burrowing animal of some sort, perhaps. It was fortunate Ronnie's condition prevented Maya from reacting to the Healer's Bond she shared with him, or she'd probably be morose with helplessness at being apart from him.

Trenka had been less than forthcoming of late; not providing many details of her investigation, or any tentative evaluation of Ronnie. It wasn't expected of her to make a quick decision, though. Whatever Trenka discovered, and whatever her decision was, it would be presented to her in person, and *she* would be the final arbiter of Ronnie's future.

She sometimes wished she'd led a different life, but Elder Kita had seen an end to that.

As Elder, Kita had seen many things all her life, and as she realized *now*, had done and ordered many things without the sure knowledge of what the future *really* held. It was probably as Ronnie had tried to explain to her one time – simply a matter of putting elements in and taking other

elements out to see what colored the future – either black or white – and hoping for an even shade of gray in the process.

Or maybe it was just the gray of Ronnie's eyes she was seeing?

She sighed and watched the children – all jumping back suddenly when the valaet surged forwards, caught the animal in her jaws, and tossed it high into the air – only to catch it on the way down and swallow it whole. The valaet sneezed once before wandering away, while various cries of dismay followed it.

Life begins – and sometimes quickly ends. In this case, she wanted Ronnie's life to end well after her own ... but not at a cost. She just hoped she had nothing to do with it.

The male valaet hidden in the bushes off to one side of her, silently agreed with that sentiment. The very tiny movement on the upper rim of the canyon wall caught his eye, but Boots remained absolutely still while evaluating the threat.

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"There he is," Hadron murmured, tilting his head slightly in the direction of the First Wife, seated far below them. "Just to her right. He spends a lot of time guarding her now when she's outside."

Gandus looked carefully before finally separating the valaet's outline from the shadows of the bush – grateful that propriety kept them safely up here on the rim instead of standing watch down inside the canyon itself.

The valaets had become more prevalent during the daylight hours ever since the Royal Household had grown by several families with young children. Now *no one* in the guard ever felt comfortable in the gardens below; especially after the mess they'd had to clean up from the Drecks incursion.

"I hear they leave you alone as long as you've given them food," Gandus muttered. "Of course, why take chances?"

"Why, indeed," Hadron agreed.

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Lili was about to leave, when an Imperial messenger, escorted by a household guard, brought her a sealed envelope. From the Imperial crest on its cover, she could see that it came directly from the court, but had no idea of why Radatel would be sending a message to her via courier, instead of just contacting her directly. She handled it curiously while the messenger stepped away from her, bowed, and made his exit.

*'My husband, do you have a moment?'* she sent out tentatively.

## The End of the Road

*'Ah! The messenger has arrived! Look through it privately, my darling. It seems that Ronnie's garden continues to provide fruit of an unusual quality. I will discuss this with you when I arrive, but in privacy'* Radatel pressed at her, and she didn't miss the urgency of his tone.

She left her crystal on the patio table and headed for her quarters and some privacy. As she walked along, curiosity got the better of her, and she broke the seal and peeked inside. The lines of text she could see seemed jumbled for some reason, until she realized they were upside down and written in Drecks.

### *In Vanir Space, On the Kraken*

Donnel and Sai had followed the instructions from the Chief Medical Officer on the *Microcosmus*, and performed the scans as requested. After transmitting the results back to the approaching ship, Sai escorted Ronnie back to his quarters – still under guard – and arranged for at least one Healer to be in attendance with him at all times.

Donnel continued his evaluation of one of the captured shielding helmets recovered from Vanaheim with a revised outlook. An hour later, the details of its construction and its quite simple mode of operation were finally revealed.

It was an impressive piece of engineering.

Over a somewhat soft shell was spread a very thin layer of fine dust. Over that was a thin metallic sheath with several connection points that led to a combination power pack and signal generator of exquisite design. In essence, it was a portable, self-powered, mind shield suitable for one person.

Donnel asked Sai to come back, put one of them on, and try to talk to him, and they got zero results. As soon as she took it off, he could hear her clearly in his mind until she lowered it once again. It was very effective.

"And they had whole *ships* covered with this stuff," she reminded him. "Kept us from finding them. Kept Ronnie from discovering their secret base back on that planet."

Donnel nodded readily, before offering his own assessment.

"Until he went back and looked *behind* the void. Lady Tal, I cannot imagine what it's like having your ability, and I'm not sure if I'd like to be burdened with it. However, I *can* tell you this is a game changer. We nearly lost the *Royal Household* because of it," he muttered while still tinkering with the stripped-down shell of one helmet.

Sai looked at him, then looked *through* him as well – feeling his genuine concern over this threat to their security.



“Donnel, do you think you can counter it somehow?”

He glanced up at her, before sitting back in thought for several seconds.

“Well ... on the *face* of it, it's very simple. The element is neutral until it's energized by a radiation source. Once energized, it blocks those frequencies commonly used by Healers and Seniors – I include Healers since you had no effective way to treat Lord Caldar's injuries until Lady Dorcas figured out about the kiss.” He paused and smiled until seeing the look on her face; then went on.

“It blocks whatever a Healer does to Heal, and whatever a Senior does to communicate – presumably by sending out an interference frequency to block...” he paused in thought for a moment. “Lady Tal, if Ronnie isn't being radiated, why is he still being blocked? If he can't Heal himself, can't communicate, and can't read other people's thoughts, then *something* must be radiating and energizing that element in his body.”

“I thought you said the element must have changed somehow and that's why it keeps on working?” she asked him.

He got up and walked over to a testing station where tiny samples from Ronnie's skin had been stripped away to reveal just a very thin layer of the rare element involved. He powered up the test station and took fresh readings. Then he came back and swiped a sample swab against the dismantled helmet and took it back to the test station to run it again. To his eyes the results looked the same.

“I don't see any difference. If we had a much *larger* sample of what's embedded in his skin...” he paused again, then looked at the microfiltration system he'd fabricated.

He got up, grabbed a tool, and started taking it apart. He managed to remove the filter section and brought it over to another workstation to disassemble it. Working carefully, he broke it down until just the filter chamber remained. Then he set up a catch basin with fine filter cloth at the bottom.

“Bring me that saline please, Sai,” he asked, formality dropping in the heat of discovery. “Fit that tube into it and attach it to the top of this,” he directed, getting ready to back flush the filter. “Now, just open the valve slightly and let's see what we can recover.”

They stood there together for the better part of five minutes while tiny traces of residue worked their way backwards out of the filter. It was slow and time-consuming; belying the genius of the design that had allowed the rare element to be trapped in a fine membrane, while the smaller blood corpuscles were diverted electromagnetically along a different path that exited back into the blood stream during Ronnie's system flush.

## The End of the Road

It would have been easier to simply replace his blood from stock, but the *Kraken* relied on Healers and Seniors, and didn't stock blood or blood products – yet *another* bit of arrogance by Lord Caldar.

Once completed, Donnel took a sample over to the test station and ran it through, before finally ending with a laugh.

“Ha! They're the *same*! That stuff in his veins is the *same* powder, just really refined. It would have circulated *everywhere* in his body, and we just have to flush it all...” he paused again, remembering the shadows on the scans. “But it won't all come out,” he muttered while slowly turning to Sai and seeing her nod.

Ronnie's body scan had shown them shadows of a foreign element in various organs throughout his body, with some of the *heavier* concentrations occurring in his head and scattered throughout his brain. He'd also found some unusual organs they'd never seen before that were located in several areas around his pelvis, but they appeared to be clean of most of the contamination.

“Donnel ... keep working on it. We need to figure out how to save Ronnie. Filter it out, neutralize it ... find out what is activating it, and *stop* it, but we need to save *Ronnie*!” She stared at him a moment more, before turning and heading towards the door.

“I – I hear and obey, my Healer,” he said quietly to her departing back.

### *On the Microcosmus*

Commander Hifacious Woldron, late of the *IRS Sectorus*, sat in his office on the *Microcosmus* and daydreamed about the last time he'd ventured onto this monstrosity of space...

Back then it had been a nearly dead hulk in the middle of a Death Void, where the First Lord and his Earth family had seen fit to seek shelter. It was also where Elder Kita had passed away during the trial of the Second Wife of the Emperor.

It was a bitter-sweet memory for him, as he'd been Kita's last lover. He'd tried very hard to convince her to retire in peace, but she'd have none of it until her last task was complete. He'd not been in the room when Kita had died, but her staff assured him it was not due to the First Lord's interference. Instead, they'd related a conflict with Lady Ai was the last thing that occurred before she'd finally collapsed; calling out to one of her previously deceased staff at the very last...

He shook himself and turned back to his monitor where the latest updates were displayed.

The First Lord had certainly gotten himself into an interesting predicament *this* time. That series of injections metered into his body were

causing *monumental* problems for him. At the very minimum, his body had already started breaking down – that was what the *latest* chemistry panels were indicating.

It was bad enough the enzyme inhibitor Mistress Blanaid had stumbled across was preventing his body's normal daily repair activities everyone took for granted – thousands of cells dying every day, and being replaced by thousands of new cells. The solution for that was relatively simple in concept. He just had to produce a counter agent and have it injected. All that remained was to get a sample of the suspect enzyme and synthesize the proper inverse for it.

The more damning problem was that *mystery* substance – the Vanir-created powder. Not even the Healers and Seniors aboard the *Kraken* seemed able to help him, and this latest scan showed he was going to die if nothing was done to remove that mystery substance from his body.

At least that clever blood filter Ardan had devised slowed things down a bit. Unfortunately, that still left foreign material lodged within his brain and various other organs, and he currently saw no way to remove it. He did wonder, though, just what in the hell those *new* organs were in the First Lord's pelvis, and why they'd remained relatively clear of contamination.

He sighed and wrote up a simple treatment plan suggesting that a good soaking in a warm bath with a selection of rather common chemicals might help open the pores of Lord Caldar's skin. That should allow the pressure-injected powder a way to leave the dermis of his body – especially if they could figure out a way to attract it somehow. He transmitted that report back to Ardan, then brought up the other file regarding the condition of a native Kee crewperson – apparently a new human-variant.

Now this was *much* more interesting, if only from a psychological aspect. If he understood the summary report correctly, the Kee in question – a Mistress Déjà – was exhibiting anxiety over “growing up.” He seemed to remember a Déjà being attached to Lady Sai Tal's command the last time he was aboard. As he recalled, the few times he'd seen her, she'd appeared to be cheerful, bright, and *very* engaging. The report now said she was becoming stressed at the prospect of “growing up” and not being able to find a suitable male companion to have a family with.

He briefly wondered why the Healers aboard the *Kraken* had even bothered to ask for his advice, but it's not like he was swamped since that one day visit of that single Vanir. Unfortunately, *his* physiology had been disappointingly routine and not really all that exotic.

He checked her physicals as transmitted by, sure enough, Lady Sai Tal, and compared them to human norms; finding nothing in the readings indicating she was incompatible in any way, for breeding purposes, or

## The End of the Road

otherwise. Just to confirm, he opened her older reference files for comparison, and charted them with the current files – only to find a veritable *slew* of changes had occurred. He sat back in confusion, before reading them again and coming to the conclusion that her files must have been mixed up with someone else's.

Just to be sure, he ran a system query and pulled up a reference to Kee. He began to read through it thoroughly, stopped, then returned to the beginning and read it again very *slowly* this time, while glancing up at the file in front of him, then at the survey records found during his data search.

Something was *wrong* somewhere, as Mistress Déjà was *not* a Kee ... not according to her *current* sample of nucleic acids. She was, in fact, pretty much human-standard – or somewhere very close to it.

He loaded the reference Kee information, then keyed off several common markers, before bringing up Kee-normal against Mistress Déjà. He found a surprising number of matching markers. On a hunch, he loaded a human-standard reference in her place and searched for matching markers ... this time finding very few matching markers on the human-standard reference. He frowned at this and sat back in thought.

On the one hand, it might be a simple error – they'd sent the wrong file. On the *other* hand, this girl was on a ship in Vanir space crewed by humans, Kee, Drecks, Vanir – *and* the First Lord. He shook his head, knowing that almost *anything* was possible with that combination of players on one ship. It was highly unlikely, but *still*...

He keyed in a request to have fresh samples taken from Mistress Déjà, and the results sent to him later this day. In the meantime, he suggested a course of birth control if she wasn't already familiar with the techniques used to prevent unwanted pregnancy. He grinned at that, then sent it – knowing full well that *wanting* something was sometimes not the same as actually *having* it. Then he checked the clock and pushed away from his desk. Clapping his hands once, then rubbing them together thoughtfully, he got up to go and gather his assistants for another round of physicals for their new arrivals – the recovered Healers and Seniors.

Although Lady Jia Huan was nominally in charge of “Healer” activities aboard the *Microcosmus*, he was a *real* medical doctor and knew quite a bit more about the intricacies of the human body than a classical Healer did. He didn't doubt the ability of a Commonwealth Healer to make sudden “miracle” Healings take place, but also recognized that not even the human body knew what to do when faced with *certain* problems – like those Lord Caldar was currently facing. He paused while considering the timing involved. Perhaps a *special* request to the Captain could get them there quicker?

***March 31, On the Kraken***

Ronnie awoke to a surprise. Beside him sat Lady Trenka, who was reading something on a data pad, but had stopped to stare at him when he'd moved.

"Good morning, Lord Caldar. You've given everyone quite a start. That crewman you knocked out is all right. You *do* remember that, don't you?"

He looked around, and saw he was in his own quarters, and had somehow gotten to bed, but could not quite remember the circumstances. He looked up at Trenka while trying to form sentences.

"Crewman ... he was ... he was a guard. He wouldn't let ... me into ... the weapons ... locker. Sai ... Sai said I fired a shot out by ... by As-something?" He awkwardly looked around his quarters again, then asked, "Why ... are you ... here, Trenka? Come to ... take my head ... already?"

She looked at him in shock, but immediately suppressed it. Her attempts at reading his thoughts had failed; supposedly his mind was blocked chemically, and yet he'd immediately figured out why she was here.

She didn't confirm his suspicions, but instead told him a half-truth.

"I'm here because it's my turn to sit with you."

"Your ... *turn*?"

"You've been injured, Lord Caldar. That substance they filtered out of your blood... Some of it is still trapped in your body and affecting parts of your memory. Lady Tal has assigned the Ladies on a rotating schedule to sit with you and provide you any assistance you need during your recovery."

"She thinks ... she thinks that I'll ... recover?" he asked with a little less difficulty.

"If they can figure out a way to get that element out of you. The doctor aboard the *Microcosmus* has ordered a rather simple treatment for you. Once it's ready, we'll see if we can remove some of that powder from your skin. Then we could at least finish Healing some of your superficial wounds. He wants to personally examine you when he arrives."

"That would be helpful," he finally got out in one complete sentence while glancing at his arms and the bandages that still covered them in some spots.

He started to get up, but she held her hand to his chest.

"If you're hungry, Lord Caldar, I can order you some food and have it brought to you," she offered, but saw the look of disgust on his face.

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"If you'll let me up, I'll try not to make a mess of my bed," he muttered, then sat up against her hand; easily pushing her out of the way, before standing and slowly walking to the facilities.

Once finished there, he started the shower.

Trenka watched for a few moments more, then contacted her relief.

By the time he was out of the shower, Dorcas was waiting for him, with Rose and Jaiying by her side.

"Good morning, Grandfather," the girls said in unison.

"Good morning, Ronnie," Dorcas greeted him afterwards.

"Good morning, girls." He smiled as he made his way towards the bed while wrapped in a towel. "What shall we do today?"

"Mister Ardan is building you a \*hot tub\*! That's what *Daddy* calls it!" Rose told him gleefully.

"A \*hot tub\*? That sounds like a good idea. I think I'd like a good, long soak."

"The medical officer on the *Microcosmus* said you're to be softened up so your pores will open and release what they can from your skin," Dorcas said. "I'm not sure how that would work," she added with a frown.

"It sounds better than being skinned alive," he muttered, getting a tiny duet of "Eww" in the process, while sitting down on his bed and letting out a sigh.

"I haven't been in a \*hot tub\* in *years*."

"What's a \*hot tub\*, Grandfather?" Jaiying asked.

"Oh, it's a *wonderful* thing, girls. It's like a bathtub, only *bigger*. You fill it full of warm water, gather a few close friends together, then you all sit around in the tub and enjoy each other's company, while the heat of the water drains *all* the stress away from your body."

"Maybe that's what Lady Trenka needs," Jaiying suggested. "She seems very stressed."

"Ahhh ... yes. That she does," he agreed. "Have you had breakfast yet?"

"We've come to take you, Ronnie – if you feel up to it," Dorcas suggested. "Or we can order in."

"Let's go out and *terrorize* the crew, shall we?" he suggested, but a distracted look flashed across his face.

"I understand I took down one of the guardsmen yesterday," he muttered with a frown, before brightening and looking up at Dorcas.

"Dorcas, please let me know if I begin to misbehave. I believe my memory might not be working as it should."

"That's all right, Grandfather," Jaiying said. "No one will notice."

He looked down at her sweet face, and suppressed a chuckle that still twitched his lips, regardless.

"You're channeling *Josie*, aren't you?"

"*Josie* says good morning, Grandfather. So does Cathy and Walter. Maya... Maya can't feel you anymore. Maybe after we get that stuff out of you—"

"Yes... Well... Let me get dressed and we'll go," he said, then remembered something else. "Did I hear someone say the *Microcosmus* was coming?"

"Yes, Ronnie. It should be here by late afternoon," Dorcas said.

"Big ship, that. I used to command it, you know," he muttered, while having difficulty managing his underwear while struggling to his feet.

He sat back down while the girls helped him dress, getting his underwear sealed before starting on his jumper.

"I spent about twenty years out there all by myself, one time."

"All by *yourself*?" Rose asked, looking up at him with wide eyes.

"Yes. Just me, and several cases of ambrosia. Well ... I wasn't *really* alone. I had the bodies of my crew with me ... and the voices in my head."

They stopped dressing him and looked at him strangely, while he continued reminiscing about the past.

"I *hated* it when the voices quit talking. From then on, I never knew *what* they were planning," he said while shaking his head distractedly.

Jaiying and Rose slowly picked up one shoe each and slipped them over his feet carefully.

"I wonder if there's any ambrosia left," he muttered.

"I'm sure Nathan has a bottle hidden away somewhere, Ronnie," Dorcas suggested quietly. "If not, perhaps Petrus has a small supply."

"Ahh, Petrus. He's a fine man. Too bad he was eaten by the Kee – *nasty* little buggers. Have you and Sai finished putting his legs back together?"

Dorcas stopped and looked at him blankly.

"Ronnie ... how did Petrus lose his legs?"

## The End of the Road

"I told you ... eaten by the Kee," he said with a confused look on his face.

Dorcas continued to stare at him, but he saw the beginnings of sadness in her eyes.

"That was just the *first* time. *This* time he cut them off *himself*. Told him get his damn sword fixed," he added lightly.

Dorcas let out a breath, then looped her arm with his before leading him to the door. The First Lord was in there – she was *sure* of it. She just wasn't quite sure if all the *bits* were still attached.

Jaiying and Rose caught that thought and smiled.

The Senior Staff had a plan. If things turned *really* sour, it might be the *only* thing that could save their Grandfather.

### *At the Commons*

They made their way to the commons; meeting and greeting several members of the crew along the way, who either smiled at them, or shied away slightly after sharing a cautious nod. Once they arrived, Ronnie stopped and looked at the breakfast crowd. They'd not been noticed yet.

He smiled at seeing so many faces aboard his ship who were all working together with the same purpose – to bring peace between humans and the Vanir. There were several Vanir present that he didn't seem to recognize, before realizing that he *did* know most of them, if only in passing. He could see several small flat packages strapped to many of them, and heard the sounds of translators converting Standard to Vanir and back.

One small contingent of uniformed men sat at a table by themselves. He recalled two of them had escorted Rose and Jaiying at one time or another. Across from them, with his back to Ronnie, sat another man in uniform. He was being teased about something, and his neck could be seen turning pink at some remark from one of the others to the amusement of his tormentors. Laughing quietly, one of them glanced in Ronnie's direction, and all conversation stopped at that table – a fact the widening circle of silence proved they'd finally been noticed.

Ronnie could see the head of the man facing away from him turn from side to side as he wondered what was going on. The footsteps when Ronnie approached became louder and louder, and he seemed to shrink into his seat; his companions averting their eyes the closer he came. Ronnie finally stopped to one side of him and cleared his throat, which sent a ripple of shivers running down the man's spine.

"Excuse me, young man. I don't believe we've been introduced ... formally."



He gently rested his hand on the guardsman's shoulder, and to his credit, the man didn't shrink away, but slowly stood and turned to face his assailant – the First Lord.

"I don't know you, but I *do* owe you an apology," Ronnie said. "I hope you'll forgive my rudeness, yesterday. I *think* it was yesterday." He tilted his head slightly, as befitted his lack of accurate knowledge of the event in question.

"Y – yes. Certainly, First Lord. I'm very sorry, Sir. I didn't ... I've never seen..." He finally stammered to a halt.

"That's all right, young man. Always better to err on the side of caution. Ahhh ... I don't *really* know you, do I?" he asked again, still not quite positive that he had no recollection of the man.

"I – I'm new, Sir. Lady Trenka Song brought me and Lael over from the *Microcosmus* as replacements. We were sent along to watch the lizards—" he froze at the sudden stern change in Ronnie's eyes.

"Yes. I imagine Lady Trenka might have had reservations traveling with Vanir she didn't know," he muttered darkly. "Who did you bring with you? The Vanir, I mean."

"Ah ... they had numbers, Sir. Ah ... 42 ... something." He really couldn't remember for sure.

"Slich 42126? And the other one was ... Slich 42130 perhaps?" Ronnie asked, pretty sure of what had happened now.

"Yes ... I mean, I think ... yes... Yes, Sir!"

"Very good, young ... what is your name?" Ronnie asked, suddenly remembering his manners.

"Casmir ... Sir."

"Casmir ... Casmir..." he muttered while lost in thought. "I think ... I think that among one of my people's tribe's, that name means 'Keeper of Peace' ... or '*Destroyer* of Peace'." He frowned in thought. "Come to think of it, I think it may be used for *both*."

"Really? Sir?" a confused Casmir asked, somewhat timidly.

"*Pretty* sure. I'd have to look it up," he said, then tilted his head in thought again. "It's better than *Lael*, anyway. That name means 'Belonging to God', which is rather *pretentious*, don't you think?"

Ronnie noticed the head of the man sitting next to them duck down just a bit.

"You know, Casmir ... you and Lael should seek an interview with my First Officer. Petrus will be happy to give you a run down of our ship's

## The End of the Road

operation, and what we expect from everyone here. You can also see the results of faulty weapons maintenance,” he said, then smiled inwardly at what he knew Petrus would put them both through if they actually mentioned that to him.

“Carry on, lad,” he said, then clapped him on the shoulder, before turning away.

“Yes, First Lord,” Casmir said quietly while watching the old man being led away by the Drecks female and two small children.

He shook his head slowly, while wondering again how he’d ended up horizontal in the corridor in front of the door he was supposed to be guarding...

When the old man had approached and asked for entry, he’d challenged him and failed to get the proper response. As instructed, he’d keyed his alert button first, then confronted the somewhat sweaty gentleman – who’d turned out to be less gentle than he’d expected. He woke up a little ways down the corridor with a Healer – a *Drecks* Healer – kneeling next to him...

He’d expected duty aboard the Commonwealth’s floating “trade, administration, Healing, research, and educational center” to be somewhat different, but he’d never expected *this*.

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Trenka watched, both amused, and irritated, as she read those thoughts dashing around the young man’s mind. She shook her head at the resultant feeling of admiration coming from him ... yet *another* convert to that arrogant old fool.

She suppressed a sigh while watching Caldar sitting down with his keepers and ordering breakfast without a care in the world.

No matter. The scales of justice featured prominently in her hidden dreams, and tipped one way or another as she weighed each tidbit of information gathered that could lead her to the First Lord’s termination. She suppressed that glee while surrounded here by his sycophants and supporters – *particularly* those Drecks and Vanir who he’d somehow elevated to the status of Healers and Seniors, as she’d detected. She could not *imagine* what Lady Ai had been thinking by giving Caldar a free hand in dealing with such a monumental task – and now Ai was *crippled*. To think she’d once *supported* Caldar, even argued in his favor and gotten *censured* for it!

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Another tidbit of Trenka’s predisposition became clearer to Jaiying, and was shared it with the rest of the Senior Staff. They thanked her, then brought her up to speed on the status of Torga’s father and his complete consolidation of the Zarox throne.

Lord Gagsa had effectively purged his opponent's camp, along with his own, and faced down more than a dozen challenges to his rule – the bodies of the majority of them raised on pikes along the road leading into the Drecks Royal compound. Unusually, though, they were the bodies of the challengers alone – not their family, staff, or associated minions.

This Drecks Lord had learned an unusual lesson, in that ruling by *fear* was different than ruling by *favor*. They both had a downside, in that someone was *always* out to get you, but when you ruled with a strong, but *tempered* hand, the number of attacks by *real* enemies were far fewer than those planned surreptitiously by supposed *friends*.

He just had to steer the rest of his nation into a new mind-set, and was expecting Torga to return some day and take his place by his side.

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

Mid-morning found Ronnie on the bridge with his escorts, and getting an update from Torga – learning with surprise that Lord Gagsa had already fully consolidated his position. It didn't seem that long ago, when he'd first landed and presented sides of Earth-grown beef to the Drecks Lord as a peaceful gesture in exchange for some meaningful conversation. That seemed to have worked out well, and even landed him a fine young Drecks crewman, along with getting wives for his other two Drecks crewmen who would otherwise still be traveling through life alone. Well ... not without their adoptive mother, but *still*...

They received a hail from the *Microcosmus* while they were there, letting them know the ship would be in-system within the next two hours or so. After exchanging pleasantries with his Captain, during which they discovered the *Microcosmus* had made several long jumps at the request of their Chief Medical Officer, Torga handed Ronnie a follow-up message from a Commander Woldron enquiring if he'd taken his bath yet. Ronnie read it while standing there, then felt the need to comment on it publically.

"It seems that this Commander ... *Hifacious* Woldron ... wants me to take a *bath*. Woldron ... why does that name sound familiar?"

Jaiying reached out to the Senior Staff, who quickly found its providence and sent it back to her.

"He was aboard Sectorus in Death Space, Grandfather," she said.

"Ah yes. He did the autopsy of Senior Yandi. I remember now. He was somewhat infatuated with Elder Kita, as I recall. He also helped Maya when she ... when I ... well, it was a difficult time for Maya ... and Kita, at the last." He stood silent for a moment, before coming back to the present. "Let's go find out where Donnel built my bathtub and see if the water's warm. Carry on, Torga."

## The End of the Road

"First Lord," Torga muttered; quite happy Ronnie was leaving the bridge.

He hurriedly contacted Lady Tal about the revised time table, then updated her on his *faux pas* with the message. He felt a bit of relief at the humor she reflected, what with Ronnie reading the message out loud on the bridge, and thanked Torga for the heads up.

Torga had been chagrined at that; looking down at his display and flushing at his mistake. The message had been addressed to Lady *Tal*, but he'd seen Ronnie's name in the body of it and just transferred it to him since he was standing right there.

### *In Ships Doc*

The water was warm and soothing, and Ronnie was thoroughly enjoying it.

It was too bad about the chemicals he was soaking in, but he was assured the *smell* would eventually wash off.

Rose and Jaiying had bolted as soon as the door opened to ships doc – leaving their guardsmen scrambling to keep up with them. Dorcas stood by as Donnel described the bath and the expected results.

She stuck around long enough to make sure he got settled in safely, before leaving for more fragrant accommodations. Donnel, who seemed to take it all in stride, pulled up a chair and kept him company.

"So *that's* where we are," Donnel said. "Besides finding traces throughout some major organs, you have high concentrations of that crap surrounding your cerebral cortex. That's were all the *important* stuff is located – senses, motor control, memory, attention span, perceptual awareness, thought, language, consciousness ... pretty much everything that makes you ... well, *you*. There are some particularly *thick* deposits in areas that aren't defined as to function – at least according to the reference materials. Hopefully, the Commander will be able to explain it better than I can."

"You done *well*, Donnel ... for an *engineer*." Ronnie laughed quietly, keeping his eyes closed while basking in the warm, if stinky, liquid.

"Hey, we're all just machines. A little more compact and complicated, and certainly delicate enough that the littlest things can throw us out of whack. At least we aren't living in that hell hole down *below*."

Ronnie suppressed a snort, instead saying, "*Oh*, don't get me *started*."

He felt like he wanted to forget all of that mess down below ... something that was quickly becoming a *real* possibility. He did remember *one* thing, though.

“Did you ever figure out what that thing attached to my back was for?”

Donnel glanced away guiltily, before saying, “That’s a good question. We’ve analyzed the chemicals dripping into you, but they don’t seem to do anything particularly nasty to the human body – aside from the powder they injected you with. Milsie thinks one of them might be an enzyme of some sort, but she could be mistaken.”

“Mistaken? She said it–”

“Her samples turned out to be contaminated. At this point, we’re not really sure *what* it does.” Donnel shook his head and shrugged.

“How about Slich 42130? Did he give you any clues?”

“Nice guy. Very forthcoming, but their Director was keeping *that* tidbit of research close to his chest. Besides, Slich 42130 was a pretty recent transfer to the research station, unlike Slich 42126. He’s quite fond of you, you know. You didn’t kill his clutch-mate, Slich 42126.”

“Didn’t stop him from poking a couple of *holes* in me, right ... here and here,” he said, pointing down to two red spots on his abdomen.

“He’s sorry for that ... I’m *reasonably* sure, anyway,” Donnel said.

“Ha! *He* wasn’t at the time. Donnel, have you noticed how ... *well* they’ve adapted to us?”

“*Adapted* to us? We already know how fast they learn stuff. How do you mean?” Donnel couldn’t help thinking back to when he’d first warned Ronnie of his fears.

Ronnie had to stop and think, before trying to put it into words.

“Their speech patterns. The way they seem to relate to us so easily. When I first listened in to Samuel, his communication structures and cadence seemed more ... *staid*? More ... oh ... kinda what you’d expect from a lethargic reptilian species. Racial profiling, I know. Once we got to talking on a regular basis, he seemed to change ... almost like he was adapting to our sociological profile, if you will.”

“Maybe they’re like the Kee?” Donnel suggested. “They become a little bit like what they eat? But I’d hate to think they could have started talking to the *Drecks* first. What a mess we’d have *then*. In fact, I think I remember...” Donnel paused and keyed in a search from the reference library. “Here it is. One of the Blight recoveries consisted of a rather dull society of stoic individuals who led extremely boring lives until the Commonwealth showed up. Once contact was made, and they were transplanted, their whole society was transformed and they became some of the most creative and *inquisitive* workers in the Commonwealth.”

“Who’s that, then?”

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"The *Balese*. We brought them in from the Blight about eight-thousand years ago, and they haven't been the same, since," Donnel said.

"*Lili's* little *Kita*? I can't imagine her *ever* being dull, let alone stoic. We had quite a time with her back on ... well, that was a few years ago."

"It was the talk of the *ship*. Lady Diane was quite *proud* of her men's performance," Donnel teased him lightly, and saw Ronnie smile at the memory of it.

The sound of the door opening drew their attention, and a tall, stately gentleman wearing the uniform of a fleet Medical Officer with the rank of Commander entered; a complaint already launching from his lips.

"Too much *sulfur*, Mister Ardan! And there should be *steam* coming up from that tub!" Commander Woldron snapped.

Woldron ignored Ronnie while chastising Donnel over the mix-up in the chemical concentration inside the tub. Then he asked for the latest scan information on both this patient, and the supposed Kee woman.

While Donnel scrambled to set up the data, Woldron turned his attention to Ronnie.

"Well, Caldar, are you still plagued by that *curse* the Elder subjected you to?" he asked, while completely ignoring the rank, title, and decorum Ronnie had expected of him.

It was somewhat refreshing.

"Oh ... I've *stopped* fighting my inner demon... We're on the *same* side, now," he retorted flippantly.

"Good! Your spirits are up. That's important – considering how *fucked* you are," Woldron muttered while reaching down and lifting one of Ronnie's arms out of the water to examine it, then the attached hand and fingers.

He pinched his palms, then worked his thumbs down over his fingers and thumbs – squeezing and pushing each one while shaking his head slowly. If Ronnie still had the ability, he would have heard the "tsk-tsk" popping from his foremost thoughts.

"*Donnel!* You have samples from that *filter*?" he asked loudly while dropping the soggy hand and turning away from Ronnie. "This tub needs to be emptied and *refilled!* I'll have some magnesium sulfate sent over from *Microcosmus* – the *good* stuff, this time!" he continued just as loudly, while wandering away from Ronnie and stalking over to Donnel, who was working at the other end of ships doc.

After setting Woldron up at the workstation, Donnel slunk back to Ronnie, where they could carry on a quiet conversation.

“What did you do to set him off?” Donnel asked quietly.

“Nothing! I was just being my normal, charming self,” he said, also in a low voice. “Maybe he’s pissed about being dragged all the way out here to Vanir space?”

“Maybe. Or maybe he’s just pissed at *you*.”

“I can’t imagine why. Look at all the wonderful new *research* opportunities I’m providing him with, and the—”

“*Donnel!* Get back over here!” Woldron shouted, and Ardan skittered off like an abused pet.

Their conversation started out measured, but gradually heated up – presumably over differences between engineers and *real* medical professionals. It ended with an agreement to have someone escort a messenger bearing *real* medical instruments from the landing bay of the *Kraken* to ships doc once she arrived. Donnel opened a link to the bridge and requested escort services from Endo, and also asked that both resident Kee report to ships doc for a medical consultation.

In the meantime, Woldron linked through to the bridge of the *Microcosmus* to have specific supplies brought over *immediately*; the words “First Lord” apparently giving him priority. Afterwards, Donnel and Woldron both advanced on Ronnie, with Woldron taking the lead.

“Caldar, tell me about your accident,” he said while looking down at the obvious signs of torture on his arms and body that even the Healers could not fix.

“My *accident*? Believe me, this was *no accident!*”

“Not *this*, you damned fool! You meant to take *life* from the Vanir, but something went *wrong!* I’ve seen the video, and listened to the subsequent speculation by Donnel here, and someone called Milsie. I’ve also had a statement of opinion by your Ambassador, Lady Caldarous, indicating the action caught on video was *totally* unexpected! Your *own* reaction to it seems to backup that impression!”

“And just what in the hell would *you* know about it?” Ronnie asked angrily, while struggling to sit up straighter and getting satisfaction in seeing Woldron finally back off.

“Uh ... gentlemen...” Donnel said quietly, but Woldron raised his hand and pulled over a chair to sit by the tub.

“Caldar ... *Lord* Caldar,” he corrected himself, but this time Ronnie raised his hand.

“Ronnie... Just ... Ronnie.”

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"Thank you, Ronnie," Woldron said quietly, while averting his eyes at the unexpected granting of familiarity. "Ronnie ... I know a *great* deal about it – and about *you*. Before she di– ... *left* me, Kita ... the *Elder* Kita ... she explained a great deal about ... about *things*. She talked about loss and regret ... and missed opportunities. And about *Visions*. And she talked about what she'd seen in the past, and what she saw as potentials for the *future*. She talked a lot about *you*," he said while looking back at him now.

"Grandmother was a rather *unique* individual," Ronnie murmured while nodding slowly.

"She certainly was, and deserving of so much more than I... *Grandmother*? You *knew*?" Woldron glanced at him warily, then saw the truth in his eyes, and sighed heavily. "Of course. She was the *Elder*, so..." he shrugged.

"She had a way of doing things," Ronnie said. "Lady Ai changed things after she was gone, but I can't say one way or another if it was a good change or not."

"Lady Ai is not the immediate problem here, Ronnie. Anyway, I understand from my contacts that she suffered a setback – *suspiciously*, some would say." He waited for a moment, but Ronnie didn't bite, so he went on. "The Emperor's First Wife, Lady Song, is now acting as the Elder, and at one time she was Kita's First Sword."

"Elder Kita assumed the reigns prematurely, as well," Ronnie said; refocusing the conversation and getting a knowing nod from Woldron before continuing. "She had to learn to deal with the Visions all by herself. Lady Ai was fortunate Kita was still around to help her through the transition, at least for a little while ... but Elder Ai was *unfortunate* in that she assumed control at this particular time in our history."

He left the issue of Ai's problems unenlightened.

"Because of the Vanir? Or because of *you*?" Woldron muttered.

"Probably a little of both. Although knowledgeable sources suggest that my birth, Maya Tal's birth, and a host of other incidents, were somehow orchestrated by Elder Kita for any one of a *variety* of reasons. When Ai inherited *that* ... well, shortly afterwards, my demon was in control."

Woldron began to chuckle, then pulled out a small flat flask. He pulled the cap off and poured a capful for himself and tossed it back, then poured a capful for Ronnie and passed it over.

Ronnie tossed it back, but began gasping before passing the cap back.

Woldron poured another capful and turned to Donnel, but Donnel raised his hands defensively – knowing full well that if it made *Ronnie* do that, it was too much for him.



Woldron chuckled again, then tossed the second capful down, before capping and putting away the flask.

“She said she feared the *Dark*,” Woldron continued; capitalizing it implicitly. “Said she kept ‘putting things in and pulling things out,’ trying to find a *stable* path for the Commonwealth to grow into. She said she’d finally had to raise someone *special* – someone who hadn’t been seen since old Aquintus Tiberious graced the throne.”

He looked down at Ronnie and smiled. “And here you *are*.”

“She *told* you all that?” Ronnie was suddenly becoming more curious about Woldron’s relationship with Elder Kita, and the Commander seemed to pick that up.

“Kita and I ... we’d known each other for a long time. A *very* long time. I felt guilty every time I bedded down with a Healer, simply to extend my life. Otherwise, she and I... She kept the office *pure*,” he murmured after a short pause, then gave a little laugh. “She told me once that she could simply *grant* me life energy ... but then she’d have to sanction *herself* for abusing her *own* laws. You seem to be living on borrowed time *yourself*,” he said quietly, while staring intently into Ronnie’s eyes and finally getting him to avert his gaze.

“Let’s just say that I worked within the *spirit* of the Elder’s law, rather than the letter of it. My demon found no moral objection to sucking life from other people in exchange for a little credit, but the closest I’d ever come to *killing* someone was a port rat who liked to beat up comfort girls. *Him* ... I took several years away from. The comfort girls – the younger ones – I took six months or less, and paid well for the privilege of it.”

“Not without leaving most of them with a tangible *benefit* ... or so the Elder’s office tells me,” Woldron said, then smiled at the look on Ronnie’s face. “It would seem the new Healer cluster out on the Fringe is just *full* of alumni from your ... *personal* indoctrination?” he hinted. “It’s a wonder Lady Tal even *serves* with you.”

“Gods! Does *everyone* know about that?”

“Know about what, Lord Caldar?” Déjà asked somberly, as she walked in quietly with Kiki by her side.

Kiki’s eyes lit up at the sight of the new visitor, and she eagerly came forward, asking him, “Hello! I am *Kiki*! Would you like to *play* with me?”

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While Donnel was taking samples from Déjà and Kiki, Woldron stood by the tub and observed the two girls while asking quiet questions about them from Ronnie.

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Kiki was noticeably stockier, while Déjà still had her slender build. If Ronnie was correct in his estimation, she also seemed to be a bit taller than before.

He admitted that he hadn't seen them together before his last mission, but then again, his memory might be at fault as well – which got a snort from Woldron.

“Commander?” a feminine voice called from the door.

Woldron immediately turned around and smiled at the sight that greeted him.

“Come in ... come in, Lady Huan,” he called softly, the change in his demeanor obvious. “Ronnie, may I present Lady Jia Huan. She’s a Senior attached to my staff.”

Ronnie sat up a little straighter and looked her over.

While Woldron was tall, *much* older, and rather gruff, Lady Huan was the very figure of loveliness in a physically compact, yet perfect body.

As she approached them, he saw that she stood only as high as Woldron’s shoulder.

“Lady Jia ... Huan,” he said slowly, while running the derivatives through his memories. “Jia ... it means either good or fine – I would have to say *auspicious*. And Huan ... to bring satisfaction or joy – I would say *both*,” he declared while watching her eyes shine at his interpretation. “I’m Ronnie. I’d get up, but, well ... it’s *cold* out there,” he said, letting his comment send a momentary lapse into the conversation.

Kiki took that moment of silence to slip over and stand in front of Ronnie so she could greet their new visitor.

“Hello! I am *Kiki*! Would *you* like to play with me?” she asked hopefully.

Lady Huan looked, in sequence; confused, shocked, fearful, dismayed, and finally curious. She finished with a smile, and said, “Perhaps later, Mistress Kiki.”

“*MISTRESS!* You called me *MISTRESS!*” she shouted before running back to Déjà, who was still being probed by Donnel. “*Mistress!* She called me *Mistress!*” she cried happily, while Déjà just rolled her eyes.

Lady Huan looked confused again, while Ronnie whispered loudly to Woldron, “You *broke* it, you *bought* it!”

Milsie, who’d escorted Lady Huan from the docking bay, just stood there and smiled; quite amused at the typical level of chaos that seemed to follow the First Lord around like a dark cloud.

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“So *that* was a Kee,” Lady Huan sighed after Kiki and Déjà left the compartment. “She seems very ... *vivacious*.”

“They have only three basic modes: eat, sleep, and sex,” Ronnie explained. “*Mostly*. Short attention span, short memory span, and an *incredible* appetite that you *don’t* want to leave unfed.”

“What about Mistress Déjà?” Woldron asked. “You said she was a Kee, but her markers are even less Kee than the *previous* sample I had. It’s almost like she was changing or evolving somehow. That isn’t *normal* for one of them, is it?”

Ronnie didn’t say anything, but glanced away uncomfortably ... which Woldron didn’t miss.

“What did you *DO*, Caldar?” he asked sternly.

After a short conversation regarding propriety issues related to “actions that took place by order of the Elder’s office,” Ronnie gave a very basic rundown of the sequence of events leading up to Déjà receiving an accidental dose of his bodily fluids that may or may *not*, but probably *did*, have some evolutionary effect on her genetic structure.

Basically, Déjà was turning into a *real* girl.

He did, of course, leave out all references to Jaiying, and the rest of the Senior Staff; that information still being held as family secret. This was at least *one* instance where his involuntary mind shield had become useful.

“So Kiki is still Kiki, and Déjà is becoming more human-standard ... or whatever *you* seem to be, Ronnie,” Woldron summarized. “And she’s picked up some limited *Senior* talents as well.”

“Yes,” Lady Huan agreed. “I heard echoes in her mind of thoughts from passing crewmen who were thinking of her. At first I thought they were simply memories, but I reached out and felt them myself.”

Ronnie tucked the large robe around himself a little tighter, and settled back in the chair Woldron had abandoned. A glance to the side found Donnel pouring several measures of magnesium sulfate into the refilled tub that now had *steam* rising from it. It didn’t smell *nearly* as bad as before, though. Then he thought of something else.

“Lady Huan, please tell me how a Cletus Senior becomes attached to a Medical Department aboard ship. I wouldn’t think the two would be all that compatible.”

“*Really*, Lord Caldar? I can think of nothing more *appropriate*. We have the ability to do *incredibly* non-invasive repairs to the human body, but as a group, both Healers and Seniors don’t really know a whole lot of the purely *technical* information needed to *truly* understand what we are

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accomplishing. Since I've begun working with Hifacious, I've gained a much more *meaningful* understanding of both *what* we do and *how* we do it."

"And *I've* gained an incredible appreciation of the *emotional* component Healers and Seniors apply to their art," Woldron admitted. "Even Combat-Healers, who can repair a severed limb in just *seconds*, must feel and believe with absolute *certainty* in what they are trying to accomplish. In the end, even though it looks like magic, I understand much better the incredibly *complex* relationship between the Healer and the client."

"And the Ladies have a much better bedside manner," Ronnie offered, getting a smile from both of them, but Woldron's smile faded just a little before he went on again.

"And that brings us back to you, Ronnie. You have a problem that, right now, neither of us can figure out how to deal with – and it's going to kill you."

### ***In Nathan and Dorcas' Compartment***

Jaiying and Rose were behaving themselves for the time being by staying in Rose's quarters and out of their guards' way.

As such, it gave them great leeway in what they could do.

In this case, they were both sitting quietly while relaying the conversations going on in ships doc to their cousins back on Kantor.

### ***On the Microcosmus***

While Lord Caldar was otherwise occupied, Lady Trenka had taken the opportunity to conduct more interviews – this time with the survivors brought back from the Vanir research station...

She'd updated her notes during an early lunch, then learned that a transport was coming from the *Microcosmus*.

She'd taken it back and begun contacting each survivor in turn to learn what they'd experienced first hand while imprisoned by the Vanir.

As hardened as she was by personal experience, she'd been shocked to learn how the Vanir had engineered their human-homing weapons from biological tissue samples – specifically – Cletus Senior *brain matter*.

She'd been hard-pressed to suppress her rage, but somehow managed to bury it for the rest of her interviews.

### ***On the Kraken***

"So you see, Ronnie, that powder on your skin – *in* your skin – is really only temporary. It will eventually work itself out ... or it *should*," Woldron

told him plainly, then thought of the strange behavior of the powder residue that had been introduced into his body. “But that powder *inside* you ... it seems to have clustered around some pretty important areas of your brain, and I’m beginning to think it was intentional.”

“Yes. Donnel was telling me about it from my scans, but why is it still active? What’s powering it?”

“I think I may understand, Lord Caldar,” Lady Huan offered softly.

Ronnie was back in the bath, in *very* warm water this time. Woldron and Huan were sitting in chairs on one side of the tub, and Donnel and Milsie were sitting opposite them, with Milsie’s attention drawn to Lady Huan once she’d spoken.

“Healers, and particularly *Seniors*, have what we know are ‘extra’ abilities,” Huan explained. “There is conjecture of how it came about in the distant past, but the fact remains that those of us from Cletus seem to be born with a thinly tapped potential for Healing. Once awakened, we seem to excel at the art.”

“That may be so, Lady Huan, but it’s been my experience that Healing can be taught,” Ronnie pointed out. “I’ve taught Drecks females. Lady Sai has taught Drecks males. She’s even taught Déjà a little – and that was *before* she started to change.”

“Yes. Even males can be taught ... if only a little,” Huan agreed. “But then your situation is somewhat *different*, Lord Caldar. You are the son of Rakel Caldarous, and have inherited many of his talents. Even though you have an Earth mother, your Kantite father’s genes provided the framework for your brain. Like all of Kantite decent, Rakel possessed a number of talents; many of which Elder Kita was hard pressed to contain, but sometimes manifested despite her efforts.”

“I am aware that Grandmother found it necessary to sanction my father. I believe his crime was primarily hubris, but resulted in the death of one of his Healer companions by drawing life from her until she died.”

“Yes, that is my belief as well ... or so the Elder’s staff would suggest. But that really has nothing to do with your situation – or rather, the act *itself* may have had something to do with it.”

“I – I’m afraid I don’t know what you mean.”

“Lord Caldar, those of us from Cletus and Kantor ... we’re ... *special*,” she said, with some difficulty. “We are not like other human-standards, or human-variants. We have longer than normal life spans – over and above the norm for an entity. Even *without* the special training between our bonded pairs, we live a long time. Part of that is because our brains–”

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“What Jia is saying is that her brain and your brain do something *extra* while just sitting there doing *nothing*,” Woldron broke in rudely.

“Huh?”

“That would *explain it!*” Milsie exclaimed. “The powder concentrates in the brain, where it finds an ... an *energy field!*”

“Then the powder injected into him *deliberately* traveled to that part of his brain where the energy is coming from?” Donnel asked Huan, who appeared a bit miffed at having her explanation ripped away from her – at least from the glare she was sending to Woldron.

“I apologize, my Lady,” Woldron said quietly, then dipped his head to her and waited several tense seconds.

“Accepted ... Hifacious. But please mind your *manners!*” she snapped curtly, before turning back to Ronnie.

“As I was *about* to say ... yes, our brains produce an energy field that is *continually* drawing energy in and effecting small repairs on our bodies. As Mistress Milsie intuitively concluded, this energy is *always* present, and allows our bodies to age at a somewhat slower rate than normal. This very special segment of our brains is also the core of where we draw energy *to*, and where we focus our Healing efforts *from*.”

“Ahhh ... not to denigrate your research, but *anyone* can be taught to develop Healer’s skills, with or without–”

“Lord Caldar, we’ve determined that the more a person practices the Healer’s art, the stronger the energy field develops – even from a beginning state of *zero*. You, *yourself*, produced many Healer candidates over the years. Lady Diane Lane, Lady Amy Lane, Lady Shay Daishi–”

“Hey, Diane is the daughter of *Petrus*, and Amy is the daughter of my *Grandson!*” Ronnie blurted, “And Shay was *already* from Healer’s stock.”

“And all those *port* girls of yours?” she asked pointedly; getting a chagrined expression back from him. “Lady Tal taught her adopted sons – Drecks *males* – limited Healing ability, yet there’s something special about *you*, Lord Caldar. Presumably something in your ... *essences* that produces *exceptionally* proficient Healers.”

His already dark complexion flushed a bit, but no one noticed.

Donnel brought up Ronnie’s brain scan on the monitor nearest the tub, and they all looked at the darkened area surrounding one *specific* location.

“That is the approximate location I visualize when performing Healing actions,” Huan said while pointing to it. “I draw energy to there, and redirect it to my client. Your brain scans seem to indicate the powder has some sort of affinity to that particular type of energy, and is drawn to it.

Unfortunately, it also appears to be *powered* by it – so much so, that normal restorative function is lost, and deterioration has started in. Worse – the deterioration occurs more rapidly the older you are. Our normal lifespan is calculated to be about two-hundred twenty-five to two-hundred fifty years, Standard. That is for human-*Cletus* or human-*Kantite*. That is *without* any effort to maintain a given age.”

“My records say you are over two-hundred twenty or so ... Standard,” Woldron told him. “You’re human-*Kantite* *and* human-Earth. The rate of decay for your body will be faster.”

“So ... I really *am* going to die of old age?”

“In a manner of speaking,” Huan told him. “You will begin to lose short term memory first – I understand you’ve already experienced that – while your long term memory will stay with you for a while longer. I believe that would be because your older memories are buried deeper in your mind, and reinforced at each remembrance of them.”

“That sounds ... reasonable,” he said, as his thoughts drifted to his backup plan. “So ... now is the time I should be writing my memoirs?”

“That’s not a bad idea, Ronnie,” Donnel suggested. “You’ve had a long and interesting life, and you really should put the record straight – from *your* perspective.”

“Physically, you should remain functional,” Huan continued, “but you will begin to lose strength, balance, and coordination after a while – perhaps within a few more days or maybe even weeks. And you should probably refrain from exerting any effort to use your mind for ... well, doing the things you normally did. Of course, the powder in your brain is suppressing that ability anyway, but you don’t want it to dig in any deeper.”

He lay there and thought about his short future, but really didn’t want to go out without a fight.

“Is there anything ... anything at *all* that can be done to get this stuff out of my head? Can’t you, you know, just excise that bit of my brain and make me a normal guy again?”

“Oh... Lord Caldar, you were *never* a normal guy,” Milsie said with a slow shake of her head.

“Well ... yeah, but couldn’t you just excise the portion where all the powder is bunched up?”

“We wouldn’t be able to tell exactly what to remove, Ronnie,” Woldron said. “If that *specific* portion is what’s been keeping you alive, then it would be pointless to remove it, as that should only accelerate the aging process.” He paused and shook his head slowly before adding, “Besides,

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we could take out a chunk of brain and find that we'd removed some *important* memories – like who you are and what you do ... or *how* you do it."

Lady Huan pointed out the other problem.

"Lord Caldar, if there were some way to *neutralize* the powder, then there might be a chance for Healers to pull it out, but the fact is that we'd be using energy to *remove* it, which would then *energize* it once again, and should prevent us from affecting it at all."

"So what you're saying is that ... as long as I'm *alive*, this stuff is stuck in my head. And if I were to *die* ... then the energy stops, and it might free it up enough to be removed?"

They all remained silent for several seconds at his rather fatalistic pronouncement.

"Well, if you were dead, we *could* try to drain it from you completely," Donnel suggested. "But the likelihood of you surviving that is pretty much non-existent. Right, Commander?"

Woldron got up and slowly paced for a minute or two. Then he accessed a terminal and searched the medical library on the *Microcosmus* remotely. He stayed at it for several minutes – long enough for Huan to open up one of the cases she'd brought with her and set up a small device next to the tub.

Donnel went over to consult with Woldron, while Huan let Milsie help her finish assembling the medical device and start working on Ronnie. In effect, it was a small but powerful vacuum that pulled debris from his softened tissue in a swath few centimeters wide. They worked it up and down his left arm for several minutes, before Huan shut it off and pulled out the collection flask.

"Mistress Milsie, do you have an analyzer here?" she asked, and Milsie took her over to a lab station, where they set up a spectrum analyzer to run their samples through. Milsie noted that Lady Huan had put on protective gloves *before* opening the flask.

Left to his own devices, Ronnie decided he'd had enough and was getting pretty hungry. As long as he was dying, he'd rather do it on a full stomach, so he quietly slipped out of the tub and dried off, before quickly dressing and walking over to the door – all the while glancing over at the engineers and medical crew working diligently to tell him there was no way to fix him while he still lived. He shook his head once, then exited the compartment. Wrapped up in their efforts, no one even noticed that he'd gone.



***Kantor, Night Side at the Royal Homestead***

*‘Walter, what should I do?’* Jaiying asked. *‘Grandfather seems ... he seems different’*

*‘He knows he’s dying, Jaiying’* Walter sent, while turning over on the bed; it being late night on their side of Kantor.

*‘But we can FIX it, can’t we?’* Josie asked.

*‘You heard them. Huan can’t remove it because it powers up’* Cathy reminded her. *‘And even if he’s dead, they’d have no way to extract it safely without killing him in the process ... or, well, you know’*

*‘Guys! We can’t let Grandfather DIE!’* Josie pushed loudly, but got shushed by everyone else. *‘Sorry’*

*‘We understand, Josie, but ... but maybe they’ll find a way’* Cathy suggested hopefully. *‘Woldron was Grandmother Kita’s doctor. Huan seems to be very knowledgeable about stuff, and Donnel, Lon, and Granger are out there as well. And you know Grandfather – he surrounds himself with the best, and they usually figure out what needs to be done’*

*‘You’ll note that his ship only has the one gun’* Josie pointed out sourly.

*‘That was Grandfather’s decision’* Cathy reminded her. *‘It sends a statement’*

*‘Yeah. Fuck with me and I’ll VAPORIZE you!’* Josie snapped.

*‘It keeps things from getting out of hand’* Walter temporized, but Josie was not letting it go.

*‘He should have VAPORIZED that damn lab from orbit and be DONE with it! His MEN all knew the risks, and Seven was GONE!’*

“Josie,” a soft voice came from the door of the parent’s room...

The Elder pro tem, Lady Song, was spending a rare night on monitor duty with the children. Spring Blossom was still asleep, but Lili had become more in tune with the children over the course of the last several months.

This night she had been listening in during Ronnie’s treatment, but found it very hard to remain silent, so she got up and wrapped herself in a robe before entering the children’s room to sit on the edge of their shared bed...

“Josie, what Ronnie did could have gone many different ways. The way he chose changed his path such that he was captured and subjected to a terrible destiny – one that we *all* face eventually – but he felt it was necessary at the time.”

## The End of the Road

“Oh, like *you* really care, Aunt Lili,” Josie snapped angrily. “*You* want him dead just as much as the *S’Slich’Tah!* That’s why you sent *Trenka* out there, isn’t it? To *kill him!*”

“*JOSIE!*” ‘*JOSIE!*’ “*JOSIE!*” ‘*JOSIE!*’ the children shouted, both far and near, which shocked Lili as much as Josie’s accusations had just moments before.

She looked down and closed her eyes for a moment to gather herself, before trying to explain to this very young child what she needed to accomplish for them all.

“Josie...” ‘*Children*’ “Children... I sent *Trenka* out to confirm *Ronnie* has not fallen so far away from his nature that he had become a *danger* to us – to the *Commonwealth*. How do you think it would be for all of us if it were revealed that a rogue *Kantite* was utilizing his *forbidden* abilities, and all the other clusters were now in danger?” she asked, looking each one of them in the face, while maintaining mindspeak with *Jaiying* and *Rose*, as did the other children.

“How would it be received if *we* – if *I* let it be known that I let even *one* *Kantite* abuse his power and kill with just a thought? How soon would they suspect that *any* of our men were on the verge of letting loose and starting another killing spree like the ones who destroyed us in the past? Children ... don’t you think that I love *Ronnie* as much as *you do*? So far, *Trenka* has found *nothing* that says *Ronnie* has become dangerous. What other sources are telling me is that the *Vanir* did something to him, so when he ... well, when he made that ill-advised attempt to punish that lab director, it backfired and killed everyone around him. I have to make sure it was just an accident ... that it is unlikely to repeat itself. If *Ronnie* were to become *dangerous*, then *yes*, I *would* have to stop him.”

“Just like Elder *Kita* killed *Rakel Aquintus*,” *Walter* pointed out. “He was getting out of hand, and things got bloody at court. When he was denied contentment, he took it out on one of his companions, and took her life using the forbidden path.”

“Yes,” *Lili* agreed. “Elder *Kita* took his life for the senseless killing of one of her staff ... because he killed a *Healer* by draining her of life. If he had killed her some *other way*–”

“He *still* woulda been an asshole,” *Josie* interrupted bitterly. “But Grandfather’s *not* an asshole!”

*Lili* was no longer shocked by *Josie*’s crude outbursts, but it still gave her pause while trying to explain her role in the existing situation.

“No, *Josie*, we don’t think that he is ... but we can no longer *read* him and it gives us *caution*,” she said formally.

They all heard the change in her voice. She wasn't speaking as Lili ... she was speaking as the *Elder*, but that triggered something in Jaiying's mind.

*'Aunt Lili, Trenka told my Mother that you aren't the Elder yet'*

Lili froze at that, while her thoughts ran through it carefully.

*'It is true that I have not officially been made Queen of Cletus – that takes time. My understanding is I was appointed at the request of the staff'*

*'I also suspect Trenka has an agenda all her own'* Jaiying continued. *'I haven't figured it out yet. She's very good'*

*'Yes... Trenka is very good. She became my First Sword for a reason'*

Lili was thinking back over the years of Trenka's service before, during, and after her direct connection to the Elder's office. She was a fellow clan member, but...

*'Thank you, Jaiying. I would be grateful if you would please tell me anything else that you learn about Lady Trenka'* Lili asked her.

"Children, please try to get to sleep. Ronnie is not in any immediate danger. There is time yet, and you know Ronnie – he has a plan for everything ... usually."

She kissed them all, then went back to join Spring Blossom. They watched her leave and waited for the door to close, before turning to each other.

Walter shifted to a high, *very* difficult band to combat Lili's eavesdropping, before he engaged his cousins.

*'Okay, we watch and wait. Jaiying – you keep an eye on Trenka, and we'll listen in to Donnel and Woldron. Maybe they'll come up with something'*

*'All right, Walter'* she agreed, although not sounding very relieved.

*'Hey, don't forget that Grandfather always has a back-up plan! Remember?'* he chided them.

There was a momentary pause...

*'Eww'* came a chorus of three tiny girlish voices. A fourth one joined in just as soon as Jaiying clued in Rose.

### ***April 7, The Kraken, A Week Later***

Ronnie had gotten into a routine. Get up, have breakfast, then spend an hour soaking in the vat of hot water dosed with magnesium sulfate.

## The End of the Road

He'd finally looked it up and found it was commonly known on Earth as Epson salt. At least it didn't stink as much as the *first* batch.

After that, he'd get his skin vacuumed by Lady Huan, who was often helped by Dorcas or even Déjà – who seemed at loose ends, but enjoyed feeling useful. The process itself left an interesting pattern of inch-wide stripes on his body. Afterwards, it was to the gym for a light workout, followed by a light dinner and then a nap – or at least stationary horizontal relaxation for a few hours. That was followed by a repeated soaking and vacuuming session before supper, and then off to bed.

He'd steadfastly refused contentment from any of the Healers without giving a reason. In his own mind, he was afraid of hurting anyone during an involuntary physiological response that might trigger a reaction in his mind similar to what had killed the Vanir. He considered it unlikely, but wasn't about to take any chances. Besides, it wasn't as if it was going to extend his life any longer.

Once alone at night, he spent his time remembering things. All the things from his past, both the good and the bad, he brought to mind and tried to commit them to his *alternate* “permanent storage” as he thought of it. Aside from that business of forgetting about vaporizing the crippled Vanir observation station, he seemed to have a relatively good grasp of his past. But then again ... how would he know?

On this particular evening, Ronnie was updating the ships documentation and recording some personal messages for later distribution. He was wondering what else needed doing, when he was distracted by a knock on his compartment door. Unable to simply reach out and read who was there, he considered playing dumb. A repeat of the knocking forced his curiosity to get the better of him, so he got up to open the door – only to find Petrus sitting there in a wheelchair.

“I'm so *disappointed* in you, Ronnie. You never take me *dancing* anymore,” he said somberly, with a very sad expression on his face.

Dorcas was lost by the comment, but Nathan almost burst out laughing; only managing to keep it in by holding his hand over his mouth.

They'd rolled Petrus over to see Ronnie because, they knew he'd been isolating himself and virtually ignoring everyone else aboard the ship. Petrus in particular was adamant that Ronnie needed his ass kicked, and he was just the person to do it ... in maybe another six inches or so. In the meantime, he'd conspired with them to surprise Ronnie that night, and glanced their way and nodded that he was fine, before looking up at Ronnie with puppy-dog eyes, and a forced, upside-down smile on his face.

“Well ... my dance card's full, and you're still...” Ronnie paused and looked down, “... a couple of feet short. Come on in,” he said, then moved

a chair away from the small table in his front room so they could both sit and talk.

Seeing his friend so encumbered triggered a flush of embarrassment that ran up the back of his neck. Obviously Petrus didn't notice it, but instead, felt it when he wheeled himself over to the table.

"You *forgot* about me, didn't you! They *told* me you were getting senile, but I never thought you'd forget all the *shit* we'd dragged ourselves through over the years!" he accused him.

Ronnie turned at his outburst and looked down at him sheepishly.

"I'm sorry, Petrus. This thing ... it's got me all wrapped up in myself," he muttered, then glanced away. "I – I think this may be the one that takes me out."

"All the *more* reason to have Dorcas or that Lady Huan spend a few quality hours with you, lad. Even *Milsie* was thinking about it. Of course, you can't share Lili's *Gift* with them for a while."

"No ... and I wouldn't want to risk trying," he said very seriously, then looked away again; not being able to meet Petrus' eyes.

Petrus could already see the deterioration around Ronnie's eyes and face, and noticed the difficulty he'd had walking back from the door. When he finally sat down, he did it carefully ... as if he wasn't sure he could control the descent.

They sat across from one another, letting the silence stretch between them, until Petrus decided enough was enough.

"Tell me about it, lad. Explain just what happened that day," he said quietly.

"You wouldn't understand, Petrus. You don't have the background. You're not—"

"Ronnie... Lili is my *sister*. My mother was *Cletus*. I don't have *all* the talents, but I am *aware* of them. Lili and I have talked before, and I know what the limits are, and why the Elders' made them. I just want to understand what happened to *you*."

"So you can report it to Lili?"

"So I can understand what *happened*, lad! So I can decide *what* I'll report to Lili."

Ronnie thought it over. It had been nagging at him off and on, and this was the first time anyone had really *asked* him about it – about what he'd gone through *personally*. Besides, Petrus deserved to know why he'd been left on that moon.

## The End of the Road

“All right. It began when ... I guess it *really* began when we found out Kantor was going to be attacked...”

### *In Trenka's Compartment*

Having returned to the *Kraken* earlier that day, Trenka was easily listening in to Petrus' mind. She'd overheard Dorcas and Nathan talking to Petrus at supper and thought this might be an opportunity in her favor. She'd followed them with her mind while sequestering herself in her quarters. Once there, she began taking notes from what she overheard from Petrus' unusually clear thoughts.

She'd been frustrated at her inability to simply peel open Ronnie's mind to get at the information she needed, but eavesdropping on a conversation between the First Officer and his Captain looked like her *only* option at the moment.

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'Aunt Lili, Trenka is spying on Uncle Petrus and Grandfather' Jaiying tattled.

'Thank you, Jaiying. Please show me where... Ah, I hear Petrus' Lili sent back, then settled in to listen as well.

Petrus and Ronnie spoke long into the evening. As the details became clearer to him, Petrus subconsciously tightened up his own block. This caused a gradual, then finally *total* silence to descend upon what Trenka was receiving.

Jaiying was having no problems with it at all, however. Neither was Lili.

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“So yes, I was *angry*. You would be, too,” Ronnie said. “He poked *holes* in me, and killed *Seven!* Before that, he'd orchestrated the kidnapping and torture of Commonwealth *Healers and Seniors!* Petrus, he ... he dissected Senior *brain tissue* while they were still *alive—*”

He had to stop, the concept being too horrible to contemplate.

Petrus reached beside him where he had a bag slung on the wheelchair and pulled out a bottle of ambrosia.

He showed it to Ronnie, who got up and dug out a couple of glasses and returned to the table.

Opening the bottle, Petrus poured a measure for Ronnie, and one for himself.

“Ronnie, we've both seen war, and we've both seen stuff *worse* than war. Out in the Blight, you and me...” He held up his glass, and Ronnie

raised his as well. "To fallen friends..." they said together, then drank half their glasses.

They both set them down and contemplated the swirling remains for several seconds before Petrus finally broke the silence.

"So ... you were angry," he prompted him.

"Gods *yes!* I was angry and wanted to *punish him!* Killing him would have been too easy. I wanted him to *suffer*. I'd already discovered that I couldn't Heal myself, so I thought, why not get a *recharge*? The *Vanir* are long-lived, right? They go for seven-hundred ... eight-hundred years, Standard, before they even *start* to age, right?" Ronnie stopped and took a sip, letting it trickle down his throat to help him relax.

"So you didn't *want* to kill him, but you wanted to leave a lasting impression on him and his friends," Petrus prompted again.

"I thought it'd be simple. Just take enough life to give him the equivalent of old age to us, and let it go at that."

"But you got it *wrong* somehow," Petrus muttered.

"No *shit*, I got it wrong! When I touched him and started to draw his life force, all *hell* broke loose! It felt like – like it never really *started*, you know? Well, I suppose not, but ... when I began the pull, I started real light. I'd never drawn from a *Vanir* before. I ... I *think* I felt it, but it seemed to reach a *barrier* in me. Then it bounced back, and just ... just exploded *everywhere!*" They were both quiet for a moment until Petrus spoke

"Like a balloon popping?" Ronnie thought about it for a few moments.

"It doesn't make any sense, but ... sure. Like a balloon popping. Like ... when his life force bounced off me, it bounced back at him, and then ... *cascaded*? Is that *possible*?"

"I don't really know, lad, but maybe someone on the Elder's staff would know? Or maybe Lady Trenka. I wouldn't put it past her."

"*Trenka*? Why would *she*—" Ronnie stopped when he saw Petrus' nodding head.

"Or Lili," Petrus continued. "The Elder's First Swords have considerable leeway regarding the ways and means to accomplish certain goals."

"That may be true, but even Elder *Kita* wouldn't do that. Rakel Aquintus died of an aneurism ... so they say."

"Following the Elder's law regarding the taking of life force, that was probably her most convenient method," Petrus suggested. "But you never intended to kill the S'SlichTah. You just wanted to punish him by aging

## The End of the Road

him. It was his *own* fault he sabotaged your means of doing so, and made it deadly for himself in the process.”

“So what are you saying, then?”

“I’m saying my recommendation to Lili is that it was an accident, self-inflicted on the part of the Vanir, that ultimately caused his and his companions’ deaths.”

“*Lovely*,” Ronnie muttered. “Only *second*-degree murder. Not that it matters.”

“No. You’re *still* gonna die of old age,” Petrus agreed, then sipped a bit of his own glass. “Going back in the tub tomorrow?”

“My routine. *You* can take a turn if you want. I’m sure Woldron would like to see *your* works in progress,” he said, glancing down towards his feet.

“Don’t care to have them turn out all wrinkled, thank you.”

“The stuff they use keeps it from happening. It’s a mineral bath treatment. Makes your muscle aches and pains go away, while drawing toxins out of the skin,” Ronnie promised him.

“Is it pulling that powder out of your skin?”

Ronnie held out his arm and showed him freshly Healed areas of dark skin – still slightly *pink* dark skin – between neat little rows of dark skin vacuumed clean by the Healer.

“It loosens it up and they use a tiny vacuum to pull it out. Huan is *terrified* of the stuff. Wears gloves when they flush out of the filter to measure the contents, and she won’t even *touch* me without gloves when I’m wet.”

“It’s *that* bad?” Petrus asked while leaning away from him slightly.

“Apparently, only if you get it into your blood stream.”

“*Apparently?* Apparently *poison* is bad for you, too, huh? And you expect *me* to sit in a tub of your leavings?”

“Hey, it feels *great* to soak in hot water! I remember when I got my foot blown off. If only someone had thought of it then. And you can have your *own* tub,” Ronnie countered.

“I’ll stick with Sai’s milk, thank you,” Petrus decided, then considered. “I *could* ask her to–”

“She’s still not happy with me, Petrus. No sense making her pissed at you, too,” he cautioned him. “Besides, Dorcas saves some for me during the week.”



"Tell you what. I'll stop by and we can work on your memoirs together. Donnel told me it would help keep your memories fresh. Besides, I want to make sure you remember all my courageous actions – like that time I rescued you from the *Kee*!"

Ronnie looked at him in sudden confusion, until Petrus burst out laughing. Then he flushed as he finally got the joke.

He took a quick drink to settle his nerves, but considered having Petrus around would probably keep him from losing his mind altogether.

"Yes..." Ronnie said slowly. "And don't forget how you rescued those two valaet kits in the Blight, and foisted them onto *me* that time!"

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Jaiying still couldn't read her Grandfather clearly, but Petrus was transparent to her.

She knew from his mind both the references and what the true stories were. She thought it was a terrific idea that he should hang out with Grandfather and keep him company.

There was still that one other little issue, though.

*'Walter, if what Uncle Petrus suggests is true, then we need to test it'* Jaiying told him.

*'You want to draw life force from a Vanir? What if it cascades like Grandfather described it?'*

*'And who would you try it on? Not on any of the Vanir aboard the ship!'* Cathy pressed.

*'I can think of ONE Vanir that nobody would miss!'* Josie suggested. *'And I'm sure Mama Laisee would like to see you'*

*'I could do that'* Jaiying considered. *'But ... Josie, how did you ... you know, what did you do to draw life force from the Drecks?'*

*'You know, I don't think that I did'* Josie considered. *'Listening to Grandfather describe it, I don't think I drew anything from them at ALL. It seems to me that I just struck out at them. I was really, really mad, and just ... I just wanted to HIT them!'*

*'Then no one knows how-'* Jaiying began, but Josie interrupted her.

*'I bet TRENKA knows how to do it! You could pull it from HER mind'*

### ***Kantor, The Royal Homestead***

Lili had been following Petrus' side of the conversation with Ronnie and became *very* relieved when an alternate cause had been suggested for the Vanir deaths. She'd been hoping for this, but it needed to be tested.

## The End of the Road

Trenka could do it if she was allowed to get close to the S'Slich'Tah – the *only* Vanir anyone knew of who wouldn't be missed if an accident occurred. There was an easier solution, however, and she reached out to another group of operators.

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*'Or we could ask Aunt Lili'* Cathy suggested. *'Not to let Jaiying KILL the Vanir, but just to test. You know, to see if they were special in anyway when ... when life was being drained out of them'*

*'Aunt Lili would rather see Grandfather DEAD!'* Josie pushed forcefully.

*'No, Josie. Aunt Lili protects the Commonwealth with her HEART ... just as Grandfather protects it with his LIFE'* Walter shared somberly.

*'Then we should ask Aunt Lili to allow Jaiying to test the S'Slich'Tah'* Cathy persisted.

*'What if she says no?'* Josie asked.

*'In this case...'* Lili interjected *'I would not be opposed to testing this latest theory. Jaiying, I'm sure your mother misses you. You should take the shuttle down and visit her. Take ... take your Uncle Petrus with you. I'm sure he would enjoy a little time planet-side. Perhaps you could both get a tour of the Administrative Center? Maybe even be allowed to visit the person who tried to kill you so they may try to make amends with you – as is our CUSTOM?'*

*'Aunt Lili, we don't think Josie pulled life force from the Drecks!'* Walter quickly shared. *'From what Grandfather described to Uncle Petrus, she doesn't think she did that. She just ... lashed out at them is all'*

*'Well ... it is not ... entirely ... unheard of'* Lili considered slowly. *'We will take it under advisement, and reevaluate the evidence. In the meantime, all of you please attend'*

For the next several seconds, the acting Elder explained the details of illegally extracting life force from an unwilling subject. At the end of it, the children had some basic questions.

*'So life force is just sucked out, and you control how much you take?'* Walter asked.

*'Yes, Walter. It must be done delicately and carefully, as your Grandfather did while out on the Fringe'* Lili told him.

*'Like what he did with the port girls?'* Josie asked.

*'Yes ... that is a good example. And he could also gift others with his life force, as he did with Lord Gagsa'* she reminded them.

*'And Gray Feather back on Earth'* Cathy added.

*'Aunt Lili, life force ... people have it. And animals. Do plants have it?'* Jaiying asked.

*'I ... I never considered plants, but I suppose we could ask Larl to enquire into it. I would imagine it would be a very small amount'* she considered.

*'And Lady Huan and the Commander were talking about Cletus and Kantite brains doing constant repairs – pulling energy from somewhere'* Jaiying continued.

*'That ... I am not aware of...'* Lili tapered off in thought for a moment. *'I will enquire from the Elder's staff. Perhaps it is a new line of research. This coupling between Commander Woldron and Lady Huan is fairly new, and the research they are doing together is rather unique in our history. Jaiying, you know what you are to do?'*

*'Yes, Aunt Lili'*

*'Very well. I will inform Laisee that her daughter pines for her company and I have suggested that you visit her planet-side. Petrus will accompany you to keep you out of trouble – in another six inches or so. Please keep me advised, Jaiying'*

*'Thank you, Aunt Lili'*

*'Josie, you and your mother will attend me in the gardens in the morning. We have much to discuss'*

*'Yes, Aunt Lili'* Josie agreed.

*'Good night, children'* Lili shared.

*'Good night, Aunt Lili'* four tiny voices replied together.

~~~

Radatel rolled over once he felt the conversation die out beside him. His gifts didn't extend to the narrow bands the children normally used. Rather, he'd gotten periodic updates to his capabilities from Lili when the need arose – such as when the Vanir Ambassador had visited. He simply could not *imagine* being barraged by thoughts all day and night, and was grateful his sleep wasn't overly disrupted because of the intense conversation Lili had just finished.

"How fares the Commonwealth, my love? I trust our dear Rondal has been keeping out of trouble?" he asked quietly, so as not to disturb Spring Blossom, who was sleeping on the other side of her.

Lili spared a glance at Spring Blossom, but they'd completely worn her out a few hours earlier. She smiled at the memory of their play before rolling closer to her husband.

## The End of the Road

"The children believe it is the *Vanir*'s fault for their own deaths. Rondal was the instigator of it, certainly, but the mineral he was embedded with may have acted as a shield when he tried to sample life force from the *Vanir*."

She felt the tiny shudder beside her; knowing her husband feared that *one* danger, probably most of all.

"Rest assured, my love. If it came down to it, I would see that you died of *exhaustion*," she teased him quietly. "I'm sure all of the Wives working together could accomplish that in a mere ... day or two?" she suggested, and felt him relax, then heard him release a small chuckle.

"So my little brother will live *after* all," he murmured while enjoying the feel of her naked breast pressing against his arm.

"I'm sending an agent to the Vanaheim surface to test the theory. If the theory is proven, then we may accept the *Vanir* deaths were accidental, and Rondal was merely acting under the 'spirit' of the law when the accident occurred."

"The 'spirit' of the law? Such a fine point that a man's life rests upon," he muttered.

"A point we do not wish to subject the safety of the Commonwealth to, my Emperor. We will allow it as we have in the past – as Lady *Ai* allowed it in the past."

"And if it should be proven *wrong*?"

"Then ... Lady Trenka is on site. And the Commonwealth will remain intact," she said quietly.

From outside their patio window, they could hear a low growl that set her nerves on edge, slowly lowering in volume as its maker wandered away. Lili let out the breath she hadn't known she'd been holding and snuggled closer to her husband; burying her head under his arm and pressing herself to him tightly, letting his closeness keep the darkness away.

He felt her terror, then considered the secret he'd discovered after Rondal had given him the gift of mindspeak. Targa Slayer was very fond of his little brother, and doted on the children as if they were his own kits.

He was also tolerant of *most* of the household, but had taken a *hard* stand with Lili and let it be known that Rondal was *Family*, and *not to be harmed* under threat of a very *severe penalty*.

She'd kept so many secrets from him over the years, and he'd relished this *one* he'd kept from her. Perhaps if she promised to keep it to herself?

“Ahh ... Lili, my love... There is something I should explain about the valaets,” he began very quietly.

***April 8, Morning on the Kraken, Taking a Dip***

Petrus had been true to his word, and wheeled himself in during Ronnie’s morning session, but spent *most* of the time talking with Lady Huan and Doctor Milsie while they were trying to perform a serious and professional treatment on their client. Despite his constant distraction, they successfully completed Ronnie’s session before leaving Petrus and Ronnie to chat while they analyzed the morning’s take of suppressant.

Petrus still rolled over and watched for a while, noting that Lady Huan was working carefully with gloves on, before wheeling back towards Ronnie, who was just getting dressed.

“What now, lad?”

“To the *gym!* Time to stretch these old bones of mine and see if I can still keep my balance.”

“They got you walking a rope or something?”

“Sparring! The good doctor slipped me some more pills when he arrived, then suggested I keep active as long as I can. We can talk while I exercise.”

“Who? *ME?*”

“No. Just by myself.”

Ronnie finished dressing, and the two of them headed to the improvised gym.

***In Trenka’s Compartment***

Lady Trenka had been following Commander Zickgraf’s thoughts this morning in hopes of learning more about Lord Caldar’s actions.

She’d gotten lucky when she caught his intention to visit with Lord Calder during his treatment, but waited impatiently while he chatted with the female engineer and the visiting Senior; seemingly focused on which individual female he was in closest proximity to at any given moment. He’d finally gotten around to talking with Lord Caldar, only to find he was headed to the gym.

She thought about it for a long while before finally making up her mind and dressing for a work out. She’d never faced the First Lord before, having only known him from the few times they’d spoken from afar. This was as good a time as any to take his measure, and it might come in handy later.

### *The Security Center*

The security lead called several of the off-duty roster to the security center – the compartment they'd taken over for one, anyway. Lord Caldor could be seen on one of the monitors, and no one wanted to miss a chance to learn from a master.

### *In the Gym*

Ronnie had finished his warm-ups and begun shadow-sparring with a pretend opponent. Meanwhile, Petrus peppered him with questions about the past. Despite his initial awkwardness with it, the staff he was using now spun easily in his hands; seeming to move like a living thing as he struck, thrust, and smashed with it – all the while answering Petrus' questions and correcting his errors ... *mostly*. He seemed to have difficulty with some of the relatively newer information, but Petrus could only confirm those items that they'd both experienced. The information starting several years earlier still seemed to be intact, though.

"Lord Caldor, you seem to be winning *much* too easily," Trenka's voice called out from the doorway. "Perhaps you could use a *fresh* opponent?"

Ronnie stopped and whipped his staff back to guard before turning to face her. He looked her over, then glanced at Petrus, who gave him a shrug. He considered it, then considered how much of his adrenalin flush he'd allocated for a relatively pain-free exercise so far – on *top* of the pills. It might hurt more later, but turning back to Trenka, he nodded once and stepped to the edge of the mat.

She came in and selected a matching staff from the wall, before turning and joining him on the mat. He waited while she performed a series of stretches and passes with her staff; then when she was ready, stepped forward with his staff tilted out for her to tap.

As soon as the top of her staff touched his, the bottom of it was rising at an angle to disarm him, which he easily evaded while raising his own staff underneath hers and spinning it neatly out of her hands.

"Very *good*, Lord Caldor! You seem to be in much better shape than the Doctor said you were," she said while forcing a smile.

"He told me I'd be loosing my mind, but I can still walk and talk at the same time."

He watched as she bent to pick up her staff before coming back to guard, then waited for her next attack, which didn't come immediately. He observed her carefully for a few minutes while she tested his defenses, until finally determining that she'd had adequate training – if very little real experience with a staff. That was proven on her next attack, which was launched with a flurry of thrusts and strikes that he easily deflected.

She reminded him of Sai ... which reminded him of *another* past event.

“You know, Petrus. I don’t think Sai has ever forgiven me for stealing my BFG right out from under her nose. I think that’s also when she heard you faking a Drecks transport pilot, wasn’t it?” he asked loudly over the sound of clashing staves.

Her next attack was met by him standing his ground just inside her strike range and deflecting a vicious swipe of her staff by jamming his vertically into the mat and bracing it with his foot. The impact jarred his hands, but he held on tightly, while the shock to her hands and arms shook her right up to her shoulders. While she was recovering from that, he flipped his staff up and disarmed her again.

“Then – then you set off those anti-matter rounds to fake that cruiser’s *explosion!*” Petrus laughed, and not from the show in front of him. “And *then* you spent all that time out there convincing the Drecks that their gun was no *good!*”

He’d heard about most of Ronnie’s activities, but didn’t get to share in them all. When Sai had joined the crew, it could have turned deadly for him if he was still aboard.

“How did you convince Sai to sign on with you, anyway?”

“Ah, Sai. Lovely girl,” Ronnie said while taking a few tentative swipes at Trenka. “You know... I was thinking of marrying her off to *Gagsa*, but figured it would be too *dangerous*.”

He nimbly stepped aside as Trenka’s lunge swept past him, but instead of tripping her, he stood still as she jumped back to recover; seeing the flush rise on her neck as she stared at him in surprise.

“Dangerous? You were worried about *Sai?*” Petrus asked.

Ronnie made a feint, luring her in, then blocked her attack – finishing it with a tap on her butt for her trouble, and causing her to spin away angrily.

“*Sai?* Not at all,” he said as he began defending against a suddenly very aggressive Trenka. “I was worried she wouldn’t leave enough of *Gagsa*’s followers *alive* long enough to help him take over the *Hegemony!*”

Trenka then made a common mistake and let her emotions override her combat sense.

He let her flail away at him for another thirty seconds before slowly pressing her back – finally putting her completely on the defensive.

In short order, he got her bending over backwards while defending from his high attacks, until suddenly knocking her feet out from under her with a delicate low reverse sweep that ended with her flat on her back. Then he

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stepped up and gently placed the tip of his staff in the middle of her abdomen; her deep panting making it rise and fall rhythmically, while he otherwise ignored her and turned back to Petrus.

“As it turns out, that bit of life force I gave Gagsa was enough to put him back in the game – along with the new arm, the new eye, and a handful of Drecks Healers.”

A loud, angry squeal came from the floor near his feet, and he looked down at the flushed face of Lady Trenka, who was still pinned in place.

“Lady *Trenka*,” he said in surprise. “I forgot you were *down* there. You know, my dear, I don’t think the staff is your weapon of choice. Perhaps you’d like to pick another?” he asked, before pulling his staff away and reaching down to help her up.

She was seething inside, but managed a tight-lipped smile when she took his hand and let him help her up.

“A *sword*, Lord Caldar. I’m best with a *sword*!”

“Ah! Please forgive me, then,” he asked her, followed by a dip of his head. “I forget that not everyone trains across the board like we do,” he added, then tilted his head towards Petrus. “Unfortunately, you never know what you have to work with.”

That triggered a snort from Petrus, which drew both their attention.

“Ha! Remember that time in the Blight when you disemboweled that guy with a *ladle*? Half those animals gave up the fight and started *puking*!” Petrus quipped; laughing heartily at the memory of it.

“*Please*, Petrus! There’s a *lady* present,” Ronnie said, then made a show of checking the ships timer on the wall.

“Perhaps we can spar again another day, Lady Trenka. I’m afraid Petrus and I have another appointment. He’s getting his legs stretched in a few minutes.”

He bent down and picked up her staff, then wandered over and placed it back on the wall with his, but by the time he turned around, Trenka was already gone.

### *The Security Center*

“That’s what he’s like when he’s *sick*?” Casmir asked in dismay.

“Hey, he took *you* down when he was *confused*,” Lael said while shaking his head slowly.

“Gentlemen, don’t forget that Lady Song is merely a Healer,” the security lead said quietly.



He'd watched and absorbed as much as he could from the lessons Lord Caldor had passed along to his opponent – at least he *hoped* it was intended that way. That's what most Master instructors do at every opportunity, but it seemed a little “open-ended” during his limited session with the Senior. He was also hoping he'd get a chance to watch when Lady Song sparred against the First Lord with swords.

He kept that to himself, however – along with rumors that Lady Song had a hidden agenda to her mission in Vanir space ... one that might place them at odds should it come to a head.

### ***In the Gym***

“Tell me, ‘oh Great Leader,’ *why* did you go out of your way just to piss her off?” Petrus asked, and Ronnie chuckled as he turned back to him.

“Just seeing what she's made of. I might have a use for her later. You never know...” he said offhandedly, then shrugged before starting towards the door.

Petrus followed him out as they headed back to the quarters he shared with Sai for his treatment. When Ronnie took over pushing him in his chair, Petrus started chomping away at his next batch of calcium tablets along the way.

### ***In Trenka's Compartment***

Trenka was pacing furiously in her quarters.

Caldor had *baited* her! She was *sure* of it! All that talk of *stealing* the gun and *faking* an explosion – all to prevent the Elder from getting the Drecks *mystery weapon*? That was just a *taunt*! That, and the admission that he'd Healed a Drecks *Warlord*! *Healed him*! As if he was a *real* Healer!

And then turned him loose to cause *more* havoc, and add an *additional* enemy to the Commonwealth? And made Healers out of Drecks *women*? That *wasn't* ... it *couldn't* be possible!

*Sai* would know. She was there for part of it. And if she didn't tell her the *truth*, she'd rip it out of her mind *forcefully* – right after she took a *shower*!

### ***In Laisee's Compartment***

“Trenka is *really* upset,” Rose said in a whisper.

They were alone in Jaiying's bedroom, but all the secrecy going on around them was making both her and Jaiying very conscious of their surroundings. They were starting to worry about using mindspeak around the Elder's First Sword, even though she'd not seemed able to detect them yet.

## The End of the Road

“Trenka seems to be living in the past,” Jaiying considered. “She is more concerned that Lady Ai was removed from office and blames Grandfather for her breakdown. I think she means to kill him for it.”

“Learning about things Grandfather has done has not made her very happy,” Rose agreed. “But he *had* to do all those things. Otherwise, we would be fighting the Hegemony instead of making peace with the Vanir.”

“Then she’ll just have to accept it. Maybe Aunt Lili could explain it to her so she understands better.”

“Or she could order Trenka back to Kantor,” Rose suggested. Closing her eyes for a second, she caught a silent yelp from Petrus. “Uncle Petrus is getting his treatment. Do you want to go help?”

Jaiying focused for a moment and caught another thought – from Trenka this time.

“We should probably avert Trenka from making trouble. She’s on the way to Grandmother’s compartment to confront her about Uncle Gagsa.”

“Warn her,” Rose said.

*‘Grandmother, Lady Trenka is coming to ask you about what you and Grandfather did to Lord Gagsa’* she sent very softly. *‘Do you want us to divert her?’*

*‘No, thank you, girls. Trenka is welcome to talk with me. As the Elder’s First Sword, she should be aware of much that goes on in support of the Commonwealth – with the exception of the Senior Staff, of course. You remain the Emperor’s agency, via the First Lord’*

‘Yes, Grandmother. Thank you’ Jaiying sent, then turned to Rose. “Well ... I guess we could go eat if you’re hungry?”

“Sure. And then we can see if we can lose our *guards* again!” Rose suggested eagerly, and they both left the compartment and headed to the commons – followed by *three* guardsmen this time.

### ***In Petrus’ Compartment***

Sai was guiding Edna and Gaia while they were working on Petrus. Déjà was merely observing, all the while Petrus and Ronnie were keeping up a low chatter about their past exploits together. In this instance, Petrus was telling the stories, while Ronnie was giving color commentary – with the occasional objection as to the *accuracy* of the content.

As a matter of course, none of the really secret Imperial missions were discussed, but Petrus was giving more than lip service to his promise of keeping no more secrets from Sai, as several humorous, sad, or embarrassing events were described that elicited the occasional gasp,

groan, or laugh from his audience. They were still at it when Trenka silently called to Sai for entry.

“Petrus ... Ronnie – Lady Trenka has come to visit. I expect your *best* behavior,” she informed them.

“Yes, my Healer,” both men chorused, before Sai went out to let her in.

She brought Trenka into the sleeping chamber where the other Ladies were treating Petrus, and offered her a chair, but Trenka chose to stand, instead. Ronnie could see her expression sour as she took in the Drecks Healers attending to Petrus.

Then he watched curiously when she turned to confront Sai.

“Lady Sai, I would like to learn more about the events that took place on the planet called Eke, which was where Lord Gagsa of Pack Gagsa was contacted, and where transactions between Hegemony and Commonwealth officials were conducted in secret,” she stated boldly.

Ronnie was about to speak up, but Sai beat him to it.

“Lady Trenka, you seem to be laboring under a false assumption. There were no meetings – transactional or otherwise – between representatives of either sphere of influence. Rather, acting as a free agent, Lord Caldar took it upon himself to offer apologies for a *personal* slight against Lord Gagsa, who had then been censured by his *own* government and cast into exile because of it. At that time, neither Lord Caldar nor Lord Gagsa had any official standing within the Commonwealth or the Hegemony.”

“Lord Caldar is First Lord of the *Commonwealth*! He is–”

“I was *then*, and I currently still *am* ... detached from the Royal court,” Ronnie interrupted her; making sure her attention was on him, before continuing. “There is an ‘acting’ First Lord taking my place ... and doing rather well for an anarchist, or so I’m told. As for *myself* – in the past, I made a grievous injury to Lord Gagsa that caused him great political embarrassment in the process. When I chanced upon him on Eke, I took it upon myself to offer my apologies to him, then stayed for a while to catch up on old times. It’s always helpful to *understand* your enemies, Lady Trenka, and what better way to learn about them, than by *talking* to them?”

“So you *admit* that you made deals with Gagsa!”

“Yes. I traded him several containers of frozen meat animals from Earth in exchange for wives for two of my crewmen, and a companion for Déjà.”

Trenka looked at him strangely for several moments before shaking her head slightly.

“What about his arm ... and ... and his *eye*?”

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“What about them? I’d cut off his arm and blinded one of his eyes. It was only right that I get them *fixed* while I was there. It didn’t *cost* me anything.”

“But ... but you also gave him *life*!”

“Yes, I did. I gave him ten years of *my* life,” he said, and pointed to the gray streaks in his hairline. “Not *nearly* enough to compensate for all the trouble I’d caused him.”

Trenka pursed her lips tightly, and was on the verge of becoming livid.

“Gagsa is one of the *enemy*!”

“Was... Was one of the enemy,” he corrected her calmly. “We currently labor under the illusion of a peaceful armistice, but in any case, I found it useful to make amends with Lord Gagsa. Lady Trenka, you were attached to the Elder’s office at the time all this was taking place. I kept the Elder informed as to my actions. Was she *less* than forthcoming with her staff?”

Trenka was becoming almost apoplectic, and Sai felt the anger radiating off her, as did the other Healers in the room. She took her by the arm, escorted her to the outer chamber, then closed the door while the Ladies and Petrus turned accusing eyes on Ronnie.

“What? What did I say wrong *this* time?” he asked plaintively.

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Trenka paced the outer compartment, furious at how easily she’d been driven to distraction. Sai was confused by her anger, but Trenka’s block was so tightly held that she could read nothing from her except her emotions. She could have exerted herself, but that would have been rude at this social level. Instead, she tried a more direct approach.

“What is your game, Trenka? What are you searching for?”

“The *truth*! What is *Caldar*’s game? What is *his* part in all this ... this *madness*? How did he turn the Drecks against *themselves*? Why is he going around attacking Vanir bases and *laboratories*? How do we know he’s not being controlled by our enemies and setting us up for *ruin*!”

“Trenka ... please come and sit with me,” Sai offered quietly while gesturing towards a pair of chairs at the table.

She got out a couple of glasses and a bottle of ambrosia, poured two measures into each, and offered one to Trenka – who looked at it warily.

Sai shook her head slowly, then sipped a quarter from each glass, before keeping one and sitting down in one of the chairs.

Trenka relented and sat in the other, before accepting the proffered glass and taking a welcome sip.

"You have several questions, Trenka, but I think you have a certain lack of trust with those of us you cannot read. You're welcome to ask me, and I will try to help you understand, or are you simply dismayed that Ronnie is blocked from you?"

"He – he can't be *read*! How can we *trust* anyone who won't share the *truth* with us! And that powder he's covered with is preventing me from finding out the *truth*!"

"The powder the Vanir injected *inside* of him is killing him, Trenka. And if Ronnie dies, all that he's accomplished will be for nothing. Or it may *lead* to nothing if he isn't around to offer a balance between the Vanir, the Drecks, and us. You don't need to read him to understand what he's accomplished."

"He destroyed the *Elder*!"

"Lady Kita was very old, Trenka. She should have stepped down *years*..."

"*NO!* He – he did something to Elder *Ai*! I *visited* her, Sai! She... She's just a *shell* of herself!"

Sai contemplated the truth, then what she could, but should *not* tell her, and settled for the lesser of several horrible truths.

"Elder Ai was ... overwhelmed with the situation she found herself in. You were there from the beginning, Trenka. You saw how difficult the transition was for her, and yet she had Kita to help her through the start of it."

Trenka looked away while aimlessly waving one hand in the air.

"But Caldar ... every time he contacted her, he – he *abused* her – *terribly*! She was so *sweet*, Sai! She trusted *everyone*, until ... until..."

"It wasn't all Ronnie's doing. There was much that was out of anyone's control. Like the curse Ai ordered for him. Like the Drecks. The Vanir set the Drecks *against* us – you *do* understand that, correct?" she asked, and got a slow nod back from her. "Ronnie did what he could to figure out how to cause the Hegemony to implode, and found Gagsa just sitting there – a dull tool ready to be sharpened. He did what he had to do, and now the Hegemony is no longer a threat ... or not nearly as much as before."

"But... what about the *Vanir*?"

"He postulated the existence of the Vanir on a *hunch*," she muttered; supposing it was really possible.

"A chance detection of one of their tracer implants in one of our crew led us to discover the Vanir – and a lost colony from Earth, or rather, one that the Vanir *stole* from Earth, thousands of years ago."

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“Yes! And then he goes and *investigates* – all on his *own*! What fool does that without *support*?”

“And what fool would investigate an unknown interstellar species by using a *fleet* of warships to make contact with them?” Sai countered.

“The Vanir have been watching us for untold *millennia*,” she continued. “They have seen us at our *worst*. They were waiting for *our* next cycle of destruction to begin, but began to worry when we’d stabilized and started growing and *expanding* our boundaries. *That’s* why they mentored the Drecks to put a limit to our ambitions.”

“But the Vanir are *pacifists*! *They* don’t aggressively attack their enemies!”

“No, they use *proxies* to do their work for them – like Ronnie is using Gagsa. Trenka ... the Vanir *do* have a violent side to them, but mostly turn it on their *own* population – something Ronnie has taken a firm stance against. We’re hopeful that reason will prevail with the sitting Prime and she finds another solution for her societal problems.”

“Or Caldar will *force* them into compliance, I suppose,” Trenka muttered angrily.

Sai observed her discontent and tried to think of a peaceful example of Caldar’s actions.

“Ronnie fostered the daughter of the sitting Prime, and she holds considerable sway with the Prime. Besides, he saved the Prime and her warren from censure and sanction by revealing the truth behind many disturbing actions against *all* Vanir by one of their *own* warren leaders.” She paused for a moment, then added, “We currently believe a suitable treaty arrangement is possible, and continue to work towards that goal.”

“And what of Caldar himself? He broke the Elder’s laws by taking *life*! He should be *sanctioned* for the deaths of those Vanir in that laboratory!”

Sai was concurrent with the latest thinking about that, and countered Trenka’s conclusion.

“We don’t think it really happened that way.”

“I saw the *video*! So did *you*! Caldar took *life* from those Vanir, and *killed them*!”

“Caldar started to take a *metered* portion of life, but we now believe the powder he was infused with caused a problem. We think it created a cascading collapse of life force between the Vanir director and those assistants trapped in the room with him. Caldar did not receive *any* life force from any of the Vanir involved, and was left *weakened* by the attempt.”

“Can you prove this?”

“You have only to look at him to see the results. Besides, my understanding is that it is still being investigated. The Elder is content to wait and see the results,” she alluded vaguely.

“The Elder pro *tem*, you mean! Very convenient for *Caldar*, wouldn’t you say?”

“Not too convenient, Trenka. Lili has suffered much at the hands of the Elder’s office. The death of her mother. The death of her only child. She well knows the penalty for abusing the limits of authority, and yet upholds them even now. If she determines Ronnie must die, then she will order it so. It just may be too late, if that powder succeeds in killing him first.”

“Her *child*? When did she ... it was *Kita*?” Trenka asked, suddenly making sense of obscure impressions she’d picked up from the Elder’s surviving staff, then saw Sai’s nodding head in confirmation.

“We know about the Visions ... *now*, Trenka. Elder Kita was alone with them for many years; burdened with thoughts of madness they brought her. Even after all her years of service, we now think her lack of training caused her to make some rather capricious decisions. The Visions must have told her it was necessary, or so we believe. One could not *possibly* be so cruel for any other reason. Ai was guided in their use, but they became too much for her – so many things pulling in all directions at once. As for *Ronnie* ... once the Visions went away, he just kept on making it up as he went along – which was *usual* for him – while Ai suffered a breakdown.”

“I was there when... Wait! *Caldar* had access to the Visions as *well*?”

“He is a Senior, and a very *powerful* one. Or he *was*, before that *powder* infected him.”

“But – but he’s...”

“The first male Senior since Aquintus Tiberious ... yes. Lady Ai brought that about as you’ll recall. You were *there*, Trenka, for Kita’s remembrance?”

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While Sai was busy with Trenka, Edna and Gaia continued the work on Petrus’ legs, and were actually making some real progress. He now had solid heels to go with his ankles, but his feet were beginning to become very painful, and Déjà’s kisses seemed to be ineffective. Déjà pulled away and sent a request to the bridge for Kiki to join them, so the Drecks Healers stopped to wait for her. In the meantime, they started a gentle massage of Petrus’ legs.

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Déjà watched for a while at first, but then sat next to Ronnie and leaned against him; letting out a troubled sigh in the process. He looked down at her, and hugged her closer; letting her snuggle against him.

“So... What’s on your mind, girl?” he quietly asked her, but felt her stiffen, before starting to quiver next to him. “Let me guess... You’re growing up, and you don’t know what that means for you?”

She still didn’t speak, but nodded her head against his chest.

He felt around his person and pulled out his small pocket knife. Pulling his arm from around her shoulders, he pushed up his sleeve, located a relatively clear area of vacuumed skin, then nicked himself neatly. It slowly started oozing blood, and he held it out in front of her.

“Healer, I seem to have injured myself. Please Heal me,” he asked softly.

All eyes turned to them as Déjà looked up at him, then down at his arm. She reached out tentatively, and a warm glow started to flow from her wrist, down to her fingertips. Letting her palm rest over the cut, she closed her eyes, and the glow intensified for several seconds before dying out all together. When she took away her hand, the cut was barely noticeable as a faint line in his skin.

Petrus started to laugh while trying to hide his grimace.

“You’ve the *devil* in you, lad! Déjà – you’re going to be a *Healer*, and the Gods *grace* on you for that!” he said, but settled back, and closed his eyes, while silently dealing with the sharp pains in his feet.

At that pronouncement, both Edna and Gaia came over and hugged Déjà between them; praising her for the Healing, and congratulating her on her new status in the Commonwealth. Déjà felt a warmth of affection from them that overrode her previously dour mood as they drew her away to talk animatedly in the corner.

~~~

When Sai had felt Déjà’s dejection from the other room, she’d shushed Trenka to pay attention to what her girl was going through, and Trenka joined with her. After Ronnie was Healed, Sai turned to Trenka with a smug look on her face.

“Did you feel *that*, Trenka? Déjà is *Kee* ... at least she *was*. *Ronnie* changed that!”

“He ... how *could* he? I’d heard about Lili’s Gift, but ... what did he *do* to her?”

“It’s *inside* him ... from when Ai cursed him at the remembrance. Ever since then, if he shares Lili’s Gift – and *himself* – the girl in question becomes a *Healer*. And if she’s already a Healer, she becomes a *Senior*.”



“And what if ... what if she’s already a Senior?”

*‘Then she becomes more like me!’ Sai sent, easily pushing through Trenka’s block with more clarity and precision than Trenka had ever imagined possible. ‘You’ve spoken to Lili before? Lady Molarà? It took me DECADES to teach Déjà the very BASICS of Healing. What he did to Déjà, he did in just MINUTES!’*

Trenka pushed away from the table and stood up, slowly backing away while looking down at Sai in shock. She’d only met Lord Caldar briefly over the years, and the few times he’d spoken to her remotely, she’d assumed it was with the help of others.

“The new Healer Cluster on Farman. That wasn’t just a – a *fluke*? That was Caldar just ... just playing with port girls and making them *Healers*?”

Now Sai was incredulous.

“Trenka, didn’t you listen to *anything* during the Elder’s staff meetings? Didn’t she share anything with *any* of you? *Ronnie* did that! And he didn’t even *know* he was doing it! Ai had me tracking them down, and I finally found them from the huge *credit* deposits into their accounts. He *Gifted* them, then paid them handsomely for the few months of life force he took from each *one* of them. The enhancement of their Healing ability was just a *bonus*. Edna and Gaia are in there helping Petrus grow back his *legs*, and they’re *Drecks*! How do you think they became so skilled in less than a *year*?”

“But then he’s ... he can ... and he’s *dying*...” Trenka was in disbelief; her confusion distracting her enough to turn away from Sai when she spoke.

“Yes! For *all* the girls born on Cletus, only a *handful* become skillful enough to serve the Commonwealth – and the *majority* of those are sent to Kantite nobles just to *keep them in line*!” Sai complained bitterly. “The previous Emperor had few wives, but several Healer companions. Emperor Radatel has five ... *four* wives now, and *each* of them is a Healer or a Senior. Our Kantite leaders keep the *peace*, and *we* keep the Kantite leaders *peaceful*! Else we wouldn’t have missed the Vanir timetable for the *collapse* of our civilization some *five-thousand years ago*, *Standard*!”

Trenka inwardly cringed at that. The “Standard” Kantite dating reference had always grated on her Cletus chronological sensibilities. Still, the point Sai had just made struck home. Her quick briefing on the Vanir and their motivations against humans referenced a five-thousand year cycle of human collapse and rebirth, based, once again, on the Kantite Standard year.

And now Caldar represented a *unique* opportunity to advance Cletus society if the secret of his technique could be learned and applied

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universally to their women. Once discovered, the women of Cletus could *truly* mediate male passions throughout *all* the clusters and bring calm and civility to the Commonwealth; thus preventing problems cropping up like that business on Wilder from several years ago – except that Caldar was *dying*. Her thoughts were interrupted by the arrival of Kiki.

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Petrus was still aching terribly. For the most part, he'd also stopped vocalizing, as the pain was causing his voice to quaver when he spoke. He was never more relieved than to see Kiki suddenly enter the room and rush to his side. She smiled at him widely, before covering his mouth with hers, and in just moments she had her tongue down his throat, and his pain dissipated in relief. When they separated, he let out a deep sigh, and heard Ronnie chuckling at him from across the room.

"Pills! *Told* you to stock up on them! I'd have given you some of mine, but I left them in my compartment."

So saying, he glanced up at the ships timer, and saw that he had a couple more hours until his next dose. Then he noticed Trenka enter with Sai, but turned his attention back to Petrus.

"Talk to Woldron or Lady Huan – they should be able to hook you up with the *good* stuff."

"Lad, I have *all* the pain relieving I need right here," Petrus said, while gesturing to Sai with one arm and hugging Kiki with the other.

"As long as they aren't distracted," Ronnie muttered, as he glanced at Trenka and she caught him at it.

"Lord Caldar, Lady Sai has explained several things to me, and–"

"To your satisfaction?" he interrupted.

"To my ... *understanding*," she continued gracefully while trying to keep a lid on her temper. "You seem to be successfully dealing with many issues. I would like to speak with you about the nature of your operations. As was suggested, Lady Ai was not always clear in her communications with her staff. After I had left my position with her, I was not privy to many of the events that have taken place since. Hence, I lack a basis upon which to continue my investigation."

"You want me to provide you with enough information so that I may be *properly* sanctioned by the office of the Elder, you mean," he stated dryly, getting a silent glare back from her, but not taking long with his answer. "Very well. We can arrange some time for us to get together and you can ask me any questions you like. I may or may not answer all of your questions completely, and I may not answer any questions at all regarding privileged information related to the Royal family or Imperial operations

currently in progress – or those with records still under Imperial seal. On my honor as an Imperial Warrior, my answers will be *truthful* ... although you may find verification of them somewhat *difficult*,” he said, then reached up and tapped his head with one finger.

She began to get excited, but held it in check.

“I ... very well, Lord Caldar. I will be happy to hear you out,” she finally agreed.

### ***April 9, On the Microcosmus, The Next Morning***

“Hello Donnel ... Doctor Blanaid,” Lon greeted them quietly.

The medical lab they’d entered was easily twenty times the size of the ships doc on the *Kraken*, with medical testing and evaluation hardware scattered uniformly around the space. Over in one corner they could see Commander Woldron and Lady Huan with their heads together over a data pad. Not too close by, Granger was standing with his arms crossed next to a machine of some sort while monitoring its operation.

Just as Donnel Ardan had been suborned to come along, Lon Tannis and Granger Deltec were brought on as engineering staff aboard the *Microcosmus* – mostly as each of them had no other life. For his part, Donnel had been asked by Lady Lili to go along with the *Kraken* on the return trip to Vanir space to “lend a hand” if needed, but he’d never had a reason to interface with a medical department before now. Although not really in their professional area of expertise, this latest project with the medical department was becoming quite intriguing.

“*Ardan!*” Granger called out. “Come look at what we *built!*”

Lon smiled as he dragged Donnel and Milsie over to show them the device he and Granger had constructed.

As they approached, Donnel could see it looked like a standard machine fabricator but didn’t recognize what it was currently producing. Whatever it was, it looked ... *juicy?*

“Okay, it looks like a fabricator, but what’s it making?” he asked.

Milsie took a closer look, then paled slightly.

“*Human tissue!*” Granger gleefully announced, and Milsie looked at him with eyes wide open before adding her own comment.

“*Eww!*”

### ***The Kraken, Some Silent Observers***

Jaiying wasn’t nearly as shocked as Rose – having been paying attention to what Granger was talking about, instead of directly listening

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to Milsie's response to his project like Rose had been doing. She kept a smile off her face when her younger but taller traveling companion returned from the facilities after rinsing out her mouth.

"You know, it's not as if it's a *bad* idea, Rose," she offered quietly. "Just think of it as a really good ships emergency sustenance system – but with better *texture*."

Rose gave her a daggered look, but managed to keep her stomach upset to a minimum this time, before joining with Jaiying to continue eavesdropping on the engineers over on the *Microcosmus*.

### *Microcosmus, Medical Lab*

"It was an idea stolen from the last planet we visited," Woldron was telling them. "Lady Huan had the same reaction."

He was beaming while the machine continued – layer by layer – putting down human tissue on a structured framework. He looked at Donnel and Milsie standing there – staring in fascination while the fabricator continued working on its current test project. Woldron was still beaming when he led them over to a table with drinks and snacks on it before he bid them sit down.

"Unlike a standard fabricator, this one builds tissue – replicates it, if you will – from a supply of standard human cells grown from a subject's own sample. It's a *brilliant* idea! We used technology similar to this millennia ago to store records on. Some of the class Fours and Fives still do. Instead of ink, we use human cells, then give them a nutrient bath to grow in. *Instant tissue!*"

Donnel got the willies, and Milsie wasn't far behind. *Nothing* in their experience included artificially fabricated body parts, and Huan saw it in their eyes.

"Believe me, I had the same reaction. Healers normally work to repair damaged tissue *naturally* – not assemble it in the lab. However, my own observations indicate it would be of benefit for those places that cannot staff Healers on a regular basis. It is a little clumsy and time consuming, but these first trials point out some advantages."

"*Definite* advantages!" Woldron gushed. "When you have a serious burn victim, and no Healer is available, you can replicate skin in the lab and apply it over the wound. If you break a bone into too many pieces, you could replicate a duplicate. You could even repair missing noses or ears. There's no reason to think that replicating hearts, livers, kidneys, or other organs is out of the question!"

Donnel and Milsie leaned closer together and reached for their drinks at the same time.

The specter of human cloning in a very real sense suddenly shot thorough both of them, and they gave an involuntary shudder in response. They paused, then slowly sipped before putting down their glasses.

Donnel cleared his throat a little before asking, "So, um ... how does this apply to Ronnie?"

"You're not ... you're not going to *clone* him, are you?" Milsie wondered aloud.

"Ha! If *only*!" Woldron said, then laughed. "No ... this is a rather more mundane test, and besides, I'm not really sure if we *could* build something that complex from scratch."

"That is something even *Healers* could not do," Lady Huan declared. "And we would not do it under *any* circumstances. The person so created would not be the same."

She saw their blank stares; still shocked at the basic concept of cloning, so she continued.

"There is the theoretical issue of their individual spirituality – what the theologians would discuss as their 'soul' – or however you wish to describe what makes an individual unique. We each have our own ideas about it; Healers, spacers, warriors ... even my good doctor, here," she said, gesturing at Woldron with a smile. "There is enough anecdotal evidence from most societies to suggest a spiritual portion of a person's life continues after physical death, and it is *that* component which would be required to clone a person – we *think*."

Woldron raised a finger, before explaining the purpose of the current exercise.

"With Ronnie, we wanted to run some tests on the powder you extracted from him," he said. "Unfortunately, we need to test it in *human* tissue, and we didn't know of a safe way to do that."

Huan's shaking head drew their attention before she spoke.

"In order to develop a way to neutralize it, we need to put it into a comparable test environment – which could be *fatal* to the volunteer," she explained. "The next best solution is to replicate the environment it works in, then provide external stimulation to see what it does. I can provide the stimulation, but I'm not about to let that substance anywhere *inside* my body – or anywhere *on* it, for that matter."

Woldron reached over and patted her hand.

"That's right, my dear. Clean handling protocols all the way," he murmured.

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Donnel and Milsie let them have a moment, before Milsie lifted her bag and set it on the table.

“So ... who gets *this* then?” she asked and pulled out a sealed flask.

Lady Huan shrank away from it, and Milsie quickly stuffed it back into her bag.

“It’s sealed, Lady Huan. And the outer surface was washed before it entered the bag. I remember what you went through when you first examined it,” Milsie assured her.

“Thank you, Mistress Milsie,” she said with relief. “Lon ... would you ... please...” she asked, with a timid gesture at Milsie’s bag.

“Certainly,” he said, then reached out to Milsie and accepted delivery of the powder container.

“So, what now? Do you want us working here in the lab with you?” Donnel asked, while Milsie clutched his leg under the table.

“No, Sir!” Woldron said. “What I would like is for you and Milsie to go back to the *Kraken* and do a daily baseline on Ronnie – see if the distribution in his tissue changes any, and comment on his pain levels, and mental discrepancies. I also have an enzyme agent I’m working on to counteract whatever they injected into him, so I’ll need you to take a blood sample daily and send it over each day. By the way, good work on that, Doctor Blanaid. Once I can verify its effectiveness, we can shoot him up and see if it slows his deterioration down. Request that Lady Tal assists you as necessary.” He looked at the package in Lon’s hands and nodded to it before going on.

“What we’re going to do is apply that to our tissue sample and see what it does.”

“Your ... um ... sample... It’s going to need blood vessels for it to work, isn’t it?” Milsie asked, somewhat squeamishly, and was answered by Huan.

“We will start with a nutrient bath, while Lon and Granger work to create blood vessels. We’ll need those for end stage testing.”

“End stage... As in...” Donnel couldn’t finish.

“As in Hifacious intends to try and replicate brain tissue so we can observe the behavior of the powder as it attacks the center of radiated power. Once we can do that in the lab, we can work on a way of negating it, and perhaps offering a potential source of energy for it to flow to.”

“But ... wouldn’t you need *actual* brain tissue to ... you know, grow it from?” Milsie asked in confusion.

“We have samples from those tracking devices Lady Tal turned over to us yesterday. Your notes on them were *excellent*,” Woldron told her. “We can try to grow some, then run some tests.”

“But ... but still... To neutralize it, you’d have to ... kill Ronnie,” Donnel said.

“Well, that’s *one* option,” Woldron admitted. “But we won’t know for sure until we can test it. In the meantime, Donnel ... Doctor Blanaid... Thank you for coming.” He didn’t need to gesture to the door.

“We have our orders,” Donnel muttered, then stood up. “By your leave, Sir,” he said passively, then took Milsie’s arm, and headed them to the door, with Milsie giving Huan a short wave on the way out.

After the door shut behind them, Woldron looked around at the others with some confusion on his face.

“Donnel is pretty close with Ronnie,” Lon said. “We *all* are. We spent six years trying to get home after the Zarox incident, and lost most of our crew – including our Senior – but Ronnie never gave up. He got us home, but it haunted him. He doesn’t mind dying himself, but to *lose* someone ... that’s probably why he went back for that missing crewman.”

“I’m worried about Ronnie, Lon,” Granger said. “The boy don’t mind dying in battle, but not ... not like *this*.”

“He was in good enough spirits when I last saw him,” Woldron said. “*Joked* about it, in fact.”

“That’s our Ronnie,” Lon murmured. “Taking care of all of us right to the end.”

### ***On the Kraken, Taking Stock***

Ronnie left the facilities feeling refreshed, then washed before returning to the bedroom. He stopped and looked down at Déjà, who was still sleeping in the bed they’d shared again last night...

She’d visited two days ago, arriving just as Commander Zickgraf was leaving his compartment. She’d had questions about her origins, and come seeking his understanding of the Kee. He hadn’t been rude, but was still somewhat blunt, while answering her questions honestly from his experiences with them. He’d also mentioned how he and Petrus had used them against the Drecks.

That talk led to other things, and eventually got around to her, and what had happened to her because of him. He’d explained it as best he could, and their talk drifted from there to her future – with *his* family, he’d assured her – and how she might eventually find her way in the Commonwealth as a Healer, and perhaps even a potential Senior.

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And she *was* family, he'd reminded her. She was part of his entire adopted household; as were Sally and Samuel, Auda, Torga and Manya, and the boys and their wives, and nearly everyone *else* he'd become attached to at some point or another. Even *Sai* ... which had finally gotten the tiniest of laughs out of her.

A shared bottle of ambrosia had brought out another of her concerns, which was the prospect of being childless for the rest of her days. Even as her adoptive-mother had kept her young, she'd aged out of her childbearing years many decades ago. He'd done his best to downplay that aspect of her life, and pointed out that being a parent wasn't the same as having children. It all depended on if you took responsibility for the caring and nurturing of a child. He'd even commented on the number of unwanted children on his home world as an example.

She'd become somewhat sad at that, then told him of the last memory of her birth mother, who'd abandoned her at some point in the distant past. He could do nothing more than hug her, which ended up with her climbing into his lap and snuggling in his arms. That's where she'd fallen asleep that first night, and before his body began to stiffen, he'd picked her up and laid her on his bed before staggering off to pop another pain pill.

Returning to the room, he'd seen that she'd shed her clothes and snuggled under the covers, while leaving plenty of space for him to lie beside her. Walking around the bed, he'd dropped his outer clothes and slipped awkwardly into bed, wearing just his underwear. It was sometime after the pill had kicked in and he'd fallen asleep, that her gentle manipulations had woken him, and he'd been surprised at his reaction.

She'd mostly lost her palliative kisses, but retained some of her ability to create sexual arousal; which was a welcome surprise to him, even as he'd worried about the possibility of transferring some of his problems to her – a budding Healer. She'd told him *Sai* had told her that he wasn't "infectious" and she would be safe, so he'd relaxed and let it happen; taking a great deal of pleasure at the opportunity afforded him.

He'd still feared causing her any harm, and tried to remain passive when she'd mounted him and rode him gently until she reached some level of her own satisfaction. Then she'd continued her rocking motion until he'd felt his own release escape his body. She'd stayed there, sitting lightly on top of his hips and smiling lazily down at him, before rolling to the side and letting him slide out of her.

He'd heard a quiet giggle when she'd reached down and brought a portion of his release up from her vagina and licked her fingers clean. Then she'd reached down and repeated it, again and again, until she'd been satisfied with the results. Apparently, she still had a taste for semen.



She'd finally snuggled closer, but not before he'd kissed her and thanked her, which brought another round of lazy giggles from her before they'd both snuggled together and fallen asleep...

Looking down at her now, he smiled at how her hair had become so tousled in the bedclothes overnight – or at least after their play. She certainly *seemed* happier ... even burdened with the loss of her youth and her uncertain future. Well, her future would be secure – Lili would make sure of that. As for her *youth*...

He remembered that little discussion with Commander Woldron about how Déjà should be made aware of birth control. He'd dismissed it out of hand, as, according to Sai, she'd not paired up with anyone since her sudden transformation from a full-Kee to a Kee-human changeling. Besides, it didn't seem possible the clock would roll back *that* far for her. Once you'd aged chronologically, some things just *didn't* regenerate. Still, the mechanism of her change was different than anyone else's he'd influenced, but he wasn't really worried about it.

All of the others had received both Lili's Gift, *and* the application of his semen in the traditional orifice. If what she'd said was accurate, she'd sampled him orally at the same time Jaiying had done so, but was somehow linked to Jaiying during her transformation – to a memory-*playback* of the Gift, it would appear.

It didn't seem possible, but then again, he'd never given a woman the Gift while she was orally pleasuring him. On the face of it, it seemed like an incredibly *dangerous* undertaking for him...

He looked down at her again and sighed quietly.

It wouldn't be fair to Déjà, having a child with no father, but that didn't mean there would be no *family* to surround her with their love. No doubt, *Sai* would be overjoyed if her little girl produced a grandchild for her to love. He thought of his own son, Walter, and how the mere knowledge of his existence had provided him with a sense of completeness, and perhaps the anticipation of his continuation to their common species.

He smiled at the memory of their shared pleasure last night, and how warm, comfortable, and pain-free it had left him. All things considered, it wouldn't be a *terrible* way to live out the last few days of this existence.

He slipped off his underwear and slid back into bed with her. Sidling up next to her, he moistened his thumb and worked it down between her legs to tease her opening lightly. She responded automatically, and spread her legs to let him in, so he pressed his thumb in and down – gently pushing her vaginal bottom towards the sleeping pad, and getting a satisfied moan of pleasure from her in return. He could already feel the subdued waves of arousal affecting him...

***In Laisee's Shipboard Compartment***

Back from dinner and finally alone, Livia looked around inside the Ambassador's quarters and suppressed a sigh...

She'd chatted with that nice engineer and his companion during the transit from the *Microcosmus*, only to find that her mistress, Lady Caldarous, was currently on planet and unavailable to accept her service.

Finding no docking officer there to greet them, the engineer and his companion had kindly escorted her to the security office on the *Kraken*, where she'd presented her credentials – only to be asked to wait while Lady Tal was asked to come and interview her personally. It was just a few minutes later when Lady Sai Tal – one of the Elder's agents, she'd remembered – had spoken with her, then simply contacted Lady Lili *directly* – confirming her status as new staff for the duration of the Imperial Ambassador's deployment aboard the *Kraken*.

Sai asked, and Lili had confirmed, that Livia was *not* to go planet-side for the time being, but would remain aboard the *Kraken* until Laisee requested her services elsewhere. As Laisee was not aboard, Lili had suggested Livia be put to use as Jaiying's housekeeper, while assuming other duties as might be expected of her.

The immediate issue resolved, Livia and her small bundle of luggage had been escorted to the Ambassador's quarters – finding two guardsmen standing outside the door. Introductions made, she'd been palm-keyed to the door, then allowed to enter.

The antechamber was rather spacious for being on a combat ship, and she saw interior doors leading off to each side – one of which had had sounds coming from behind it. Knowing Lady Laisee was planet-side, she'd wondered who it might be, but was enlightened when the Ambassador's daughter had come out and greeted her, followed by a somewhat familiar young girl who was a head taller than Jaiying.

Introductions made, Livia had been given the "official" tour by Jaiying and Rose; each of them taking a hand and dragging her along to the commons, ships doc, and other locations of interest on board the ship ... followed along quietly by both of the children's guards.

Jaiying had then asked one of the guardsmen where Livia's quarters were located, and he'd contacted the security center before directing them there. After Livia had been palm-keyed to the door and entered, she'd thought they were very spacious quarters for a mere servant, especially since she would not be sharing the space with anyone. Jaiying had then bluntly told her she'd be welcome to have someone share them with her if she desired, but it wasn't required of her – causing her to blush a tiny bit in front of the guardsmen who were escorting them.

After retrieving her luggage, the children – and their guardsmen – had escorted her back to her new quarters and gotten her settled in. Then they'd decided it was time for dinner, and bravely trooped off to the commons – all the while extolling the virtues of the *Kraken's* improved ship's poop dispenser to their unwitting victim.

After relishing a *non-ship's* poop repast, the girls had left her there in the commons, and gone off on their own ... followed, of course, by a new pair of guardsmen. One of the remaining guardsmen, Casmir by name, had stayed behind and offered to escort Livia back to her quarters, but she'd asked instead to be taken back to the Ambassador's compartment.

As they'd walked along, she'd asked about the ship, and how well the relationship with the Vanir was coming along. She'd also mentioned concern over the First Lord, having heard he'd recently had an accident of some sort. Casmir made light of it, before relating an embarrassing personal experience with Lord Caldor of his own.

Arriving back at the Ambassadorial suite, it'd opened to her palm, and she'd thanked him for his hospitality. In return, he'd offered to demonstrate the ship's information and monitoring systems to her. At the end of another hour, she'd thanked him again, and he'd left...

Alone at last, she silently considered that duty here might be better in some ways than that back at the Royal Homestead.

The quarters were already well kempt, considering that the Ambassador was planet-side and her daughter was the only other occupant. Looking around again, she decided the second part of her mission was out of her hands for now, so she'd simply apply herself as was expected – just like on Kantor.

As she started inspecting the quarters with a professional eye, she idly wondered when Casmir would get off duty.

### ***April 12, Exercising with the First Lord***

Trenka stepped back and was catching her breath, while Ronnie calmly stood there and waited for her...

It'd been four days since he'd agreed to talk with her, and this afternoon was the first time they'd actually gotten together. As long as they were at it, he'd turned it into a training session for her – “sharpening the Elder's First Sword” as he'd thought of it – just never mentioning it to her as such...

They'd been practicing for half an hour, but he'd been very polite and instructive. In fact, she was learning some useful new techniques.

“Any time, Trenka,” he said while still resting his sword on his shoulder.

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They were using Imperial swords – *Royal* weapons, in this case, without power packs or any place to install them. He'd explained that it eliminated most fatal accidents in the gym.

"How ... how can you ... remain so calm?" she asked him between gulps of air.

"You have to learn to pace yourself. When you go out on patrol for days at a time, you want to be ready. And then you want a *first strike* kill, which is something you don't really get to do here in the gym. You can *practice* ... but it's not the same as *doing*. An Imperial warrior facing a group of fighters can take them all down as long as he can touch them with his sword – if he's *quick* enough. If he's slow or clumsy ... *OR SLIPS IN BLOOD...*" he added loudly, while pausing to gesture with his head towards Petrus, "...he gets taken down. The trick is – don't let yourself get tagged."

"Or turn your back on a *SIMULATION!*" Petrus shot back.

He'd turned to look at them, and Ronnie glanced over and stuck his tongue out. Petrus just smiled, then turned to the rack; selecting a staff, before hobbling over to another portion of the mat to begin a slow exercise, with Déjà rolling his wheelchair along nearby ... just in case.

"Or turn your back on a simulation that you didn't program *yourself*," Ronnie agreed, before turning back to face Trenka.

"So how do you practice a 'first strike' kill if you can't do it here in the gym?" she asked him.

"Well, like anything else, you go through the *motions*. It's hard to do against another Imperial warrior using the same weapon. The powered sword is *unstoppable* – unless it hits another activated power sword. Otherwise, it's like a hot knife passing through jelly – it cuts no matter *what* it touches. Fighting in the outer corridors of a ship is difficult because of it. You have to exercise caution *NOT TO BREACH THE HULL*," he said loudly, while missing the glare from Petrus.

"What are the motions, then?"

"Just the basics ... a thrust through the heart, or removal of the head. Those two are the *primary* first kills. Cleaving the body vertically or horizontally also work, but that leaves *two* big pieces to stumble over, instead of just one big one, with a loose head on the deck. They're also bigger motions that can leave you open to attack from the sides."

He waited for her acceptance of the idea, which he got when she said, "Show me."

They spent the next several minutes with him circling a stationary Trenka while she thrust and swiped at an imaginary opponent; he giving her instructions all the while.

“Balance! Balance is the same whether you use a sword or a staff ... or a stick or a rock,” he said, then flat-handed her in the back, which sent her scrambling forward.

She fumbled and rolled, but recovered quickly and whirled to face him.

“I wasn’t *ready!*”

“And you were taken out when you rolled over your *activated sword*,” he said, gesturing to the death grip she had on the hilt of her weapon.

“Power swords are *dangerous* things. If you’re not careful ... if you fail to perform *ROUTINE MAINTENANCE*...” he said loudly, triggering a raspberry from Petrus, “...you can end up slicing off important bits. Your sword folded *in* across your body when you rolled. If you’d clenched the handle of a *powered*-sword, it would have cut you in two. Better to direct the blade *away* from your body – even *drop* it if necessary – rather than tumble with it.”

“But if I lose the blade–”

“Then you scramble to disengage until you can pick it up – *or* make a manly retreat and live to fight another day. Best to keep your balance and be aware of your surroundings. We call it combat awareness.”

“Didn’t seem to protect you from the *Vanir*,” she said pointedly.

“No, but I tend to suffer from *hubris*. Unfortunately, it runs in my family. Come... Time to practice!”

At the end of another half hour, she was thoroughly winded, and he was finally showing signs of fatigue. She noticed that he’d winced once or twice during her last two attacks, but kept his defenses up and finally proclaimed she was much better than when they’d started out. He continued with the next two passes, but was slowing down even more now. She became concerned when he closed his eyes in pain and lurched over after the next pass. She began to approach him, but was halted at sword point ... something he’d done blindly and automatically.

“Lord Caldar, are you all right?” she asked, and he looked up ... somewhat embarrassed, she thought, and lowered his arm.

“Sorry, Trenka. I think that’s it for today.”

She watched as he turned and shuffled over to the wall to rack his sword. He said something to Déjà, and she rushed off and returned with a container of water for him, while he slid down to the floor. He began fumbling with his jumper, and pulled out a packet, before selecting a pill

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from it and swallowing it. Sitting there on the floor, he looked older, with his shoulders sagging and his head hanging low; definitely giving her the impression that he was exhausted. She noted for the first time that he *did* look older – *much* older than she, even considering that she was only a little over twice his age.

Trenka walked over and racked her sword, before turning and taking a closer look this time.

She reached out and extended through him; still finding swatches of blockage from different areas of his skin but seeing nothing horribly wrong with his body that some proper contentment couldn't fix ... except for those concentrations of powder in his brain, and some of his organs.

"Lord Caldar, I believe you could use some rest ... followed by an hour or two of contentment. I ... I have some time this evening I can spare for you, if you wish?"

He looked up at her and smiled through a grimace.

"I thank you for your kind offer, Lady Trenka, but I fear contentment is probably the *least* of my concerns for the time being. I *will* get some rest, though," he said wearily, before closing his eyes and leaning back against the wall.

"Not here, Lord Caldar. In your quarters. Let me escort you to your quarters ... please."

He opened his eyes and looked up at her again, before reluctantly nodding. "Probably right," he mumbled, then struggled to get up with her help.

He paused to admonish Déjà to take care of his First Officer, before letting Trenka lead him to the door. He stopped and looked back, pleased that Petrus was finally back on his feet – after a fashion. The petty delay Sai had put him through while using him as a training dummy for the Drecks Healers was finally over – after another couple of toes, anyway.

He shook his head, then straightened himself before opening the door for Trenka and letting her pass before him.

They slowly strolled arm-in-arm to his compartment while his steps became firmer after the pill kicked in and finally relieved the pounding in his head. She offered her services once again, but he smiled sadly and thanked her.

Then he kissed her on the cheek and thanked her for the exercise, before entering his compartment and shutting the door behind him ... leaving her standing in the corridor by herself.

'*Sai ... are they any closer to a cure?*' she called out silently.

***April 13, Microcosmus, Medical Lab***

"Hifacious, the latest blood draws from Lord Caldor are here," Lady Huan called out to him.

The package from the *Kraken* had arrived on schedule this morning, and she put on protective gloves before transferring the vial's contents to the test machine. After setting up the test, she joined Woldron at his workstation, where he was still researching information related to genetic diseases. He finally pushed away from his monitor, and stretched in his seat, the wane smile shared with her promising very little good news.

"Jia, my love, that lab director was either a pure genius or *incredibly* lucky. He must have studied humans for a *long* time to come up with the hell he unleashed on Ronnie."

She leaned in closer and rested a comforting arm around his shoulders, while he slowly shook his head before continuing.

"It's too bad he fried the director and destroyed that lab. I would have *loved* to have you pick his brains and gotten my hands on everything they'd researched there."

Jia momentarily stiffened at her lover's indiscreet observation. She knew they had very different backgrounds, but sometimes his pronouncements could be jarring to her more holistic leanings.

He meant well – *mostly* – but sometimes she was forced to overlook some of his rawer comments, like now.

"Hifacious, did you find anything useful in your search?"

He reached an arm around her but failed to hug her.

"Only to confirm what Mistress Milsie had originally found. Ronnie's blood work is slowly becoming more stable, but it's like she said ... the enzyme markers are all messed up at the genetic level. I'm hoping the latest tests show *some* sort of improvement."

***April 16, On Vanaheim***

It had taken several days, but Jaiying had finally finagled a planet-side trip to "visit with her lonely mother" as she'd phrased it to her; all with the express permission of both Lili and Sai. Laisee had been skeptical, but bowed to pressure. Since she was missing her little girl anyway, she'd allowed it. She was surprised to learn Petrus was coming along ... or perhaps, *hobbling* along would be more appropriate.

When they arrived, they were greeted by Laisee and her guardsmen ... and Sue, which surprised Petrus, as he'd understood she was much busier now since picking up some special duties associated with the Prime's office. He wondered what they included.

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Walking back to the human's quarters, Laisee and her daughter preceded him while Sue dropped back to walk alongside him. She walked a bit slower, and he slowed to match her, letting Laisee and Jaiying get several steps ahead of them. When the gap opened sufficiently, she spoke to him quietly in Vanir.

"Petrus – Lady Lili requests a favor from us. She tells me you have a need to visit one of our special guests. Someone whom *no one* would miss."

He wasn't exactly shocked, but surprised she was involved. A question came to mind, though.

"Tell me, Sue, is your *Mother* in agreement with this?" Her sudden flinch told him he'd caught her off guard, but she recovered nicely and told him what he needed to know.

"Let us say that she is *less* concerned about the health of an unstable Vanir who has jeopardized the security of our society and violated the sanctity of the office of the Prime. What do you need for your test?"

He considered his answer, while going over in his mind what he, the engineer, and the biologist had theorized...

Petrus, Donnel, and Milsie had gotten together and brainstormed several hours one evening before jointly coming to the conclusion that the deaths of the assistants were proximity-based – the Director's life force cascading into failure, and striking and killing *them*, instead of flowing smoothly into Ronnie. In all the records the Tier One staff of the Elder's office had researched, no other episode similar to this had *ever* been recorded.

There was some concern Slich 42130 had been affected by the same cascading event, even though he was almost outside the facility. When asked about it, Ronnie had theorized it was because all the Vanir were from the same warren, and what one of them experienced, *all* of them would experience. Petrus didn't believe that concept, and later interviewed Slich 42130 about that day.

Petrus concluded afterwards that Slich 43130 was merely the recipient of a psychic *scream* – the equivalent of being frightened by a loud noise while focusing on his escape. Having Slich 42130 go over it in his mind several times seemed to justify that belief.

*Just the same...*

"Petrus? What do you need?" she asked him again.

"Huh? Oh ... sorry. Uhh, a mind-shielded room would be nice, but I think you've eliminated *that* possibility for the time being. We should probably conduct the interview in a secure and *remote* location ... like the



bottom-most holding cell in the Center. Or perhaps somewhere else – as long as no other Vanir were within a hundred meters or so.”

“A hundred *meters*? I thought you *knew* what happened?” she asked; pausing in the corridor.

“We *think* we know what happened, but ... well, you never know,” he said, then shrugged, before they continued along in silence for a while.

“We cannot provide you with a mind-shielded room, but I can suggest an *excellent* location to test your theory,” she finally offered. “The enclave of the S’Slich’Tah is not far away, and peopled exclusively by S’Slich’Tah. If the incident *repeats* ... if it happened merely because they are Vanir, then *none* of them would be missed.”

“That ... that should be all right,” he said uneasily.

*‘That will be fine, Uncle Petrus’* Jaiying’s thoughts came whispering back to them. *‘Sue, I will visit with my Mother for a while, but please let Uncle Petrus know when you are ready. We will go and perform the test when you are ready’*

‘We?’ Sue’s question hung in the silence for several moments.

*‘Uncle Petrus is too nice to do that ... and he’s not a Healer. Aunt Lili told me what must be done, but I am not to explain it to you. It is what destroyed us before, and we do not want to destabilize your society any more than we already have’* she added apologetically.

Sue bristled at that, but almost immediately considered the impact of such knowledge, and concluded it was a door better left *closed* – the more people who *didn’t* know how to do what humans could do, the better.

*‘I will make arrangements’* she agreed, then turned aside as they approached the human’s quarters, but paused to look back at him.

“Petrus ... my Mother wishes to meet you. She finds it fascinating that a human male can actually converse in Vanir, and she would test your vocabulary.”

“Ah! And I forgot to bring *flowers* ... or the Vanir equivalent. Please convey to the Prime that I would be *delighted* to meet with her! I’m sure I can tell her some *amusing* stories about her little girl,” he promised with a laugh, which caused a slight tint change in Sue.

“I will inform Mother,” she said stiffly, before turning and walking down the corridor.

“Nice girl,” Petrus said in Standard. “Kinda miss her.”

The four Imperial guardsmen who’d accompanied them from the *Kraken* glanced his way once, but ignored his comment, while they all

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entered the compartment and were greeted by a luncheon spread wafting promising smells in their direction. Petrus was looking forward to a meal *without* a chalky after-taste for a change.

### *April 19, On the Microcosmus*

Woldron was muttering to himself again while looking from the bio-display to the lines of calculations on the monitor beside it. Lon and Granger understood his frustration, but didn't have a solution for it.

"Hifacious, you must back away and relax for a while," Lady Huan told him gently. "Your brain needs to rest and relax."

"*Damnit*, woman! The First Lord is *dying*, and I can't let that *happen!*" he said just below a shout. He caught himself a moment later, and turned, then bowed his head to her. "Please forgive me, Jia. This is ... I don't want to ... I *can't* lose another one," he stammered, and she reached out and brought his head down to her neck; hugging him awkwardly until his anger dissipated and he sighed in resignation.

"We will figure it out, Hifacious. All the pieces are before us, and it is just a matter of putting the puzzle together properly."

He gave her a hug, before turning back and waving a hand at the bio-display. "But it *can't* work, Jia. There's no *way* that powder could work its way to his brain without clogging his arteries along the way. The crystalline structure is too jagged to pass easily. That's why it was so hard to pry it out of his skin. The stuff you filtered out of his blood is just the same, only much finer."

He looked at the bio-display, which showed a highly-magnified image of the tissue sample they'd grown. He could see the obvious clumping where samples of the injected powder had stalled at the first opportunity and stayed pretty much where they were dropped. If this stuff really *was* injected, then Ronnie should have had a stroke within minutes, instead of it slowly progressing throughout his body to his brain and a few other organs. It was maddening.

"Um, Commander ... Jia is right," Lon said. "You should take a break. We'll send all this data over to the *Kraken*, and have Donnel and Milsie look it over ... see if maybe we've missed something. You know, just in case."

Woldron turned and looked at the weariness on Lon's face; his expression finally forcing him to concede the point.

"That ... that's fine. Good idea." He stood up straight, stretched his tightened body, then let out another sigh ... much deeper now. "Gentlemen, I believe the evening meal is almost over. We should eat before we're left with ships gruel," he said.

Lon and Granger nodded, then packed it in for the time being. They'd be back after supper to stream all the data to Donnel for his insights.

After all, you never knew...

### ***April 20, On the Kraken***

Despite the sleep he'd enjoyed in the company of Déjà, Ronnie awoke feeling crappy while she was still lying asleep beside him. His glance at the ships timer told him he had hours to go before breakfast, and simply considered going back to sleep, but the pounding in his head, and the ache in his limbs informed him otherwise.

Rolling sideways, he slipped his legs over the edge of the bed, but had to force himself up by jamming his right elbow into the pad and locking his hands together to lever himself upright. Once vertical, he paused for a moment, before standing and hobbling to the facilities, where he kept his stash of pills. After downing *two* this time, he looked at himself in the mirror, but wondered who the old man looking back at him was.

The lines on his face had deepened, and it looked like his face had sagged a bit in places. His hair line was receding; not for the first time, obviously, but his hair was back to gray, with streaks of white running through it now. Looking down at his arms, the impact, and penetration points had been Healed, but still showed pinkish instead of his normal reddish skin – not that any of his skin looked particularly healthy at this point. He rotated his hands and clenched his fists, feeling how tight his joints had become and how prominently his knuckles stood out. He noted that a few more spots had shown up on them just since yesterday, joining the wrinkles that seemed to be spreading all over his body.

Brushing his teeth brought another new surprise in the amount of blood he spat out when he rinsed his mouth. He put away his brush with a sigh, then washed his face in cold water; letting its chill tingle what senses he had left before the pills kicked in.

He hobbled over to the toilet and sat down to relieve his bladder; grateful he hadn't yet suffered the indignity of an enlarged prostate, and would likely not live long enough for that to become an issue. He didn't feel a secondary need, but rinsed himself anyway, then got up – noting that his lack of appetite probably had more to do with his new irregularity than the effects of the powder in his system.

Washing his hands once again, he glanced at the mirror one more time and was shocked to suddenly recognize the face in the mirror – the reflection of his dead son, Walter. He turned away, angry at the memory and how it still affected him.

It was yet another reminder of the differences between Earth and the rest of the "Galactics" as Diane had dubbed them.

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Once standing in the doorway, he could see Déjà still sleeping peacefully in the bed she'd shared with him for the last several days. The light from the facilities highlighted the glow on her face. She didn't snore like Maya did, and her breasts were certainly not the comforting pillow-like cushions he preferred, but she'd seemed to make it her job, if not her duty, to share her company and keep him distracted.

He looked down at her and sighed at the sight of the pretty little Kee, who was becoming an even lovelier young woman. Then he flinched when a spasm ran through his body. Grabbing the door frame tightly, he tried to ride it out ... wondering if *today* was the day he'd give Lady Trenka her final lesson. When it finally subsided, it was from the effects of the pills, as they began to work – making the pain manageable again.

Once he was able to walk, he hobbled over to the other side of the bed and sat carefully so he wouldn't disturb Déjà. Once down, he tilted over sideways and got his upper body horizontal; leaving his legs exposed while letting the pills continue to do their work, until finally getting to the point where he was comfortable enough to get the *rest* of him under the covers.

It wasn't long after, when Déjà rolled over and reached down to fondle him. After she slipped beneath the covers and covered him with her mouth, he thought that perhaps Trenka's final lesson could be put off for another couple of days.

### *Lady Trenka's Compartment*

Trenka still lay awake, resting after enjoying the delights of her vivacious evening companion, little Kiki, who seemed to have an *inexhaustible* desire for sexual activity.

The first time they were together, it was under the guidance of Lady Tal – who'd suggested sampling the *raw* delights of a Kee should be on *everyone's* to-do list. It was only after having experienced several hours of lost time, that she'd realized Lady Tal had neglected to mention that little tidbit about the reactive enzyme a female Kee produces to safely mate with – and then *eat* – its chosen partner. Still, it had been *well* worth it.

Sai had later shown her where and how to negate the effects of the enzyme by adjusting receptors within her own body.

Kiki had pouted at that, of course, but then made more overtures, which Trenka accepted – then cautiously *tested* – before enjoying the *next* several hours in a more or less conscious and participating manner.

On this night, Kiki had finally fallen asleep for the moment, and Trenka was remotely poking around the surface of Déjà's strangely adapted mind – not working *fully* in the human band, but somewhere pretty close.

Sai had no explanation for it, as the Kee had never been capable of mindspeak before, and anyone who actually *could* detect thoughts, could not sense them at *all*. As Sai had later explained, the Kee were a genetically-engineered bio-weapon from day one. However their thoughts worked *internally*, they would be sheer *gibberish* to an outsider – if they could be detected at *all*.

Trenka found feelings of warmth and affection towards Ronnie coming from the little Kee-changeling, and knew they were *true* emotions, and not just hormonal attractions. She'd watched and felt from afar how Déjà was concerned Ronnie was deteriorating on a daily basis now, and surprised to feel a flash of anger directed at *her* for making Ronnie exercise with her in the gym. She listed that under both jealousy and protectiveness, considering Déjà appeared to be relating to Ronnie more as a parent, rather than a lover.

She wondered what Ronnie really felt about Déjà ... or *all* of them for that matter, but his mind remained closed to her, and it was frustrating to be thwarted in this manner. Perhaps it was as Sai had suggested – she'd become dependent on her skills as a Senior, and lost those *interpersonal* skills the rest of civilization had to work with. Or, as Ronnie had suggested, it was like losing the Visions and having to rely on your *own* observations to make decisions.

She shifted her focus to Commander Woldron and Lady Huan over on the *Microcosmus*, who were both asleep ... or rather; Lady Huan was asleep, while the Commander was suffering through a nightmare involving the Elder Kita and a dark cloud surrounding her. She pulled away quickly, not needing to have old memories dredged up, before redirecting her attention to Donnel and Milsie. They were still in the lab and running calculations on the powdered substance they'd recovered from Ronnie's body.

Neither of them were happy, and were both *very* tired at the moment. Just seconds later, she detected a shift in their intent, and felt them pack it in for the night – or the morning in this case – and dropped away just as they both headed for the door.

Having made the rounds, yet still feeling very much awake, she looked at the ships timer, then down at her sleeping companion. She smiled widely before reaching down to tickle Kiki's fancy, getting a response in just *seconds*. The Kee opened her eyes and smiled back at her, before expertly launching her tongue into her mouth and partway down her throat. She swooned at the feelings the little Kee was giving her, while considering this was as good a way as any to spend quality time before breakfast. She even decided to let Kiki have her way with her – knowing the little Kee would eventually get hungry and wander off by herself for breakfast when she did ... or maybe dinner ... or perhaps supper.

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### *April 21, Vanaheim, At the S'Slich'Tah Enclave*

Up until two days ago, Senior Observer S'Slich'Tah 24854, formerly in charge of Observer Station 23, had spent the majority of his time alternately plotting to somehow recover his warren leader, or wallowing in despair over the loss of his command and the censure of his warren; the fact that his warren had not been officially *sanctioned* never crossing any of the segments of his mind, simply because it was *beyond* reason for them to even *consider* such an option.

Life had been nearly *intolerable* since he and his crew had been repatriated on Vanaheim; something *else* beyond reason simply because it was a “courtesy” of the rapaciously violent humans who had quite blithely turned them over to the Prime’s authorities, before merrily going on their way. Their return home had been darkened by the loss of their warren leader; by then a more or less *permanent* guest of the Prime, from reports of what few spies they had left near the Administrative Center.

Very little of that network still existed, and none at all within the Center itself, but the very latest gossip of two days ago was that Warren Leader S'Slich'Tah 29531 would be returning soon – *today*, in fact – and at the request of the very humans who’d caused her downfall. On top of that, *two* of the hated creatures would be traveling with the warren leader – presumably to ensure her safe delivery into the equivalent of house arrest; as if being transferred to the enclave would prevent her from leaving again if she so chose.

S'Slich'Tah 24854 would *not* let events overtake him again. There would be a *penalty* meted out for all the trouble the humans had brought down on the S'Slich'Tah, and he’d set about planning it two days ago. Now all the pieces were nearly in place, and it was simply a matter of waiting to see if the rumors were true.

### *The Kraken, Late Morning*

Milsie and Donnel had both been exhausted, and bypassed a shower in favor of simply crashing into bed and shutting down the lights. That was how they spent the next six hours until Donnel woke up at Noon minus two. He lay there now, staring at the ceiling and feeling despondent at his lack of success in helping to find a cure for Ronnie.

Looking over at Milsie in the dim light, he smiled while watching a tiny bit of drool escape her lips to join a small pool of it in a fold of her pillowcase. He reflected on how pretty her hair was, all mussed up, then remembered how it bounced freely when they played – although not lately, since they’d had very little free time, other than for sleeping. Still, he enjoyed her company, *and* her mind, even if she *was* a biologist and he was an engineer. He was glad he’d found her – a *non-girly* girl to share his life with – except he’d not asked her yet. He’d *wanted* to ask her, but it

never seemed like the right time – certainly not with the imminent death of the First Lord hanging over their heads.

They'd both been shocked while taking blood work and scans of Ronnie, only to watch his rapid deterioration on a daily basis.

He looked back up at the ceiling and closed his eyes, while going over the results of Ronnie's latest tests in his mind. Woldron had told them the powder shouldn't have gotten past the injection site, because as fine as it was, it was still rough-edged. Unfortunately, it had somehow worked its way through Ronnie's body and deposited itself around his brain, which was causing more problems than the Vanir had probably ever *dreamt* of.

Teeny, tiny particles – not exactly blood-borne, but just along for the ride. The tests on the lab grown tissue showed them beginning distribution into the nutrient stream, before they just *stopped*. The horribly invasive test they'd conducted on a live lab animal had the same results, and the animal died quickly. *Human* testing was out of the question.

Donnel racked his brain, but couldn't come up with any ideas.

He glanced at Milsie once again; silently tickled to see another glob of drool getting ready to join the pool on her pillow. Then he wondered how big the weave on the pillowcase would have to be to let the drool soak through to the ticking. He knew pillowcases were limited to wicking moisture from sweat and spilled water – with anything thicker pooling and drying on the surface; only to be rinsed away in the laundry. And if anything *still* remained – dirt, dust, sweat, or drool – the surfactant used as a release agent would thin it out, and the leftovers would simply flow away in the rinse.

He really wanted to wiggle over and play with her, but knew she needed more sleep than he did; the vagaries of their age difference coming to a head in this singular department. He suppressed a chuckle while looking up at the ceiling again ... but suddenly sat straight up in bed.

### ***Vanaheim, En Route to the S'Slich'Tah Enclave***

Their ground transportation made its slow deliberate way along the one-hundred kilometers to the S'Slich'Tah enclave located on the far outskirts of the Vanaheim administrative metro-center.

Jaiying sat forward with Petrus and watched as the depressingly barren countryside flowed past their vehicle.

Their four Imperial guardsmen sat behind her wearing light armor over ship suits. They carried spare collars with their kit; knowing that once they left the confines of their vehicle, the filtered air would turn dirty and toxic. In addition to their power swords of Royal manufacture, they also

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carried sidearms; two of them compact *beam* weapons. There would be *no* repeat of the incident that had taken out Lady Laisee's guardsmen.

Jaiying's view out the front seemed rather bleak. The sky was a dirty, reddish tint that seemed darker over the area they were headed towards in the distance. While the countryside was bleak and uneven, the road they were on was smooth and level, but also depressingly straight in her mind. With nothing else of interest to see, it only made sense to build a road directly from point-to-point, and this one was as straight as any, aside from the occasional widely sweeping turn around a short bit of hill that had, for some reason, escaped the road-builder's contempt.

From their vantage point up forward, Petrus could just catch a glimpse of the patrol craft pacing them overhead, but not see the other two vehicles following behind them. The three vehicles were armored, as was the patrol craft, and would be the *only* vehicles allowed into the enclave and back out. This was to insure the S'Slich'Tah would not have the opportunity to leave their assigned territory without means of observation from the ground or the sky. As they got closer, he noted several small dots circling the enclave from several hundred feet above.

As Sue had explained to him, each of the enclaves was a small, self-contained city-state, with its own source of supply for the basic needs of its warren. Most food was produced internally, along with other basic necessities for civic functioning; such as water, energy, shelter, and governance. Very little was brought in from the outside, and only when something could not be produced internally by the warren itself.

Finished goods likewise found the majority of their consumption within the warren, with very little finding its way outside the warren boundaries.

Other than those limited areas of commerce related to non-essential items, the enclaves were worlds onto their own, and travel into and out of each one was restricted by the governing warren of each one.

The Central Government controlled all the outside activities of each warren and was the only thing holding the totality of the Vanir society in check. As an outsider, it seemed harsh to Petrus, but allowed each warren the self-government it desired, while providing a centralized authority to ensure the continuity of the species as a whole.

In many ways, it resembled the Commonwealth, as the Kantite/Cletus duality controlled the cohesive fates of the Commonwealth, while each planet in each cluster in the Commonwealth held a certain amount of autonomy regarding their own citizenry – up to a certain extent. On Vanaheim, as in the Commonwealth, you wanted to avoid pissing off the central authority; except in the Commonwealth, you didn't risk having your entire *planet* wiped clean over the political *faux pas* of a few incautious leaders.



The external actions of each warren were either contracted or authorized by the sitting Prime and her advisors. That was how the Observer Stations were created and manned, while the extended protective bases were manned by segments of warren staffers, all working within closed, warren functions. Where multiple-warrens worked together, the Prime and her advisors insured that a relatively equal balance of power was represented.

It was really only at the very higher levels that warrens cross-mingled to accomplish common goals; not to denigrate very lower-level warren members from cross-mingling after work ... such as drinking together at fermented-fruit establishments in certain mixed-work environments. Otherwise, warrens stayed apart, with only the occasional non-warren member working alongside members of another warren – and that usually only because of some technical or medical specialty.

Upon learning all this, Petrus was struck that public riots and chaos had not prevailed centuries beforehand, but wisely kept his mouth shut so as not to offend Sue or her mother. He considered that, while it *did* seem to work, it was dependent upon the Vanir mind-set more than anything else. That, and the fact that, through no fault of their *own*, thirty-thousand lives could be snuffed out after a *single* individual exercised poor judgment of one kind or another.

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S'Slich'Tah 29531 sat alone in the transport compartment of the middle vehicle; easily anticipating each slight turn of the road. She was being brought home. Not in triumph, but simply being returned – as if she were a misplaced package finding its way back to the shipper.

She'd been surprised to learn that several humans were traveling with them – one of them the human child she'd had captured and sealed within a shielded container in her former quarters. She'd been apprised by the traitorous Prime that the child and her adult handler would be expecting an "act of contrition" from her – *personally* – to make amends for the attempt on her life. She couldn't imagine what that might mean, but the overheard conversations about the number and armament of the human guards accompanying them, led her to believe that it somehow involved them entering her enclave and coming out *alive* ... which would be a *first* for uninvited guests.

She closed her eyes in anticipation of what she would *really* like to do to the hated humans, but the fact that her enclave was still functioning – even if effectively blockaded – meant that rumors of the humans pleading for their lives may have had some merit. Certainly, if the situation were reversed, she wouldn't have hesitated in sanctioning the S'Ahi'Ma right down to the last *egg*! Or even better, drop them down on that abomination of a planet the S'Tak'Sah had created with all of those tiny humanoid

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*cannibals* running around! *Yes! That* would have been *much* more satisfying!

One part of her mind smiled at that thought, while another part continued plotting to wrest control from the S'Ahi'Ma once she could consolidate her power once again. A handful of other segments seemed to be wandering around in confusion, but one tiny segment sat alone – crying in a metaphorical corner, while wondering just what in the Pit of Disaster had happened to their host.

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'Wow' Jaiying commented silently.

'Yes. *She is severely messed up*' Petrus agreed. '*Do you still want to do this?*'

'*You brought the sampler, didn't you?*'

She hadn't seen him carrying anything but his personal power sword – hopefully *properly* repaired by now.

'*It's in the kit. I meant the tour. We could just go in, do the deed, and get out before anyone's the wiser*' he suggested, then reached over and patted her hand.

'*Commander Woldron was interested in the studies Milsie and her crew did from orbit. It would help to have real samples. Maybe he and Lady Huan could come up with a way to help them?*'

'*The Prime is already having surveys taken of other planets for them to move to. Within a year or two, Vanaheim will be a ghost town*'

She glanced at him, but read the connotation from his mind before dismissing it.

'*As long as we're here, and it should be interesting*' she pointed out.

'*I hear and obey, my Healer*' he sent; sending a tiny flush up her neck.

They both felt the transport begin to slow, and could see beyond the curve of the road that they were approaching a huge wall, easily ten meters or more in height, with a wide, latticed-gate that was currently closed.

Two armed and armored guards were standing on the outside, facing in, while two armed and armored guards were on the inside, facing out.

"We're *hereee...*" Petrus murmured, while Jaiying rippled with a tiny shudder as the chill of *déjà vu* flooded her.

With a tiny sigh, she closed her eyes and bowed her head in acceptance.

### *On the Kraken*

Ronnie was cautiously standing in the tub, while Déjà was preparing to help him out of it. Milsie was on the other side of ships doc with Sai and checking the catch of the day. From their comments, it was looking pretty sparse, which suited him just fine, as he was tired of being vacuumed every day – although the hot tub was very relaxing for him and his aching body. He stepped out gingerly, and Déjà wrapped him in a towel, then waited for him to be sitting down, before starting in with a vigorous rubbing. As he suddenly realized, this was another thing he found enjoyable.

He looked over at Sai and silently apologized for all the antagonistic things he'd ever done to her – but *not* for hiding her estranged husband from her. Milsie – he didn't really know her all that well, but hoped she and Donnel got over themselves and got married at some point, or at least *bonded* for a while. She was young and healthy, and Donnel really needed a woman in his life to settle him down. He'd wondered where Donnel was, but Milsie had commented that he'd been pursuing yet another line of research since before noon, and gotten “lost in his work – yet again.”

While drying his torso, he missed the frown from Sai over the scar under his left elbow; it being the “honor” scar Xiaoli had graced him with during sword practice so many years ago, which he'd insisted remain.

“Ronnie, what's next?” Sai called out, and he paused for a moment while thinking about it...

His recordings were all up to date, along with his records. Torga and the boys were all fine spacers now, and they could fight his ship, with or without Petrus on board – *despite* whatever bad decisions Sai might make in the process. Petrus was planet-side with Jaiying while they were both visiting Laisee, so they were safe. According to Laisee, the peace treaty was on the verge of being signed – as long as Petrus didn't try to charm the non-existent *pants* off the Prime. Oh ... and the Vanir were getting ready for a historic move to healthier climes.

In general, the Commonwealth was secure, the Hegemony was in good hands ... and he was no longer needed...

“I think... I think I'll get a bite to eat, then go give Trenka another lesson. She's just about ready, and I'm just about out of time.”

He carefully stood, swapped out the towel for a robe, and belted it around himself.

“Déjà... Please see that Lord Caldar makes it to his quarters in a *stately* manner. It wouldn't do to have the First Lord staggering down the corridors like a drunken spacer.” She'd directed her orders to Déjà, while chiding him obliquely in the process.

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Ronnie hugged Déjà close to him; whispering loudly, “She’s just pissed ‘cause I won’t take her *ice minin’* again,” and they left the compartment with his arm resting over her shoulder.

Sai was watching as the door closed behind them, but something was nagging at her. Nothing really seemed suspicious, but she couldn’t quite put her finger on what triggered it, so she added another task for Déjà.

*‘Déjà, please see if you can get Lord Caldar to rest this afternoon. I worry he is exerting himself too much’*

‘Yes, Mother’ Déjà’s silent voice carried to her; seeming much stronger now than even just a few days ago.

“Mother... Just a few weeks ago I was ‘Mommy’ – but not now,” Sai murmured. “Caldar, I don’t know whether to kill you or kiss you.” She stood still for a moment longer before turning back to Milsie – who was watching her strangely.

“S’all right, Milsie. Happens with age,” she muttered. For some reason, that thought struck a cord in her, but left her just as quickly as it had come. Then she and Milsie ran down the list of files they were going to send to the *Microcosmus* for today’s update.

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Ronnie was considering what he’d like to eat on this wonderful day, and decided to fall back on a favorite staple – ships poop. In this case, the *new* version plagiarized from the Drecks by the skilled engineers of Claxon ship works.

Déjà escorted him back to his compartment and helped him dress. Then she watched as he disappeared into the facilities, where she peeked around the corner of the door and watched him count out *three* pills and down them with a swallow of water. This was up from the two pills he’d been taking several times a day for the last few days.

She offered to go get his food for him, but he declined in favor of visiting with his crewmembers and staff during the meal. She reluctantly went along and ate with him; all the while feeling that something was different about him today.

At the commons, he seemed very happy and relaxed for a change, even speaking with many of the staff and crew during lunch. Afterwards, they strolled to the bridge and visited with Endo and Edna, who were standing the watch together this cycle.

He left with a few words of praise for Endo and his brother, and for both their wives.

Then he told them he would appreciate it if they watched over Torga and Manya until he rejoined his father in the Hegemony.

They left the bridge, and prompted by the words of her mother, Déjà guided him in the general direction of his compartment; he making no effort to change their path while seeming to be lost in thought.

### *In the Lab*

Donnel was on a visual link with Commander Woldron and Lady Huan while they worked on the latest test batch using the data he'd sent to them just before the midday meal.

After going over all the parameters of the suppressive element, they thought they'd known everything about it – except for how it traveled so easily through the human body. Donnel's day-mares had had him flummoxed until he'd visualized the laundry process while watching Milsie sleep.

With that still in his mind, he'd gone back down his mental check list from the moment Ronnie had come aboard, and chanced upon the very first thing he'd done for him – removing that drip package and setting it aside.

The chemical analysis of the *second* injected substance had revealed nothing spectacular about it, other than it was medically inert, and would eventually break down and be flushed out through the liver and kidneys with the rest of the waste products. The chemical breakdown of it was on file, and he'd sent it to Woldron before digging out the drip kit and packaging it for transit by immediate messenger.

Subsequent conversations with the doctor, with a healthy dose of speculation tossed in, allowed a *new* understanding of the scan results, and they suddenly found a *reasonable* explanation for the concentration of powder in the liver and kidneys. Unlike the brain, those two organs were working as advertized by filtering out and trying to flush the powder from Ronnie's system as best as they could; considering the problems they faced trying to deal with the mineral substance in the first place.

It had taken a little trial and error to replicate the exact formulation of the drip kit in the *Microcosmos*' lab – ironically having the original kit delivered just before the final sample came out of the processor.

A quick check through a comparator had proved the solutions were identical, and Woldron, with Lady Huan looking on from inside an activated ship suit, had mixed the recovered powder samples with the solution, then dripped it onto a sample piece of tissue.

Instead of clumping in one location, this time it dispersed evenly throughout the tissue, and a cautious elation was shared by all three of them.

Now they had a starting point – a *reasonable* chance of saving Ronnie!

*Vanaheim, At the S'Slich'Tah Enclave*

Warren Leader S'Slich'Tah 29531 had returned and been greeted by a rather subdued gathering of supporters – mostly because of the armed and very dangerous humans who'd accompanied her through the gates. Strangely enough, the two unarmed humans in front were being treated as guests by She-Who-Would-Be-Prime, and everyone followed suit, as was expected.

The Warren Leader had magnanimously introduced the humans as peaceful visitors to Vanaheim, who had also been guests of the Prime at the Administrative Center. They'd been allowed to travel with her to visit a typical warren enclave to see how a typical warren was structured. The humans, she'd said, were curious at how the Vanir all worked together so well, compared to the multiple conflicts human society had had to endure until this most auspicious confluence of events – peace between the Hegemony and the Commonwealth, and a peaceful curiosity about their new neighbors below them – the Vanir.

Her advisors, long out of direct contact with her, had held off their questions once it became obvious the barking sounds coming from the small packages carried by the human guards were actually translations of spoken Vanir into whatever alien language the humans spoke. It wasn't expected, but something they could work around.

What had come as a *complete* shock was that the adult human spoke a fairly clear dialect of Vanir, even through the faint, blue shield of his ship suit. It sounded very much like S'Shac'Kah, and the male had not taken long in confirming that the S'Shac'Kah had been the first Vanir contacted by the humans out by Observation Station 27.

He'd also commiserated with them over the lost of Observer Station 6, but praised the quick actions of S'Slich'Tah 41568, who bravely accepted death in order to save the life of the daughter of the sitting Prime – a truly courageous example of the spirit of the S'Slich'Tah.

Personally, Jaiying thought he was in over his head, as some of the feelings she'd been reading had been coming back very negative.

Strangely enough, she'd also picked up feelings of pleasure that their warren had been commended for *something* – even if it was from a bunch of savage *humans*.

As Petrus stepped back so S'Slich'Tah 29531 could address her warren again, he looked over the small crowd and started picking up anomalies among the citizens; seeing wider variations in skin tones, and in a few places, the patterns seemed off somehow. He also noticed different facial features – more prominent differences than he'd ever noticed in members from other warrens. It looked like Ronnie's researchers were right on the mark.

Once S'Slich'Tah 29531 was done, a short walking tour was conducted through the central enclave area, which led them through a shopping area, and a few small fabrication facilities. After that, they'd headed back to the administrative building that held the warren leader's primary office, and the offices and administrative functions of all the different production facilities.

### *The Kraken, Nap Time*

As they approached his quarters, Ronnie checked his internal check list once again...

Woldron and Lady Huan had made it clear – there was no fix for him, other than death. He really would have liked to return home one more time, but his relative age was advancing rapidly. By his calculations, he just wouldn't live long enough. He wanted to go out fighting – not lying in bed, panting out his last breaths, as he'd seen too many times during his many combat deployments in the past...

He stopped at his door and paused, considering if he should send Déjà away for a while so he could meet with Trenka a little earlier.

She aborted that thought by opening the door and giggling like a girl while dragging him into the sleeping compartment and flopping backwards onto the bed in front of him.

"Play with me, Ronnie! *Pretty* please?" she teased him, while smiling up at him prettily.

"What? *Now*?" He started thinking that maybe repeated applications of his semen had somehow regressed her new development – or maybe just her appetite?

"Yes! *Now*! I'm *still* hungry, and you're suppose to lie *down* for a while! Besides, it's *fun*!" she insisted, while sitting up and pulling at the seals on his jumper.

"Yes, it – *wait* a minute. We'll have plenty of time for this *later*," he said while fending off her busy fingers.

"Mother says you're to *rest* ... or lie *down* for a while. And as long as you're lying *down*, I can have a *snack*!" she said, then grabbed hold of him and leveraged him down beside her on the bed.

"Well ... as long as I'm *dow*–" he managed to get out just before she attached herself to his face.

Her enzymes didn't have *nearly* the effect that they used to, and her tongue had shortened considerably, but he still considered the sensation of her kisses to be unique in the known universe, so he settled back, to let her have her way with him.

***Vanaheim, After the Tour***

Although the enclave comprised close to thirty-thousand individuals, the majority of the space was used for food and energy production. This was displayed on a map in the main entryway of the Administrative Center. From there, several corridors branched out to the various offices.

S'Slich'Tah 29531 swiveled slowly as she decided which way to go first. The sound of popping behind her caused her to quickly spin around, only to see the humans had merely dropped their face shields – all but two of the guards in the rear.

This unnerved several of the Vanir, as they still held the deep-seated belief that humans were poisonous, but they suppressed displays of distress in front of their warren leader, who seemed to have gotten over that apparent interspecies misunderstanding.

The human child walked over to the Warren Leader, reached up her hand, and tugged on the Vanir's little finger. S'Slich'Tah 29531 looked down, and heard a loudly whispered, "I need to relieve myself," which sent a few of her advisors back into their memories as having had a similarly shared-experience. It seemed to somehow lessen their overall anxiety.

One of her advisors came forward and asked, "If I may?" and slowly reached out her hand for Jaiying's. Jaiying smiled widely and accepted it, then glanced back at one of her guardsmen and slightly tilted her head at him.

He broke formation and joined the party of two in search of a toilet.

"She's just a little girl," Petrus said aloud, then dropped his voice. "She has a tiny bladder," he added quietly, getting feelings of mirth from the surrounding crowd.

After having swiveled her head slightly to follow the child with her eyes, S'Slich'Tah 29531 was standing *very* still now. The child had spoken *perfect* Vanir ... perfect *S'Slich'Tah* Vanir. She'd not expected that – not at *all*.

***Exercise Time on the Kraken***

Ronnie had finally begged off from playing with Déjà any longer that afternoon, with a promise to play again after supper that evening – *maybe*. Then he'd gotten up to shower, and Déjà joined him.

She spent her time in the shower happily washing his back and front, before having him kneel down so she could reach his hair. He returned the favor, and enjoyed the feel of her soapy skin under his hands, while slowly stroking her body up and down, and all around the fun parts, while she hung on to his play toy and gave it gentle tugs, but got no reaction from him at all.



Stepping around behind her, he reached around and teased her nipples, before rolling her small breasts under his fingers. Holding and teasing one breast, he reached down with his other hand and stroked her between her legs; eliciting moans and panting breaths from her until she finally scrunched her eyes closed and issued a short scream – her body unexpectedly locking up in his arms.

He slowed down for several seconds to let her ride it out, before gradually sliding both his hands to her waist while waiting for her to recover. They stayed like that under the running water, until she suddenly straightened and remembered where she was, then looked up over her shoulder at him with wonder in her eyes.

“Okay, girl. Time to rinse off,” he said quietly, then proceeded to rotate her through the spray until all the soap was rinsed off, before doing the same for himself.

He stepped out and found Déjà just standing there looking at him strangely, so he got two towels from the storage compartment, tossed one to her, and used the other on himself. She dried herself slowly as she watched him get into his pill packet again and down three more pills. She thought it might be important, but her mind just couldn’t get past what she’d just experienced.

“Ronnie... Thank you,” she finally said in a near whisper, and he turned and smiled down at her, then picked up his towel where he’d stepped on it and tossed it into the laundry bin.

“Got a meeting with Trenka in a bit. You know, I think you should check in with Lady Tal and see how your new Healer abilities are growing. I know you’re making *me* feel real good,” he said, then blew her a kiss, before leaving the facilities and dressing for a gym session.

### ***On the Microcosmos***

Woldron and Huan were working on the sixth test sample, but getting mixed results.

They’d started by infusing a solution of powder with the new carrier and watching as it distributed itself throughout the tissue sample. Huan would then attempt to draw it to her by directing an energy stream towards it – all this behind a protective laboratory shield, of course.

It wasn’t working as well as they’d hoped, as sometimes the particles would *seem* to shift as a cohesive unit, and other times they meandered aimlessly about in the sample.

What they were looking for was a definite *draw* – something the particles were *really* attracted to – but nothing she’d tried so far had worked.

*Vanaheim, The Office of the S'Slich'Tah Leader*

With their tour nearly concluded, the visiting party returned to the center of the building, where both of the humans thanked their hosts for providing an interesting and educational afternoon.

Considering the thinly dystopian undertones prevalent throughout the warren, Petrus was particularly impressed that everything seemed to work so well. Although history was not re-written so much as remembered accurately, it was usually never mentioned in polite company unless fulfilling a specifically asked question. Petrus took caution not to mention or ask anything about the warren's actions against the humans, and never detected any expectation of such questions from anyone they'd met.

S'Slich'Tah 29531 thanked her advisors for their assistance, before dismissing them all, then turned back to the humans and waited expectantly for their next request. When it wasn't forthcoming, she broke her silence and asked what else they wanted of her.

"We would like to see your private office, Slich 29531. It will allow us privacy as we discuss the terms of your freedom," Jaiying said in her tiny, perfect voice.

S'Slich'Tah 29531 stood still once again while staring down at Jaiying. The tiny human's perfect diction and rude familiarity were disturbingly unexpected. A sinking feeling started to suffuse through those few elements of her mind that were still functioning at a somewhat reasonable capacity, but she inclined her head slightly, before heading towards a short corridor directly across from the main entrance.

Another chill passed through Jaiying when they came within sight of the intricately-carved double-doors serving as the entrance to the Warren Leader's office. The carvings told the history of the S'Slich'Tah Warren in exquisite detail, as read in an ever-growing spiral running from the center of the door, out nearly to its edges. Her command of written Vanir was very slight, but she listened silently when Slich 29351 glanced at it, and several of her mind's segments quoted sections of it by rote.

Her heart sank when the door opened, and she recognized where they were; the small, workman-like business office; the door leading to private facilities for the warren leader; the arch leading to a small private galley, and the last door leading to a nesting area. She'd seen it all before – in the *Visions* – and knew *this* was where her history was going to change, but didn't know by how much, or in which direction.

The Warren Leader wandered into the galley, retrieved a cup from a cupboard, and inspected it. Then she opened a faucet and filled it with water; swirling it around a bit before sipping it and closing her eyes in pleasure. Then she turned and opened a larger cabinet, keyed a sequence on the metal trunk inside it, and opened the lid to recover something from

within. It was a piece of fresh fruit. She closed the lid absently while contemplating the fruit in her hand, before taking a full bite of it; the delicate scent of it wafting gently in the slight breeze of the air circulation system.

“Please forgive me, my guests. The fruit of the warnak... It has been just ... so ... long,” she said with strange politeness.

At a signal from Petrus, two of the guardsmen left to stand watch outside the door, while the other two closed it behind them. If the Vanir took note of it, she never commented; seeming totally engrossed with her water and fruit.

S’Slich’Tah 29531 wandered back into the room, saying, “Please ... find someplace to sit,” while settling in behind her desk and finishing the fruit with one last bite, before licking her fingers clean and washing it all down with the remainder of her water.

Then she looked at both of them with resignation in her posture.

“So ... which of you two is my executioner?”

### ***The Kraken, In the Gym***

Four off-duty guardsmen had gathered for practice in the gym, and, strangely enough, at the request of the *Kraken’s* Master, Lord Caldar.

There was very little speculation by them, other than from the new guardsman, Casmir, who’d been so easily taken by the First Lord during the incident outside the weapons locker. Despite his obvious deterioration, when Lord Caldar was in the gym, his stiff movements quickly smoothed out, and he became the seasoned, deadly master of whatever he held in his hands.

They’d all taken the opportunity to observe, either live or through the security system, when Lord Caldar practiced sparring, or even just exercised in the makeshift gym. They were uniformly hopeful that the First Lord might share some additional training with them this afternoon, but of them all, *none* of them dared to speculate about any “hand-to-hand” activities with him – and not because they were afraid of hurting *him*.

All talk ceased the moment Ronnie entered the compartment, and they immediately took note that he carried a well-worn *Royal* sword on his hip.

“Good afternoon, gentlemen. I find that I have been remiss in formally welcoming all of you aboard the *Kraken*. I’m afraid I’ve been rather busy of late, but I expect all of you to keep your practical skills up to date ... and maintain *regular* appointments with the Healer staff whenever possible.”

The first was expected, while the latter was greeted with smiles all around, before he went on.

## The End of the Road

“Since my First Officer has taken the opportunity visit planet-side, I thought we might take advantage of his absence to break a few rules. Today will be the first – and *last* time you’ll be allowed to activate your swords aboard the *Kraken* during practice. We don’t normally ship out with Combat-Healers, so if you were to lose some important bits during practice ... well, they might be gone for a while until our new Ladies get a handle on things. Please pair up and let’s see what you’ve got.”

He stepped back and watched as the guardsmen faced off and powered up their weapons. Observing the practiced movements of attack and defense, he was impressed with their obvious skill, and thought that two of them had faced real combat at one time or another. The slightly darker tint of their blades under power also suggested more extensive experience by the same two.

He watched and made appropriate comments while they sparred, until a near-fumble by one of them made him call a halt to the proceedings. The luckless fencer, the same one he’d taken down so easily, cringed internally when Ronnie approached him.

“You’re doing well, son. Your footwork is good, but it could be a little bit more stable – more *balanced*. Your defense is quick, but it needs to be more *intuitive*. Unfortunately, that comes with practice ... or the threat of someone trying to take your head. Let’s dance,” he said, before stepping back and calling the *Fire*.

They’d all watched, amused, when Ronnie had spoken to their younger companion, but the deep violet haze surrounding his blade was nothing to laugh at. Neither was the angry squealing that accompanied it – both telltales of a master swordsman who’d faced a *lot* of death in his day.

Ronnie let the young man begin slowly, and was gratified when he eventually warmed up to the exercise. When he felt he was ready, he began making small suggestions that were eagerly incorporated by his opponent. At the end of several minutes, he could see the sweat on Casmir’s face, but also a huge smile because of the new confidence he was feeling. Ronnie was having fun as well, but noticed Trenka had arrived, so he backed away gracefully and came up to guard, before saluting his young opponent.

“Very good, Casmir,” he told him, then turned to the rest of the group. “The rest of you watch *out* for him now,” he teased them, but glanced to the side.

“Ah! I see the Elder’s First Sword approaches and means to teach me a lesson. Please excuse me, gentlemen. Oh... You’re welcome to stay and take notes. I might even learn something *myself*!” he said, getting a few quiet chuckles at Trenka’s expense.

Ronnie got himself a towel and wiped his face and arms. Then he pulled a packet from his jumper, counted out three more pills, and headed over to a water dispenser. Between the metered adrenalin he was flushing, and the previous set of pills wearing off, he wanted to be fresh enough to give Trenka this final lesson.

### *In Petrus' Compartment*

"Are you *sure*, girl?" Sai asked her again. It was unexpected, or it *would* be if anyone other than Caldor had been involved. "You didn't just feel it from *him*?"

"No, Mother. It happened to me in the shower. He – he *played* with me, and made me feel... It felt just like when you... Oh Mother, it was *wonderful*," Déjà sighed dreamily, while Sai smiled down at her little girl – all grown up now it would seem.

As a rule, Kee do not experience orgasm – not like *humans* do.

They enjoyed sex a great deal – a *huge* deal, if you considered how many of their waking hours they expended on it – but they never *peaked*. The only climax Déjà had ever experienced was after developing a link with Sai, and even then, it wasn't *her* climax she was feeling, but Sai's own, but feeling just a part of. It still didn't "complete" her, as in bringing her to a state of resolution, but allowed her vicarious enjoyment of the experience. According to Déjà, she'd now experienced it all on her *own*.

Her little girl *was* growing up. She didn't know whether to laugh or cry. She *could*, however, help her celebrate it.

### *In the Gym*

Trenka had entered the gym to the sounds of power swords, and watched with a strange fascination while the old man sparred with the young guardsman and seemed to be enjoying it thoroughly. She knew it had to be painful for him, as he hardly moved from that one spot ... then remembered that he'd never moved when he sparred with *her* – except for that one time when he'd forced her back and swept her off her feet. She blushed slightly at the memory of it.

She saw him notice her standing there, and watched when he broke off from his partner; seeing the glances cast her way and hearing a bit of suppressed laughter; no doubt directed at *her*. She ignored them, and began her warm up stretches, catching a few appreciative glances from the same young men. When she finished her stretches, she walked over and pulled a sword from the rack – a standard sword of Royal manufacture. She wondered if those were *all* the swords allowed aboard the *Kraken*, then remembered the Drecks crewmen had swords – *big* swords – which *included* power packs.

## The End of the Road

She concluded that, besides herself – Sai, Caldar, and the Drecks were probably the *only* persons aboard using swords with power packs, and Caldar was just insuring no accidents happened aboard ship. The fact that he'd just sparred live with a guardsman was something she'd ask him about later. As he walked over to greet her, she was struck at how much he'd aged over the last several days. Woldron and Lady Huan had told her his deterioration would be rapid, but it looked like he was losing more than a year for each day he lived. Aside from his obvious skill with the sword, this was probably going to be the last lesson he was going to teach her. His sword work was very pretty, though, if somewhat loud and raucous. She'd never seen one glow such a unique color before, and wondered if the power pack it was using was running low on charge.

"Hello, Trenka. Are you ready for today's lesson?"

His voice seemed the same, but it wasn't quite right, somehow. Maybe it was the pills he was taking? He seemed steady enough when he walked, though.

"Certainly, Lord Caldar ...but only *after* you pull your power pack."

He pulled his sword and turned the well-worn hilt towards her.

"That would be hard – haven't got one. But I promise I won't Fire my sword against you," he offered, but saw the confusion in her eyes, and frowned. "*Earth-spawn... Half-breed...*" he whispered the hated curses, "...but I *am* my father's son."

The intensity of his eyes held her for just a moment, before she found her voice.

"Very well, Lord Caldar. Let's dance," she said steadily, despite suddenly realizing that yet *another* facet of Rondal Caldar had been withheld from her.

### ***Vanaheim, Testing a Theory***

"So, you see our difficulty," Petrus told her. "If your director hadn't covered Caldar with all that powder, there was every expectation that he would still be alive. Subsequently, Rondal Caldar would not be under penalty of death, and we would not be here today."

"What does it *matter*, human! You're *still* going to kill me! Go ahead! I'm *home* now, and you won't get out of here *alive*!"

"I have no intention of killing you, Slich 29531," Jaiying said. "I just need to see if what happened to my Grandfather really was an accident."

She approached her desk and stopped, before reaching out silently.

*'And I promise to be very careful. Don't be afraid, Slich 29531'* she forcefully pushed into her mind, before paralyzing her motor functions and walking around the desk to place a hand on Slich 29531's arm.

*'I will try to be very gentle'* she promised her, before beginning to draw life force from the immobilized Vanir.

### ***On the Microcosmus***

Lady Huan was exhausted. She, and three other Healers aboard the *Microcosmus*, had tried repeatedly, but failed to get the powder to migrate as they'd hoped. Woldron had remained silent throughout their tests, while recording the results per protocol, but was also feeling down at the lack of progress.

It was depressing, particularly as it had started out so *promising*. Perhaps they were still missing something?

"Hifacious, I am so sorry," Huan murmured. She was standing beside him, but was afraid to reach out and be rejected by him. He surprised her by sliding his arm around her waist and hugging her to his side.

"My Lady, you've done all that you could," he said, then bent down to kiss the top of her head. "Glad we didn't let Caldar know in advance. The disappointment would have been too much. How was he this morning?"

"Lady Tal reported that he slept well enough, but the girl she assigned to his contentment reports he's now up to three pills, several times a day. Isn't that too much?"

"My dear, we men are happiest when we *aren't* in pain. And he'll probably be dead before he comes close to an overdose of those pills. Three pills ... he's in his seventies or eighties, Relative ... Relative to *Earth*, that is. He must be looking like a Kantite in his late ... oh, hundred-eighties ... maybe nineties?"

Lady Huan closed her eyes in sadness. They'd so hoped that a cure for the First Lord could be found, but it didn't look very promising.

"Should I update Lady Tal?"

"Yes. Please let her know what progress we've made, and ... and that we'll continue to work on it," he muttered, then turned away to look at the test sample again with its pattern of powder scattered all over its surface.

*'Lady Tal, do you have a moment?'* Huan asked politely after turning to look in the supposed direction of the *Kraken* out of habit.

She caught the faint impression of great joy radiating from her, and her current companion – Déjà, she felt – lying next to her.

"JIA! ... JIA, LOOK AT THIS!!!" Woldron shouted.

## The End of the Road

### *On the Kraken*

“Sorry, Trenka,” Ronnie said, while not sounding very sorry at all to her mind, and he declined to help her up this time. “Balance is *key*! You lose your *balance* – you *fall*! It’s *that simple*! *Again!*” he said, before bringing his sword up to guard.

Trenka rolled and snapped back to her feet; on guard and ready...

The first several minutes had been warm up and practice on what he’d already taught her, and it’d seemed to be going well, but as they’d continued, he’d become more demanding, and was starting to lose his patience with her to the point of becoming *rude* about it.

They circled each other – he actually *could* move his feet, she noted, and allowed her to attack at will, but he easily defended each strike, before striking back *incredibly* fast, and placing just the  *tiniest* of touches on her torso. If his sword were live, she would be dead ten times over.

Even the guardsmen noted his work and, considering how helpful and polite he’d been with them, wondered why he was treating her so poorly. Lady Trenka wasn’t all *that* bad, and from what they could tell, she would be an even match for some of them. They really felt bad about watching her being abused like this, and more than one of them felt like coming to her assistance – except Caldar was the *First Lord*. Nearly all of them had determined to stand by and offer their consolation after he got done with her, though.

### *In Petrus’ Compartment*

Sai was just coming down from an *incredible* feeling, as she’d been able to tap into *Déjà* for a change, and experience *her* climax – one of her very *own* this time – in all its passion and glory.

She hugged her young girl tightly and only faintly heard the call from Lady Huan. She momentarily thought of responding to her, but figured if it was at all important, she’d call back. She relaxed next to her girl – her young *woman*, now – and enjoyed the bliss radiating from her.

She *was*, however, starting to pick up disturbing thoughts from *another* direction.

### *In the Gym*

Trenka got up again and faced her tormenter. She didn’t understand why Caldar was acting this way. Whatever civility they’d developed over the last several days, was being swept away by his harsh words and behavior, and she was getting angrier by the minute.

“Come *on*, Caldar! Teach me something *new!*” she pressed angrily, while exerting a little rudeness of her own.



“All *right*, First Sword. Let’s see your *QUICK KILLS!*” he shouted, then snapped out a blow to her neck that she barely blocked.

Her return was quick and neat; not a swipe, so much as a flick of her wrist that he’d had to jerk back to avoid.

“*HA!*” she shouted, then had to defend against a flurry of attacks that nearly touched her on several parts of her body, and almost finished up with a slap to her thigh. She’d fended them off while dancing back quickly, but carefully – remaining *balanced* at all times.

“\*Very *good*, Grasshopper,\*” he said unintelligibly, which only led to more confusion. “Let’s try *this!*” he added, then put her *totally* on the defensive, before finally stepping in and tripping her with his foot.

She flailed momentarily, but recovered and rolled – sword-side out and *away* from her body – before springing back up to face him, panting and furious ... becoming *more* so, when he casually turned his back on her and slowly walked away. To her credit, she stood her ground and didn’t take the bait.

“Wisdom ... is knowing *when* to attack,” he intoned to the wall, before slowly turning to face her again. “And I see you’ve finally gained a tiny *bit* of it – for a *woman!*” he chided her rudely; causing the flush to rise up her neck. “Now let’s work on your *technical* skills some more,” he said, before dropping back to guard.

They began the next round while the guardsmen looked on in confusion. This was *no way* to teach someone the sword.

### ***In Petrus’ Compartment***

Sai was feeling Trenka’s anxiety, and tempted to dig in and see what it was about, but she knew how rude that would be. Besides, a glance at the ship’s timer showed her this was the hour Trenka was scheduled to be practicing with Ronnie. She knew how infuriating he could be; *especially* if he put his mind to it.

She remembered how he’d baited her back on Earth the day he’d broken her wrist; then suddenly sat up and extended out to Trenka, while paying *closer* attention to what was dancing along the surface of her mind. A few moments later, she was up and getting dressed.

### ***On the Microcosmus***

Woldron and Lady Huan were looking at the tissue sample where the powder had decided – *on its own* – to migrate towards one edge of the nutrient tray.

“Jia, what did you do?” he asked in a whisper, but she shrugged to the back of his head before speaking.

## The End of the Road

"I ... nothing," she finally said.

She looked at the sample, and was confused at the concentration of powder extending along a rough perpendicular line to where they were standing.

"I was just ... I was calling to Sai as you asked."

"Your mind... You used your *mind* for that! How different is it than when you Heal?"

"I ... it's *different*, of course. But it should be the—

"Call Sai again! Or call someone *else*. *WAIT!*" he said loudly, and rotated the tray out of line with them.

"*Now! Do it now!*"

'*Mistress Classa. We are conducting a test of that sample. It may be responsive to—*' she was interrupted by a loud whoop from Woldron.

'*It appears to be responsive to mindful communications*' she finished, while looking down at the tissue sample before them, and feeling somewhat bewildered, but happy, none the less.

The line of powder had shortened and bunched towards where she was standing. It was now unequivocal that *mindspeak* was the trigger element, and it made perfect sense. Seniors used their minds for communications on a regular basis, and Rondal Caldar had used his in effectively managing his ship, and his far-flung crew. It only made sense that his repeated use of it had finally drawn the powder to that area of his brain, where it closed it off from further use. Now it was just a matter of figuring out the best way to trick it into leaving the body.

"Jia, would you please inform Lady Tal that we have discovered a means to recover the powder from Lord Caldar?" he asked her; his pleased expression brightening his face.

### ***Vanaheim, The Test is Over***

S'Slich'Tah 29531 was recovering quietly, while Jaiying was reporting to Lili and the rest of the Senior Staff how she'd drawn life force from the Vanir without the resultant chaos that had confronted her Grandfather.

When asked about it, she told them she'd transferred the tiny amount she'd collected – approximately ten human years worth – to Petrus, much to his surprise. To the Vanir it was neglectable, and she'd only suffered a bit of weariness during the process.

The guards, not being privy to what was really going on, never realized what Jaiying had been doing; only that the Vanir seemed shocked at whatever they'd been talking about, and still seemed disturbed by it.

They'd remained by the door, while Petrus reached over and grabbed the cup off the desk, before going into the galley kitchen.

They heard the sounds of water running, and of him rummaging around in the food container, followed by "Amazing!" before he came back and set the water, and a new piece of fruit in front of the Vanir.

Jaiying came back to the front of the desk next to Petrus and released the S'Slich'Tah from control – finally getting a large gasp out of her in the process. She sat upright and looked around the room, before reaching out and picking up the cup and gulping down the water. She just looked at the fruit, then back up to the humans.

"We accept your act of *contrition*, S'Slich'Tah 29531 ... as is our *custom*," Petrus said politely, before wondering what the guardsmen were thinking as the translation quietly spewed out of their translators.

### ***On the Kraken***

Ronnie had become even *more* abusive, and Trenka was hovering between breaking down and crying, or becoming uncontrollably angry and lashing out. She was currently trying very hard to split the difference.

"Ha! Very *good* ... *GIRL!* I used to dance with Sai, but she's not as fast on her *feet!* I see *you* keep to your *diet!*" he taunted her, while fighting off her next attack.

"You talk too *much*, *OLD MAN!*" she shouted, before pushing him back a few steps, and snapping a swipe at his neck, which he deflected poorly.

She moved back a step and looked him over.

"Looks like you're getting *tired!* Should I have your little Kee bedmate bring the *wheelchair* for you?" she asked tauntingly, while making a controlled thrust to his heart that he nearly missed deflecting.

"*Hot* little Kee, you mean! But *all* the Ladies find *me* hot! How about after I *beat* you, I take you on and charm the *pants* off you?" he suggested, while making random thrusts all over her defensive zone.

He slipped in a neck swipe of his own, and she almost missed it – deflecting it at the last moment. He stepped back and laughed, which infuriated her.

"You got anything left for me after she *drained* you?" she taunted him. "I hear they like *liquid protein* better than anything *else*. But you're so feeble now, it's a wonder you can get it up at *all*. You can still get it *up*, *right?*"

"You'd be *surprised* at the native talents they have," he said; finally feeling himself wearing down. It was time.

## The End of the Road

“You know, if Ai had spent some time with a *KEE* between her legs, she probably wouldn’t have gone *CRAZY!*” he said loudly, then saw the reaction he wanted on her face.

Trenka remained silent, but attacked with a determined effort, and kept him on the defensive for a change. She felt she was gaining when he forced her back just to catch his breath.

“Getting *tired*, First Lord? Need to go take a *nap*?” she said, then made a cautious lunge’ he was slow coming up to deflect.

She finally made contact with his body for the very first time, and he took that as his cue.

“*Sad* thing about Lady Ai. She never really had a sense of *worth* about herself. Always more concerned about what people *thought* of her, instead of paying attention to the *goal!*” he said loudly, then made an aimless pass at her with his sword.

Trenka fumed and launched a new series of swipes and thrusts, but they were measured and exact. They didn’t connect – except for the last one, which caught the backside of his sword hand, and almost disarmed him, but failed. They broke apart and faced each other.

### *Vanaheim, Taking Their Leave*

“Thank you for your hospitality, S’SlichTah 29531,” Jaiying said politely. “Your enclave is functioning well, and we are confident that your new enclave on one of the suggested planets will bring you even greater prosperity and safety.”

The Vanir leader looked confused.

“New?” This was news to Slich 29531.

“I’m sorry you weren’t told,” Petrus said. “Our own planetary survey revealed a high concentration of toxic elements in your atmosphere. Our research suggests it was dangerous enough to cause some *reproductive* problems within the Vanir population. We presented our data to the Prime, and her own advisors looked into it in great detail. Her determination was to begin a migration to a couple of more hospitable planets within your own sphere of influence. Those enclaves most at risk have been selected to move first.”

“But ... but all of our *citizens* ... our *buildings* ... our *factories* ... our ... our *homes*...”

“It will be a *huge* undertaking,” Petrus agreed. “But the Vanir are quite capable of completing the task. It will be socially challenging, as each enclave will have more independence than ever before ... along with some of them being on different planets. It may even change the social and

political dynamics as the different warrens may choose to relocate to other planets than originally suggested.”

The Warren Leader’s look turned stricken as the ramifications started stumbling through the broken segments of her mind. Jaiying couldn’t fix that, but tried to ease her fears.

“It is very important your people get away from Vanaheim, as it is becoming very unstable and dangerous to you,” she said, then reached up to hold Petrus’ hand, and he bent down and picked her up to settle her at his hip.

“S’Slich’Tah 29531, again we thank you for your hospitality, and will now take our leave,” Petrus offered politely.

### ***At a Listening Spot Several Rooms Away***

Senior Observer S’Slich’Tah 24854 had heard *enough*. Not only had the humans convinced the Prime to let his uselessly volatile Warren Leader *live*, but she’d been returned to the enclave to wreck *further* damage to his fellow citizens – *again*, courtesy of the interfering *humans*!

Slich 24854 decided he’d waited long enough, and looked at the button for just a moment before savagely pressing it and sending the signal to detonate the charge in the Warren Leader’s *desk*!

### ***On the Kraken, in the Gym***

“Come *ON*, Trenka! You don’t *REALLY* think Ai was up to the job, do you? I mean, it was all she could do to face each *DAY*! You should have felt her *WHINING* all the time – like to make me *SICK*!” he said nastily.

### ***In the Corridors...***

Sai was running through the corridors while trying to break into Trenka’s thoughts, but Trenka was locked up tight. She knew what Ronnie was doing, and thought she knew what he was after, but now there was *no need*!

Huan and Woldron had figured it *out*! He didn’t need to *do* this!

### ***Vanaheim, At the Enclave***

Petrus was turning to leave, when the bomb went off with Jaiying on his hip and angled towards the desk as he turned. The blast tore apart the desk, while sending shards all over the room. The majority of them struck the Vanir and shredded her against the wall, but there were plenty of targets available.

Both Petrus and Jaiying were knocked to the floor in the blast, while the inside guardsmen were flung against the outer doors and lay crumpled on the floor against them.

## The End of the Road

The doors were stout and withstood the blast, but they'd jammed. The outside men powered up their swords and, hoping no one was standing against them, made small, head-high cuts through the doors to take a look inside. They noted the legs sticking out at the base of the door, before carefully cutting a vertical slice through the center latch.

A healthy shove freed the jam, and pushed the bodies aside. Once inside, they rushed to their principals to assess the damage. Aside from superficial damage to his hands, arms, and face, Petrus had been struck by a horizontal piece at around ankle height that folded his ankles sideways as a result. The one piece that would have pierced his heart had been blocked by Jaiying's limp body.

The senior guardsman, having had extensive field experience, fired his sword and very cautiously lowered it between the girl and the First Officer to sever the wooden connection between the two of them.

Petrus was still alive and breathing, but Jaiying was bleeding fitfully around the puncture, and her breath was very faint and raspy. They were without facilities, without a Healer, and a *very* long way from home.

### *On the Kraken*

Sai felt a wash of pain shoot through her, and stumbled in the corridor; being stricken with agony as it felt as if her feet were broken, along with a stabbing pain in her chest. She reached out to the surface and felt around for Petrus, but didn't find him at the Administrative Center.

Laisee, however, was radiating freely, and the loss coming from her was nearly *overwhelming*.

*'Laisee! Laisee, where is Petrus!'* she called out, only getting silent agony in return.

*'LAISEE! WHERE IS PETRUS!'* she pushed loudly, but it was Rose who answered her.

*'He is with Jaiying at the S'Slich'Tah enclave'* she said, and Sai could feel the anguish she was feeling.

*'LAISEE. PETRUS AND JAIYING ARE TOGETHER SOMEWHERE. WHERE ARE THEY?'* she pushed loudly, and this time Laisee responded.

*'They ... they went to the S'Slich'Tah ... they returned her ... to her enclave'* she sent back weakly.

*'WHERE? WHERE IS IT? SHOW ME!'* she pressed, and got back a mental image of a map, and approximate coordinates for the enclave.

Sai sat on the floor and reached out to Petrus, but couldn't find him. She widened her search and felt a few other humans, then focused on

them instead; the one seeming most approachable being the one she touched.

### ***Vanaheim, At the Enclave***

Second Garlan was applying all the knowledge he could to keep Jaiying immobile, but there was very little else that he *could* do.

Commander Zickgraf looked like he would live. His companion had already rummaged towels and packing from the facilities, and was working on him. At the moment, though, all Garlan could do was hold Jaiying's tiny body, and it was very hard for him to hold back his tears.

That was when he felt the touch...

'Garlan ... Garlan this is Sai Tal speaking as a Senior to you' he heard in his head.

"I ... yes, Lady Tal. I hear you. There was a bomb," he said aloud.

*'Say what you see. Tell me what you can about the injuries'*

"Commander Zickgraf – ahh, feet broken, and a puncture to his chest. Some blood from his mouth. He might have a punctured lung. It looks like it missed his heart."

*'The girl ... Jaiying'* she pressed, and felt his grief almost overwhelm him.

"She's ... a piece passed through her, and into the Commander. She's... Her lungs... I don't think we can save her," he said with difficulty.

*'Garlan ... tell me where you are. What is available to you?'* she asked, and he could hear the desperation in her voice.

"Ah ... a room ... it's an office ... where the bomb went off. There's a separate toilet room ... some place to sleep, and ... and a small kitchen."

### ***On the Kraken***

Sai felt so lost. If only she were *there*. If only *any* Healer were there. She reached out to Garlan and tried to look through his eyes, but he wasn't familiar to her, and she didn't know how to make him so in the time allotted.

She couldn't feel Jaiying, and Petrus was also out, but he wasn't a Healer anyway.

"Damn you, Caldar! All the stupid, crazy things you do, and now we're dealing with insane Vanir setting off *bombs!*"

She floundered in anguish, as she knew time was running out, but kept thinking back to the Vanir and what might be available below. She had

## The End of the Road

other considerations up here, but the survivors on the surface took priority, so she focused on the group's survival.

### *Vanaheim, At the Enclave*

*'Garlan, what is your tactical situation?'* she sent.

"Two men down – still alive. Me and Hadrus were outside the doors when the bomb went off. No immediate threat," he said, then pointed to the outer door.

Hadrus walked over and took a quick look, but saw no one and shook his head.

"Looks like no one wants to find out what happened," he said, but Hadrus drew his sidearm anyway and stood off to one side, while hearing a reassuring moan from one of the downed guardsmen. "We're being left alone," Garlan reported.

*'What happened down there?'* she asked him.

"We got here. They gave us a tour. Had a private meeting in the office here, just the one Vanir – the Warren Leader – talking with Mistress Jaiying and Commander Zickgraf. We couldn't understand it all, but watched everyone. The Vanir had some water, and ... she ate some fruit or something from the kitchen. She called it warnak, I think."

### *On the Kraken*

Sai listened, and wondered why there was such a long delay between them getting there, and the bomb going off.

And how did they know she was coming back *today*, and how did they know when to set the timer?

They *wouldn't*. It was set off *manually*. Someone had *done it*.

Most likely they had listened somehow, and didn't like what was being said.

*'Garlan, you and Hadrus be on guard. Most likely, someone set the bomb off manually and may want to make sure it worked'*

"Understood," she read him say, then tried hard not to think about Jaiying.

She'd already heard Laisee was boarding a Vanir transport and would be there in a short while, but feared Jaiying wouldn't last long enough.

If only they had a...

*'GARLAN!'* she shouted.



### ***Vanaheim, At the Enclave***

“No! It would have *FOOD* in it. Like a *CHEST FREEZER!*” Garlan shouted, while Hadrus fumbled around in the galley and finally found the small storage box.

“*Found it!*”

“Lady Tal, he found it!” Garlan said aloud, then relayed Sai’s description of the control panel, and opening sequence to Hadrus.

A few moments later, he heard the lid pop open, and heard a happy shout from Hadrus.

“Empty it out! *All of it!*” Garlan shouted, wondering if she was *really* going to order him to...

He carefully stood and carried the child’s limp body to the stasis unit and gently placed it inside. Shaking his head, he followed Sai’s instructions and closed the lid, then started up the storage sequence. In just a few seconds, Jaiying had been placed into stasis until she could be recovered to the *Kraken* and given a chance at life.

They were both looking down at the small figure through the viewing window, when they heard the first tentative steps approaching from the door, and immediately took cover.

### ***On the Kraken***

‘*Laisee, Jaiying is in stasis at the enclave ... in the Warren Leader’s office. Petrus is alive, but down. Two guards down. Two guards in service. Unknown threat level!*’ Sai reported to her.

‘*Understood, Sai. Thank you ... for everything!*’

‘*Get the girl. Bring her home!*’ Sai told her, then relaxed against the corridor wall.

It took her a moment, but she suddenly remembered where she was, and where she’d been headed, so she struggled to her feet and started running to the gym again.

### ***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!*”

## The End of the Road

He stood still while laughing loudly, and Trenka 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 she 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 loudly, 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.

### ***Vanaheim, At the Enclave***

Laisee arrived in force, only to find the enclave in disarray. Several Vanir were milling about in confusion, with a handful of Vanir guarding the entrance to the Administrative Center. She saw they weren't S'Slich'Tah, but caught sight of a small group of Vanir off to one side who were S'Slich'Tah. She was about to approach them, but a human guardsman came out of the building leading stretcher teams carrying

three other humans. The human guardsman, Second Hadrus, she noted, saw her and walked up to greet her.

“Lady Caldarous... Second Hadrus, my Lady. Commander Zickgraf and our other two men will survive. Second Galan remains inside with ... with the container that holds your daughter,” he said, with some difficulty.

“The container – it was a stasis vessel?”

“Yes ... we believe so, my Lady. Galan ... he was very gentle with her. There wasn’t really–”

“Was she still alive when she was put inside?”

“I couldn’t tell. Galan was... We *hope* so, my Lady,” he said, then dropped his eyes.

“Very well,” she said, then straightened herself.

She spoke to the Vanir she’d traveled with and made arrangements to transport the food locker. Then she joined with Hadrus as he escorted her to her daughter’s impromptu casket.

### ***The Kraken, The Gym***

“*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 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.

## The End of the Road

"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 was 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 down 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. Reaching out slowly, 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.

## ***End of Book Six***

## ***Acknowledgements***

This has been an interesting journey up to this point, and I would like to thank everyone involved in putting up with my chronic delays while I was actually trying to learn *how* to write and, more importantly, how to properly *edit* (at least, I *hope* I learned something about it).

My Editor (my long-time “womb-mate”) hadn’t suffered quite as much as I during the process (reading and *re*-reading the *same* passages through every major revision cycle gets *very* confusing after a while) but she still bore the brunt of pointing out the obvious (but not to *me*) errors in spelling, punctuation, word choice, continuity, and a host of other literary sins in the process of beating these first six volumes into what you see today.

I do want to apologize (*again*) to any reader who had to endure the first four volumes (Edition One’s) that suffered from my *own* hubris in the insane rush to publish in the spring of 2015 – those four volumes never having previously gone through a proper “ink-on-paper” edit pass – a fact that reared its ugly head during the conversion from the print version to the *first* Kindle version, which revealed an entirely *astonishing* number of gross errors in the text.

Of course, now we’re at the end of Book Six, and left with another damn “cliff-hanger” ending on it.

Never fear, as Book Seven and Eight are in the wings and awaiting their edit pass before yet another *final* formal release to the world, as has already happened with “Second Editions” of Books One through Four (you learn so many *interesting* things about your characters over the years that you end up having to go back and drop “breadcrumbs” into the past to make things clearer in the present (and future, one would suppose).

I would like to extend my thanks to the new support staff at Kindle Direct Publishing (kdp.amazon.com), who have taken over from CreateSpace (the previous Amazon book publishing resource) for all their help in making me understand and apply the correct processes in getting these stories from keyboard to print. Without their help, I would have been lost and confused (pretty much the same thing with me) and still be back at square one.

I would also like to recognize those same helpful folks for putting up with my somewhat wordy and difficult tech support questions – realizing that I’d tasked them with many questions that had obviously *never* been asked in such exquisitely confusing detail before (note that Tech Support is often separate from the Engineering groups who actually *develop* the tools used during the publishing process and sometimes provide differing degrees of information with conflicting reasons behind them).

That said, my efforts to convert text to Kindle ultimately met with disaster when I finally discovered the limitations Kindle introduces to the publishing process (yes, I'm not a Kindle user; sadly being content to curl up with a thinly sliced tree in my hands, while I read the stories that various authors lay out for our enjoyment).

Yes, you can read your digital books anywhere you can find a comfortable place to sit (and a charging plug). However, the efforts I put into text formatting and font selections fell by the wayside due to those same convenient, but ultimately limiting issues, so all of my previous Kindle efforts have been permanently pulled from Amazon (unless one of my offspring chooses to pursue it after my demise).

Finally, for any aspiring writers out there, if you have a story in your head then by all means get it down on paper (or, you know, bits and bytes) and go for it.

I'm not in this for the money. It was just to get the damn story out of my head, which would then hopefully let me focus on other aspects of my retirement – although nothing I've ever done before has kept me this involved for this long a period of time, and sadly, still continues to do so.

Thank you one and all.

- Floyde Leong

(Yes, for a *tiny* glimpse of Book Seven, keep thumbing through the back pages until you find something that looks like a story in progress...)

## An Unfortunate Decision

***April 22, 2005, 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.

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 down 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.

## An Unfortunate Decision

"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 at 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.



## An Unfortunate Decision

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 ... Eeewwww!’*

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

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