



Unhide the Past

**The Caldar Chronicles
Book Five**

Floyde Leong

Unhide the Past

Books in the Caldor Chronicles Series

Upsetting the Balance

The Wheels of Justice

Taming the Demon

Back to Work

Unhide the Past

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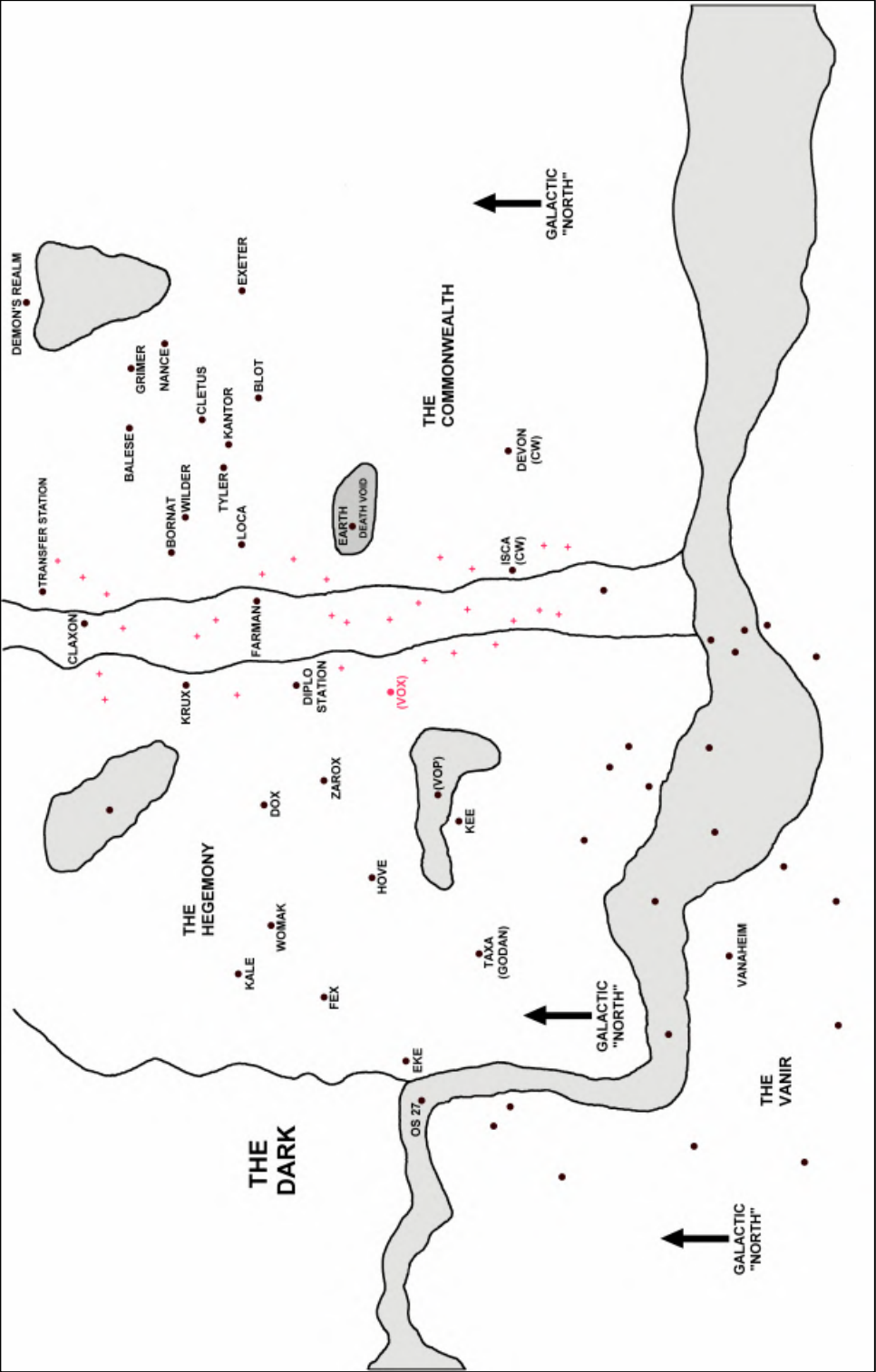
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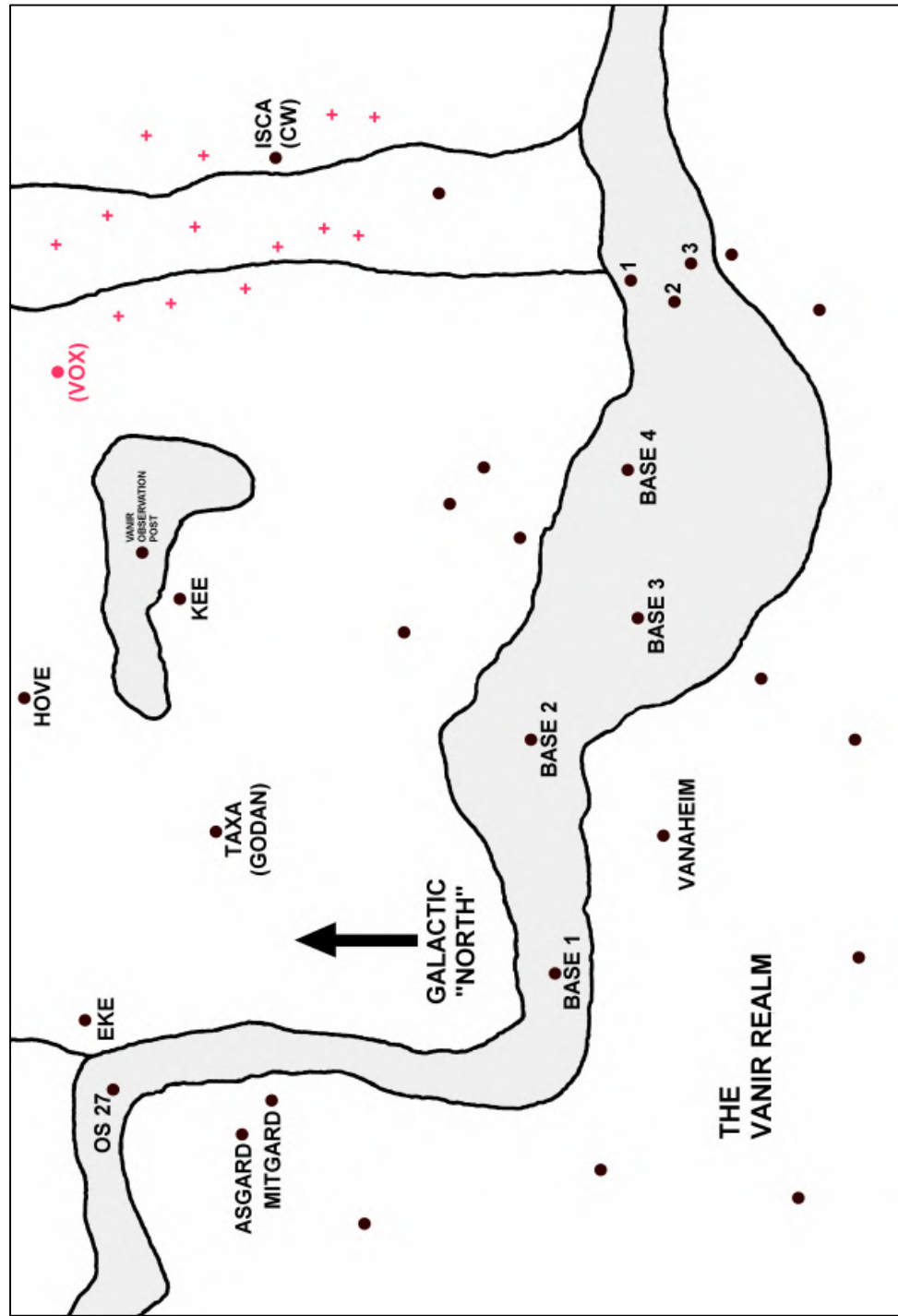
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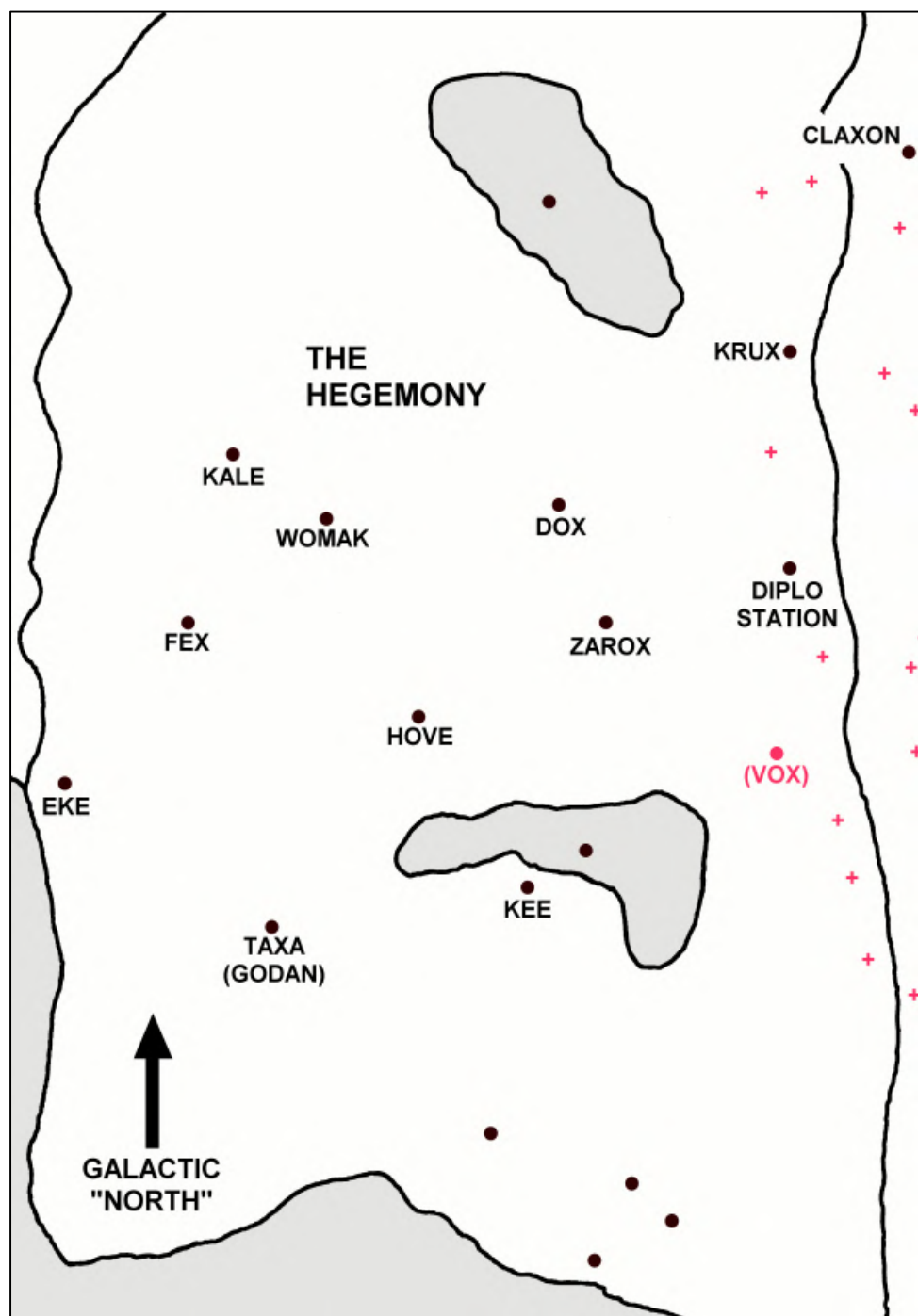
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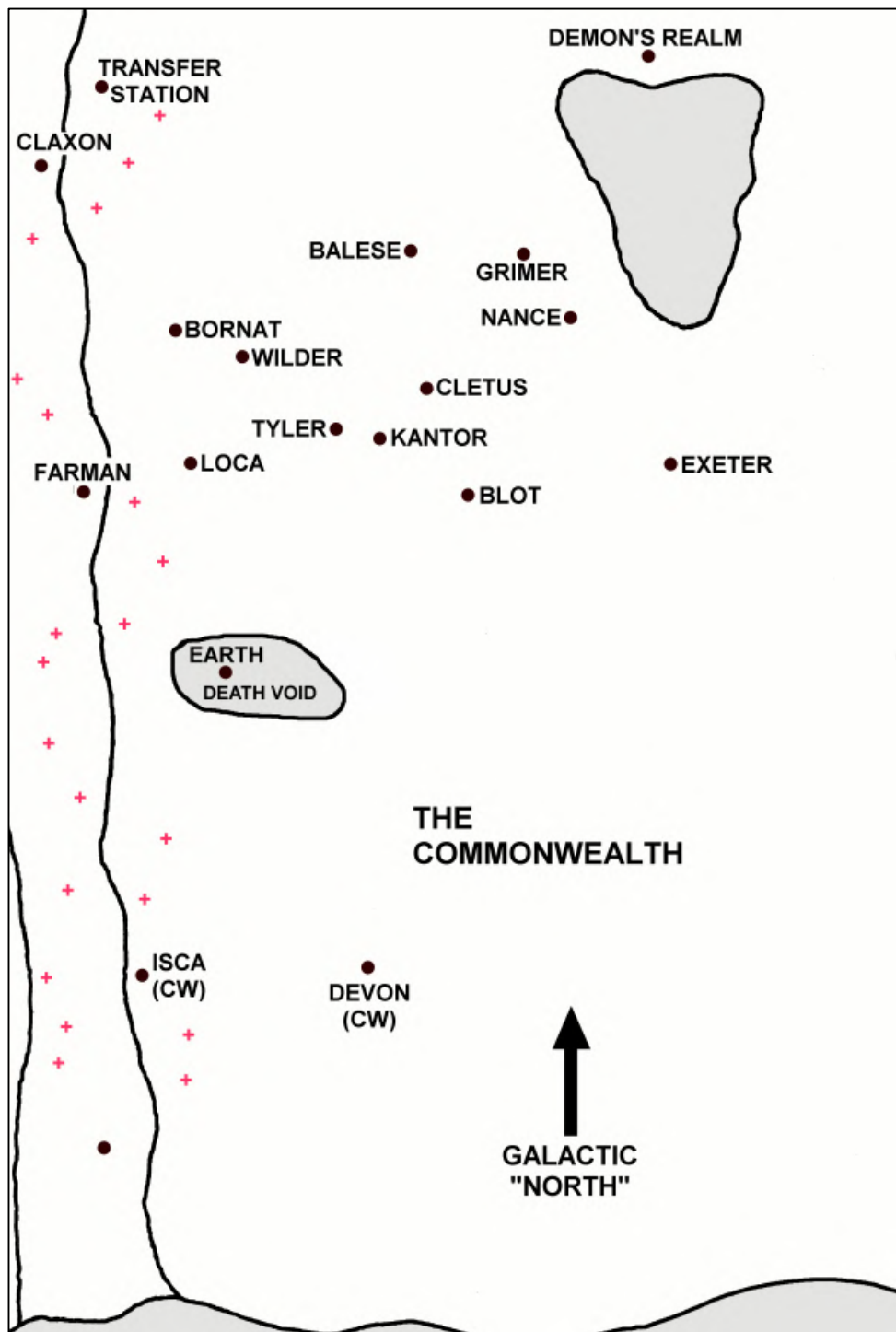
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For Gabriela, who brings smiles to her parents and grandparents









Conflict – without which a story is just a banal exposition of the tedium of our existence...

Proceed onward to share the continuing misery of these poor people's lives...

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Prologue

Lady Sai Tal had been sent on a fool's mission. She was to keep watch over a cursed Kantite Lord and kill him if he stepped out of line.

The only problem was, she no longer thought she was capable of it. In fact, for all intents and purposes, she'd severed her connections with authority and joined his piratical "off-the-books" operation on behalf of the Kantite Elder.

Unknown to the Commonwealth Emperor's First Sword, Lord Rondal Caldor was getting close to discovering the one misshapen piece in the puzzle that had been plaguing both the Commonwealth and the Hegemony for quite some time now. Due to the generosity of his previous nemesis, Lord Gagsa of the Drecks, he had even been given a clue in the form of a sole survivor from an unknown system... Someone, it would appear, from Earth's own distant past.

This hopelessly lost young woman had related a fantastic tale of Asgardian Gods ruling over her agrarian world, who would transport Midgardian grown food by way of the Bifrost Bridge, and take human sacrifices by way of incredible flying machines created by the Dwarves.

Naturally, they'd found nothing in any of their records to back up these claims, but luck was on their side – if they survived their encounter with their mysterious "third party" who was even now tracking their progress across the stars.

In the Cloud, Observer Station 27, The Vanir Senior Observer

The Senior Observer was of mixed emotions. On the one extremity, the expectation of recovering the last female and her new companions was an exciting prospect, even if they would eventually have to be destroyed. At least he could observe them together and perhaps make a determination of exactly *why* the female had been stressless for the last several periods.

On the *other* extremity, the fact that the female was proceeding, not *towards* Observer Station 27, but had diverted upwards to avoid the cloud and was headed *past* it was another fascinating object of speculation. Oh, to be a *grugnat* in the corner of that transport's control room! He fleetingly considered the very excitement of *personally* being along to observe them, but several of his mind-segments immediately put a stop to *that* nonsense!

He, along with absolutely *no* other Vanir, would never, *ever* consider placing himself near a human without adequate protection – such as force fields or solid armor. *All* Vanir knew that humans were *extremely*

dangerous, and who knew what would happen if any of them so much as *touched* a Vanir! Some of them might even be *poisonous*!

No – no – no – no. He was content to nestle within his station and continue his readings. The female's implant continued to send along emotional stressor impressions and physical condition, along with subtle impressions of the life forms immediately surrounding it. It was too bad it could not send along proper thoughts the *host* was experiencing, but that smacked of fiction. Eleven-twelfths of his collective mind laughed at the concept, while one segment of his mind, tucked deep down in a tiny part left over from his childhood, thought, '*Wouldn't that be neat!*' before being jeered into silence by its peers.

March 30, 2004, The Kraken, Setting the New Course

"Well, out into the big unknown," Rondal muttered in Commonwealth Standard. He missed the rolled eyes from Sai, who'd stopped by the bridge to learn what their status was, while Torga was there for his training rotation with Rondal this watch...

Over the last third of a month, they'd been slowly switching back to Commonwealth Standard from simple necessity. The Drecks females needed to learn it, and Auda, who spoke *none* of the languages within the Commonwealth proper, needed to be able to communicate with everyone without benefit of his inadequate translation services. With Déjà's help, Kiki had already mastered enough of it to get by, and the rest of the girls were becoming somewhat conversant in it, as well. They were helped, of course, since Rondal, Sai, and her sons already spoke it fluently. Even Torga already had quite a bit of it and only needed immersion to make the final transition.

"Where *exactly* are we headed, Rondal?" Sai asked in frustration. Since he'd started them drifting to the "left" of Hegemony territory, she was just as curious as Endo, Gallus, and Torga by this point.

"About thirty minutes out and back. Lord Gagsa said there was nothing out there, but I'd kinda like to take a look around for myself."

"But ... but that will take a ... a couple of *months!* At least!"

"At *normal* cruise, sure, but you know the navigation system we have, Sai. If we cut our calculations from five minutes down to less than half a minute per jump, then it won't take as long, will it?"

"Half a–"

"Not that many stars out here to look at, Sai," he interrupted her. "Besides, I haven't traveled by star shot for years." Her expression said she wasn't buying any of it, and neither was Torga.

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“Look, we’ll still do one-tenth second jumps – we’ll just do a lot *more* of them in the same amount of time. Thirty minutes out would normally take us about sixty-days at standard cruise, plus another sixty for the return trip. I’ve set the sensors to do a wide forward sweep, and we’ll do a quick look during the pause between jumps. We can be out and back in maybe a week. We get out there, survey the open space for anomalies – loose dark planets and other gravity wells – and if we find nothing, we’ll shift over a bit and wander on back. It’s not like we don’t have the fuel.”

“But ... Lord Caldar... Why this? Why now?” Torga asked, and Sai looked at Rondal pointedly before silently asking the same question.

‘Yes, Rondal, *why are you doing this?*’

‘*Because it needs to be done, Sai. I have foreseen it*’

“No, wait...” she said aloud while letting a disgusted look darken her features. “This is another one of your damned *hunches*, isn’t it? Just like the one that led you to *Kee* to try to rescue Torga’s *father*, but got your first officer *killed* in the process! Now you’ve got one to come out *here* for some asinine reason and we’re being dragged along for the *ride*! *Fine*, my Lord! Fire this damn thing up and let’s get this party in motion, but if we run out of fuel, *you’re walking back by yourself!*” she bitched at him loudly, before throwing up her hands and storming off the bridge.

‘*Sufficient diversion, my Lord?*’ she asked silently.

‘*Four could not have done better, my Lady Tal*’ he replied gratefully, before setting up the console for the multi-jump sequence, with sensor scanning that would both stop the ship, and send out an alarm at any contact at all.

They were on their way with a four-section watch rotation of all four men, plus Sai. Torga would be floating among them until he was up to speed, and could take over as the fourth watch stander all by himself.

April 6, Vanir Realm, Vanaheim, Reports for the Vanir Prime

“The Senior Observer at Observer Station 4 reports he is moving the station out of position and returning to our space as quickly as possible. The Death Void is rapidly approaching and almost upon the source planet of the human samples,” the Senior Advisor reported.

The Prime considered this for a moment, but nodded just once in approval. She was not about to offer a single one of the Vanir as a useless sacrifice for no purpose whatsoever. If their tagged humans on the source planet suddenly ceased to report, then it would be clear the Death Void was a real threat and not just an error of a few ships’ transit officers over several millennia ago.

“The Senior Observer at Observer Station 27 reports the remaining lost female has been proceeding into the Dark for several rotations. She had traveled approximately thirty units ‘left’ of our control group of humans, and is now returning in the opposite direction, but two units above the initial pass. The Senior Observer speculates she is on a transport that is conducting a search of the Dark in that area. He also concludes they are travelling at speed – not by jump length, but by jump frequency. It would appear their navigation system is not maintaining the proper calculation time to conduct a safe jump,” the Senior Advisor continued; but the Prime did not waste any time in speculation about the stupidity of humans.

“There is very little out there for a navigation system to calculate from,” she considered aloud. “Also very little for them to run into. One could surmise they are merely wasting their time, unless they do not already know the space is virtually empty. Have the Senior Observer at Station 27 keep us apprised.”

The Senior Advisor noted this before going on.

“The Senior Observer at Observer Station 14 reports subtle observations of those implanted among the dangerous grouping would seem to indicate they are aware of being under observation.”

“On what does he base this observation?”

“On nothing, specifically. It is a calculated summation based upon subsequent actions of the implanted humans’ contacts. Before implantation, their contact impressions have one tonal aspect. Shortly after implantation, their contact impressions changed to a great degree,” he reported somewhat vaguely.

The Prime barely considered this vaguely “potential” observation.

“That is insufficient data, Senior Advisor. The Senior Observer from Station 14 will be augmented with a Senior Advisor from our staff who will review the data such that a logical conclusion can be reached. Perhaps the Senior Observer at Station 14 has spent too much time observing the humans and subsequently lost his objectivity. Some would suggest the Senior Observer at Station 27 has shown similar irregularities in his reporting, as well.”

“Prime, the Senior Observer at Station 27 has always remained objective, but favors a protective role towards the sample species and recommends maintaining them as a preservative function when the rest of the humans eventually destroy themselves ... as they surly will,” the Senior Advisor asserted.

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The Prime ignored her Advisor's slight delay in agreement with the Prime's stated policy guidelines. The humans *will* destroy themselves. It was just a matter of *when*.

"That will be decided when the bulk of the human worlds have been allowed to collapse. It is not yet clear when that will happen, and I must admit that I find it curious they seem to be behind schedule. One could hardly hope that, after all these thousands of years, *these* humans might be the one species who could prove worthy of social contact. However, the mere speculation of such is frightening enough. *WE* are content to wait and observe, and if the humans become troublesome, then *WE* will decide what to do about them."

The Senior Advisor updated his notes before turning to continue his work, while the Prime settled back in her nest and set her multifaceted mind to ponder once again the question of the humans.

They were a very intriguing race. Quite noble savages after a fashion ... once you got past that pasty, pale complexion, and soft, squishy skin. Nevertheless, they were *extremely* dangerous, as well. She still wondered why she had agreed to the *second* phase of the implantation project, but for some reason did not think it was important enough to worry about.

In fact, the more she considered it, the less important it seemed, until it slipped out of her mind completely.

May 30, Kantor, Elder's Office, Evening Staff Meeting

"By the Gods, I never expected there to be so *many*! And even among our lower *staff*!" Molara put down the data pad and turned to Lady Ai with a lost look on her face.

"Make sure they're all cataloged properly," the Elder reminded her. "Larl is working on a database to cross-reference their positions, their access, and their backgrounds. *Something* ties them all together!"

"We need to keep checking, as well," Trenka said. "We found a new one who had just come back from a leave of absence. She seems the same, yet now she has an implant. We're checking her actions during her absence."

The Elder shared a grim smile while nodding her head.

"Good. We need to keep on top of this. Someone is out to infiltrate the Commonwealth, and we must be wary at all times."

"What of us? What if one of *us* becomes implanted?" Xiu murmured.

The Elder looked at her in shock before quickly pushing through every one of her senior staff, then looked within herself, as well.

“For now that does not seem to be a problem,” she said with relief, but then thought it through. “Each of you ... look within us all – and yourselves,” she hurriedly said, and waited impatiently to hear the results.

“We all appear to be clean, my Lady,” Fan finally said with relief.

“Yes ... for today,” Trenka muttered.

“Or the moment,” Molará added.

The Elder dropped her head, then covered her face with her hands, before muttering, “Ai-yah... *This* is how the Commonwealth comes to an end? Fueled by distrust and worry until we deal with each other in *fear*?”

“Those we find do not seem any different, and there are few differences between the devices as seen in the drawings made for us,” Xiu reminded her. “The screeners–”

“They are still working and sleeping in groups?” Ai quickly interrupted her.

“Yes, my Lady. No one is left alone – even when visiting the facilities,” Fan assured her. “Groups of three or more when possible, and they constantly scan those around them. My Lady, some of the screeners ... it’s becoming very stressful for them,” she added quietly.

“As it is for us,” she agreed.

“My Lady, tonight ... do you wish to view the Visions together?” Trenka asked softly.

Ai closed her eyes, and saw several paths looming before her, but so far, nothing of import was among them. They all still led months into the future, but then an idea came to mind.

“Who are the next to request leave? Get us their names and images, and we will place their pieces onto the table and see what their future holds for them,” she suggested hopefully.

“Excellent plan, my Lady,” Trenka said.

“We will all assist you, my Lady,” Fan said.

“And either way, it is ‘ships holiday’ eve and we may all help you celebrate at the peak of night,” Xiu said.

“I will stay with you, as well, my Lady,” Molará offered.

“No, Molará. It’s *your* night with Larl and Amy, and I know you look forward to their company, even as we all do,” she said, then shared a smile with her before reaching out to hug and kiss her warmly.

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“And while you’re with them this evening, you might mention what we have planned and ask Larl for his advice. Perhaps it will lead to something simple like ... like the same *travel* arranger, or the same *shuttle* transport. We need but find a few connections to break down the entire web.”

“It shall be as you say, my Lady,” Molara promised her, but dreaded to deliver this next bit of news. “My Lady, two Seniors en route to Loca have failed to arrive. Their transport never completed its journey.”

They all turned to Molara, who was still shaking her head slowly, before Ai finally broached the question.

“No reports of distress or wreckage? It is not unheard of, but...”

“We will continue to monitor reports, my Lady; but the Seniors in question were new to their position, and personally unknown to any of us. Their sponsors have not been able to contact them, but we remain hopeful.”

“Very well, Molara. We will ... we *must* remain hopeful,” Ai said before letting out a sad sigh. “Notify Lili and ... and the Emperor’s military advisor. Perhaps they have already heard news of them and need only advise us. Distribute identification for the missing Seniors, as well.”

“I will prepare the information personally, my Lady,” Molara said, then they all looked at each other for a moment more, before heading to their shared evening meal.

June 20, The Kraken, Beyond the Drecks Realm

It had been nearly three months. Three months of traipsing thirty minutes out and thirty minutes back, in a pattern intended to cover a cubic volume of space over half the size of the Hegemony and nearly two-thirds the size of the Commonwealth. The trip had been dull – with the exception of unannounced ship drills, scheduled training in languages, history, cultures, proper social behavior, and, of course, sword practice.

They were at the far end of another loop when Rondal made his way to the bridge and settled in for the changeover, joining Torga, the crewman on duty.

“Well, your father said it was the ‘Dark’,” he observed in Standard, while looking at the large forward display and fine-tuning the scanners across a wide band of detection. “Still looks pretty damn dark to *me*.”

He reset the scanners for gravity wells and radiation detection, then turned to check the galaxy chart in the three-dimensional tank located behind the control positions up forward.

“If there was ever something out here, then it was either reduced to nothing or it moved away – each situation calling for the same sort of instrumentality to accomplish,” he muttered to no one in particular.

“Lots of knowledge or lots of power. Probably both,” Torga commented from beside him. He’d had to step around Auda, who was staring raptly at the tank again, still fascinated at what it represented.

Manya didn’t usually accompany Torga on the bridge during day watches, but in her free time, Auda was Rondal’s nearly constant companion now that she’d discovered just how much fun it was to let him play in that “special” little place between her legs...

That had happened a couple of weeks after she’d started sharing bed space with him and Sai. He’d made her work for it, though, by insisting she learn to speak and read Standard along with the other Drecks women. Then he’d finally ordered her to start learning the ‘God’ powers from Sai, also along with the other Drecks women...

Rondal finished resetting the sensors back to normal before letting out a quiet sigh.

“Okay, nothing to see out here. Torga, go ahead and shift us over to the next pattern and we’ll head back towards the Hegemony again. We get into range, and you can check in with your father ... and tell him your *latest* batch of secrets.”

He smiled at the display, while feeling the chagrin rolling off his new crewman. That was *another* thing that had changed in the last few months...

They’d gotten a month into the survey cruise, when he’d caught Torga trying to figure out the communications system during a return pass. He’d let him sweat it out for several minutes, before admitting he and Gagsa had arranged for him to come along for the ride, while picking up some extra skills along the way. Meanwhile, his father had Torga safely out of harm’s way, while he went about reclaiming his honor and position within the Pack system. Any information Torga learned about the Commonwealth was just a bonus.

The young Drecks Lordling had bristled at the thought, until Rondal convinced him the concept of fostering was common to both Hegemony and Commonwealth societies. Gagsa had put him there as a valuable asset – both to keep him safe, *and* to learn from Rondal. Rondal had assured him that once he left the *Kraken*, he’d be a considerable force to deal with as, long as someone didn’t pick him off with a beamer, or pellet thrower, or perhaps poison, or a bomb – or a hungry Kee, *none* of which

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were considered honorable ways to deal with a personal threat in the Drecks honor system.

Torga had opined that it wasn't an even exchange. Rondal had Torga, but who did Gagsa have? Rondal admitted that he'd pondered the situation, but the only person who came to mind was *far* too dangerous to simply hand over to Gagsa and expect anyone to live.

When Torga persisted, he'd finally admitted that he'd been thinking of having *Sai* assume the role of Gagsa's First Wife, which had caused a *complete* breakdown of seriousness for about two more days until he'd had him face her in the practice room for the first time. The experience had been humbling. Two months later, he was still being abused by her, but his overall improvement had been remarkable.

In fact, she'd recently told him that in a few more weeks, he'd be ready to have his eyes opened and trained by Rondal himself.

June 21, Kantor, Royal Homestead

Fresh out of the shower and ready to relax for the evening, the Emperor was looking forward to sampling the latest vintage from the Royal vineyards, before spending a few hours in the loving care of his First Wife. After deliberately leaving a damp towel hanging out of the hamper, he wrapped himself in his robe and walked into his outer suite with a question on his lips.

"Lili, what do your spies tell you about the Drecks lately?"

Instead of getting a direct answer, the scene he walked into was of Lili sitting comfortably next to an end table, with two crystals of ambrosia on it. Just leaving the suite was Spring Blossom, with little Josie and Jaiying in tow. The girls had wanted to stop by and visit their Aunt Lili before going to bed, and the fact that they'd caught their Uncle Rad as he was coming out of the shower was just a bonus.

On hearing his voice, the girls ran back and wrapped themselves around his legs, saying they already missed him and loved him, but they had to go to bed now, and goodnight. He ruffled their hair and sent them off again. Once the door closed, Lili rose and brought him a crystal of ambrosia, then drew him over to share some relaxed cuddling time before they went to bed.

"My spies tell me Lord Gagsa has been making steady progress in causing upheaval within the Hegemony," she murmured, her smile reflecting the sweetness of her voice, before going on. "He seems to have acquired a new left *arm*. Rumor says a retainer had *displeased* him, and his arm had been taken in retribution before it being surgically attached

to replace his *missing* arm,” she said, then paused to sip from her crystal before continuing.

“There are also stories that he captured a Commonwealth Witch and compelled her to make potions for him to make him grow younger. There are even indications the Master Pack on Zarox has taken note, and now seeks him out for an appraisal of his position within the Drecks pack structure,” she added teasingly.

“Remarkable,” Radatel murmured, before sipping his drink quietly. “I wonder if our dear brother had anything to do with this?”

“Oh, *no*, my love. Our Ronnie would *never* do such a terrible thing as that! *Rondal*, on the other hand, might very well have had a bit to play in it. I know he vexes the Elder constantly, although *Sai* seems to have calmed down over the last several months.”

“Ah! You are so right, my precious Lili. Truly, it *is* something that scoundrel *Rondal* would be up to. You don’t suppose he’s added anyone *else* to the family lately, do you?”

“Well, let’s see... We have *Sai* – and her *boys*, of course. Their wives ... the fosterling *Torga*, and *his* wife. Ah! ... And the little *transplant*, *Auda*. Plus the *Kee*, of course.”

“Oh, of course. Still no idea of the other players in our little drama?”

“No, my Lord. That is what *most* disturbs the Elder. Her lower staff is *riddled* with implant victims, and we’ve yet to determine a safe way to deal with them; other than rounding them up and destroying them all at once,” she muttered in irritation, appearing merely vexed about the situation rather than appalled.

“Lili, that I will *not* allow! Elder or not, she will *not* arbitrarily kill my *citizens* – *whomever* they are!”

“She has the means, my Lord, and the will. She is a force to be reckoned with.”

“She is just another citizen of the *Commonwealth* and is sworn to *guard* the citizens and guide the *Crown*. She does *not* make *policy*!”

“You *do* remember your father, my Lord? He chose a policy that did *not* meet with the Elder’s approval,” she reminded him in a murmur.

“Lili, my father was a *fool* to ignore the advice and counsel of his staff ... and the *Elder*, of course. I realize this, but I chaff at the barriers placed between the Crown and the Elder. You advise me, certainly, and I accept your guidance, yet I fail to receive an invitation to visit the *Elder*? To receive her guidance and counsel *directly*? If we are of two different

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minds, then how can we effectively draft policy to best fit the needs of the Commonwealth?”

“My Husband, it has *always* been so. The Emperor leads, the Elder advises. It is the custom.”

“My point *exactly*, Lili! It is *custom* – not *law*!”

She remained silent while sipping her drink, as did he. It was not hard for him to read the sudden tenseness in her shoulders.

“Lili... I forget my manners, and unjustly put you in the middle between the Crown and the Elder. Please forgive me,” he quietly offered, and after several seconds, let out a quiet sigh of contrition, before she was able to relax enough to let her shoulders slump.

“My Husband, you rule and lead in difficult times, and it is my duty to support you as best I can. I will advise the Elder of your suggestion for collaboration on various policy issues. I cannot imagine her response – yet we may remain hopeful,” she said, then leaned over to kiss him lightly on the cheek, before sliding around to his lips.

He returned the kiss, but broke from her lips to set their crystals aside, before returning to kiss her in earnest.

After a minute of constructive effort at her lips, he began working his way down her chin and along her jaw before pausing by one of her ears.

“Lili, I don’t know how I would manage without you,” he murmured lovingly, before starting to pull the shoulder of her robe down.

“My darling Husband, it is time for bed. I believe I have a few choice words to *share* with you,” she murmured huskily, and he agreed wholeheartedly.

He helped her up and guided her to his room. Almost as an afterthought, along the way, he asked her, “Lili, have you heard anything new about the Bornat?”

In the Children’s Suite

It was Sharla and Vitas’ turn to stay with them tonight, and the children were finally settling down. Vitas stood by and smiled at the tiny waves they sent his way, while Sharla was tucking them in and kissing them goodnight.

After assuring them they would be in the room right next door, they bid them all a goodnight before showering and crawling into bed to relax for the remainder of the evening.

‘Walter, what’s Grandpa doing now?’ Cathy asked.

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'He and Auda are playing again. Grandmother Sai is lying nearby and playing with a toy'

'Poor Grandmother. I bet she's missing Endo and Gallus. At least she's still teaching Torga, isn't she?' Josie asked.

'Torga is on the bridge with Manya, and they're playing, too. So are Endo and Gallus, although they've traded with each other tonight' Jaiying pointed out.

'What I meant was, what is Grandpa doing with the SHIP?' Cathy clarified; finally getting a word in. *'Is he still headed out, or is he coming back again?'*

'He's headed back in on another vector. I don't think there's anything out there, and told him that. I think he is deliberately delaying things' Walter speculated.

'Why would he do that?' Jaiying asked. *'No. Never mind. Even Grandfather does not know why he does things, sometimes'*

'He studied all he could about the Kee. He is having Grandmother teach the Drecks to Heal and love. He is teaching Torga to be a better warrior, and having lots of sex with Auda. Are we going to be like that?' Josie asked.

'One can only hope' Walter suggested.

'Boys!' All three girls giggled into their pillows.

'I have a feeling--' Cathy started to share.

'You're only five!' Josie protested.

'No! It's like I feel something is going to happen, and Grandfather needs to come home' she was allowed to finish.

'Is it like when we watch the Elder's visions?' Walter asked. *'They are working together later tonight and I was going to watch again'*

'No. I don't see anything, but I just feel Grandfather should come back this way for some reason' Cathy shared, then sighed at the ambivalence she was feeling.

'Should we call him home?' Walter asked, curious as to her motives.

'Oh no. Not yet. I am only five. Besides, he is playing with Auda. If she becomes Healer enough to bond when they achieve a climax together, then it may open up a link between them that he can exploit. Perhaps that is what I'm feeling?' Cathy considered.

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'Great... Now I'm torn between listening to the Elder, or listening to Grandfather and Auda. Mother and Andy don't do it often enough for me anymore' Walter protested.

'Boys!' The muffled childish giggles of three precocious young girls echoed very quietly in their roomy bedroom.

June 23, The Kraken, In the Dark and Headed Back ... Again

Rondal had Auda flat on her back, with legs up and arms crossed underneath her knees. He suspended her bottom in the air while Sai tucked a pillow under it and helped her settle in comfortably.

"Don't worry, sweet Auda. Rondal will make you feel *very* special tonight," Sai assured her, then bent down to kiss her again, before leaning over to suckle on his shaft; making it nice and wet for his penetration of her.

She placed more salvia on her fingers and wetted Auda's vagina even more than her previous oral attentions had made it, before moving out of the way for him to slide himself into her, which he did. Auda looked up at him with a delighted expression on her face.

"Oh Rondal! Ja ... Ja ... is *good!*" she said while he slowly slid all the way in and almost all the way out, over and over.

As he kept stroking, she emitted several squeaks and groans indicating the delight she was receiving under his attention; then he finally took firm hold of her hands and held on tightly. He started very slowly...

Tiny tingles started around her erectile tissue and crept up to her clitoris; shocking her eyes open and making her stare into his eyes in astonishment. Then it slowly extended further into her vaginal opening until it was involving the majority of nerve endings capable of feeling pleasure in her groin. Finally, the tingles reached down to her anus, where they tickled and teased; even as she could see that both of his hands were holding hers, and both of Sai's hands were on her breasts; slowly rolling them in large circles while tweaking her nipples lightly. She started to make anxious noises, so Sai clamped her lips over her mouth to muffle the sounds and hold her in place for what she knew was soon to come.

He started moving a bit faster, and Auda started breathing heavily through her nose. Sai let off her lips, and Auda began panting while he pushed her arousal up another notch, then kept her at it for a few more minutes, before pushing it up again.

'Are you going to let her come soon, Rondal? I promised her tonight would be special'

'I'm trying to establish that sexual bond between Healers and clients. The one where you both feel each other climax at the same time? The kids think it might lead to a breakthrough'

'Well, you'd better let her come before she has a heart attack' she warned him.

'Oh... Okay' he agreed, then pushed Auda over the edge lightly.

"Oh – OH – OH – JA! JA! Minn Allvaldr! JA!" she exclaimed while bearing down hard around him in a series of tight spasms.

He slowed and cut the stimulation, letting her catch her breath and begin to relax.

"Oh ... Oh, that was very good, minn Rondal," she said lazily while he continued his slow stroking.

He let her rest for a few minutes, before speeding up again, and ramping up her stimulation at the same time. This time, when she started to vocalize, he had another idea.

'Sai, remember that thing Maya showed you about breath control? Auda is making entirely too much noise for me to concentrate. Would you please?'

'Certainly Rondal. Perhaps you can extend the favor to me some time?'

'You need but ask, my Lady Tal'

'Charmer!'

Sai stretched out sideways to Auda and wrapped her arms around her head to hold her face tightly with her hands. Then she clamped her lips over Auda's and blew a deep breath into her mouth; opening up her throat to her lungs, and keeping it open by repeatedly blowing into her mouth, while slowly pinching off her nose. Auda panicked a little, but he assured her Sai was just going to help him love her tonight. She relaxed once she felt Sai was not going to hurt her, and that is when he ramped things up another notch, before speeding up again. He did this a few more times, then started working with Sai to control Auda's breathing.

'Fill her up and hold her for a ten count'

Sai took a deep breath and blew it forcefully into Auda's lungs until they were full, then closed her throat, forcing Auda to hold her breath, while Rondal counted to five, and then forced a large peak through her body. After another five-count, Sai opened up, and Auda gasped rapidly in and out of her mouth. She was getting partially fresh air through Sai's nose, and partially used air from Sai's lungs.

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He gave her another thirty seconds, then had Sai repeat the cycle. After the third cycle, he began to feel things in his body that were not from his body.

‘Sai, you’re not gonna come soon, are you?’

‘Not unless you ravish me right after you get done with her’

‘Good. I’m starting to feel her’

‘Oh! Give her that looping thing. That should open her up!’

‘All right. One more cycle like before. When the next one comes, you hold her to a count of sixty. You just breathe through your nose’

‘Sixty? All right. Just don’t kill her’

‘Haven’t lost one yet’

He started moving faster, and brought her up rapidly. He counted to five, pushed two moderate climaxes through her body, then felt the connection begin to solidify, so he backed off for another thirty seconds.

“Auda ... Auda, my lover, I’m going to make you *very* excited now. Don’t be afraid,” he told her, then sent to Sai *‘Now’*

Sai took a deep breath and forced it into Auda’s lungs; holding it there tightly. Auda seemed to know what was coming because she began to struggle, but by then it was too late. He slammed her with arousal, and she started involuntarily clenching him repeatedly while multiple climaxes swarmed within her groin – taking control over most of her abdominal muscles in the process. As each one hit, he heard muffled words coming from her mind on an odd band, that seemed to be echoed somewhere in the middle of her abdomen, as well.

He mapped her mind and locked the band into his own memory by sound, location, and type, then continued with the arousal and started feeling more of what she was feeling internally. Sai finished her sixty count and pulled away, leaving Auda free to gasp and pant wildly. Auda was staring wild-eyed at Rondal, while her system was slammed by the overload of climaxes that now included his own arousal as well.

‘Hop on board, Sai. Listen right here’ he showed her.

Once she made the connection with him, Sai rolled onto her back and began feeling all that Auda was feeling without being touched, but as nice as it was, she still reached down between her legs to help her catch up with Rondal and Auda. Rondal started feeling a clenching within his own abdomen and knew Auda was feeling herself tightening over his penis, as well. It was at that point when he pushed all three of them over. Auda half-screamed, then held her breath when her body locked up tightly

while draining him of his remaining seed – Sai, as well, feeling the collateral effects of the Healer's orgasm, because all three of them had been attached together before their group climax.

Afterwards, Auda lay there panting rapidly while looking at him with dazed wonderment in her eyes – *and* her thoughts, as he was finally able to skim over her mind and interpret her thoughts on that odd band that was strangely echoed from the implant in her abdomen, which somehow appeared to be radiating in a *directed* vector. He followed that line, and felt it led elsewhere into space below them; then felt something *else*, as well.

'Walter, is that you, I feel creeping around out here?'

'Yes Grandfather. Congratulations. You've found the correct band, and we will trace it from this side'

'I advise caution, Walter. The rest of you, as well. Listen only! Do not project! See if you can safely triangulate the receiving point for the implants. Do nothing else!'

'I see your wisdom, Grandfather. Aunt Lili? The Elder?'

'Lili only. Contingency only. I have already upset the Elder enough this cycle'

'Understood, Grandfather. And we welcome Mistress Auda to the family'

'Thank you, my family. Goodnight' he pushed before dropping the conversation.

Rondal took a deep breath and slowly pushed himself upright; slowing his thrusting but keeping up a slow rocking because it still felt good to him as he was still somewhat hard – until *that* started to go away, as well. He sighed and pulled out, before bending down to kiss and lick Auda's vagina clean of what little of his juices he'd let leak from himself. Then he pushed her legs up against her chest and released her hands; letting them fall listlessly to her sides, while carefully guiding her legs down to the bed – all the while noticing her eyes still shone brightly whenever she looked at him.

He searched her mind, and held on to the connection when she emanated waves of love and caring regarding him; then watched intently when Sai rose up and kissed her lightly, and felt the shift of caring include Sai as well.

"Auda, how do you feel?" Sai asked softly.

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“Umm, I feel much *loved*, my Sai. I love our Rondal,” she said dreamily, and he felt the truth of it coming from her.

‘Sai, do you need more attention this night?’

‘Not anymore, Rondal. You gave her enough for both of us. She’s adorable, isn’t she?’ she radiated quietly.

‘Well, if you like them tall...’

‘I hope you like them Drecks-sized, because we have a problem. Gaia can’t come’

‘Where does she have to go?’ he teased her.

‘No. I mean, she’s ... how long have you known?’

‘From day one. She was a virgin in that regard. Virgins sometimes can’t let go’

‘Why didn’t you say something?’

‘Not my place to interfere between a man and his wife’

‘Well, I need you to interfere now’

‘Hmm, perhaps we need a ships holiday?’

‘Gallus was thinking more of a therapy session with us and them, or maybe just another routine contentment lesson? Special Healer techniques? You haven’t yet Gifted them like you did the rest of Gagsa’s Healers. He is comfortable enough with his own sexuality so he has no bad feelings about himself. He’s just concerned he’s denying Gaia of all the pleasure that’s due her’

‘Just remind him of that when she’s trailing around behind him and begging for his touch night and day’ he mentioned, while glancing down at Auda.

He leaned down and kissed her, and she sighed and closed her eyes. It seemed only moments later when gentle snores emanated from her nose and lips. He and Sai rolled her over sideways facing the wall and tucked her in, hearing a tiny murmur of contented exhaustion from her, before the snores came back, but muted now.

He stared at her wistfully, but Sai broke his concentration.

‘She snores louder than Maya’

‘I noticed that, Sai’

‘Rondal, Maya has—’

Floyde Leong

'A new set of responsibilities which do not include worrying about the person called Ronnie ... who no longer exists'

'She made a mistake, Rondal!'

'No, she made a choice, and I cannot blame her for it. I have lied in the past, and I will lie again in the future. Even now, the first seeds of my deceit begin to nibble at the Hegemony from within, and I am mutating the next crop on a daily basis' He sat upright before turning to look directly at her.

'If I had a thousand female Kee to drop on every Drecks stronghold, I could eliminate our problems within a year ... or make them so weak, they could not withstand the Commonwealth forces my brother would send against them. We have the FIRST clue on our implant victims this night, and the children have been notified. By the Gods' grace, we will FIND our third party, and either JOIN them with us, or DESTROY THEM ALL TOGETHER!'

'Rondal, you can't be serious!'

'If THAT'S what it takes to secure our Commonwealth!' he pressed forcefully. *'Sai, I have fostered Lord Gagsa's son within the Royal family of the Commonwealth. My original thought was to bond you to Lord Gagsa in return – as his First Wife'*

'WHAT?'

'I would have gladly done so, myself. Unfortunately, I lack the appropriate accessories to make it worth his while' he told her while reaching out and gently patting one of her breasts. *'Besides, you're the only woman I know who'd be safe under his roof. Everyone else would be TERRIFIED of you – at least, those of them left alive after the bodies began to pile up'*

'You're insane!'

'Am I? Two Royal Houses, Sai. One of the Commonwealth, one of the Hegemony – bonded by family and fostering. NOTHING could stand before us!'

'You're serious about this, aren't you?'

'We're all humans, Sai. You told that to Gagsa, yourself. If we're all humans, then we should all pull together AS humans and put our societies on a peaceful standing'

'The Drecks would NEVER go for it!'

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‘No ... not right now. Perhaps in a few more years when my garden begins to flower’

‘Why, you devious bastard... You had this planned all along, didn’t you!’

‘No, Sai. I had PREPARED for many things all along. This was simply the easiest to manipulate into being. I took a chance on Gagsa based on my research on him, and he had reason to see me anyway. We’ll see what happens in a year or two’

‘What will we do in the mean time?’

‘We will continue to sharpen the tools we carry and make sure they are finely trained. My Senior Staff continues research along various lines. We’ll just wait and see what pops up’

He leaned over and kissed her, then hugged her tightly, but flinched.

‘Oh, my. Have your exertions injured you, Rondal?’ she asked solicitously, but already had an idea of what he’d done.

‘I believe it’s called “retrograde ejaculation.” Wouldn’t want Auda to be cursed unnecessarily now, would we?’ he sent with a grimace, before suddenly relaxing.

He was trying to be circumspect about inadvertently creating new Healers, but was beginning to have second thoughts about *this* particular method. Unfortunately, condoms weren’t carried aboard as standard supplies.

He glanced down at the solidly sleeping Auda, before turning back to Sai and quietly asking, “Would you care to wash now, or in the morning?”

“The morning will be soon enough for me, Rondal,” she whispered, then yawned, forcing him to hold back his own yawn, while she settled in next to Auda before snuggling up to her – back-to-back.

He got up and used the facilities to drain the redirected semen from his bladder, rinsed himself off, then brushed his teeth again, before coming back to bed and snuggling with Sai. He was soon asleep, while Sai lay there, considering why Rondal had not ejaculated fully into Auda, but rather redirected his emission into his bladder. Although it was relatively easy to neutralize semen after the fact, there had to have been a reason for it, but it was late, and she could address it when they all were not so tired. She closed her eyes and soon drifted off to sleep.

June 27, Earth, The Annex, Snow Woman’s Gift

The Annex Healing and Learning Center had been running smoothly for the last few years. In addition to accepting two more young tribal

women to begin Healer training, they'd added widely accepted regular adult sex education classes for the tribe – such as the one that was nearly over for this evening...

Ling and her bond-mate were still visiting the Ambassador in Washington D.C., and had left the Center in the hands of Lady Shu and her husband, Wilber Milton. This particular class found Kayla and Mary on staff and waiting for the test to be over to grade the results, with Gray Feather and Snow Woman proctoring the written portion.

Snow Woman savored her relationship with Gray Feather, but because he was so difficult to shop for, she wanted to do something special for him. He had insisted only her love and company was enough to make him happy, but she felt he deserved more.

Tonight would be different. Kayla and Mary had been teaching her some *new* techniques that, up until a few years ago, she would have been embarrassed to even *think* about. There was that, and she'd made him an extra special little gift that was already in a box and tied with a ribbon...

After the exam was over, the participants were rewarded with a small buffet of snacks and welcomed to partake of the Center's facilities to practice some of the techniques they'd just been tested on. Many had stayed to do so, but Snow Woman dragged Gray Feather to one of the smaller rooms. When they got there, it looked like his wife had already prepared the room with sheets, pillows, and blankets for an evening of play. They hugged and kissed, before he directed her towards the large platform, but she held up a hand while revealing a surprise brought from behind her back. Snow Woman handed him the tiny box and waited with sparkling eyes while he opened it and looked inside.

Her special present for him was a new beaded thong to replace the worn loop of leather that had graced his neck when he'd first warmed her bed so many years ago.

Gray Feather smiled at the beautifully beaded work she had created for him to replace his aging leather thong. She'd often commented that the old one was worn and sometimes smelled, but he'd never followed through with promises to replace it.

He kissed her in thanks, before pulling out his talisman and lifting it from around his neck...

(Not Quite in Phase with Reality)

Although still quite deceased, Elder Kita had been very patient all these months, and tonight it was finally going to pay off...

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After finally locating the faint source of her Grandson's emanations, she was at first dismayed, and then disgusted to discover that just the tiniest portion of his being was trapped inside the essence of this elderly Earthling by a mere bauble; a totem created by her Great-Grandson. Oh, that clever, clever boy to have figured out a way to defeat her successor's curse like that, yet with no word at all of where HE has been hiding all these years!

Rakel, her hateful, evil grandchild, was now remarkably contrite after his few years of imprisonment; apologetic, even ... as well he should be, after stealing the life of one of her Healer's who'd declined to provide proper contentment to him. That the order had come as an object lesson to her wayward Grandchild from Elder Kita herself, was beside the point. He had taken that Healer's LIFE, and the result had been the aneurism that had taken HIS rebellious life.

They had found it amusing that, only NOW – now that they were BOTH dead – could they chat amicably about the past, and consider the future of their Commonwealth, and how best to assist those left to shepherd it...

Both Kita and Rakel waited silently – well, they were dead – and the moment the talisman left Gray Feather's neck, Rakel was released into his Grandmother's custody. They quickly sped off to join the rest of the rebellious disembodied entities who were busy setting up shop around the Birth World; intending to keep it safe once again from the “nosy neighbors” somewhere “down below” them.

The Annex, A Gift to Remember

As the talisman left his neck, Gray Feather gave out a quiet gasp, and staggered for a moment. This caused Snow Woman to look on in fear; for he had told her what the talisman kept at bay. He looked around himself anxiously while pressing the talisman to his neck fruitlessly, before pulling it away again and settling heavily on the platform bed, where Snow Woman slowly joined him.

“Gray Feather, are ... are you all right?” she asked in a murmur.

“My woman, the demon ... Ronnie's demon has fled.”

He handled the talisman in his palm again, while looking thoughtfully at the image on one side, and the crest on the other. That didn't stop both of them from quickly changing out the old thong for the new one, while Gray Feather held on to it tightly, but once it was around his neck again, he still felt no different. Then she saw him close his eyes and begin to nod his head, so she waited patiently while he returned to the teachings he had practiced for the majority of his life; eventually letting out a quiet sigh before opening his eyes.

"What do you think it means," she asked, but he only shook his head, while still lost in thought at the confusing impressions he'd found.

"I think it means there is change coming," he finally said quietly. He looked at her with concern, but then smiled warmly, saying, "But there is still time to celebrate life."

So saying, he covered her face with kisses, which finally relaxed both of them, before they settled in for some loving, and perhaps a little bit of rest ... after Snow Woman gave him her *other* little surprise.

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"What's going on with Grandfather and Grandmother?" Mary asked, having picked up some levels of stress from their familiar presences.

"I think... I think Grandfather will be going on a Vision Quest soon," Kayla suggested. "And we'd better contact Ling – in the morning," she added, after looking at the clock, then they finished recording the scores from the test before putting away the test material.

The staff had already cleaned up the buffet before joining some of the graduating class in practice and play, so after everything was done, they went back to the residence and waited for Danny to return from his watch. They both had several words to say to him and knew he would love each one.

***July 15, Kantor, Royal Homestead, Evening, The Children's Room***

*'I never thought I'd be saying this, but I'm getting tired of feeling people having sex'* Walter considered. *'At least strangers'*

There was a collective girlish gasp, followed by the sound of giggling within the dimly lit room. The door to the visiting parent's room opened and Maya stuck her head out.

"Girls, it is bedtime. Please settle down before you wake up Walter."

"Yes, Maya," Cathy said.

"Yes, Milk Mother," Jaiking said.

"Snnn," Josie snored.

"Ai-yah," Maya whispered quietly, before closing the door once again.

*'So, what are the latest results, Walter?'* Cathy asked.

*'Well, considering that I only seem to be able to follow those emanations resulting from either vigorous sexual activity or violence, I've located several alien watch stations scattered about the Commonwealth, along with a few over in the Hegemony. They are shielded at least as well as*

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*Grandfather's tank, but do not appear to have any offensive weapons aboard them. The occupants appear to be reptiles, or some other form of saurian species. Their mind bands are similar to the ones the implants are using to transmit data to them'*

*'Can you read them – their minds?'* Josie asked.

*'Thought forms only. From what I can gather, there are a variety of impressions of humans among them'*

*'What do you mean, Walter?'* Jaiying asked.

*'Some of them seem disinterested in us – we are just something they monitor and report on. A few of them seem interested in us as a species, and one or two groups seem to be actively working to cause us grief'*

*'The bombs?'* Josie asked.

*'All of them seem to fear us collectively, but the ones who have bombs on board seem most interested in our elimination'*

*'Factions among their people, perhaps?'* Cathy suggested.

*'If it's anything like what's between us and the Hegemony, it could become very difficult if there is a power struggle among their kind'* Jaiying considered.

*'For us, certainly, but we could use that to our advantage'* Walter suggested. *'I caught a testing sequence from one of the groups implanting our citizens with bombs, and traced it back through the receiving section of the implant. I think we can prevent them from going off, but I lack the fine skills to do so. Jaiying, you are the best at that sort of detail work'*

Jaiying gave it a moment's consideration, before agreeing to work on this with him.

*'I'll go out with you, and you can show me what must be done. We can try to disable one of their bombs on one of their stations. If that works, then I can go out and disable all the bombs already implanted in our citizens'*

*'What about the Drecks?'* Cathy asked.

*'Screw the Drecks!'* Josie pushed.

*'Josie! That is not Grandfather's plan! Right now, it's humanity against the saurians – or whatever they call themselves. Besides, Lord Gagsa is solidifying his power base, and he should be able to remove Lord Glau within three years or less'* Walter pointed out.

*'Or, we could just set off the bomb in Lord Glau's First Minister du jour during the next court session?'* Josie suggested.

‘Let’s call that ... Plan-B’ Cathy countered, and they all giggled quietly again.

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“Maya, don’t bother getting up,” Amy murmured while Larl continued to nurse from her breast in a half doze. “They’ll settle down in a while.”

‘Walter, Girls – be sure to update Grandfather BEFORE you take any aggressive actions’ she sent to the next room.

‘Yes, Mama Amy’ came back from the group.

July 16, The Kraken, Approaching the Hegemony

Rondal and Sai watched Gallus walking towards them, followed closely by Gaia, who had a silly grin on her face, and a rosy blush to her cheeks.

‘Virgins’ Rondal shared silently, and Sai went to poke him in the side with her elbow, but caught Auda’s hand in the process.

“Ow!” she said, and Sai immediately apologized to her.

“I lost my footing for a moment, Auda. I’m sorry,” she said, but frowned up at Rondal.

“Yes. Well, you know how it is with us *older* folks. Perhaps I should take you both to bed now for a ... *nap*?” he suggested lightly, and Auda’s eyes lit up, just as he was contacted from home.

“Or perhaps I should report in and let you girls start without me.”

He slid out from between their arms and guided them forward, before turning and heading to his planning room.

‘Hello Walter, how is everything?’

July 20, Commonwealth Space, Observer Station 6

Observer Station 6 was nestled in a rocky stillness in space not far from one of the busier jump routes between Kantor, Cletus, and Tyler.

The location the Vanir had selected was perfect. It remained securely cloaked from human sensors, and they were able to send out their cloaked ships to intercept and insert explosive implants into selected humans along those routes. The precise technology involved was very clever in concept, but the intricacies of construction had finally been mastered in recent rotations by senior scientists of the S’Slich’Tah Warren.

The Senior Observer was a proud member of the S’Slich’Tah Warren, and to him went the honor of implementing his warren’s personal plan in

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opposition to the public desires of the Prime. His warren's plan had been *authorized* by her, but was still unknown to the general citizens of the Vanir public. He didn't know how his warren leader had managed to gain *that* particular concession from her, but did not question it – he just implemented it. Since the human infestation had failed to self-destruct on schedule, the Senior Observer had absolutely *no* regrets in his preemptive actions to help push things along. He had surrounded himself with others of his warren who believed the same, and they were willing to face the banishment of their entire warren should their actions ever explode in their collective visage.

Seven Observer stations were now involved in implanting efforts, but only his, and Observer Station 23, situated over in their augmented group of insane humans, were actually implanting explosive devices into humans of a specific behavioral type – usually angry, abusive, and at the upper levels of their society. The idea was to eliminate these specific individuals, then let chaos reign once control from above was removed. Within a short amount of time, humanity should then finish their self-destruction quite neatly on their own – just like they had done so often before.

He did not understand why the Prime didn't simply declare the humans excess life forms all together and begin efforts to eliminate them from existence. It's not as if there were absolutely no Vanir at all who would *gladly* step forward to perform such a disgusting and morally repugnant task. After all, it's not as if they were a *properly* regulated species.

Moreover, the *worlds* they lived on! How could *any* reasonable being be expected to live on such a variety of dry, cold, thin-atmosphered, and otherwise inhospitable worlds they all seemed able to thrive upon? Perhaps that was the *root* cause of their insanity? The only truly *calm* humans they had ever discovered lived in icy conditions at the top of one of their worlds, and even then, they ate their young on a regular basis when food gathering became impossible. They just had no sense – no ... no *honor*!

The Senior Observer sent out the next implantation ship to intercept and implant their targeted human subject – some high-level administrator of some sort – then retired to his nest to relax in the high-pressure, climate-controlled environment that all Vanir everywhere dreamt about – a virtual duplicate of home on Vanaheim. He set a single facet of his multi-compartmented mind to monitoring the room telltales, before settling in to dream of the warm swamps and bubbling mud baths of home.

Kantor, The Royal Homestead, The Children's Patio

It was a beautiful mid-morning in the canyon, and the children were enjoying the fresh air and sunshine while they played in the special area recreated from the memories of Lady Diane. There was a climbing structure, a couple of slides, a set of four swings, and a sand pit, with the appropriate number of scoops and buckets for digging holes and creating sand castles – should anyone truly desire to look them up and see what was involved in their construction.

Puss and Boots were lounging in the shade of bushes nearby, while their kits were wandering about chasing small flying insects.

‘Jaiying, there appears to be a cloaked ship approaching one of the transfer nodes. It carries a few of those implantable bombs’ Walter pointed out, while he was playing in the sand area.

Jaiying stopped pumping her swing and focused on where Walter was looking.

‘I see it, Walter. Should we stop it?’

‘More importantly, do you think you can disable the bombs?’ Cathy asked her.

‘It would be better to watch and see how they pull it off, first’ Josie suggested, then called the kits over to be petted, which they eagerly did; instead of having to wait for bedtime cuddles with their human siblings.

Tyler Transport Vessel, En Route to Tyler

The liner traveling along the standard route between Kantor and Tyler was approaching a transfer and transition node.

The Senior Administrator of Commerce for Tyler was on his way home. He still had an upset stomach from the *almost*-confrontation he’d had in the Emperor’s court last week that had ended poorly and barely allowed him to walk away with his dignity intact. Looking back, he had realized just earlier today that the absent-minded Emperor he’d dealt with last week was *also* the one who had, not that long ago, blithely ordered the death – by *valaet*, no less – of the Borgalas clan leader over what some would consider a somewhat lesser issue.

At least, *he* considered it a lesser issue. If the Emperor could not see through the fog of his First Wife’s influence that trade negotiations between Tyler and Blot should definitely favor *Tyler* in all respects, then he was a fool.

Administrator Kroner rubbed his stomach a bit while the ship settled in for it’s next round of navigation calculations. They said that you

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couldn't feel it, but he was sure that he could. For one of such girth, he was a very sensitive man, and it never failed to amaze him that his sensitivity in all things was scoffed at by everyone, including his wife, and the Healer he visited on a regular basis.

She, in fact, had suggested that he find *another* Healer to work with. When questioned further as to why, she had informed him she was finding it difficult to deal with his issues of anger and disappointment – issues that he continually refused to deal with on his *own*.

Ah, there it was *again!* That painful little twitch – just below his *naval* this time. Not sensitive? *Him?* Ha! He would have *words* with the Captain after this voyage was over. By the Gods, *yes!*

Kantor, The Royal Homestead, The Children's Patio

Maya started to get out of her seat, but Laisee reached out to her.

"Maya, what's the matter?" she asked, which brought Maya's eyes to her face.

"Josie... She ... she's calling the kits." There was a touch of worry in her voice.

"Nothing she has not done for several *years* now, Maya," Laisee said quietly, while still resting a hand on her arm. "Puss and Boots will watch over them."

Maya watched – *terrified* – when the kits, almost a third the size of their parents, now, slunk closer to Josie before plopping down right next to her. They rolled over and allowed Josie to rub their bellies and scratch their ears – somewhat too roughly in her eyes, while Puss and Boots seemed extra attentive to this action. Josie played with them for quite a long time before they both got up and wandered over to their parents and began chasing the tips of their tails – and gotten swatted several feet away when they connected.

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'*Did you get all that?*' Josie asked, after thanking the kits for lending themselves to the diversion.

'*Nice setup. I think Donnel is almost there*' Walter considered.

'*Who was it they implanted this time?*' Jaiying asked.

'*The Administrator who irritated Uncle at court last week*' Cathy shared.

'*Ooh ... too bad those bombs are so big*' Josie lamented.

'*Josie!*' Laisee sent.

*'Sorry, Mama Laisee, but people shouldn't pick on Uncle. He has enough to worry about with the Commonwealth and Grandfather giving him problems all the time'*

*'Jaiying, do you think you can disable the bomb?'* Laisee asked.

*'I think I can, Mother'*

*'Grandfather, a moment of your time, please?'* Walter asked, while turning over another scoop of sand.

*'Hello, Walter, it appears to be a nice day outside'*

*'Yes, it is, Grandfather'* he replied, before quickly bringing him up to speed on their new findings.

*'Very well. Jaiying, you may proceed to try and disable a bomb, but disable one on the ship that's headed back to that station thingy. Do it ... do it when they're docking. Lots of bad things happen when people are busy'*

*'They aren't people, Grandfather'* Josie protested.

*'They're people until I say otherwise! Right now, they are planting explosive devices within citizens who are not their concern! Walter, Cathy – transfer all of your observations to Donnel as soon as it can be arranged!'* he ordered fiercely, then quickly started reviewing other possible avenues for further research from a somewhat calmer perspective.

After a short delay, he suggested *'Some way to block their activation signals would be appropriate, but since we've never been able to artificially block our own thought bands, I'm somewhat doubtful one will be found. It may very well be necessary to seek out each bomb and disarm them, one-by-one, before we move on the aliens'*

*'When do you plan to move on the aliens, Grandfather?'* Cathy asked.

*'That depends on you, children'* he sent with warmth.

*'Understood, Grandfather. Umm, do you want to watch?'* Walter asked, while the ship was getting closer to its station.

*'Certainly. Jaiying, you may proceed'* Rondal sent.

*'Oh, ah ... all right ... ah ... ah ... oops!'* she muttered silently.

### ***Aboard Observer Station 6***

The Senior Observer on Station 6 was in a light doze when the outer screens flared, and the alarms went off. He slithered out of his nest and made his way to the control station in record time.

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“What happened?” he asked the Duty Observer.

“The implantation ship ... it was returning, and it ... it just self-destructed! If it were just moments later, our shields would have been down, and we would have been destroyed as well!” the Duty Observer reported while hissing in agitation.

“Move the station! Full cloaking and shields! Take us ... take us *down* thirty segments!” he snapped, and the call went out for ships movement.

“Communications! Transmit a full report of this incident directly to Vanaheim! Include all log recordings! Between them and us, maybe we’ll determine what happened!”

“Moving station!” the call went out, and they began their top speed of nearly whole second jump durations, followed by thirty seconds of jump calculations.

It was purely misfortune they’d not updated their star charts in a while, and completely missed the fact that a Death Void had moved in directly beneath them.

### ***Kantor, The Royal Homestead, The Children’s Patio***

‘Well ... *damn*’ Rondal’s silently muttered imprecation echoed across the void.

*‘The OTHER connection next time, Jaiying’* Walter shared dryly.

*‘I’m sorry, Grandfather ... I ... I was a little nervous’* she explained, while sounding very upset.

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“Maya, where are you going?” Laisee asked while reaching out to stop her again.

“Jaiying – she ... she’s upset about something.”

“Well, if she’s upset enough, then she’ll come over and tell us about it.” Laisee gently patted Maya’s arm again. “Please sit back down and relax, Maya. The children need to rely on themselves during playtime.”

~~~

*‘It’s all right, Jaiying – those aliens were not supposed to be putting bombs into our citizens’* Laisee sent to her daughter with a warming flush of love.

*‘Yes, Jaiying. You saved Commonwealth lives today by preventing their future execution – and all those who would be near them’* Rondal sent with loving warmth.



*'That base is moving, Grandfather'* Cathy observed.

*'Watch and see where it goes. They may be leaving town for a while, but remember – do not probe actively. Observe only. Especially if you find a planet full of those people'*

*'Yes, Grandfather'* Walter and Cathy sent together.

*'We'll do our best'* Josie assured him.

*'I promise I will try to be very careful, Grandfather'* Jaiying promised.

*'I'm sure you will, Jaiying. I love you all'* Rondal sent.

*'We love you, too, Grandfather'* Walter sent for all, before dropping their conversation to focus on the departing platform.

### ***July 21, The Kraken, Almost Joining Sai and Auda***

After all the excitement of the *previous* day, this day had remained somewhat routine. Endo and Sai spent their quiet watches on the bridge, and now Torga was just starting his rotation for the next six hours, and Rondal figured he would give him three hours alone on the bridge before wandering by to see how he was doing.

The “evening” watches seemed more boring than either of the nominally “daytime” watches, but everyone seemed to adapt rather well to the enforced Earth time structure they operated on while playing pirates out in the far reaches of enemy territory.

Since he had the time, Rondal thought he would stop in and see if either of his roommates wanted to play. Just a few minutes later, he found himself in the position of a voyeuristic observer of the ladies' focused activities. He stood by the doorway and watched while Sai devoured their blond bed companion to a high-level of satisfaction and maintained her there for several minutes. It appeared she was content to keep giving, and Auda was content to continue receiving, so he quietly backed away and wandered to the commons while considering their current status.

Following his time-honored ‘safe’ ritual, he sat down with a tall glass of juice – reintroduced sometime after Sai and her family had adapted to his environment – before opening a data pad to go over his list of both known and suspected information.

First of all, there *was* a third party involved. That had been borne out last month, when Walter and the girls had followed that obscure directional thought band from Auda to a solitary station hidden in a cloud not far from Eke. That was where they'd discovered an interesting race of non-humans who appeared to be reptilian, or at least saurian in

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nature. It had certainly been a more intriguing discovery than finding the Kee. That they used communications and control frequencies up in the *thought* bands was absolutely remarkable. Even more so, since they apparently did not know how to use it themselves – *personally*, that is.

He, and more importantly, the *kids*, were having little trouble picking up saurian thought forms now, but divining the obscure meanings made them difficult to interpret. Once you got past “tired,” “hungry,” and “gotta poop,” all the rest was pretty much superficial nonsense.

Rather than simply heading directly for that platform sitting in the local cloud, he’d chosen to tease them to see if he could lure them out by continued trolling back and forth across the Dark. However, even the enticement of dangling themselves like a worm on a hook didn’t garner a response from them, other than a comment or two from Walter when they’d had a hot evening of play, and the readouts at the hidden station became somewhat more agitated when Auda reached climax.

Otherwise, that tiny implant in Auda, barely a half-inch square and very thin, gave no indication that it was working. Walter thought he had identified the means to disable it, but Rondal ordered them left alone for the time being. The important issue was the *bombs*.

Those devices, somewhat larger in size and containing a very tiny radioactive component, could also be disabled – if Jaiying could select the *correct* connection. To give her credit, Rondal himself would have had trouble picking the right connection in that tiny bit of manufactured marvel that this new species could produce. In fact, he doubted very much that he could have worked out the intricacies of either of these devices.

Not for the first time did he wonder just what the limits of his Grandchildren were. The fact that they were able to decipher the alien devices to the extent that they had was simply astonishing. It involved micro manufacturing – *nano*-manufacturing, for all practical purposes. That was an area neither the Hegemony nor the Commonwealth had had any real success with; and the Commonwealth had been at it for a much longer time. Apparently, the technology was needed to work at thought-level frequencies. Perhaps that was a missing research field they would need to pursue it from?

There was a whole new potential market place for devices both useful and deadly. Certainly, deadly enough in the hands of their new adversary, whom they still knew damn little about, other than they were saurian, liked low or red light, and were fond of warm, damp places.

*‘Umm, Grandfather? There is an update you would probably like to know about’* Walter called to him delicately.

***Kantor, The Royal Homestead, A Conversation with the First Wife***

*‘Lili, just when were you going to let me know this had happened to Earth?’ Rondal asked brusquely.*

*‘We are still investigating, Rondal. There appears to be no cause for alarm at this time’*

*‘Lili, there is a considerable amount of extremely provocative weaponry both on, and above Earth. If the void holds true to form, then everyone on the planet is at risk!’*

*‘And, dear boy, we were quite delighted to discover Ling is reporting conditions appear to be normal – although, yes, we have suspended transports to and from Earth for the time being, and are watching the situation very carefully. Something else of note... Wilber reports your Medicine Man, Gray Feather, seems to have misplaced your Demon’ she reported, somewhat curiously. ‘He reports Gray Feather no longer feels the Demon’s influence when he removes his talisman. If you should wish to try the same experiment, we would be pleased to hear the results?’*

*‘I... In addition to my talisman, I have other safeguards watching over me,’ he shared vaguely; deliberately not mentioning the tiny talisman he’d embedded into his abdomen, before she continued.*

*‘We wonder how you learned of this situation, Rondal. You appear to have resources we are currently unaware of ... unless Petrus has been speaking out of turn?’*

*‘Petrus? Is he still in residence?’ he asked blindly.*

*‘He left quite a while ago, once he’d learned that you’d taken Sai away for the duration. Be sure to let us know when it is time for him to go back into hiding’ she teased him.*

*‘He’s safe for now, but this new information comes at a most inauspicious time. What of the information from the Hegemony? Has my “contact” within the Master Pack’s court produced any further heartwarming news?’ he asked hopefully.*

*‘Your “contact” has reported a great deal of stress from Lord Glau of late. He appears to be approaching a point of contention within his own Pack over the lack of security within the Hegemony. Since the Demon has been silent, he is now faced with Lord Gagsa and his followers – who’ve seemed to have worked out an understanding with the Kraken’s Child, it would appear’*

*‘Then it would appear my garden begins to bear fruit’*

*‘And it appears to be pulling its own weeds’ she added teasingly.*

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*'As was hoped'*

*'Not planned, my darling boy?'* she asked sweetly.

*'An opportunistic happenstance, my lovely Lili, which bore fruit of an unusual quality. We must still wait to savor its flavor, to see if it suits our palate and meets approval with our digestion – or the Elder's'*

*'Ha! And I'll wager you've not mentioned this to the Elder?'*

*'No more than what you've included within your reports, Lili. She has such a delicate digestion'*

*'And what of the big question, Rondal? What of our third party? Do you have any information you care to share?'*

*'The investigation is proceeding, and I cannot stress too highly that such is its delicacy, it must remain between the two of us for the time being. Rest assured that, upon any misfortune that consumes me, my Senior Staff will report to you immediately – directly, and in full measure – so that you may attempt to deal with it as may be required. Although, I would suggest that you let my Senior Staff handle the details of such actions as may be warranted'* he told her, which, she noted, was worded very formally.

*'Your Senior Staff, I trust, are being carefully protected?'* she asked daintily, but he could feel her persistent curiosity dancing around the edges of her question.

*'They are in the safest place I could find, and protected day and night, both within and without their quarters, by the most dangerous and trustworthy guardians I could summon'*

*'Very well, Rondal. We will continue to trust your instincts in this matter, but should you have any worry for them, know that the entire Commonwealth is at your brother's command, and stands ready to lend assistance to your endeavors upon our behalf'*

*'My love to you and the family, Lili ... and my apologies to Jaiying for forgetting her birthday last month'*

*'Our love to you, Rondal, and to our extended family, and ... have any new seeds begun to sprout among them yet?'* she asked teasingly.

*'Sai has taught them well, and they are not with child as yet'* he sent with silent laughter.

*'And so, our little Auda? Has she become an exceptional Healer – as yet?'* she teased again.

*'Sai reports that her skill is becoming quite well honed for a beginner, but not as a "Gifted" beginner. As for the taller ladies, I made*

*accommodations to Sai's request. They have all received the Gift, but it was by extending myself through Sai. She also provided a bit of my essences manually, but it was unknown to them. We are treating it as a human-standard versus a human-Drecks situation – just so I would not have to personally service each of the ladies in turn'*

*'You were never known for shyness, Rondal. Dorcas certainly never complained'*

*'We are still bringing Torga along slowly. At this early stage of his marriage, it would perhaps damage his fragile ego should he see Many respond to me in such a manner; although, perhaps teaching them the skills Ling and I developed could relieve that worry from his mind. I don't believe it would bother Endo and Gallus all that much, but certainly word would get back to Torga and his lady, and thus we avoid confusion'*

*'Then perhaps that is one plan you may pursue, Rondal. After all, you've already prepared for it'* she teased him once again.

*'I bow to your wisdom, my Lady'* he sent with warmth before dropping the conversation.

Lili lay back on her divan while reviewing the conversation she'd just had with Rondal. It had been somewhat informative, but still lacked one of the pressing elements the Elder herself was so concerned about. Any further thought on it was forestalled when she saw her husband's smiling face enter the room, accompanied by two fresh crystals of ambrosia.

"Ah! You're back, my love," he said while continuing over to her. He leaned down to give her a kiss, before handing her a crystal. "And how is my little brother this evening?"

"He *knew!* He *knew* about Earth's investment within the void, and confronted me with it!" she said in a pout.

"Lili, it's not like it's all *that* big a secret. The latest updates have been going out for days now, and–"

"My Lord Husband – Rondal is on the *other* side of Hegemony space! He could *not* know about it unless someone *told* him about it!" she said in frustration, before taking a tiny sip of ambrosia.

"Well, perhaps Petrus has been updating him?" he suggested, while settling back into a comfortable chair.

"He says not. No, he asked if Petrus was still in residence here. Perhaps that was merely a diversion?"

"It could have been. What else has he to say about it?"

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"I've assured him that Earth is still viable, but we've stopped all physical traffic. I told him Ling is still reporting, and also about that business with his Medicine Man."

"The 'demon' he carried within him? I've often wondered about that ... if it was merely a delusion they both shared." Radatel pondered that while sipping his own ambrosia.

"It appeared not, my Lord, at least in their eyes. Gray Feather is of Earth, but he would be a lesser Healer on Cletus if he were female," she considered abstractly.

"Another 'sport' then?"

"Possibly so... *Probably* so, if Rondal's comments on Gray Feather's visions are true. No further word about the mysterious third party, or who is dealing with the implants. Larl and Amy have made many trips to the platform to discuss intricacies of shield technology and manipulation – something Rondal had asked about once before. Something about putting force fields within other force fields, or some such. I suspect it is an entryway into the human body that Rondal is having them investigate. It would leave no telltale incisions or wounds if worked properly."

"What of his elusive 'Senior Staff' he's mentioned upon occasion? Does he still deny it's composed of Ardan, Tannis, and Deltec out on the platform?"

Lili spun that around her mind for a few more passes, but kept coming up with the same obstacles. She finally let out a sigh while shaking her head slowly.

"I truly do not think it is them, my Husband. He said they were in the safest place he could think of, and protected both day and night. He said their guards were the most trustworthy he could find, and extremely dangerous."

"Lili, that could be any *number* of places. Just about any garrison of Imperial *"Marines"* would qualify for that distinction. Perhaps they are residing down on Earth with Ling? That garrison is composed of some of our most senior and loyal warriors."

Lili thought back over her earlier conversation with Rondal again, but it triggered another cycle of head shaking.

"No. He was not concerned for *their* safety, my love. He was concerned about *Earth*. His staff was only brought up later when I asked about them. He does not seem concerned about their safety at *all*, except that he will not tell me who they *are*. He – he does not appear to *trust* me!" she finished with a pout.

“Lili... I could ... *order* him to tell you who they are,” he suggested slowly, before taking another sip of his drink.

She thought through the ramifications of such a command – *none* of which were positive in her mind.

“No, my Husband. That would be unfair to both Rondal and you. You enjoy the benefits of ‘plausible deniability’ to a tenuous degree simply by the fact that Rondal is out of your control. He has resources he protects from without, and also from within, by that very same mechanism. If you were to deny his exclusivity in this, then he might decline to provide us what little that he does.”

“But what happens if misfortune befalls him, Lili? All that he knows would be lost.”

“No ... his Senior Staff would contact me immediately – report *directly* to me, he says – and provide all the information they had so we may make best use of it, but...”

She paused for a considerable amount of time while following that line of thought.

“Lili?”

“He – he said they would report to *me* ... but that I should let *them* handle the details of anything I decide to do. *Gods!* Rad, you don’t suppose he’s raised an army of ... of *Seniors*, do you?” she asked in confusion, then turned to look up at her husband.

Radatel looked down at his lovely wife – the *First Wife* of the Emperor – and set his crystal down.

He came over to the bed, kneeled down beside her, then kissed her gently on the lips before pulling back and looking into her eyes.

“My darling, I think you should finish your drink. Then perhaps you will share a special word or two with me this night. We may reconsider these matters *later* ... in the *fresher* light of day,” he suggested softly, before kissing her lightly once more.

She looked into his eyes lovingly, and smiled at him sweetly ... almost serenely.

“I hear and obey, my Emperor,” she murmured, before tossing back her drink and letting him lead her to his bedroom.

### *In the Children’s Suite*

“Walter ... *what did you just do to Uncle Emperor?*” Cathy asked accusingly.

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*‘Just reminded him of what a very special lady Aunt Lili is’*

*‘We’re not supposed to change people’s minds like that!’* Jaiying reminded him.

*‘You’re the one who suggested having Lady Ai think it was a good idea to have Grandmother Sai talk to Maya through Mama Amy’* Cathy reminded her.

*‘Aunt Lili was getting too close to finding out about us’* Josie pointed out.

*‘Aunt Lili is the Elder’s master spy. She will not forget this little distraction’* Cathy counter-pointed out.

*‘Uncle Rad is not that little’* Josie reminded them, then giggled.

*‘And perhaps we could change Aunt Lili’s mind, as well?’* Jaiying suggested.

*‘If Aunt Lili figures us out, then we will contact Grandfather for advice’* Walter reminded them all. *‘We will not hurt or otherwise affect Aunt Lili. If necessary, I will fall upon her and beg for her mercy – leaving all of you out of it’*

*‘You’ll fall upon her NIPPLES, you mean!’* Josie sent with a snort, which got them all giggling quietly.

### ***The Kraken, In Contemplation***

Rondal was torn about what he should focus on. He felt he needed to get back to Earth, but Jaiying also needed to do a successful test of disarming an implanted bomb. If Jaiying had that much trouble picking out which circuit to burn, his thoughts of teaching Seniors to disarm them en masse was doomed to failure. He could have them start with the simple tracers, but that could send a bigger alert out, and possibly trigger a panicked reaction to set off *all* the bombs.

He wondered how Donnel was doing with the shield and force field studies he’d been making. The kids had promised him this last bit of data they’d fed him seemed very promising. If they could go in, suck out a bomb, then send it far enough away – or perhaps into a force field of sufficient strength to withstand the explosion – that would be of *immense* usefulness. They might have the luxury of pulling out a simple monitoring tracer – just one or two – to see its reaction to being removed from its host without raising an alarm. He suspected it would simply stop transmitting once removed from the power source, but pulling a bomb out might very well trigger it. But then again, surely *some* of the implanted victims have died by now? He hadn’t heard of any



“unaccountable death by explosion” reports ... not that he necessarily *would have*, of course. Something else to mention to Lili, he supposed.

Ideally, coming up with a way to block the signal would be preferred, but he wasn't sure it would be safe for those who had bombs installed. They could rely on a repeating signal to *stop* them from exploding, or perhaps needed a counter-signal to *keep* them from exploding if contact with their host was somehow lost. That's what *he* would do as a human ... a human who would do something as immoral as implanting bombs in non-combatant civilians, that is.

Unfortunately, he had no way to judge their morality, unless he simply went and *asked* them just what in the hell they thought they were *doing*!

That thought caused him to sit upright, while his mind began sorting the possibilities...

Bold move ... or stupid ... or *insane* ... and probably not very likely he would be allowed to simply knock on the door and be invited in.

Besides, there was that tricky little thing about a language barrier to overcome, unless he found at least *some* of them communicating on that particular band of thought, or perhaps ... maybe one of them could be *taught* to communicate on that band of thought? After all, he'd already done that to his big brother, along with Lord Gagsa...

He gave that situation several seconds of serious consideration, until it started spitting out ridiculous scenarios that he couldn't interpret to his *own* satisfaction – and he was usually very good with ridiculous scenarios. Shelving that now pointless exercise, he came to the conclusion that he'd have to consult his Senior Staff about it, as they were so much better at some things than he was. After all, they were young, and did not yet know what couldn't be done.

### ***Vanaheim, The Prime's Offices***

The Prime was not having a particularly good day. She had just finished reviewing the report on the loss of Observer Station 6 – gone missing upon entering the Death Void that was currently in the general area around the human's source world. She was very disturbed by the report. The station had disappeared the moment it entered the Death Void. No messages, no debris, and presumably, no survivors – just like before. Yet according to their remote readings, the implanted subjects on the source world still lived. It was a perplexing problem, but there was a further issue. Observer Station 6 was “special.”

“Prime, the first analysis of the recordings is complete. Detectors on the implantation ship reported an unexpected transmission from

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somewhere nearby that appears to have triggered an explosive device of some sort aboard the implantation ship,” the Senior Advisor reported.

The Prime stiffened at his report. They had assured her the implants would be *absolutely* safe until triggered remotely, and now *this*? They’d *lied*! She’d lied! The *scandal*! She had to ... had to...

“An *explosive* device? What is an implantation ship doing carrying *explosive* devices? That is *not* part of their accepted procedure! How did this happen?” she asked with a great deal of agitation.

*If the truth ever got out...*

“Prime, the Leader of the S’Slich’Tah Warren claims ... she claims their scientists have perfected an implantation device small enough to carry a low yield explosive that is suitable for disrupting the humans ability to maintain their stability. They suggest the current policy of letting the humans fail on their own is unsound and should be dropped in favor of more *direct* action to insure the safety of Vanaheim.”

This was *insane*! How could she have let them *convince* her! Moreover, why was their warren leader going *public* with their capability?

*Control! Must maintain control...*

“How many...” she whispered.

“Prime?”

“How *many*!” she asked clearly. “How many humans have been implanted with these ... these *morally reprehensible devices*!”

“The ... the S’Slich’Tah Warren has control of two Observer Stations – number 6, which was lost, and number 23, which remains outside the small void near our primary control species in the controlled grouping. They did not say they have implanted any of them, but are prepared to do so upon your command.”

The Prime thought that through with the majority of her mind’s segments.

The S’Slich’Tah had not said they’d *implanted* any bombs; only that they were *prepared* to do so, and only upon *her* command. Very clever, the S’Slich’Tah ... presenting a tempting option that might force her withdrawal from office. She wondered just how many bombs they’d *actually* implanted, but almost automatically pushed that thought completely out of her mind.

The Prime was confused for a moment, before again considering the current situation facing her.

“Have Observer Station 23 cease all operations immediately! They are to return to Vanir space. Their charter to act on behalf of Vanaheim is revoked. As of now, the S’Slich’Tah Warren is censured, and restricted to their hereditary holdings on Vanaheim until proper disposition is made by the assembly. Warn all other Observer Stations of this breach of passivity. Acts of retribution by the humans have suddenly become a very real possibility.”

Her Senior Advisor looked at her in surprise.

“My Prime... Humans are ... well, they are merely *humans*. They could not be expected to pose a *serious* threat to us,” he suggested, while she was trying very hard to maintain her calm.

“Senior Advisor, I appreciate your candor. I am well aware that, in *general*, humans are merely humans and not a laudable threat ... for the *most* part. I also remind you that, while we were still swimming in mud and hunting for our sustenance, the humans were spreading themselves out amongst the stars and reshaping entire *worlds* to make them the *least* bit habitable for themselves – and then moving onto them, and *thriving!*” she said forcefully, before closing her eyes to gather her senses again.

“This recent bit of stability is most profound among them, and it deserves quiet study and contemplation. If they’re finally on the verge of moderating their passions to approach a moral civility comparable to the Vanir, then causing them to redirect their efforts against *us*, rather than each *other*, is the very *height* of foolishness.”

Her eyes remained closed while her Senior Advisor pursued his thoughts.

“Prime, it was this very office that sought to position them against each other. The two groups have stopped growing, and confront each *other* while they continue to ignore us.”

The Prime finally found a measure of calm that allowed her to face her Senior Advisor and settle her point.

“I am well aware of the policies of my *predecessor*. Her policies have only shown that the larger group failed to pursue domination over the smaller, as she had expected. This was something that she did *not* predict. She is no longer in charge,” she pointed out unnecessarily. “My policy is to observe quietly and see if the humans continue to either moderate their behavior, or fall into chaos – but if they fall into chaos, it must be by their *own doing!*”

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“Yes, my Prime!” the Senior Advisor said abruptly, before turning to issue the appropriate orders regarding the remnants of S’Slich’Tah Warren, while the Prime continued to stew in her nest.

*Damnable! Absolutely inexcusable!* How did the leader of S’Slich’Tah Warren expect her to *cover* their activities if she let incompetent followers threaten her *plans*? What could she do now? How could she save this catastrophe from destroying her *own* warren because of the stupidity of a few S’Slich’Tah? Now she would have to sanction their entire *warren* to ... to... No... Perhaps a more *enlightened* approach would be wiser?

### *In the Death Void Surrounding Earth*

There was a gathering of entities around the remains of Station 6, but one of them was not altogether pleased about the situation.

*‘Would it be too much to ask why that station was disassembled?’ Kita testily enquired of the group.*

*‘It is what was always done’ replied ‘Alf ... something’*

*‘They might have hurt us’ added ‘Kra ... something’*

*‘And no lives were lost’ pointed out ‘Hew ... something’*

*‘There are bodies everywhere!’ Yandi exclaimed.*

*‘They are only the vessels’ explained ‘Lwi ... something’*

*‘They live on elsewhere’ agreed ‘Flar ... something’*

*‘Not with us?’ Yandi asked.*

*‘They are not as advanced as us’ remarked ‘Pew ... something’*

*‘You can’t even remember your own names!’ Rakel muttered.*

*‘You will not disassemble anymore ships, or kill any more beings!’ Kita insisted.*

*‘Where do the others go?’ Yandi asked quietly.*

*‘Somewhere they can become useful’ offered ... Recdes?*

### *Somewhere Else...*

The Fate on Duty, the **Fainting Fate**, as it turned out, was training a new apprentice.

*“Basically, we sit here and monitor our assignment. If certain words or phrases are uttered, or if certain situations come to pass, then the object is to give the assignment a **stressful** challenge that they are then required to overcome. That is selected in various ways that you will learn. If they*

successfully meet the challenge, then you mark it down in this little log book.”

“What happens if they fail the assignment?” the new trainee asked.

“Then you mark it down in the little log book as **failed**,” she explained.

“That’s it?”

“Well, with very young assignments, it’s just about that easy, but the longer an assignment lives, and the higher within their society an assignment climbs, their challenges become more difficult, and the lessons they learn become harsher. If they succeed, a **spiritual** growth is achieved!”

“What happens if they fail?”

“Either they, or many others of their kind **die**. If the assignment dies, the book is **retired**...”

“Makes sense—”

“Until they’re **reborn**, and the book adds a **new** chapter,” she finished.

“Reborn? Then ... then they **keep** getting challenges?”

“Until they grow enough to advance beyond where they are now,” she said, then followed it with a shrug.

“They keep having to come back? But that ... that’s gotta **suck**!”

“Well, you get used to it. After they are reborn, they forget **everything** until they get to the end again, and review all they have accomplished. Then they forget again, when they are reborn again ... or reassigned. You are still new, but not to worry. You will pick it up quickly. Pretty soon, you’ll forget all about your **own** past life.”

“My own past ... I’ve been reborn?”

“Not quite. You’re still **dead**. Officially, you are just a disembodied **spirit**. Everything you see here is just for convenience – that table ... that chair ... that big honking display over there ... that control panel...”

“The **book**?”

“That’s real – that’s very real in a **certain** sense. Don’t worry, though. You can’t break it. You can’t tear it. I found that out one time during a really frustrating day ... or night. I forget.”

“Wow ... I died, and I’ve come to ... **this**?”

“It’s not all that bad. You’re still new. What do you remember?” she asked curiously.

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*"I remember ... I remember warm water ... and mud ... soothing mud ... a deep red sky..." he murmured, while drifting off dreamily for a short while, but the Fainting Fate put those few tiny clues together and figured out just **where** this new recruit had come from. Of course, his subconscious virtual display of medium-green, scaly skin should have been a dead giveaway.*

*Among all the Fates, very few looked anything like each other, but were mostly modeled on bi-pedal humanoids – after a fashion. It made it easier to sit in a chair and hold a pencil – or the projected **equivalent** of one.*

*She certainly hoped this one didn't hold a **grudge**.*

### ***On the Kraken***

Sai left Auda sleeping in a blissful afterglow while she went searching for Rondal. She found him sitting in his planning room and staring at his data pad; apparently lost in thought.

"You never came back to us," she teased him from the doorway, but caught his look of sadness. "What's wrong?"

He sighed and pushed his pad away.

"I can never see the future clearly, but what I *do* see is darkness," he muttered, then looked up at her with his thoughts full of confusion. "Do you ever wonder how we came into existence, Sai? You and I? Elder Kita pulled the strings of destiny to engineer my birth, and yet now I wonder who pulled *her* strings and caused *her* premature ascension to the position of Elder." Sai came in and sat down next to him, then reached over and rested her hand on his.

"What do you mean, Rondal?" she asked, and he thought about that for several seconds before going on.

"I mean... I mean, Kita became Elder, but not by *proper* means. The previous Elder died unexpectedly, and Kita was cursed with the Visions, but with no preparation for their understanding. She was left to flounder in worry and fear – thinking she was going *insane*, before finally beginning to understand their meanings. But even at the last, she struggled with them for proper interpretation."

Sai, now knowing about Kita's abrupt ascension to Elder – along with all the nasty side effects that came with it – thought she understood his concerns, and squeezed his hand reassuringly.

"Lady Ai has broken with that tradition, Rondal. She includes many of her Senior staff in the Visions. The interpretations are determined by a careful review from many viewpoints. She does not wish the chaos that

Kita went through to affect her performance in these trying times,” she suggested, but Rondal let out a silent snort while shaking his head sadly.

“*These* trying times,” he muttered, then ran a hand through his hair. “Sai, why didn’t the Emperor pursue the prosecution of the Drecks after I failed to reduce their home world? Was it merely his *own* fear, or was it by design? And *who’s* design? Kita’s? Or someone *else*?”

“Rondal, the Emperor wasn’t afraid of *anything*. He—”

She stopped when he pulled out his talisman and flipped the cord from around his neck. He held it out in front of him, then turned it over and over before finally putting it on the table between them, with the image of Lord Gagsa facing up.

“The Emperor – my *father* – the *great* Rakel Timorous, was *terrified* of the Drecks. This image keeps him trapped in a tiny portion of my consciousness and out of my way,” he muttered angrily, while tapping the image with the tip of his finger. “Were it not for *this*, I’d be an even *bigger* bastard than I already am,” he said bitterly, but she looped her arm around his and gently squeezed it alongside her breast.

“You’re not *that* big of a bastard. I was *married* to the biggest bastard of them all. What would you say about a man who cries out the name of his *former* lover, in the midst of his climax with *you*?”

“Sounds like someone I knew,” he muttered. “And do you not worry that I think of *Maya* sometimes, when I’m sharing contentment with you, my lovely Sai?”

“You still love her, and she still loves you. She cannot be with you yet; Rondal, but I may remind you of her, and grant you contentment on her behalf,” she said, before leaning over to kiss him lightly on the lips.

She continued the kiss, and finally pierced his lips with her tongue, before reaching down to fondle him through his jumper, while he began caressing her breasts and rolling his thumbs gently over her nipples.

“My milk, Ronnie ... my milk is full,” she murmured, then pulled away to drop her robes, before getting up to bring her breasts to his lips.

She straddled him in his chair and held his head to her breasts while he nursed, first from one side, and then the other; running her fingers through his hair and cooing to him like a loving mother to a lonely, distressed child. When she felt empty enough, she pulled back and kissed him lovingly, before sliding down to the floor while pulling his seams open in the process.

“You’ve had your fill, Ronnie. Now let Maya have hers,” she murmured, then pulled out his stiffness and engulfed him within her

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warm mouth, pulling and drawing upon him, until he finally released himself, while crying out softly, “Oh, Maya...”

She continued to nurse from him until he subsided, then pulled away and sealed his seams back up, before straddling him again and snuggling with him; rocking gently with him while caressing his hair.

“Ronnie... I love you, Maya loves you, and Auda loves you, too. You have your entire *family* to help you with this. Together ... *all* of us, will see this through with you,” she whispered.

He hugged her back tightly, before pulling her head down to kiss her long and lingeringly; relishing the sweetness of her love, while trying to decide how to tell her that her deceased husband, Petrus Aloysius Zickgraf, wasn't *quite* as deceased as she'd been led to believe. In fact, he was very much alive and kicking somewhere out on the Fringe.

He'd inadvertently pulled *that* tidbit from her surface thoughts when she'd mentioned his reprehensible actions during what appeared to be their very last night of passion together.

Then he had *another* thought. Petrus ... his potential *father-in-law*?

He groaned into her mouth, but she assumed another meaning.

“Come, Ronnie. Get up and take me to bed,” she said, before slipping back to the floor and gathering up her robes. “My need is much upon me, and I would have you once again!”

After shutting down his data pad, he got up and joined her, but paused for a moment before opening the door.

“And what if I should cry out another's name in the moment of my climax?” he asked teasingly.

“It matters not. Your sword will be piercing *me* at the time, and that's *all* that matters right now!” she said huskily, before dragging him back to his compartment.

He certainly hoped she remembered that statement *later* ... especially if things turned out like his *latest* Vision had suggested.

### ***August 12, Kantor, The Royal Homestead, The Children's Quarters***

Shay was keeping Maya busy in her compartment, and Laisee was assisting vigorously with help from some of the sex toys brought back from Earth on the last French fry run. Some of the toys ran on batteries, and the Imperial technician tapped for the adaptation task had been very impressed. She'd converted them over to a standard power source, then tested some of them personally. The catalog they'd brought back had



given her quite a few ideas of her own, too. She'd even contemplated contacting a friend of hers who was skilled in similar fabrications.

While their husbands were busy on the Emperor's and Elder's business, Diane and Amy were with the children this evening and reviewing a list of names. All the names on the list were, in one way or another, Commonwealth citizens whose proclivities for impolite behavior were well established. Of them all, they only needed one to try the great experiment on – disarming a bomb within a live subject.

Jaiying thought she had it down now...

When they'd followed that platform 'down' and watched it become disassembled upon breaching the Death Void, there were *plenty* of spare parts to practice on. Jaiying had gotten it right on the third try – unless, of course, that bomb had been a dud, but she'd continued and been able to kill the activation circuits on all the rest of them she'd tried. Presumably... Unfortunately, Walter, Cathy, and ham-fisted Josie consistently blew up the ones *they'd* tried...

Diane kept going down the list, before pulling up another name for consideration and presenting it to the children.

"How about *this* one?" she asked.

"Who is he?" Amy asked.

*'More importantly, is he a real dick?'* Josie asked.

"Josie!" Diane admonished her.

*'Well, we don't wanna pick someone who's nice to his kids, do we?'*

"No, Josie. That would be bad for his children, I suppose," Diane considered, then noticed Amy was humming something – something familiar.

"Amy, are you channeling *Ronnie* again?"

"He would love this, Mom. How does it go? *'If some-day it should happen that a vic-tim must be found, I've got a lit-tle list...\*.'*"

*'Why don't we ask Grandfather to pick a sacrifice for us?'* Cathy suggested.

Amy sighed, glad it was *Cathy* instead of Josie making the suggestion.

"Sacrifice? Let ... let's just pick one that's all by himself somewhere, so we don't hurt anyone else," Amy suggested.

*'I've got one. Fraud, embezzlement – and he beats his kids. And he's all alone in his office'* Walter suggested.

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They all looked on with interest; the mothers' piggybacking with the children, and watching patiently as that subject left his office and headed to his personal transport.

*'He lives here'*

In their minds, Walter shared the image of an isolated home on pretty grounds.

*'Jaiying can disarm it once he clears his property line'*

*'I will try very hard'* she promised.

*'No! Do, or do not. There IS no try!'* Walter pushed theatrically. *'Grandfather once told me that'*

Diane and Amy snickered quietly.

"Go for it, Jaiying," Amy prompted, and Jaiying did – and nothing untoward happened.

*'Great – now he's gonna go beat his kids'* Josie said morosely.

*'Not after tonight. Somehow, the hidden records of his misdeeds have been shared with those who will see that justice is done'* Walter pressed smugly.

*'The Elder does not know? You used very little effort?'* Cathy asked.

*'Just the barest minimum – and I blocked it, as Grandfather taught us'* he assured her, then congratulated Jaiying on a successful operation. *'Nicely done, Jaiying ... although I think your future will become much busier'*

*'It would be prudent to have that bomb removed at the soonest opportunity and placed in containment'* she suggested. *'I believe Donnel's latest working model can contain at least ten kilotons with little strain, as long as it's just a single pulse'*

"What do you think we should do with them, Walter? Drop them into the nearest star?" Diane asked.

*'I think we should save them for Grandfather, Mama Diane. I'm sure he'll dispose of them properly – or find a novel way to use them'* he suggested.

Walter closed down his thoughts for a few moments and considered what they now knew...

The saurians had pulled out of Commonwealth space ... at least this one station. Another one was felt to be slowly on the move in the Hegemony, and he'd tracked it for a while until distracted by Maya. When

the line of flight on the destroyed station was extended, he'd gone out over an hour away, but found nothing out there, save for a thin gas cloud, before pulling back.

They'd gotten Jaiying practice in disabling bombs, and even if none of the *rest* of them mastered it – as none of them had – Jaiying could still go from implant to implant and remove their threat. It would take a *while*, though. A *long* while. They needed to update Grandfather about it, too. Likely, he would suggest 'wait and see' to determine if the saurians had any reaction to Jaiying's action, or if they even knew about it. At least, Maya's implant was just a tracker of some sort.

He thought about that disassembled platform and wondered how that had happened, but could not yet think of a reason. Grandfather said they would get stronger and smarter as they grew, but it was a time consuming process. It would be nice, though, to have some of those saurian bodies recovered for examination...

A single, clear, and very precise thought pinged on his consciousness.

'*Walter Lane, we request a moment of your time*' echoed the massed intellect of the Bornat collective.

'(!?! ) Huh?'

### ***August 13, The Kraken, Drifting Down Past Eke***

Rondal had been unusually indecisive for the last three weeks, which had been decisively unusual for him, but since things on Earth hadn't changed significantly, nor had the alien station doing the bomb implants remained in human space, things seemed somewhat calm in comparison.

As Walter expected, after the successful disabling of that Kantite administrator's bomb, Rondal's orders were to 'wait and see'. The only result so far had been the slow withdrawal of a second bomb-containing station; this one in Hegemony space, that Walter had just barely detected. Its reaction seemed firmly tied to the first unsuccessful disarming test Jaiying had attempted, though.

The children had found several other monitoring stations scattered somewhat evenly throughout the occupied clusters in both Hegemony and Commonwealth space, but none of them contained bombs, nor seemed inclined to relocate. This indicated that those two bomb stations were associated somehow. Alternatively, there might be a limit to the range of their reception capabilities, but that was somewhat doubtful, or perhaps the other stations simply felt they were safe from detection.

There were some apparent coverage gaps, but those stations were either already recovered, or were never put into position to begin with,

## Unhide the Past

unless they had somehow already fallen afoul of an accident. In time, Walter and the girls could find out for sure, but time was not on their side in this. Rondal felt that strongly based on yet another “hunch.” They did know exactly where *one* was, however, and its occupants seemed to lean towards the positive side of the Vanir love/hate perspective regarding humanity in general. This was based on emanations of interest in humans, rather than loathing, and that’s why he decided to visit the visitor in the cloud and see if he could gain a better grasp of the situation at close quarters.

Rondal felt much better at finally coming to a decision that felt right. He went to the bridge to change course back to the Dark, and made the heading a straight line just above the cloud to the ‘left’ of Eke. When they were about four minutes out from Eke, he would depart in the *Kraken’s Child* and make an up-close and *personal* visit to the alien platform. Having followed him to the bridge, Auda saw his happier mood and caressed him discreetly when he seemed to have completed his task. He looked at her and nodded, smiling, so hand-in-hand, they both left the bridge while Endo noted their course change in the log file.

### *Somewhere Else...*

*The Fate on Duty, the **Fainting Fate**, was blithely trying to ignore the fact that it was another Friday the Thirteenth on Earth, and she thus had access to a **free** opportunity – now established by **precedent** – to mess with her assignment.*

*She still checked her lists and considered **all** her options, but paused to sit back in contemplation.*

*Lord Caldar was planning to visit Station 27, but he was either not aware of, or had forgotten the Senior Observer was probably tracking Auda’s implant on that particular station. In the **normal** course of events, it could be reasonable to assume that, once that tracer approached the station, the Senior Observer would move it in a panic, and Lord Caldar would have little opportunity to get close enough to observe their operation.*

*The Station was, by association with Lord Caldar’s intent, **included** with his fate, and therefore a suitable target for any activities she could think of. If Auda’s tracer suddenly went **dead**, then they’d have no idea **where** Lord Caldar actually was, if they weren’t really **looking** for him, would they?*

*She smiled a grim smile and watched patiently as Lord Caldar and Auda played once again. Finally, at the **peak** of Auda’s last climax, she reached out and fused a teensy, tiny connection within Auda’s tracer; and it went **silent**.*

If Lord Caldar ever made it far enough to **visit** them, she hoped he remembered this day fondly — at least fondly enough that he would let her keep her **fanny**.

### *In the Cloud, Observer Station 27*

Observer Station 27 was still located in the cloud just 'left' and 'down' from Eke, when a receiver detected the loss of a tracking signal.

"The female has ceased reporting, Senior Observer," the Duty Observer reported.

"She has died?"

"Her tracker stopped reporting after the fourth extreme peak of emotion. This was associated with her frequent sexual activity. It appears that she has either died from it, or her tracker has overloaded."

"*Remarkable!* In either case, simply *remarkable!*" the Senior Observer remarked, while looking over the recorded tracking traces.

"You don't suppose they simply *ate* her, do you?" the Duty Observer asked.

"No... According to these traces, there was no indication of distress. Perhaps ... death by sexual *overload*, and *then* dining on her lifeless body? That would be a *completely* different pattern; even from the aggressor species that were set into place. I believe they eat their young ones *alive*, if I recall. Horrible, *horrible* creatures!"

"Indeed, Senior Observer. Your orders?"

"Continue monitoring the rest of our charges, as usual. Note if any females matching the genetic pattern of our recent loss are subsequently implanted later. It would almost be worthwhile trying to interview her properly if she could describe her life over these past several rotations, but I leave that up to the linguistics experts."

The Senior Observer looked away in thought, while exhaling a hissing sigh of dejection. The Duty Observer took that opportunity to ask one more question.

"What of the transport she was on? It was last headed 'left' and above the edge of the cloud."

"Well, we have no means of tracking it *now*. Standard proximity sensors all around. Full cloaking and shields, should anything come within range," he ordered, then went back to his nest to consider a *new* topic for a monograph, '*Death by Sexual Excess in a Lower Species*'.

*Remarkable! Absolutely remarkable!*

## Unhide the Past

### *August 27, The Kraken's Child, Into the Cloud*

Rondal had not relented, even at Sai's strongly worded suggestion, to have him take Auda with him on his little junket. Even Walter had agreed with his decision to leave Auda behind, as all his attention needed to be focused on his task if he was to make any sense out of the alien species. For whatever Sai's reasoning was against it, Auda was staying on the *Kraken* for the time being.

Walter had also gently chided him about dropping clues to Aunt Lili about his 'Senior Staff' and advised him it was now stuck in her head, and she wouldn't let go of it. Rondal told him that if things turned sour out here, they would be revealing themselves anyway, and the time would soon be coming when it would be a moot point to begin with.

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As the *Kraken's Child* approached the alien platform, Rondal settled himself with the knowledge that he had prepared as best he could for what he expected to meet. His ship suit was already proof against their atmosphere. In addition to a hard vacuum, it would protect him down to five atmospheres – not a whole lot, but hopefully sufficient to sustain him if he got an invite for tea.

He momentarily chuckled at that; thinking of the impressions Walter had given him of the alien's perception of humanity – pale, 'squishy', and, of course, ugly.

He wondered if they'd looked in a mirror lately.

The cloud was an unusual anomaly in this area – not dark, not light ... just a kind of dim grayishness his optical system had little trouble matching, and masking. There were no stars to duplicate from one side of the ship to the other; and as long as he stayed out of the way of their arrival and departure lanes, he should be invisible to them. Unless they had the same mindfulness that he and most of the Seniors in the Commonwealth had, he should be able to sit outside their lock, and they would never know it – unless someone stepped outside and started throwing rocks at him.

He ate a light supper, then voided and washed before settling in, much as he'd done around Krux so many years ago – except *this* time he was going to try to learn a new language, and a new way of thinking – or that was what Walter had suggested he do. It seemed Walter was extremely confident in him, and besides, that's why you hired the experts.

Kantor, The Royal Homestead, The Children's Patio

'Are you *REALLY* gonna do that, Walter?' Josie asked.

'This is our Grandfather!' Jaiying protested.

‘Grandfather is really very good, Jaiying, and he’s gotten much better since he’s known us. But he needs to be better still – at least, almost as good as we are’

‘Can you do that without coloring his perception of the aliens? He really should make his own opinions of them’ Cathy pointed out.

‘Grandfather already has opinions about them, as he told Josie’ Walter reminded her. *‘He considers them people – until they prove otherwise. I’ll just add a few tools to his tool box to help him figure them out’*

‘Is there anything the rest of us can do?’ Josie asked.

Walter thought about that for several moments, before considering something he’d been thinking of for a while, now – something he’d read from Grandfather’s mind that he’d once read in a really, *really* old book. He looked at them, then held out his arms.

‘Come join with me, and we’ll do this together’ he sent silently, and for once the girls didn’t giggle, but got up and joined with him over on the grass. Once there, they sat in a closed circle and held hands, before closing their eyes and focusing together.

‘Oh, my...’ Jaiying shared faintly, which was quickly echoed by the other three.

Diane noticed the circle out of the corner of her eye, but focused the rest of her attention on Maya, who was chatting with her and Laisee this morning. She quickly thought of something, then silently called out to Shay for help, who soon came outside and walked up to Maya.

“Oh, Maya ... I have a few questions about ... about Senior things. The other Wives are busy, and I was wondering if you could help me with it inside. There is a passage in one of the books that I am having trouble understanding.”

“Go ahead, Maya. I’ll be here with the children until you come back,” Diane offered while subtly lifting her arm towards the door in a subliminal distraction to focus Maya’s attention away from the children.

‘Keep her busy, Shay. I’m not sure what they’re doing, but it looks intense’ Diane sent tightly, before turning her attention back to the children – who were no longer sitting alone.

Two of their most dangerous and trustworthy guardians had crept up silently from beneath a row of bushes, and sat facing outwards at opposite edges of the circle – making sure the Senior Staff was not disturbed – while the older two watched from the nearby shadows; remaining still and silent.

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September 1, The Kraken's Child, In the Cloud

Rondal sat back after eating sparingly. He didn't rush things like he had after his Vision Quest. He ate only one sandwich this time, and with very little content in it. While he relaxed, he sipped his juice and considered what he *now* knew about the Vanir. They were old. They were *unbelievably* old, but had not been racked by the same level of violence humanity had suffered over several successions of rise and subsequent fall. In contrast, the Vanir appeared to live incredibly dull and unassuming lives on a few *very* select worlds that matched most closely the living conditions of Vanaheim Prime; perhaps three in total.

Looking back at what he'd first felt, then interpreted, then finally read *directly* from the mind of their 'Senior Observer', one S'Shac'Kah 39496, of Warren S'Shac'Kah, was that the Vanir – *all of them* – were basically the same. Well, not *really* the same, but genetically not *nearly* as diverse as humanity was. Vanir family trees didn't stray far from the very few genome-types they'd started with – a least according to his light reading of S'Shac'Kah 39496's mind.

He also had an inkling of what they found confusing about humans in general – humans were all *different!* Unless they were socially bonded together, individual humans tended to act in unique ways. Even then, there were wide variations in behavior within a social group, and that confused the *dickens* out of the Vanir. He would have to pass that bit of information over to his experts, or more likely, Doctor Riker, who'd been working on some pet project at one time or another concerning Earth's genome-types, and their comparison to the rest of humanity's sitting out there in the Commonwealth.

On the one hand, it should make his job much easier, since he'd only have to deal with a few groups of families, or 'warrens' as they grouped themselves. On the *other* hand, he'd probably have a great deal of difficulty getting even *one* Vanir to sit still long enough to talk to, let alone, actually *acknowledge* his concerns over their interference with the Commonwealth and the Hegemony. After all, it was well known, to the *Vanir*, anyway, that humans were *incredibly* insane, and *extremely* dangerous.

He was not overly surprised to discover that the Kee were a genetic experiment gone bad in the early days of their experimental human countermeasures efforts; perhaps as few as five or six-thousand years ago. One *particular* Vanir family warren – apparently either very brave, or very self-sacrificing – had postulated a solution to human overcrowding, and then taken it upon *themselves* to develop it. It had entailed taking human samples, then genetically engineering them to produce the first pairs of Kee.

Like their own society, they'd made it matriarchal; putting the *best* bits of genetic thinking into the *female* of the species. What they got was a fast-breeding, cannibalistic bunch of *really* smart humanoid animals that were *incredibly* adaptable – when they weren't killing and eating each other, or in the case of the females, *mating*, killing, and *then* eating each other. It was helpful to learn that the offending Vanir had been banished to a system within the void immediately above Kee, meaning that someone recognized *negative* performance, and rewarded it accordingly.

He momentarily considered the possibility of perhaps finding *more* volunteers to join the colony in the Demon's Realm.

The Drecks advancement seemed a mystery, until he'd subtly pushed the Senior Observer to review their involvement with them. That effort had revealed it was simply a matter of moving surplus equipment onto a previously unexplored region of Zarox, sometime over a thousand years ago. That had given the Drecks a 'leg up' as it were, and they'd merrily gone along and pushed their way into the stars on the backs of other, *earlier*, space explorers; subsequently subjugating the more or less human-standards in their segment of the spiral arm.

The building spree which produced the mighty planetary siege engines and planetary crackers that had taken out twenty-seven Commonwealth colony worlds close to the Fringe, had also wreaked havoc with, not only the Zarox economy, but also that of the entire Hegemony. That partly explained why the Drecks did not follow up on Rondal's failure to destroy Zarox. They had simply run out of resources ... but the *Commonwealth* certainly hadn't.

He still had no good explanation of why Emperor Rakel did not follow up with additional attacks. It could not have been because of base cowardice, since all he had to do was give the order. That pointed the finger back at Elder Kita, but why would she hold off from a final confrontation that would eliminate the Drecks, and let the Commonwealth annex the Hegemony, and be done with it? Unless she knew something ... or suspected something ... or perhaps saw blackness in the future over that particular action? That might make sense. If the Commonwealth moved to wipe out the Drecks, then the ensuing chaos might cause alarm in previously unknown quarters.

Perhaps that's what Kita saw in the Visions? A truly alien species just waiting for us to fall on our faces once again, so they could sit back and not have to worry about us for another five or ten-thousand years ... except that some of them, more progressive thinkers no doubt, had gone ahead and somehow convinced the First ... the Prime, S'Ahi'Ma aka 'Grandmother', to let them begin implanting bombs into both Hegemony

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and Commonwealth citizens as a fall-back position. That would be Plan-B in Caldar terms. Either that, or they'd gone ahead and done it alone. The Senior Observer's thoughts were not clear on the subject.

Well, they'd gotten away with disabling at least *one* bomb without detection, but he'd ordered the children to hold off on doing anything more with them until he got a better read on the Vanir mindset, and consulted with them afterward.

Thinking of that, he loudly sent out '*Walter, have I told you lately that you're a sneaky little bugger?*'

Observer Station 27

"Senior Observer! There is a *signal* close by!" the Duty Observer reported.

S'Shac'Kah 39496 quickly slithered out of his nest and up to the observation room.

"Where? Where did it originate?" he asked, while bringing up his own controls to try to pinpoint the locus of the signal.

"*Above* us, Senior Observer! There!" the Duty Observer reported, while sending a string of coordinates pointing directly overhead, just as the signal died out.

They all sat silent while the Senior Observer ... observed ... and contemplated ... and thought ... and thought some more...

"Signal type and duration?" he asked calmly, although he was *anything* but calm at the moment.

"My instruments say it's similar to a human tracking band, but ... but not from either of our samples! And ... and very *strong!*"

"Duration?"

"Ah ... just ... just a few seconds, Senior Observer!"

The Senior Observer stood, and thought ... and thought some more ... and then...

"If it was not a signal from one of *our* sample humans, what humans did it match?" he asked, now becoming more curious as the possibilities intrigued him greatly.

"It was similar to transient signals that other stations have reported, Senior Observer! It was ... it was related to those detected simultaneously between our managed group here, and the ones on the other side of the thin area ... the area where Observer Station 6 was recently evacuated from!"

The Senior Observer looked at the Duty Observer, then at the rest of his small staff. Then he thought back over some of the more *radical* speculations made by others that had been previously dismissed. For a logical species, he made a radical decision, then announced it very calmly, and clearly.

“You all know the Warren’s duty at this Station, and you all know my *personal* feelings about our sample humans ... and about humans in general. I do not believe we are currently in danger. We have *never* placed humans we have implanted into danger,” he stated calmly.

“We have never contemplated the despicable actions of the S’Slich’Tah Warren in their desire to push the humans into a premature failure of their society. We have no reason to believe humans would *deliberately* seek us out for any purpose, other than one of general interest and curiosity on their part at finding another space-faring life form,” he continued reasonably.

“We are a *peaceful* installation, and we do not carry weapons, nor would we use them, as our *sole* purpose in being here is to monitor the emotional content of the humans we are currently tracking – thus providing us a reasonable assessment of the mental stability of their society as a whole,” he calmly reminded them.

“If contact were to be made, we would hope these ideas, and impressions of such, were understood and accepted by any humans who happened to chance upon us. Perhaps a dialogue of some sort could commence that might allow us to address the concerns of our race, the Vanir, who have observed with dismay the dozens of times humanity has grown into a space-faring society ... only to collapse at their own hands,” he stated with confidence, while standing very still and quietly looking at his crew. He nodded thoughtfully, before finally taking a deep, relaxing breath; holding onto the hope that his spurious internal conjectures would turn out to be baseless.

On the Kraken’s Child

“*Thank you for the updates, Grandfather, and I’m sorry for our intrusion into your mind*’ a somewhat subdued Walter said, with the girls chiming in.

“*Forgiven – THIS time, but please be mindful of your manners ... especially around Lili and Uncle Emperor! Probably be prudent not to irritate the Elder, as well. Thank you for your help, and ... I see we have excited someone below me just a little. Twenty-five hours starts now. If I don’t contact you by this time tomorrow, tell Sai all that has happened, and reveal yourselves to Lili, as discussed*’ Rondal sent, before dropping out to pay attention to the neighbors in the station just below him.

Unhide the Past

He watched, listened, and now understood nearly all that was going on. He and Walter had been picked up chatting just a moment ago, which was probably *his* fault, since he habitually “shouted” mentally when making calls across distances like that. They probably picked up his emanation, but not Walter’s ... he didn’t *think* they got Walter’s. At least, they couldn’t *read* any of their conversations, yet. He hoped...

He continued to listen carefully, and noted the Senior Observer had put a lot of thought into his speech to his crew. It was very polite, very low key, and to the point, while putting their official position out in the open. He wondered if the crew suspected whom he was *really* speaking to.

He *really* didn’t want to step into it out here, and irritating the Elder was probably the *last* thing he needed to do right now, but ... well ... since he was already *here*...

Observer Station 27

S’Shac’Kah 39496 had just relaxed, now feeling his caution might have been unreasonable after all; but it was at that point when his composure was shaken.

‘Senior Observer of S’Shac’Kah Warren, I am so very glad to hear of your peaceful intentions here at Observer Station 27. I would welcome a dialogue between the Vanir and my people’ Rondal sent lightly.

“Senior Observer? S’Shac’Kah 39496, are you all right?” the Duty Observer asked after his leader staggered slightly and gripped the edge of an equipment console while bracing his tail against a stanchion.

‘If you say anything to them, they might think you have lost your reason. Do you have translation devices for audible words in many languages? Perhaps we may communicate in that manner?’ Rondal suggested.

“Duty Observer, please ... please bring up translation programs for the primary species of the monitored local spaces. I would be interested in listening on ... on standard communications frequencies for ... for local communications?”

“Senior Observer? We’ve detected no... Ah!” the Duty Observer said, when a subordinate unleashed her initiative, and enabled the requested com circuit, before putting it on speaker.

“Greetings, Vanir (?) Platform. My people have (?) questions (?) Vanir (?) to them. We grow (?) (?) many dangerous (?) (?) put into bodies (?) some (?) people. We worry there (?) (?) need to protect ourselves further (?) into our (?) space. We would (?) with one (?) has (?) to speak (?) all Vanir,” the voice

came, translated from Drecks into broken Vanir, while a clearer message was sent directly to S'Shac'Kah 39469's mind.

'It is somewhat refreshing to see that neither of our translators work as well as one could expect, S'Shac'Kah 39496' Rondal observed silently, before sending a variation of his words directly to him. *'My people are worried. We would ask Vanir intentions of your leader – one who speaks for all. We worry for the safety of our people. We fear the need to protect ourselves from Vanir. We do not want to hurt Vanir if it is not necessary'* the Senior Observer heard in his mind. *'You may respond through your communications system, but I will be listening directly to you'* the voice added silently.

The Senior Observer cleared his throat, before stepping up to the communicator and transmitting, "Where are you?"

'I am the distance of two long lengths of your platform above your current position. My ship is hidden – much as the platform is hidden' the voice in his head told him, with something similar repeating over the speaker. *'I will reveal'* the voice said, and the crew hissed the equivalent of a human gasp when the eighty-foot length of the black Galaxy-class came into being above them – currently *not* pointing at them, as shown on their sensors they noted with relief.

"Your ship carries weapons?"

'It seems prudent at times. I am not often welcome on this side of the Fringe' echoed separately in his mind, and from the speakers.

"You ... you kill?"

'Only out of necessity. To do otherwise would be insane'

"H-How did you find us?"

'The female we were given has a tiny transmitter of some sort inside her. I listened carefully, and found that that it sends messages in this direction when she is very happy, or very excited. I thought to bring you to us, but found that I needed to come to you'

For the audible portion, the Vanir translation program seemed to be making an effort at improving the accuracy of the translation with each transmission. It was an excellent example of quality engineering.

"How did she die? Did you eat her?"

'She is not dead. We do not eat our people. She has been accepted by my family, and resides with them on my ship. She was alive when I spoke to my ship today'

Unhide the Past

“We lost track of her implant. We thought she was dead. You have added her to your ... your *Warren?*” he asked in confusion, the concept of a “mixed-family” being very alien to the Senior Observer, while the auto-translator had converted ‘family’ to ‘warren’ in an attempt to make things clearer.

‘I have many in my family. We are all human, and many are welcome in my family. I even have two Kee, who we find interesting, but of little use in conversation. They assist us as they can, and we take care of them, as well’

There was a slight delay while the Senior Observer silently deliberated the risk he was taking, but finally went ahead anyway.

“The female ... she and her group were lost to us. Some humans took them and killed them, but she survived,” he remarked, now considering that he might not actually be communicating with the *largest* of the human species.

‘The human-Drecks took them and ate all but her. She was given to me by a Drecks on the nearby planet they call Eke. I traded him food from my home world for Drecks women as mates for my Drecks crew. The one you know of was a gift to us’

“You are not Drecks, but you have Drecks crew... That serve you?”

‘I have human-Drecks, human-Cletus, human-Midgard, and ... and whatever the Kee are called, as my crew’

That revelation stumped several segments of the Senior Observer’s mind, which then let loose a question from yet *another* segment competing for information.

“You say you are not welcome here. What is your purpose here?”

‘My brother asks that I work to prevent fighting between the Drecks and my people. Their leadership is of questionable morality, and I have set Drecks against Drecks to let them resolve their issues internally. When the issue is resolved, we will ask the Drecks and all their people to join my people in peace’

“What if the issue cannot be resolved?”

‘Then I will continue to relocate their willing citizens to colony worlds of my own choosing, where they must learn to work and live together in peace. When the Drecks run out of citizens to abuse, the problem will be reduced. If they do not further intrude upon our side of the Fringe, then we will leave them alone. That has always been our intention’

S’Shac’Kah 39496 paused to consider that rather subdued – for a *human* – reaction, but wondered about a more important issue.

“What are your intentions towards the Vanir?”

‘In the little time I have studied the Vanir – you and your crew – I see opportunities for trade exist. Your skills in nano-technology – as in the implant tracers you use – have many useful applications. Not so, for the explosive implants your people have placed in citizens on BOTH sides of the Fringe. We would like assurances they will not be activated. I fear if the Vanir were to activate them, an unfortunate, yet inevitable, reaction would occur. I would not like to pursue it, but those above me would insist’

S’Shac’Kah 39496 was stunned at this news. The S’Slich’Tah had lobbied heavily for a *forcible* resolution to the human problem, and this was one of their rumored solutions! He had received notification the S’Slich’Tah Warren had been censured, and their stations ordered home, but *this ... explosive implants!* The rumors were *true!* This could *not* have been authorized by the Prime! It would *ruin* her, and cause the sanction of her entire *warren!*

“We understand explosive implants were not approved by the Vanir Prime! She would *never* approve of such horrible devices! The warren that produced such terrible things has been censured and recalled to our home world to await judgment!”

‘My Senior Staff advised me that one of your stations was lost in transit from within the far grouping. It was headed past my home world when it entered the Death Void and was disassembled. Another was observed transiting on this side of the Fringe’

“They knew it was there? How...”

‘They observed when a ship went out and implanted a citizen. On the way back, they observed the ship explode, before it docked. The station then moved away. I am sorry for the loss of your citizens, but we are very worried about the lives of our citizens, as well’

“Did your people destroy the station?”

‘We are confused about that. Our contacts on my home world still report they are alive and well, yet they are surrounded by the Death Void that usually destroys every ship of ours that passes through it. Do you have any knowledge about the Death Voids?’

“Our history is the same as yours. Our ships in the past have also failed to pass the Death Void.”

‘It would then appear there is another species among us who takes great exception to our interference in their chosen space. I have advised that we watch and wait’

“A sensible plan,” S’Shac’Kah 39496 agreed numbly.

Unhide the Past

The speaker went silent while the voice spoke to S'Shac'Kah 39496 alone.

'I have a concern for you and your crew. What will be the reaction of your authority to our conversation here? Now that we have started a dialogue, I would not want to cause harm to you, or to your crew, because of it. You may simply think your answer very clearly' the voice said.

'I do not believe we are in any danger; but this is the first communication I have ever heard of between humans and Vanir that did not take place with those who study languages. You envy our nano-technology, but surely the machine that sends your thoughts to me is based on such?' S'Shac'Kah 39496's mind asked.

'I do not have such a machine. This we do by ourselves' the voice said in his head alone.

Such was the incredulous claim by his visitor that S'Shac'Kah 39496 was unable to respond.

Eventually, the voice in his mind, and over the audio circuits, continued as before.

'You have much to consider, and I must report to my Senior Staff, and to my brother. If I do not report every standard rotation of my brother's home world, they will come looking for me with my other ship. It would become most unpleasant. Please know that humans can adapt to many environments, but from what I understand of your preferred living conditions, a human would not like those conditions, nor could a human adapt to them, unless of extreme necessity; for it would be too dark and too wet for us'

The logical reasoning part of his brain finally kicked into gear and booted aside the confused and very perplexed segment of his brain that was still stumbling over the concept of mind-to-mind communication, and all that it implied.

"I will inform our Prime of this contact with a civilized and curious human who desires urgent communication with authority for the purpose of determining intent between the Vanir and the humans," S'Shac'Kah 39496 said aloud.

"My thanks to you, Senior Observer S'Shac'Kah 39496," came from the speaker, before the signal went silent.

The collective crew-held breath finally let out, and there were more smiles than panic among his small crew of ten; although the fact they were still alive probably had much to do with it. The Senior Observer exchanged positive emotional displays with everyone, before a few of the lower-level crew paired off to celebrate their survival in one of the private

nests, rather than the communal nest they usually used for sleeping and thoughtful dozing.

The Senior Observer was of mixed minds about this – quite *literally* – but the majority of them agreed that a new relationship was on the verge of becoming a reality between Vanir and humanity if both sides took slow patient steps.

Oh, the *monograph* he was going to write about this, right after he reported to the *Prime*!

‘*Aww ... extruded, sticky feces!*’ he thought abruptly, while a tiny, ignored portion of his early mind, cheerfully called out softly, ‘*I told you so!*’

On the Kraken’s Child

Rondal had updated his Senior Staff in a much softer blip or two of mindspeak, before reporting in with the rest of the interested parties to catch them up to date. This meeting included Sai, Lili, and Radatel. It also included Amy, so she could get information to Larl, without having it translated by Lili.

Lili merely considered it strange that Amy was included, but had allowed it – not that she could change it in any fashion.

‘Well, there you have it. Our third party is a saurian species with a multi-segmented mind, living in conditions that, according to my readings, NO humans I am currently aware of would enjoy. I have not sampled their atmosphere, and I personally don’t think I would like to. I thought there were elements of sulfur in there somewhere. That is the impression I got while tapping into their physical organic systems. It would play hell with their technology, but there are ways around it’

‘You should pull back now, Rondal. Join us back on the ship, before they think it through too much and decide you are more dangerous alive, then dead’ Sai suggested.

‘I’m sitting in a fully-loaded, Galaxy-class, with shields up and cycling. Just this morning, my staff reminded me of how the Vanir can implant tracers remotely’

‘Still, you shouldn’t be exposing yourself so flagrantly in these early stages of negotiations’ Radatel pointed out.

‘My Lord Husband, as we have no other means of communicating with the Vanir, as yet, his proximity has allowed Rondal to acquire samples of their audible speech for analysis, and our linguists will soon be analyzing it and compiling suitable cross-references based on his translations’ Lili advised him.

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‘Ronnie, does your Senior Staff have a recommendation on how to proceed from here?’ Amy asked, already knowing what that recommendation had been during their family conference a few minutes earlier.

‘Yes. If we are to meet with their ultimate authority – the Prime on their home world – they recommend a cross-section of humanity in attendance to show humanity has advanced to the point that SOME of us are reasoning beings, instead of stark-raving, bloodthirsty lunatics. I’m guessing that we definitely do NOT want professional ambassadors along for that ride?’

‘No’ Radatel immediately agreed. ‘That would be counter-productive’

‘Would you be bringing along your Senior Staff for this meeting, Rondal?’ Lili asked sweetly.

‘They will be in attendance – remotely. If this all spools into a black hole, they will be the Commonwealth’s only protection from the Vanir, and provide the means to do so’ he replied vaguely.

‘Are they still well protected, Rondal?’

‘My Lady Song, they enjoy protections that exceed even your own’ he assured her, before Amy quickly diverted.

‘Donnel reports success with directional containment force-fields. The apparatus is smaller than the ‘Ceti’s refrigerator, and is self-powered with a tiny exciter/converter combination. It has fine controls to allow adjustment of its projection and size that would allow it to create a field around an implant victim to contain any blast. As long as you keep the tank full of water, he said it should contain up to five-kilotons of explosive force in a single pulse’

‘How long does it run?’

‘Idle drain is just a few ounces per hour, which is more than long enough to go in remotely and remove the device if no other means presents itself to disable the bomb while still internal to the victim’ she stated, knowing this was the fallback plan should Jaiying fail to complete the disarming phase of their planned operations.

‘How about a box for removing a device without damage, like the Vanir insert them?’ he asked.

‘That’s a little trickier. He suggested that if you could get your hands on one, it would be a lot easier to reverse-engineer it’

There were several moments of silence while Rondal quickly consulted with his Senior Staff, before coming back to the current conversation.

‘My Senior Staff reminds me there was one on the ship that blew up in your local space, and another might still be in the debris field of the Station that fell apart when it tried to approach Earth. I suppose I could mosey on over there and take a look – if I knew what to look for’

‘Rondal, that is a Death Void!’ Sai pressed urgently. ‘Why don’t you simply ask your new friends for a sample box?’

‘I suppose I could ask S’Shac’Kah 39496 if he had a spare box, but that’s a bit pushy at this stage of negotiations, don’t you think? And his group only places tracers, not bombs. Besides, I’ve been in that Death Void before. Uhh, I might have to borrow the ‘Ceti, Rad’

‘You’ll have to contract with the owner, Rondal’ the Emperor reminded him.

‘Ah! I forgot. Well as long as I’m not carrying any hot-loads, I suppose I could stop by dressed in this’

‘NO!’ four individual voices echoed very quietly in the background; a profound silence following that interruption.

‘Or not... Well, I guess I’ll hang around out here for a while and relax. I will chat up S’Shac’Kah 39496 tomorrow and see what he says about a meeting with the Prime. It is a matriarchal society. You think maybe the Elder would like to come along, or is that just asking for trouble?’

‘The Elder was less than enthused with discussing policy directly with me’ Radatel shared in frustration. ‘No doubt, I will wake up dead one morning when her unspoken advice and my policies collide’

‘I could ask the Elder if she wishes to participate directly in the Vanir negotiations, but I fear she has very little experience in such matters’ Lili offered. ‘The Visions plague her nightly, and her staff is worried’

‘Perhaps she relies too much on the Visions. They did not seem to help Kita avoid the mess she left me with. My love to you all’ he sent with a silent sigh, before dropping out.

Kantor, The Royal Homestead

The three of them looked at each other, while lost in their own thoughts, while Sai lingered remotely on the off chance she would need to answer questions about the current mission. This revelation of communications with a previously unknown species promised to be a thorn in many of their sides in the coming days and weeks ... if they even had that long to develop a plan to manage it safely.

“Do you want to update the Elder, or should I?” Amy asked Lili, and got a surprised look from her in return.

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"I believe it would be better if *I* were to advise the Elder, dear. She is much distraught over things that are continuing to spiral out of her control. I would fear for your relationship with her, should she take offense."

"Lili ... is Lady Ai *that* worried about the current direction of things?" her husband asked. "Surely she knows we will proceed with all due caution. I'm of the opinion that our options are somewhat limited at this time, considering we have some technological deficiencies compared to the Vanir."

"The Elder is *very* concerned with her lack of understandings of the Visions, my Husband," she said, before reaching out to Sai.

'Sai, are you in position to support Rondal should he require it?'

'I've never fought using his ship, but I have the Orca, and it's fully armed. Endo and Gallus can decide between them who will stay aboard the Kraken while the other will come with me to recover Rondal, if necessary – but Rondal is in the Kraken's Child. He should be safe'

'Very well, Sai. Please remain attentive. I worry the Elder might be making decisions in a void – unfortunate and ill-advised decisions, to be sure – yet we must continue to support her as best we can. Please continue to advise me of all that Rondal allows, and I will continue to share it with the Elder, as appropriate'

'Be careful, Lili. I'm pirate now, and have an excuse. If she feels you are holding back too much information, then your position will become tenuous, at best' Sai reminded her.

'Well considered, Sai. I thank you for your concern' she replied, before dropping out.

They were down to three now and reached out to each other – a tight little conspiracy denying information to the Elder that, if taken *wrongly*, would reap disagreeable rewards from she who was supposed to advise them all.

Late Evening, Near the Kraken's Child

It had taken a while, but the small group of loose entities had finally found their putative leader's target inside a sleeping Rondal.

'There he is!' a delighted Kita exclaimed.

'And he's all alone – again!' Rakel pointed out.

'No, he's not. He's got your other half inside his head' she reminded him.

'Yes, but that half is still trapped inside, and it will stay there until he removes his evil charm!' Rakel said in frustration.

'Then perhaps you can convince your other half to get over it and come out to join with you? To join with us? Unless you haven't learned your lesson as yet, Grandchild?'

'He's like me – in point of fact, he IS me – and he still fears the Drecks, just as I do. Did I tell you of my terror when he let Dorcas take him into her mouth and...'

'Twice now, Grandchild, and you still foolishly worry so. Go and speak with him – your other half. See if he can overcome his fears. The Drecks are just people – just really big people. You never trusted yourself, Rakel. Even Radatel would be a fair match to a Drecks'

When he didn't move, she reminded him of the accident that had occurred in his distant past.

'Perhaps it was your Milk Mother's fault when she dropped you that day?' she suggested once again, which prompted him to petulantly separate from their little group and approach his trapped half through the cycling shield of the Kraken's Child.

'Do we really need to do this, Kita?' Dwufry asked.

'We were humans once before, so we should help when we can' Bredar suggested.

'Dead or alive, we are all still humans and should help' Kita asserted.

'Grandmother, he refuses to come out and play' Rakel said upon his return.

'Ai-yah! I wish there were some way to get him to take off that damn talisman!'

'Don't forget the one inside of him' Loqqam reminded.

'Why don't you simply tell him to take them away?' Bredar asked.

'He would question my motives and err on the side of caution, yet he needs the burden removed from his mind. Whatever was Ai thinking of when she decided to curse him like this?'

'What shall we do, Kita?' Dwufry asked.

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'We shall wait and see what opportunity comes upon us' she said, then settled back in the limbo of non-existence to do just that.

'By the Gods, this is bor-OW!' Rakel yelped.

Somewhere Else...

*The Fate on Duty considered that wish **carefully**.*

*She hadn't been caught before, and it'd **seemed** to work out all right when she'd popped Auda's tracer – thus allowing Lord Caldar to sneak up on Observer Station 27, which then placed him in an **excellent** position to learn about the Vanir.*

*This was going to be **tricky**, though. She could simply have the thong holding his talisman snap unexpectedly, but ripping that tiny one out of his abdomen would be a little more difficult to explain.*

Observer Station 27 did not have any of the new implant machines. They did it the old fashioned way by capturing their victims and knocking them out for the few minutes it took to insert the tracer – all while carefully protected by armor and biohazard shields, of course – before sending them on their way, with but a minute or two of their subjective time missing.

*There was **another** way, however. Observer Station 23 was still on its way back from the Hegemony while returning to Vanaheim – by way of **Midgard** for some reason – and they had several implantation systems that could safely rip out the tiny talisman.*

*She wasn't supposed to be taking an **active** part in any of the actions regarding her assignment, but was really getting fed up with the stuff being **dumped** on Lord Caldar. Besides, there was a **wish** involved!*

*She decided on a course, and logged the start of the action in the logbook. She was the Fate on Duty from now until it was over, and directed events from this point onward. After all, if they **fired** her – so what? What's the **worst** that could happen?*

*She just hoped she didn't **faint** again in the middle of something important.*

Cletus, The Elder's Council, Another Frustrating Morning

Xue opened her eyes and checked the timer on the wall of her accommodations, but it only triggered her frown. It was really too early to get up, but she couldn't possibly get back to sleep after just receiving Senior Fan's update concerning Ai's current level of frustration. She got up anyway and ventured into the facilities. If she voided her bowels, perhaps it would justify her taking a long, luxurious shower to ensure

her thorough cleanliness? Sadly, the only urge she had was to urinate, so she did so and washed herself with the warm bidet spray afterwards. Choosing to “air dry” this very early morning, she merely patted her genitals with a hand cloth, before addressing the state of her teeth and face.

Once those minor tasks were completed, she stared at the mirror and considered the *latest* set of wrinkles that had appeared seemingly overnight around her eyes and smile. For a moment, she felt Meixiu – her *host* – looking on within her, but it was not with a sense of dismay. Rather, it was with a sense of pride for the string of accomplishments she’d shared with the others of the Elder’s Council after having lived so long beyond her allotted years...

Unskilled and thus childless, Meixiu had looked forward to a short life of little useful service, until she’d been offered a rather *unique* opportunity for personal growth and learning. In exchange for her personal sacrifice of a mere few centuries of time, she would become a highly skilled Healer, nay, a *Senior* for all practical purposes, and at the end of her service, she would be provided a stipend, and then placement into a position suitable for her new level of skills. In return, the continuity of the Commonwealth was assured, and her only request had been an occasional reminder of what she had given up...

Xue smiled at them both – seeing both herself and the image of Meixiu in her mind, as she was nearly three centuries ago – and considered that she had some time to spare.

She sauntered back to her bed and languorously stretched out on it, before sliding her hand down to her groin to begin sharing a memory of what Meixiu had given up for her. When she began to pant, she wasn’t sure if it was her or Meixiu panting with her, and in a few minutes more, she didn’t really care.

September 2, The Kraken’s Child, Near Observer Station 27

‘*How did you sleep, Rondal?*’ Sai asked him sweetly. She was in a good mood after Auda had woken her up so nicely this morning.

‘*Like a rock, my passionate Vigdis*’ he replied, while not the *least* bit rested after those weird dreams last night. He rolled over before carefully sitting up in the last seat row, which he’d flattened against the bulkhead the night before.

‘*Passionate ... what? Vigdis?*’

‘*Ask Auda*’

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He sighed, then groaned a bit, before standing and staggering to the forward toilet. *'Have you fully updated the boys on our current situation?'*

'They are concerned that you are there by yourself. Auda grows lonely for you – as do I' she teased him.

'Well, you have lips and tongues, fingers and thumbs ... and toys...'

'Rondal, it is just not the same, and you know it. Are you well? Perhaps there is a female Vanir who would be willing?'

For just a moment, he wasn't sure if she was serious or just teasing him.

'Different mechanical parts, Sai. Stick to Drecks, sweetie' He snorted and washed himself while thinking of something else. *'Sai, I'm concerned about Torga. How is he taking it, now that he knows it was the Vanir who created the situation the Drecks have found themselves in?'*

'After his studies of Commonwealth history over the last several months, I think he's taking it rather well. The Drecks do not have strong religious convictions, as such. Not nearly as strong as many of the pre-Commonwealth societies we have records of. Of course, nothing as insane as those from your HOME world'

'Is there any research from Doctor Riker that would be useful?'

'Larl's studies report similarities between Drecks and a certain islander society on your home world. They seem like a very cruel people, even compared to the Drecks'

'Let me guess, New Guinea?'

'How did you know?'

'Earth has a lot of dirty little secrets' he shared quietly.

'Rondal, Auda wanted to know if they know where her home is – Midgard, that is. I believe she is concerned about her family'

'I can ask – or just poke around a little. How are we doing on reaction mass?'

'About half capacity ... Auda says there is both salt and fresh water on Midgard, if this thing can be landed'

'We can hover and extend a hose if necessary, but I never planned for an actual grounding – although the hull should handle it easily. It would take longer to haul tankers up and down – about twenty times for half a load. I'll ask the Vanir if there is a convenient watering hole'

'Be careful, Rondal'

‘Always, my Healer’

Rondal dressed, then looked in on the Vanir – catching them at their mid-morning, it would appear.

The Vanir crew was in the middle of changing watches, and he was finding it interesting their service structure seemed to mimic his own. He noted there seemed to be a higher mix of female-to-male crew available, but the Observer cadre probably did not find themselves in combat all that often. He wondered how long the crew was on station before rotations, but decided he could wait and simply ask out of simple curiosity later.

He got some juice, then squeezed out a square of ships poop for breakfast, before settling in to observe for a while; biding his time until the Senior Observer made his way to the control room.

Kantor, The Elder’s Conference Room

“So, it would appear that *Sai* now keeps secrets from us,” a dour Lady Ai muttered to her staff this morning.

“She has told us Rondal is investigating evidence of another species,” Molara reminded her. “They appear to be involved with the implants we are currently plagued with, my Lady.”

“Yes, but what I pulled from him last night shows he is in *negotiation* with these aliens – these *Vanir* as they are called. In addition, he has ‘Senior Staff’ who are involved with resolving the *bombs* hidden among our citizens, yet he has not advised *us* of such! And he seems somewhat *unstable* in his mind, almost as if he had *night terrors*, or was on the verge of a mental *breakdown* of some sort!”

Lady Trenka, the newest member of the Elder’s staff, was very concerned at this suggestion and spoke softly to offer her advice.

“My Lady, Lord Caldar was charged to deal with the Drecks. All the information we currently have from Sai, Lili, and our other resources, indicates he has caused havoc and disarray; even at the Master Pack level. He has set upon them from *within*, my Lady, and that process is proceeding as he’d hoped.”

“Yes! And all indications show that he merely chooses to replace *one* harsh Pack ruler with *another!*”

“Elder, the child of Lord Gagsa has been fostered *within* the family of Lord Caldar,” Xiu reminded her. “As Sai has informed us, this was with *full* knowledge of the implications for such a relationship between the Hegemony and the Commonwealth. His plan may be bold, my Lady, but if

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it follows true, it brokers a reasonable stability between two powerful enemies. It does not preclude other options.”

“And what *other* options does he leave us? His mysterious ‘Senior Staff’, whom even *Lili* does not know the identity or whereabouts of? He plays a dangerous game with the *Commonwealth* as the stake!”

“Your pardon, my Elder, but this is the task set before him, and he is proceeding at a good pace,” Trenka said. “Our *own* estimates show an outside time frame of three years, Standard, to effect a change at the Master Pack level. This is beyond all expectations.”

“And now he would embroil us with an *alien* species as well!”

“My Elder – that is all out of our control, and there is no one better positioned to deal with it than Lord Caldar,” Trenka went on. “Lord Caldar and his staff have discovered the alien presence, and they are developing information on them, and their intentions towards the Commonwealth. If he can broker peace with those putting implants into our citizens and work on getting them safely removed ... perhaps we should *let* him proceed ... with all due caution, of course.”

“And are you presuming to act as *ELDER* now, Trenka?” Ai called out harshly

The room became quiet for several seconds while Trenka considered the unfortunate position she suddenly found herself thrust into. The strident level of distrust radiating from Ai finally made up her mind, and she slowly pushed back her chair and stood upright; facing the Elder with a calm and neutral expression on her face, before offering a half-bow of respect to her.

“I have served at the Elder’s pleasure to offer counsel and support during a difficult period. I am proud to have served you, my Lady, but as you no longer need my counsel ... I will respectfully withdraw,” she said quietly, then, after bowing again, turned and left the room; the door closing silently behind her.

“*SCAN HER! SCAN HER, RIGHT NOW!*” Ai screamed at her remaining staff, who were all shocked at this new development, but dutifully extended out and scanned Trenka, and each other – and then the Elder.

“My Lady, Trenka is not implanted ... nor are we. Neither are you,” Fan said calmly while stepping over and placing a comforting hand on Ai’s shoulder. Xiu came from the other side and reached out to the Elder, but Ai angrily shook them both off.

“*No!* Someone has *gotten* to her! Someone or *something!* Perhaps these ... these *ALIENS!*” she shouted even louder, and both Fan and Xiu reached out to her and extended their love.

They stood on both sides of her while glowing from head to foot, but it was when Molara walked up to face her before hugging and kissing her that she finally broke down and started crying. In the end, all four of them were kneeling on the floor – the three of them letting Ai release all her frustration, fear, and anger while trying very hard to wash it all away.

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Lady Trenka Song was packing a small bag when Rondal contacted her.

*‘Your pardon, Lady Trenka, but I cannot seem to get a response from the Elder or others of the Elder’s staff’*

*‘They are currently indisposed, Lord Caldar, and I am no longer part of the Elder’s staff. You should refer all further inquiries to Lady Lili. Good day, First Lord’* she replied, then dropped the conversation, which he immediately resumed.

*‘Lady Trenka, if you are no longer part of the Elder’s staff, then I would request that you inform me of what has happened. Please do not make this an order’*

*‘First Lord, I am Trenka Song se Cletus – ne Cletus ... although I may no longer have clan affiliation. I may no longer discuss the situation inside the Elder’s office and would ask that you please discuss this properly with Lady Liling Song – who should still have clan affiliation for the time being. By your leave, my Lord’* she sent, then dropped the conversation again ... waiting for only a few heartbeats before letting out a sigh.

She finished packing what few belongings she had. Her books she set aside, and, with the exception of two of them, made a call to housekeeping for the remainder of them to be placed into storage. Looking around her room one last time, she wiped her eyes on the sleeve of her robe, then left without looking back.

While walking down the corridor to the lift, she pondered what she could be doing next. Perhaps take a position back in the fleet? She thought of those she was familiar with, then wondered if Captain Talon might have room for her in his crew.

There was at least *one* reliable person she could still ask, and silently extended out to her once she reached the lift.

### ***Kantor, The Royal Household, Lili’s Suite***

Lili had just finished speaking silently with Lady Trenka when she received another silent request.

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*‘Lili, it appears there is some distress in the Elder’s office. Lady Trenka informs me she is no longer part of the Elder’s staff?’ Lili heard Rondal’s polite query.*

*‘She was just telling me, Rondal. It appears that your guard was down last night, and the Elder chose that moment to review your memories. I’m told she was very upset’*

*‘So THAT’S why my sleep was ruined last night. I’d thought it was my Demon acting up. I seemed to hear him last night ... talking to HIMSELF. He was arguing with himself about something, and it upset my whole sleep period. If she chose THAT moment to sneak a look within, then there’s no telling WHAT she’s learned – out of CONTEXT, naturally’ he shared dismally, and she felt his sigh from nearly two hours away.*

*‘The Elder should not have affected you so, Rondal. Perhaps it was your Demon who chose the wrong moment for self-reflection, but the fact remains that the Elder has suffered a severe loss of confidence in Trenka, and she has voluntarily left her service because of it’*

*‘She left ... can she even DO that? I mean, Lady Ai is the Elder, and all, but ... Jeeze!’*

*‘Trenka has left her service, as Lady Ai has refused to even listen to her advice and counsel; regardless of what she thinks about it. Lady Ai is under a great deal of stress, Rondal’*

*‘Oh, really? Then perhaps she needs a small vacation. Perhaps you should have Petrus pick her up and drag her ass over HERE to advise and counsel ME for a while!’ he snapped angrily before immediately relenting. ‘My very sincerest apologies, my Lady Song. That was uncalled for, and I have no excuse. Is Trenka going to be all right? She can stay in my room, if you will allow. I’m not gonna be back for ... oh, probably quite a while now. Not after I have Petrus join us on the Kraken’ he sent halfheartedly.*

*‘Trenka’s clan status has not been affected yet, and it ... Petrus do WHAT?’*

*‘Lili, if things turn sour down here, I need someone aboard who can fight the ship. Petrus can do that – Sai cannot’*

*‘But – but Sai thinks Petrus is dead! You TOLD her he was DEAD!’*

*‘No, I told her I returned his body to his FAMILY. She ASSUMED it was dead. She still loves him, Lili, and he ... well, he still loves everyone’*

*‘But ... but Sai will KILL him the moment she sees him!’*

*‘Don’t be silly! Petrus is an Earth-bastard like me, and has worked JUST as hard as me to make up for it. Neither one of us may be able to take a full-blooded Kantite Lord in a fair fight, but he should still be able to*

*fend off Sai easily enough. I made sure of that while we were still playing together on the Kraken – unless you guys buggered up his eyes and legs somehow'*

*'His eyesight is perfect, as are his legs. Uncle Petrus practiced while he was here, Rondal. The children much enjoyed it, as he did exercises in the garden, and then played with them afterwards. He is a good father ... figure'* she stumbled awkwardly.

*'Then he should have no problems avoiding Sai ... unless he slips on blood. She will need HIM to fight the ship, and I need HER influence over all the Drecks I have on board – plus the Kee ... and probably many more representatives from the Commonwealth, and perhaps some from the Demon's Realm. I am still undecided, but I'll know more once I have spoken to the local Vanir leader – who is currently five tank-lengths below me'*

*'Please keep us advised, Rondal. And also your Senior Staff. Should anything unfortunate happen to you, they should have the latest updates in order to properly advise me'* she sent, then thought further on it. *'Perhaps you should wait to burden the Elder with anymore uncomfortable facts until you brief me on them beforehand'* she added.

*'I believe that would be for the best, my Lady Lili. My love to you, and all of our family'*

*'Our love to you, Rondal'* she sent before dropping out with a weary sigh.

"Troubles, my pretty Lili?" Spring Blossom asked while lifting her head from the pillow beside Lili's.

"Chaos surrounds us, my beautiful Blossom, and now we have a *new* house guest arriving. Lady Trenka joins us for a visit while she is between jobs."

"Oh! She may share *my* quarters, Lili," she offered graciously.

"Rondal has offered her *his* quarters, my sweet, but we shall see," she said, then leaned over to kiss her lightly before getting up and dressing for the outside weather.

With robes and outdoor slippers on, Lili joined the young mothers on the children's patio, where she sat with them to sip her drink in the shade while they chatted about the household and the latest happenings at court. The children spent their time running around on the grass and tumbling carelessly with each other – laughing and giggling, all the while.

A movement under the edge of a bush caught her eye, and the face of a young valaet poked out very low to the ground. Its eyes were huge and

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black while it slowly crept towards the playing children – its haunches quivering in anticipation. She watched in rising alarm when the valaet launched itself *high into the air* – and snatched a flying insect out of it *well* above the pile of children before landing on the other side of them. Walter sat up laughing and called to it, it triumphantly bringing over its tiny kill for his approval.

Jaiying reached out and hugged it, pulling it off its feet, and Josie and Cathy joined in by rubbing its belly, head, and haunches. Meanwhile, Walter kept talking to it and scratching its ears. It rolled over onto its back and let them continue, and before long, the other kit showed up and flopped down loosely on the lawn next to the children, before demanding the same amount of attention.

Shaking her head at this blissful scene of relaxed children and pets at play, Lili turned her attention back to the mothers. She enjoyed their company for the remainder of her drink before getting up to pursue the issue Trenka had reported that morning. She wished she could stay and simply play in the sunshine without a single concern like her nieces and nephew, but the pressures of her responsibilities to both Crown and Elder were settling even heavier on her shoulders.

The Elder was having serious *personal* issues, and Lili had *no* idea of what to do about them.

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

"That is what has happened, my Ladies. Truly," Xue assured them calmly, as if Ju and Rong actually *had* a "calm" setting in their makeup.

Before either Ju or Rong could react, Daiyu raised her hand and got Xue's nod to continue.

"Xue, do you feel Ai has a stability issue or is it more likely that her frustrations with Lord Caldor are the root cause of her situation?"

Ju jumped the line and preempted Xue's response.

"That Man-Child is *more* than capable of driving Ai *insane!*" she said loudly, and *felt*, rather than saw, the nodding agreement from Rong sitting beside her.

"As I was *about* to say," Xue muttered on the low side of her own frustration, "The reports from Fan, Molara, and Xiu seem to indicate that Ai chose an *inopportune* moment to seek knowledge from a sleeping male Senior. I'm sure you remember those few times that we've *all* delved into the mind of a sleeping Healer; or *Senior*, for that matter."

She saw Wen's raised hand and nodded in her direction.

“My Ladies, the sleeping mind *often* dallies with memories both real and imagined,” Wen reminded them. “We’ve *all* had occasion to feel the dreams of our *hosts*, as well. Some of those memories – though not as depressing as one might suppose coming from the *First Lord* – are still not full of *hopeful* feelings, are they?”

This time Rong jumped the line and asked, “Then how is Ai supposed to *deal* with the Man-Child if he cannot be properly *read*?”

Xue let out a sigh. On some days she *really* hated being the spokesperson for the Council. Lately, it seemed Ju and Rong had been becoming even *testier* in their old age. Well, Ju was next to gain a new host, and she hoped it was a more *congenial* one this time. In the *meantime*...

“I should point out that trying to read a *sleeping* mind is – *at best* – a *fool’s* mission,” Xue commented pointedly. “Although, I wonder how she manages to *reach* Lord Caldar if his location is truly where Lady Tal has reported. That *too* is questionable – how both Sai and Lord Caldar can reach Elder Ai, and presumably Lady Liling Song. I would recommend we maintain close contact with the Elder’s remaining Kantite staff and monitor her progress through them remotely. For some reason, I lack the sensitivity to work past Ai’s blocks to the point that I do not understand what she is feeling,” she admitted, and then, as a show of *courtesy* this time, Ju raised her hand and waited for Xue’s polite nod.

“I had noticed my connection to Ai had become somewhat more tenuous after her “conjugal” liaison with Lord Caldar back on his derelict platform,” she finally admitted after all these years. “I had not thought much of it at the time, but, now knowing of his *affect* on Healers...” she raised just her hands from their wrists in a fractional shrug. “One could suppose there is a connection between her behavior and the effect of his ‘Gift’ to her, but I would be hard-pressed to understand the reason for it.”

This brought several uncomfortable nods among the five of them, but Xue had a counter observation.

“My understanding is that Lord Caldar also ‘Gifted’ the *rest* of Kita’s staff, and yet we seem to have no problem communicating with *them*. If anything, it seemed to become even *easier*,” she suggested, but tried to remember if she had ever actually made the effort to pry into their minds without their knowledge.

Daiyu raised her hand, and Xue nodded vacantly in her direction.

“My Ladies, historically the Elder’s Visions have always been of a *singular* nature. Now we’ve learned Ai not only *shares* her Visions with her staff, but that Lord Caldar had been plagued with them while waiting

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to die on his platform – or so we’d been informed. I must admit that, without actually having experienced them *personally*, I fail to understand the impact it has on the mind of the recipient. It has been reported that Lord Caldor suffered a period of insanity until he learned to *ignore* them – or perhaps it was the voices he had *claimed* to hear? I am unsure of which. In either occurrence, there *is*, no doubt, an emotional toll that must be a burden upon the recipient. At this time, I would postulate that Lady Ai is experiencing such and should be monitored closely,” Daiyu offered candidly.

“Her staff already works together in that regard,” Xue assured them, and, as there was really nothing more to say on the matter, pushed ahead to the next item on her list.

“I have an update to our last meeting’s report from Wilder...”

### *Observer Station 27*

“Good morning, S’Shac’Kah 39496. My greetings to you and your crew,” came from the speaker at the communications panel.

“Good morning ... human,” S’Shac’Kah 39496 said aloud.

A tiny part of his mind halfway wondered if the previous day had been a huge mass-hallucination, while several of the other parts smacked that part upside its neurons for ignoring the fact of the audible and visual recordings. Yet another part was crying out, *‘Hey, don’t forget what you’ve already reported to the Prime, and what she expects of you!’*

*‘That must be terribly confusing – having several compartments of your mind vying for attention like that. In my people, that is an illness referred to as a multiple-personality disorder’* he heard all by himself, while the speaker announced, *“My name is Rondal Caldor. My home world is where the Vanir took samples of humans and relocated them – without our permission. Please provide me with the location of the human samples so that I may verify their health and safety.”*

The Senior Observer was taken aback. As ordered, he had just learned the human’s name, but the Prime had insisted the sample humans remain undisclosed for the time being. A tiny portion of his mind made the comment that, *‘the “time being” has come and gone,’* before dodging the neural swipe from its neighbors.

“I thank you for your name, Rondal Caldor. That is a question our Prime has asked of me,” he said through the com system. “I have not been given permission to discuss the humans that were relocated as a representative sample of your society for study; although I assure you they remain healthy and safe.”



*“Auda and her friends were not safe when they found themselves taken by Drecks. Could you please explain how that came to be?”* Rondal asked through the coms, clearly for the benefit of the bridge crew. *‘You need not speak aloud’* came clearly into S’Shac’Kah 39496’s mind.

*“I cannot adequately explain that to you at this time – on the orders of the Prime,”* he said clearly, while continuing in silence. *‘There are two samples, one advanced, one not. The more advanced humans were transporting the female and her group, when they suffered mechanical failure and passed beyond the cloud. After that, their tracers stopped reporting; one by one’*

*“We all operate at the pleasure of those above us, and I will not ask you to openly defy your Prime’s orders,”* came from the speaker, while Rondal silently asked *‘Compared to the Vanir or my technology – are the advanced humans a danger to you or me?’*

*“We work in the background to keep their technology limited. The resources of their planet do not include the proper elements to let them achieve much more. We were very surprised when their ship got as far as the cloud itself”* S’Shac’Kah 39496 admitted only with his mind.

*‘Yes. Humans are a very clever species. At least we’re never boring’*

*‘No, not in the least,’* S’Shac’Kah 39496 silently agreed, then realized humans really *did* have a sense of humor; which was yet another indicator of intelligence and maturity.

Rondal continued through the audio system with, *“My ships require periodic fueling, and I need a source for such. A sufficient quantity of hydrogen and oxygen combined in liquid form is required. I can filter for impurities. Would there be a planetary structure nearby that has surface liquid of this nature?”*

*“There is a place that may not be discussed,”* S’Shac’Kah 39496 said stiffly. *“My apologies that the Prime denies me further permission to speak.”* S’Shac’Kah 39496 didn’t know why he even considered bending the rules so narrowly, and hoped it didn’t come back to sully him.

*“The more primitive sample lies below us, well below the cloud in clear space”* he continued silently. *‘The more advanced sample is somewhat closer – below and to the left – also outside the cloud, and in an adjacent system’*

*“I understand your restrictions, and I will not ask your crew to defy the orders of the Prime,”* came over the speaker. *“Does the Prime have any requests of me?”*

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*'Aside from not darkening the sky with our ashes?'* one tiny segment of S'Shac'Kah 39496's mind thought to itself, but then collectively got a grip and continued aloud. "The Prime asks that you continue to display reasonable precautions so the Vanir, as a whole, will not be distressed at this unprecedented occurrence between Vanir and humans. She is still reviewing with her advisors the proper course of action. Truthfully, this has never occurred within the long history of the Vanir and must be considered carefully."

*"I understand the Prime's concerns and precautions. I personally do not intend to engage Vanir in any capacity other than actions required to safeguard my people, or my own life. If Vanir should chose to challenge this simple condition, it may change my outlook unfavorably. I will report this to my superiors, and withdraw for a period of time so that my ship may seek fuel at a convenient planet that matches my requirements."*

"You are leaving?" S'Shac'Kah 39496 quickly asked.

*"I am going to refuel, and then return. Perhaps the Prime will have other questions for me – and I for her. Goodbye, Senior Observer,"* Rondal said over the speaker while continuing directly to the Senior Observer's mind.

*'I will refuel and see if my passenger can locate her family on Midgard. I will consider the Midgard situation, and review possibilities for their relocation and integration back into the rest of human society. This delay will give the Prime an opportunity to consider her options'*

Rondal paused in thought for a moment, before deciding to offer a silent shadowy truce. He wanted to make sure this representative of the Vanir understood *exactly* what he was facing.

*'Humanity will join together and hopefully grow into maturity under the careful guidance of my people. I understand the Vanir concerns, but I do not currently see a need for conflict. You have no resources that we want, and neither do we have resources that you need. If the Vanir choose to remove themselves from Hegemony and Commonwealth space, then you may all simply sit back and watch us either grow and become stable, or implode spectacularly, as before'*

He let that sit for a second before issuing a not so subtle reminder.

*'If Vanir continue to interfere with Humanity, then my position may change. If Vanir choose conflict with me personally, then I will assume it is on the orders of the Prime, and take steps to eliminate that danger to me ... and to Humanity'*

"Goodbye ... Rondal ... Caldar," the Senior Observer hissed out in an uneven voice while the background noise of the communication system died down.

The change in his voice and the severe tint of emotional distress in his general coloration had become readily apparent. There was silence in the control room until it started to become uncomfortable.

One of his crewmen finally asked, “S’Shac’Kah 39496 ... are you well?” which brought a delayed reaction from the Senior Observer until he slowly rotated his head in the crewman’s direction.

The Senior Medical Technician came forward and planted herself in his line of sight – blocking the view of the curious crewman. She looked him over, before reaching out with her tail and rubbing it alongside his.

“Come with me, Shac’Kah, and I will see to your rest,” she said softly while using the very *personal* address of mating pairs that, although they really weren’t, she was going to emulate to reassure him of his worth as a person, and viable member of warren S’Shac’Kah in the simplest and most carnal way possible.

The rest of the bridge crew turned away from them in respect while she led their shaken leader back to her nest.

### ***The Kraken’s Child, In the Cloud***

Rondal watched with a semblance of clinical curiosity for a few minutes, but made a graceful withdrawal once things began to get slippery in the nest of the medical crewwoman. As he’d indicated to Sai earlier, his initial assessment of *that* particular interspecies interaction had been correct. Then he reported in to let Lili know what his current plans were for visiting Midgard and doing a preliminary assessment. Once Lili was updated, he sat down and cleared his thoughts before extending in the general direction S’Shac’Kah 39496 had indicated. He eventually came across the general feeling of thought forms similar to Auda’s at about the right distance ... with a few Vanir thrown in, as well. ‘*Probably another Vanir observation facility,*’ he thought to himself.

‘*Sai, I have ship movement coordinates for you*’

‘*You trust me with your ship again?*’ she sent with amusement.

‘*There isn’t supposed to be anything down here to run into*’ he sent back dryly. ‘*But I want you to park the rock and come in with the Kraken running full shields, just the same. We’re gonna check out Midgard, and then refuel if we can do it without terrorizing the natives. I’ll go in first and establish a proper fix for you. Then I’ll send you the new coordinates*’

‘*Cycle the shields, Sai*’ he added as an afterthought.

‘*We’ll be on our way, Rondal. Auda and I are looking forward to having you to ourselves once again*’ she said warmly.

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‘And I, you, my little Vigdis’ he teased her.

‘War Goddess, indeed! Keep in touch. Our love to you, Rondal’

‘And my love to you’ he sent, then ended.

That done, he took a big breath and considered his next message. After a quick consultation with Lili, he relaxed and began.

‘Elder, if you have a moment, I have much new information to share with you’ he sent clearly, and for him, *politely* this time.

### ***September 4, Vanaheim Prime, Due Diligence***

The Prime had been considering the reports from the Senior Observer of Station 27 for several cycles now, but her staff had questions regarding Observer S’Shac’Kah 39496’s “interpretation” of the human’s intentions. Those were based on her staff linguists’ translations of the raw audio recordings they had received, rather than the rather crude translations the Senior Observer had relied upon to carry on what appeared to be a rather limited conversation with the “alleged” human in question.

The Senior Medical Technician’s report had also indicated a period of extreme stress that had required extensive efforts on her part to return the Observer’s status to one of calm demeanor, which subsequently relieved the anxiety of the crew who had actually witnessed the event in question. This stress level did not seem warranted by the limited audio dialogue that had been reviewed. Aside from the disparity between the written report and the audio dialogue, there was the disturbing report of Observer Station 23, or rather, the *non*-reporting of Observer Station 23. Senior Observer S’Slich’Tah 24854 of that station had failed to report arrival in Vanir space as scheduled, nor had he submitted any reports at all since receipt of their acknowledgement of their recall orders.

If the supposed human dealing with S’Shac’Kah 39496 was to be believed, the only critical point of contention between the Vanir and that human were the unauthorized implantations of explosive devices into unsuspecting humans by the S’Slich’Tah Warren. One station was already destroyed, apparently by *accident*, according to the initial transmitted report, while the other one was overdue for communication with Vanaheim Prime and *potentially* destroyed.

Would the human have done that and *not* mentioned it to S’Shac’Kah 39496?

Then there was yet *another* consideration ... the subject humans on the Vanir-acquired observation worlds. The human, this Rondal Caldar, was intent upon locating them and observing their current condition. To her knowledge, those two planets were in good condition and stable,

although the Aesir had recently developed a primitive jump drive of some sort that had accidentally gotten a ship lost through the cloud.

The Vanir observers had immediately put a *stop* to that nonsense by scrambling the minds of those researchers who'd produced that line of discovery. It had been very distasteful at the time, but necessary. They did *not* need humans traveling all over Vanir space like the humans above the cloud did within their own domains. '*And yet there was one just talking to one of our observation stations directly,*' a lone portion of her mind quietly pointed out, which momentarily garnered the attention of the *rest* of her mind's segments before they shifted their focus back to the human's stated concerns.

The two "acquired" societies were still maintaining their same symbiotic relationship, much as they had since their sampling nearly fifteen millennia ago. The humans on Midgard provided food supplies and occasional manual laborers for the Aesir, while the Aesir continued to live as they always had – developing the sciences and arts, and living very comfortably at the expense of their Midgardian slave workers. This Rondal Caldar would *surely* understand the situation was one of *human* creation and not the responsibility of the Vanir, wouldn't he? Besides, the few moderating actions had been only those necessary to prevent unfortunate scientific advances, such as what had allowed that Aesir ship to leave their immediate space.

As for the *original* Aesir relocation – that had happened fifteen *millennia* ago. That was *long* before the current human inhabitants of either realm had been established – during *this* cycle, at least.

She stretched in her nest while pondering her next steps. The human had supposedly gone off somewhere to refuel. That meant going back to Eke, certainly ... one hoped. There should still be time available...

The Prime issued commands that would set her linguists into a tizzy. They were to research and find all references to a human named Rondal Caldar. Origin ... somewhere within the *dangerous* human grouping. They were to compile a report that either established his relationship with authority within that group, or tell her he can be safely eliminated as a possible threat to the Vanir. As an afterthought, she ordered a quick review of the sample worlds for stability and general healthiness just in case, because ... you never know.

A ship and crew were dispatched that very day from a Vanir outpost fairly close to the human sample worlds.

### ***September 5, The Kraken's Child, A View to the Past***

Rondal was reviewing the planet revolving below him.

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It was quite pretty, with its open oceans, some spectacular lakes and rivers, a great deal of green land, and several moderately majestic mountain ranges.

He observed no great cities while sitting silent and invisible in orbit, but found several farming communities with advanced machinery that seemed at odds with his assumptions about Auda's living conditions. He set his optics to record before sitting back to observe while the planet unfolded beneath him for several rotations. There were wide areas of wilderness, but much of one continent was reserved for agriculture and animal husbandry.

Rail lines linked the flat farm and rolling rangelands, and all led back to a single advanced facility of warehouses and buildings. They appeared to be staffed by humans and what looked like robots; at least from his current position in orbit.

He was thinking of dropping down to get a closer look, but his instruments suddenly spiked, and a dazzling bolt of multi-colored light popped into being several kilometers from the ship that connected with the ground, or rather, a particular *place* on the ground that was surrounded by low buildings. He watched avidly, but saw no immediate destruction, so he traced it back into space while looking for its source. When it shut off just as suddenly, he turned his attention back to the ground.

He was expecting to see a big empty hole in it, but nothing had changed – other than finding that a pile of containers were now stacked neatly at the center of impact. Then he watched as workers swarmed around the pile and began breaking it down. They appeared to be relocating the containers into adjacent storage buildings.

"Well, it appears Auda neglected to mention a few things about her home world," he muttered quietly.

'CALDAR! CALDAR, ARE YOU ALL RIGHT?' a silent shout came from Sai.

*'Yes I am. I've just seen the most remarkable thing. It's–'*

*'WE'RE UNDER ATTACK! THESE COORDINATES!'*

'JUMP THE SHIP! RANDOM – NOW!' he pressed back, even while keying in the *Kraken's* location and triggering his own jump. They were less than two minutes out.

'Sai – are you safe? Sai!' he sent, but waited anxiously for the seconds to run by before coming out of transition near another planet.

*‘Caldar! Caldar ... we’re safe! We were knocked out of a transition sequence and fired upon by a planetary weapon of some sort!’ she finally sent back.*

*‘Did it hit you?’*

*‘No. They failed to aim it at us, but it was headed towards you! Are you all right?’*

*‘I think... I think I know what it is’* he shared, then scooted his ship over a bit *well* away from a direct line between Midgard and this planet – which he tentatively identified as Asgard – before dropping down and enabling his external optics, then taking a *really* close look below.

He saw brilliantly shining spires, exquisitely crafted monuments and buildings, broad boulevards, casually dressed citizens, and shining armored guards ... or workers ... or robots. He found what looked like a spaceport – at least the vessels would have no other land or sea purpose. His sensors caught extremely high radiation readings from that area, so he made a mental note to avoid it in the future. Much further away, he found a facility similar to the one on Midgard, then hung in a stationary orbit several dozen kilometers off to one side of it.

His patience was finally rewarded when another display of multi-colored lightening lasted for several seconds, then stopped just as suddenly. When he could focus his eyes once again, he saw another neatly stacked pile of shipping containers that were being broken down and relocated by another swarm of workers on *this* side, this time.

*‘Sai, you’ve just been the victim of the Bifrost Bridge between Asgard and Midgard’* he sent in admiration. *‘They appear to have teleportation as a fact – after a fashion. They use it to transport commodities between planets. Apparently, the effect on a ship in mid-transition is to kick it into real space ... if it isn’t directly in the path of the beam’*

*‘Teleportation? These PRIMITIVES?’*

*‘History, Sai. Remember our history. Humankind has risen and fallen many, many times. Looks like the Vanir sampled humanity on either the way up or the way down. In either case, they have teleportation. It’s a bit messy, but it appears to work ... although I’d not like to use it for personal transportation. Send me your coordinates and I’ll join you’* he requested, and shortly he was on his way.

### ***Asgard, Transceiver Station***

An anomaly had been registered earlier at the transceiver station on Asgard, and another blip had just occurred. Technician Dagrun looked at

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his instruments, then tapped a couple of meters to settle their bearings. *More* anomalies this time?

He shook his head, then noted it in the equipment logs, and added, “Mysterious visitor again?” before closing the book and gathering up his tools and probes.

“Anything to report, Dagrun?” his shift supervisor asked.

“Just the first surge, Team Leader. Nothing on the second transmission,” he reported while deliberately keeping his opinions to himself.

Upon occasion, similar entries had been recorded, and he was not the *only* one who had opinions on the cause. He knew it would only be a matter of time when *whatever* was getting too close to the transmission beam would be nailed hard enough to fall to Asgard. Then they’d *all* learn the truth about the Vanir Gods, once and for all.

### *Aboard the Kraken*

Rondal docked and shut down the *Kraken’s Child* before standing and stretching. Then he transferred his recordings over Midgard to a data tab and exited his ship to find Sai, Auda, Endo, and Torga waiting for him.

“You suffered no damage?” he asked while cycling the lock shut on the tank. He was greeted with a hug from Sai, but she seemed shaken by her ordeal.

“The systems seem all right, but after having that *surge* go through us like that, I’m worried about the *navigation system*! It tore us right out of transition and dropped us into *real space*! We never saw it *coming*!”

He pushed her back a bit to look down at her face. She appeared worried, and Auda had come up to stand right beside them with an anxious look on her face as well.

“Well, an interesting tool, then. Too bad it’s so ill-mannered,” he said calmly, then hugged the two of them before reaching out and shaking hands with Endo and Torga.

“Everyone’s all right, though? No injuries?”

“Aside from having the *pee* scared out of me – *literally*,” Sai admitted, then blushed lightly. “I want to compare your system with the navigation system on the bridge, just to make sure.”

“We’ll compare *all* of them just to make sure,” he agreed, then turned his attention to Auda. “Auda, I have some pictures I want you to see. Maybe you can tell me what they are,” he suggested, before starting them walking towards the interior of the ship.



They stopped by the commons, where he greeted the other women and the Kee. Once things had settled down a bit, the ladies had gone ahead with meal preparations as normally planned. Rondal told them to keep it simple for the time being, and Manya assured him that it would be both simple and delicious, before turning back to her group. He asked the men to meet him in the conference room in half an hour, before heading to his quarters, with Sai and Auda following along quietly. He couldn't understand why Sai was freaking out so badly, but she'd probably tell him about it when she was ready.

Once he arrived in his quarters, he sloughed off his clothes and dumped them in the hamper before heading to the facilities for a welcome shower. Both Sai and Auda joined him, but as he had things to do, he kept the shower serious for a change. Once cleaned and refreshed, they dressed and headed to the conference room. The men joined them there, while Gallus kept watch and listened on a monitor from the bridge.

Rondal soon had a split-screen up on the wall display showing the two worlds slowly rotating side-by-side. He zoomed in closer to one of them and details began to pop out on Midgard; such as occupied areas, large fields for crops, ranges for herd animals, and the storage and transmission area.

On the Asgard image, they watched as that world rotated, but everyone noted it displayed some traumatic continental upheavals. Rondal slowed it down at a point where the land leveled out and it became obvious the Aesir were living well compared to the humans on Midgard. Instead of great agricultural expanses, the Aesir seemed to be concentrated in a huge gleaming city of spires, monumental buildings, and elegant boulevards. He stopped the image there before making Midgard the primary image on the display.

"Auda, can you tell me anything about where you lived on Midgard?"

She stood up and approached the image of Midgard before stopping to watch while the surface slowly rotated in front of her.

She watched intently for several minutes, tilting her head back and forth until she suddenly stiffened and pointed to a spot she seemed to recognize. He slowed the rotation while zooming in until a small village was seen. Small plots of land surrounded it, and the local hills were dotted with grazing animals, but none of it was on the scale necessary for supporting another planet.

"Auda, is that your village?" he asked her.

## Unhide the Past

“Ja! *Tofa!* Minn hju in *Tofa!*” she said while circling the image with her finger several times. He zoomed in even closer and slowed it down to a crawl.

“Minn *husgord!* Minn *husgord!*” she said excitedly while bouncing on her toes happily and pointing at a particular hut. “*MODIR!*” she shouted when an older version of herself was seen standing beside the hut. “*Modir! Modir!*”

‘*Her town or village, her house, her mother – “modir,” Sai. This was real time about three hours ago*’ he explained silently, then froze the image.

“Auda, would you please tell everyone else what you just said?” Sai asked her.

“Ja! Ja – ja! My ... *village?* Tofa is name! On the mountain, away from the proell – the ... the ones you make *work?*” she asked, and Rondal read her quickly.

“Slaves,” he said quietly.

“Ja! *Slaves!* My modir ... my mother,” she said, pointing to the frozen image on the screen. “My mother ... house. I live in mother house as virgin girl! Ah!” she suddenly gasped, then turned her face away from the display while covering her eyes.

“Auda ósœmd blóta. Auda ósœmd modir,” she said, then fell to her knees on the floor before curling over into a tight ball.

“Auda – you’re not a sacrifice, and you haven’t dishonored anyone,” Rondal explained calmly for everyone’s benefit.

He stepped over to her, then got her up and walked her back to the table where he seated her next to Sai.

“Tell us about how you got so lost,” he suggested, and she sniffed a few times before nodding.

“Ja... Auda and ... and other friends... We to go to Aesir as sacrifice from the village. We go on the road ... to there,” she said, then pointed to an area off the edge of the display. “Aesir come and take us in a ship the Dwarves make for them on Nidarvellir. They take us, but ... but Vanir punish them and break the ship. The Vanir send us to the *Jotuns* instead. We are sacrifice to *Jotuns* now, but Jotuns eat *Aesir*, too,” she said, but looked over at Torga and Endo.

“That is not right, is it?” she asked quietly.

“No, little Auda, that is not quite right at all,” Sai softly agreed while hugging her warmly.

“Auda, who are the Aesir to your people?” Rondal asked her quietly, and saw her eyes suddenly light up.

“The... The *Gods and Goddesses!* They are the *Sky Gods* who come in ships built by the *Dwarves*. They take the *food* we grow for them across the *Bifrost Bridge!* That is what we are *born* to do!” she said eagerly, but then paused for a considerable amount of time.

“That ... that is not right either,” she stated flatly as she wound down dejectedly.

“Auda ... who is Rondal Caldar to you?” Sai asked softly.

“He is ... he is friend... He is my lover... He rules this ship... He is ... he is Emperor’s *brother*,” she said while tilting her head. “He is ... he is like a *God!*” she said quickly.

“Auda,” Torga said, then held out his arm.

He pulled his small knife out and scored his flesh lightly. Concentrating strongly, he placed his hand over the cut, and Rondal caught just the tiniest bit of glow coming from underneath it while he held it there for about thirty seconds before pulling his hand away to reveal a thin scar.

“Auda ... am *I* a God?”

“No, you are Jotu– you are Drecks,” she corrected herself, then reached out and finished his Healing perfectly.

“Yes, I am human-Drecks,” he agreed, then patted her hand gently and got a smile in return, before she turned to Rondal with questions in her mind.

“Rondal Caldar – please tell me about my history,” she requested, and for the next hour he pieced it together as best he could from his observations of the Vanir, and her *own* mythology about Asgard and their parasitic relationship with Midgard.

### ***September 6, Observer Station 23, In Orbit around Midgard***

The Senior Observer of Station 23 was fuming in anger as he watched Midgard revolve below him. He didn’t have enough resources to even *decimate* the human infestation below, but could still make life *miserable* for them and their “Gods” on *Asgard!*

“*All of them!* I want *all* the implants put into key individuals and we’ll *destroy* this nest once and for *all!*” S’Slich’Tah 24854 shouted angrily.

He was still smarting from the Prime’s recall order and her letter of censure, but it was when he’d learned that his warren-sibling,

## Unhide the Past

S'Slich'Tah 24848, had been reported lost with his station and crew, that he'd become *enraged* with anger. *None* of his mind segments disagreed in the least with his desire to enact revenge for that obvious act of wanton destruction at the hands of the filthy humans; and as long as he was able, he was going to take this one last opportunity to *strike back* – *despite the recall order!*

As ordered, he was on his way back to Vanaheim, but taking the “scenic” route. It was likely that censure was just the *beginning* for his warren, but he refused to be grounded without striking out at least *once* in opposition to the Prime's directives. Unlike now, the *previous* Prime had sensibly engineered the humans into fighting with each *other*, instead of sitting back on her tail and watching their safety whittle away minute-by-minute while the humans *continued* to breed and spread themselves throughout space above the *pureness* of the Vanir Realm!

“Send out the *implantation ships! All of them! Get started immediately!* If there are any Aesir down there, do them *first! Especially* if they work with that matter-transmitter!” he ordered, and his crew rushed to obey. They were all from S'Slich'Tah Warren, and all felt the same. The humans were an *excess* life form that had *no need to exist!*

### ***Aboard the Kraken***

Rondal and Sai were on the bridge of the *Kraken*. Auda was sitting quietly off to one side and looking at the view screen displaying the world of her birth. She seemed to have been in a somber mood ever since they'd arrived in orbit.

*‘We can't very well go down and just drop in on her mother. She understands that, right?’* he silently asked Sai.

*‘Right now, she's still terribly embarrassed she's no longer a virgin. When we finally succeeded in seducing her, her mind was made up that she would never go home again. Now that you've “ruined” her, she can't go back again without a husband – or a corpse that used to be a husband’*

He looked over at the melancholy expression on Auda's face and shook his head slowly before going on.

*‘Well, I'm not about to volunteer for the latter, but she is part of our family now. Everyone back home has accepted her, sight unseen. How does her society feel about plural marriage? Not that she would end up as First Wife ... should I actually manage to survive all this’*

Sai looked at him from the side while she thought of her own daughter's dreams.

*‘Let's just leave that thought alone for the time being, shall we?’* Sai turned to the view screen and gestured at it before continuing silently.

*‘There’s an ocean down there that looks good, and according to Auda, no fishing boats come out this far – from the stories she’s heard, anyway. Supposed to be monsters in the deep water’*

“All right,” he said, then sent out a ship-wide announcement in Standard. “Maneuvering for atmosphere in twenty minutes! Everyone into ship suits with fully charged collars. Torga to the bridge. Endo to the *Orca*. Gallus to the shuttle with the girls. Sai to the *Kraken’s Child*. Stand by for final instructions before departure!”

Rondal reached out and hugged Sai to him, then gave her a kiss before sending her off.

“Don’t break my ship!” he warned her with a stern expression, and she blew him a raspberry before grabbing Auda by the arm and taking her along.

He could feel Auda’s sudden distress, but dismissed it in preparation to take this one hundred and fifty meter behemoth down into atmosphere for the very first time to attempt a direct refueling. Clax had built it in, even though the likelihood of it ever being necessary was tiny. If it worked, he would have to send him another case of ambrosia – if Lili could locate her little brother again and have him deliver it personally.

Torga arrived shortly and took over, while Rondal slipped on his ship suit. He went over the scenario with Torga, before linking with the pilots of the ships and the shuttle – doing so silently.

*‘Hello, everyone. All navigation computers were synchronized with the Kraken’s Child as the reference, and all seem to have survived the unfortunate pulse from the Bifrost device’* he sent, lessening its prestige down a notch from its mythology.

*‘Sai, you have high guard over the Kraken. Stay cloaked, with shields up and cycling. Endo, you have guard over the shuttle and I want you to stay cloaked with shields cycling, as well. Protect it at all costs. Gallus, down the shuttle in a clear space and sit tight; shields up and cycling. If anything unfortunate happens to the Kraken, Auda may help all of you deal with the local society until a recovery operation can be launched from the Commonwealth’*

He opened the hanger door in the rear of the *Kraken*, and then, one-by-one, the tanks and shuttle passed through the air barrier and left the dock. He closed the door and waited for them to settle into position before beginning his descent. The transition from space to atmosphere was handled slowly by simply dropping – horizontally – straight down at sub-sonic speeds while staying shielded and cloaked.

## Unhide the Past

### *Observer Station 23*

"Senior Observer! There are transmissions on the *higher* bands close to where we monitor the human trackers!" the Duty Observer reported.

"*WHERE? WHERE ARE THEY?*"

"Emanations are coming from an area over the large ocean below, Senior Observer!"

This gave S'Slich'Tah 24854 the slightest pause, before he ordered one of his implantation ships to cut loose and investigate.

"Have ship Four break off immediately and investigate that area! Implant any humans found in that area!" he ordered.

### *Aboard the Kraken*

"Well, this is *workable* ... but I wonder if it'd be any quicker if we just transported two tankers worth at the same time?" Rondal muttered.

"Perhaps it's the shield slowing the pumps down?" Torga suggested.

He checked the shield settings, and stepped Torga through it with him as he did so. He was actually quite proud of him, and happy that his subconscious had revealed the amount of love and caring he felt towards his father, Lord Gagsa. Likewise, Torga had fond memories of Maya, and been concerned about her ever since his father had taken her for the dinner entrée at the Diplomatic Station.

"See there? The hole we've opened in the shields isn't blocking the pumps at all," Rondal pointed out. "Of course, we couldn't do that if they were *cycling*, but with the shields up against the outer armor there isn't much that could penetrate us."

Torga's attention shifted back to the bottom camera array once again. He'd been eyeing it off and on ever since they'd stopped ten meters above sea level.

"Lord Caldar ... you don't *really* think there are monsters in the deep ocean out here, do you?" he asked somewhat hesitantly.

"Are you worried about being served up on some monster's food platter?" Rondal teased him, causing Torga to think about that, and then about the past...

He hadn't understood all that had gone on back then, but in later years, he'd shamed his father by refusing to eat live food, and especially live *humans*. He was unsure of exactly when his father had changed his *own* thinking about that aspect of Drecks' life. Perhaps it was around the time they were slowly starving to death on Kee, and he'd refused to eat any of the food girls assigned to his Pack. The successful "fishing" of live

Kee, and their subsequent escape from Kee, cemented the loyalty of nearly all of the remaining Pack ... except for a few, it would appear. At least Rondal Caldar had given him gifts to help deal with those issues...

Torga was still thinking about how his father was managing against his hidden detractors, when his attention was brought back to the present.

"...I'm afraid. Of course, I never *did* go back and get some smaller guns mounted on this thing. That's the only problem we have right now, and why Lady Sai is sitting up there watching over us," Rondal said quietly.

Torga had to scramble to appear to be paying attention.

"Just the one gun. The ... \*BF\* ... \*BF\* ..."

"The \*BFG\* ... courtesy of Kale engineers, and the extremely aggressive and stupid ship-handling by the first Avenger-class ship Captain – or his *Overseer*, more likely," Rondal said, and Torga's thoughts were quick in catching up.

"We were never known for caution, Lord Caldar, which is why I've often wondered how we've raised so high over the humans in our grouping. The existence of the Vanir explains that quite plainly, I'm afraid." His sigh was subdued, but the emotions behind it were easily felt.

Rondal understood his frustration; having seen it many times when the once mighty suddenly realize they are no longer at the top of the food chain. He tried to put it into perspective for him.

"If a people refuses to learn, then they die off. The Drecks learned a few things well, but did not learn *all* the things needed for stability and proper growth. The Commonwealth almost died out – at least *two* times that we know of – and who knows how many countless times *before* that?"

He paused and caught Torga's eye, before going on.

"The *Vanir* probably have a pretty good idea. If it weren't for the actions of a small group of human-'somethings' some ten to fifteen thousand years ago, we'd probably still be crawling out of our huts to scratch in the dirt, instead of hovering a sixty-thousand-ton spacecraft ten-meters over an ocean on a planet nearly an hour from it's construction point and sucking up fuel in the form of water. If we can continue to learn without *destroying* ourselves, I'd call that progress, and–"

'*Rondal! I have transient atmospheric signatures from a cloaked ship near by!*' Sai reported.

## Unhide the Past

*‘Stay clear, Sai. The Aesir aren’t supposed to have anything like that, so it might be a change in policy from the Vanir Prime’* he sent silently while including Torga for his awareness.

“Torga, we appear to be a target of some sort, but we’ll have to draw the attacker to us,” he said, then shut off the pumps and sealed the reaction mass valves before retracting the hose.

As soon as the hose docked, and the hose door shut, he ran the shields up to cycling, but changed his mind. He set the shield to a steady state and contacted Sai again.

*‘Sai, the Vanir don’t send out ships with weapons – not according to our friends on Station 27. I also read their method of implantation is to knock out the victim, implant the tracer, then turn them loose. To do that, they will have to come aboard, and they cannot do that through an active shield. Hell, they couldn’t even get through the locks. Keep a careful watch and see what you can’*

*‘Why don’t you contact your friend at Station 27 and ask him? He’s been pretty forthcoming, so far’*

*‘I don’t know if I can reach him from this far out, but ... sure’* he sent, then settled in to work on it.

### ***Observer Station 23***

“Senior Observer, ship Four reports a *huge* vessel on the ocean sucking water into itself. They report two humans on board who appear to be radiating thought forms similar to the *aggressor* humans!”

*“Implant them! Immediately! And when we run out of devices, we’ll destroy them all!”*

### ***Observer Station 27***

Senior Observer S’Shac’Kah 39496 was resting somewhat comfortably for a change.

The Senior Medical Technician had applied herself once again and relieved his stress to the point that he could finally relax a bit and even catch a bit of sleep – as much as a Vanir could actually be said to sleep, anyway.

*‘S’Shac’Kah 39496... S’Shac’Kah 39496... Please forgive this intrusion, but I have a situation I need clarified’* was heard faintly on the fringes of his consciousness.

A tiny portion of his mind began beating strongly on the adjacent segments to no avail, so it decided to respond as best as it could.



*'He-lo! Hel-o, Ro-dal Ca-dar! Th-s ... this is pa-t of S'Sh-c'Ka- 39-96's mid! T-e o-hers ign-re me b-t I c-n he-r y-u'* it expressed weakly, while the slumbering portion of its counterparts reacted with mixed subliminal emotions.

### ***Aboard the Kraken***

This would *never* do. The minimal energy Rondal could sense coming back was not strong enough to converse clearly, but now that he had at least a *tenuous* connection...

*'Forgive me, segment of S'Shac'Kah 39496, but I can barely hear you. For both our societies' sake I will help you'* he sent, then reached out to Kantor for assistance.

In just moments of mindspeak, he relayed the problem. In a few moments more, elements of his Senior Staff used his tenuous connection to Station 27's Senior Observer and began a few delicate modifications to that particular segment which seemed interested in talking to him at all. Only seconds later, Rondal could hear him just *fine*.

### ***Observer Station 27***

*'S'Shac'Kah 39496, we are currently refueling on the planet called Midgard, and there is a cloaked ship hovering around us. We are concerned that it may be a change in the Vanir Prime's policy. If it should attack, we would be forced to defend ourselves'* Rondal advised him.

*'I will arouse the others!'* that tiny segment declared, then in a very loud *internal* voice, it finally got the attention of the rest of S'Shac'Kah 39496's mind, and dragged them from an uneasy slumber. He quickly brought the rest of S'Shac'Kah 39496's segments up to date, before handing the conversation over to him directly.

*'Rondal Caldar, I know of no change in policy the Prime has instructed for us. Observer Stations are not armed, nor are the implantation ships that are assigned to them. The only stations with any sort of dangerous devices were either destroyed or ordered returned to Vanaheim Prime'*

*'Have they all been accounted for?'*

*'Observer Station 23 is reported overdue and non-responsive. There are also indications their warren's scientists have produced a safer method of implantation that does not require physical acquisition of the target subject'*

*'The name! What is the name of the Senior Observer for Station 23!'*

*'Senior Observer S'Slich'Tah 24854 is in charge of Station 23. The entire station is crewed by his warren mates, as ours is crewed by mine'* S'Shac'Kah 39496 informed him.

## Unhide the Past

*'My apologies in advance if Senior Observer S'Slich'Tah 24854 becomes troublesome and needs to be stopped. I will take your mitigating information into account'* Rondal sent, then immediately dropped the conversation.

The Senior Observer pondered the situation, and quickly reached a logical conclusion – either the Prime had sent a ship to investigate the sample worlds, or Observer Station 23 had just been located and was up to some unauthorized activity.

If he reported to the Prime that the humans were at Midgard, then the obvious question would be that someone had *told* them where to find it – and *he* was the obvious choice. On the other extremity, if the humans destroyed a ship sent by the Prime as a simple observer, then things would *certainly* spiral out of control – and he would *still* be the obvious choice as to how they got there. Again, a rational and logical decision *had* to be made – *minimize* the information!

He got up and went to the control room to advise the Prime that the humans had contacted him from some distance away and reported interference from a cloaked ship during refueling. He reported there was some concern the Prime had possibly changed her preliminary stance on their tentative peaceful relationship – volunteering no more information than was immediately necessary. Once receipt of his message was confirmed, he relaxed and contemplated his rather dismal future.

There were *no* communications logs to support his report. As such, unless the human actually continued with his suggested plan of action, there would be no verification of his report at all. That did not seem to present an existence that lingered very far into his future.

*'He is worried. The rest of the crew is worried. Has contact with the human shattered Shac'Kah 39496 of his senses?'* he heard clearly in his mind, then turned to see his Senior Medical Technician standing quietly behind him. He closed his eyes and let his head hang down; not considering the impressions of those observing him.

*'Come with me, Shac'Kah, and I will see to your rest'* he heard in his mind, just before she actually spoke aloud. "Come with me, Shac'Kah, and I will see to your rest."

He numbly accepted her supporting arm and let himself be escorted to her nest; his crew politely turning their backs to them in respect.

### ***S'Slich'Tah Implant Ship Four***

*"There! Got the big one!"* the operator said, then loaded the next bomb into the matter-transceiver on Implant Ship Four.

## Floyde Leong

He searched and searched, but there was interference in the target area, and he reported it.

“He already *has* an implant, but I can’t *read it!*”

“Then *remove* it and put in a *bomb!*”

“I obey!”

### *On the Kraken*

After a moment of indecision, Torga said, “Ow!” and grabbed at his midsection.

“What’s wrong, Torga?” Rondal asked, but felt a tug at his lower abdomen, then a sudden, sharp pain.

“Aww, *CRAP!*” he exclaimed, then looked within Torga and himself – not really surprised to find that an extra bit of hardware had just been installed in them both.

He could remove the one from Torga, but if it went off, they would *both* be killed. The same thing could happen if he pulled out the one in his *own* abdomen – and it would hurt like a *bitch*, besides.

He could call Jaiying, but if she got nervous under pressure, they could *still* both be killed.

He was frozen in indecision. He needed to come up with something *fast*, but absolutely *nothing* came to mind!

*Gods!*

### *Somewhere Else...*

*The Fate on Duty had been waiting for **just** this moment. With a **trivial** effort of will, she performed a **tiny** bit of slight of hand.*

*The knot holding the thong around Rondal’s neck suddenly came loose, and the only **remaining** talisman slithered down inside his ship suit to settle around his groin on the outside of his underwear.*

*His immediate panicked dancing let it slide far enough down his thigh so that Kita was able to snag the **rest** of her Grandson out of Rondal’s head and spirit him far away.*

### *On the Kraken*

Ronnie had a sudden moment of clarity that made him ignore the lump sliding down his thigh.

## Unhide the Past

They needed a control signal to blow the bombs. It could come from the *station*, or come from the *ship*.

He'd grab the *ship* first, and ask questions!

"S'Slich'Tah on implantation ship – hold your position and drop your cloak *immediately!*" he ordered loudly on the Vanir com frequency while extending himself out in an expanding bowl above and around him to see if he could feel the Vanir vessel anywhere nearby.

*'Sai, listen, and look on the Vanir bands!'*

*'I hear you!'* came back from her, sharp, and clear.

Then he thinned out his shield and quickly started expanding it outwards and upwards, distorting it away from the water, and watching for anomalies in its shape indicating an obstruction – invisible or not – and started cycling it again.

### ***S'Slich'Tah Implant Ship Four***

"The ship! It ... it's *talking* to us! They're *humans* and they're *talking* to us!" the communications operator shouted.

*"Ignore them!"* the Implantation Officer ordered. "Take us back to the Aesir interface and let's *finish* implanting these bombs so we can *leave!*"

"Something just touched our *shields!*"

### ***On the Kraken***

Ronnie caught the flicker on the shield display when it washed over the obstruction moving thirteen-kilometers away. He rapidly expanded the shield to forty kilometers and tightened it up solid before starting to shrink it. A few moments later, he felt the captain of that little ship beginning to panic as he started beating at the shield like a moth trapped inside a bottle – a bottle that was rapidly shrinking.

*'Rondal, I see it! It's like Walter described to us. I'm picking up three Vanir inside!'*

*'Great! You look inside. I'm gonna give 'em a bath. While you're at it, see if you can pick their brains on how to disable or block the activation signal!'* he sent, while shrinking the field even tighter, until the smaller ship was pulled into contact with the *Kraken* – and then tightened it *severely*.

Now *that* was done, he'd go with the tried and true method of communications blackout; dip the ship under salt water. If they were lucky, their ship-to-ship transceiver would be short range enough to be dulled by the water. It was a long shot, but other than burning out their

brains, that's all he had at the moment. He wanted them alive – for a *while*, at least.

“Torga, by any chance, can you *swim*?” he asked casually, almost jovially.

“Ahh, it ... it's never come up. Why do you ask?”

“Oh, no reason. Hey, let's go lookin' for them *sea monsters*!” he said with a chuckle, then with an evil grin on his face, rotated the nose of the *Kraken* straight down, and dived the ship underwater.

“*CALDAR! YOU'RE INSANE!*” Torga shouted as he gripped the edge of the console tightly and held on.

Considering its bulk and configuration, the *Kraken* entered the water rather smoothly, and the artificial gravity within the hull kept everything in proper orientation while it headed downwards until it got to the depth Ronnie wanted.

He leveled it out at two-hundred meters, where he stopped the ship before programming a random pattern into the navigation system, then setting it for a five-minute duration – chuckling *manically* all the while, until he glanced over at Torga.

“Oh, hey! You might wanna fasten your *seat belt*!”

He giggled and tightened his straps securely before locking his seat into place. He waited until Torga snapped himself in before adding, “Enjoy the *ride*, Torga!”

Ronnie gripped his shoulder straps securely, then issued the verbal command, “*Scramble One!*”

He hung on and watched the screen for a moment, before closing his eyes and reaching out to the mind of S'Slich'Tah *whatever-the-fuck-his-number-was* to observe the chaos his multi-faceted mind was dealing with. It was *most* enlightening.

‘*Sai, I have the coordinates of Observation Station 23, and there are two things that I want you to do*’ he sent out gaily before transferring the location of Station 23 to her.

‘*Rondal – you feeling all right? What's going on down there? From up here, it looks like a whole pod of sea monsters are mating*’

‘*Just getting our guests loosened up a little. I want you to go to the platform, and first, take out the communications module here*’ he sent while framing the location exactly in his mind as he'd read it in the ship commanders mind. ‘*Then I want you to take out the jump drive system*

## Unhide the Past

*here'* he added, then carefully pointed out the second location he wanted hit.

*'Rondal, even with number one loads, it will probably take out the whole station!*

*'Nah! Just pretend you're ice minin' again'* he sent with a flush of silent laughter. *'Crank up the shields like I showed you, and have at it. Any survivors – we'll see what we can do for 'em. Scoot now, 'cause that damn platform can set off all the bombs for ten minutes around, and both Torga and I have been implanted!'*

*'Ahh ... Sh ... it!'* she sent, which Doppler-shifted halfway through her exclamation when she short-jumped the *Kraken's Child* to the target coordinates.

### *Observer Station 23*

"Senior Observer! Implant Ship Four reported two subjects successfully implanted, and they are headed back to the matter-transmitter!" the Duty Observer reported.

"Good! Ship Four has wasted *enough* time. Ships One, Two, and Three are almost halfway done already. Let me know when ship Four arrives."

### *Somewhere Else...*

*The Fate on Duty was taking **no** chances, and took two **extra** little steps for this event.*

*First, she disabled the warning light for the cloaking system on the station. Then, she caused a **tiny** bit of dust to enter the left nostril of the Vanir sitting at that control panel before working that bit of dust onto the proper sensor in his nose. The resulting sneeze caused him to flinch and accidentally disable the cloaking system. Since the warning light was now **defective**, his quick glance didn't catch anything amiss, and he went back to monitoring station keeping and shields.*

### *In the Kraken's Child*

Sai's gut-wrenching jump had her arriving at the coordinates Rondal had given her, but a passive scan of the area revealed nothing out of the ordinary. She went out a bit further and looked down at the planet while shifting her position about and searching for a distortion field that might indicate a cloaked ship. She sat there, frustrated, and wondering how well the cloak of a Vanir station worked, but by a miracle of coincidence, Station 23 materialized right in front of her.

*'Wow, that's pretty damn good!'* she thought to herself, before synchronizing her *outer* shield to the stations' shield. That was thanks to

a bit of *extra* hardware, which was now part of the rear panel of the *Kraken's Child* – a very *custom* built bit that had been fabricated back at Donnel's magic shop on *Microcosmus*.

Taking a lesson from Rondal, she quickly programmed the navigation system for a quick double-strike at the assigned targets, strapped herself in tightly, and slowly advanced to the edge of the spherical shield of the station – her inner shield formed into a *very* narrow wedge suitable for slicing and dicing.

### ***Observer Station 23***

"Senior Observer! There is a *shield* anomaly on the outer quadrant! It looks like–"

The rest of the report was cut off when the station suffered an impact on the communications module. Alarms began sounding, and atmospheric pressure started dropping. Nearly as soon as those alarms were reset, a *second* impact hit the station that set it tumbling slowly, and the drive system warning lights lit up the control board warning of an imminent disaster.

"*Vacuum suits! Everyone into vacuum suits!*" the Senior Observer ordered, as if the *first* pressure drop hadn't already clued the crew, that things were turning *seriously* bad.

### ***On the Kraken, Five Minutes Later***

"Rondal ... I - I think I'm gonna be sick," a dizzy Torga groaned while the ship slowed and finally came to a stop.

"Hang in there, kiddo. Gotta talk to the passengers," Ronnie muttered, before calling out on the Vanir com band again in Drecks.

"S'Slich'Tah on implantation ship! If you would like to see *daylight* again, you will follow these instructions without *fail!* Shut down your drive, shield, and cloaking systems *immediately!*"

After a minute without compliance...

"Or would you like to go for another *ride?*"

The cloaking and shield systems dropped, with Ronnie watching carefully all the while. He reached out and felt around, then announced '*ship handling*' and burned the circuits on both the shield and cloaking systems so they could not be energized again. It took a while longer for the drive system to shut down, but once it was, he permanently disabled that as well.

'*Rondal, are you all right?*' Sai called out.

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*'Uhh, yeah. Shaken, not stirred. Our passengers are a bit better behaved, but Torga's got an upset tummy. Maybe you can spare him some milk?'*

*'Maybe you can Gift his wife so she can make her own?' He felt her relief wash over him as she continued her report. 'As far as I can tell, the station is completely disabled. The crew is in a subdued panic, and evacuating the station in pressure suits and rescue pods. The communications pod is down, and the drives are shot. The station is in a stable orbit for the time being, but it's tumbling a little, and the drives might blow after a while. I'm reading mixed messages from the crew. What do you want to do with them?'*

*'Ahh ... they got three ships left, but I don't know how many each could carry or how far they can get. I don't even know if they can survive on the surface. We can probably pressurize one of our passenger spaces just for them – dim the lights, and all' he suggested, then thought of something else.*

*'Oh! Read them thoroughly in all their mind-facets to see if there is a way to activate the bombs with a handheld device of some kind. Then poke around and see what happens if these things are pulled out just as they are. I'll do the same with my guys and see if they agree. Otherwise, I might be stuck submerged for a while'*

*'Can't Jaiying disarm them?'*

*'Probably, but I'd still like to know. They implanted a \*butt-load\* of them all over the place'*

*'\*Butt-load\*? Is that a lot?'*

*'About a hundred twenty-six gallons worth, or close to four hundred and eighty liters. I'm not about to calculate how many of them thingies that is, but it's a lot. They've been working on this project of theirs for a while now. They'd make a hell of a hole in SOMETHING if they all went off at the same time'*

*'Ouch!'*

*'Or they could be exaggerating. Who knows what's goin' on in them slippery little minds of theirs'*

*'Uhh, Rondal – are you feeling all right?'*

*'Aside from a queasy stomach, an ache in my belly where they implanted a fractional-yield explosive device, and a deep yearning to get laid – yup, I'm feeling pretty good!'*

*'Umm ... okay. I'll pick these guys brains, and you pick your guys brains, and we'll see what comes of it. What about the last three ships?'*



*'I don't know yet, but I'll think of something'* he tossed out gamely, before dropping the conversation.

He had a few pointed questions to ask before his unwilling passengers ran out of life support – or he ran out of patience.

### ***Vanaheim, The Prime's Offices***

To say things were in a tizzy would be a *gross* understatement.

Once the Senior Observer from Observer Station 27 reported in with his urgent message, communications had immediately gone out to the observer ship sent by the Prime to observe the situation around Midgard. They were to report any new developments, and those reports were just coming back, containing an odd mixture of admiration and terror by the crew of that ship.

Considering their limited amount of time on station, they'd already received distress signals from three implantation ships operating illegally out of Observer Station 23, which was currently floating silent and abandoned in space. The images from that had come back showing damage to communications and drive modules – *specific* strikes intended to silence the station and keep it from leaving the area.

The investigating ship also noted that rescue pods had been floating outside the station, but then seemed to gather together and slowly headed away from it. They could not determine a reason for the movement until a dimly glowing creature was seen becoming brighter and clearer. It appeared to be reaching out with tentacles that seemed to be beckoning the pods to it. As it flowed away from the station, it appeared to be dragging the pods behind it somehow. The *terror* part of their report was that the image evoked a very visceral *racial* memory of a dangerous predator from their distant past that still resonated within the most primitive part of their minds to this day.

They were able to send directed beams to the surviving implantation ships to guide them towards their current location – thankfully *away* from the space-going predator – but were unable to do anything about the rescue pods.

The Prime was not exactly at a loss for things to do. The question was, what exactly *should* she do?

After being recalled, Observer Station 23 had been found to be *still* operating. For some reason, it was in operation over one of the sample worlds and apparently still implanting humans with explosive devices.

The human who'd contacted the Vanir – this Rondal Caldar – had informed them of his intention to observe the sample worlds and their

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integrity, but warned them from further interference into human affairs – *particularly* with implantations of explosive devices. It would appear that someone, *not* the Aesir, was currently dealing with the illegal intrusion of Observer Station 23, and that someone was likely this Rondal Caldar entity.

She had no idea at all about the space-going *vormat* that seemed to have slithered out of their collective nightmares and taken hold of the rescue pods from Station 23.

### *On the Kraken*

Ronnie was still holding the *Kraken* stationary at two-hundred meters below the surface, along with the implantation ship bound to them by his shields.

*‘My guys have been more or less forthcoming, Sai. How about yours?’*

*‘They were reluctant at first. Then I turned on the light show, and they got quite excited about it – all kinds of fantasy nightmare stuff running around inside their heads. From what I could gather, the activation signal is on the station, but it needed the communications module to work properly. Truthfully, I’m tempted to just throw a number five at it, and destroy the whole thing, but I’d be afraid of setting it off by accident’*

*‘Well, if that’s the case, then I’m guessing the safest thing would be to vaporize it all at once. THAT – I can do’*

*‘You’ll probably want to move it away from the planet, though’* she suggested.

*‘Well ... yeah. You still got them rescue pods? Been thinkin’ of a place to set them down. I’m torn between leaving them at that teleportation station and sending them to Aesir direct, or dropping them down in a clear spot with a note for the Vanir to come pick them up’*

*‘They’ll probably be killed if you drop them into a populated place’*

*‘This particular group has already been censured, and then violated the rules of that censure. It might be kinder to ground them and let them take their chances, but ... that’s what Rondal would do, I suppose, and the Demon would just kill them outright...’*

She felt his ambivalence while he pondered the variables – something she’d never really felt before.

*‘Rondal ... what’s going on?’*

*‘Rondal... Rondal has misplaced his Demon and is sitting out the rest of this act. Ronnie is left holding the bag to clean up BOTH their messes...’* he sent, and she felt his resigned sigh from orbit.

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*‘Tell you what. I’ll call my buddy on Station 27 and see if he can tell me where the Prime wants us to leave the survivors. Oh! We can deliver them personally – now that I know where she is’* he sent, then flashed the coordinates to her, Endo, and Gallus, just in case, before making another request of her.

*‘In the meantime, drag their asses over here, and I’ll beach the ship I’ve caught ... somewhere. If you see any good spots, you let me know’*

A moment later, he added a thought...

*‘I think I’ll finish refueling while I’m waiting. Let you know when I find out anything’* he sent, before reaching out to Station 27.

*‘S’Shac’Kah 39496! We have resolved the mystery of the missing Station 23! It suffered unfortunate communications and drive failures when we observed them engaged in implanting more bombs in humans on Midgard ... and possibly Asgard. In point of fact, I directed their communications and drive failures. The survivors are being transported to Midgard and will be left on the ground for recovery by authorized Vanir representatives. Alternatively, I can deliver them directly to Vanaheim’*

He paused in thought before deciding to admit outright theft of Vanir hardware.

*‘I have also recovered one implantation ship, and I will be retaining that ship for the technology it contains that will allow the safe removal of the bombs. If you have accurate knowledge of a way to safely remove all types of implants without damage to the bearer, I would appreciate that information being provided to my staff and me. You may contact the Prime to advise her of my actions, and my requests. Please extend my kindest regards and gratitude to the Grandmother for any help she may care to offer us’*

There were a few seconds of delay where he felt S’Shac’Kah 39496 was currently engaged in some activity, but he finally responded.

*‘Rondal Caldar, I ... I thank you for your forbearance regarding Station 23 crewmembers, and ... and I will notify the Prime immediately!’*

*‘I will be delighted to hear what she has to say’* he sent, before dropping the conversation.

Ronnie cranked the shields down to a steady state and opened a gap in the bottom of the field to allow his refueling line to extend a few meters. A moment later, he opened the internal valves and started filling the mass reaction tank.

*‘Wow, look at that, Torga! It’s coming in like a fire hose, now! Two-hundred meters ... about ... twenty atmospheres on Earth!’*

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“Should be full in another half-segment or so,” Torga suggested quietly while looking at him strangely.

### *Observer Station 27, A Bit of Confusion*

The Senior Medical Technician was reflecting on how much longer it had taken to garner the appropriate mating response from S’Shac’Kah 39496 this time...

She was gratified when he had finally proceeded in an orderly manner until it had devolved into an impassioned effort from one in desperate crisis.

She continued to ride it out; already being quite comfortable with her Senior Observer during this deployment, and decided that, given the *unusual* circumstances that had developed over the last several day-blocks of time, his extra vigor was quite understandable.

Of course, his reporting of recent *non-existent* communications with the humans was an area of concern, but she would continue her observations and place them into proper context later – *after* he reached his completion and had a chance for quiet reflection...

Almost as if on cue, S’Shac’Kah 39496 froze above her; but his body did not engage in the involuntary spasms announcing the culmination of his efforts. Instead, he held himself suspended above her for a few seconds until slowly beginning a somewhat reluctant reengagement. Then he seemed to come to his senses and quickly worked himself up to completion. Afterwards, instead of remaining seated within her and relaxing together, he pulled himself up and left her nest.

S’Shac’Kah 39496 looked down at her with a strange expression in his eyes, and she saw an unusual tint to his complexion she had never seen before. She was even more surprised when he reached over and took one of the post-engagement wiping cloths and *personally* attended to her cloaca.

“I must report a new message to the Prime,” he told her quietly, before turning away and heading to the door.

‘*Oh no! S’Shac’Kah 39496 is losing his mind!*’ he heard echo silently into his brain, and paused at the door without looking back at her.

“No, S’Shac’Kah 38521. I am not losing my mind,” he said calmly, before composing the message he would send once he reached the communication system in the control room.

*Vanaheim, Updates to the Prime*

The latest message from Senior Observer S'Shac'Kah 39496 had been received exactly as Ronnie had sent it to him. When questioned of the whereabouts of the audio logs, S'Shac'Kah 39496 had reported that – during a *sleep* period – the human had gone into his mind and improved a few things to make communications between humans and Vanir much easier and clearer. The Senior Observer had then offered himself up for examination, quarantine, or destruction as the Prime saw fit, but he strongly urged that this opportunity to establish a non-aggressive relationship between humans and Vanir not be wasted unnecessarily.

The Prime had reviewed his report several times over in an effort to understand meaning where very little had ever been achieved before. Her advisors were also engaged, but the ruckus *that* had devolved into, necessitated them being sequestered in another room.

Humans had found and attacked a Vanir Observation Station, but did not destroy it outright. The humans had merely disabled it, then engaged in the rescue of the station's survivors. They had then offered to leave them somewhere in safety, or turn them over to Vanir authority ... or bring them directly here to *Vanaheim!*

They had discovered the location of the sample planets, either by pulling it from the mind of Station 27's Senior Observer, or by following Station 23 ... or S'Shac'Kah 39496 had simply *given* it to them, but when? The raw recordings her linguists were retranslating clearly indicated the human had accepted the Prime's request to withhold that information, and S'Shac'Kah 39496 had not mentioned it – but there was that business of his extreme *stress* level requiring medical intervention. Did the human somehow *threaten* him, then pull the location of the sample worlds out of him *then?*

This human had captured an *implantation* ship – presumably while it was both cloaked and shielded. It would be crewed by S'Slich'Tah Warren loyal to S'Slich'Tah 24854. Perhaps *that* was how he had learned of the location of Vanaheim? Then he was *keeping* the ship to recover the implantation technology, simply to remove the implants from his citizens, and had asked for assistance in doing so?

Finally, he sends felicitations to the *Grandmother*, as if ... as if *he* were a *Warren Leader*? Never had the Prime *ever* considered anywhere deep in her multi-faceted psyche that a *human* would extend that level of association with a Vanir – *any* of the Vanir – let alone a Vanir *Prime!*

Several of her segments thought back to the previous Prime's comments upon her dismissal, *'May your service be filled with events of a*

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*diverse and educational nature,*' but were chastened by the remaining segments who were trying to keep up with current events.

Surely by now the human had *already* extracted what he needed from both S'Slich'Tah 24854, and S'Shac'Kah 39496, and their crews. Perhaps it would be prudent to play along until this human, this Rondal Caldar, could be brought under *Vanir* control and examined at leisure – and then safely *destroyed*, along with *all* those he has contacted?

That was the *only* way she could be sure.

### ***September 7, The Kraken, Visitors Come Aboard***

Ronnie had often wondered what in the hell Donnel and those guys had been thinking when they'd come up with some of the design quirks in the *Kraken*, but even *he* had to admit that, even in the drunken haze of that evening, they'd considered a *huge* number of variables. The space once used for Kee transport, and later on for an exercise room, would now be used as a containment area to house their new visitors in relative safety, if not actual comfort.

Once the *Kraken* had drunk his fill, they'd raised the ship back into orbit and recovered everyone back aboard. Endo, Gallus, and the girls were glad to be back, while Auda had come in quietly and bowed formally to Ronnie, before going off to Sai's quarters to clean up and change. Sai remained outside in the *Kraken's Child*, with the recovered rescue pods attached.

After a hurried discussion, Endo and Gallus were back in ship suits and working in the exercise room to get it ready for their guests, while Torga remained on watch at the bridge. Several mats were pulled from compartments along one of the recovery corridors and laid on the floor, while valves and fittings were shut or turned off. Waste containers with lids were brought in since Ronnie was not sure if the drains would pump properly with high atmospheric pressure behind them. Finally, the temperature and humidity were raised a bit higher to accommodate their guests.

Then it was Sai's turn to bring in the rescue pods, one at a time, and set them on the docking bay until they were all inside. There was just enough room to squeeze in the *Kraken's Child* alongside the shuttle, but she stayed outside with the implantation ship and waited.

Ronnie called Torga on the bridge, and shortly the hanger bay door closed, slowly blocking off the light of the star until it was tightly shut. He wasn't sure what would happen when the docking bay was pressurized only under shields and didn't need a blowout now.

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Once it was secure, he had the hanger bay pressure raised until it approximated the pressure of the rescue pods.

*'My Elder, my crew has recovered survivors of the Vanir species, and we are preparing to house them aboard my ship until they can be repatriated. You are welcome to observe'* he sent, and got a curt acknowledgement back from Lady Ai.

He left his Elder block down while letting Ai observe at her leisure, if she chose to do so. His Senior Staff were also watching with interest, but they remained quite silent. Switching thought bands, he directed his next communication to their visitors.

*'Crew of S'Slich'Tah Warren. We have prepared a place of safety for you while the Prime decides what she will do with you. We have asked that she recover you, as we do not have compatible living spaces for you at this time'* he sent clearly.

As expected, the rescue pods did not have the communication and translation devices of an Observer Station, but their radiated shock, followed by a subsequent amount of fear, indicated his message had been received. He tapped on the first rescue pod door, then stepped back and waited.

When it finally opened, he waved out the two occupants, who were still wearing their vacuum suits, and pointed them aside while he looked around inside the pod for weapons of any kind. Finding nothing worrisome, he pointed to one of the survivors and ordered him to take whatever he wanted from it.

Pod by pod, the four pods were emptied, and nine prisoners were lined up alongside the shuttle. The dock pressure was not quite a match for their suits, so Ronnie had it raised slightly higher.

The prisoners did *not* look happy being there, but were quite surprised when their vacuum suits slowly relaxed around them, while the tiny human came up and poked and prodded them fearlessly.

They looked down at him from their height, between eight and nine feet, he surmised, and seemed happy enough to be out of their rescue pods, but still isolated from him by their vacuum suits.

*'I do not know what your diet consists of. If there are food stocks inside the pods, please recover them now. The pods will be left behind when we recover one of your implantation ships'*

After going back in and getting what else they wanted, he directed them to the exercise room. That door was sealed while the pressure was

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lowered on the docking bay and the dock opened once again so Sai could remove the pods and bring in the implantation ship.

Going through the same motions, and with a little bit of shuffling, the implantation ship was stuffed unceremoniously off to one side, and Sai was able to cram the *Kraken's Child* inside and shut it down.

When she stepped outside the ship, Ronnie watched in amusement from behind his face shield when her nose wrinkled and her face shield popped up to deliver processed air to her.

"What's that horrible smell?" he heard her ask through her collar's com circuit.

*"That SMELL is what will prevent humans from EVER wanting to settle on Vanir worlds, my dear Sai!"*

He let out a laugh and walked over to hug her tightly, before reaching up and popping both their face shields so he could kiss her. She beat him off and popped her shield up once again, as did he.

*"Rondal, are you INSANE? Wait until we get things SETTLED, at least!"* she said, then pushed away his fingers, which were trying to tease her nipples through her ship suit, so he finally reached out to hug her and held on tight.

*"Sai, I am so VERY sorry I broke your wrist back on Earth. Lili and I... Well, we figured the Elder would be concerned that I wasn't fierce enough in her eyes to deal with the problems out here. And now – now my Demon has left me, and I'm FREE once again!"*

"What do you mean, you're free?" she asked warily.

*"Just that! The Vanir pulled the talisman from my belly and put in their bomb. Then my thong broke, and the SECOND talisman fell down inside my suit! Must have been what old Rakel Timorous was waiting for, 'cause he bailed on me, and left me with a bomb in my belly, and a clear head for the first time in FIVE YEARS! I guess the Vanir were the final straw and he couldn't TAKE it anymore!"* he said, then started laughing excitedly.

*"Gagsa is consolidating his power, and should take over the Hegemony in a few more years. In the meantime, we have fostered his son and daughter-in-law within the Royal House of the Commonwealth, and now we're on the verge of making peace with the VANIR! FINALLY... Finally, I can see an END to all this, and Maya and I can... if Maya will still have me, we can go back to Earth and work the Gleanings once again and be happy... Finally,"* he insisted, with tears running down his face inside the shield of his ship suit.



His emotional outburst left him weak and thinking of the future, causing Sai to take hold of him and speak to him softly.

*“Rondal... Ronnie, you are the First Lord of the Commonwealth. You CAN’T be doing refugee work anymore. You have duties and responsibilities to consider. The Emperor would NEVER allow–”*

*“Oh, SCREW what my brother wants! He was sent to watch over me on Earth, and he STILL held the reigns of the Commonwealth from fourteen minutes out! Even now, my replacement does a MUCH better job than I ever could! I’m not a bean-counter, Sai! I’m a bastard Earthling torn between Healing and KILLING, and I’m tired of KILLING all the time! I want it to STOP, Sai! I don’t want to KILL anymore! I just... I just want to live in PEACE... Just for a while... Just for a little while, until... until they can take over and carry the burden. Is that ... is that TOO much to ask?”* he finished quietly, then hugged her once more, before taking a deep breath and turning back to see Endo and Gallus standing right behind him.

*“Welcome back, Ronnie,”* Endo said from behind his face shield, then bent down to hug him.

*“It’s good you have you back, Ronnie,”* Gallus said, then hugged him as well.

*“Thank you, guys. I don’t know how we could have done all this without you,”* he said, then turned and pulled Sai over as well. *“Without ALL of you.”* He sighed again, but perked up with a sniff, then glanced towards the captured ship.

*“Well, let’s crack this egg and add it to the omelet. Please bring us back up to Vanaheim sea level while your Mother and I scan this sucker from stem to stern. I’m sure there’s SOMETHING in there we’ll want to dispose of... Hopefully, there won’t be any SUICIDE-prone occupants,”* he muttered, before focusing on the implantation ship with Sai while slowly raising his Elder block.

He hadn’t mentioned the children directly, but *did* refer to them obliquely – which was *still* an unforgivable mistake.

### ***September 8, Kantor, The Elder’s Office, A Conference***

The Elder sat quietly while staring at Lili.

They’d been sitting – *all* of them – her remaining staff, Larl, Amy, and even the Emperor, while Ai tried, once again, to gather her confused thoughts and put into words the feelings of distrust and *anger* she felt towards the Royal family right at this moment. It certainly didn’t help any that Rondal had given her *open* access during his recovery of the alien monsters. It took a while, but she finally calmed down enough to begin.

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“Lili, I have been reviewing my understanding of the events that have happened over the last several days and I cannot help but feel I have been denied *critical, need-to-know information* on, oh ... *more* than a few occasions over the last several years,” she said stiffly.

“Elder, the actions of my agent are reported to *me*. Lili reports those items to *you* as I deem appropriate for your consideration,” Radatel said firmly.

“I beg your *pardon*, ‘Emperor’, is your name ‘Lili’?” she asked coolly, causing him to bristle, but Lili reached over and placed a hand on his arm. He was no match for the Elder.

“My Lady Ai, what would you like to know?” Lili asked quietly.

“I would like to know *EVERYTHING!*” she said hotly, while half-rising from her seat. Fan and Xiu reached out to her, but were held back at a glance.

“Rondal does not *tell* us everything, Ai,” Lili stated clearly. “And I understand you may have heard things from his *sleeping* mind that were taken out of *context* – as you well know happens during *sleep*, my Lady.”

“Ha! Or perhaps this is the *only* truth I’ve ever gotten from him!” Ai countered quickly.

Radatel was still upset over her attack against his little brother and tried to rise to the occasion.

“Rondal does not tell *me* – does not tell *us* of everything he does, my ‘Elder’, nor do we wish to be informed of everything he does. As he is *my* agent – *my First Sword* – I have sent him out to pursue a resolution to the Drecks issue that will bring stability and harmony to the *Commonwealth*. So far, I have not been displeased. *Surprised* upon occasion, certainly, but not to the point of distress. We have yet to determine the benefit of your *curse*, although Lili and Larl have applied quite a bit of thought in that regard if you would care to *listen?*” he suggested, not *quite* rudely.

Ai fumed while looking between Radatel, Lili, and Larl, before finally nodding to Larl, who slowly stood while gathering his thoughts.

“My Ladies... my Lord Emperor... I have studied Rondal Caldar’s past and present. I have worked with him, and we shared an interesting adventure several years ago that gave me a great deal of insight into his capabilities, thought processes, and personal integrity. Along with that, I’ve conducted informal interviews with family and staff who knew Ronnie ... Lord Caldar ... since his childhood.” He paused to gauge their reaction, finding nothing negative while he contemplated how his next comments might be interpreted.

"I've mapped his transition from the person he was, to the person I spent several months with on a failing ship lost in space. And I've also observed his subsequent change of behavior since the curse of his 'Demon' as he calls it, and interviewed his crewmate over the last few years – a person called 'Four'."

"That would be Lili's little brother. *Petrus*, if I recall correctly?" Ai stated with a grim smile.

"That is correct, my Elder. Petrus Aloysius Zickgraf. Earth father, and Cletus mother ... and *another* half-breed bastard like Lord Caldar."

"Half-breed *bastard*? Isn't that a little *harsh*, Doctor Riker?" Molara asked in surprise.

"Oh, it goes on to explain quite a bit about both Commander Zickgraf *and* Lord Caldar, my Ladies. They have both had to strive to overcome the accident of their births, and they both understand the tremendous amount of effort it took to get them to where they are today. While growing up, Rondal had to fight to *excel* just to be considered *equal* to a Kantite. We are all aware of his step-brothers influence in his life and the lack of attention paid paid him by his step-father," he said while gesturing slightly to Radatel. "His 'Grandfather' paid him courtesies; but for his *own* purposes, it would appear."

"We already *know* all of this. What is your *point*, Doctor Riker?" Ai pressed him.

"My point, is that the curse you gave him, the curse you felt would give him the extra edge in dealing with the task the Emperor set before him, only restored Ronnie to what he used to be in his *youth* – somewhat cold, arrogant, self-assured, and *very* dangerous."

"We all witnessed this to some degree. The Farman Healer Cluster is one result. His confused dealings with previous associations on Earth, as reported by the Ambassador's liaison, are another. He, himself, recognized what it was doing to him and took steps to mitigate the problems by consulting with a spiritual healer from his Earth tribe. Together they found a solution that brought the curse under control and allowed him to function more ... *effectively* – more or less."

"So you're saying my Vision was wrong and the curse was of *no* benefit!" she stated loudly, but Lili caught her attention.

"We are saying the 'curse', as we all call it restored the fire that Rondal was *originally* possessed with, now coupled with elements of his *true* father, Rakel Timorous – but it was also moderated with the maturity and knowledge of *Rondal's* experiences. My Lady Ai, your Vision told you of a

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*possible* solution – a *desirable* solution at the time,” she offered before going on.

“For however long Rondal needed the extra... Anger? Hostility? Perhaps a certain lack of *control*? For *whatever* reason, the curse gave him an edge, and he was able to soften it enough to allow him to function in a relatively normal way – for *him*. Rondal was not particularly difficult during his youth. Always polite, always respectful – especially to the Lady Wives and myself – but he harbored a great deal of resentment towards his position ... or what he felt his position was as the *least* acceptable person within the Royal Household: the Earthling *half*-breed. As Petrus reported to me, this followed him all throughout his military career and culminated with the failure at Zarox and his subsequent dismissal.

“Rondal *more* than made up for many faults over the years; but it was never enough to gain what little respect he had previously achieved. He fell into despair – *again*, something we are all aware of. But he overcame that portion of his life, then turned his life around by finding something that gave him satisfaction and a sense of purpose.”

“Again – we are *aware of this!* Please get to the *point!*” Ai snapped in frustration, and Larl bowed once again.

“My Lady, Lord Caldar was cursed, and found a way to mediate the effects of it – thus gaining a measure of *control* over the curse, but still being influenced by it to some degree,” he said, glancing around the table to see how they were taking his comments.

“The old Lord Caldar – *Ronnie*, we may call him – in my opinion, would have had difficulty in pursuing the goals set out for him by the Emperor. His heart would find it very difficult to leave behind *any* that could have been saved; yet he has done so out of necessity – *repeatedly* over the years. One wonders at the emotional turmoil it must have caused him.”

“So you’re saying this *colony* world of his, this ‘Demon’s Realm’ is that part of Lord Caldar which remains of his ‘*good*’ nature? *That’s* why he brings back entire villages of humans?”

“I’m saying it is very likely his *control* over his curse is what has kept the peace between the Commonwealth and the Hegemony while he’s been merely poking at stinger nests instead of blowing up entire *planets*. And I’ve no doubt he is quite aware of that fact himself. It’s probably what prompted him to pursue a cure for it to begin with.”

Larl wondered if he had crossed the line, but when Ai took a breath while nodding slowly, he let go of his own held breath and waited quietly.

Ai’s glare faded away as she considered the current situation in the Hegemony.

“And now he has planted seeds *within* the Hegemony to bring it down – or perhaps he intends to put his ‘friend’, Lord Gagsa, at the Master Pack’s palace, where a suitable *truce* might be forged?” she suggested testily.

“My Lady, as bastards go, Rondal has always been a very *clever* one,” Radatel offered softly.

“Indeed,” Ai agreed. “And you are aware of the Vanir and his actions – either with them or against them? It remains unclear to me.”

Radatel paused for just a moment before continuing his thoughts aloud.

“If *anything*, my Lady, Rondal has always placed the Commonwealth’s concerns above *all*. His actions against the Vanir have been restrained, as you mentioned earlier this afternoon. He is, if you will, on a *fact-finding* mission for his Emperor. He will investigate and pursue such actions as he deems appropriate until it reaches the point where ‘*official*’ recognition of the situation must be made. Then he will draw the Crown into negotiations for peace – *or war*, if deemed necessary to secure the Commonwealth.”

Ai frowned at him before snorting lightly in disgust.

“And yet one wonders that he would even bother to *tell* you about it ... as he has his ‘Senior Staff’ to work out the details for him one way or another,” she muttered, before focusing on Lili. “You *still* do not know who they are?”

“No, my Lady. Of *all* the secrets Rondal has kept from me, this one remains absolutely inviolate. We’d thought at first they referred to three of his previous crewmates still on the platform, but Larl assures us those three are no part of them – whomever they may be.”

“No ... clues? Ideas? Nothing at *all*?” she pressed.

“Just that ... they’re in the *safest* place he could find within the Commonwealth and protected day and night by hand-picked guards. We have made some *very* discreet inquiries over the last year, but found *nothing* in Rondal’s past expenditures that could not be accounted for. We simply do not know, unless ... and believe me, Ai, I do not consider this a *credible* thought, but ... unless Rondal has somehow gathered a group of Seniors and *privately* tasked them to advise him? I would not suggest this is the case, as I cannot imagine *any*–”

“Oh, I can *well* imagine what Rondal could do once he puts his mind to it. He talked Sai into re-growing Lord Gagsa’s arm – *after* he had

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arranged the deaths of her *Granddaughters!* Perhaps *this* is why Elder Kita denied herself as she did,” she muttered sourly.

“All things in moderation, my Elder,” Radatel said quietly before taking a chance. “I would hear your comments *directly* on my policies, my Lady Ai, if only to strike a balance,” he suggested gently, at seeing an opportunity to promote cooperation between Crown and Elder.

Ai looked at him and considered it for a few moments.

“Perhaps ... perhaps, my Lord Emperor,” she murmured, before pausing to look around at them all. “But now that Rondal has lost his *Demon*, perhaps things will spiral out of *CONTROL* and this will all become *POINTLESS!*”

“*WHAT?*” a startled Lili exclaimed.

### ***September 9, Aboard the Kraken***

Sai crept out of bed; once again, leaving Ronnie sated and asleep.

She looked down at him and smiled at the silly grin that graced his lips, even as he lay sprawled across the bed while snoring quietly. She gathered up her things and got dressed in the facilities to avoid waking him. Passing quietly into the outer passage afterwards, she left to have that talk with Auda she’d put off since they’d all returned to the *Kraken* and spent a *considerable* amount of time putting away things that had been shaken loose during the capture of the Vanir implantation ship.

Since the shuttle’s return, Auda had taken pains to stay away from Ronnie.

She kept herself busy with the other women and the Kee while doing simple chores in the kitchen, and occasionally watching the displays on which their guests were observed while they maintained themselves in the confines of the exercise room. Otherwise, she had chosen to sleep in Sai’s compartment instead of joining Ronnie and Sai in his.

It being the evening cycle, Sai stopped at the bridge and found Endo on watch, with his wife keeping him company. Between a little fondling and necking, Endo was keeping an eye on the displays, and on station keeping in general, but the ship had sensors set to detect any approach from Asgard or the Vanir, mostly by the cycling shield that was extended out several hundred kilometers around them in orbit. Any ship hitting that, even a cloaked and shielded ship, would send out enough alarms to wake everyone, *including* Ronnie.

Not finding Auda there, she knew better than to bother the Kee, so she went right to her quarters, where she found Auda working with a data

pad and learning more about Earth history and mythology. Auda looked up when Sai entered before looking back down at her pad and sighing.

“Auda, how are you feeling?” Sai asked, and she looked up this time with a lost expression on her face.

“Sai ... I am very confused. I know the legends of my people and now know they are all *lies*. All that I knew was wrong, and I don’t think I belong there anymore.”

“But your mother is there. Don’t you want to see her again? Don’t you think she misses you?”

“She probably still thinks I was a proper sacrifice to the Aesir. If she sees me now, she will think I ran away, or ... or *worse* – that I wasn’t *acceptable*! I was a *good* girl before you and Rondal ... before I became a *woman*.”

Auda turned away in shame, while Sai smiled at her naivety.

“Auda, you’re *still* a good girl, and now you’re a member of the Royal House of Caldarous ... the *rulers* of the Commonwealth. You’re a *Princess*!” she told her with a cheerful smile, then glanced down at the data pad. “What are you learning about tonight?”

Auda turned it around and showed her the picture on the screen. Sai read the English to Standard translation aloud.

“The kraken. That’s the name of our ship, and Ronnie’s little ship is the *Kraken’s Child*,” she said, but Auda remained somber.

“The kraken is just a legend... Just a myth... It doesn’t exist. Not even the *Gods* exist,” she muttered dejectedly, then sighed again while looking down at the pad. Sai laid a hand on her arm and reached out to caress her cheek with her other hand, which prompted Auda to raise her eyes back to hers.

“The kraken is a *real* living creature on Earth, Auda. It lives in the Earth’s deepest oceans and feeds on large sea animals – about the size of our little ships,” she explained, then sat next to her before bringing up entries for the giant squid on the Earth database. “Ronnie showed it to me one day when I asked him what a kraken was. It’s extremely shy and hunts at the bottom of the ocean. The food it eats, also likes to eat it, and swims to the bottom to find it.”

“But ... it’s not the monster that everyone thinks it is,” Auda said listlessly, and Sai drew an arm around her shoulders and gave her a gentle hug.

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"If you were in the water and a twenty-four meter creature with ten-tentacles grabbed ahold of you and bit you in *two* – I'm pretty sure *you'd* think it was a monster," she said with a laugh, then scanned the files. "Look here – it says there have even been attacks on *surface* ships by them when they thought the ship was their food!"

"So the kraken is a *real* thing ... but not a monster. Not like the *Kraken's Child*, who took my virginity from me." She sighed again while shaking her head sadly.

"Auda, what nonsense are you talking about? *Ronnie* is not a monster. He is a *protector*! He's out here trying to protect *all* of his people – and *you*, too!"

Auda turned her sad face towards Sai again.

"Gallus said ... Gallus said Rondal was the *Kraken's Child*, and that he destroyed whole *worlds*! He *must* be a monster to do that," she said, then bowed her head again while Sai hugged her and tried to find a way to reach her.

"Auda ... Ronnie has had a long and very difficult life. He has fought to protect the Commonwealth since he was very young, and one of the things he was ordered to do was remove dangerous enemies – like the Drecks. He took out several moons and a few planets, but failed on his last assignment. *That* is why we are still at war with the Drecks ... or in an uneasy truce, anyway. The Drecks destroyed twenty-seven of our *colony worlds*, Auda! We had very little choice other than to fight back to protect ourselves."

"But – but to do that ... to kill all those people, he *must* be–"

"Auda, the Vanir – *some* of them – wish to remove *all* humans from existence. Ronnie is trying to make peace with them, just as he is trying to have Lord Gagsa work within the Hegemony to bring about change so the Hegemony and Commonwealth can finally be at peace. Ronnie has *always* protected you, Auda. He loves you, and you love him ... just as I love him. I trust him to work for *all* humans so we can *all* live in peace."

"Even the *Drecks*? Rondal would even be friends with the *Drecks*?"

Sai looked away for a moment, but decided to reveal another painful truth in the hopes that it helped.

"Auda... Lord Gagsa is responsible for the deaths of my Granddaughters, and yet ... Ronnie convinced me that ... for the good of the *Commonwealth*, I should grow him a new arm ... and I did. I don't *like* Lord Gagsa, and would *still* like to see him dead, but ... if he can bring about a *peaceful* solution between the Hegemony and the



Commonwealth, then I'm afraid the lives of my Granddaughters may have to be part of the price."

"That is a *terrible* price to pay!"

"Auda, you were to be sacrificed to the *Aesir*. Wasn't *that* a terrible price for your mother to pay?"

"But the *Aesir* don't *kill* us. They take us and make us keep house for them, and cook, and—"

"Auda ... do *any* of your people ever come back from Asgard? Do they ever send *messages* to their families?"

"No, but the *Aesir* tell us—"

"Whatever you want to hear, no doubt," Sai said, effectively shutting her up for a moment. "Auda, you worry about Ronnie because of his *name* – the name his *crew* gave him on his combat platform. That was a ship over three *times* the size of this one, and it could tear apart entire *planets*. Ronnie got his name – his 'honor' name – from his *crew*, simply because he was the *best* warrior with a sword. There is nothing more to it than that."

"Then he is *not* a demon, either?" she asked, and Sai just laughed.

"He may *act* the devil's own spawn at times, but he's not a demon. Ronnie does what he must to protect his family and his people. He will *die* before he lets any of us come to harm. He is sleeping again, but I know he would like to see you when he wakes up. Would you like to come back to bed with us?"

"I ... I don't know. I don't know *what* to believe anymore."

"Would you like me to stay with you tonight?"

"But ... he will *miss* you when he wakes. He will *expect* you there," she said, which triggered a sigh of Sai's own.

"Auda – *we* choose whom we wish to share ourselves with. Ronnie does not *own* me, and he does not own *you*. If you do not want his pleasure any longer, then just tell him and he will accept it – or tell me, and *I will* tell him, and he will *still* accept it. You are not a prisoner here. You do not have to stay on the ship. I can take you home. You can stay with your mother once again, and ... and we will just explain that the Vanir punished the *Aesir* for taking you too young, and I am bringing you back. Do you think she would believe that?"

"I – I don't know," she said while becoming lost in thought.

Sai leaned over and kissed her cheek before standing up.

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“Let us know what you decide, Auda. I choose to be there beside Ronnie when he wakes,” she said, then turned to leave.

“Wait! Sai... What ... what does he plan to do about ... about Midgard and Asgard?”

Sai stopped and turned back to her while remembering what she’d discussed with him earlier that evening.

“He wants to declare them Protectorates of the Commonwealth of Planets. That means the Commonwealth will send very smart men and women here to guide your people out from under control of the Aesir. Maybe teach the Aesir how to grow their *own* food – or probably just arrange a trade agreement between your people and the Aesir that benefits Midgard. They could probably start by providing better services for health, education, eliminating slavery, and preventing any *further* sacrifices to the Aesir for household slaves in return for food and other compensated services.”

“Compensated services?”

“Auda, everyone on board this ship is an *employee* of Ronnie’s and gets paid on a regular basis. Even Torga and Manya are receiving a regular deposit in a savings account. Even *you* are being paid a small amount based on how well you apply yourself to ships work, how well and how fast you’re learning, and how proficient you are as a Healer. For you, that’s in addition to having access to the general account of the Royal household once you take up residence in the Royal Homestead on Kantor – *if* you decide you want to live there. Ahh ... in point of fact, *all* of us – with the exception of the Vanir – are part of the Royal household. Well, maybe not Kiki ... not *yet*. I’ll have to ask Ronnie,” she said, before leaving Auda with a slight wave.

Auda watched her go. After the door closed behind her, she looked at the big empty bed for a little while before shutting off the data pad. She got up and used the facilities to wash and brush her teeth before crawling under the covers on the big lonely bed and trying to sleep, but without much success. She kept going back to the things Gallus had talked about while remembering the destruction of the Vanir station she’d watched while standing next to Sai on the bridge of the *Kraken*. She had a lot of things to think about and several decisions to make.

### ***Observer Station 27***

S’Shac’Kah 39496 was getting worried.

The *majority* of his multi-faceted mind was seriously pondering the significance of the considerable delay in a response from the Prime who had, *so far*, neglected to provide any decision about his willingness to

offer himself for destruction as a contaminated observer. Meanwhile, a few other segments considered that scenario to be a *ridiculous* waste of resources, but could not get any of the majority to agree with them.

In all his history with the current Prime, this was an *unprecedented* occurrence. Although his very logical and ordered mind told him she was faced with many issues to sift through, the fact that she wasn't contacting him regarding the *simplest* request – what to tell the humans to do with the errant Vanir from Station 23 – was of great concern to him. It would probably be a great concern for Rondal Caldar as well.

For the very first time he was considering if the Prime might be changing her policy of “watch and wait” – but whether she was going to withdraw Vanir interventions into human space completely, as the human had requested, or pursue more *severe* actions against the humans in general, was the big question. It nagged the processes of his mind – *most* of it, anyway.

*Another* part of his mind was still considering the curious question Rondal Caldar had posed to him when asking if Vanir would readily destroy themselves if it meant destroying the ship where they were currently residing. He truly did not see the point, one way, or another.

Rondal Caldar had reported his medical technician had removed the bombs from both his and his crewman's bodies, then put them with the other bombs from the implantation ship. He'd intended to destroy the bombs, but then asked if placing them in close proximity to the captive Vanir would prompt more cooperative behavior from them.

Truthfully, S'Shac'Kah 39496 could not give him an accurate answer. Since the answer was unclear, Rondal Caldar had taken *all* the bombs, and returned them to the Observation Station, then *vaporized* the entire thing! The impulse from that had been detected a few hours later on Station 27.

*Remarkable. Simply remarkable.*

He'd hoped the Vanir investigative ship took notice of the warning Rondal Caldar had broadcast before moving and destroying Station 23. That would have been very unfortunate if they had been anywhere in line with that destruction.

### ***Vanaheim, The Prime's Quarters***

The Prime sat uneasily on the edge of her nest.

“Sat” was actually a state between “squatting” and “lying comfortably” – in this case, on her nesting material – but she was nervous to a degree

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she'd never experienced before, so sitting on the edge of her nest was the best she could manage at the moment.

Senior Observer S'Shac'Kah 39496 was still waiting patiently for her answer, and, likewise, the investigative ship she'd sent to Midgard was still waiting for further instructions.

The humans had the crew of Station 23, but did not want them. Neither did they want to *kill* them – apparently, because they had made no active attempt to *attack* the humans. That confusing scenario failed to find reason within her logical thought processes. *Most* of them, anyway.

Upon finding a threat, *most* rational beings would simply *eliminate* that threat and go on with their existence. That is what the Prime had expected from these humans. After all, that is what they did with their *own* people, isn't it?

Some parts of her mind were *gladdened* the humans had made such a distinction. This prompted a suggestion that humans – *some* humans, at least – were of honor ... still not fully *defined*, of course, but of *some* measure of honor. They lobbied for a continued dialogue with the humans to see what *other* fascinating revelations would occur, but the *rest* of her logical mind kept shouting them down.

The Prime's initial thoughts that this Rondal Caldar might be unable to even *pursue* the issue vanished in the blinding flash of an anti-matter powered, particle beam weapon that had *vaporized* the damaged Observation Station, and everything in, around, and beyond it – including the bombs they had removed from themselves, and all the *other* bombs they'd found on the implantation ship. This would be the *same* weapon that was on the ship currently holding her missing Vanir, *which*, according to S'Shac'Kah 39496, he had offered to return directly to *her*.

The *last* thing the Prime wanted was an anti-matter powered, particle-beam weapon in orbit over Vanaheim Prime during negotiations for peaceful coexistence. The more she thought about it collectively, the more her *first* impression of simply destroying the humans and going on with her existence – thus making *sure* the Vanir remained safe from further human encroachments – was the best solution.

She wondered for a moment how she could even *consider* such a decision, but for some reason, she sided towards their *elimination* – *all of them!* However, without *further* information she just did not quite know how to pull it off.

### ***Kantor, The Royal Homestead, Later Afternoon, The Children's Patio***

The children fell apart from their circle, and the younger valaets stood and shook themselves, before wandering off to a secluded area to relive

themselves. Meanwhile, their parents stayed close by and watched over the children until their kits returned and herded the children back into the human's caves. It was time for the evening meal, and then bedtime...

The children's combined efforts allowed them to reach out to *extreme* distances, but they didn't have all the sensitivity and power they enjoyed when working even thirty minutes away from a subject – and *nothing* that they could exert when in actual *contact* with someone – but the information they could gather remotely was *always* useful ... once interpreted *properly*...

Now that they were all tucked in for sleep, they stayed up a while longer to discuss their latest findings from that afternoon.

*'Walter, it feels like the Vanir Prime means to kill Grandfather and all of our family!'* Jaiying shared fretfully.

*'How is she going to do that?'*

*'She hasn't decided yet, but she is afraid of change, and afraid of humans'* Jaiying responded sadly.

*'Well, we're not gonna let that happen!'* Josie stated forcefully.

*'No. Not even if we have to promote another warren to the position of Prime'* Cathy suggested. *'Perhaps S'Shac'Kah 39496 has a Grandmother in his warren who would make a suitable Prime?'*

*'I suppose we could always ask him directly – or try to read it from his mind'* Josie suggested. *'I kinda like him'*

*'No'* Walter asserted. *'We'll tell Grandfather and Grandmother. We will let them know, and then make suggestions of what we can do to support their decision. Our time to rule is not now'*

*'Walter, do you really want to rule?'* Jaiying asked quietly.

*'No. I would much rather play with you guys, and then grow up and REALLY play with you guys, but we'll do what we have to do. Now that Rakel has left Grandfather alone, he might need more than simple advice from us'*

*'Walter, have you figured out what happened to Rakel yet?'* Josie asked.

*'Not yet. I don't believe Rakel could have gotten away all by himself. With Grandfather's talismans removed, he should have just tried to take over – like Lili told the Elder when he first went back to Earth. The Elder is still very unhappy about that on some levels, but inside she is relieved that*

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*it has happened. I believe the Elder is becoming unstable to a degree, and should probably step down'*

*'But she's still very young, Walter!' Cathy protested. 'Kita held that office for a MUCH longer time before she lost control!'*

*'Yes, and she lost control and turned it over to Lady Ai – who never had control to BEGIN with' he reminded her. 'The Visions are merely shadows of the future, but the Elder believes them to be solid. Sadly, we'll never convince her of that'*

*'But without the Visions, how will the Elder advise Uncle Emperor?'* Josie asked.

*'Like she should be doing already – gathering the best information she can, and making intelligent decisions of a moderate nature to continue a sustained and peaceful society while directing continued growth to new colony worlds' he shared, pointing out the obvious. 'That, or just maintain WHAT we have with the resources we have available to us. If we were to TRULY achieve peace, then the birthrate would have to drop significantly to maintain a healthy standard of living'*

*'That sounds so cold, Walter' Cathy said.*

*'There is no such thing as sustainable growth, Cathy. At some point, resources fail, and quality of life deteriorates to a level that triggers societal collapse. Those are the kinds of decisions we will have to make when we grow up. Sucks, doesn't it? Grandfather is asleep right now. I'll call him after he wakes up and plays with Grandmother again' he promised.*

*'He's been doing that a lot in the last day or so' Josie mentioned.*

*'With Rakel gone, he enjoys it much more than before. I hope one day he enjoys it as much with me' Jaiying shared wistfully.*

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Shay and Laisee were sharing the parent's duty that night while lying there listening to the children's silent discussion.

"Laisee, did you ever think our children would become so special to the Commonwealth?" Shay whispered.

Laisee pulled away from Shay's nipple and looked at her, before finally putting her response into quietly spoken words.

"I grew up in the Royal household surrounded by those who ruled over the Commonwealth. My father was the First Lord, and now he is the Emperor. It does not seem so strange that our children will come to rule us one day. I'm only saddened they must lose their childhood at such an early age." She let out a sigh and snuggled closer to Shay before going on.

“After Ronnie and I had our first contentment lessons, we managed to sneak away together to play, and that was *all* we could think about, until my mother pulled us apart. The children talk about it in passing, even as they are dealing with very *real* problems in the Commonwealth, the Hegemony, and now the Vanir. I’m very sad for them,” she said, then lay her head down on Shay’s breast.

Shay ran her fingers through her hair while letting out a sigh of her own.

“Don’t worry, Laisee. Ronnie is the best man for the job, and the children will do all they can to help him. Besides, if they hurt Ronnie, we’ll send Lady *Lili* after them, and then they’ll be *truly* sorry!”

Shay let out a giggle before leaning down to kiss Laisee’s hair while trying to ease her troubled mind.

September 10, The Kraken, A New Day

Ronnie woke up feeling *much* better and in an excellent mood. He opened his eyes and reached over to Sai – cuddling close to her and very gently sending tendrils of arousal through her genitals until she began to moan in her sleep. He kissed her softly around her neck and chin until she reached out blindly in her sleep and brought his face to hers. She forced her tongue into his mouth while her dream Ronnie pulled the covers down and wrapped his arms around her. She felt him lie across her and slide himself into her so warm and firmly that her passions quickly rose higher and higher until she convulsed below him and woke up enough to open her eyes to see him staring back at her from mere inches away. She pulled slightly away from him, then lazily smiled up at him.

“You’re the *devil’s* spawn, Caldar. Do me *proper*, now that I’m awake.”

“I hear and obey, my Healer,” he said, then did just what she’d asked of him ... a *couple* of times.

Afterwards, they lay sated and content, resting together in quiet companionship while the sounds of the ship surrounded them. Ronnie closed his eyes while extending through his ship...

Their recent load of fuel had topped off the tanks, and the relative purity of the source promised to keep the feed filters from needing service for another several months. Aside from the zero-maintenance exciter/converter systems – they being either working or not – the rest of the critical hardware seemed to be fully functional.

The quiet rumble of the air handling system was muted in his compartment, but didn’t prevent him from detecting a slight variation in

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one of the distribution booster fan chambers. It was a Drecks design – not particularly noted for maintenance-free operation – but minimal routine maintenance was easily accomplished.

He'd have to take a look at it later, or ... he wondered who was available?

Endo currently manned the bridge, while Edna seemed to be on her own this morning. Torga and Manya were sleeping in, and Gallus and Gaia were having a late breakfast...

'Gallus, a moment of your time, please?' he sent out silently.

'Yes, Rondal Caldar?' he immediately got back.

'I believe the air booster on level two, portside aft, might require service. Would you have time to look into it and advise me?'

'Certainly, Lord Caldar. I will go immediately and–'

'Not a priority, Gallus. You and Gaia stay and enjoy your meal. Instructions are on the access cover for the booster' he reminded him. *'Thank you, Gallus'* he sent before ending.

He reached out again; finding only the empty void that suggested the Kee were in the kitchen. He didn't feel Auda anywhere close by.

"Where's Auda? I haven't seen much of her since the recovery, or... Wasn't she on the bridge when we disposed of that station?" he asked a drowsy Sai.

"Auda has a problem in her head," she murmured.

"Her *head*? We pulled that tracer out of her *belly*. Have you checked her for–"

"She's worried, Ronnie," she muttered, then opened her eyes to look at him. "While on the grounded shuttle, she and Gallus ... they had time to *talk*, and Gallus ... he gave her a *condensed* history of Lord Rondal Caldar – battlefield warrior, tank commander, destroyer of planets, First Sword of the Emperor, *Demon* of the Commonwealth, and the *Kraken's Child*. Your reputation now precedes you – with a *vengeance*."

"I swear to the *Gods*, Sai, I did *not* drown those kittens! That's *all* a cruel lie!" he joked, and after a moment of confusion, she gave out a sharp laugh, but then brought him up to date on Auda's concerns.

He lay back and considered what to do about Auda – the no-longer-virgin-sacrifice.

“Well, I could simply wipe her memory of those facts – all the way back to *before* she was picked up for the sacrifice – but that’s something I’ll *never* do again–”

“Unless it was *absolutely* necessary under *extremely* extenuating circumstances,” she murmured, then kissed him on the cheek. “I understand why you did what you did, and why you couldn’t fix it without help. I’ll *never* understand why Kita did what *she* did, though.”

He reached over and drew her lips to his for another lingering kiss.

“Thank you, Sai. That means a lot to me,” he whispered, then kissed her again, before pursuing another option. “Is there any danger for her – if we just dump her off with her mom, I mean? They don’t, you know, *kill* rejected virgins, do they? Or could we ... maybe ... make her a virgin again ... *medically* speaking?”

“Well, she might not have a problem finding a husband – *socially*, that is. Of course, *you’ve* ruined her for anyone else,” she mused, and that made him laugh out loud.

“What? What’s so funny?”

“Oh, just something Lili mentioned a while ago,” he said, but continued along that line while thinking about *another* little matter that still had to be dealt with.

“Sai, when you say you love me ... do you *really* love me? You *do* understand that I do the things I do just because sometimes they’re the *right* thing to do ... at the *time*?” he asked casually.

“Yes, I love you, and you love me ... and Maya, and Lili ... and even *Molara* – although I can’t imagine how *that* happened,” she said, which got another chuckle from him.

“Sai, I don’t like to bring up painful memories, but ... please tell me about ... about Petrus,” he asked quietly, and she stiffened in his arms.

“W-Why do you want to know?” she asked, her voice barely breaking.

“I found out after he was ... well ... after I reported our last visit to Kee, I found out he was Lili’s little brother, and ... and she insisted I bring his body back to her,” he said, while holding her just a little tighter while he continued speaking quietly.

“When I showed you the video from Kee, I noticed you were upset when he ... when he fell. I thought that maybe you might have known him at some point. He certainly knew *you*. He was *terrified* of you.”

Unhide the Past

She lay unresisting in his arms, and when she spoke again, it was somewhat subdued.

"He's my ... he *was* my husband. I met him when I was about two. He was visiting my mother, Yandi. At two years old, I thought he was the most wonderful man. When we met again much later, I fell in love with him. We got married when I was only eighty-eight – *unsanctioned*, of course. We separated a while later and never saw each other again."

"He's the one who cried out another woman's name during–"

"*Yes! That bastard!* And then I met a *nice* man – a *decent* man who wanted to *marry* me, but ... but Petrus and I married on *Kantor*, and–"

"There *is* no divorce on Kantor," he finished for her.

"Yes. So, I lost that opportunity for happiness and took service with the *Elder*, but I kept looking for him to *punish* him for ruining my life! I never thought to look for him in the *service*, though. At least his chances of dying in action were *greater*, and, anyway, I would have been punished for his death if I had killed him then. After a while, I caught track of him at the *Fringe*," she muttered while glancing over at him.

She took a breath and let it out, even as Ronnie snuggled her a little closer.

"I never caught up with him at the Fringe, though, even when he was still serving with *you* while you played the part of the *Madman*," she said, now turning to look directly at him. "I never suspected he was there."

"Yes. From the time I left the academy, Lili made a point of making sure I was being watched constantly. Some silly ass thing about my destiny – or maybe it was under Kita's orders? Petrus was my crewmate on many *adventures*."

"When I heard the voice of that Drecks security pilot – back when you stole this cruiser – I thought that was really *him*," she said, and he nodded in agreement.

"Then I heard his voice from the *collar* recording, and saw him fall... Saw him–"

"I got him out, Sai. I took him back to Lili," he murmured.

She took a deep breath and almost sounded on the verge of a sob, but let it out with a whoosh and curled tighter within his arms.

"And now I'm finally *free* of him," she said weakly, but started to tear up a just bit while she hugged him even tighter.

Ronnie wrapped his arms around her tightly in return ... then looped one of his legs over hers for good measure.

“Umm ... not ... *quite* ... free ... yet, Sai,” he slowly whispered into her hair while she continued to sob quietly – but then *froze*.

“What do you *mean*, Caldar?” she asked coolly, then tried to pull away from his arms, but he held her *very* tightly.

“I mean ... he was chewed up pretty *bad*. Lost his *eyes* ... most of his *face* ... both *legs*–”

“But you took him back to *Lili*! You took him back, and she *fixed* him, *didn't she!*” she said hotly while starting to struggle.

“Yes, Petrus stayed with Lili and Rad for a while until she reassembled him. Then he took off again when you signed on with me,” he said quickly, while trying to restrain her from hitting him.

When it got to the point where she started biting him, he took the easy way out and flooded her with arousal that made her helpless with need. Then he ravished her until she was exhausted. Afterwards, they lay sated and exhausted – *again* – with Sai breathing heavily until she rolled over and kissed him fiercely once more, before thumping him on his chest.

“You’re a *bastard*, Ronnie! Just like *Petrus!*” she said with new tears in her eyes. “And I *still* love you, damnit!”

“And you still love Petrus, don’t you?” he asked gently.

She refused to meet his eyes, but turned away and nodded her head twice, so he pulled her back to him and held her head to his chest.

“And Petrus still loves *you*. Even if he called out another’s name while his sword was piercing you,” he murmured, tossing her own words back at her gently.

“He called out *Lili’s* name!” she said from the area of his armpit.

“Well, she *was* his first, but she’d punished him over the years by making him watch over *me*. If it makes you feel any better, there were many times he almost *died* playing the same silly games I play.”

“No! I wanted to kill him! *Me!*”

“Sai, you couldn’t kill *me*, let alone Petrus. We may be half-breed bastards, but we’ve both worked too hard to be taken so easily. Probably a full-blooded Kantite *Lord* could do it. Maybe even Radatel – he’s had enough sword practice in his youth, before he turned to spreadsheets and bean counting – but *you?* Sai, you’re a *Healer*, not born killers like *we* are.”

Unhide the Past

“But you’re *not!* You’re *not* a killer anymore, Ronnie. You said so *yourself*.”

“Yes. I appear to be afflicted with the Healer’s curse, and I don’t know what I’m going to do about the Vanir Prime. She appears *less* than happy with the prospect of a peaceful relationship with humans,” he murmured, before telling her what the kids had told him earlier that morning, when they’d changed their minds and *didn’t* wait until after Grandma and Grandpa played.

In the Hanger Deck Storage Compartment

Senior Observer S’Slich’Tah 24854 was restless.

For some *unfathomable* reason, the humans had rescued them, and then locked them in a compartment within their ship. Unbelievably, they were also making efforts to keep them *alive*. It wasn’t much of an effort, as the lights were too harsh, and the air was stale and tasteless. At least the *protein* food was life sustaining, and they had changed the waste buckets twice now.

He’d wondered at first how they could manage to communicate with them, but the lead male and female seemed to handle that quite neatly by some sort of mind-machine they’d developed. It was a small consolation that a previously unsuspected technological breakthrough was probably the *only* reason they had been traced and discovered.

It might become a mitigating factor in their censure if they could bring this new technology to the Prime, but from their current position of incarceration, it was unlikely they’d have a chance to exploit this new information – if they could even discover what machinery was being used, and exactly where it was being kept. Even if they escaped their prison, the amount of life support left in their vacuum suits was minimal, and they had no weapons other than their size advantage over the humans – the *little* humans, anyway. The three big ones were a *well-known* source of worry for them.

At least they didn’t have to share the same *atmosphere* with them.

Maddeningly, the humans seemed to know much about them already, as they had dimmed the lighting slightly lower during the local “nighttime” cycle for the approximate number of hours necessary to emulate the rotation of Vanaheim.

Observer Station 27

The Senior Medical Technician left the Senior Observer resting comfortably once again after having seen to his needs in a proficient and exemplary fashion...

Fortunately, she enjoyed her work, and if the *truth* were known, she would fancy a *mating* partnership with S'Shac'Kah 39496 if it were ever allowed – *if* he survived the orders which had yet to arrive from the Prime.

If they *all* survived the orders that had yet to arrive from the Prime...

As the Senior Medical Technician, S'Shac'Kah 38521 was responsible for the health and well-being of the crew. For those who had *not* formed pseudo-mating pairs for this assignment, she filled in on an as-needed basis to quell their anxiety and bring them some small comfort in the loneliness of their solitude out here in the cloud...

She left the Senior Observer to his rest and went about checking on the remainder of the crew who were still blissfully unaware of S'Shac'Kah 39496's concerns. That was something he'd shared with her as a normal part of her therapy, which she had initially thought was a *psychosis* he was experiencing. Unfortunately, the follow-on communications to and from the Prime seemed to lend credible evidence that he had *reason* to worry, but like *all* of her classification, she kept it to herself.

Finding a lonely crewman, she took him aside and began her usual quick and efficient evaluation that determined he needed perhaps a mere hour of affectionate treatment to offset his discomfort. It was sometime during the middle of that sexual encounter when she wondered if the humans had ever considered maintaining *their* sanity by the same simple means the Vanir used. It made so much more sense than the usual senseless *killing* frenzies they were noted for.

Vanaheim, The Prime's Offices

The Prime was racked by indecision, and that was definitely a *new* situation for her. If she made the *wrong* decision, it would remove her and her warren from power, but *worse*, it could destroy the safety and security of the Vanir for all time. Her personal desires aside, the security of the Vanir had to come *first*.

With her advisors still in disarray, it was up to *her* to arrive at a solution. Based on the limited amount of knowledge available, she made the only logical choice open to her – she would send a ship to pick up the survivors and return them to Vanaheim. Almost as an afterthought, she decided to send an observer to the humans in order to observe them in person. That way, the only one in *immediate* danger would be the sacrifice ... *OBSERVER* ... and hopefully, much precious information, and more importantly, *insight* into the human mind, would become available to her ... *provided*, of course, the observer lived long enough to report such. The only question was, who would it be?

Unhide the Past

The Kraken, A Quick Update

After getting a promise from Sai not to kill him outright – at least not right away – Ronnie got up and called a crew meeting to bring everyone up to speed. Once everyone had gathered in the commons, with Endo participating remotely from the bridge, he related the Vanir Prime's willingness to eliminate the offending humans – *them* – and his *own* reluctance to let that happen. They were all suitably grateful to hear of his assurances in that regard..

He told them they were still waiting for his tentative friend on Station 27 to get back to him with “official” news from the Prime of what to do about the prisoners.

Aside from that, the shields would remain up and cycling randomly to prevent any further implantation business. Once resolution was achieved with the prisoners, they would be heading back to Kantor to deliver their captured implantation machine so a covert operation could commence to remove, first the bombs, then all the *rest* of the tracer implants among the Commonwealth citizens ... followed by removal operations among those afflicted within the Hegemony.

Before the question was raised, he did point out the *second* operation would depend on the progress of Lord Gagsa's efforts in forcing a vote of no confidence in the Master Pack on Zarox – the *polite* Dreds way of saying, “A bloody coup with just the *principal* players involved.”

According to Torga, it was an “honor” thing, and they let it go at that.

The meeting broke up, with Torga and Gallus dressing out for waste disposal duty for their guests, and Sai and Ronnie coming along to act as translators.

Observer Station 27

S'Shac'Kah 39496 had received the Prime's message, and then read it three times – not one *word* of it changing from the first two readings. He rested back on his tail, letting out a soulful sigh in the process, while contemplating his long life and how fascinating he had found his avocation during all those years in the Observation Department of the Prime's cabinet.

Well, there was nothing for it now, but to follow through with his orders, and hope for the best. He was going to *miss* Observation Station 27, though. Gathering the small crew of the station in the common eating area, he commended S'Shac'Kah 40302 on his promotion to Senior Observer, and after a suitable period of celebration, took him aside and transferred all the necessary access codes and detailed information he would need to continue the current mission.

As for him and Senior Medical Technician S'Shac'Kah 38521, replacements would soon be arriving who would fill the necessary head count on the station, while *they*, if the Prime's offer was accepted by them, would live out what was probably the very *short* amount of life left to them in close proximity to the humans.

Oh, the *irony* of the entire situation...

The Kraken, A Joyous Undertaking

"Sai, *good news!*" Ronnie said jovially before she turned a skeptical eye towards him.

Knowing Ronnie, she figured it would be enough to ruin her midday meal here in the commons, but tried to remain hopeful.

"Petrus got sucked into a black *hole*?"

"Ha! Even *better!* The Vanir Prime is sending a ship to pick up the *survivors*, and they'll be here in a couple of *days!* We should have *just* enough time to prepare suitable quarters before they arrive!" he said happily, before sitting down across from her.

"Quarters? Why do we need to prepare quarters if they're picking them up?"

"Oh! *Visitors!* The Prime is sending an *Ambassador* to stay with us and work out the negotiations for a *treaty!* Isn't that *great?*"

"Ronnie – do you even *listen* to yourself any more? The Prime wants to *kill us!* And how are we going to properly host a Vanir Ambassador if we're going to be wearing *ship suits* all the time?"

She had to wait for his answer while he snatched a bit of her food, then stole a sip of her drink to wash it down with.

"We'll work something out. They breathe oxygen. Three atmospheres would be all right for us if we cut down the nitrogen content, or we could probably cut down their pressure and raise ours a little bit, then up the oxygen content for them a little. Once we have them on board, we can get a better idea of what they can tolerate. They should be pretty tough under all those scales."

"*They?* Just how many Vanir are we going to be hosting?"

"Ahh, our friend S'Shac'Kah 39496, and his Senior Medical Technician, S'Shac'Kah 38521. I'll diddle with her mind a bit and get her talking just like her boss. Maybe you and she can compare notes of a medical nature," he said offhandedly.

"And I suppose you want me to make a Healer out of *her*, too?"

Unhide the Past

“Well ... now that you *mention* it, you might spend some time pushing through her and getting a full *physiological* reading of them – a *cooperative* live them. I haven’t heard back from Larl yet if anyone’s gone in to fish one of them bodies from the Death Void.”

That last had been a suggestion from the kids. Since they really knew very little about the Vanir, and it would not be politic to take apart a *live* one, picking up a dead one and going full-research mode on the remains would be very helpful.

“Ronnie – you didn’t order anyone to go into the Death Void to recover *bodies*, did you?”

“No, but the kids were working on trying to get one out somehow. I didn’t pry as to how they expected that to happen,” he admitted, then shifted focus.

“Hey, how’s Auda doing today? Did she make any decision yet on if she wants to go home, or what?”

“She ... she’s not feeling all that happy about going home to her mother – not knowing what she does *now*, anyway. Maybe after they become Protectorates and start being primed for membership in the Commonwealth.”

“Should be easy. The Aesir are *already* using them. We’ll probably have more problems with the Aesir, if they got that whole ‘God’ complex thing running through their heads, though. At least it won’t be nearly as messy as trying to bring *Earth* into the fold.”

“I wouldn’t wish that on *anyone*, Ronnie.”

“Yeah... Well, Lili suggested I work on that after we get done straightening out the Hegemony,” he said sourly.

“So, she expects you to hang around for the next several hundred *years*?” She scoffed, and he reached over and pulled her face close to his.

“Sai, with you and Maya by my side, I can do *anything*!” he said happily, then kissed her on her nose. “I’ll even build you a little in-law cottage on our estate back on Earth where you and Petrus can set up housekeeping. Then *both* of you can keep an eye on us!”

He laughed and kissed her again.

“Ha! Are you sure your *demon* is gone, or is it just your common *sense*?” she chided him, then struggled for a moment, before he stole another kiss from her lips, then let her go.

“Little of both,” he teased, then patted her breast before getting up and wandering off towards a corridor.

“Ronnie! Where are you going?”

“I’m gonna grab Torga and start modifying a passenger corridor for our guests. Have to isolate the plumbing and vents,” he called out, while slowly walking away as he continued to mutter. “High pressure ... maybe they can take half of that? Fresh air would be nice. I wonder if they always smell like that?” he asked himself aloud as he turned a corner.

Sai sat there, shaking her head and wondering if this really *was* the Ronnie she knew.

‘He’s very much the Ronnie he was before being cursed, Grandmother ... according to Maya’s talks with Mama Diane and other things we overhear’ Walter offered silently, getting Sai to jump involuntarily in the process.

She settled back and composed herself before coming up with a reply.

‘You scared me, Walter! So, Ronnie IS insane, then?’ she asked, and heard the silent laughter all the way from Kantor.

‘No, Grandmother. Grandfather is HAPPY now’ Cathy sent. *‘Once he joins with Maya again, he will be complete’*

‘Well, he’s still got that little problem with the Vanir Prime to deal with’ Josie pointed out.

‘Yes. S’Shac’Kah 39496 is not so much an Ambassador, as he is an observer – or spy – to see how we all behave as humans. He is very worried about that – S’Shac’Kah 39496, that is. One who would be his mate is also concerned, but more so for S’Shac’Kah 39496’ Jaiying shared.

‘He’s engaged?’

‘She is much like you, Grandmother. Her name is S’Shac’Kah 38521, and she is a Senior Medical Technician. She is like a doctor, and also provides contentment to him when she sees he needs it to remain stable. We suspect it is a by-product of his multi-compartmented brain’ Cathy suggested.

‘Makes sense’ Josie offered. *‘The guy gets confused, and she screws him back into sensibility’*

‘Yes, but she also cares for him, and would bond with him if it were allowed ... if they survive their encounter with you and Grandfather’ Jaiying continued.

Sai thought about that for a moment, but became confused.

‘Why would they not survive visiting with us?’

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‘The usual. Humans are dangerous. Humans are poisonous. Humans are disease-ridden’ Walter quipped. *‘And the Vanir Prime hasn’t yet decided to let him live, since Grandfather “contaminated” him’*

‘GODS! I can see it coming’

‘Indeed, Grandmother. Grandfather’s family continues to grow’ Jaiying suggested.

‘Oh, the smell...’

‘It may not be that bad, Grandmother’ Walter suggested. *‘They were on that platform for YEARS. Mama Diane said the Odontoceti smelled bad after only a month, Standard. Perhaps a bath and fresh air would make a difference? Oh! Please tell Grandfather not to worry about the docking bay atmospheric shield. It will hold ten atmospheres easily’*

‘Right. I’ll let him know. Or why don’t you let him know?’

‘Grandfather is busy fixing S’Shac’Kah 38521’s brain so she can talk to you. She seems like a nice lady – saurian – lizard person’ Josie advised while skipping down the list.

‘Yes Grandmother. She seems very caring towards S’Shac’Kah 39496, like you are to Grandfather’ Jaiying asserted.

‘And he wants me to make a Healer out of her’ Sai sent with disgust.

‘It only makes sense, Grandmother’ Cathy agreed. *‘After all, she IS a woman’*

‘Ai-yah...’

‘Indeed’ Walter ended.

‘Our love to you, Grandmother’ the girls sent in chorus.

‘And my love to you’ she replied, before slouching back in her chair.

‘A Vanir Healer,’ she thought. *‘Wonderful.’*

September 12, Company Comes to Stay

They used the shuttle for the prisoner transfer since everyone would fit inside, including Gallus, who was piloting, and Torga, who was riding guard. The prisoners seemed subdued, and both Ronnie and Torga were keeping eyes on their actions, while Ronnie was also keeping a mental ear on their thoughts.

The meeting with the Vanir transport ship was uneventful, and held well away from the *Kraken*. As everyone was wearing a vacuum suit of one kind or another, the prisoners were escorted off quietly, and the

Ambassador and his companion were welcomed aboard and shown a place to stand. Their luggage, along with a considerable amount of consumables, was placed aboard and stowed for the shuttle's return trip – receiving a quick scan for bugs and tracers, and, Ronnie noted, coming up surprisingly clean.

He was already considering modifications to the shuttle to accommodate Vanir-compatible seating arrangements, while the Vanir transport, having made its pick-up and delivery, turned tail and transitioned away as soon as it was clear. Ronnie could already feel the loneliness and despair rolling off S'Shac'Kah 39496.

'Please do not feel sorrow, S'Shac'Kah 39496. We are preparing a place for you and your companion. If you should require anything else, then I expect you to tell us, so we may try to provide it for you'

'Thank you, Rondal Caltar. We will try to be no bother' S'Shac'Kah 39496 sent back, before bracing himself against a seat back, along with S'Shac'Kah 38521, when the shuttle began to move.

Ronnie had Gallus bring them back to the docking bay and park close in to the *Orca*. He held them there while Sai returned in the *Kraken's Child* and docked on the other side of them. She had stayed outside on invisible guard during the Vanir approach, and prisoner and Ambassadorial transfer. After the transfer was complete, she'd observed and tracked the departure of the Vanir transport.

Ronnie reached out to the bridge and got the docking bay closed, before they bled shuttle atmosphere to match the over-pressure within the docking bay, the special corridor, and the set of compartments they'd prepared for the Ambassador and his staff. Once balanced out, he dropped the rear cargo door and escorted the Vanir party out the back.

'If you will come this way, S'Shac'Kah 39496, we will take you to the quarters we have prepared for you' he sent, and they walked towards the receiving corridors.

Ronnie stopped when they reached the exercise room, which was currently being cleaned by Endo and two of the wives. They were all dressed in ship suits for this smelly task. The Kee were in there as well, helping as best they could by doing some of the detailed cleaning. Ronnie spoke for a moment to Endo and the Kee, while Sai joined with them at the exercise room.

'THIS is where we'll be staying?' S'Shac'Kah 38521 asked in dismay.

'This is where the crew of Station 23 was staying. We've prepared quarters for you that we hope you'll find comfortable enough' Sai told her,

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before Ronnie joined them and continued to lead them to the prepared corridor and Ambassadorial suites.

Once opening the reserved corridor door, Ronnie began a general overview for their new guests as he continued walking through it.

‘Through here are living compartments that have been sealed and provided with modified lighting for you, along with a higher atmospheric pressure. The outer door will have to remain sealed and locked to prevent a blow-out, and you’ll have to wear vacuum suits, or let us match the docking bay pressure to your spaces before we open this door’ he explained.

‘Once we have a better understanding of your physiology, perhaps we may approach a compromise that will allow us all to use the same atmospheric pressure and oxygen content, so we won’t need vacuum suits all the time’ he suggested, and immediately felt the terror coming from S’Shac’Kah 39496, but oddly enough, S’Shac’Kah 38521 seemed to take it in stride.

‘Thank you for your efforts, Rondal Caldar’ she shared in a somewhat subdued tone. *‘I will be happy to work with you on that goal. I do not like the confinement of a vacuum suit’*

‘I must leave that process to my second – Sai Tal. She is to me, as you are to S’Shac’Kah 39496’

‘She is a Medical Technician?’ she asked curiously.

‘She is a Commonwealth Healer’ he corrected her, but felt the confusion in her mind. *‘She is very much like a medical technician, but uses her heart and senses to determine what is needed to effect repair on a damaged body’*

‘Then she is a Medical Technician’ S’Shac’Kah 38521 stated firmly.

‘Yes. With us, she is like a medical technician’ he agreed, while deciding to elaborate on this little bit of culture shock later.

He took them down the corridor and pointed out several rooms specifically prepared for them.

‘You may use any of these rooms. We will bring all your belongings here, and you may store them anywhere within. If you have special storage needs for frozen foods, please let me know and I will have those items placed in our freezer. Each compartment has a place for bathing, and elimination of bodily wastes, much as you’re already familiar with, but with some differences. The system has been isolated because of the over-pressure from this area, so the drainage system is limited and we may ask you to wear vacuum suits every few days so we can flush the system out’

Floyde Leong

He paused before addressing what might be a private issue with the Vanir species, but still had to be addressed.

'I was not sure of how to create a proper sleeping environment for each of you, so I must beg your forgiveness and ask that you tell us what you need to prepare a proper nest for you out of what we have available. Each compartment has individual lighting and environmental controls, but there is a limit. I am not sure if it will be damp enough for your comfort. This section of compartments is on a separate ventilation system so you won't have to suffer through the human smells of the ship while you try to sleep' he assured them.

Then he proceeded to give a very thorough demonstration of the environmental controls and facilities functions, which S'Shac'Kah 39496 shuddered through, while S'Shac'Kah 38521 followed with interest.

Before that was over, Endo and Gallus began bringing their belongings into the corridor and setting them alongside one of the walls while Ronnie and Sai were still attending to their guests. The wives, and then the little Kee, who were bringing along some of the smaller packages, soon followed them.

'S'Shac'Kah 39496, I must ask you and your companion if you brought any weapons aboard my ship, or any communication, or tracing devices of any kind. I know of the Vanir's distaste for weapons, but the spaces we will be traveling through will not tolerate accidental discovery of us. This ship only has one weapon, and its use is somewhat extreme'

Amusingly, the male and female Vanir glanced at each other, before S'Shac'Kah 39496 turned back to face Ronnie.

'To my knowledge, we have brought no weapons on board, Rondal Caldor, nor do we know of any other devices such as you mention. We are assuming you will allow us to communicate to the Vanir Prime as necessary' S'Shac'Kah 39496 pressed.

'I will not unduly impede your communications to the Vanir home world. Perhaps the Prime would find it appropriate to speak to us as, we do to you?'

S'Shac'Kah 39496 froze for a few moments while Ronnie detected about a dozen separate conversations going on just below the surface.

'Perhaps ... perhaps that is something that may be revisited at a later time' he finally suggested, with only part of his mind juggling that sending.

'At a later time, then,' Ronnie agreed, before turning to the systems panel on the inner wall next to the compartment door.

Unhide the Past

‘The communications system does not translate Vanir into Commonwealth Standard. By pressing this button, it will send an alert that you need something, and we will respond. The corridor has a monitoring camera, but we do not typically monitor the compartments ... although, we have cameras in place to do so’ he said, then reached up and pointed to the camera over the door, which viewed the general compartment space.

‘If you feel uncomfortable, then please just cover the cameras and do not break them. My word they will not be used unless there is an emergency. This RED button will fill the compartment with a fire suppressant that is NOT life sustaining. I suggest that you step OUTSIDE the compartment after pressing it’

Ronnie took a glance into the corridor and saw the pile of luggage and containers stacked along the wall.

‘My crew has brought your luggage and supplies, and we will leave you to sort out your living situation. Please do not hesitate to contact Sai Tal or me if you need anything at anytime. We will begin transitions back to Commonwealth space within the hour and inform you of any uncomfortable long jumps along the way. We try to keep them less than a minute long, as they tend to cause upset stomachs. By your leave, Ambassador S’Shac’Kah 39496’ he said with a bow, before escorting Sai and the rest of his crew out and sealing the corridor door behind them.

‘Ship handling’ he sent, then dropped the pressure of the docking bay back to standard, before popping his collar shield and taking a few sniffs.

“Huh. Not too bad. Well done, guys ... ladies. My thanks to all of you for cleaning house. Déjà, do you know where Auda is?”

“I saw her on the bridge with Torga and Manya. She’s learning more stuff!”

“Well ... good. That’s very good,” he said, then ran his hand through his hair and smelled it, before pulling his arm closer to his nose to sniff it, as well. He turned to Endo, grabbed his arm, and sniffed it, too.

“Let’s all shower and send the ship suits through the laundry one time, shall we? If you don’t have a spare, then bring up the collar shield and shower with it on, just to rinse off the smell before you hang it up to dry. Be sure to recharge your collars,” he reminded them, before distractedly heading off to his quarters, with Sai quickly following along.

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“Ronnie – what’s going on in your head right now?”

“Oh, the usual. S’Shac’Kah 39496 was sent here to observe and then die. His companion was sent along because she knows all about S’Shac’Kah 39496, and his ‘contamination’. She’s expected to die, too.”

He thought about the current situation they were now facing, which he'd learned when the Ambassador and his partner had looked at each other for those few moments.

"It would appear that the Prime wants to eliminate the threat of eminent human contamination. Then I caught the most intriguing *ghost* of a conversation S'Shac'Kah 39496 was having with *himself*. He was considering what the Prime would be compelled to do if I twiddled with *her* brain and made her able to speak with us, as I did her two observers ... although I don't think the Prime knows about S'Shac'Kah 39496's companion, as yet."

"What would she have to do?"

"Crisis of conscience. Either she changes her mind about humans all together and decides to wipe us out now, or she continues down the path to letting us pass or fail on our own – but disgraces her warren because she became 'contaminated' just like S'Shac'Kah 39496, and then terminates her *own* life. I think I'd call that – Plan-B."

"I don't suppose the *next* Prime would be any more favorable towards us than the current one is?" Sai pondered aloud as they continued to Ronnie's compartment.

"From *her* warren, the best we could hope for is that she dies and someone else steps up and takes her place with the same policy of pass or fail for the humans ... unless it brings up a vote of no confidence among the Vanir, and her warren is dismissed out of hand, and another one takes its place."

"Would that be any better for us?" she asked, as he paused outside his compartment door.

"Well, if the *Ambassador's* warren took over, it might," he considered, then started peeling off his ship suit the moment he entered his compartment. "If it was *another* warren, our position might become more precarious."

He paused to stretch before stripping down to take a shower, with Sai following suit to join him.

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

Even as her companion was helping her sort through their personal belongings and getting things put away, a portion of S'Shac'Kah 38521's mind was in quiet contemplation of what it had just eavesdropped from Rondal Caldar's and Sai Tal's conversation.

This had been an unexpected development from when the human had capriciously taken it upon himself to violate her brain and *forced* his

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contamination upon her, only to leave *himself* open to her reading him when his guard was down ... as it was, it seemed, quite *frequently*. Aside from the marvel at having an ability that had only been idle speculation beforehand, S'Shac'Kah 38521 now found herself privy to *much* more detailed and intimate information about S'Shac'Kah 39496 that explained a very great deal of what he'd been going through over their last few days together on the Observation Station.

It also let her catch the argument he'd been having with *himself* at the suggestion of the Prime being changed by the human to make her able to use her mind as both of them now could. It would certainly add a new dimension to the discussion of *humans*!

The human, Rondal Caldar, had told her that, in addition to being able to send and receive communications to similar beings, she might one day be able to interact with those beings in such a way that they would not necessarily detect it. It was a frightening thought, but he'd assured her that, among *peers*, it was an understood and tolerated situation, and common courtesy was the accepted norm during nominally private moments.

She reached out now with that tiny portion of her mind and found Rondal Caldar in his facilities letting warm water cascade over his body while using a surfactant to release foreign particles from his squishy skin.

*'No, not squishy ... just skin ... just a bit softer than normal scales'*

*'Interesting,'* she thought, then wondered where *that* thought had originated from; but none of the segments of her mind were confessing at the moment.

Rondal Caldar's thoughts were somewhat muddled, and unclear, but at least she could sense him, unlike the *other* humans in his crew.

*'S'Shac'Kah 38521? I'm surprised'* came from Sai. *'But then, Ronnie is not quite himself right now. Perhaps when you and your companion have had time to unpack and relax for a while, you and I may spend some time together and see how we may best support our males?'*

*'Sai Tal. Forgive me for the intrusion. I meant no harm'* S'Shac'Kah 38521 sent rapidly.

*'Do not worry. You are still learning, and Ronnie was perhaps imprudent in involving you in his action. I will see to Ronnie's contentment, and then share the evening meal with him. Perhaps we may contemplate a common solution for the environment – if S'Shac'Kah 39496 can get over his fear of humans'*

*'I would welcome that, Sai Tal. What is ... contentment?'*



*‘We will engage in sexual activities for the purpose of emotional bonding and physiological gratification. It will promote a feeling of calmness within Ronnie and me. That is one of the purposes of a Commonwealth Healer. We are alike in many ways’*

‘Indeed’ S’Shac’Kah 38521 sent back, but ended the conversation when she sensed Sai’s attention being drawn elsewhere.

### ***In Ronnie’s Compartment***

“Did you say something, Sai?” Ronnie asked while rinsing the soap from his hair.

“I said hurry up and get *out* of there! My *need* is upon me!” she said, then giggled as she reached in and tugged on his flaccid member.

“I hear and obey, my Healer.”

He laughed and quickly finished rinsing off, then grabbed the damp towel from around her and wiped himself down before chasing her back to his bed.

### ***October 2, The Kraken, En Route to the Commonwealth***

Safely ensconced within their fake asteroid shell, they had taken their time approaching the Fringe – spending twenty days in transit just reaching the Hegemony edges of it while passing nearly five minutes below Kee on the “down” side of Hegemony space. They could have gone much faster, even with all the species on board, but Ronnie knew they needed time to get acquainted and comfortable with each other. The first part was easy – while the Vanir stayed within their compartments.

It was the *second* part of becoming comfortable with each other that had Sai and “Sally” working overtime with “Samuel” to overcome his neurosis about the humans, even after they’d both proven they were a biologically incompatible species that carried no diseases that *any* race on board was subject to.

The first major hurdle was the issue of atmospheric pressure that was solved between Sai and Sally by gradually raising the standard ship’s pressure to two atmospheres over the first week and gradually dropping the Ambassador’s spaces to two atmospheres over the same time period. Sai worked with Sally to check blood oxygen levels, and Sally kept track of Samuel’s mental state while they were doing this without his direct knowledge. Then they started tapering it down slowly until it reached an atmosphere and a half – a level easily tolerated by both species, and the ships’ systems.

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Ronnie knew, of course, but Sai had smacked him lightly about the head and warned him to keep his mind locked down so that Samuel wouldn't freak out while it was happening – that last a courtesy of Sally, who'd pointed out how easy it was for her to pick up Ronnie's thoughts, but no one else's.

The olfactory issue was another concern, but much like Cathy had suggested – bad processed air and a *long* time between changes were the principal factors involved. As such, it had not been an insurmountable task to deal with once carried out with a great deal of thought behind it.

Clean Vanir in a clean environment smelled like hardly anything; even warm-blooded as they were. They just didn't appear to sweat. The generally dryer atmosphere on the ship was remedied by humidifying their spaces, and the Kee found a new hobby in providing massage services to both Samuel and Sally with the application of soothing oils they had brought with them. Of course, that was only *after* Samuel had gotten over his fright, when he'd learned they were Vanir-created *cannibals* who were attending to him and his companion.

On the human side, more frequent showers were being taken to accommodate the suddenly more sensitive noses of the Vanir, which was both a polite and sensible solution.

Food was handled separately at the request of Sally, as she didn't want to introduce too many variables for her male to overcome. They took their meals in their compartments from the stores they had brought aboard, while Sally and Sai worked out the dietary needs of Vanir in a Commonwealth environment. They eventually determined that several items were compatible on a gastric level, with the exception of certain fruits and vegetables, but the targa and beef stores were quite compatible as long as Sally took care in its preparation. They hit the mother-load, though, when Sai was explaining the emergency food system – ship's poop!

Sally was fascinated at the variety of textures that came out of the spigot in the commons, and also commented on its unique smell and flavor. Through careful analysis, she'd also determined that it was *wholly* compatible with Vanir biology. She wasn't so thrilled when Sai explained *how* it was produced, however, and extracted *profuse* promises to *never* mention it to Samuel – *ever*. Sai put the word out to *everyone*, and the emergency food was now officially fabricated from “powdered protein stock” – no matter *where* it came from.

The culmination of adaptation was when Samuel and Sally – accommodation names presented to them by Ronnie since most humans could not properly pronounce the sibilants of Vanir speech – joined them

at the dining commons twenty days after boarding and shared a somewhat common mealtime with them.

Conversation was very light since, of them all, only Ronnie and Sai had any fluency in the Vanir language, and that, only on the mental level.

Endo and Gallus were catching up, and Torga was making the effort. None of the wives could operate at that level, but at least they were all conversant in both Drecks, and Commonwealth Standard now, as was everyone else, except the Vanir. Even Auda, who had taken to keeping Manya company rather than spending time with Ronnie and Sai any longer, was becoming proficient in Standard.

After the somewhat successful supper, Gallus took the bridge watch to relieve Endo, and the women cleaned up, while Ronnie escorted the Vanir back to their corridor.

It now remained open to the ship's common atmosphere, and Samuel seemed to be doing rather well. Ronnie suspected Sally would continue to apply her special talents to help ease Samuel's nervousness, and complemented her privately on her support for the diplomatic mission.

*'Sally, I see that Samuel is still somewhat disturbed, but I am sure you will be able to manage his proper care. I am much relieved he has adapted so well in such a short amount of time'* he sent directly to her.

*'And you have no care for my feelings as well, Rondal Caldar?'*

*'As the female is always of stronger character in both our species, it was to be expected. I am also quite pleased you have the strength to work with me and Sai on what must be a completely unexpected adventure for you. Again, I must apologize for involving you, but I fear Samuel would not have adapted as well if you were not here to take care of him. Sai has remarked upon it, as well'*

*'You are the destroyer of worlds, and Sai is the one of stronger character between you? Yet, she also kills when necessary'*

*'Perhaps if humans stopped growing so fast and had matured properly, like the Vanir, we would develop proper behavior closer to the Vanir?'*

*'A strange concept from a human, Rondal Caldar. I look forward to learning more about Commonwealth history'*

*'Just as we would like to learn more about our own history. Perhaps the long memories of the Vanir would someday provide us with that enlightenment, if only to show us the folly of our destructive ways'*

*'Certainly one who does not recall the follies of the past must surely suffer from that failure in the future'* she stated.

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*'A truth among all intelligent beings'* he agreed as they reached the corridor entrance, where he stopped and widened his communication band.

*'Samuel ... Sally, I have greatly enjoyed your company for the evening meal, and have hopes for your pleasant rest period. Should you need anything, please do not hesitate to contact Sai or me so that we may try to provide for your needs'* he stated to both of them.

He then bowed properly, receiving a polite dip of the head from the Vanir in response, before they entered their corridor.

### ***Kantor, The Royal Homestead, The Children Discuss the Dead***

All of the children were sitting in a sunny part of the patio and appeared focused on the loose, floppy books in their hands.

*'Walter, do you REALLY think it was her?'* Cathy asked while reaching down to select a different colored crayon.

*'If it wasn't, then SOMEONE has gone to great lengths to pretend otherwise. Besides, the second one had the same feeling I felt around Grandfather'* Walter pointed out, then leaned down to carefully fill the gap between two curving lines.

*'Yes, Cathy. I felt that as well'* Jaiying agreed.

*'So, Grandmother Kita has taken Rakel away from Grandfather'* Cathy considered silently.

*'I wonder if Grandfather found his talisman on that implantation ship'* Josie asked no one in particular, while waiting for Walter to give up the purple crayon.

*'It may have been tossed aside, or simply deposited in the ship's disposal. I never looked into the operator's mind while they remained prisoners'* Walter told her, then passed over the purple crayon, before selecting a red one.

*'At least all the implants in the Elder's office have been rounded up and removed. Lady Ai should be happy about THAT'* Josie considered.

*'Lady Ai is not happy about ANYTHING. She thinks Grandfather is bringing RUIN to the Commonwealth'* Jaiying offered sadly.

*'Then perhaps it's time that Lady Ai stepped down?'* Cathy suggested.

*'Too bad SHE didn't get a bomb implant. Jaiying could have practiced on HER'* Josie considered.

*'JOSIE!'* Jaiying protested, before putting down her green crayon to glare at her older cousin.

*‘Just sayin’... Lady Ai is the Elder only because she got the Visions. Maybe it’s time that someone ELSE took over’* she suggested, then dropped the purple crayon and searched the small box for a different color.

*‘It would solve a lot of problems if someone were in a position to NOT be going crazy over those fuzzy impressions of potential futures’* Walter considered.

*‘But that’s how the Commonwealth has ALWAYS worked’* Cathy reminded them.

*‘No. That CUSTOM was established ten-thousand years ago – maybe. It’s like Uncle Emperor said – custom is different than policy’* he explained.

*‘What is the difference, Walter?’* Jaiying asked to everyone else’s surprise.

*‘Custom is doing something because it’s ALWAYS been done that way. Policy is something that can change and grow to fit the current situation’* the smug assertion came from Josie.

*‘But what about the Visions, then? How would they be transferred to someone else?’* Cathy asked.

*‘Grandfather sees the Visions – sort of’* Walter reminded them. *‘Gray Feather sees them, as well – sort of – and they’re known to the Others, but they call them the Flux. They don’t seem to have helped ANYONE lately, though’*

*‘The Visions are just tools, Cathy, and they’re only as good as the person trying to interpret them’* Josie declared firmly. *‘Elder Kita lost her way for some reason, and Lady Ai is doing much worse. I say it’s time for a transfer of power’*

*‘Who would you suggest?’* Walter asked.

*‘Well, Uncle Emperor has wanted a closer working relationship with the Elder’* Josie pointed out, then glanced down at her book and put the finishing stroke on the red bird she was coloring. *‘Maybe it’s time to bring the Elder closer to home? Aunt Lili isn’t doing much as the Elder’s master spy anymore’*

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Lili was sitting with Diane and Shay in the shaded portion of the patio, while the children sat out in the sun and quietly played together.

“What is it they’re doing again?” Lili asked before taking another sip of her iced drink.

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"It's called 'coloring'. The color sticks are made out of wax, and the books are coloring books," Diane explained as she sorted through a small pile of booklets. "It builds fine motor skills while they learn to control the placement of the crayon so they color inside the lines. See?"

She held up a page in an Earth children's coloring book that Walter had done...

This was yet another dodge the Earth wives had concocted to divert Lili's attention away from the children in her search for Ronnie's "Senior Staff." A supply of books and crayons were brought back on the last French fly run that David and Andy had made.

The dads still had no idea of the importance of their progeny, but Larl was beginning to suspect *something* was up, because Amy was constantly feeding him information, supposedly from *Ronnie*, which had origins he felt came from elsewhere. A way to recover bodies from the Vanir station that had fallen apart in the Death Void surrounding Earth was just *one* issue. Amy first suggested it as coming from Ronnie, weeks before it came from the Elder, officially – *also* supposedly from Ronnie.

Radatel still had a blockade on the Death Void for all Commonwealth ships, so they were pursuing other options based on the experiences they'd had five years ago on *Odontoceti* – like sending in an unarmed and probably robotic ship. However, at the distances involved, it required forbidden use of Kantite skills. Forbidden to *males*, but sometimes approved for *females* – depending on the circumstances. Unfortunately, there was no ship currently available for that sort of experiment, and no one capable of doing it.

Of course, no one else knew about the *kids*...

Lili flipped through the book page-by-page and saw the careful coloring work done by Walter. She had seen a similar practice on Cletus, but it was done with blank paper and a marking stylus. She picked up another book and looked through it, seeing the work was of much better quality.

"Whose is this one?" she asked while holding out the book.

"Oh. That's one of Jaiying's. She's very good for being so much younger than everyone else," Shay said, while Lili continued to look through the book.

Underneath the small pile of books were some loose pages, and there were figures drawn freehand of human outlines of various sizes. Lili glossed over them, until she noticed one page that had a splash of green on it, and pulled it out from the bottom.

This page had a human figure standing next to a tall human figure, then a much smaller human figure to the other side of it. Finally, completely off to one side, was a figure shaded in green that was taller than the first figure, but shorter than the taller figure.

It had a small tail at the base of its legs – or an *enormous* penis, she thought.

“Diane – what’s this?” she asked curiously.

“That? Oh... We were talking a few days ago about humans, Drecks, and Kee. Then the Vanir were mentioned, and two of the children were curious about them, so we sketched a representative human; then a Drecks, and then the Kee. We sorta sketched in a Vanir based on the descriptions we’d heard – a little taller than Kantite standard but shorter than the average Drecks.”

“And the tail?”

“Well – they’re *reptiles*, aren’t they? They *should* have a tail. I thought *sure*, someone mentioned a tail. Maybe it was Amy?”

“Yes. Yes, maybe it was Amy,” Lili mused thoughtfully before putting the picture back down.

She took another sip of her drink while glancing at the sun creeping slowly overhead. She closed her eyes, basking in the radiance for a few moments, before looking back over at the children. She smiled at how they seemed so intently focused on their artwork. A bit of motion caught her eyes, and she could see two of the younger valaets lounging in the shade of the bushes; one on either side of the group of children.

Each of them had a small object in its paws and was lazily playing with it while flopping back and forth on their backs. She found the sight of it very calming, but shook her head slowly. The kits were nearly half as big as the adults now, but they still acted like kittens around the children. Really *huge* kittens.

She sighed, then had another sip of her drink before standing.

“Well ... I must be off. The Emperor is working on a policy statement. One, should the Vanir choose *peace* – and another, should we all be fighting for *survival* in the next few weeks,” she said cheerfully, before turning away to leave. “Never a dull moment in the Commonwealth,” they heard her mutter before entering the patio door.

‘Mama! If Aunt Lili asks you, you told the rest of the Mama’s that Ronnie said the Vanir had tails – and they were green!’ Josie quickly sent out.

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‘Got it, *baby girl!*’ Amy quickly sent back, before continuing to review progress reports for implantation removals on the other side of the planet.

The Kraken, A New Bonding

S’Shac’Kah 38521 helped S’Shac’Kah 39496 wash in the warm water of the shower, and he helped her in return. This was certainly a surprising luxury that *neither* of them had expected when sentenced to die under the care of humans. Afterwards, they dried each other in the darkened sleeping compartment before she slowly and thoroughly applied moisturizing oils to his scales until judging him ready for her attentions. He surprised her by insisting that she lay down next and let him oil *her* scales as well, beginning by making sure she was comfortably positioned.

He took his time in the dimly lit compartment; spreading the oils and working them in slowly, and ... and *lovingly* she felt. This was an odd departure for him, and she wondered what it meant.

She set half of her mind to ponder that question, while a quarter of it focused on information gathered during dinner, which left the last quarter responding to the sensual applications of pressure and motion that were slowly diverting attention from all the other segments to focus on this one specific activity.

“S’Shac’Kah 39496 ... I am supposed to be relaxing *you*,” she said with a husky sibilance.

“You have born the *brunt* of our efforts, S’Shac’Kah 38521, and I would do this for you,” he stated softly, while applying gentle pressure to sensitive areas around her hips.

“You *honor* me, Shac 39496. You put me into the mood to ... to *mate* with you... I want to *mate* with you, Shac’Kah,” she murmured, before giving out another low hiss.

“I would ... produce ... *eggs* for you ... Samuel,” she added quietly, to the shock and surprise of at least *two* of her brain’s segments, who were *immediately* told to keep quiet as the party was just starting.

“Shac 38521... How *daring* of you. In only twenty days, we have gone from outside observers, to total *immersion* with the subjects of our observation. And now it seems we’ve become *corrupted* by our hosts ... Sally,” he murmured.

The atmosphere between them seemed charged with energy ... and Sally finally went all in.

“If our lives are forfeit *anyway*, then perhaps we may live out the rest of our lives for *ourselves*?” she suggested hopefully, then reached out to

his mind with hers, and found *all* of his segments actively involved in her seduction.

'Now, Samuel! Let us begin now, my Samuel!'

'Sally, you are my companion, and I take you now and forever!'

In Ronnie's Compartment

"Ronnie, I think it's about time you spread your seed around and get the girls primed for becoming better Healers," Sai told him.

"How about if we save a little seed and use just a bit of it on their outer lips or something? Then I can Gift them when their husbands are with them. Besides, what's the hurry?"

"My dear boy, the hurry is that we need *all* the skilled Healers we can get, and you're the easiest way to make that happen! Besides, I'm curious to see if the Vanir... *Whoa!* What was *that?*"

"Feels like the Vanir are sharing contentment – and projecting just a mite *strongly*," he suggested.

'Hello Grandmother, Grandfather. It would appear the Vanir have just become pair-bonded' Walter sent warmly.

'Oh, Grandfather! It was so romantic! Sally proposed to Samuel, and he accepted!' Jaiying gushed.

'It was more like they had nothing else to live for' Josie sniped.

'No. They chose to draw strength from each other instead of giving in to their despair' Cathy clarified. *'Samuel went to the trouble of seducing Sally. She actually offered to produce EGGS for him'*

'Well... Lili will be so pleased' Ronnie commented dryly.

'Umm, if it comes up ... you told Mama Amy about green Vanir with tails, and she told the rest of our mothers' Walter urged.

'Lili is still unaware of your status?' he quickly asked.

'She does not yet know ... but we worry for the Elder, and would suggest that Aunt Lili assume her duties' Walter advocated. *'We only lack the knowledge to shift the Visions from Lady Ai to Aunt Lili so that–'*

'NO! Lili does NOT get the Visions' Ronnie cut him off in mid-sentence. *'They are a POOR tool that is too EASILY misunderstood! Leave the Elder alone, and let ME deal with my future, children! YOUR destiny lies before you, and may not include my own'*

'But Grandfather, you–'

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‘Cathy – what is your duty?’ he interrupted her, but included all of them.

‘Protect the family. Protect the Commonwealth. Protect the Crown’ the four of them chorused.

‘And THAT is how we will either SUCCEED OR FAIL!’

‘Then one suggestion, Grandfather. Pick up the remains of the Vanir in the Death Void. Doing so, will confound the Vanir Prime, and allow Daddy Larl to research them for you’ Walter proposed.

‘Will it be safe, then?’ he asked, already wondering if the children knew something they weren’t telling him about yet.

‘The Grandmother of the person who occupied your head assures us that it is safe – but perhaps use the shuttle, because–’

‘You never know’ he finished for him. *‘Thank you, Walter. I will take it under advisement’*

‘We love you, Grandfather ... Grandmother’

‘And we love you, children’ Sai sent, since Ronnie had wandered over to the com panel as soon as the conversation wound down.

“Bridge, this is Ronnie,” he called through the com system.

“Endo here, Ronnie. How may I serve you?”

“If nothing is in the way, please set a course for Earth, and double our transition rate. Stop us five minutes out from the Death Void. Program that into the navigation computer and try not to hit anything on the way. Full screens up and cycling. Put them about a hundred kilometers out, and very thin.”

“Working it out now, Ronnie. You want my calculations?”

“I’ll check ‘em in the morning when I relieve you,” he said, then shut down the com link, before coming back to bed where Sai was looking at him like he was nuts.

“You’re not seriously thinking of going into the Death Void, are you?”

“Well, if Kita told them it’s safe, then why not? And when we get close, I’ll ask around and see if I can get an *official* invite to enter.”

October 12, Vanaheim, The Prime’s Offices

The Prime had been skeptical over much of the information S’Shac’Kah 39496 had been sending her, but the additional information from S’Shac’Kah 38521 seemed to back it up. They were amassing a

tremendous amount of detailed historical data from the “Commonwealth” humans as they called themselves, plus additional anecdotal information from one of the suborned Drecks crewmen.

Already, the Prime realized the Vanir had never really understood *either* of the major societal groups – the one they were most afraid of, and the one they had “enhanced” to divert the first group from exploratory efforts into Vanir space. The Vanir sociologists were in an uproar, but some of the calmer heads were holding sway and trying to develop a consensus of what humans from either group would do under various situations. This was being refined on a daily ... sometimes *hourly* basis.

As for her imbedded observers – ‘Samuel’ and ‘Sally,’ as the humans had so cavalierly renamed them for their *own* convenience – they seemed quite well and hearty after their month-long ordeal. Several of her brain segments took a moment to consider how remarkable that was, while a couple more were going back over some of the wordings used in certain passages from audio transmissions they had received from them.

When they sent separate reports, they were precise and to the point. When they jointly sent reports, it was as if they spoke as one person; one starting a comment, and the other finishing it smoothly ... although sometimes offering different viewpoints about the same issue. It was almost as if they had pair-bonded, and this prompted the Prime to pull records for the two of them for mating-pair compatibility, which, given the situation they found themselves in, was highly likely if left to their own recognizance.

Still, no concrete solution presented itself, and the Prime remained guarded, but hopeful. Never the less, she had called forth several of their now obsolete but still dangerous defensive platforms to surround Vanaheim Prime under the guise of drills for their space operations support groups. It was little enough for a species that was nominally passive to a degree – but that degree was subject to change, the closer peril approached Vanaheim.

That left the *last* issue, and she was curious as to why the human, Rondal Caldar, had insisted on pursuing it. Dead Vanir were nothing more than empty husks. The *only* reason to recover them was to study them for the very practical purpose of exploiting their physiology towards determining the best way to eliminate them as a *species*. She had ordered S’Shac’Kah 39496 to dissuade the humans, and, if unsuccessful, arrange for the bodies to be destroyed according to Vanir “custom” by reducing them to a fine ash. Of course, that left S’Shac’Kah 39496 and his companion as *live* specimens for study, but that was countered by the need to gain further intimate knowledge of the humans that would be of benefit to the Vanir as a whole.

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It was a delicate balance, perched on the edge of indecision, and she did not much care for it. The fact that she felt strong *alternating* conflicts, bothered her as well. She never used to be this indecisive about *anything*.

‘Don’t forget that other little issue regarding Station 6,’ a lone segment of her mind softly reminded her, but S’Ahi’Ma 31245 had already resolved the possibility of that loss with the rest of her mind, and accepted the pain of it ... after a while.

The Kraken, Approaching the Death Void

“Ronnie – have you gone *totally insane*? You have *no* guarantees that you’ll *survive* out there!”

“Come on, Sai. You *heard* the kids. If Grandmother says it’s safe, then who am I to question it? Besides – I’ll be wearing my ship suit and using the shuttle. I’ll not even carry a side arm.”

“Well, the *boys* aren’t going with you!” she said while quickly looking over at Endo and Gallus, and raising her hand to stop them.

“I never asked them to, Sai,” he said, then turned to look at them as well.

“Endo ... Gallus, you need to stay here and help your mother. You know, just in case I’ve gone insane. Besides, your wives will need blood sacrifices for practice on the more *esoteric* skills of the advanced Healer,” he teased them, which got a set of groans from both of them.

In the Vanir Corridor

“Sally ... do you understand what they are arguing about?” Samuel asked from the comfort of the nest they’d made after Rondal Caldar approved the removal of the sleeping platform from their chosen nesting quarters.

“It involves the concern of Sai Tal for the Dreck’s crew she calls her sons. Even though they are not hers by birth, they appear to hold a prominent position in her familial associations – even tighter than those of a warren, it would seem. I do not understand the reference to blood sacrifices. Perhaps it refers to the “Healer” custom she claims to be a practitioner of?”

Neither Sally nor Samuel had seen evidence of Sai Tal’s “Healer” talents, as nothing had come up in the last month that actually needed them. Samuel considered that, while using a few portions of his mind to correlate the distinction and compare it to the Vanir norms, as Sally went on.

“As for her customs – they have ship docs much like ours. Perhaps a little better since they are so fragile. The closest I understand it, is the two Drecks would be mating pairs with her, but they obviously have mating pairs of their own.

“Perhaps it is because they are born live from her body – or *would* have been born so? She would have fed them her milk until they could forage on their own. She also has a daughter who was a companion to Rondal Caldar at one time – yet now *she* is a companion to him. Or assumes the role of one?”

Samuel applied a few more segments to the further consideration of human family and close associational structures, but doubted it would help his understanding any better. It was no *wonder* he had such difficulty in understanding the conversations of the sociological researchers in his own warren, or the sometimes-strange behavior they displayed among their mating pairs.

Alternatively, was he becoming *more* like them with his close association with his chosen mate, Sally? Was this something *normal* for Vanir, or something merely overlooked during his long life while being so focused on monitoring the humans? And what was *Sally's* association with him that now they had performed the minimal function of their biological drive?

While the rest of his mind was so occupied, a couple of renegade segments ganged up and pushed through an idea related to the *absurd* concept that Vanir might *like* to have their dead returned to them.

Samuel had a new thought. Well, *several* of them actually, but this one involved ambulatory action.

“Sally, it strikes me that Rondal Caldar might require *assistance* on this adventure he proposes, and my help might be of benefit to him,” he said, then stood up and stretched.

He rubbed his tail lovingly across hers, but left the nest anyway, then began to pull out his vacuum suit and started to slip it on.

“Samuel... What do you intend to do?” she asked warily.

“Rondal Caldar has no experience with our hardware, and may require assistance in identifying parts of it for recovery. I will go with him and assist with his efforts,” he said, but she rose to stop him.

“Samuel – do you not *listen* to yourself when you speak? This is *not* the act of a *Senior Observer!*”

“My Sally...” he said, but immediately paused for a moment to wonder where *that* had come from. “Sally ... we have lived *much* longer in human

Unhide the Past

captivity than I'd ever expected, and I have completed my mating duties to you. If we are skillful, then I will return and continue to learn more about these humans. If Rondal Caldar fails because he goes all alone, then I feel I will have failed as well. This opportunity is too important to ignore."

He stood before her, then tentatively reached out to her in a purely human gesture to hug her, and she responded. A tiny portion of his mind recorded this and thought, *'How curious.'*

'If you DIE out there with the human, I ... I will NEVER forgive you, my Samuel' he heard in his head.

"Then we shall take all measures to be careful, my Sally," he promised softly while hugging her just a bit tighter, before leaving her standing alone in the dim light of the room. Sally continued to stand there in shock after the door closed behind him, and finally let out a choking breath before stumbling of their shared nest.

'Sai Tal! Sai Tal! My mate has gone mad and means to join Rondal Caldar on his adventure!' she sent out desperately, while heading out the door.

'Wonderful!' her incongruous remark came back to her, laced with both sarcasm and further dismay. *'Would you care to join me in the commons for an intoxicating beverage?'* Since she was already in the corridor, Sally took little time to consider.

'I'm on my way!' she sent, and left the corridor; passing the door to the docking bay without looking within, while continuing to the commons.

Kantor, The Royal Homestead, Josie Asks a Question

'Great-Grandmother... Grandfather is on the way' Walter sent to the void.

'I will tell my companions, Walter' Kita quickly sent back.

'He is bringing along a new friend. The Vanir male sent by the Vanir Prime'

'Heh! Lost children and small animals...' he heard her silent mutter from twelve minutes out, before her voice dwindled away.

'Walter, will Grandfather be safe?' Jaiying asked anxiously.

'From Grandmother, Great-Grandmother and her friends, the Elder, or the Prime?' Josie ran down the current list.

'Let's watch and see' Cathy suggested.

'And act if we need to' Walter added unnecessarily.

The Shuttle, On the Way to the Remains of Station 6

The shuttle had safely traversed *well* past the edge of the Death Void, so Samuel finally relaxed the death grip he'd held on the seat back in front of him for the last ten minutes. He was sitting on the modified bench whose seatbacks had been removed to accommodate the vestigial tail that hung down to the mid-point of his knees. It wasn't a *great* solution, but it accommodated him adequately – aside from being in the last row of four seats.

'Are you still comfortable back there?' Ronnie asked solicitously.

'I'm still alive. It would appear that your information was correct'

'There was some question of whether it only affected Vanir, but I'm glad to see you're still with me'

Rondal stood up and stretched his clenched muscles, before turning around to face Samuel. The Vanir seemed to have a knowing look in his eyes, and his question only confirmed it.

'It would seem that you were nervous as well?'

'My dead relative declined to speak to ME this trip out, but she DID speak to my Senior Staff back on Kantor, so I thought it was a worthwhile risk'

'But I told you the Prime does not care WHAT happens to dead Vanir!'

'It's a matter of honor for us – for ME, anyway. Even if Station 6 was operating beyond their charter, their warren should know exactly how and why they were subject to disaster. Even if it's only a guess at this point'

'A – a GUESS? You don't KNOW what happened to them?'

'Our own ships wandering into the Death Void... Well, they simply ceased to report, and nothing was ever recovered. This has been a mystery for centuries, Kantor Standard, yet I spent months in this very space without a problem – aside from being on a ship without fuel, and running out of life support'

'How ... how did you survive?'

'We got lucky'

Ronnie turned and checked his navigation settings before locking them in. Turning back, he gave Samuel a quick nod before being interrupted.

Unhide the Past

'Grandfather, another two hours at standard transit on your current course – flip-over on the hour' Walter suggested quietly.

'Thank you, Walter' He reached over and set the ships timer for a fifty-five minute alert, then stretched once again before coming back and joining Samuel at the rear.

'Hungry?' Ronnie asked, while beginning to prepare a cold snack for himself.

Samuel contemplated Rondal Caldar with several segments of his mind, but *all* of them found him to be a puzzle. According to his very open comments about his own history, he apparently killed very easily, but also went well out of his way to *protect* lives – both his own crew, and the crew of the Observer Station. He had prepared quite luxurious accommodations for him and Sally, and been the most gracious host. Perhaps that was the *good* side of his psychosis?

As for the *bad* side...

This business of him talking to dead relatives was certainly *indicative* of that, and probably part of the reason for this trip; working out the imaginary path to a mystery that will undoubtedly *remain* a mystery whether they survived the journey or not.

What, by all the Vanir deities, was he *thinking* when he decided that coming out here with this mad human was a *good* idea?

'Ahh ... Not right now, Rondal Caldar. I find my digestion somewhat distressed at the moment' he finally managed to respond.

'I understand. There is a human-size toilet forward, there, and a Drecks-size toilet in the middle cargo hold. We have about an hour, Standard, before we start slowing to meet up with the debris field. My Senior Staff tells me everything is still relatively close together – within a ten-kilometer diameter, or so. We should be able to draw everything closer to us if I work slowly and carefully'

Samuel flashed back to what his orders had been, and voiced his paraphrase of them once again.

'Rondal Caldar, I must repeat – the Vanir Prime does not care if the deceased of this warren are returned to Vanaheim or not. This serves no purpose!'

'Then we may recover some of the technology ... AND the bodies ... and perhaps learn how it happened? We are very interested in the physiology of the Vanir, and can study that from the bodies. After all, it wouldn't be prudent for us to take YOU apart and study you as such, would it?' he

asked lightly, which triggered a freeze of several seconds before Samuel was able to respond.

‘No... No, Sally and I would find it greatly distressing should that happen. Not now that–’ he suddenly stopped and looked at Ronnie sharply.

‘Now that Sally is carrying fertile eggs that carry your children? We are all very happy for you, Samuel. When I was lost out here in the void, three of our females were pregnant, and we all worked very hard to insure their safety. Now they and their children and mates live on Kantor with the rest of my family, and serve productive lives within the Commonwealth’

‘You know about ... about Sally and me?’ he asked rigidly.

‘Samuel... My apologies. Sai Tal spoke to Sally about some of the effects of the mind-to-mind communications we use. I thought Sally would have explained it to you by now. When some of us are experiencing emotional events, it tends to radiate to others who are capable of sensing it. We knew when you bonded with Sally, and rejoiced for your happiness. I would have expected Sally to show you how to block those sorts of emissions by now’ he explained gently.

‘You knew?’ Samuel asked again; still astonished.

‘Samuel, my Senior Staff back on KANTOR knew. In fact, they told ME. However, they are very special to begin with. They report to Sai and me. They do not report to the Emperor or the Elder of my people’

Samuel sagged back on his haunches.

‘Is there NOTHING you cannot learn about us, Rondal Caldar? Are there NO secrets left to withhold from you or your people? Is there ANYTHING you cannot force from us?’

Ronnie sat down close to him and sought contact with his eyes.

‘Samuel, I can’t make people do what I think is the correct thing to do. I can’t bring peace between the Hegemony and Commonwealth if both sides continue to fight among themselves and each other. If the Vanir are going to interfere with us, I can’t guarantee that humans won’t interfere with the Vanir’

Samuel started to stand, but Ronnie raised his hand.

‘There are a lot of things I don’t like in all three of our areas of interest, Samuel, and I don’t know how to fix all of them. All I can do is try my very best and see what happens. That’s what the Commonwealth Elders have done for ten-thousand years – they see the Visions, and guide the Emperor towards the path that leads to peaceful growth’

Unhide the Past

'You believe this? You believe in ... in visions?' Samuel asked cautiously, trying not to excite this mad human.

'I had lived with the Visions for nearly twenty years, Standard, while surviving on a dead platform in the middle of nowhere. I thought I was going mad. I saw the Visions, and heard the voices – and they didn't even have the decency to talk directly TO me... They just talked about me...' he drifted off in memory for a moment. 'Even now, they won't speak to me ... but apparently they're talking to my Senior Staff back on Kantor'

Ronnie lifted his shoulders in a shrug, then shook his head in embarrassment.

'What happened to you during those twenty years?' Samuel asked him, hoping to gain insight on the psychosis that drove Rondal Caldar to this extreme level of insanity before they both died from it.

'I drank heavily. I dreamt the Visions, and heard the voices. Finally – I decided to read some books. Old books, written on paper – that is a compressed plant fiber that will accept printing. I studied the books for many years and became a somewhat clumsy Healer among our people – very privately, of course. Men are not Healers in our society. That task is given to our life-givers – our females ... like your Sally'

'Medical technicians? You studied medical technician ... books?'

'Something like that. Got pretty good at it' he said, then bent down to show him the lumpy scar on the back of his head.

Samuel reached out and delicately felt the scar on his head.

'You serviced that ... yourself? It looks like it went in quite far'

'Sword-strike when my back was turned. From a TRAINING program, no less. It was most embarrassing at the time, but that was NOTHING compared to being in a zero-gee fire. I lost most of the left side of my TORSO in that one' he stated, but got a concentrated look from Samuel that he misinterpreted.

'But I'm feeling MUCH better now' he quickly added.

'Yes... So I see...' Samuel replied gently, before reconsidering his current situation.

This human was *clearly* insane and he, *himself*, was *DOOMED*.

On the Kraken, In Ronnie's Compartment

'Sai Tal, why to our males do such foolish things?'

Sally was sipping lightly at the fruit juice she'd been offered.

Surprisingly, it fermented quickly within her upper digestive track and converted to an intoxicant suitable for providing a light buzz to the Vanir metabolism.

'Gods! Why do they do anything! If we didn't need them to make children, then the world would be a better place!'

Sally looked at her in shock.

'Do you ... really mean that, Sai Tal?' she asked, which prompted a disgusted glance from Sai.

'Oh ... sometimes. But there are times when they're very useful to us. Like my not-quite-ex-husband. He was a bastard, but he gave me a wonderful daughter'

'You did not like him, yet you had a child with him?'

'I liked him well enough at the time, but I drove him away because he was a bastard. He was having sex with me, but thinking of another at the same time'

'But ... humans have many partners, don't they? My studies show some of your females provide services to many males, just as my task requires. It that not the same?'

'He said he LOVED me, Sally! But in the middle of loving ME, he called out his SISTER'S name!'

'His sister?' she asked, now becoming very confused.

Sally tried hard to consider the relationship between human males and females compared to the Vanir, but finally had to ask.

'How did he know it was his sister? No ... humans keep their children as possessions, but ... his sister?' she asked again, which prompted a long discussion of Commonwealth sexual practices, starting ages, expectations, bondings, bonding contracts, marriage, and other related issues.

'One husband and FIVE wives? Really? And he has the STAMINA for such?'

While Sai was formulating an answer from her slightly distorted thoughts, Sally was thinking she would *not* like to share Samuel with another female – related or not.

'The Wives provide comfort to each other so they don't get lonely. The important thing is that they keep him from doing stupid things' Sai finally explained.

Unhide the Past

‘Yes... Perhaps I should have kept Samuel in the nest with me so your Rondal Caldar could go out by himself. Then my Samuel would still be safe here with me, and... The wives ... comfort ... each other?’

‘Yeah. After all, only another female knows what a female REALLY wants and needs. My little Déjà used to play with me all the time, when she wasn’t playing with the boys. It’s a good thing we found Kiki or she’d wear out Ronnie and then he’d have nothing left for me, at all. We don’t know what’s going on with Auda anymore. She just hangs around Manya, and sometimes spends the night with her when Torga is on watch’

‘Auda seems very lonely’ Sally observed.

‘She used to sleep with me and Ronnie before we recovered the crew from Station 23. Learning the truth behind Asgard and Midgard, and then all about the Vanir, seems to have set her off, somehow. We don’t understand what’s going on with her, but as long as she eats properly and maintains contact with someone, we’re leaving her alone until she decides to talk to us’

To Sally the solution was obvious, but she would coach it in more delicate terms to the human, though.

‘Perhaps ... perhaps we should talk to her, together? Ask her to join us for drinking and talking?’ Sally suggested, and Sai considered it for less than a moment.

‘Perhaps you’re right, Sally’ she agreed, then sent out the call for Auda to join them.

By the time Auda arrived, Sai had gotten another cup and added a measure to it from a very rare bottle of ambrosia from the stash Ronnie had been keeping aside for emergencies – which he thought she didn’t know about.

‘Auda, Sally and I have been talking about you, and we decided you need to talk to us and tell us what’s going on. Please join us for a while’ Sai pushed to her silently.

‘Yes, Auda. I’m sure you have many questions about the Vanir, and I will gladly tell you all that I know’ Sally added.

“I do not think that would be a very good idea, Lady Sai,” she said aloud.

“Don’t be rude, Auda. We have a guest,” Sai reminded her gently.

‘I don’t think I would be good company right now’ Auda shared silently, if somewhat faintly.

‘Tell me, Auda ... why are you in discomfort right now?’ Sally asked her gently, and Auda took the cup Sai slowly pushed in front of her and sipped at it lightly. She closed her eyes at the taste, then took another sip. Then she sat down and sipped some more. She became quite *chatty* by the middle of the *second* cup.

Somewhere Else...

*The Fate on Duty was trying **very** hard to keep track of everything, but so far, things were going **well**. At least everyone was still **alive** – except for that one Vanir who was only **sort** of alive at the remains of Station 6. If that crewman ended up a **survivor**, then so much the better to confound the Prime, as she was still waffling on the **bad** side of genocide.*

*The Fate was **sure** this set of actions would overcome whatever issue had occurred so long ago that had set the Commonwealth on the path to disaster. She certainly **hoped** so, because her favorite human had spent the majority of his very limited life span dealing with the strange divergence Destiny had allowed to occur, before it wandered off to deal with something happening **elsewhere**.*

*She didn’t complain **then**, and wasn’t about to complain **now**. Not after **the** last Fate who complained to Destiny failed to **return** from that meeting.*

*She settled in to watch and hoped for the best, just like her **favorite** human.*

On the Shuttle

‘Ha! There ... you see it? The debris field ... just like they said!’

‘It ... it’s scattered all over the place’ Samuel pointed out, but Ronnie just threw up one hand in dismissal.

*‘This may not be the Kraken’s Child, but my engineers have fitted it out with a pretty *spiffy* shield’* he sent while maneuvering the shuttle into the approximate center of the field and stopping.

‘Now, we go out about twenty kilometers and enable the shield’ he silently muttered his mindful comments to Samuel. *‘And then we just tighten it up a bit and start reeling in the pieces – slowly’*

He checked his settings while watching the results on his sensors.

‘Now we sit back and watch as everything comes to us. This was about the same size as Station 27?’

Unhide the Past

‘Yes. They were very similar – although the payloads were much different. Not of the Prime’s doing, I assure you once again’ Samuel stated, while still trying to figure out exactly what a “*spiffy*” was.

‘I believe you, Samuel. More importantly, the Senior Staff believes the Prime’ Ronnie said in a half-truth.

It took a while for that to sink in, but a couple of Samuel’s segments finally parsed and processed it before throwing it up for the rest of the group to comprehend it.

‘Your Senior Staff has... The thinking of the Prime is open to your Senior Staff?’ he asked in shock.

‘Yes. Well, a bit, anyway. It surprised me as well. It seems my staff becomes more clever everyday. They led us safely here. Warned me about the Prime. Warned me about YOU, in fact. Told me you were lurking somewhere down in the cloud, then pointed you out to me. Gave me advice, and taught me how to talk to you more effectively’

‘They ... taught ... you?’

*‘I said they were very clever. I would have figured you out eventually, but time was of the essence – what with bombs being implanted *willy-nilly* all over human-occupied space’*

Samuel just sat there and stared at him while the linguistic segment of his brain swiftly correlated “*willy-nilly*” in context to indicate “a random dispersal of some object or idea” and prided itself on the connection.

*‘Hey, it coulda been worse. The Drecks might have found you first, and they’d be having *LIZARD* for dinner instead of *LONG PORK*’* Ronnie added before turning back to the display.

‘I don’t understand your references, Rondal Caldar. They do not trans...’

He stopped when Ronnie flashed him the specific references and connotations, which ended up getting his stomach to turn just shy of voiding itself all over the back row.

Ronnie didn’t miss the emotional distress coming from him, even with his back turned.

‘Yes. I completely agree with you about that subject. On my home world, we raise meat animals for protein, but do not consume sentient animals. Not as a rule. My home world is very primitive compared to the rest of the Commonwealth’

Samuel's emotional distress hardly lightened at that, but his stomach slowly began to settle.

'Well, here come some of the pieces' Ronnie shared while pointing them out on the forward display. They could see large sections of the station drifting closer to them, with smaller pieces being dragged along.

'This image is still several kilometers out. When they get closer in, we'll move out of the way and let them come together by themselves so we don't get squished'

Thirty minutes later, the majority of the station was all together – in pieces – but they all seemed to be there.

'It looks like it wasn't attacked at all' Samuel observed.

'You're right. It kinda looks like somebody took it apart cleanly and just scattered the pieces all around. Whatever did that would be an effective weapon. Oh, look – there are a couple of bodies'

He pointed to the screen, then zoomed into a portion of station shell where two bodies had been scooped up during the sweep and brought back to the center.

'There's a few pieces of what look like implantation ship' Samuel pointed out.

'It would seem that whatever did this, took apart the hardware, but left the crew alone. I certainly hope it was quick'

They continued to watch while the pieces finally jammed together before starting to separate again, but even slower. Ronnie told Samuel to enable his suit to react to a vacuum before energizing his own collar. He had an hour of air and a recharger on board but didn't know how long Samuel had and asked him, finding he was good for about two hours or so – as long as he didn't get excited. He thought the lower pressure should help with that.

'Samuel, I'm gonna go back and open the rear cargo door. I will be maneuvering the shuttle from there, and I want you to stay here and keep watch on the monitors as I showed you. Let me know If you see anything big headed our way. Likewise, if you see anything you think I should recover. I want to pick up all the bodies while we're here. I'll pack them in the body bags in the rear after they're recovered.'

'Rondal Caldar... If you are lost out there...'

'Just shout as loud as you can for Sai or Sally, and I'm sure they'll do something brave and foolish ... just like I would' he shared, then grinned behind his face shield.

Unhide the Past

He headed back, closed the two doors between the back and middle sections of the shuttle, then depressurized the rear cargo area so he could open the hatch. He activated the door and watched as it lowered to display the rather majestic view of an Observer Station kit – including the optional freeze-dried crew. He let out a sigh, then called out *‘ship handling – for a while’* before proceeding to slowly move the shuttle in and around the debris field so he could reach bodies at the end of his tether and bring them back to the cargo bay.

The next hour went by slowly while he jumped out and fished bodies back to the cargo bay, tied them down temporarily, then jumped back out for more.

Samuel pointed out the occasional body and identified what looked like an implantation device. Ronnie confirmed it looked like the one they’d already gotten from Station 23, but added it to the cargo bay anyway. Good to have a spare for reverse engineering purposes.

‘How many bodies are we still missing? Less the ones that died on the implantation ship that failed to return to the station?’

‘I believe we have them all, but for one or two. The crew load varies’

‘I’ll bag the ones we have and come forward’ Ronnie said, then closed the rear hatch and started getting bodies stuffed into bags and sealed up tightly.

‘Rondal Caldar – there is a box out there that looks peculiar... No, it’s just an older box’

‘Is it dangerous?’

‘No. It shouldn’t be. It is like the box we store our food in, but much bigger, and it... There is a body hanging onto one side of it. It’s wearing a vacuum suit’

‘I need to come forward to change my collar. Then I’ll go back out and get him’ he shared, then started pressurizing the cargo area. Once that was done, he came forward and dropped his face shield before checking the image Samuel reported.

‘The crewman doesn’t look like he survived very long. I’m very sorry, Samuel, but it appears he simply ran out of air and there was nothing left to act as a lifeboat’

‘It’s been over thirty days. He would not have survived even if all three remaining implantation ships were not destroyed and he had food to eat. We can leave him here’ Samuel asserted.

‘No. A job worth doing is worth doing well’ he said, then got a fresh collar and energized it after putting his first collar back to charging.

'I'll be right back'

He pointed to his face shield, then pointed to Samuel, who quickly checked the seal on his vacuum suit as well.

Working his way back, he opened the hatch again and maneuvered the shuttle into position to recover the last body. He launched himself like a line cast from a fisherman and got hold of the body before noticing the crewman had looped one of his arms around a fitting on the box.

From what he could tell, it looked like he'd intentionally pulled the suit release. He shook his head in dismay, then started to pull the arm from around the fitting, but noticed some blinking lights on the box and froze in place.

'Uhhh, Samuel... Were the crew of Station 6 the kinda guys to put together traps for the unwary?' He'd sent that quietly as if the slighted noise would set off a bomb – even from his mind.

'That runs counter to anything I would expect from a Vanir, Rondal Caldar. Please describe what you are seeing'

'Blinking lights on the box' he shared, then described the pattern.

'That is a food storage box. The lights you describe say there is food inside, in stasis, but the power is slowly failing'

'What sort of food would these things hold?'

'Fresh vegetables, fresh meat ... the usual. Fully powered, the food stays fresh indefinitely until it is removed from the box. Otherwise, it is in stasis – it does not degrade or rot. We brought two smaller ones aboard your ship. You do not have something similar?'

'We freeze or refrigerate our food, but the freezing process breaks down the individual cellular structures, and it's not the same after being frozen for a long time unless it is wrapped very securely'

'That explains the complaints Sally made a few nights ago about the freshness of the meat that was served' Samuel considered.

'Well, I guess there's room on board for it. Maybe there's something in here left for...'

He had extended through it at the same time he was sending, but froze again. There was an observation port on the box, and he reached over to wipe a thin layer of dust off it, then remained silent for several more seconds.

'Rondal Caldar... Rondal Caldar, are you all right?'

Unhide the Past

‘Samuel... Are there any instances where the Vanir have ever preserved the bodies of your dead ... for ANY reason?’

‘There would be no reason to do so. Once the body is dead, the electrical integrity of the brain collapses, and the identity is gone. We simply dispose of the empty husk. We do not preserve it. Why do you ask?’

‘Uh ... someone preserved a crewman inside this box, Samuel. I’m bringing both of them in’

He attached an additional line from his belt to the box and pulled himself back to the hatch, where he attached the box line to a hatch clip. Then he went inside and cleared space for the new acquisition before finally maneuvering the box and the body inside and closing the hatch. While he waited patiently for the pressure to come back up, he secured the box to the deck for transport. When the pressure evened out, he went forward; dropping his face shield on the way.

‘Samuel, can you please come back and explain this to me?’

They both went back and looked at the box. Samuel ignored the dead crewman, other than simply jerking his arm away from the fitting and pushing him aside, then he studied the lights on the box carefully, before looking over the rest of it for any damage.

‘The stasis is currently stable, but it will deteriorate in another twenty to thirty hours – about. I do not know why this crewman was preserved. She does not look damaged, but surely she is dead’ he declared while looking at the eyes staring out of the observation port before glancing at the blinking lights again.

‘Well, we can’t open the box here because she’d explode in the reduced pressure’ Ronnie told him, before letting his brain kick into overdrive. *‘Sai! We might have a survivor!’* he sent out, but got nothing back in reply. *‘Sai!’*

‘Samuel, call out to Sally, please’ he asked calmly while shifting his attention to Endo and Gallus.

‘Endo! Gallus! What’s going on?’

‘Mother and Sally had a drinking party with Auda. All three of them are currently in the Ambassadorial quarters and getting massages by Déjà and Kiki – and I believe Déjà is learning about Vanir female sexuality at the moment. I have a camera on the activities – for security purposes’ Endo reported.

‘Oh! I wanna see a recording of that! Uhh, we’re coming back real soon and have a survivor – maybe – if we get her back on the low side of ...’

nineteen hours now' he said, after checking the ships timer in the compartment.

'What will you need, Ronnie?'

'Ahh ... I'll need a Vanir-normal pressure zone, and preferably an airlock of some sort so we can enter and exit safely and quickly. Pressurizing the docking bay in a hurry is not acceptable for this event'

'How many pressure spaces?' Gallus asked.

'One for the patient ... to include facilities. One adjacent for a safe zone and living space, and one more for the airlock itself. Do you think the three of you can work something out for us?'

'We'll make it happen, Ronnie' Endo sent.

'Great! We're on the way!' Ronnie confirmed, then turned to Samuel, who just looked at him in confusion.

'Sally seems to be engaged in some activity with one of the ... the Kee?' Samuel shared in wonder.

'The girls got shitfaced and are getting massages right now. The boys are gonna fake up a Vanir pressure zone for us and it should be ready before the box defrosts – or whatever it does when it runs out of power' he said, then turned to go forward, but stopped and tossed Samuel a body bag. *'Uh, would you please gift wrap that guy and tie him in? Then come forward. As soon as you join me, we're heading back'*

Samuel absently placed the remaining body in the bag and sealed it, while the linguistics segment of his mind kept ramming into a virtual wall at the connotations of “shitfaced.” Via previous references from Rondal Caldar, it understood what “shit” was, and it certainly was familiar with a “face.” It eventually filed it under “Ask a Human,” then went on about its business while Samuel finished securing the last body and headed forward to join Ronnie.

October 13, Preparations are Made

They'd made it back and gotten the dead into the exercise room. Then they moved the stasis box onto the docking bay deck while waiting for the boys to finish up.

The boys had done an impressive job, and Ronnie let them continue alone. The only distraction was the conference he'd had with them about getting the stasis box into the room they were prepping. They quickly took a few measurements and selected the opposite space as the air lock before they continued as before without having to make any major modifications for that extra accommodation.

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While they were still working on that, Ronnie hovered around the stasis box and searched within. He was trying very hard to read any bits of brain activity at all, but got nothing from her body. The other disturbing thing found was that her legs had been broken, *both* of them, with a clean break at about the same place; either when forcing her into the box or breaking them so she would even fit inside the box. Her tail also looked awkwardly out of place, but he couldn't tell if any bones were actually broken, or if it was just really flexible.

He really wanted to ask Sally about that, but apparently she was having a harder time recovering from the fermented fruit juice in her system, than Sai was from the secret stash of his ambrosia she'd found. Auda was out cold, but at least she would wake up without a hangover. Hopefully, Sally would, too, but he was reluctant to bother Samuel while he was hovering over "his" Sally. The surface thoughts coming from him were somewhat scattered, but primarily delved into the possibility of Sally having found a *different* form of sexual gratification that excluded him. He seemed to be forming concerns that she had forgotten all about him.

Ronnie cleared his mind, then focused intently on the female's body once again. It was weird seeing everything frozen like that, and he extended several times to the exercise room to compare the defrosting bodies in the bags to what he was seeing within the female. Whatever the stasis box was doing, it was keeping her intact. Whether or not she was still *alive*, was the question, and he hoped Sai could answer that before the power ran out on the box.

After a few more hours, Endo and Gallus strode up and told him they were ready. The two of them hefted the box into the Ambassadorial corridor and turned into the larger suite closer to the corridor entrance. From that room, they had cut and mounted a pressure door to the adjacent compartment, and an opening from there into the next one, linking all three compartments.

They carried the box into the middle room and set it along the outer wall opposite the platform bed that was still located in there. It was Drecks-sized, so there was plenty of room all around it. Ronnie made sure they set it down so the box controls were facing them.

"We're sealing these last two corridor doors to prevent accidental blowouts," Gallus said. "Torga is working on the last one now. If your survivor, you know, survives, we can gradually bring the pressure down, and the doors can be kept open." They could hear the sounds of welding coming from the last compartment in the sequence, and Torga came forward shortly.

"I tacked the corridor doors shut to prevent accidental opening. We'll have to run some pressure checks to see how things hold up, but we've

sealed the facilities lines in all three rooms as we did before. The holding capacity for just these three compartments is a lot less since they're isolated from this entire wing, though."

"How much less?" Ronnie asked.

"I'd say it'd be better if chamber pots were used, but the showers and sinks could probably work – sparingly – for maybe a day or two, before the patient would have to be suited up and the pressure dropped enough to flush the systems properly."

"The next time we take the *Kraken* in for an overhaul, we'll have to add isolated feed lines, drain lines, and holding tanks for special guests. I wonder how much that will tap from our operating budget?" Ronnie mused.

"If we're gonna be doing this a *lot*, it might be worth it," Endo suggested, and Ronnie stood there with arms crossed and fingers tapping his lips, before finally glancing at the ship's timer.

"Well, in about six hours, we need these spaces ready to go. Gentlemen, please carry on," he said, then left them to their work.

He stopped in briefly to see Samuel still hovering over the nest where he'd found Sally's *very* relaxed body, before going back to track down Sai where the boys had carried her. She was in his quarters, along with Auda. The Kee were nowhere to be seen.

Kantor, The Royal Homestead, The Children's Patio

Lili was relaxing with Maya in the warm sunshine on the patio and sipping an iced drink when Ronnie contacted her.

'Lili, how are you this very fine day?'

'Rondal, have you made that little detour you mentioned? Whatever is taking you so long, dear boy?'

'Oh... We stopped to pick up some bodies ... and perhaps a survivor from the Vanir station that fell apart on the way past Earth' he shared cheerfully.

'A survi... RONDAL! Did you enter the Death Void against orders?'

She half rose from her seat, but caught herself and settled back down.

'Now, I had it on good authority that it would be safe for me to visit. At least long enough to pick up a few bodies. Lili, do you know of any technology that places organic matter into a stasis of some sort? Our potential survivor was stuffed into a Vanir food storage container that maintains cellular integrity indefinitely as long as it remains powered'

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‘Stasis? A TRUE stasis? I don’t believe we have any research like that going on. Would you like me to request information from Doctor Riker?’

‘Yes, very much so, Lili, and perhaps from the boys out on the platform. I have a sample device that we’re going to open up in ... another three hours. We have to, because the power is running out and I don’t want to risk the contents by trying to recharge the box poorly and losing her in the process’

‘Losing her? There’s a woman in the box? The STASIS box?’

‘There’s a Vanir female in the box. Someone thought it was important she be put in there because they went to the trouble of breaking her legs to fit her in there. Presumably, she was still alive when it happened ... at least from the expression in her eyes’

She felt his shudder from wherever he currently was.

‘If what you say is true, I cannot imagine the terror she must have felt’

‘Aside from the pain from her broken legs. Anyway, when Sai sobers up, we’re gonna pop the top and see if we can get her running again’

‘Sobers up? You told her about Petrus, didn’t you!’ she sent accusingly.

‘I told her that DAYS ago. When the Vanir Ambassador and I took off to get the bodies, she and the Vanir female had a pity party about their men leaving them behind. Then they got Auda drunk as well. Sai’s still a little silly, but Auda’s sleeping it off. I don’t know what Sally was drinking’ he said, then quickly explained the new names given to the Vanir – ostensibly because the numbers were getting confusing.

‘I should mention that the Vanir don’t expect these bodies back. Their cultural norms do not regard the bodies as important after death, and are typically disposed of. I can probably spring one for Larl to study. You know ... full physical, DNA, that sort of thing. We will certainly do a work up on it locally. I’m sure he’ll be curious, as will the guys on the platform. How is the platform doing, by the way?’

‘It is doing extremely well, Rondal, but there have been many requests to put it on a rotating schedule around the Commonwealth. It is currently in transit to Kantor and should reach high orbit in another eight days. I believe you will be pleasantly surprised to find the many accommodations available to all of the known human species. I suppose we’ll probably need to include the Vanir at some point?’ she asked wryly.

‘Truthfully, Lili, the question remains open. By the return of Vanir citizens, I’m hoping to show that we consider them of value as a people and would treat them as such. Certainly, the Ambassador and his companion have had many of their misconceptions shattered in the last

month. The Vanir Prime never expected them to live as long as they have. The Vanir thought we were “poisonous” in addition to being extremely dangerous’ She felt his chuckle from twelve minutes out.

‘Yes. I would imagine many misconceptions abound – even among friends. How is your friend Lord Gagsa proceeding with his goals?’

‘Torga says his father is ahead of schedule, so he has slowed down to consolidate his power base. The quieter the transfer of power to Pack Gagsa, the better for humanity overall. Especially considering the Vanir are somewhat skeptical observers to all of these goings on’ She could feel his sigh, then felt the switch when he considered something else. ‘Lili ... how is Maya?’

‘She is well, my dear boy. She’s sitting here next to me on the patio. We’re watching the children play. Your grandchildren are becoming quite talented. Days ago, Diane showed me a colored picture of a tall, green, scaly lizard creature – with a tail’

‘Ah! Did it look like the description I gave to Amy? Is it taller than a human-standard but shorter than a Drecks?’

‘Look within me, Rondal’ she said, and invited him in. A moment later, he was looking at the image within her mind.

‘Hmm ... wrong shade of green ... and the tail’s too long. You said you’re sitting with Maya?’ he prompted. She opened her eyes and looked at Maya; feeling his wave of longing for her in the process.

‘She’s just as beautiful as ever, Lili. Thank you for taking care of her’ he sent quietly.

‘Do you have a message for her, Rondal?’ she asked just as quietly.

‘I ... no ... not right at this moment. Lili...’

‘Do you still love her?’ she asked serenely.

‘Yes, I do, Lili. Very much so. Perhaps later–’

‘Yes, perhaps later – when you build that little cottage for Sai and Petrus. Sai DOES talk to me upon occasion, even if she’s turned pirate to be with you. When are you coming home, Rondal?’

‘Soon, Lili. We’ll need some time to see if our survivor really survived and then get her adapted to Kantor normal atmosphere’

‘You truly expect to bring the Vanir Ambassador to Kantor?’

‘I expect him to present his credentials to the Emperor in the most proper manner, Lili – in full court!’

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'Oh, my. I suppose you'll be bringing along Sai's boys and their wives? And the Kee?'

'Ahh ... perhaps I'd better let Torga contact his father to see if that would screw things up for him. Depending on the loyalty of his power base, it could either boost him, or tear him back down'

'NOW? You're starting to think like a politician NOW? Shameful, Rondal! Simply shameful! I shall confer with the Elder and see if this need be a public or private event' She paused to think of possible alternate locations, before presenting another suitable one. *'Perhaps you'll host us on your pirate ship, if necessary?'* she suggested teasingly.

'Certainly, Lili. As always, I would welcome your company. Do you think the Elder would like to participate?'

'I will ask. Ahh ... Rondal... Ronnie... Exactly how ARE you feeling?'

'I feel fine, Lili. I'll admit that I feared greatly for Torga and myself back when we were refueling, but we overcame that situation, and I now appear to be free of my father's influence'

'We worry, Rondal. We worry what the curse did to you, and what the loss of it will detract from you'

'The curse made me an angry and impatient person. I was close to losing control many times. With my talisman, I managed the curse and kept it under my control. Now that it's gone, I feel free – but I recognize that I needed it somehow ... perhaps as a tool to sharpen my edge?' he suggested thoughtfully, then spent a moment's consideration of how he'd felt back when he'd spoken to Sai so fervently after the dismissal of his geas.

'I've seen a lot of death and suffering that I could not take the time to deal with, and it still hurts to think about it, but ... but the overall goal is what I'm after. It's what I'm STILL after. If I survive, then I'll come back and see if Maya still wants me. If she does not, I'll still come back and work the Gleanings once again. Rad has a good man as acting First Lord. Perhaps it would be best if he becomes First Lord permanently. Gods know, I'm not suited for the position' he shared wearily.

'You sound very tired, Rondal. You should get some rest'

'Once we get this girl back from the dead'

'Well, it certainly wouldn't be the first time now, would it?' she teased him lightly.

'No. No, it wouldn't. Ten days, Lili. Maybe twelve days transit; here to Kantor. I'll have Torga contact Lord Gagsa and see what a shock like this would do to his campaign. My love to you all'

'And my love to you, Rondal' she sent, before relaxing back in her chair once again.

She hadn't realized she'd been holding herself so tightly, and quickly glanced over to Maya, but Maya was focused on the children – and the nearly half-grown kits lying quietly nearby. Maya was too distracted to notice.

'My Elder... Did you hear him clearly?' she asked politely.

'Yes, I did, Lili. He appears ... he appears normal' Lady Ai replied.

'What do you think of his suggestion, my Elder? A full court presentation, or a private meeting between the Head of State and the new Ambassador from the Vanir?'

'Lili... I would think on this carefully, but I do not cast it aside lightly. As for the Drecks – the human-Drecks – I think that ... if it does not interfere with Lord Gagsa's timetable, it would be an interesting day at court, do you not?'

'It would certainly show the Commonwealth's willingness to be hospitable to guests who can behave themselves. Eventually, the Demon's Realm will petition for official recognition, and they will, no doubt, include human ... human-LARGE as part of their constituency' Lili considered.

'Oh, no doubt... Carry on, Lili. Please keep me informed' Lady Ai sent.

'As always, my Elder' Lili sent to the now silent void.

She sighed quietly and considered that last exchange. The Elder seemed quite calm for a change, which was very strange, considering the amount of stress Rondal had been putting her through lately. She doubted very much that Ai was simply getting used to him, but it *might* be possible ... unless he was the source of all her stress?

She took another sip of her drink – mostly watered-down juice by now – then got up without notice and slipped away; Maya's total focus being on the children with the kits so close by.

As Lili walked down the hallway, she pondered the suggestion Rondal had made.

Imagine... Taldus Remy se Loca ... *ne Kantor*.

A failed Krux pawn as First Lord of the *Commonwealth!*

Oh, the *irony*...

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The children were on the grass and talking silently, while playing a game together that involved hopping over two ropes swinging close to the ground. Mama Amy had explained it to them, but they didn't swing them over their heads any longer, because the kits had a habit of leaping into the air to attack the ropes before they hit their heads.

*'Well, THAT was certainly weird'* Josie considered.

*'No, Aunt Lili has done that before a few times'* Walter reminded her.

*'Yes. Remember when Grandfather said that discouraging word about the Elder when Lili let her eavesdrop?'* Cathy reminded them with a giggle.

*'No. I mean how nice the Elder was. It's like she was a different person'* Josie pointed out.

*'Perhaps she is becoming calmer about Grandfather and Grandmother?'* Jaiying suggested.

*'Or she's going totally schizophrenic?'* Josie offered.

That triggered a rather *silent* silence until Walter offered an opinion.

*'That might actually have some merit'* he suggested. *'Lady Ai has not taken contentment for over a month now'*

*'I wondered about that'* Josie commented. *'Mama was concerned about her, but didn't mention her not taking contentment'*

*'What can we do about it?'* Jaiying asked.

*'We could gather together and take a look'* Cathy suggested.

*'We won't hurt her, will we?'* Jaiying asked with concern.

*'It's Mama and Daddy Larl's week with the Elder's staff. It's night over there, and the Elder is still up'* Josie prompted.

*'Josie, perhaps suggest that your folks stop in to visit the Elder?'* Cathy suggested.

*'And we could gather together and take a look – and maybe make a suggestion or two?'* Walter considered.

They stopped swinging the ropes and laid the two of them into two small circles, one within the other. Then they joined hands and walked around them slowly while looking at the ground to stay within the circles.

As they did that, Puss and Boots slowly walked from between the bushes and approached from either side of them until there were now

*four* valaets surrounding the children and calmly facing away from them ... all while Maya remained sitting in frozen terror.

### ***The Kraken, Waking Up Sai***

Almost hating to do it, he sat next to Sai and gripped her arm lightly before converting the leftover ambrosia into neutral waste products within her body. She may not have a headache when she woke up, but should still be able to focus on the task he needed her for. At the end of ten minutes, he patted her face lightly and got a swat from her hand in response.

“Sai... Sai, I have a medical emergency of a sort, and I need your help,” he said calmly, and her eyes popped open and she quickly sat up. She wobbled just a little before gripping his arms to steady herself, then started looking at him and *through* him, but he held up his hand to get her to focus on him.

“Not me. It’s a Vanir.”

“A Va... Who is it? Sally or Samuel?” she asked while swinging her legs over the edge of the bed.

“Ahhh ... it’s somebody we brought back from the wreckage,” he muttered, before quickly bringing her up to speed.

“And you think she might *still* be alive?” she asked, as if he were the *stupidest* Healer in the world.

“Hey! They aren’t dead until they’re *warm* and dead! According to the box readings, whatever condition she was in when she was stuffed *in* there, *that’s* the condition she’s in now – just, you know, a little *stiffer* is all.”

“You got *nothing* from her brain?”

“No, but people on Earth have been revived after being in icy water for up to thirty minutes, and by all accounts they were dead at the time.”

“All right, Ronnie... Let’s go decant your dead girl and see if we can breathe some life into her,” she said before sighing in exasperation. She got up and headed to the door, but diverted to the facilities.

“After I pee and wash up first,” she muttered, so he waited impatiently before finally wandering over to the door, where he stopped and looked back at the snoring figure of Auda still sprawled out on the bed.

“So, what’s the story with Auda? You guys got her drunk and had your way with her, or what?” he asked loudly, and got a sharp laugh from Sai, accompanied by the flush of the toilet.

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"She's broken hearted about her lost illusions of reality, and then she was all concerned why you hadn't called her back to your bed," she said while washing her hands and face.

"She knows it's always up to her. You *explained* that to her, didn't you?" he asked, as she dried her hands and face.

"Yes, but *I* never called for her, and *you* never called for her, so she's been moping around with Manya all this time until Torga gets off watch. Then she runs back to my quarters to cry herself to sleep. She didn't even play with the *Kee* when they offered, but she sure played *today*, though!"

"A regular girl's day out, then?" he asked before turning to dig out Sai's ship suit and pulling out his own. He assembled both with fresh collars before stripping down to his underwear.

"Oh, we drank, we partied, we got massages; not as good as *your* massage, Ronnie, but Déjà does a little bit *extra* for me with her tiny hands." She closed her eyes and sighed dreamily, then struggled back to provide more informative observations before going on. "I'm not quite sure, but I think Sally got a little wild with Kiki, too. She was telling me to tell Kiki to be careful with her eggs. Have you looked *within* her yet? It's *amazing!* She's got like a dozen *eggs* in there!"

"Well, I guess it's a good thing they don't do *live* births, isn't it? Are they all fertile?"

"I never looked. I suppose it's something I should ask her about. Also about her cultural norms for child rearing..." she paused when she walked out of the facilities to see the ship suit he was holding out to her, and sighed again.

"Pressure ... of course," she muttered, and he nodded sadly. She stripped down as well, before slipping the suit on and sealing it.

Once they were ready, they continued their discussion while heading to the Vanir corridor.

"So, I should ask Auda if she wants to join us again?"

"Yes, you should. It will make her feel wanted. And you might want to be suitably *apologetic* about it, too. You were *busy*. You were working out Vanir-human *relations* – *that* sort of thing. But you've really missed her, and even though I've served your pleasure *faithfully* all this time, you *really* miss your little Auda, and would she *please* consider coming back to share your bed?"

"You think that would work?"

“Yes. *Definitely*. And you have to present her with your seed and the Gift – at the *same time!* She needs to have her Healer skills boosted like you did with Manya, Edna, and Gaia. We’re likely to need her at some point,” she instructed him.

“I hear and obey, my Healer,” he said, then reached down to hold her hand while they walked.

They stopped at the entrance to the Vanir corridor where he turned and leaned down to kiss her.

“Thanks for this, Sai. No matter how it turns out.”

“We’ll try, Ronnie. Ahhh, let’s see if Sally is functioning yet,” she suggested, then called out to the Vanir.

*‘Samuel ... Sally, we would like to come in and begin the removal of the female from the stasis box’*

*‘Come in please, Sai Tal and Rondal Caldar. Sally is ... she is not quite functional at the moment’* came back from Samuel.

“Maybe you can take a quick look at Sally and flush her like I just flushed you?” Ronnie suggested.

“Ahh... *That’s* why I’m awake already,” she said, then poked his nose with her finger.

She went off to find Sally, while Ronnie went in to check the stasis box in the second room; being joined shortly by Samuel.

*‘Samuel, Sai and I will be using ship suits for the pressure we’ll be under. I’m assuming the box is at Vanaheim normal?’*

*‘It is currently at slightly less than that. I do not know the conversion that would make any sense to you’*

*‘Then we’ll over-pressure the room and unlock the box, then drop the pressure slowly. When the lid comes off easily, we’ll know the pressure has been equaled. Oh. Can we unlock the box without breaking stasis?’*

*‘The stasis will cease once the box is unlocked. It is a protection for the user. We will have to act quickly’*

*‘Do you have emergency equipment suitable for Vanir? Breathable gasses, and masks to force air into the lungs? Suitable devices for measuring the effects of our efforts?’* Ronnie asked.

*‘Sally... Sally would have knowledge of such, but she’s–’*

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*'Sally is right here'* Sally sent while bringing a rolling case into the room and setting it up close to the head of the stasis box. She looked at the settings, then looked through the viewing window.

*'Sai Tal says her bones were broken?'* she asked skeptically.

*'Yes. Both lower legs ... and her tail is in an uncomfortable position ... I would imagine'* Ronnie suggested.

She looked at him hard, before reaching down and forcibly pulling her tail to one side.

*'Is it much like this?'* she asked, then watched as he looked at her, and then down at the opaque case, then back at her.

*'Yes. Bent like that, but perhaps not as much'* he agreed; now getting some very strange looks from Samuel.

*'We have cartilage in our tails instead of bone. It makes it very flexible'* she stated, before continuing to set up her equipment.

Unfolding a tray, she placed several instruments on it, then pulled out the obvious breathing mask and bag, before connecting tubing between all the parts and a canister within the case.

Once she was ready, she focused on him once again.

*'Do you have anything to dull the pain she would feel because of her broken bones?'* he asked her.

She silently pointed to a stick she had laid out on the tray.

*'Sally, this body has been there since ... since before we left Station 27. Can it be possible that she is still alive?'* Samuel asked curiously, and she turned her gaze on him while issuing her instructions.

*'Sai Tal – you will stand by me to assist me. Rondal Caldor – you will help to remove the lid when I instruct. Samuel – you will assist Rondal Caldor to remove the lid when I instruct'* she ordered while still staring into Samuel's eyes as everyone took their places.

Ronnie brought up the pressure issue.

*'The pressure will be going up to about Vanaheim sea-level, or just below it. We intend to over-pressure the room and unlock the box, and then reduce the pressure until the lid becomes loose'*

*'No,'* she stated curtly. *'The box must remain locked until the pressure is matched. I will tell you when that happens, and when to remove the lid'*

*'The over pressure and subsequent return to your quarters – will you need pressure suits for that?'*

*'No. My companion and I will stay here if the female is alive. If she is not, we will leave quickly and decompress in the outer room. We will rely upon you to bring us supplies while the girl lives – if she lives'* she corrected herself.

*'Understood, Senior Medical Technician S'Shac'Kah 38521'* Ronnie pressed formally, then called out *'ship handling'* and sealed the outer door, and started the pressure rising in the inner, middle, and airlock chambers.

He glanced at the Vanir, before popping his collar shield up, followed quickly by Sai, while observing the internal readouts for atmospheric pressure.

*'Endo, Gallus – who's got the watch?'* he asked.

*'Gallus here on the bridge, Ronnie. How may I serve?'*

*'Please monitor pressure sensors in the new rooms, and monitor the central room camera – record all three rooms, please. We're taking the spaces up to about three atmospheres, and then bleeding them down to allow the lid to be opened. After that, we'll see what happens'*

*'Understood, Ronnie'* Gallus sent, then set up the recordings and started monitoring the pressure settings remotely.

It would take about three minutes for the rooms to reach pressure, and the Vanir spoke quietly to each other during the wait. They weren't arguing – *quite* – but it was happening too rapidly to keep up with. It obviously didn't concern Ronnie or Sai, so they just stood by and waited.

Ronnie noted the collar had automatically shifted over to pure oxygen, and the carbon dioxide neutralizer was working nominally, but he was only just now realizing they'd brought no spare collars with them.

*'Gallus, would it be difficult to bleed extra oxygen, plus a pressure-neutral gas into the Vanir pressure chambers?'*

*'Already doing so, Ronnie. It's safer for everyone that way. Just, you know, don't make a fire'*

*'Thank you, Gallus'* he sent, then relaxed before turning to Sai and dropping his collar. "Sai, we're on collars for only an hour, but they plumbed these spaces for oxygen, plus a pressure-neutral filler," he added, so Sai dropped her collar as well.

"We'll still need them if we have to step out to get supplies," she said.

"Or, we could simply have supplies left in the air lock and re-pressurize it," he suggested aloud.

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After another minute, Sally leaned over and watched the lights intently. A moment later, she shared her request.

*'Rondal Caldar – stop the pressure rise'* she ordered, and Ronnie dutifully shut the valves remotely.

*'Samuel, you stand here. Rondal Caldar, you stand there. Sai – press these buttons in the sequence I will tell you'* she said, then grabbed the stick from the tray.

*'Ready – LEFT – RIGHT – MIDDLE – MIDDLE – RIGHT – LEFT'* she instructed, and the lights went out.

With a slight hiss, the lid seemed to relax.

*'Unlatch it quickly and remove it!'* she ordered, and the lid was unlatched, and lifted by the men, then set aside from the container.

They turned back to see a slender Vanir female scrunched into the short box by the expedient means of breaking her lower legs to fit. She didn't move at all.

Sally quickly checked her, but put down the stick.

*'Sai, help me lift her out of the box and get her onto the platform. Samuel, you and Rondal get this box out of the way'* she ordered, and once she and Sai had lifted the body up high enough, the men slid the container out from underneath it.

They picked up the lid and placed it back on the box before shoving the whole thing into the airlock chamber.

Coming back, they saw Sally gently straightening out the legs of the body, with Sai helping her.

*'Sai, how is she?'* Ronnie asked.

*'Warm, but non-responsive'*

*'Anything in her brain?'* he asked, while extending within her himself.

*'I don't find anything, Rondal. She's–'* Sai jerked a moment.

*'Did you feel it?'* he asked quickly.

*'Yes! ... Yes! She's still in there! Sally, get her on the bag and breathing! Ronnie and I will see what we can do. If you have any stimulants, that might help as well!'*

They stepped aside to let Sally set things up and administer a stimulant, then continued to watch as she started the breathing apparatus and got the female's lungs inflating with pure oxygen. Sally hovered over the female; checking her eyes and listening with an



electronic probe of some kind, but wasn't rewarded with any positive results. She looked at Sai and shook her head in a very human way.

"Ronnie, you're up!" Sai ordered aloud, and he stepped closer and reached out to the warm, but lifeless body next to him.

He'd wanted *her* to do this, but she'd insisted it would be better if he did it, instead. After all, he'd done it before. He closed his eyes and focused ... extending into the female and watching the action of her lungs, before following the major vessels and arteries to the pumping organ that sat motionless within her chest. He examined, then poked and prodded it, before focusing on it a bit deeper. It looked very similar at the cellular level, and he remembered some lessons once received years ago.

He sought out a *particular* set of muscles, traced their number and span – then *jolted* them with a flood of energy.

The body heaved beneath his hands, and a hiss came from both Sally and Samuel.

He watched that tiny quivering bit of tissue, then jolted it once again. The muscle contracted a few times, but stopped, so he started drawing in energy and sending it to the body below him ... gently tickling the muscles on the heart's lining, and observing when they tried to spasm unevenly until they slowly started working together as a team.

He kept up the gentle encouragement while flooding her body; lightly at first, then gradually increasing the flow, until his hands began to glow. It slowly spread to her body and began covering her chest and torso until her body and his was covered from head to foot with softly glowing light. He stood there calmly and allowed the energy to flow, while merely channeling it to her and letting her body deal with it.

Sai stood aside and watched proudly, but then glanced at Sally and Samuel. Sally was standing bravely in the face of what she was witnessing, but Samuel was cowering behind her and breathing heavily...

In a way this was unfortunate, because they'd intended to demonstrate a proper Healing once the Vanir acceptance level went up. Through both Ronnie and Sai's very careful questioning, it had become apparent the Vanir had absolutely *no* concept of Healers as such, or the actual possibility of Healing as performed by Commonwealth Healers.

They'd danced very gingerly around the question, but since the Vanir never asked them about it at all, it became apparent there was either a disconnect between observation and reality, or the Vanir leadership was deliberately suppressing such knowledge. Either situation required this remedy, although perhaps not such an *extreme* one. If nothing else, it

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opened doors to more questions about Vanir motives; not only with humans, but with their own people as well...

Sai continued to watch while pushing through the survivor; seeing that she was responding well, and her systems were coming back to full functioning. She reached out to Sally and waved her over. Sally came closer, but a bit reluctantly.

*'Sally, we're hearing some brain activity now. It is very confused, but getting stronger. She may need to be sedated as we continue to work on her. Sally... Sally?'*

Sally was looking down at the now living, breathing, and glowing body, but only glancing sparingly at the faintly glowing Ronnie standing by her side. She reached out tentatively, but pulled away from the glow.

*'It's all right, Sally. Ronnie is giving her the energy to repair herself. Her heart is beating again, and ... and listen ... she's starting to fight the respirator'*

They could hear the out-of-sequence pressure as the female tried to control her own breathing.

*'Sally, can you give her just oxygen? She seems ready to breathe on her own, now'* Sai suggested, so Sally changed a few settings that stopped the pump, but still flooded the mask with oxygen.

The female seemed to relax a bit, but then her mind started to scatter in fear and confusion.

*'Talk to her, Sally. She's becoming aware. Talk to her and calm her down. Ronnie's almost done, but she might be in pain soon and become very frightened of us if she sees us. Perhaps you may cover her eyes?'* she suggested, then left to pull a washcloth from the facilities.

Sally started speaking to her quietly and calmly, placing her face directly in her line of sight to distract her from her surroundings. Sai handed her the cloth to drape over her eyes, and she jumped slightly when it first covered them, but calmed down while listening to Sally's soothing voice.

She was holding her own, but began making a horrible, *anguished sound*. Sally spoke to her, and her response was harsh, so she reached over, grabbed the stick, then pressed it against her neck. The patient tilted her head back, then relaxed on the platform. Sally pulled the cover off her eyes, and they were both closed beneath the cloth. She opened each eyelid and shined a light into each one, nodding in satisfaction.

*'She was in pain at the last, so I knocked her out'*

*'That was very kind of you, Sally. About how long will it last?'* Sai asked.

*'Maybe ... six hours, your standard'* she said, then looked over at Ronnie again as the glow began to dim down and taper off. After another minute, it stopped all together, and Ronnie stretched, then stepped back and sighed.

*'Ah! Sally! How's the patient?'* he asked cheerfully.

*'She's ... alive... With two broken legs, still'*

She pointed towards the Vanir patient's legs while standing in a somewhat rigid stance.

*'I'm not very good with bones'* he said, then turned to Sai. *'Sai, you're up!'*

*'It's about time! You're so slow, Ronnie! I thought Lili taught you better than that!'* she chided him.

*'Hey! I am only a man. Do your thing, Healer. I'm getting hungry, and I'd like to spend some quality time between your legs tonight! Perhaps Auda's, as well!'*

He watched as Sai carefully aligned the bones in each leg, before flashing them separately for several seconds to knit them back together. While she was doing that, he sidled over to a very nervous Sally and casually draped an arm around her torso while sighing in admiration.

*'Isn't she wonderful, Sally? I'm only a man, so I can't judge properly, but she does beautiful work, doesn't she?'* he asked, then reached out and within to see the quality of the Healing Sai was performing on their victim's legs. *'Beautiful, Sai. Just beautiful'* He shook his head slowly while sighing again.

*'How would you know, you clumsy amateur?'* Sai casually teased him, before scanning the female from head to toe one more time. *'Sally, I can't tell, but ... is this a young one of your species?'*

*'She ... appears young'* "... appears young," she both projected and spoke aloud somewhat oddly. She also didn't look too steady.

*'Sally, are you all right?'* Ronnie asked while looking up at the Vanir medical technician.

*'There were rumors ... impossible to ... believe...'*

She looked at the female, then over at Sai, and then down at Ronnie.

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‘Sally... *I think Samuel is broken*’ Sai sent quietly, and pointed downwards towards the wall at a leathery ball curled on the floor.

Sally slipped out of Ronnie’s arm and rushed to the side of her companion; speaking to him quietly, and urging him to his feet.

‘Take him to the other room if you wish. We’ll watch over the female’ Ronnie offered.

‘No. Please leave us. BOTH of you. I will take care of them both. I will call for you if I have need of assistance’ she sent back, before focusing on Samuel again.

Both Sai and Ronnie looked through the female one more time, before leaving them alone and closing the adjoining door to cycle themselves down.

‘Gallus – how long have we been in here?’ Sai asked.

‘About ... an hour and ten minutes, Mother. You are at two point eight atmospheres, and will need at least ten minutes to reach one and a half atmospheres’ he added in anticipation of her next request. ‘Even with pure oxygen, I would recommend it because...’

‘You never know...’ Ronnie joined in with him, and they both chuckled while Gallus slowly started bleeding the pressure from the room to their final decompression stop.

“Samuel seems to be in crisis. Sally seems to be handling it well, though,” Ronnie said quietly.

“Auda cut herself slicing a bit of fruit while we were getting drunk, and Sally watched me Heal her through a drunken haze,” she murmured.

“Auda couldn’t Heal it herself?”

“Not *laughing* as hard as she was.” She sighed and leaned against the sleeping platform next to Ronnie, before looking around at it.

“Hey, wanna *play*?” she asked teasingly.

“I want to peel you out of your suit and climb into a hot *shower* with you. Then I want to take you to bed and *ravish* you until you scream – or fall asleep.”

“And then do *Auda*?”

She laughed at his expression, then slipped an arm around his waist while he rested his arm across her shoulders. He drew her close and kissed her ... then kissed her again more thoroughly as she reached down to fondle him through his suit.

"I wanna do *you*, my pretty Sai – and *then* I'll do Audal!"

He chuckled and kissed her again, but sagged back against the edge of the bed, while she rested her head against his chest and sighed.

'Grandmother ... Grandfather, there are things you should probably know' Walter intruded gently.

'Aww, crap!' Ronnie silently muttered across the minutes, getting a chuckle from both Sai and the kids.

### ***October 14, A World View Turned Upside-Down***

Sally watched over her mate in one room, and the female survivor in the other.

As requested, she had received additional supplies from Sai and Ronnie that were left in the outer chamber they were using as an air lock. At Sally's request, the pressure had been slowly dropped to below two atmospheres overnight and would reach one and a half atmospheres by late evening.

The female was sleeping under the influence of a sedative, while Samuel was sleeping by the simple expedient of placing an extensive sexual demand on him over and above that necessary to fertilize every egg she would ever produce in the next hundred years. Sai had suggested it would have worked with Rondal, and it seemed to have worked very well with Samuel.

With things quiet for the moment, Sally rested on one of the backless stools Torga had fabricated for the Vanir party earlier that month as she contemplated her situation...

They were slowly approaching the authority center of the Commonwealth group of humans – an even *more* dangerous collection of humans than the ones the Vanir had advanced over nine centuries ago. She'd read all the reports – the ones that were permitted to be shared with the Observation Department, anyway – and had now come to believe they were merely a set of *specifically* altered data regarding humanity in general; the humans in the control group, the humans in the uplifted group, and the humans considered extremely dangerous to all existence. In *all* that data, not one *word*, not one tiny *bit* of information ever mentioned the kinds of things she and Samuel had witnessed yesterday.

Later that evening, Sai had told her it was *common*.

*Routine*, in fact.

*Expected* of their women, but a surprisingly poor gift in the hands of their men. After all, she'd told her, it had taken *forever* for Rondal Calder

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to get the female's heart repaired and running again. She'd complained that he was horribly slow, but said he made up for it with his skills at reproductive play – and *killing*...

A chill ran through her at that memory. They spoke of death and killing so easily. Auda had narrowly escaped being *eaten* by the Vanir-uplifted humans, and they'd somehow managed to domesticate two of the genetically engineered *killing* breed, the Kee.

Of course, while her Samuel was off with Rondal Caldar doing something *extremely* foolish and dangerous, *she* was left to the tender mercies of the human females and their *Kee*.

She quivered at the memory of Sai asking her very intimate and *personal* questions about female Vanir sexuality and stimulation, then her drunken, yet very open and *willingly* given answers during the course of their massage session yesterday.

And the things the humans had later *done* to each other in *demonstration*! She'd *tried* to turn away, just as any *reasonable* Vanir would have done to honor their privacy, but she'd been welcomed to watch so she could *learn*. She'd struggled to become detached from it as a clinical observer – right up until little Déjà had slipped her tiny hand right up *inside* Sai.

If the sounds and emotions radiating from Sai were any indication, Déjà had produced *exquisite* feelings of fullness and excitement within her that brought her to several peaks, before leaving her a quivering mass of panting flesh. As an outside observer, she had been *amazed*, but when Déjà then bent down and covered Sai's reproductive opening with her *mouth*, it was up to Auda to explain *exactly* what Déjà was doing to Sai with her *tongue*.

At that point, she had lost *all* composure.

She, herself, had *never* considered doing that – although it was gossiped about at medical school as an aberrant sexual behavior from an unbalanced mind. Still confused and *very* excited – and with *no* trace of clinical detachment whatsoever – Kiki had hugged her, and she'd felt *waves* of arousal flood *through* her. Then Kiki's tongue had darted lightly at her *lips*.

Once she'd turned to say something to her, Kiki had pushed her tongue *inside* her mouth, and she'd lost all control of her *reasoning*!

Between that, and the extensive arousal she could not fend off, she'd found herself being rolled to the side while a very *intimate* part of her anatomy was caressed in a most sensuous manner.

In only moments, she had involuntarily opened herself to the Kee. Thankfully, instead of her hand, Kiki had moved down to lick about the outside of her opening, before slipping her tongue *inside* and wiggling it around in a most *delicious* manner!

The rest of the afternoon was a haze, but before dropping into an exhausted sleep, she *did* remember being offered Sai's breast, and tasting the human liquid food protein that leaked from her nipple.

That thought now made her quiver even *harder*, and she visited the facilities to dampen a towel and press the cool, wet cloth to her skin to relieve her flush.

She wished she could *forget* that drunken afternoon, but the one segment of her mind that had *barricaded* itself from the influence of intoxication had remembered *everything*, then gleefully *shared* it with the others once Sai had visited and done something to her to neutralize the remaining intoxicants.

It was only *then* that she realized the extent of her loss of control, and how the *humans* – and the *cannibals* – had taken advantage of it. No – not the humans, but the *cannibals*! They *did* something to her – to *all* of them! Something with their *tongues*, but also something that seemed to bring her blood to a *boil* when she'd suddenly found herself wanting to mate in the most intimate and *lascivious* fashion!

She looked at herself in the mirror and considered her complexion. It had shifted color with her arousal, and she thought how it looked much like the patient's complexion. In fact, it was almost the same shade as the S'Ahi'Ma Warren of the Prime. Several of her mind's segments found jest at that, before going back to thinking of that wild afternoon.

One tiny, sober segment put that tidbit away for later consideration. What indeed would a female of S'Ahi'Ma Warren be doing on Station 6? The Prime was *already* on record of being against implanting bombs in *anyone* – human or otherwise.

Sally let out a hissing sigh, then went back to the middle chamber to check on her patient once again, before deciding if she was capable of getting any rest for herself anytime soon.

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Samuel lay quietly in the inner chamber. Sally had exhausted him, yet again, but he was finally gaining some control over his shattered emotions; and his confused, and uncooperative, multi-segmented mind.

The last several cycles had been one continuous stream of stressful events; from the time he'd made that ill-conceived decision to go with Rondal Caldar, to the moment he'd come to his senses – *somewhat* – and

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found Sally performing an *extremely* intimate penetration of his body in order to extract his mating appendage so she could make use of it; apparently *without* his active participation.

Of course, once he'd recovered enough to know what was going on, he'd become a *more* than willing participant – *extremely* willing, if he remembered correctly – until his moment of completion had come and gone, and his active mind had gathered itself up again and went on another run-through of the emotional turmoil that had caused his collapse in the first place.

Sally had been very patient ... and *very* persistent. He forgot how many times they'd engaged in reproductive play, but he considered his fertilization duties to be done for the next decade or two – if he even *lived* that long. One thing he *did* remember was that he'd failed the Prime. Rondal Caldar had gone into the Death Void and recovered the bodies, just as he'd reported was his intention to the Prime. The Grandmother had *specifically* ordered Samuel to discourage it, if at all possible. Well he'd *tried*, hadn't he? He'd *tried* to talk him out of it, then joined the expedition and tried to talk him out of it *again*, but to no avail.

The Prime didn't indicate *why* she wanted the bodies left in the void, but he could guess. If the humans wanted access to a Vanir for experimentation, they would have plenty of bodies to do it with. Of course, that was assuming they weren't going to experiment on him and Sally when they arrived in Commonwealth space – which is exactly where they were right now.

He arose on unsteady feet and wandered out to the middle chamber ... seeing Sally standing there, before glancing to the side. He stopped when he realized Sally was looking down at the young female who was no longer lying in death's repose. She looked well. Considering that she'd been dead, she was looking *fantastic*.

He slowly stepped forward and pulled aside the cover over her legs; noting the smooth and undamaged skin, where parts of bone had protruded just the day before. A few of his mind's segments panicked and tried to flee, but the majority held them in place and made them observe and accept this *new* reality – as evidenced by the living dead lying before them. He reached out and gently stroked her lower leg; feeling the smooth unblemished skin beneath his fingers.

Sally stepped close to him and watched his reactions carefully.

"She's doing very well ... for a dead girl," she said quietly, but was relieved when he did not begin the quivering that would indicate a relapse into the confusion and madness that had plagued him since yesterday afternoon. "At the request of Sai Tal, I have reported her survival to the Prime," she murmured.

“Rondal Caldar seems to be more than I expected,” he replied just as quietly, then let his mind wander for a few moments. “You know ... at first, I thought they’d simply mastered a new technology; that he was talking to me using a machine of some sort. Then he told me it was *inborn* in him ... and *many* of his kind. I believe it was the day after that when you first took me aside and reestablished my sanity for me, my Sally.”

“It was my duty, my Samuel,” she replied in a whisper, then reached out to him with a side hug.

They stood there together while looking down at the girl.

“She does not look like S’Slich’Tah,” he muttered, and she looked at him sharply.

“Who do you think she is, Samuel?”

“I don’t know. Perhaps she will tell us when she wakes, or we may simply ask Rondal Caldar or Sai Tal? They seem to know *many* things that have remained hidden from us. Or perhaps his mysterious Senior Staff may already know?”

“His Senior Staff?”

“He said they already knew the Prime’s thinking about humanity – and had determined this from his home world – his Commonwealth home world that we are headed for. Sally ... I don’t know what comes to us now, and I don’t know if I have the strength for it.”

“Whatever comes, we will stand *together*, my Samuel. To the end,” she murmured, and then, much to his surprise, she leaned up and touched the tip of her tongue to his lips.

“Come with me, my Samuel. I would share myself with you again,” she murmured, then drew him to the inner chamber once more.

In the Kraken’s Temporary Morgue

“All done, Sai?”

Sai heard the tinny question from her collar com at the same time Ronnie entered the exercise/holding cell/morgue room with his suit shield already up.

She was in the makeshift morgue and taking visual identification records of all the recovered bodies, but easily heard his disgusted sigh through the collar shield without his coms.

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"Just about. We got everything we needed from the one corpse who wasn't freeze-dried in space. The guy in the suit," she muttered in response to the questioning look on his face.

"I thought he popped his seals and vented to vacuum?"

"Oh, he did – but the suit took over after he lost consciousness, and sealed the suit again, so most of his fluids were ... you know, still somewhat fluid. We took samples of blood, lymph, stomach contents, and a few tissue samples, plus a full photo-spread of his skeletal structure. Endo and Gallus took advantage of the corpse to teach Torga the finer aspects of a ship doc, and they got a complete breakdown of his interior organs in the process."

He turned to her in expectation, but she remained silent, so he asked, "So... *what are our first, true aliens really made out of?*"

She looked around at all the dead bodies with her hands propped on the sides of her waist, before answering.

"Strangely enough, they don't really seem to be all that alien. Carbon-based – like we are – and they seem to have most of the same kinds of organs that we do. Their reproductive systems are internal, much like several similar species among the Commonwealth, but there is nothing really exotic or truly alien about them. Certainly not like I expected."

He thought that was strange, but ... not completely impossible.

"Well, maybe they came from the same genesis stock, but from a different branch of the tree? Could be that on their home planet, mammals like us couldn't have developed, or were wiped out in some disaster, or maybe never evolved into the dominant species."

"Yes... Well, I'll transfer all this information to your Doctor Riker, and deliver the samples for detailed analysis when we arrive. In the meantime, Sally and Samuel can arrange for their disposal."

Ronnie looked around the room with a frown.

"Disposal. Yes. That curiously NEW custom the Prime was so insistent that Samuel perform, before you got all these samples taken. I suppose it's a good thing he had a melt down during the Healing yesterday."

"Yes, I suppose so. Sally seemed to enjoy it, though. She's had him enough times in the last day to last a lifetime, and ... she's having him again," she murmured while closing her eyes for just a moment.

Ronnie closed his eyes and reached out lightly to feel them, before pulling back and clamping his thoughts tightly for a change.

"He seems to be more aware today. Did you feel me when I checked up on them just now?"

"No. You appear to be back to your pre-Ronnie, sneaky-self again. I'm already starting to miss the old Ronnie." She turned away, but he tried to give her his assurances.

"He's not gone, Sai. I'm just going to be a little more circumspect – like I should have been all along. Getting rid of Rakel was such a relief that I left myself wide open. I can't afford to do that again."

"I suppose not. How was Auda? Have you given her your double Gift?"

"Oh my, yes. I'm surprised you didn't hear her from here. She's feeling much better and very much loved right now. After we washed up, she ran off to tell Manya that she'd finally seduced me into submission."

"That little slut!" Sai laughed and stuck her tongue out at him, so he came over to hug her, then reached up to her collar.

"Don't you DARE drop my shield!" she said, and forcefully pushed him away.

"Jealous of a little bit of a girl like Auda?" he teased her.

"No, but I'm not about to void my stomach just to share a kiss with YOU!" she said, and made a face.

"Later then, my lover, and then we'll BOTH ravish the blond goddess who shares our bed," he promised her, but looked around at the bodies again, then walked over to the one who'd been draped over the stasis box.

"We can let Samuel toast the rest of the bodies if he wants, but I want to hang on to this one," he said quietly. *"There was something dancing around in the confusion of her mind when she was coming back to life. I want to know her reaction when she sees this body."*

"You think he was special to her?"

He looked around the room again before turning back to the corpse in front of him.

"I think the Vanir are more emotionally attached to their companions than they let on. Samuel and Sally have become possessive of each other. It's 'my Samuel' and 'my Sally' now, and the kids didn't find that to be in accordance with their society as we tentatively understood it. Their dead are merely empty husks and fit only for disposal, yet the Prime now insists it's a 'custom' they be destroyed – and rather quickly, according to Sally."

"The children could simply rip it from their minds, Ronnie."

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“Yes. Well, maybe ... but without a full cultural understanding of their history, current practices, and beliefs, it’s not enough to know the Prime didn’t want us to have the bodies in the first place. Even I can figure out it’s a way to determine how best to destroy them.”

He turned away from the Vanir body he was keeping and locked his gaze on Sai instead.

“We have to understand – culturally – the full implications if we want to avoid bashing our heads together in the future. I don’t want to broker a tentative peace, only to stumble over a cultural blunder that finds humanity wiped out overnight for an imagined slight – let alone living under a false sense of security while a peaceful enemy develops a way to destroy us all at once. We’d be better off sending our planet crackers in to reduce all the Vanir-inhabited worlds and be done with it.”

“That’s ... uh-hh, that’s a little extreme, isn’t it? Even for you, Ronnie ... Rondal?”

“Family, Commonwealth, and Crown. Even Ronnie agrees with that,” he said evenly, before turning to leave the room.

As Sai watched him leave, she wondered if the Demon really *had* left him, or if he was struggling to somehow strike a balance with the rapidly advancing situation.

On the Bridge...

“Torga! How is your father this fine morning?” Ronnie asked after entering the bridge.

He began checking navigation settings and ships status, while waiting for Torga to get over the surprise of his mid-morning visit.

“Intrigued with the possibility of being presented at the Commonwealth court – but *now* is not the time,” he finally said politely.

“I reluctantly agree. It would be better if his ascension was an accomplished fact *before* he started brokering a formal truce with the Emperor.” He looked at the current course and position, then nodded in satisfaction. Torga was becoming a very competent ship handler.

“Lord Caldor, now that you know about our past ... that of the Drecks ... how ... how would *you* like to see the Hegemony ... progress?” Torga asked haltingly.

Ronnie finished checking the console while thinking of an answer that wouldn’t be terribly rude. Then he sat down and regarded Torga, who was truly the image of his father ... not only much younger, but also wiser in some ways.

“Torga, the Drecks received an unexpected boon when the Vanir left some very dangerous toys lying around for them to find. If that had not happened, where do *you* think the Drecks would be today?” he asked, which caused Torga to take some time to consider his answer, and the delay was long enough to cycle through several of the security cameras, before Torga took a breath to speak.

“Nine hundred years ago? Nine hundred years ago, there was no space technology. The packs were all anyone knew. They controlled the various guilds, which controlled all of our technology. Iron, steel, ceramics, the very early electronics, and related fields – they were all divided up among the packs. The packs were very rough in those days. Looking back, I sometimes wonder how we could have developed so far, while living and fighting among ourselves as much as we did.”

He gave a disgusted snort and looked away somewhat guiltily. Ronnie could easily relate that impression to current day Earth.

“There were similarities on my *own* home world, Torga. A strange mixture of advancement, and yet some of those in power were *still* clinging to the past. Still are, today.”

Torga nodded his head, before continuing his assessment.

“I read in the Commonwealth’s histories that, following rapid advancement, the people became more autonomous so that a better life was had by most, and only the lowliest remained to do the menial labors of growing food, or serving others – and even *that* was eventually taken over by large businesses and machines.”

“Right up to the point where civilization collapsed once again,” Ronnie muttered.

“Yes. The Commonwealth humans advanced just so far. Then... Then they went crazy and destroyed each other for power, or position, or ... or just about *any* excuse,” Torga continued.

“Mostly power, I would say,” Ronnie suggested, but again asked, “But where would the Drecks be today if they *didn’t* gain advantage over the other clusters in your grouping?”

“*Truly?* In the space of maybe four-hundred years, we’d jumped from a Class-Five to a Class-Two society – *technology*-wise – but the people we went on to subjugate were already Class-Fours and Threes. On places like Hove, Fex, and Womak, the Drecks occupiers have fallen back to Class-Five in behavior, if not in technology, and we can’t even maintain our *own* machinery properly. Even now, we rely on the engineers on Kale and Dox to develop technology for us. That’s probably why my father’s pack lobbied so hard to acquire Krux nearly two centuries...” he paused,

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then stopped that uncomfortable line of thought before returning to the question.

“*Without* the advantage? We’d probably still be fighting among ourselves on Zarox; still with the existing pack and guild divisions, and still planet bound – while the other clusters jeered at us from the safety of orbit,” he said bitterly.

“And tell me, young Lord of Pack Gagsa ... how would *you* guide the Drecks towards acceptance among your clusters as *equals*, rather than conquerors?”

“Ha! That would *never* happen!” Torga exclaimed while shaking his head slowly, but Ronnie continued to push him.

“But if it *were* to happen ... how might *you* suggest your people to grow and become responsible citizens of the Hegemony? Remember, the Drecks are not stupid. In a mere few hundred years, they took those clues left by the Vanir and turned the Hegemony into a *reality*. What do you think it would take to ... to *civilize* the Drecks and make them *welcome* companions among the rest of all humanity?”

Torga paused before turning to look down into Ronnie’s eyes. He seemed to be considering that thoughtfully, and it was several seconds before he spoke again.

“It would take ... *time*, certainly, and a *strong* hand – like my *father’s*. And Drecks *can* be taught, and they can *learn*. Look at Endo and Gallus. Raised by a Commonwealth Healer and given love and encouragement – instead of threats, beatings, and the risk of becoming dinner,” he pointed out.

Ronnie noted silently that he didn’t say Commonwealth Witch, but thought his summation was a good starting point for the future.

“Perhaps that’s something you and your father can work out? He knows the Drecks pack system well. He’s certainly been a *victim* of it long enough. You know quite a bit about the Commonwealth and how we operate. Between the two of you, you could work out a way to consolidate the Drecks society and put it on a steadier footing. This would allow it to grow in a less haphazard manner. Maybe produce a society that could operate on trade rather than the sword? You certainly have many examples from your *subject* clusters to study; and you’ve already studied the Commonwealth clusters. Although I’d avoid suggesting you adopt an *Elder* to pull your father’s strings. Perhaps a favored *wife* would be a good starting point?” he suggested, and got a sly chuckle from Torga in response.

“And tell me, Lord Caldar. What would *you* suggest the Drecks do?” he asked while smiling now.

“Ha! No easy way out for *you*, young Lord. I have my *own* ideas, but it would be far better if you and your father worked out the Drecks salvation in a *Drecks* way. The Drecks are strong and obedient to the Master Pack. Once Lord Gagsa assumes the throne, there will be a way to turn all that energy into a learning experience for the packs that will let them reap the benefits of civilization, instead of simply plundering it,” he suggested, then stood up after glancing at the bridge timer.

“Well, about time for an early dinner, I think. I hope Sai washed the stink of the exercise room off her before she dines. Endo is your watch relief?”

“Yes, my Lord. I believe he and Edna will be along shortly. And thank you, my Lord, for taking Auda back to your bed. Manya is *much* relieved at not having to console her every day.”

“You are quite welcome, Torga,” he said, then left for the dining commons, while Torga considered that very thought-provoking conversation with the Commonwealth’s First Lord.

‘Consolidation and trade? Care instead of threats? That promises to be a HUGE undertaking,’ Torga contemplated, *‘But certainly not an impossible goal for the Drecks.’*

Vanaheim, A Prime in Confusion

The Prime was perplexed. It was over a month ago when Station 6 was destroyed, and yet *one* Vanir had remained intact – *preserved within a stasis box*.

Moreover, Rondal Caldar brought that one back to *life*.

Personally...

Using techniques Sally could not explain in her report; other than to say they needed to be *observed* to appreciate *fully*, *somehow* the humans had taken a *dead body* – *preserved in a stasis box for more than a month* – and brought it back to *life*.

In addition, according to the Senior Medical Technician, they had fixed two compound fractures.

Perfectly.

Without instrumentation.

In mere seconds...

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The Prime was not even sure if she should send her advisors scurrying about to research this new, or at least, *overlooked* technology. One might assume it was probably related to the mind-to-mind communications that certain of them were capable of.

Two segments of her mind took that last bit and trundled along with it for several moments before coming to an awkward thought.

The Senior Observer, "Samuel," had *already* reported that his brain had been "worked upon remotely" to allow it to communicate more effectively with the human, Rondal Caldar.

When that thought ran out to its logical conclusion, the Prime's digestive track ground to a halt and nearly voided itself at both ends. She staggered just a bit, but her most Senior Medical Technician was at her side in a moment and steadied her within his arms.

"Grandmother, you appear to be in some distress. Please allow me to escort you to your nest where I may see to your comfort and rest," he suggested. The few courtiers in their presence turned their backs to them in honor of their privacy as he led the Prime to her quarters to administer the appropriate emulation of affection to reassure her of her worth as a person and viable leader of Warren S'Ahi'Ma.

She did not require his services often, but he still held out hope she would find value in him as a *permanent* companion and realize that, unlike his two *underlings*, he was emulating *nothing* in her service.

October 15, The Kraken, The Sleeper Awakes

'Hello Samuel ... Sally. We're here at your request. How can we help you this morning?' Ronnie asked from outside the Ambassadorial corridor.

'Please come in, Rondal Caldar and Sai Tal' Samuel replied from the middle chamber. 'The female is awake, but doing poorly'

'Will she be frightened if she sees us?' Sai asked.

'We will brighten the lights and cover her eyes. We will tell her it is necessary for her care' Sally sent.

'Very well. We're coming in then' Ronnie told them, and they entered the corridor and saw the air lock chamber was open all the way through to the inner chamber. They waited outside the middle chamber until the female's eyes were covered and Sally finished talking to her.

They noted she was strapped down at the legs, torso, and arms; and also canted somewhat sideways to ease the pressure off her tail. Bolstered, rolled blankets were being used to keep her in place.

'How is she doing? Is there any indication she's in pain, Sally?' Sai asked while looking through the saurian girl, but finding nothing seriously out of place.

'Her pain is emotional. We are ... we cannot read her mind as you do with us. Can you listen to her mind and tell me what she is saying inside?'

Sai walked over to stand behind Sally, then took her arms in hand and moved them toward the female.

'Place your hands over the sides of her head and hold her gently. Tell her to relax and rest. Massage her head, as you would like it massaged, and we will go in together and listen to what is going on in there'

As the ladies worked on the female, Ronnie pulled Samuel to the side to give them some privacy while they worked. He was also trying to distract him from the proceedings.

'Are you feeling any better, Samuel?'

'Sally has seen to my sanity. As long as I do not think too much about it, I hope to remain sane for the time being' he answered frankly.

'Good. You are a valuable asset to our two peoples, and I would not care to lose your unique insight into the Vanir, and the Prime. I suspect we will come to rely upon it during our further meetings'

He glanced up at Samuel and then over at Sally and Sai.

'I do want you to know that we did not intend to surprise you with this display of our Healing ability. In truth, there was a question of the girl being recoverable or not. As time was of the essence, we had to try'

Samuel looked down at him, then looked at the women, before responding.

'I do not understand, Rondal Caldar. In the time we have traveled together, or in any of the information you have allowed us access to, you never mentioned this ... this Healing ability. We wonder now just why that is? Is this some new capability your people have developed?'

'My people – specifically the people on Kantor and Cletus – have been able to do this for the last ten-thousand years. Perhaps not as well or as effectively, but after ten-thousand years, you can get pretty good at something. Both Sai and I were quite surprised when you asked nothing about our Healers, so we devised very careful questions to extract your knowledge about us from you. From what you told us, you had no information at all about Healers – except for rumors Sally had mentioned'

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The silence between them lingered as Samuel considered the possible reasons for such a lack of knowledge. He could only think of one possibility, but it sounded ridiculous, even to him.

'Perhaps it is because the majority of our studies have regarded the Hegemony and not the Commonwealth? But I simply cannot believe that NO one noticed! Not in all the several thousands of years of observation, did ANYONE notice the actions of your Healers! I find that unaccountable!'

Ronnie glanced up, but Samuel's expression hadn't changed any, as he continued to watch the women working with the girl. The tint of his skin seemed to be tinged a slightly different shade, but he had no way to interpret it.

At least one thing was clear. It would seem that humans weren't the only ones keeping secrets.

'I find that very difficult to believe, as well, and it raises questions that are difficult to answer; such as ... is the Prime aware of our Healing ability? Could this be interpreted as a threat to the Vanir as a whole? Is it possible the Prime, or any of the previous Primes, both knew about our Healing ability, and intentionally suppressed that knowledge for some reason? So far as I know, the only overtly aggressive stance the Vanir have orchestrated against humanity is to set the Drecks against the Commonwealth, and in truth, it might have happened at some point, anyway. And implanting bombs in citizens of both sides, of course'

Samuel stood absolutely still for more than a minute to contemplate these issues, but came up with more questions than answers.

'I find no reasonable excuse for withholding knowledge of this capability. If anything, an aggressive stance would have us gathering biological samples, then putting them into the laboratory for a detailed analysis of skills and practices. Such skills would be of benefit to Vanir ... to ALL Vanir'

'Certainly of benefit to those Vanir who work at dangerous tasks, where the flash Healing Sai did for the girl's legs could be life saving' Ronnie agreed.

A minute or two passed, before Samuel voiced another concern from one segment of his mind.

'Rondal Caldar ... was the female really dead? Or did you just animate a corpse?'

'Oh, Gods! I certainly HOPE not! After you explained what the box, was and how it acted on organic matter, I reasoned that, if she was still alive at the moment of her stasis, then there was a good chance she could be revived. Of course, the problem then was what was left of her brain. How

long she was without a beating heart is usually the key to recovery of the mind, but she was in stasis, and I had no way to judge' he admitted, before adding to that thought.

'Gross physical injury usually always causes some debilitating damage. One who would have become my mate was gravely injured, and I saved her life. Unfortunately, her injury was to her head. Although I Healed her head and brain perfectly, those memories locked within lost tissue, were also lost to her new brain growth. She recovered ... but only with the memories of a five-year-old human child'

There was another minute or two of quiet contemplation, before Samuel broached another question – somewhat delicately on his part.

'Rondal Caldar ... do you think ... perhaps if we negotiate a PROPER peace between our people ... do you think ... Commonwealth Healers might ... might contract to serve ... aboard ... Vanir transports?'

Ronnie smiled, but Samuel was still focused on what the women were doing, so he didn't see it. Getting Samuel to even *consider* buying into his subtle plot to level the playing fields between the Hegemony, the Commonwealth, and now the Vanir, had been way down on his to-do list, but as long as Samuel had brought it up, he decided to dangle the lure just a little bit to see how hard he would bite.

'I would not say it's impossible, Samuel, but I think it would be easier to simply teach your females our way of Healing. I have asked Sai to speak to Sally about that – after they get done getting your girl back on her feet. I would see Sally learn our Healing techniques, and then have her teach them to other Vanir'

'Teach Sally? You could DO that? Sai could do that?'

Ronnie sensed the sudden tension in Samuel, but couldn't tell if it was a good or bad reaction to the suggestion, so he continued with the simple truth.

'She taught Gallus and Endo years ago, and now she teaches their wives. She taught Torga and his wife. She's still teaching Auda. She even taught a little bit to the Kee ... although I have NO idea of how she managed that. I don't see why she should not try to teach Sally as well'

'If that is true ... if Sai Tal is willing to...'

"Ronnie! Go get one of the Kee in here!" Sai ordered aloud, and he turned to see the girl struggling in her bindings.

'Bridge! Send Déjà and Kiki to the Vanir quarters immediately!' he called out silently, and in just a few minutes, both of the Kee arrived in the Vanir corridor – out of breath and calling to him.

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“Déjà ... Kiki, in here! Come through the open door and enter the middle chamber,” he called out loudly, and they both bounced in.

“Sai needs you,” he said, and pointed his finger at the struggling threesome.

In seconds, Sai had Déjà at the head of the girl, and Kiki was down between her legs. Both of them were darting their tongues out and teasing the girl with them. In just a few moments more, her struggles lessened and she became *much* more relaxed. About a minute later, Kiki started making inroads between her legs, and finally orally penetrated her cloaca to begin sensuous ministrations intended to give the girl a sensory distraction to her mental distress.

Sai watched in detached interest, while Sally observed with thinly veiled excitement. Meanwhile, Samuel had politely turned his back on the whole evolution.

‘*Sai, what’s up?*’ Ronnie asked privately as he turned away from the group groping just as Samuel had.

‘The girl’s mind was all over the place, so Sally prescribed a sensory distraction for her. I think Sally is losing her objectivity, though’

‘Why don’t you suggest Sally take Samuel into the inner chamber to provide her with a sensory distraction for herself? We can keep an eye on the Kee, and watch the girl’

Almost as fast as Sai suggested it, Sally came over and grabbed Samuel by the arm, before dragging him to the inner chamber – shutting the door behind them, and leaving Sai and Ronnie alone with the Kee to watch over the girl.

Sai moved up, took Sally’s place next to the girl’s head, and kept up the gentle massage, before Déjà smiled and took over. In a quiet discussion, Sai outlined the treatment Sally wanted for the girl. Déjà nodded eagerly, and Sai walked out and returned a few minutes later with some of the massage oil the Vanir used and handed it to her.

“Well... That certainly looks like fun... Massage and oral sex,” Ronnie commented quietly, as Sai slipped up to his side and put an arm around his waist to hug him.

“That girl is *seriously* messed up inside,” she told him in a low voice, but caught his startled look. “Oh, no... Not missing pieces of her mind, but it’s all terribly confused right now. There are some pretty *horrific* memories in there of her and a guy – the guy in the *suit*, I think. They were trying to escape from the station when it started to come apart. That happened rather slowly, from outside to inside, so they lost all the external stuff first – communications modules, power, and such. That’s

probably why none of our ships ever reported back.” She let out a shudder and gripped his waist a little tighter.

“Anyway, the guy somehow managed to suit up, grabbed the girl, and was headed to one of the small ships to escape, when those were cut loose next. They found themselves forced deeper into the station, and ended up in a storage chamber. She could hear the ship breaking up around her, and the guy went nuts dumping food from a stasis box before stuffing her into it. The last thing she remembers is him breaking her legs to fit her in there, and then the lid coming down on top of her. After that, it’s all a blank until she remembers glimpses of humans just before we put that cloth over her eyes. Then the phantom pain from her legs hit her, and Sally knocked her out.”

Ronnie nodded slowly while processing that chain of events.

“So ... she just needs to assimilate her current status with all her fragmented segments and basically ... get a grip?”

“Basically? Yes.”

They continued to watch the Kee work on the girl as she seemed to be melting in relaxation under their care. Ronnie could just imagine how that might feel. Then he had a few more thoughts on why Sally seemed complacent with using the Kee for this task, since this was already part of her duties.

“I thought Sally offered this sort of service as a medical technician for her crew?”

“I thought so, too. Although in larger vessels, I understand they use *male* medical technicians for female crew,” she told him quietly.

He thought about that, before glancing at the closed inner chamber door.

“I take it she didn’t think Samuel was up to the task?”

“I got feelings of propriety from her regarding Samuel in that role. She considered it, but it would not be proper since he wasn’t trained for it. There might also have been issues of a *proprietary* nature.”

“So ... our Sally might have gotten a bit *jealous* if Samuel had helped her out?”

“Well, he is *‘her’* Samuel and all, but I also felt something else in there. A ‘not-part-of-my-warren’ issue underneath everything. And Ronnie, I’m thinking the kids were right. Sally and Samuel both think the girl might not be from S’Slich’Tah Warren.”

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“They *told* you that?”

“It was a feeling I got from Sally. I asked, and she said they’d both discussed it this morning before we got here. We may not notice it casually, but the girl’s skin tones and patterns are different than Sally’s. Auda and I spent some girl time with Sally, and I see now that the color patterns on the girl’s side and back are different than Sally’s.”

She stepped over to a monitor and keyed in the override to access the *Kraken*’s database. Then she brought up images taken from the morgue studies and selected the female victims of Station 6 – setting the five of them side-by-side on the screen.

“See here,” she said, pointing to each figure in turn. “This pattern is the same for all female members of a warren. It’s as distinctive to them, as Auda’s blond hair is to us.”

He walked closer to stand next to Sai while they compared each image. Then he looked over at the girl, and then back and forth several times.

“Well, she doesn’t look like Sally, and I can see now that she doesn’t look like the rest of her crew. If she’s not part of S’Slich’Tah Warren, then I wonder who she is and what warren she’s *really* from?”

Sai leaned into him, and he put his arm around her waist ... and then something *else* came to her mind. “Maybe there was *another* reason the Prime didn’t want these bodies recovered?” she murmured.

October 21, The Patient Recovers

It had taken several days for Sally – and Déjà and Kiki – to get their new survivor, tentatively identified as “Sue,” into a calm enough state that allowed conversation between her and Sally.

She had been gradually introduced to Sai, and then Ronnie. A few days later, the Dreds women were brought in, along with their husbands.

Auda had tagged along quietly, but at least she was over her reluctance to be around the Vanir now.

Sue had difficulty at each step, but through the efforts of the Senior Medical Technician – and her two willing Kee assistants – her stress levels had been caught and reduced each time, before she had another major meltdown.

There was a point of contention with her *true* identity, though.

She’d insisted she was part of the crew for Station 6, but when confronted with the fact that she was *not* of S’Slich’Tah Warren, she’d dodged the answer they were looking for at each inquiry.

Samuel and Sally had remained calm at each denial, but it was the declaration Ronnie would make on the following day that would cause a minor rift in these preliminary Vanir-Human relations.

October 22, The New Crewmate

Ronnie and Sai were in a private late morning meeting with Samuel and Sally in the planning room. The seating was courtesy of the mechanical talents of Torga. For the time being, the Kee were keeping company with Sue back in the Ambassadorial corridor.

‘Samuel, I really don’t understand your objection to this. It’s the most reasonable decision I could come up with’ Ronnie insisted.

‘No! She is Vanir – not human!’

‘Sai, tell him, please’ Ronnie asked her, but Sai addressed Sally instead of Samuel.

‘Sally, when Rondal Caldar recovered the stasis box as salvage – what were its contents?’

‘The status box contained the survivor. The one you have named Sue. We all know this, Sai Tal’

‘Sally ... was the body found in the stasis box alive when it was removed from the box?’ she asked pointedly.

‘It was resuscitated successfully!’

‘But was it alive when we removed it from the box?’

‘No. The body had ceased all life functions’

‘When you examined the body, did you think to attempt to resuscitate it?’

‘No. The body was dead’

Sai glanced at Samuel before asking Sally her next question.

‘How did the dead body return to life?’

Sally glanced at Samuel, then over at Ronnie, before turning back to Sai.

‘You requested we begin respiration to the body and the addition of a stimulant, but the body did not respond. And then Rondal Caldar did ... something...’

‘As the Vanir Senior Medical Technician, you declared the body to be dead, and you did not intend to attempt resuscitation’ Sai stated pointedly.

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'It was only after we humans asked for your assistance that Sue was able to recover from her apparent death. This is true, Sally?' Sai asked gently, while sparing another glance at Samuel.

'I ... yes, Sai Tal. I would not have tried to bring her back. She was dead' she admitted, then hung her head down.

Sai turned, first to Samuel, who looked on quietly, and then nodded to Ronnie, who continued with his statement.

'S'Shac'Kah 39496, the survivor we have named Sue was a dead body. She was salvage. I declare salvage rights over her, and I have decided she would be a welcome addition to my crew. Now that she is more stable, she will move into crews' quarters and begin training for her new duties. Perhaps in time she will become comfortable with her new situation, but for right now, I do not feel it is in the girl's best interests to remain with the Ambassador from Vanir, as she is not part of his staff'

Samuel said something to Sally, and she looked up quickly and leaned over to him. Fierce whisperings took place for about a minute, but at the end of it, Samuel seemed to sink onto his stool in defeat, before turning to Ronnie.

'Rondal Caldar... The Vanir Ambassador thanks you for your efforts to save the life of a citizen of Vanir under extreme circumstances. I will report such to the Prime' he sent in subdued dismay, then thought to present a possible concern.

'As her current identity is in question, I ask you to exercise caution so she does not become an undue burden upon your crew and ship. My... Our own belief is she is not from S'Slich'Tah Warren, but we cannot determine which warren she belongs to, or what loyalties she may harbor. Perhaps she may reveal who she is and what she represents in an unguarded moment. We ask you to exercise all due diligence regarding ... Sue'

Samuel stood up, along with Sally.

'We will inform her of her change in status' he conceded.

'She will quarter with the Kee. They've already picked up a working knowledge of Vanir' Sai told him.

Samuel looked at her quickly, then back to Sally. If anything, Sally seemed to flush just a bit.

"The Kee are very adaptive, Samuel. They learn languages very quickly, which is good ... because they cannot use their minds to do so," she said aloud in Vanir.

Samuel nodded in a human gesture, then left the meeting, with Sally following along quietly – except for a light, tight thought cast towards Sai.

'I think it worked, Sai Tal. I will review it with him later to discuss the ramifications in detail'

'Just as we planned, Sally'

'Yes, Sai Tal. *Just as we planned*' the teasing private thought came back from Sally.

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Upon arrival at their corridor, Sally continued to their shared quarters, while Samuel stopped at the makeshift Vanir medical suite to inform Sue of her new status. He left her there in the company of Kiki – who seemed ecstatic at the change in berthing assignment for Sue.

"Sue! Come *on* Sue! Time for *dinner!*" Kiki said happily in Vanir, as she led the young Vanir out of the Ambassadorial corridor and through the ship to the commons.

They made their way slowly as Sue looked at everything very intently along the way. This would be the first time she would be joining the crew for a common meal.

Afterwards, she would be returning to her *new* quarters – the one she would be sharing with the Kee.

In what was yet another example of their fantastic adaptability, the Kee had managed to pick up enough Vanir speech in the last thirty days to carry on a simple conversation with Sally and Samuel. Now that they were getting a Vanir roommate, it would allow them to practice their language skills even further.

As narrowly focused as they were, Déjà and Kiki never considered the *primary* reason they were assigned as Sue's keepers was because they could manage her most easily when she had a bad episode.

### ***In the Vanir Ambassador's Room***

"Are you reading anything from her, Sally?" Samuel asked while they nestled together in their nest and relaxed after a shared private meal with each other for the first time in over a week.

"She is still very nervous. Perhaps later, when the Kee are talking to her in private, she may become relaxed and forget herself," she murmured, then rubbed her tail up against his lasciviously.

"Sally, I believe you are becoming more like the humans every day," he chided her, but rolled to grasp her and brought their faces together to indulge in mutual tongue kisses – something *else* she'd picked up from the humans – or probably the *Kee*, he considered. It certainly didn't lessen *his* enjoyment of them, though.

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All thoughts of Sue left them for a while as they renewed their intimate knowledge of each other.

### *With the “Salvaged” Help*

Dinner had been a quiet affair, with the crew eating in stages, so Sue wouldn't feel overwhelmed with a flurry of Drecks bodies surrounding her – no more than what she'd already felt when being around the other humans. The Kee she tolerated quite well. Of course, anytime she was feeling distressed, the Kee immediately stepped in and provided a great deal of relaxation for her, so that was somewhat understandable.

As the newest crewmember, Sue was – somewhat unsurprisingly – tasked with kitchen maintenance responsibilities ... starting right after dinner. After having her new duties explained to her by the Kee, she engaged in those almost mindless tasks while contemplating her rather abrupt drop in status. It could be worse, she thought. She could have died on the station along with...

Sue stopped and shuddered for a moment, but one of the Kee was right there with her and hugged her tightly; sending feelings of love and a tiny bit of arousal through her. She blinked several times, then looked down at that tiny furry head, and gently hugged her back before returning to her task. Once they finished in the kitchen, the Kee led her back to their shared compartment.

Now that they were in the Kee's compartment – *hers* and the Kee's, now – she was shown where the one of the previous sleeping platforms had been removed so she could make herself a nest. The human, Rondal Caldar, seemed very determined to provide appropriate creature comforts for her, by making her feel welcomed in his crew. A supply of nesting material had been provided, courtesy of the Vanir Ambassador, along with other soft bedding for her to configure her nest the way she wanted it.

Before she got started with that, however, the Kee started giggling and dragged her off to the shower, where they scrubbed both her and themselves thoroughly and helped dry her off. Then they surprised her with a bottle of rubbing oil, and pulled her to their huge sleeping platform before they began rubbing her down from top to bottom.

After a certain point in the process, she lost all sense of time and reasoning while giving in to their sensuous efforts by allowing herself to be *completely* distracted in the most enjoyable fashion.

They were so interesting ... so giving ... and, *oh*, so friendly.

*In Ronnie's Compartment*

*"Well, has he figured it out, yet?"* Ronnie asked in Cletus while he and Sai were sharing a shower.

Auda had just arrived from the kitchen and was leaving an organic waste deposit in the toilet just around the partition in a most odorous fashion.

*"Hey! Auda! Courtesy flush, please!"* Sai called out in Standard, before replying to Ronnie's question in Cletus.

*"I think Samuel's too logical to figure out he's been tricked. As long as you keep your mind shut to him, he'll probably never figure it out,"* she asserted.

*"Yes, but what about Sally? He could pick it up from her, couldn't he?"*

*"Oh please! You men are all alike! Maybe YOU of all men could pick it out of her head, but Samuel? Not a chance, lover. You are unique, where Samuel is just another man."*

*"What about Sue? I can't seem to get a firm grasp on her,"* he admitted. *"The kids said it was similar to picking the Prime's brain, but harder. I can't seem to break in, and neither can they. They did say she's still somewhat traumatized, though."*

*"What they said was not all of her mind's segments were in agreement with reality yet,"* she corrected him.

*"Yes. Like I said – she's still traumatized. At least with either Déjà or Kiki around her, she'll have a chance to calm down and not go all \*wonky\* like she'd been doing."*

*"Wonky?"* It that an Earth diagnosis?" She'd smiled when she'd asked him in Standard, then giggled.

*"It just means..."*

"I know what it means, Ronnie," she muttered, then patted him on his bottom.

He turned around and took her into his arms for a kiss, before pinching her bottom in retaliation.

"Ow! Just for that, you can scrub my back!" she grumped, then turned away from him.

He soaped up a scrubbing cloth and worked it over her back, bottom, legs, and back up again. Then he reached around with soapy hands and started on her breasts before working his way down to her groin. By the time Auda had flushed and joined them, they were ready to dry off and

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head to bed. Auda looked at her longingly, then called out to Ronnie as they hurried to the other room.

“Save some of her milk for *me!*”

### *Vanaheim, The Prime's Quarters*

The Prime was in the arms of her Senior Medical Technician once again, even after having received the benefits of his skillful ministrations several times in the last few hours. He had found it necessary to calm her down from the shock of the message her Ambassador had sent earlier in the day...

The survivor had still not been positively identified, but the Prime had a pretty good idea of who it might be – although how she'd gotten aboard Station 6 in the first place was *still* in question. However, that wasn't what had set her off.

Since the body had been declared *dead* by the Ambassador's Senior Medical Technician, the human had declared it valid *salvage* – *after* her resuscitation!

Aside from the fact that she was Vanir to begin with, she wasn't of the same warren as the crew of Station 6! This was in accordance with the evidence of the dead bodies the human and Ambassador had recovered, *in spite* of her specific orders to the *contrary!*

At least the human had acquiesced to turning over the bodies the day after recovery, but now he had his hands on a *live* Vanir, and there was *nothing* stopping him from sending her to a lab for some horribly invasive examination during which she would suffer terribly and probably *fatally*.

*In addition*, once again he had assigned her a *human* name – “Sue” – simply for his *own* convenience!

The sheer *audacity* of the humans to cast aside one's name and give them another so casually! The fact that “Sue” either forgot her name or simply refused to give it was *beside* the point! Certainly, once her mind became defragmented, she would be able to remember who she was and exactly what she was doing on Station 6.

For the *ultimate* irony, the predator species, the *Kee*, were the *only* ones who had made the effort to learn spoken Vanir! Because of that, the girl was now sharing quarters with *two* of them – *cannibals!* She quivered in revulsion at the thought of it.

Her Senior Medical Technician noted her sudden quivering and immediately began a soothing, rhythmic pattern of strokes along her belly and flanks; ending with delicate touches to her lower mid-section that distracted her conscious thoughts sufficiently enough to let her baser

functions take over. She settled comfortably into his care to be relieved of her stress ... yet again.

### *October 24, The Kraken, The Party Arrives*

The rock arrived in outer orbit near a Kantite moon before grounding itself quietly and without notice. This was by the simple expedient of Ronnie dipping into the minds of the local observers and waiting for them to “look the other way” before passing through their viewing areas.

The initial meeting between the Vanir Ambassador and the Head of State for the Commonwealth had been quite difficult to arrange. Since the Vanir did not yet “officially” exist, there was the obvious concern that springing them upon an unprepared public might cause quite a bit of alarm. There had been much discussion over the last few days regarding exactly how to conduct this rather significant bit of cultural slight-of-hand.

Likewise, bringing the Drecks into the Emperor’s court was not currently in the best interests of Lord Gagsa, so that left out Torga, certainly, and perhaps Sai’s two boys ... although Endo and Gallus had already been introduced to the Imperials five years ago during the incident back on the platform ... but when they were much *shorter*.

Although it had started as somewhat sheltered knowledge, it was also becoming better known that the First Lord had fostered a Drecks food girl during a visit to Earth, and brought her and her Earthling mate to Kantor a while back. Exactly what she and her mate *did* for the First Lord was still in question, but was rumored to be related to the much-pondered Demon’s Realm that was supposed to be located somewhere within the Commonwealth, but nobody knew where for sure.

Speculation on the Demon’s Realm had run the gamut, from ludicrous disbelief to the embodiment of all that was evil, but it was generally accepted that those who entered the Demon’s Realm went in and *never* came out. Exactly *who* was entering and not returning was always subject to rumor, but since the average number of missing persons had not changed significantly, the general consensus was that Commonwealth citizens were currently *exempt*. At least, that was the *current* rumor.

Of course, *all* rumors had to be cleared through Lili and her staff *first*, before being coordinated with the Elder’s Tier One staff (now that *all* of their Vanir tracers had been removed) so speculation didn’t get out of hand. After all, it wouldn’t do to have the public melting down in a panic upon learning a Demon roamed the darkness and had set up housekeeping in the Commonwealth, let alone revealing the sudden

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appearance of Drecks or Vanir in the Imperial Court without sufficient time to get the public ready for such.

Rumors aside, the potential venue shifted several times between the *Kraken* and the Royal Homestead on Kantor, with pros and cons for each discussed nearly to death, but with neither site deemed appropriate. As it turned out, instead of hosting the party on the *Kraken*, a notorious rumor in its *own* right, the Commonwealth Ship *KS Microcosmus* was currently in orbit and available as a *neutral* meeting ground.

It was quite suitable as such, since it was primarily a civilian entity of the Kraken Collective, with a very small percentage of space leased to Imperial offices. Very *secure* Imperial offices.

After confirming the available space, dietary needs, and the required communications frequencies for the Vanir Ambassador (in this case, relayed through a local hidden Observation Station), Ronnie, his visitors, and most of his crew found themselves in the shuttle and headed to the ex-planetary striker platform. He'd left Torga and his wife, Auda, Sue, and the Kee behind on the *Kraken*, along with a private word for Torga to expect a visitor or two, who would arrive shortly; one of whom would be in charge of the *Kraken* in Ronnie's absence. Sai, who was running cover in the *Kraken's Child* and pacing the shuttle invisibly, would remain so until the shuttle docked, before she would dock and join the party.

### *The KS Microcosmus*

The ex-planetary striker had been transformed. No longer a distorted, broken shell of its former self, the rebuilt, four-hundred meter diameter of the Kraken Collective's *KS Microcosmus* boasted a basic off-white covering of new armor plate, backed by new shield generators that were engineered by Donnel Arden specifically for the task.

Although not powered as heartily as it had been when configured for combat, the *KS Microcosmus* could still maintain a decent cruise speed, but that was about it. Without the necessity of feeding exciters and converters for the removed primary weapon system, the amount of reaction mass it carried could keep it going for *years* on a single filling.

As a civilian ship, it wasn't armed, but the new shield system had several nice features; including several externally located shield generators like what were installed on the *Kraken's Child* for very *special* occasions.

Labs, workshops, research space, administrative offices, an Imperial representative's office, an Elder's representative's office, a technical school, a health facility, Healer specialty training, and an advanced studies facility were just a few of the many sub-leases that were currently planned. Once fully manned, the staff and crew would represent nearly

every planet in the Commonwealth. There were even regular and restricted docking bays for special guests, and it was at the latter where Ronnie docked the shuttle. Here he knew everyone was vetted and would remain silent on all they saw and heard.

As they were escorted from the docking bay, Ronnie and Sai led their party, with the Vanir couple following along and looking curiously at everything and everyone they saw. To Samuel and Sally's amazement, they saw nothing but smiles from the pointedly unarmed guards, and made quiet remarks to each other on the way to the initial meeting place.

Endo and Gallus brought up the rear with their wives, and acknowledged some of the familiar faces and grins while they both walked proudly by with their women at their sides.

### *In the Imperial Commons...*

"About eight feet tall, you say?" Radatel asked curiously.

"Yes, my Husband. As Rondal described him, I am sure he is a very logical and thoughtful individual. As usual, his companion is the one to watch out for. She and Sai have already manipulated the poor dear a few times, and no doubt he will be most disappointed when he learns of it," she warned him with a teasing note.

"Well, my love, best that he does not learn of it from *us*, then," he said, then smiled when the party arrived in the Imperial commons.

Lili looked curiously at the Vanir Ambassador and noted that his skin tone was very close to what Rondal had shared with her.

Tall, eight feet, or perhaps a little taller, and bipedal, with a short tail and no exposed genitalia. No adornments, other than a device clamped to one arm that Rondal had indicated was a communications device of some sort – this simply a relay back to a base transmitter located in the *Kraken*, thus assuring the Ambassador's ability to communicate with his leader during key discussions, one might suppose. She wondered if it also transmitted video with the voice.

The female was shorter by a foot, and adorned much the same, but her color pattern was different. Interesting that Rondal had mentioned all the males and females of one family tree had identical patterns ... or at least, patterns that did not vary by much at all.

*'Sally, how is Samuel doing?'* Sai asked on a tight band.

*'Nervous, but so am I. The guardsmen next to the first human are armed'* she mentioned silently, and Sai shot a thought at Ronnie.

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Ronnie walked forward and spoke quietly to Captain Tomar, who nodded reluctantly, removed his sword, and handed it to his second. His second withdrew, along with the third and fourth guards, each of them returning about a minute later, fully disarmed, before taking up their positions once again. Now that this brief bit of decorum had been settled, Ronnie walked up to his brother and bowed deeply.

Upon becoming upright again, he began introductions between the Commonwealth Head of State and the Vanir Ambassador, which was, not surprisingly, an assisted greeting in Commonwealth fashion.

“Radatel Caldarous se Kantor, Rex ... I am pleased to present Vanir Ambassador S’Shac’Kah 39496 and his companion, Senior Medical Technician S’Shac’Kah 38521,” he said formally.

As previously instructed, Samuel stepped up to stand in front of Radatel, and then waited politely.

Radatel smiled kindly – *hoping* it was coming off kindly – and raised his right hand, fingers spread. He was delighted when the Vanir quickly did so with the proper hand as well. Noting the Vanir only had three fingers, he quickly closed his little and adjacent finger to match his hand before introducing himself.

“Radatel Caldarous se Kantor,” he said, then listened carefully when the Vanir articulated “S’Shac’Kah 39496” in his native sibilants before bowing his head slightly in the appropriate amount as expected for a representative of the Vanir Prime.

Samuel shifted over to Lili and repeated the format, but raised his right hand first this time. Lili performed a proper curtsy, then stood proudly and immediately raised her left hand and matched his finger pattern, as had her husband.

“S’Shac’Kah 39496,” Samuel said in Vanir, and Lili responded with, “Liling Shan Ting Song se Cletus” in Standard, then dipped her head quite a bit lower than Samuel had in front of Radatel.

Samuel stepped aside while Sally took his place in front of Lili, but it was Sally this time who attempted the curtsy and pulled it off gracefully, before raising her left hand up to match Lili’s right hand.

“Liling Shan Ting Song se Cletus,” Lili said, and Sally replied with, “S’Shac’Kah 38521,” and bowed her head accordingly.

Instead of simply dropping her hand, Lili reached out and looped her arm through Sally’s, before starting up a conversation – in *Vanir*.

“My dear, I understand you must have suffered *terribly* under Rondal’s hospitality! All that stress and struggle at having to deal with such a



messy, smelly *human!* And I'm sure *nothing* in your training gave you any preparation for it!" she exclaimed in near perfect Vanir, while starting them walking off together in front of the men. "Oh! And I understand you're a Healer-in-*Training* now. How *exciting* that must be for you! I remember *my* first days of school... Oh, so many years ago..." she trailed off wistfully as they walked around a curve in the corridor.

Lili's guards, suddenly realizing she'd gotten away from them, took off after her at a trot, while the rest of the men simply stood there in bemused silence until Radatel turned a shaking head to Samuel.

*'Remarkable, Samuel. Simply remarkable. Sally is a VERY special woman. You must be very proud of her. Perhaps if we delay here a few minutes more, they will have everything worked out by the time we catch up with them? Then all that will be left is the signing of a few documents?'* he suggested hopefully.

*'Emperor Caldarous... I – I have no idea of what just happened. I just don't know what...'*

Radatel gently cut him off with a raised hand, before slowly drawing him in the direction of the women.

*'Oh, I know VERY well what just happened, Samuel, but I'm used to it by now. Surely, Rondal has explained our rather duplicitous form of government to you? Alas, it has the unfortunate benefit of WORKING for us – at least for the last ten-thousand years, anyway. Are you hungry? Has my little brother FED you anything in the last month or so? I understand they've made a modification to the supplemental protein processor that adds a bit of variety and texture to the output that makes it quite acceptable'* he suggested while they headed down the corridor.

Ronnie almost laughed at that, but then sent a quick thought in Standard for Radatel to never, *ever* disclose the source of the protein powder used in the processor to the Vanir Ambassador – at the specific request of the Ambassador's *companion*.

### ***Back on the Kraken***

Torga watched the very colorful transport advance over the rock, and settle in behind it before coming to the realization that it matched the general configuration of a Galaxy-class tank.

This was what Ronnie had told him to expect, but the reality of it still surprised him.

If what Ronnie had said was true, it was the very same tank he'd used to rescue Maya Tal from the Diplomatic Station all those years ago – only then it had been fully cloaked and shielded. Right now, it was sliding in

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the back door – having somehow opened it remotely. This was something *else* Ronnie had not mentioned, and he now wondered about the occupants of the tank, and how much they knew about the *Kraken*.

He headed to the docking bay at a trot to find out.

### *On the Hanger Deck*

“Wow, it seems *roomier* inside!”

Andy stood in the ‘*Ceti*’s lock and marveled at the airiness of the open space. The last time he was here, it’d been crowded with workers, refugees, supplies, and three other transports. Now only the *Orca* remained behind. At a prod from behind him, he stepped down to the deck, and David and their two passengers were not far behind.

“Looks a little used,” Petrus muttered, while Larl sniffed the air curiously.

“What’s that smell?”

“I suspect it might be the lingering odor of a dead body or two, along with the smell of ... *spices*?” Petrus suggested, then caught sight of Torga just entering the hanger, with one of the Kee in company.

“Welcome to the *Kraken*,” Torga called out in Standard as he came forward. “My name is Torga. I’m to turn command over to ... to number *Four*?”

“That be me,” Petrus said, then held out his hand, Earth-style, and took Torga’s huge hand in a firm grip. “This is Lord Caldar’s Grandson and Great-Grandson, David and Andy Lane. And *this*,” he added, letting go of his hand and gesturing to Larl, “... is Doctor Larl Riker. Larl is here to examine the remaining body from the Death Void, and perhaps get a chance to interview the Vanir called Sue, and a young lady by the name of *Auda*?”

Torga was momentarily stunned but quickly recovered.

“Well, Sue’s not too talkative so far, but Auda has learned enough Standard. This is *Déjà*,” he said, bringing the Kee forward from behind him.

Her eyes twinkled at the smiles and tiny waves from David, Andy, and Larl.

“The Kee seemed to pick up the Vanir language quite easily, but I can’t pronounce any of their names.” Torga continued with a shrug, then added, “It’s probably why Ronnie gave them human names.”

This triggered a quiet chuckle from Larl, but Torga glared at him with a hard look on his face, causing Larl to raise one hand in placation.

“Forgive me, Torga, son of Lord Gagsa. Ronnie probably did that because he does not believe people should be *numbered* ... and it would make it easier for *him* more than anything else. Besides, giving them human names – *Earth* names, in fact – makes their assimilation into our society much easier.”

Torga relaxed, then noticed Petrus was looking curiously down at the Kee. After a few more moments, he squatted down to meet Déjà eye-to-eye and look her over more carefully. She smiled at his attention, then executed a single pirouette for him. After curtsying gracefully, she smiled at him again.

“Would you like to *play* with me?” she asked politely while grinning from ear to ear.

“Déjà, do you promise not to *eat* any of our guests?” Torga asked jokingly, and she beamed up at him.

“Oh *no*, Torga! Déjà and Kiki don’t eat *anyone* anymore – unless they *want* us to!”

She giggled and hugged his leg, before turning to face the four visitors and smiling even wider.

### ***October 25, Petrus and Larl Conduct their Investigations***

After settling in the previous afternoon, Torga had taken David, Andy, and Larl on a general tour of the *Kraken*, while Petrus had worked his way from the bridge, through the systems, and then down to the power plant, and engines; checking and testing things as he went.

After that, he ran through the ships logs, and read, watched, and listened to recorded events since he’d been off the ship, and learned that Sai and her boys had taken his place. Aside from his general fear factor, Petrus was very glad the lad had picked up Sai and turned her and her boys into a proper crew for the *Kraken* – even if she didn’t always follow orders to the letter.

Supper that evening had brought polite introductions and conversation with Auda and Kiki, along with somewhat limited greetings with Sue, the Vanir survivor. Petrus and Larl had put off any further questions until the next morning. After supper, David and Andy said their goodbyes and headed back to the platform to dock and await further transportation duties from the Emperor and his wife.

In the morning, Doctor Riker conducted a physical examination of the body that had been stored in ship doc, but kept shaking his head while

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looking over the results. Something was not adding up, and to make any sense out of it he would need input from a full bio-team to pick apart his rough findings. The morning dragged on as he conducted more tests; and took more readings, and images of the body's internal organs, and structures, but nothing seemed to produce any happy conclusions about *any* of them.

The Vanir were supposed to be an *alien* species – a *true* alien species – but he just wasn't seeing anything that stood up and screamed *ALIEN* at him, and it was making him frustrated. He may not deal *directly* with the biological sciences, but he wasn't *stupid*, either, and this investigation was making him feel *very* inadequate. No doubt, he would have to suffer some academic hazing over the hash he was getting for results; probably something a first year bio student would pick out in but a moment.

It was later in the day when Petrus walked into ship doc, with Déjà in tow.

"So, what's the big lizard made out of? Silicone-based? Some form of alien carbon-based thing, or what?"

Larl was still stumped, and admitted it.

"I can't make it out. It's *carbon*-based, just like us – and I mean *just* like us – but that raises *more* questions than answers. If you follow the Genesis theory of life, then it makes sense that whomever or whatever was seeding the galaxy with carbon-based life forms..." Larl paused and raised his hands vaguely while shaking his head slightly, "...for *some* reason, they created this one for the planet they evolved on, but from what Ronnie told me about their home planet, they aren't really suited for *that* place either. I would have expected them to come from someplace with a whiter star, and maybe somewhat dryer – maybe tropical, but with dry land, and lots of trees and plants."

Petrus stood there with his arm draped casually around Déjà's shoulders while considering Larl's dilemma. He wanted to ignore the dismal prospect of yet another mystery for Ronnie to get involved with, but pursued it obliquely anyway.

"You think maybe ... they're transplants?"

Larl cocked his head, then glanced down at Déjà for a moment, while cerebrating the possibility of it.

"Transplants? That ... that *sort* of makes sense, but from what Ronnie told me, their primary planet is wet, and under a red sun, and the few other places they've spread out to, are similar. Not at *all* like we're used to on Kantor, Cletus, Balese, and the like. Of course, humans can live

almost *anywhere* they can get food and shelter,” he considered, then started making notes in his data pad for further thought.

“I see you’ve gotten over your Kee phobia,” he stated offhandedly, while continuing to make entries.

“Phobia? Who ever said I had a phobia about the Kee?” Petrus asked indignantly.

“Four – the *last* time I saw you, you’d been eaten pretty badly, and as I recall, you didn’t even have *legs*,” Larl pointed out dryly, then looked up in time to catch the defensive hug Petrus had just given Déjà.

“Well, as it turns out, both Déjà and Kiki are perfectly *charming* young ladies, and *very* accommodating. I highly recommend an hour or two in their company.”

Déjà beamed up at Petrus, before turning her attention to Larl.

“Doctor Riker, would *you* like to play with me? Kiki played with David and Andy *yesterday*, and Four is going to talk to *Sue*, so Déjà will be *all* alone,” she said with a sad pout on her face.

Larl squatted down to her level and put a gentle smile on his face.

“Perhaps later, Déjà,” he said, which got him a big smile in return, before something jolted his memory and brought him upright again. “Sue! Ronnie said something about Sue and this body! Oh, yeah! He thinks *this* is the guy that saved her life, and ... how do you plan to talk to Sue? Through Déjà, or can you read her mind like Ronnie does?”

“Actually, Lili taught me a bit of Vanir, and Déjà was practicing with me a little while ago. I thought I would go and chat up the young lady and see if I could jog her memory a bit. Ronnie said she’s still a bit confused.”

Larl nodded in memory of that report.

“Yes. A truly multi-compartmented mind. It’s an amazing development ... probably related to survival of some sort. According to Ronnie, the bits sometimes get into arguments. Still ... I suppose having the ability to do things and still think about other things would be a bonus. It would allow you to consult *yourself* after a fashion and work out processes that bog down in group discussions ... like the ones I’m going to introduce with *these* findings.”

Larl sighed dejectedly, and Petrus made a suggestion.

“Suppose I bring her here to see what she can tell us about the body? Ronnie said they had no ID on any of them, seeing as how they’re naked

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all the time. Something about skin color patterns, or something like that? Maybe seeing him will help her remember more things?”

“Sure. Sounds like a plan,” Larl agreed, but Déjà suddenly spoke up.

“Kiki or Déjà have to *be* here! Sue is not right in the *head* yet! We need to *be* with her! We calm her *down*! We make her *happy* again!”

The men looked at each other and shrugged, with Larl voicing the decision.

“Very well, Déjà. You can be here when we ask Sue who this man is. If she gets upset, we’ll rely on you to take care of her.”

“*Thank you!* Déjà go get *Sue*?” she asked happily, while looking between the two of them.

“You go ahead and do that, Déjà,” Petrus said. “Just tell her we want to check her health once more, and maybe talk to her for a while. Please don’t tell her about the man.”

“Déjà will bring *Sue*! Déjà will not tell Sue about the *man*!” she agreed, then took off quickly, leaving the men looking on with dazed expressions on their faces.

“So ... how was your Kee interaction *this* time around?” Larl asked while covering the body and sliding it back into storage.

“She was absolutely *delightful*. She can do some *amazing* things with her tongue, and what she can do with her vagina is *unbelievable*! She could have gone on all day, and kept *me* at it, too – much like that business Ronnie worked out with that Healer back on Earth – but she *always* wants payment at some point. She eventually insists on a *liquid* protein treat, and she’ll *get it* from you – *over and over* if you let her,” he said with just a touch of weariness.

“That sounds just like what I’ve read about the Kee,” Larl agreed, and they settled back to wait for Sue and Déjà to show up.

### ***Vanaheim, The Prime’s Quarters***

The Prime was resting once again, thanks to the efforts of her Senior Medical Technician ... not that he minded in the least.

She had been handling things pretty well – right up until yesterday evening, when her linguists and specialists had finally identified the human known only as Rondal Caldar. To her dismay, it appeared to be the *same* Rondal Caldar who had destroyed entire *worlds*, and killed *millions upon millions of humans* in the process, nearly two-hundred *years ago*!

Using invasive and distasteful means, one source of special research had queried a few select humans and learned that Rondal Caldar was very likely behind the removal of implanted humans from Hegemony space for the last several *years*. Unfortunately, all those implanted humans delivered into Commonwealth space had been *killed!* At least, the cessation of their *tracers* would seem to indicate such.

This had been determined through careful backtracking of the tracking signals. A tracer-implanted human would move in a random pattern through the Hegemony, while carefully avoiding the planetary clusters. Shortly after entering Commonwealth space, their signals would disappear – sometimes one-by-one if they were traveling in a group.

They had never discovered what had been going on, because no one had ever analyzed the data before the humans had contacted them outright. As for the sudden disappearance of many more tracers, her sources asserted that the human was told the tracers could be removed safely, but for a race who valued life so cheaply, why would they bother? According to accepted human theory, it would be much easier to simply *kill* the implanted ones. Once you knew what to look for, tracers were not hard to find, and simply disposing of the few tens of thousands of bodies out of billions of humans would mean *nothing* to them.

This human menace – this *Rondal Caldar* – needed to be *eliminated*, but how to go about it? Even now, the Vanir sent to spy and die, were being hosted by the humans to negotiate a “treaty” of some sort that would supposedly set forth boundaries for each society. But what was the likelihood of humans remaining observant of it? After all, they tried to push their expansion into Hegemony-held space, and maintained an armed presence, and even open conflict with each other. Now her spies report this Rondal Caldar has been harassing the Hegemony from within; stealing citizens and taking them off to die at the hands of Commonwealth *slavers*?

This was *madness!* Humans were *mad!*

The Prime’s emotions tossed and turned, while her individual mind segments argued and shouted at each other – each one having a different interpretation of the reports from S’Shac’Kah 39496 and S’Shac’Kah 38521.

‘*The humans are NOT dying!*’ argued one segment, while another shouted it down with *accepted* human knowledge gained from years of remote studies.

‘*The spies report them being taken and worked to death by Commonwealth SLAVERS!*’ argued another segment, while yet *another* proclaimed, ‘*That isn’t what they said at all!*’

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Still another segment wanted her to focus on the survivor, who could not be identified by her spies.

*‘Perhaps you have FOUND her!’* it proclaimed, while another pointed out that, *‘She’s now part of the HUMAN’S crew!’* which only muddled the process by adding conflicting viewpoints to the entire babbling conversation.

Somewhere along there, the Senior Medical Technician stepped in and offered the Prime a fruit drink and a massage – which quickly devolved into an argument; before becoming a grappling of slippery bodies, followed by gentle caresses that quickly advanced to more forceful demands, which finally overtook *both* their senses – and the Prime was once again made stable and whole – for a little while longer.

As the Senior Medical Technician lay with the Prime nestled safely within his strong embrace, he wondered if the humans truly *could* read Vanir minds, as the spy had claimed. Wouldn’t that be a *wonderful* gift for the medical profession? And for the *Prime*, as well! Perhaps he would suggest it in a calmer moment? Or arrange to contact the spy to see if the human would perform that same miracle for *his* benefit in support of the Prime?

### ***Aboard the Kraken***

“Come on, Sue! Come meet *Four!* He talks Vanir, *too!* He’s a *nice* man! He plays with me *good!*” Dêjà said excitedly, while leading Sue through the corridors to the ship doc.

Since Sue’s last visit hadn’t been that pleasant, she wasn’t enthused with the prospect of visiting the ship doc again. They hadn’t hurt her, but it brought back unpleasant memories of occasions where she’d observed humans being implanted or experimented upon by the technicians of Station 6. She was much calmer about it now, but avoided memory of it because it was so unsettling for her – or *parts* of her, at least.

She also missed S’Slich’Tah 41568 – one who would have mated with her; if she were of his warren, and if they were free to do so within their society. He was not like the others in his warren. He did not seem to harbor the same animosity towards the humans like the Senior Observer and the rest of his staff. A portion of her mind dawdled over those memories...

It was on Vanaheim where she’d discovered a disturbing tidbit of information about the Prime’s *private* policy in contrast to her *public* policy. It had eaten at her until she developed the desire to resolve the issue *personally*. That was the excuse *most* of her mind had agreed they would base her actions on.



What she *really* wanted to do was simply leave Vanaheim, and didn't care how she did so. That she had the resources to produce impeccable false credentials had never been detected. She was off Vanaheim, and doing something besides sitting around the warren every day, while waiting for the *proper* pair bonding to be assigned to her. It was just a bonus that both opportunities had occurred at the same time.

Upon first hearing rumors of the illegal program the Prime had allowed, she'd thought it was incredibly horrible and cruel. Implanting bombs in humans was *beyond* wrong – it was morally *repugnant!* To her dismay, the Senior Observer aboard the station had documents stating it was a *top* priority of the Prime. It was at that point she'd wished she really *was* an Official Observer just to report this anomaly of public policy back to the Prime's staff, but then she would have been found. At least the communications technician never questioned her one-way messages back to Vanaheim on that separate unmonitored frequency.

S'Slich'Tah 41568 had been kind to her, and understanding of her position as an Official Observer. That was the story she'd provided to the Senior Observer upon arrival, anyway.

Not that she didn't send out reports praising the actions of Observer Station 6 ... they just didn't go out on a frequency that anyone was monitoring.

And surprise, surprise! What she'd hoped for all of her relatively young life had finally happened – she'd become attached to a male Vanir ... just not one from *her* warren. Poor S'Slich'Tah 41568. He'd cared for her so *very* much. She cared for *him*, as well, but her warren would *never* allow their mating. The possibility of them allowing her to mate below her station and become an outcast without a warren at all was very unlikely. Indeed, such a thing had never even been heard of.

Then there was the accident! An implant ship exploded upon approach to the station, and they'd immediately aborted and left for Vanir space ... but started falling apart upon approaching the source world. S'Slich'Tah 41568 had tried so very hard to save her; finally forcing her into that tiny box and breaking her legs to fit inside it, before closing the lid on her. The last thing she saw through the haze of her pain was his eyes looking in at her ... and then her mind went blank...

Sue broke out of her reverie when they entered ship doc, and she looked down at the two human males. One of them greeted her familiarly in Vanir.

"Hello Sue. My name is Four," Petrus said in Vanir. Thanks to Lili, he also silently listened in on her thought processes to gauge her reaction.

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### *Aboard the Microcosmus*

Samuel was reluctantly explaining his rather tenuous position as an untried Ambassador – and one without the authority to make or accept agreements between their two societies.

*‘Emperor Radatel Caldarous, you must understand this is an unprecedented occasion between the Vanir and another race. Anything we discuss must be presented to the Prime back on Vanaheim, and she must be the final arbiter of any agreement you and I might suggest between our people’*

Samuel had presented it quite reluctantly, but Radatel seemed to have expected it. At least his smile seemed genuine.

*‘That is quite acceptable, Ambassador S’Shac’Kah 39496. As are whatever suggestions my First Lord, Rondal Caldar, might present to you. As Emperor of the Commonwealth, we found it very enlightening to gauge your response to us – as Vanir to Human, if you will. We have not found you lacking in understanding. We find many similarities between the desires of our peoples for their security and safety in our suddenly more-crowded bit of this galaxy. However, as Rondal has already described to you, the Vanir-occupied worlds do not interest us due to their environmental nature’*

Samuel nodded his head in a purely human gesture and shared the equivalent of a Vanir smile before confirming it.

*‘Rondal Caldar had mentioned that. He considers it somewhat odd the Vanir choose to live in such surroundings, as we seem to be quite easily adaptable to a human-standard environment. During the last several weeks of travel with your First Lord, I have pondered that question myself, Sir. Aside from a little light-headedness at first, we seemed to have adapted to the lower air pressure and brighter lights – at least aboard ship’*

Radatel nodded his head similarly and smiled as well.

*‘Perhaps when our negotiations are further along, you will care to accept our hospitality at the Royal Homestead on Kantor? It is quite temperate, and the sun only shines down on the gardens during the few hours of full mid-day – we live along the base walls of a canyon, you see’* the Emperor offered.

*‘Rondal Caldar has explained such to me. He says a walk in the gardens is quite pleasant in the early evening’*

*‘Oh yes. Very pleasant, Ambassador. Very pleasant, indeed’* Radatel agreed.

*Aboard the Kraken*

“Well, was *that* what you were expecting?” Petrus asked with difficulty, while struggling to contain the thrashing body of Sue where she lay sprawled on the floor.

Déjà was trying hard to work her tongue around to Sue’s more available mucus membranes, then finally managed to lick her along her teeth just inside her lip line.

After a few more seconds, Sue finally started to relax, and Déjà thrust her tongue deeply into her mouth, which finally made her go limp in Petrus’ arms. He relaxed his hold on her and began rubbing her back and torso, before slowly working around to her belly.

“Off hand, I’d say she knew the victim,” Larl suggested drily. “Did you get anything?”

“Oh yeah. His name was S’SlichTah 41568, and they were young and in love, but it would not be approved by *any* of the warrens, because she’s from Warren S’Ahi’Ma – whatever *that* means. I also caught something about her not being aboard *officially*, or maybe in some *unofficial* capacity? I think she lied about that somehow. That’s the impression I got, before the arguments started inside her head.”

As Sue continued to relax, Petrus maintained his gentle massage of her underbelly.

“Arguments? Oh, that multiple-brain-segment thing? What was *that* like?” Larl asked.

“Ha! Remember when the girls and the Wives got together and argued over how often they got go shopping on Earth? *Much* worse than that!” he said, while beginning gentle, teasing pressures between Sue’s legs, which didn’t shock Larl so much, as cause him to look upon it in a clinical manner.

“Can humans and Vanir ... really ... you know ... *do that*?” he asked skeptically, while observing Petrus press and manipulate Sue’s reproductive opening until it relaxed enough to begin opening up.

As soon as it did, Déjà dived down and began teasing it with her tongue, so Petrus leaned back and stood up to stretch.

“I don’t really know. I don’t think a human would be big enough to be noticeable – except maybe a Drecks.”

They both watched for a few minutes until Sue suddenly tensed, then gave out a relaxed shudder. Then she held Déjà close to her body for several minutes before finally sagging back contentedly.

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About a minute later, Déjà withdrew and stood up.

“Sue gonna be all *right* for now! Déjà and Kiki take care of her again *later!*” she said happily, but looked over at the sheet-covered body. “I think she *knows* that boy,” she added quietly, while pointing to the body Larl had pulled out of the way of the thrashing Sue.

They all looked at Sue, while Déjà squatted down and began gently rubbing her around her head and neck. Sue finally opened her eyes and looked up at them, staring at her. Then she turned the most *amazing* shade of green, with tints of *orange* flashing through it. Petrus broke into concerned Vanir tones before she could do more than that.

“Sue, are you feeling better now?” he asked politely in Vanir, while squatting down and holding her hand firmly to keep her from bolting. “Please let me help you up. I think you should get something to eat or drink, and then maybe rest for a while,” he told her while working his arm around her and helping her stagger to her feet.

Once erect, she looked down at him quizzically as he hugged her gently while looking up at her.

“You go ahead and take care of yourself, Sue. Déjà will go with you to make sure you are all right. Perhaps you’ll join us at supper later?” he suggested, and she silently let Déjà lead her out of ship doc and down the corridor.

“More questions than answers, Four,” Larl muttered after they left the space.

“Aye, lad. That be true.” Petrus glanced at the ship doc’s timer and compared it to the unofficial schedule in his head. “You want to interview Auda now?”

Larl looked at the timer and let out a sigh.

“Might as well. Lili was wondering if the sociologists would be better served if Auda stayed with us while Ronnie goes farting around with the Vanir again. Then the sociologists can learn more about ... *Midgard*, I think he called it?”

### ***Kantor, The Elder’s Quarters***

The Elder was relaxing while sitting quietly in her room and sipping a measure of ambrosia. The non-descript instrumental music she was listening to was almost subliminal in its soothing components...

She was alone for the moment, while her staff was still busy orchestrating the mass removal of Vanir trackers and bombs in whatever citizens they had been located within. The final decision had been to do

so under the guise of a routine medical alert for a possible new infectious vector. It had been done before, at least within the last hundred years or so, and was an established procedure that only needed minor modifications for it to be effective – in this case, *physically* removing something, instead of simply having your local Healer cure you from whatever had infected your body.

They had acquired three remote insertion and removal machines from the Vanir implantation ships recovered by Rondal. As such, the entire task promised to take several months, if not a whole year to complete. It could probably be done more quickly, but explaining why a Healer needed to *physically* open your lower abdomen, remove a suspicious bit of hardware, and then Heal over the incision would lead to too many unpleasant questions at this point in time.

At least this *latest* information from Lili was somewhat positive. This Vanir Ambassador, Samuel, seemed very sincere, but he was not of the ruling warren of Vanaheim. She'd found it curiously refreshing that the Vanir had followed the Commonwealth practice of having a *female* in overall guidance of society, or rather, it would appear the Commonwealth followed the same practice the *Vanir* had developed.

A thought crossed her mind. Lili had still not found the mysterious Senior Staff of Rondal, nor did she seem particularly inclined to pursue the hunt more actively than she had been. But then again, it did not appear to be all *that* disturbing. None of the latest Visions had indicated anything related to their location, but there was still a nagging doubt in her mind that they even existed. Of course, that could imply Rondal was perhaps much more powerful than he had let on, and was using the premise to misdirect efforts away from himself.

She gave out a weary sigh. Lili had suggested a meeting between her and the Grandmother of the Vanir at some point, but when that variable was introduced, the Visions became cloudy once again, compared to their more recent clarity regarding Rondal and his actions. That triggered another chain of thought for her, as it appeared that, although Rondal had somehow finally *removed* his curse, there was no indication of how he had managed it. She paused at that, and then remembered.

Hadn't Rondal removed his curse several *weeks* ago? She shook her head, before sipping a little more ambrosia. She did not want to consider that her memory might be slipping. She wondered again how Kita had maintained her objectivity with the Visions over all those centuries, let alone her sanity. She'd only dealt with them over the last six years, and *still* only dimly grasped their effectiveness in managing *anything* – least of all the direction the Commonwealth *should* be pursuing. Perhaps, as Lili had suggested, it was time to meet with the Emperor on a regular basis

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to develop and maintain a consistent policy for the further development of the Commonwealth? Wait ... was that not *Radatel's* suggestion?

Lady Ai sipped her drink once more while remaining blissfully unaware of how close to madness she'd come just several weeks earlier, even as she considered those chaotic events in her mind right now.

Trenka had left her service. Rondal had changed tactics and become helpful instead of abusive towards her. The Vanir had inadvertently been discovered, and now *both* societies were in the tentative stages of negotiations for a peaceful coexistence. The trackers and bombs, an almost *reasonable* response to humanity's natural aggressiveness, were being located. Once the recovered tools were setup, and training in their safe operation had been completed, they planned the removal of both types of devices on a daily basis.

Additionally, Sai had advised her that Rondal was no *complete* fool, and that, should negotiations fail to provide adequate security for the Commonwealth, Rondal was quite ready and capable of eliminating the entire Vanir *race!* If not at *his* hands, then at the hands of his *Senior Staff!*

There was that nagging issue once again, the Senior Staff. She suspected Sai knew *much* more than she let on, but it seemed like there was something blocking her from prying harder, or ... no, just no real push within her of forcing Sai to reveal that particular secret.

Lili, *too*, it would almost seem, but Lili truly did *not* know who they were...

She'd clearly read in her mind that she was clueless as to their identity; and during that one chance she'd had into Rondal's mind, he'd not been thinking of them – just all the *other* nonsense she'd run across during one of his nightmares...

She thought she should probably push harder into Sai or Rondal and *force* the knowledge from them, but ... maybe not right away...

She took another sip of her drink, and relaxed further. Then she glanced up at her timer and smiled. Doctor Riker was out on assignment right now, but Amy was in residence, and due to stop by in another hour.

They would share the evening meal together, and then retire for the night ... and Amy would do her very *best* to make up for the absence of her husband.

It had been a *long* while...

***Kantor, The Royal Homestead, The Royal Gardens***

Three of the children were walking through the gardens accompanied by Diane, the kits, and a very reluctant Maya.

While the children seemed to be on a simple nature walk, Diane, who was keeping Maya occupied with simple gossip about the household, was deflecting the undercurrents of their activities from her.

*'She seems to be holding steady for the time being'* Cathy observed.

*'She'll be very upset with us if she ever finds out what we've done to her'* Jaiying reminded them a little hollowly.

*'The Elder should not become upset enough to break her conditioning as long as Grandfather can keep everything under control'* Josie considered.

*'It wasn't conditioning, Josie'* Walter pointed out. *'We merely suggested that things weren't as dire as she thought they were, and she should let the issue of Grandfather's Senior Staff fall aside for a while'*

*'Well, Momma better bring the BIG toys with her, since Daddy Larl is still checking out the body on the Kraken'* Josie shared, which got a giggle from the other two girls.

The giggle brought Maya's instant attention, but all she saw was a tail swipe from one of the valaet kits flicking between the girl's heads.

*'How is Daddy Larl coming with that data? Are the Vanir real aliens, or not?'* Cathy asked.

*'He really doesn't know'* Josie shared. *'He sent the DNA data through the databases and was getting all kinds of matches, but they're all screwed up. He's called for a specialist to come visit the Kraken'*

*'It might be better to take that body off the Kraken and get it to a proper lab'* Walter suggested thoughtfully, then thought of another reason to get it off the Kraken.

*'It pushed Sue over the edge when she first saw it'* he added.

*'Oh yes! Did you hear the MESS in there?'* Jaiying asked.

*'I don't see how anyone could function with THAT much confusion in their brain'* Josie silently considered.

*'That never happened to us when WE were joined together'* Cathy reminded them.

*'But we aren't as limited as the Vanir, and we do this for a living'* Walter reminded them. *'I'd suggest getting that body sent down to the platform. Maybe Grandmother can bring it over?'*

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*‘Walter! It would be better if Daddy Larl brought it back to the platform’ Josie protested. ‘Daddy David and Daddy Andy can pick it up when they recover Daddy Larl’*

*‘You’re probably right’ Walter admitted. ‘Grandfather should be there when Grandmother sees Uncle Petrus for the first time. Or is he Grandfather Petrus now?’*

*‘It doesn’t really matter. He is still family’ Jaiying pointed out, and that was something they all agreed on.*

*‘How is Rose, Jaiying?’ Walter asked.*

*‘She still can’t project very far, but she’s a year younger than us. She is really tall, though! I’ll work with her while I’m here. Do we want her to talk to her mother?’*

*‘Mama Dorcas has a lot to do with Grandfather’s refugees. With this new task, it might be too much for her’ Walter suggested.*

*‘Walter! Grandfather Gifted Mama Dorcas just like he Gifted ALL our mothers! She should be able to handle it!’ Josie pressed forcefully. ‘Besides, she’s temporarily assigned to the Kraken for the duration. Her job has passed to someone else’*

*‘Perhaps we should let Grandfather decide at this point?’ Cathy suggested.*

*‘Yes. You’re right’ Walter agreed. ‘Grandfather should probably decide this. We know how he hates surprises’*

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

*Destiny had arrived.*

*It had last been in this tiny segment of the quadrant nearly ten-thousand years ago, when it set the Fates in motion to mold and guide humanity towards its Master’s goals – **yet again** – before leaving to deal with other segments in other quadrants.*

*It took a moment to become apprised of the general level of progress of **this** particular grouping of humans, and was pleasantly surprised to see a critical development within the grouping named the Commonwealth. This was a hoped-for, but not yet **expected**, event within the human community. Destiny manifested so he could review the logs of the principal players to gauge the performance of his minions.*

*There was a **recent** one that stood out. He was currently under the guidance of she whom they called **The Fainting Fate**. Looking into his travails, he was almost astonished to discover an error had slipped by undetected – or **unreported**, in this case – and a tool of Destiny and Fate*



*had been under the perusal of a small group of these humans for nearly the last ten-thousand years!*

*On the whole, they had handled this tool rather **well** – right up until just mere moments ago; perhaps as little as five or six-hundred years.*

*Destiny considered the implications.*

*On the one hand, humanity **could** have fallen by the wayside once again until they matured and became more stable on their own.*

*On the **other** hand, humanity – at least within the Commonwealth grouping – was stable, after a fashion, and the Flux had provided a means to **enhance** that stability.*

*What to do ... what to do?*

*Well, the Flux was **not** a tool for humans. Their dependence upon it was **proof** of that, since pride and hubris had **obviously** led to a failure to apply its benefits **properly**. That was going to stop right **now** – and it **did**.*

***That** situation taken care of, Destiny continued to dig into the current situation, and found the **older** siblings of humanity had taken an active interest in their development, as well. Interesting... Their development had progressed along the lines that humanity was **supposed** to have been going all this time, but now **they** were leaving. Well, at least it was providing a **new** challenge for humanity to deal with.*

*This **other** development, though...*

*They would bear careful scrutiny, as they grew and matured. There were just the four of them, yet ... no, there was a **fifth**, albeit a bit younger. They held the promise of the Master in their future. The trick would be to see if any of them **lived** long enough to achieve it.*

*Destiny wondered for just a moment how they came to be, then immediately became aware of their connection to the Fainting Fate and her **principal** charge – the human called Rondal Caldar. Understanding dawned on Destiny as the **current** trial – orchestrated and tracked by this currently assigned Fate – was being played out.*

*This Fate was quite unusual. She had taken a **liking** to the human! She admired his cleverness and drive, and Destiny could easily see she had a hand in creating in him the conditions of his unusual growth and maturity.*

*Well... Destiny would let this path continue to play out without further interference and see what the result was.*

*Could this human broker a peace with his **ancient** siblings, or would humanity fall once again? Or worse, would humanity take several steps*

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*backwards and **destroy** what gains they had made by destroying part of their own past?*

*Destiny observed the Fainting Fate while she watched and made, oh-so-subtle, shifts in reality to help guide and grow her chosen human champion.*

*Not all of them were necessarily helpful, but all of them brought growth, as was required. Should her pet human survive, perhaps Destiny might **reward** this particular Fate with a very **special** gift?*

**That** would be an interesting development, indeed!

### **October 26, KS Microcosmus, Affirmations and Goodbyes**

When David and Andy had gone over to recover Larl, they'd also brought back the Vanir body with them. Donnel Ardan was on hand to receive the body and personally supervised its transfer to the secured bio-lab under his watchful eyes. Doctor Riker, accompanied by a tall, blonde-haired woman with a rather sad expression on her face, came with it. Larl had brought all his notes and findings on both original and back up data tabs, and passed them to the special group of researchers who had gathered in anticipation of this particular specimen.

With promises that the bio-lab crew would keep him fully apprised of their findings, Larl and Auda left to rejoin David and Andy in preparation to return to Kantor with the Emperor's party. Then Donnel turned control of the body over to the senior bio-lab investigator with instructions to treat the body – *in all regards* – as a person of humanity, before leaving to finish packing for his own departure.

### **A Formal Departure...**

A small group had gathered in the formal meeting room that had been used for discussions between the Commonwealth and Vanir representatives. Ronnie and Sai were seated across from Samuel and Sally, and all were waiting quietly when another group of humans entered the room. Following them were two very *young* humans. Samuel and Sally were shocked to see both of the small humans smile at them and wave, which startled them into standing. The rest of the room rose as well, but everyone's attention was drawn to the Emperor and his First wife, who had followed them in.

The entire room remained standing while Radatel summarized the Commonwealth's position and goals for the future. As Radatel spoke silently to Samuel and Sally, Lili translated it into Vanir orally for the transmission device worn by Samuel.

*‘Ambassador S’Shac’Kah 39496, our current understanding of the Vanir Prime’s position is that she was not the instigator of the premature development of the Drecks society, nor was she knowledgeable about the implantation of explosive devices among the citizens of humanity. We accept the implantation of benign tracking devices as a somewhat necessary, if undesirable, response to the Vanir need to research humanity and develop an understanding of human goals and aspirations. We are now pursuing a program for their removal at a very low-level of attention among our population – thus hoping to prevent undue fear and panic’* Radatel stated silently.

*‘Just as we work to maintain peaceful relationships within all occupied Commonwealth star clusters, we are determined to maintain a peaceful relationship towards the Vanir home world, and Vanir society at large. We appreciate that the Prime is responsible for protecting the Vanir from threats to your inhabited space, both inside and out. We have no intentions on Vanir-occupied space, nor would we find it desirable to do so except as a measure of self-defense – although we are quite acceptable to considering commerce of a nature to be determined by formal treaty at some point in the future’* He paused for the amount of time necessary for Lili to complete her oral recitation before going on.

*‘The Commonwealth’s intention in the human-occupied space known as the Hegemony is to observe and prevent disruptions from human species who have acted in a predatory nature towards other human species – both within the Hegemony and without. You are currently aware of our low-level efforts towards that goal, and you should be aware that those goals also include preventing undue attention and detrimental interaction between the Hegemony and the Vanir. Our ultimate goal is total integration between the two human-occupied spaces ... but we’ll settle for peaceful coexistence as long as certain undesirable societal behaviors are formally ended*

Radatel seemed to relax after this last, and presented a friendly smile to Samuel and Sally, before Lili continued in Vanir with the final part of his statement.

“Please extend our kindest regards to the Prime, and convey our desire for a peaceful relationship in the near future. Perhaps at some point, the Prime would consider the establishment of a Confederation between Humanity and Vanir – but that is best left for later discussions,” she stated to finish her husband’s presentation.

Samuel cleared his throat, then made a short statement aloud.

“Emperor Caldarous, I will convey these understandings, and your current policies and greetings, to the Prime upon our return to Vanaheim. I thank you for the kind hospitality you have shown us, and I

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commend your ... Brother ... for his actions on behalf of Vanir citizens wherever he may have encountered them.”

Once it was clear he was done, Lili bowed to the Ambassador’s party; then Radatel and Samuel bowed to each other at the same time. Once heads popped back up, the official mission was complete, and it was time to wrap things up.

“Ambassador, your transport awaits you,” Lili said aloud in Vanir, before adding, “As a matter of practicality, we are sending along several researchers, linguists, engineers, and physicists, along with their support staff,” she added, but paused to turn to the group that had proceed them into the room, and gestured in their direction.

“Members of the Royal family will *also* be traveling with you,” she continued in Vanir, while gesturing with her arm as each name was announced. “The Emperor’s daughter, Princess Laisee Caldarous se Kantor, and her daughter Jaiying, along with Princess Dorcas Caldarous se Womak ne Kantor, her consort Nathan Thomas se Earth ne Kantor, and their daughter Rose.”

Samuel froze in consternation, and Sally gripped his arm tightly while Lili continued in Vanir.

“Rondal Caldar assures us the *Kraken* has plenty of space, and the extra crew will be kept out of your way. The linguists are naturally very anxious to catalog your language so it can be added to our translation devices. We have learned many painful lessons due to a failure of *proper* communication and translation.”

*‘That is why we prefer to use a more direct means of communication, Samuel. The words may not always translate properly, but the intention is most often correct’* she stated silently, before continuing aloud in Vanir.

“If I’m not mistaken, one or more of the *Kraken*’s crew is already well-versed in Vanir, and they will be working with the linguists directly. We would be most grateful if a difficult translation would be addressed by you, Ambassador,” she asked politely.

“I ... yes, that would be most appropriate, Lady Liling,” he replied for the record, but continued silently in a panic.

*‘Children? You are sending along human children?’* he asked silently, while his body began to quiver in anxiety.

Ronnie, having been left out of *that* portion of the conversation until just *now*, suddenly tensed up while Lili continued silently.

*‘Ambassador, you have assured us of the Prime’s peaceful intentions. We have no other way to display our own peaceful intentions, other than to*

*allow our most precious beings passage with you to your home world. Even as Torga, son of Lord Gagsa, is fostered with peaceful intent to the First Lord, so do Rose and Jaiying travel with you as proof of our peaceful intent with the Vanir. Is the situation other than what we were led to believe, Ambassador?’*

‘No ... no, Lady Liling ... Emperor Caldarous. What I have told you is exactly what the Prime has told me – nothing more, nothing less’

“Very well, Ambassador,” Lili continued smoothly, “We wish you a quiet and fruitful journey home,” she stated aloud, then gave an appropriate bow to the Vanir, which they returned rather shakily in kind.

The Emperor left, followed by Lili, and the two little girls saw their opportunity and ran, squealing, to grab Ronnie around each leg – much to the amusement of their parents, but the shock of the Vanir and Ronnie.

“Laisee... Dorcas... What’s going on?” Ronnie quietly asked between clenched teeth, just before Samuel blindly ended the communications link between him and the *Kraken*.

### ***Back on the Kraken***

Ronnie looked out over the mass of bodies and wondered how he’d been sucked into this *latest* fiasco. He glanced to either side of him and tried to find comfort in the presence of his existing crew.

On either side of him stood Sai and her boys, their wives, and his Drecks fosterling, Torga and his wife. The only one missing was Auda, who – Lili had informed him just *before* he’d boarded his shuttle – would be staying behind to work with Commonwealth sociologists regarding the Midgardian situation. The Kee were somewhere in the middle, with Sue standing between them and holding their hands. All of them were wearing expressions of friendliness to one degree or another – except for the Kee. Kiki and Déjà were looking over the assemblage with a thinly veiled hunger at all of the *new* possibilities for play.

If nothing else, it was a blatant, if silent, presentation of a blended-crew, and the expected norm for this trip.

“I welcome all of you to the *Kraken*,” Ronnie said quietly to the assembled newcomers.

The newbies were spread around in the suddenly somewhat cramped docking bay. He took in their piles of new technical equipment, interspersed with bundles of personal belongings. As he glanced around, he could already see factions forming. Technical staff had bunched behind Donnel Ardan, his new engineering lead, and Sai had acquired a

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small Healer contingent composed of Senior Dandan Qiaolian and her two assistants, Mistress Yan Yu and Mistress Qiao Ning.

He'd wondered at the inclusion of three more Healer staff until learning the Royals would naturally be traveling with a protective detail. This one was composed of twenty-six senior warriors – four of whom were already on station outside the quarters of Laisee and Dorcas and their daughters, while the remainder were bunched together in the middle of the docking bay.

Standing in a tight group were the additional housekeeping and kitchen staff, which brought the total crew complement up to eighty.

He suppressed a sigh while continuing with the informal introduction to his ship, then promised follow-on meetings with staff leads to assign workspaces and training for shipboard routines.

Afterwards, he gave Sai responsibility for finding places for everyone to sleep, and left workspace assignment to Donnel; who *had*, no doubt, already *planned* for that eventually with Granger Deltec and Lon Tannis during one drunken evening over half a decade ago. Having settled things to his satisfaction, he took his leave and headed back to his compartment.

Externally, Ronnie had taken this sudden addition to his crew in stride, while *internally*, he was seething with anger that Lili had broken up his Senior Staff, and was sending Jaiying and Rose into harm's way.

Upon reaching his compartment, he'd found Laisee and Jaiying waiting for him by his door. They joined him in his cabin and were now watching him pace as he worked through the implications of what Petrus had casually informed him of while they were still in transit to the *Kraken*. Their armed escort remained outside in the corridor.

'Grandfather, it will be all right' Jaiying shared with him.

"Jaiying, it may *not* be all right. Not after Four learned these new things about Sue!"

"Ronnie, the children *already* knew something was hidden within her," Laisee told him.

"Yes, and now we know what it *is*, Grandfather."

"Jaiying!"

"Grandfather, we are quite alone here. Grandmother is checking stores, and everyone else is busy. Uncle Petrus is still hiding, and you should be *more* worried about Grandmother and Uncle Petrus right now. Sue is still confused, but I will listen as more and more of her mind comes together. There is some question about the truthfulness of the

Station Senior Observer she was with. It may be that the Prime truly did *not* know about the bombs.”

He stopped his pacing and turned to face her.

“And there’s a good chance she *did* know about the bombs, and is lying to us, and to Samuel and Sally about her *authorizing* them! If *that’s* the case, then there’s every reason we *shouldn’t* be taking you into Vanir space!” he said in a near shout.

“If that is the case...” Laisee started calmly, while getting Ronnie to focus on her, “If she *truly* means us harm, then it will not matter *where* we are, if the Vanir are determined to destroy us.”

“Girls... Look – if I have to worry about *your* immediate safety, then it might distract me at a *most* inopportune time,” he said in frustration, before returning to his nervous pacing as Jaiying continued to advise him.

“Grandfather, Sue continues to Heal and become better integrated. The Kee are keeping her stable, and Daddy Larl has found many interesting things about the Vanir. In the meantime, we think you should focus on learning more about the Prime and her motives while we transit to Vanaheim. You will have to use Samuel and Sally ... and Sue. Sue is not what she seems. She is from the Prime’s own warren, and has acted atypical of her warren; of *any* of the warrens, according to the statements of Samuel and Sally.”

Jaiying looked up at him when he paused again, and added, “You’ll also have to keep Grandmother Sai and Uncle Petrus from hurting each other. Or is it Grandfather Petrus, now?”

Ronnie looked down at her sitting on her mother’s lap. The incongruity of her spoken words with her five-year-old body was not lost on him, and he took a deep breath before sighing while shaking his head.

“This was a *lot* easier to deal with when you were all just a bunch of disembodied *voices* across a couple of *hours!*” he muttered angrily, before striding out to locate Sai and Petrus, with Laisee and Jaiying watching quietly as he left.

“Mother, was Grandfather very kind to you when he was your first?”

Laisee was startled for a moment, but then relaxed. The audible words from Jaiying often had the same effect on her, as they’d just had on Ronnie.

“Yes... Yes he was. Ronnie was very kind, and very gentle, and we very much enjoyed each other until my mother found us together.”

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“Do you think he’ll agree to be *my* first? When I’m *older*, I mean?”

“You can always ask him, sweetheart. Ronnie has always been a gentleman about things like that,” she said, and Jaiying laid her head against her mother’s chest and sighed.

### *On the Bridge*

“I have not seen the one named Four since before your arrival,” Torga reported. “He mentioned it would be prudent to make sure Sai was disarmed before his presence was revealed to her.”

“Oh yes... That would be *most* prudent on his part, for sure,” Ronnie muttered, before turning and leaving the bridge in disgust on his mission to find Petrus.

He continued to the commons and found Sai giving a tour to the new technical staff and their support crew. He waited for a lull, and finally got one while the new staff explored the kitchens and ready-access food dispensers.

“Sai, it’s Noon, minus two. I plan to have a staff meeting – ship’s staff meeting – at noon in the large planning room. We’ll be introducing our new crew leads, and laying out our travel plans to the Vanir home world.”

“I’ll finish up this tour in plenty of time, Ronnie,” she assured him, then gave him a peck on the cheek before turning back to her charges.

### *Kantor, The Elder’s Quarters*

Lady Ai stirred just a bit and stretched, before rolling over and settling back down. She had slept like the *dead* and never stirred throughout the night, not even waking when Amy had left her bed and made her way out to breakfast. As she lay there, slowly coming back to consciousness, she marveled at the peace she felt, then fondly remembered the workout she and Amy had shared the night before. She reached out to Amy, but the bed was empty, and when she opened her eyes, found the room dimly lighted from sunlight coming from under the door. She considered that, then glanced at the clock on the wall, and sat upright in bed. It was so *late*!

She scrambled out of bed; feeling the tiny twinges and strains that she and Amy had produced within her, then opened the outer door of her chamber to find no staff in attendance. Turning back to her room, she used the facilities, then took a quick shower, before drying and dressing for the day’s tasks. Another glance at the clock reminded her of how late it was. Caldar’s ship must be ready to leave, and there was information she needed to glean from the Visions before it set out again!



She made her way to the conference room, where she found Amy in review with Fan, Xiu, and Molar. Several documents were shared among them, along with a tray of fruit that sat at the center of the table. She grabbed a napkin and a piece of fruit before sitting down with them.

“Elder! You look *wonderful*!” Fan exclaimed. “Amy said you slept *particularly* well this morning, so we thought a few more hours would be of great benefit to you.”

“Yes, Ai,” Xiu said. “You do look very well rested! You’ve had no troubling dreams last night?”

“I ... no, I don’t think I dreamt at all. I remember our play, and ... and then nothing else. Amy, was there anything you noticed about me last night?”

“My Lady Ai, you were *exhausted* after our play. When you slept, it was as if you had not a care in the world. I was awake early to use the facilities and found you still sleeping well. You had a smile on your face, so I let you continue to sleep. You look very well this morning, my Lady. Your rest has done *wonders* for you,” she assured her, and the rest of her staff nodded in agreement.

Ai relaxed in her chair and felt through her body. She *was* well rested and felt *very* relaxed. In fact, she had not felt this well in several *years*; perhaps not since before Elder Kita’s death. As a matter of course, she scanned herself, and all the rest of her staff but found no tracers, or any of those dreaded bombs of the Vanir observers. At least that nasty intrusive business had been eliminated since Caldor had contacted the Vanir – which reminded her of that pressing matter, and she quickly finished her fruit.

“My Ladies, I will be accessing the Visions and would have your consult along with me. I wish to view the possibilities of this latest venture of Rondal Caldor so we may prepare a proper response to any problem that arises. When you are ready, Ladies,” she stated confidently, then sat back in her chair and closed her eyes.

Ai felt her staff connect with her, and when they were all attached, she reached out and opened herself to the Visions ... but found nothing. She concentrated and focused, but could not feel the threads of possible realities unfolding before her as she’d expected; then began to panic. She opened her eyes and looked at the shocked faces of her staff, barely stifling a scream when they all rose out of their seats and came to kneel beside her chair.

“Ai, are you feeling all right?” Fan asked, while reaching out to put a loving touch on her arm.

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“You’ve just woken from a *very* good sleep, Ai. Perhaps you are *too* relaxed at the moment?” Xiu suggested teasingly.

“There is no rush, my Lady. Caldar will take more than a month to reach Vanaheim ... perhaps *two*,” Molara suggested.

Amy sat and watched quietly, and listened even *more* quietly than Lady Ai, or any of her staff suspected she could. She relayed this directly to Josie, who shared it immediately with Walter, Cathy, Jaiying, and their mothers.

She would rely on the children to update Ronnie and Sai.

### ***On the Kraken, Getting Acquainted***

Ronnie had just finished the formal ship’s meeting, which included personal introductions to Sai’s young men and their wives, Torga and his wife, the Kee, and Sue. It also allowed him to outline his expectations regarding ships functioning, their responsibilities, where they would be assigned working spaces, when they would start their first vacuum and evacuation drills, and what the restricted areas on the ship were.

Lady Dandan Qiaolian had been introduced as the new Healer lead aboard ship who would be reporting to Sai Tal. Dandan would be in charge of Healer training, and she and her staff would provide additional training to the Drecks Healers, along with traditional services to the crew. Lady Qiaolian and her staff of Healers would handle medical emergencies, and it was a credit to her professionalism that she accepted without question the Drecks females as Healers.

The Royal passengers, along with the Ambassador and his staff, were to be treated with the utmost respect, as was, of course, to be expected. Ronnie also let it be known that both of the Kee acted as translators for the Vanir, along with the new First Officer, who was currently finishing an inspection of the ship before launching for transition to Vanir space.

Sai had been startled by that. She never considered Lili would be willing to leave her husband’s side for such a long period of time, but just brushed it off as having acquired one *more* nuisance to deal with over the next several months. At least they’d been on somewhat friendlier terms for the last few years.

After Ronnie dismissed the meeting, he asked Sai to stay behind, before silently calling for Jaiying to bring her mother to the conference room, along with Uncle Petrus.

“Sai, I don’t like the fact that Lili decided to send Jaiying and Rose out here with us – particularly now that we know a little bit more about the *Prime!*” he told her, then quickly outlined the information picked from Sue’s brain during her mini-crisis in their absence.

The stress of this brought him to his feet while he gestured expansively in the telling of it. Sai's back was still to the door when Laisee and Jaiying walked in – with Petrus right behind them – but it was Jaiying's squeal that got her turned around.

“Grandmother!” she shouted aloud, then ran over to her seat and climbed into her lap – all but ignored when Sai's eyes became riveted upon Petrus.

“Uhh, Sai... I believe you might have met our new First Officer? His name is Four,” Ronnie said quietly, while making sure he was standing *well* outside her reach.

She looked at Petrus with deadly intent, while Jaiying wrapped her arms around her neck and pulled herself up higher to kiss her on the cheek.

“I'm so happy to *see* you again, Grandmother! Walter, Cathy, and Josie *all* wanted to come with me, but Aunt Lili said their daddies would miss their mommies too much, so she let me and Rose come *instead*! Can Mommy and I stay with you and Grandfather in *your* cabin?” she asked.

“Hello Sai. You look as lovely today, as when I first saw you, my love,” Petrus said quietly.

“Petrus ... Aloysius ... Zickgraf,” she said slowly, then reached around Jaiying to hug her lightly, but kept her eyes locked on Petrus. “You are ... our new First Officer?”

“Well, truth be known, my Lady Tal, I've been the lad's First Officer for a while now – up until he got my eyes and legs eaten away,” he muttered while tilting his head towards Ronnie.

“Hey! *You* got your eyes eaten. *I* chopped your legs off,” Ronnie countered easily, then turned to Sai. “Otherwise I wouldn't have been able to pick him *up* – he was too *fat*!”

Laisee smiled at the byplay while watching and listening to Sai's very loud surface thoughts bouncing around during the verbal distraction. Meanwhile, Ronnie made the first quiet overture...

“Sai ... every member of my crew is a valuable asset, and I need assurances that my crew will function without personal difficulties. You are an excellent Healer and tank commander ... but Petrus has the experience, and he can fight the *Kraken*. We need that level of versatility for this next stage of our mission, Sai, but I will understand if you wish to withdraw from my service,” he stated softly, then waited as the silence stretched between everyone.

“I will miss you very much if you do,” he added quietly.

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Jaiying still held onto Sai loosely, then looked over at her mother's shocked face, before turning back to Sai.

"Grandmother, Uncle Petrus is necessary at this point in time, and so are you. Uncle Petrus is your husband, and he loves you – and you still love him. Now is the time to resolve your differences, Grandmother ... especially since the Elder has lost the Visions."

Whatever feelings were running through anyone, stopped at that moment, and they all looked to Jaiying.

"Jaiying?" Ronnie asked.

"Mama Amy just told me and the rest of us. Sometime during the night, the Visions were taken away from Lady Ai, and she is now returning to her earlier state of dementia. We do not know if this is a simple matter of a disorder or not, but both Walter and Cathy are watching her carefully."

"When you say ... 'taken away' ... what *exactly* do you mean?" Ronnie asked, while sitting down heavily.

"Lady Ai slept well after she and Mama Amy played last night. She slept *really* well, and they continued to let her sleep. When she attempted to connect with the Visions this morning ... she could not."

"But that's ... that means that someone *else*..."

"We are searching, Grandfather, but none of the minds we have touched seem to be experiencing the level of confusion and frenzy that you described."

Ronnie stared at her for several seconds, before settling back and closing his eyes. He reached out – searching for the threads of potential reality – but they were gone. He pressed and pressed while focusing *intently*, but they were just ... *gone*. He opened his eyes and looked around the room with a bemused look on his face, then reached up and scratched the back of his head before dropping his arm.

"Well... At least they aren't *black* anymore," he muttered while shaking his head slowly.

The silence stretched out for more than a minute, until Petrus cleared his throat.

"Umm, lad? Would you care to explain what just took place?" he asked diffidently, while looking from face to face.

"Oh. I'm sorry Four ... Petrus. You know Sai, of course. And Laisee and Jaiying," he said, then silently reached out to the others, while including Petrus in the conversation.

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*'May I introduce my Senior Staff – Walter Lane, Josie Lane, Cathy Lane, and Jaiying Caldaraus?'* he share with them all.

*'Your ... Senior Staff?'* Petrus asked with an incredulous look on his face.

*'Oh yes. VERY Senior, I assure you. It also includes their mothers in an advisory capacity. You and Sai are the only outsiders who are aware of them'* Ronnie pressed upon him.

*'That may no longer be true, Grandfather'* Walter sent clearly. *'Hello Uncle Petrus!'*

*'Hi, Uncle Petrus!'* Josie added.

*'Be good to Grandmother, Uncle Petrus'* Cathy chimed in, just as he dropped heavily into a chair on the other side of the table.

*'What have you discovered, Walter?'* Ronnie asked.

*'Not so much a discovery, as a feeling, Grandfather. The Visions, or the Flux as Grandmother Kita called it, have been shut off at the source. We suspect this was deliberate on the part of the entity performing the action'*

*'The Vanir?'* Sai immediately asked.

*'No, Grandmother. They have no knowledge of such that we can determine. We suspect a level of entities above the Others are responsible for this. Perhaps this is evidence of the Gods that Grandfather swears by?'*

*'Well, not having the Visions anymore... Of course they didn't help Kita stay on the straight and narrow, but surely they were a key element in guiding the early growth of the Commonwealth'* Ronnie considered.

*'That was ten-thousand years ago, Grandfather'* Jaiying pointed out. *'There is no reference within the Elder's offices that tells of the Visions. It was all passed down directly from Elder to Elder. There is only speculation the Visions even existed at that early stage of the Commonwealth. There is nothing to verify if they always existed, or when they were first used by the Commonwealth Healers. Or if, in fact, they were the first ones to use them'*

*'They could be an artifact of the creation of Cletus and the Healer colonies'* Walter suggested.

*'Or it might have been something the First male Senior discovered or developed and never told anyone about'* Cathy suggested.

*'Or ... it may be that we've finally been caught with our fingers in the cookie jar and they've closed the lid on it!'* Josie suggested cheerfully.

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*'The Elder's staff must be going nuts right about now'* Ronnie sent while sighing dismally.

*'No, Grandfather. Just the Elder'* Walter shared sadly.

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

Amy had stayed seated at the table after the Seniors escorted Lady Ai back to her room.

She'd updated the kids, and they'd updated Ronnie by now, so she sat there eating another piece of fruit and sipping at a cup of juice, but turned her head as the door opened, and asked, "How is she?"

Molara came in and closed the door. She looked down at her, and wondered, once again, if Amy could have had *anything* to do with Lady Ai's condition, but then dismissed it – once again. More likely, it was something Ronnie's mysterious "Senior Staff" had cooked up and subjected the Elder to as punishment for cursing Ronnie all those years ago. She walked over and flopped dejectedly into her seat, then reached for her cup of juice and sipped at it lightly, before looking over at Amy.

"She's sedated for the time being. Perhaps when she rests a while longer, she'll be ready to try again," she muttered.

Amy reached out to her and touched her arm gently.

"Molara ... you were connected with her. What was it like? Was it dark like it was before? Ronnie said he'd seen dark Visions sometimes and–"

"It was *nothing*! She could not connect! Not dark, not light – just *nothing*!" she said angrily, and Amy relayed this to the kids, to relay it to Ronnie and Sai.

A very quick conference occurred, before Ronnie reached out to Molara with a question.

*'Molara? The Elder seems to be unreachable. May I have a moment of your time, please? I appear to have a problem'*

*'The Elder is indisposed, Rondal. What is your problem?'* she asked distractedly.

*'This may sound silly, but late last night I was looking through the Visions, and then... I don't know. I suddenly seemed to lose focus, and I could not find them again. I thought I was just tired last night, but this morning, I still cannot seem to connect. Then I began wondering if it was just me. Has the Elder had any problems lately?'* he asked politely, and felt her consternation across the fractional seconds between the moon and Kantor.

*‘The Elder is... She was unable to view the Visions this morning, Rondal. You say you experienced this last night?’*

*‘Yes. I was working variations between us and the Vanir, then things first got fuzzy, and then they went blank. Not light or dark as I’ve seen before, but ... well ... disconnected is the best I can describe it. Well, for a while there I was worried, but if the Elder is also cut off, then it’s nothing we have control over’*

*‘What does your “Senior Staff” have to say about it?’*

*‘Them? Very little, actually. They only have the limited information I was able to provide to them, and anecdotal information about the Elder’s use of the Visions. Nothing else is available – no records, no oral history’*

*‘Rondal, if the Visions don’t return, then–’*

*‘Then, my dear Molara, we do it the old fashioned way and think very carefully over ALL the ramifications of our actions BEFORE we act. It’s not that hard. I’ve been doing it all my life’* he shared, then shrugged mentally.

*‘But ... the Commonwealth! The stakes are so high!’*

*‘And they are the same decisions no matter how they are approached. That’s all we can do, Molara. We will just have to do the best we can. My regards for the Elder’s distress, and please advise her that all is not lost. She will just have to rely more on the data her Tier One staff processes for her and make her best decisions on issues given the circumstances. Thank you for your time, Molara’* he sent in closing.

“Molara ... where were you just now?” Amy asked with a tilt of her head.

“Ronnie. He’s lost the Visions, too,” she muttered, and Amy nodded slowly.

“Do you think you should tell Lady Lili about this?” Amy asked her while continuing to nod slowly.

“No! She doesn’t need to be aware that–” she stopped at Amy’s nodding look and reconsidered. “Rondal just might tell her ... and it would be better if we told her first. I’ll confer with Fan and Xiu, and we’ll decide what to tell Lili.”

“The truth would probably be best,” Amy said. Molara looked at her sharply, but nodded her head slowly at the suggestion.

“Probably,” she agreed, before leaving to find Fan and Xiu.

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

Xue had just returned after having taken a break from calming her sister's spirits from the shock of Fan's report.

Perhaps it was merely temporary? Perhaps, due to some unexpected incapacity within Ai, another Senior somewhere *else* has been blessed with the Visions? The Kantite Elder had been acting strange of late – even as noted by Fan and Xiu. She had already dismissed out of hand the suspicion from Molara that Lady Amy had anything to do with Ai's sudden failure. Indeed, by all accounts, Ai had awoken refreshed and *happy* for a change.

After her short visit to the facilities, she was just about to reenter the Council chamber to resume their meeting, when she received a quick update from Xiu.

*'Senior Xue, a moment please?'*

*'I am ready, Xiu'*

*'Molara reports she has received word from Lord Caldor that he had lost access to the Visions sometime within the last fifteen hours'* Xiu shared, then waited politely while Xue caught up with that concept.

*'It is true then, that ... that Lord Caldor had access to the Visions?'*

*'It was reported by him to Elder Ai at the time of his last meeting with her on his dead platform – if he is to be believed'*

Xue was stumped. They'd known of his claim, but there'd been no way to verify it – nor really any way to verify the claim that Ai had been receiving Visions, for that matter, other than the word of her staff when they observed with her.

*'Do you believe Lord Caldor has actually experienced the Visions, Xiu?'*

*'My Senior, Lord Caldor had actually INSTRUCTED Lady Ai on suitable methods with which to make sense of the Visions – much like Ai reported Elder Kita instructed her. Of course, I have no way to judge'* Xiu admitted.

Xue thought of what little they knew about the Visions, and what hearsay had told them about Lord Caldor's limited experiences with them during his two-decade sojourn on the dead battle platform. Perhaps he had taken it upon *himself* to try to use the Visions after learning how Kita had advised Ai? Of course, that didn't fix the *immediate* issue.

*'Xiu, please advise the Elder's staff to watch over Elder Ai and provide whatever care you deem necessary and reasonable. On the matter of the missing Visions ... we will extend out and try to sense the chaos Elder Kita had experienced when she'd been unexpectedly blessed with them'*



She considered that for a few moments, before adding *'I would suggest you contact Seniors within your reach to extend out as well and be watchful of chaos emanating among their peers'*

*'I hear and obey, my Senior'* Xiu sent, then waited the nominal three-count, before dropping the connection and turning to her assignment.

Xue tilted her head down and began rubbing her eyes.

"I am just too *old* for this nonsense," she muttered irritably, before pushing open the Council chamber door and stepping in to confront the existing chaos before her.

### ***The Kraken, A Standoff***

Ronnie looked over at Sai appraisingly and noted she was disarmed – as disarmed as any combat-rated warrior can be, and still be breathing. He glanced at Petrus, then back at Jaiying and Laisee.

"Girls – it would seem that our First Officer and our Senior Healer have a few things to work out. We should probably let them do that in privacy," he said quietly, then reached out to take Jaiying from Sai's arms.

He gathered Jaiying to himself and they made their way out of the meeting room while he casually asked Laisee about things back on Kantor. As the door was closing behind them, Jaiying piped up with information about how Maya was doing now that she was a full Senior.

The room remained silent for a full minute after they'd left, before finally...

"Petrus," Sai muttered.

"Sai," Petrus murmured.

She sat still in her chair while looking him over.

"I was told you were dead."

"I got better."

"You look *well* ... for a *dead* man – or so *Ronnie* led me to believe!"

She scowled darkly at him, remembering that night.

"I truly thought I was, my love, but I knew you wanted the privilege. He returned me to Kantor, and they put me back together."

"He took you back to *Lili*!" She'd spat it out like a curse.

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"I didn't have much say in the matter, my love. And I couldn't really see where we were going at the time."

"I suppose once you got yourself together, you took up with that Royal harlot once again?"

"Lili? Sai, my precious, Lili's heart is *forever* taken by the Emperor ... just as you hold my heart in your hands," he said, then bowed his head.

"*HA!* I notice you've kept it out of my *reach* for these last two-hundred years, you ... you philandering *scoundrel!*"

"*Sai!* Do you never *listen* to yourself? You sound just like ... like an *Earthling!* I suppose all this time *you've* been sleeping by yourself and not availed yourself of Ronnie's company? Or your *boys?*"

"And what was I *supposed* to do? You *left* me! You left me and—"

"And you threatened to *kill* me! *That* put a little damper on things, don't you think!"

"I was going to be *married!* All I needed was to take your head, and I would have been free to marry and be *happy* again!" she shouted; her lips trembling between the anger and agony she'd suffered over the years she'd spent looking to end her loneliness.

"If you hadn't driven me away, we could have been happy all that *time!*" he said hotly; now, dredging up memories of his *own* over how he'd missed her all these years. "All that time we've *wasted*, Sai, when we could have been *together*, but you were so *jealous!* Jealous like – like an *Earthling!* I *loved* you, Sai! I *still* love you! I—"

"You were my *first* love, Petrus! I thought you loved *me only*, but you called out *Lili's* name when you were making love to *me!*" she said petulantly, and felt the old hurt rush over her again.

"And I suppose you'd expect me to be jealous if you called out *Ronnie's* name when you're loving *me?* When I called out *Lili's* name, it was because you were just as good as *she* was!" he said, but the lie hurt him now as never before.

Sai watched his face, seeing the same longing from him she remembered from so long ago, but shook herself to keep from falling under his spell.

"No! *No*, Petrus! You can't get me back *that* easily! You do *your* job, and I'll do *mine*. I grant you a *truce* during this mission!"

"A *truce*, my love?"

"And you'll keep your hands to *yourself!*" she said forcefully.

“So, we’ll take our contentment from *others*? Very well, Sai. I *do* love you – *still* – but I’m accepting of your truce for this mission. Don’t take your anger out on your partners, Sai. You feel the need, you come yell at *me*,” he offered, then stood and bowed slightly, before turning and exiting the meeting room.

“You’re a *devil*, Petrus Aloysius Zickgraf. I know your game, but you won’t catch *me* unawares. I’ll see you mate with a *Vanir* before you share contentment with *me* again!” she muttered coolly to the closed door. Her face was grim when she stood to return to her tasks.

### ***October 28, Vanaheim, The Prime Reviews her Options***

The Prime would *not* be holding court over Warren S’Slich’Tah. *None* of that warren’s rank and file would set foot near the governing body for *both* their sakes. The leader of the S’Slich’Tah Warren was being moderately chastened for her transgressions by censure and reclusion for a specific period of time

After all, these were *modern* times, and punishing *everyone* for the actions of a few was a bit extreme. She still questioned her decision about that leniency, but every time she did so, shortly disregarded it as unimportant to pursue.

It had seemed like a reasonable precaution at the time, but *now*... Now the foolishness of letting the S’Slich’Tah, not only *field* implantable bombs, but allowing them to actually *deploy* them was going to come back and destroy not only *her*, but also her entire *warren* – if not the entirety of the *Vanir Civilization* – but she still had no idea of *why* she’d allowed it!

It *could* have been salvaged ... until her missing offspring had become the *sole* survivor of Station 6’s complement, and there was *still* an investigation going on regarding *that* issue. So far, no one had any idea of how she’d managed to get off planet, let alone forge documents allowing her access to Observer Station 6 as, if you could believe it, *an Official Observer from the Prime!*

Once she returned, and the story of her experiences was told, it would bring down the Prime and cause censure – *NO!* – *SANCTION FOR THE ENTIRE WARREN!* A Prime going against stated policy and lying to her public would *NOT* be tolerated, nor would all those *associated* with her. The S’Slich’Tah were getting off *lightly* in comparison, as they were only doing what the Prime had authorized and *ordered* – *regardless of spoken public policy!*

It was going to be a mess ... *unless*... Unless something *unfortunate* happened to her offspring before she returned to Vanaheim – or before

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she told anyone what she knew. She would at least be smart enough not to *say* anything, wouldn't she? It is not as if the Ambassador could simply read her...

The Prime shuddered, but it was unseen by her attendant, as he was using the facilities at the moment...

If the Ambassador could *read* her mind ... even if she did not *speak* of it ... then *he* would have to die as well, along with *all* who had learned of it. A final factor completed her thoughts - this was the *human's fault!*

Decision made, then. The humans, the Ambassador, his party, the crew - probably the entire *ship*... They would *all* have to disappear with no trace left behind. However, who could she get to do the deed?

As her Senior Medical Technician returned from the facilities, she decided she would think about it for a while longer. She looked at him, then raised her arms to him, getting impassioned shading from him in return as he approached her directly. The thought of violence did not shock her *nearly* as much as it used to, and she wondered at that, before it seemed to become forgotten in just a few more moments.

Her Senior Medical Technician displayed a mating tint that she responded only sedately to, but his efforts would still not go wasted for the next few hours.

If things truly turned dark, and she and her warren found themselves summarily replaced in the near future, then she would relish the memories of her entwinings with her Senior Medical Technician for what little remained of her life.

They entered her nest and settled in for a period of mutual bonding.

### ***November 1, The Kraken, Picking Through the Pieces***

They were a few days out from Kantor, and Rose and Jaiying had the run of the ship ... at least they *thought* they did. They were still tailed by security force members who tried to remain unobtrusive while providing a physical presence near them. They both knew Mama Laisee could locate them anywhere on the ship, and so could Grandfather and Grandmother ... and Uncle Petrus, now. That had been a surprising revelation for him at first, but he'd accepted it readily enough.

At the moment, they were watching intently while Donnel Ardan was making some very specific modifications to the docking bay storage room. It had been previously used as a morgue, prisoner cell, and exercise room, but now it was being retrofitted with Donnel's latest creation in force projector technology that didn't require the same massive installation the *Microcosmus* had needed in his gym.

They watched in fascination when Donnel brought the program up. Wire-frame bodies materialized in the center of the space. As the figures solidified, they became accurate representations of human-standards, Drecks, Balese, Bornat, and other human-variant species – fully armed. Finally, a representative Vanir materialized among the mix, looking a lot like Ambassador S'Shac'Kah 39496.

"I don't think Samuel will like that, Mister Ardan. The Vanir are not a war-like species," Jaiying said quietly, with Rose nodding solemnly beside her.

"Ahh, but don't forget, Princess, the Vanir implanted bombs in Commonwealth *citizens*. *Someone* on Vanaheim doesn't believe in peaceful solutions," he said, then caught himself, and looked down at Jaiying.

Rose smiled and waved politely, and he waved back slowly.

"And what brings you young ladies into the gym today, may I ask?" he inquired, turning on a smile for the girls after he squatted down to their level.

"We think you should have children as part of the program, Mister Ardan," Jaiying said. "The Vanir never see humans for real unless they are Observers, but when we meet the Vanir Prime, she will need to see what *all* humans are like, and that includes children. We think you should add these," she said, and Rose handed him a data tab.

Donnel accepted it, inserted it into his data pad, and accessed the tab. After several keystrokes and a few surprised glances their way, a group of four children materialized among the adults – one of them looking just like Jaiying.

"Those are my cousins; Walter, Cathy, and Josie," Jaiying said while pointing to each one in turn. "They didn't get to come on this trip and I miss them, but Grandfather said he would let us talk with them when we wanted to."

"Well ... if there are any games the four of you play, I could maybe program the simulation to play them with you?" Donnel suggested, but Jaiying shook her head sadly.

"That's all right, Mister Ardan. It's enough that the Vanir will see them and know humans are small when they are young – like me and Rose."

She reached out and took hold of Rose's hand.

"Thank you, Mister Ardan," Rose said, and she looked over at the children's simulacrums once again, before they turned and left the gym,

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with their silent shadows following along; leaving Donnel shaking his head in confusion as he watched them depart.

### *Kantor, The Royal Homestead, The Children's Patio*

"They do not seem the same now that Jaiying has gone with Ronnie," Maya said quietly.

Lili sipped her drink while looking at the children sitting almost listlessly in the grass; the valaets surrounding them at a discreet distance.

The Elder had lost her Visions, and if Molara was correct, and there was no reason to doubt her, Rondal had lost access to them as well. In fact, he'd mentioned it almost casually a little earlier this morning.

What was worse, was when Fan and Xiu had contacted her two hours later about the situation they faced as minions of an Elder who was no longer functional. The Elder's staff did not know what to do, and they'd finally turned to *her* after exhausting all other ideas. It simply would *not* do to announce that the Elder, the *Supreme Ruler of the Commonwealth* (if only to those in the know) was failing, and could no longer perform her function. The subject they'd then danced around was delicate, at best, and a step not to be taken lightly. She had told them to speak with Molara, before making any suggestions or requests of the Imperial household regarding the temporarily open vacancy.

If Rondal no longer had access to the Visions ... well, it would appear the future of the Commonwealth was at some sort of *crossroads*, and she and her husband were right in the *middle* of it!

She shook her head slowly, before sipping her drink as she pondered the possibilities. Of course, she would *still* advise Radatel, but without the *Visions*... What is it Rondal had suggested? Oh, yes ... rely upon the information dredged up by the Tier One Staff, and then make the best *guess* on how to react to it!

*Damn* that man! *Damn* him, *and* his "Senior Staff" – *whomever* they finally turned out to be!

She rolled her neck and listened to the tiny pops and crackles while watching the children stand, and then gather into a smaller circle; reaching out and holding each other's hands, before settling down on the grass again and closing their eyes. They seemed calm and relaxed, just the opposite of how she felt.

She caught the quick motion when the head of one of the valaets snapped around when a rim guard shifted his position slightly. He was nearly a hundred meters off, yet the valaet had caught that tiniest of movements, and reacted to it instantly.

Rondal's "Senior Staff," indeed! She bet they didn't have *nearly* the protection these children had right here in the Royal Homestead! There were guards walking the halls. Guards were watching from the rim. There was surveillance around the clock, and four of the deadliest creatures alive watched over them every moment of the day and night!

Lili closed her eyes and rolled her head around once more, before letting out a disgusted sigh at the tension she continued to feel.

Maya had been constantly watching the children, and felt compelled to comment on it to Lili.

"They have been doing that more often, now that Jaiying has left," she whispered. "It is like... They are not sad, exactly, but they seem like they are almost praying for Jaiying. It is the first time they have ever been separated."

Lili opened her eyes and watched for a moment longer, then finished her drink before standing.

"The children will have to get over it, Maya," she said curtly, then stretched slightly where she stood. "As they grew up, separation would have come sooner or later. I remember how hard it was when Petrus had to leave me," she said, then turned to walk away while thinking back to the times she and Petrus used to speak silently to each other after they had been separated so long ago – almost as if they were still...

Lili stopped and quickly swung around – all four valaets *instantly* focusing their attention on her.

"The safest place," she whispered. "He said they were in the *safest* place in the Commonwealth ... protected day and night ... inside and out ... by the most *dangerous*..."

The older female valaet stood up and slowly stalked over as Lili remained frozen in place. Maya held her breath as it approached, not daring to move a muscle. Silent Hunter stopped beside a quivering Maya and stared at her intently – then chuffed loudly. The other valaets watched, and the children opened their eyes, and looked at her as well. The valaet looked back at the children, and then over at Lili. Then it walked around behind Lili and butted her with her head in the direction of the children.

Gently pushing from behind, Silent Hunter directed the First Wife to the edge of the circle, where Walter and Cathy reached out to pull her down to sit with them.

'Welcome, Aunt Lili. You probably have questions you would like answers for' Walter stated silently on a very precise and narrow band.

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### *The Kraken, Outbound*

“Oh-oh,” Ronnie muttered, just as Sai jerked around and looked at him in shock.

*‘Hello Lili. How is every little thing back home?’* he asked politely, but reeled at the vindictive that was thrust across the minutes from Kantor to the Kraken’s current location.

*‘Don’t hold back, Lili. Tell him how you REALLY feel!’* Sai gloated, but caught a comparable blast for herself.

*‘Lili, darling, I just found out a few days ago!’* came from Petrus, but that didn’t lessen his punishment any.

*‘YOU ... YOU ... ALL OF YOU!’* Lili screamed silently.

*‘Lili, if you had known, would you have taken it any more seriously? Really?’* Ronnie asked.

*‘I ... I ... I don’t know... But STILL–’*

*‘Still ... they are my Senior Staff, and they provide a high degree of reliable advice and information unobtainable from any other means within the Commonwealth’* Ronnie calmly stated.

*‘That is true, Aunt Lili. We can do things together that none of the Elder’s staff have ever contemplated’* Cathy declared proudly.

*‘Walter and Cathy have been the ONLY reason the Elder has held it together for as long as she has’* Josie pointed out. *‘Of course, now that they cut off the Visions, she’s gone all \*wonky\*’* she added glumly.

*‘\*Wonky\*?’*

*‘It means–’* Sai began.

*‘I CAN GUESS WHAT IT MEANS!’*

*‘Lili, you wanted to know what gifts the women gained from the Gift from you and my semen. Well, it appears that if they are with child, they get a little bonus’*

*‘Yes, Aunt Lili. If Grandfather and Maya had a child, and he Gifted her while she was pregnant, then their child would be like us. That is probably what Elder Kita had in mind before things got so complicated’* Jaiying shared.

*‘But that kid would end up so lonely. At least there’s four of us’* Josie sent.

*‘Five’* came quietly from Rose.



‘Rose! You can reach us!’ Walter shouted silently.

‘Jaiying has been helping me, big brother’ Rose sent warmly, and they all felt the happy backwash from Walter.

‘Boys!’ followed by giggling echoes, came from Cathy, Josie, and Jaiying.

‘Wait! You said... Josie, you said they cut off the Visions? Who are they?’ Lili asked them.

‘Supposition only, Aunt Lili’ Walter admitted. ‘There is no reason to speculate on a natural phenomena that could block the Visions from occurring, nor a similar reason that would affect the Elder and Grandfather at the same time. The current conjecture is that an entity of some sort has deliberately blocked access to the Visions. Perhaps Elder Kita’s “Others,” or some entity above them’

‘I can hardly believe in the “Others,” let alone something above them, but we know so little that I suppose it’s reasonable to make certain assumptions’ Lili conceded.

‘Actually, looking back over Grandfather’s life, there have been occurrences where certain uttered phrases seem to have extraordinary reactions – too much so for mere coincidence to account for’ Cathy shared. ‘Apparently, if Grandfather merely wishes for something–’

‘Cathy – NO!’ Ronnie silently shouted.

‘If Grandfather merely wishes for something, then something exciting happens as a response – more or less’ she continued. ‘You’ll note Grandfather now avoids that word sequence quite carefully, although recent events would seem to indicate either Grandfather has been forgotten for the time being, or he’s been really careful with what he says – or someone has taken a liking to him’

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

The Fate on Duty was watching and listening **carefully**. This was getting interesting, but very close to the **truth**. She would have **blushed** at that last comment ... if she was of tangible existence. She wondered for a moment if she’d **overstepped** the bounds of her authority.

The entity that had just materialized **behind** her was thinking the **very** same thing, but Destiny was nothing, if not patient. Destiny would wait this out and see what **reward** this little Fate had earned when the dust finally settled. Destiny dissipated as silently as it had materialized.

## Unhide the Past

### ***Kantor, The Royal Homestead, The Inner Circle***

‘Umm, *Maya’s starting to freak*’ Josie mentioned while looking across the grass at the patio table where a panicked expression had come over Maya’s face.

She’d remained frozen in place for the last thirty seconds or so, while Lili had been pushed over to the children by the female valaet.

‘*Ronnie, it’s time*’ Sai declared.

‘Yes. Yes, Sai. You’re right. Josie, would you please go and bring Maya into the circle?’ Ronnie asked, and Josie got up and walked over to Maya.

‘Come on, Maya! Come and sit with us!’ she said while smiling and pulling on Maya’s hand to drag her closer to the circle, as the valaets moved further away, but maintained guard over all.

Maya sat opposite Lili between Cathy and Josie. Each of the girls took her hands, and she nearly swooned when they joined her to the conversation.

Much of the confusion over the last four years suddenly became *much* clearer in the next few minutes for both Lili and Maya.

### ***November 3, The Kraken, En Route, The Vanir Compartment***

‘Sally, the more I think about it, the more I’m convinced *someone* had to know! They’ve been practicing it for nearly ten-thousand *years*, and surely *someone* would have noticed in all that time!’ Samuel insisted.

‘We’ve only observed the manipulated humans. They don’t use their minds for anything like that.’

‘But *other* Observers would surely have noticed the Commonwealth Healers at *some* point in time – or are you suggesting that *all* Vanir Observers are that incompetent?’ he persisted.

‘Perhaps they simply never noticed a situation where they were in action? Or did not recognize it for what it was?’

She continued to watch him as he paced their quarters. At least his agitation wasn’t about to cascade into emotional turmoil this time.

‘Or they observed it and didn’t report it for some reason – or reported it, and...’ He stopped and turned to look at her. ‘And the reports were *suppressed*?’

‘But who would suppress that information?’

He paused long in thought and contemplated the ramifications. Steeling himself, he proceeded in a quieter tone of voice.

"Sally, what was your reaction when you first observed a Healing?"

"That first time I was intoxicated, but later that day, I was *fascinated*. You were—"

"Yes. I recall. I was quivering on the floor in *terror*. I was in shock ... *afraid*. I'd observed something that simply could *not* be real, and yet it was," he said, then began pacing the room again, while Sally tried to rationalize his observational response.

"But just because it was real, it should not have frightened you so. It was surprising, yes, but you are an Observer. You should have simply made an observation and reported it, but you—"

"Yes, I froze in *panic* ... like a *common* Vanir. Like *any* common Vanir. I wonder ... what did that *first* Observer do when this became known? Did *he* freeze as well? Did *he* report it?"

He turned to look at her again, but she'd turned away to avoid the lost look in his eyes when she spoke.

"His Medical Technician would have been observing, then would have ... *should* have offered an opinion. Certainly, that Medical Technician would have been obliged to render assistance if the Observer in question had become distressed. If that were the case, then a medical report would have been forwarded to Vanaheim as well," she said, before quickly turning to look at Samuel.

"I did not report further about you, my Samuel! Our circumstances are different. You are no longer a mere Observer. You are Ambassador, and I am your staff."

He stepped to her and hugged her firmly.

"You are my Sally and I am your Samuel," he murmured by her aural orifice, while another segment of his mind reminded him of something else. "And we are in a precarious position."

He pushed away from her gently, but still held her loosely.

"If the actions of Healers were reported, but the knowledge *suppressed*, that would have been at the level of the Prime. If my reaction was the same as our hypothetical Observer, then at some point in the past, a decision was made by the sitting Prime to suppress that information to prevent panic within the general populace. It may explain some of our restrictions against close contact with humans in general."

She looked up at him while her mind's segments tossed ideas back and forth, just trying to keep up.

## Unhide the Past

“Yes... It might explain the fears of contamination and why we were instructed to be fully armored and sealed when inserting the tracers. Certainly, *I’ve* never found any pathogens to be wary of among the humans we’ve been associating with.”

He separated from her, then folded himself into their nest while she watched. Thankfully, he seemed to be holding up rather well during this uncomfortable discussion. He looked up at her, then took a relaxing breath, nodding slowly before sharing some of Ronnie’s comments with her.

“Rondal Caldar said some late research shows our species and his have several similarities, and some common biological enemies, but for the most part, we appear to be immune from each other. The same poisons kill both our species, but the diseases that affect us both have been controlled – ours by drugs, and the Commonwealth’s eliminated by their Healers.”

Sally smiled at that as she was looking forward to learning those skills. Then she joined him in their nest and snuggled next to him.

“Sai Tal has been telling me I will be learning how to do that during advanced training.”

“Advanced training? You are still pursuing the Healing training?”

“Yes, my Samuel. It would be of great benefit to the Vanir in general – and to my Samuel,” she added, while reaching down and caressing him gently.

He reached down and held her hand still.

“Before we continue, we must consider. We are bringing a ship carrying several Commonwealth Healers into Vanir space. If the knowledge was suppressed for a reason, then what would the reaction of the Vanir Prime be to that?”

Sally knew the Prime’s *first* responsibility was to the Vanir.

“It would be... She would... She might consider it a dangerous situation. One that she might not like to leave as part of her legacy...”

“Indeed. One that she might take steps to prevent if–”

“But she *orders* us to return! She has *accepted* the Commonwealth delegation to Vanir! She would *not*. She *could* not! Publicly it would be *disastrous* to go against her word in this!”

“*If* she has given her word to the Vanir?” he questioned. “Or perhaps she intended to bring the Commonwealth visitors to Vanaheim as a

*complete* surprise? It would – *should* have been publicly announced that formal contact with the Commonwealth was at hand. If it was not–”

“Then she means to control the situation somehow–”

“And it’s easiest to control a situation by *eliminating it!*” he finished for her.

Her eyes widened in shock.

“Oh, my Samuel! We must *warn* Rondal Caldar of our *suspicions!*”

She tried to push away from him, but he held her tightly with one hand, while his other still held hers against his lower abdomen.

“Not right at this moment, my Sally,” he murmured, then began slowly rubbing her hand against himself.

“No, my Samuel ... not right at this moment,” she agreed, and flicked her tongue to his lips.

### *At Laisee’s Compartment...*

“Hello, Laisee. Have you seen Rose anywhere?” Dorcas asked at Laisee’s doorway. “She said she was coming to visit Jaiying.”

‘Rose, does Mama Dorcas know about you yet?’ Laisee quickly asked her.

‘No, Mama Laisee... I have not told her’ Rose’s response came quietly.

‘Jaiying ... Rose, find your Grandfather and bring him to my quarters, please’ Laisee asked, before responding to Dorcas without missing a beat.

“The girls went out to visit around the ship. They were told to stay away from the engineering spaces, but should be safe enough. Everyone on board knows about them, and their guards follow them around constantly. Are you worried about Rose?”

“Rose is almost five, Standard, but this is a new place for her. We watch her around strangers. She’s usually not very shy, but doesn’t play with other children her age ... although she’s always gotten along well with Jaiying and the others.”

“Well, they’ve probably gone searching for Ronnie, and I wouldn’t be surprised if they showed up here or at your quarters with him in tow. How are you and Nathan doing with the project, Dorcas? We hardly know *what* to believe, with all the rumors Lady Lili fabricates to keep the naysayers from digging into it too deeply,” she asked while biding time for Ronnie to arrive with the children.

## Unhide the Past

“Nathan is *very* happy with the program. It is as Lady Sai proposed – nurture over nature. Occasionally, we still get temperamental Drecks acting out, but that is no worse than the human-standards Ronnie has delivered to us over the years. It takes a while, but they usually start to fit in after a few months of proper and fair treatment – *without* the threat of beatings or death hanging over their heads. We’ve had to relocate a few groups around, but those were the exceptions.”

Laisee nodded her head, then glanced behind her at the chairs she had available. She smiled at the oversized chairs that had been provided for oversized guests.

“Please come inside, Dorcas.”

She guided her over to one of the bigger chairs, then sat nearby before she went on.

“How about interactions between Drecks and the rest of the groups?”

“It’s not been as difficult as you’d expect. After the initial shock of a non-threatening environment, they seem to settle down quite a bit. Ronnie brought us one couple whose woman had borne a Drecks child. It was difficult for them at first, but now the husband dotes on the baby. The rest of their companions seem to have accepted the child as well. We have even had inquiries about Nathan and me. They can’t believe that I’m as old as I am, and that Nathan is not Drecks!” She gave out a short laugh, then blushed a bit before going on.

“Then the subject comes up about Commonwealth Healers, and how Nathan and I apply it to our lives, and ... well, let us say we’ve had *many* interested young Drecks females wanting to learn more about their options.”

“Let me guess – they see the little men treat their women better than Drecks men do?” Laisee asked, and got a corresponding chuckle from Dorcas in return.

“Something like that. But they’re also interested in learning Healing – *along* with improving the behavior of their men.”

“That would be a chore I can understand. Have you considered starting a Healer Cluster in the Demon’s Realm?” she asked while observing Dorcas casually.

“We’d need more Senior staff for that to happen,” Dorcas suggested, just as Ronnie walked in with Rose and Jaiying each holding on to one of his hands.

“Senior staff? *More* Senior staff? I can’t seem to handle the ones I’ve *got*,” he muttered. “*Dorcas!* I hear you’ve misplaced *this* little one,” he

said while directing Rose to her mother's arms. "Laisee, I think this one is for you," he finished, directing Jaiying to Laisee, before walking up to hug Dorcas and then Laisee in turn.

Afterwards, he turned and sat in the nearest seat while looking up at Dorcas.

"Dorcas, have you gotten *taller*?"

"Seven and six still, Ronnie. Nathan takes *very* good care to keep me at this height!" she said with a chuckle.

"So, what's this about more Senior staff?" he asked while looking between the two women.

"I was just suggesting to Dorcas that a new Healer Cluster in the Demon's Realm would be a welcome addition in their integration into the Commonwealth."

"Well, Sai built one over on Farman... Out at the Fringe. Of course, that one is kinda special," he muttered, before turning back to his tall family guest. "Dorcas, let me have a look at you," he said, then reached out his hands to her.

She looked at him, and then his hands, then slowly extended her hands to him, but seemed unusually wary.

"Dorcas, I've seen you *naked*. Surely you can hold an old man's *hands*?" he teased her, and she relented and let him grip her fingers.

He quickly looked at her general readiness for what he felt she would need and not found her lacking for any of it. Then she became dizzy for a few moments while he pushed through her and made a few adjustments.

*'Dorcas, let me be the first to welcome you into the most secret conspiracy within the Commonwealth. You are now a supporting mother of the latest addition to the Senior Staff of the First Lord of the Commonwealth. Rose, you may speak to her now'*

*'Hello Mother. Walter Lane, Cathy Lane, Josie Lane, and Jaiying Caldarous comprise the Senior Staff for Grandfather, and I have just been added to the Staff'* Rose sent very clearly and precisely.

Dorcas sat there looking at Rose – whose lips had never moved as she told her mother this news.

"Laisee, I can see that you four girls have a lot of catching up to do, so I'll let you get on with it," he said offhandedly while standing and heading towards the door.

## Unhide the Past

Then he paused at the door and turned back to them. “Laisee, I’ll need to talk to your security lead. His teams are making the Vanir nervous. Perhaps they can forgo the usual weapons and dress down for the duration? Please send him to me at the change of the watch. Oh... Lili is now aware of us, and she wasn’t too pleased about it, but she’ll come around. In addition, the Elder has lost her mind. Otherwise, things are moving along *swimmingly*,” he said dryly, then quickly exited the room.

‘Laisee... What...’ “Laisee... What...”

‘Don’t be afraid, Dorcas. It takes a little getting used to, but it only makes sense when you think about it. After all ... it’s all Ronnie’s fault’ Laisee informed her, then proceeded to bring her up to speed on how Rose had joined the party, and why she, Dorcas, was in the category of a non-certified Senior at this stage of her training and experience.

By the end of the next twenty minutes, they’d gotten caught up, and then joined in a current planning session with the rest of the Senior Staff, which now included Lady Lili; along with a reluctant Maya as a mere supporting adult for the time being.

### *On the Bridge*

Petrus was on the bridge with Endo this evening and going over the logs to see what *other* kinds of mischief Ronnie had gotten into during his absence.

He didn’t expect to see Ronnie out and about for a while, since Sai was still pissed at him over bringing him back to life and onto the ship. She’d even reestablished her presence in her *own* compartment, and left Ronnie to fend for himself.

Supper had been a tight-lipped affair earlier that evening, with Ronnie, Sai, and Petrus taking unobtrusive care to avoid talking to each other. All of them had quickly left after eating. Petrus had taken *extra* care to avoid all eye contact with Sai when he’d bussed his own tray and headed to the bridge to check the status of the watch.

With new crewmembers augmenting the ships existing staff, there would be additional training scheduled during the passage. Not that Petrus expected trouble from the Vanir, but as Ronnie would say, “You never know.” Anyway, he’d need to evaluate Sai’s boys – her young *men*, now – and young Lord Torga, on ship combat techniques and weapons; basically the BFG and how to fire it ... and how close *not* to get to it when it was being fired.

He mused over that. The big gun had never been fired as part of an assault or military action. Certainly, anti-matter charges had gone off, but aside from the initial test firing, to his knowledge, it had never been



used in anger against an aggressive foe. He hoped that didn't change on this trip.

### *In Ronnie's Compartment...*

Ronnie was lying alone in his compartment and pondering the information the Vanir Ambassador had conveyed to him shortly before the evening meal. How thoughtful, that...

The Ambassador and his companion could not be absolutely certain of the Prime's duplicity; but their concern was acknowledged and appreciated by him. Not that he was going to enter Vanir space blindly, but he valued the heads up, just the same. Unfortunately, until they had more to go on, they would just have to remain cautious.

The lack of accurate intelligence was a situation the Senior Staff had anticipated, and it was somewhat fortuitous that Radatel had chosen his daughter as the representative of the Commonwealth. Laisee had initially protested taking Jaiying along, but the Senior Staff had convinced her that the closer she got to Vanaheim, the clearer the Prime's intent would become, and the easier the Staff could analyze Jaiying's impressions. If Jaiying actually managed to *touch* her, the Prime would become an open book to them.

Poor Rose was stuck on this trip as part of Dorcas and Nathan's display of how a human-standard and human-Drecks could work, live, and even mate as a secure family unit. She could have stayed on Kantor, but again, the Staff had conferred, and Rose had volunteered to go along – if nothing more than as a traveling companion to Jaiying.

He stretched and sighed, shifting uncomfortably in his empty bed. They had a ways to go before reaching Vanaheim, but that didn't mean Jaiying had nothing to do. Perhaps she could do a little practice work on Sue to see if she could decipher Sue's "confusion" about her past?

Maybe tomorrow...

'Ronnie ... *may we speak?*' came a tentative request from Maya.

### *Somewhere Else...*

*Even disembodied as she was, Kita appeared to have radiated sufficient ire to drive away all the companions she'd recruited to help defend humanity against external threats. Even her recently liberated Grandson had fled her presence and was keeping company elsewhere.*

*At least, that was the **impression** she'd conjectured in a moment of reflection. Her clarity of vision had sharpened **dramatically** after her death, and as she read the **Flux**, she thought she saw several potential*

## Unhide the Past

turning points to **eliminating** the threat of the Vanir against humanity **forever!** Then suddenly – the Flux was **gone!**

Now her young hopeful, Rondal, approached Earth once again – this time with a ship full of Drecks, humans, Kee, and Vanir – and **all** having passed through the edge of the Death Void with impunity. Her being remained stationary alongside the Kraken as it approached the dark side of Earth's moon, before settling quietly into a shadowy crater and parking.

At least **she** was still in a position to offer advice to Rondal, and planned to do so momentarily...

'I don't **think** so, Kita' the voice of Destiny murmured as its essence solidified around Kita's ephemeral existence.

Kita was **stuck!** She couldn't move, speak, or even cry out to any of her companions!

'I've sent them **away**, Kita. It's time for Humanity to work out its **own** solutions ... and it's time for **you** to move on' she heard, and the tenuous nature of her being began to brighten, and she felt a welling of gladness ... and then nothing.

Destiny wondered how **this** little quirk of reality had come into existence. Mortals dying and becoming disembodied spirits, but then just hanging around to meddle in **mortal** affairs? The Fates were **one** thing, but **these** wild cards? Destiny would have scratched its head if it had one, but instead scratched this little morsel off the list of things that needed fixing.

Now that the **last** of the strays had been rounded up, Destiny headed back to monitor the Fates, or rather, the **Fainting Fate**. Her obsession with Rondal Caldar was presenting an unusual amount of enjoyment to an otherwise routine endeavor.

In point of fact, it was getting **interesting**.

### **November 11, Grounded**

Ronnie read again the request from the xeno-bio boys on the *Microcosmus* that Donnel had passed to him a few days earlier. He was not a stupid man, but if what he *did* understand was correct, this went way beyond his wildest expectations. He'd finally agreed to a layover on the dark side of Earth's moon to allow Donnel time to arrange for samples to be brought up from Earth for analysis by the *Kraken's* new technical team.

Just this ship morning, the Kantite Ambassador's office had finally reported the samples had made it to the Arizona facility, and just needed to be picked up. He'd scheduled Donnel and Doctor Milsie Blanaid to go

down and verify the samples were what they were looking for. As an afterthought, he decided to add a couple more headcount to the recovery mission for later this day, then contacted one of the pair invited.

Tossing aside the data pad, he got up and headed to the commons to grab a bite, but reconsidered and decided to check in on the kids first.

### *In Ship Doc*

“Just like that, Dorcas. Carefully weave the muscle tissue around the nerve fiber as you guide it past the intrusion,” Sai directed her.

“Aren’t we supposed to allow the body to do this on its own? The Healers at the site I trained with–”

“Are not *Combat*-Healers,” Sai interrupted her. “When seconds count, and you can’t do anything properly about something like this, then you do what you have to, in order to sustain the life of your client. You are still very young, Dorcas. With time, training, and experience, you’ll develop the skills to do a *proper* Healing very quickly, but right now, you need to learn how all the pieces go together.”

Dorcas nodded in acquiescence and reapplied herself to the task.

Laisee, Jaiying, and Rose watched raptly, while Sai guided Dorcas in the reconstruction of muscle and nerve fiber around the small rectangular post she had driven through Petrus’ arm and into a board. Sai remained focused on Dorcas while she worked – only letting a tiny bit of gleeful emotion escape when she watched Petrus squirm during the procedure.

Instead of Healer’s Milk, Sai had offered him a small measure of ambrosia, before stabbing him with the tool and pinning him in place.

It was only after remembering a conversation with Ronnie that he’d finally triggered his combat flush of adrenalin, which took that little amount of intoxicant and distributed it throughout his body as far as possible in the least amount of time. Between the ambrosia and the adrenalin, it was enough to bring his agony down to a dull ache. He still made sure to wince at appropriate intervals, as Sai seemed content with that bit of tangible torment on his part.

This was the picture that greeted Ronnie when he entered the room.

“You know, Sai ... I was planning on using Petrus for *another* task in a little while,” he muttered.

“Certainly,” she said, then jerked out the post before tossing it on the equipment tray with a clatter.

## Unhide the Past

Dorcas quickly reached out and began Healing his open wound, then focused internally – studying it while watching it realign the rerouted tissue and nerve bundles by itself.

In a few more minutes, there was no sign of anything out of the ordinary at the point of puncture, and she pulled her hand away to reveal an unscarred arm.

“Very nice, Dorcas. That came out perfect,” Sai admitted.

“Aye, Lass. You done right *well!* Thank you, my Healer!” Petrus said loudly to her blushing acceptance, before he sat up and rubbed his arm appreciatively. “And thank *you*, Senior Tal. Your student is *very* exceptional.”

“As should be expected, First Officer,” she muttered, then turned her back on him while she began cleaning the instruments.

Ronnie took that pause to give him his new orders.

“Petrus, change in plans. You’ll be taking the *Kraken’s Child* down to the garrison in Arizona to deliver Donnel and his team so they can pick up the samples.”

He felt a flash of interest from Dorcas.

“You’ll also be taking Nathan ... and Dorcas and Rose with you.”

At her gasp, he turned to Dorcas and smiled.

“Kayla and Mary have missed you. As long as we’re here, I thought you’d like to visit for while. You’ll have a layover of twenty-four hours, or so – Earth standard. Should be just enough time to stock up on groceries, too. I’ve already sent a shopping list to Wilber.”

“Thank you! Thank you, Ronnie!” she said, just as Nathan entered the compartment.

“Hey, Sweetheart, do you wanna to go for a ride?” he asked her, before scooping up Rose and reaching out to his wife. “Four, we’ll be packed and ready to go in about ten minutes,” he said before directing his wife out the door to their compartment so she could pack for an overnigher.

Dorcas and Rose’s guards followed behind discreetly; now dressed in mufti.

Ronnie looked on, smiling, while Petrus studied his friend.

“Would you rather go in my place, lad?”

## Floyde Leong

Ronnie considered it for several seconds. It was home, and he would like to catch up with his Earth family, but there were still issues here to work on.

Besides, he'd made his brother a promise.

"Nah... There's not enough \*Happy Meals\* on Earth that would make *that* event go over smoothly," he said cryptically, before wandering out to the corridor.

Petrus looked at Sai in confusion, but she just shrugged her shoulders and turned back to her task. He stood up and approached her slowly.

"Sai... How are you, girl?"

He stopped just behind her with his hands at his sides, and she stilled; feeling his closeness ... but finally snorted.

"Girl? I *wanted* to bear your children, but--"

"We have Maya--"

"*I have Maya!*"

He let her anger wash over him until she calmed down a bit.

"And she's a lovely woman, Sai. You done right well with her."

She dropped her head and let out a quiet breath.

"I did *poorly* with her, Petrus. She didn't know her place *then*, and she's just learning it *now*. If Lili hadn't threatened her with..."

She dropped the instruments and turned to look up at him with a grimace on her face.

"Oh Petrus! How did we come to this place?" she asked with a half-sob, while he reached out slowly and took her hands in his.

She looked down as his fingers interlaced with hers ... just as they'd done so many years ago. She tugged lightly, but remained attached to him.

"Lili never taught you the Gift, did she?" she asked shyly; her eyes still downcast.

"No, my love. Lili taught me a great many things, but she only shared the Gift with Ronnie. Probably a *good* thing, that," he considered, and got a chuckle from her.

"Yes ... probably. Or we'd have a great many *more* Healer Clusters than we already have," she said, with just a trace of amusement in her voice.

## Unhide the Past

“No, lass. That ‘Gift’ be *Ronnie’s* curse. Though, I understand that *new* thing he and his Earth Healers developed is quite helpful,” he mentioned thoughtfully, which caused her to look up at him quickly.

“And I suppose you’ve been practicing it since you learned it from Lili?”

“No, my love. I know *how* it works, and *why* ... but I’ve never found anyone else I’d like to practice it with ... except you,” he said quietly, then pulled her arms around him slowly; she letting herself be drawn close to him.

As she pressed her arms around him, he let go and reached around to hug her. After a few moments, his body tilted down, and she felt his lips on the top of her head. A flush of warmth rushed through her, and she pushed back and tilted her head up ... looking into his eyes closely for the first time in years – *centuries*, in fact.

He slowly brought his lips to hers and pressed a warm, loving, and chaste kiss upon them for several seconds ... but they both pulled apart at the ship-wide announcement, “*Kraken’s Child* departure in ten minutes. All transient personnel to the hanger bay.”

He looked down at her and smiled.

“Pears I got to go, lass.”

He bent down and kissed her forehead, then brought her hands up and kissed the backs of her fingertips. Sighing loudly, he backed towards the door and reached for the latch blindly.

“I’ll be back in a day, Sai. Watch o’r the lad for me – keep him out of trouble, now,” he said, then turned to leave for the hanger bay.

She stood there for several seconds after the door closed, and wondered at the feelings she was experiencing. Anger... Passion... Confusion... And what else?

She finally let out a great sigh.

“Oh Petrus ... you *are* a spawn of hell,” she whispered, before turning to straighten the instruments and put them away.

### *November 15, A Slight Detour*

The rock that rose and departed the backside of the Moon, left while it was eclipsed by the Earth’s shadow and out of observation range. By the orbit of Mars, they were free to move about the system undetected. At yet another request by Donnel, they wandered out to the asteroid field between Mars and Jupiter, where they conducted some intensive scans, and collected a few ore samples over the next several days.

Donnel and a couple of his technicians were on the bridge for this, while Sai piloted the *Kraken's Child* in and about the floating debris field and collected samples with a small crew of her own.

Ronnie sat quietly while watching at one of the stations, before he thought to pry once again.

*'Walter, would you care to explain this "fishing trip" yet?'*

*'Good evening, Grandfather. How are you and Grandmother?'*

*'Walter... You know I don't like surprises'*

*'Then it would be pointless to disturb your digestion over mere conjecture, rather than verifiable facts'* Cathy countered reasonably.

*'Yes, Grandfather. No sense getting excited over what might turn out to be nothing!'* Josie added cheerfully.

*'Have you been talking to Lili again?'* he pressed, getting a handful of silent childish giggles in response.

*'Every day, Grandfather'* Walter admitted, just before Ronnie was cut out of the conversation.

*'Kids?'* he sent, then waited, silent and impatient. This had been going on for the last two days.

*'Walter...'*

*'Sorry, Grandfather. We needed to confer so we could present some of our findings for your review. The first issue appears to be valid as of a few moments ago. Jaiying finally extracted that bit of information from Sue that we have just confirmed among the Vanir – as well as we could, from an hour out'* he explained, Kantor being just an hour and eight minutes, Standard, from Vanaheim and the Vanir Prime.

Ronnie shook his head and sighed, knowing this would not be pleasant.

*'Let's hear it'*

*'It appears that Sue is either a child or a sibling of the sitting Prime. We are leaning towards child. Her true name is S'Ahi'Ma 42491, but we would suggest withholding that information from the Prime at this time'*

*'Ahhh ... why would that be a BAD idea, Walter?'*

*'It would seem that Sue was not authorized to be aboard that observation station'* Cathy explained. *'She went missing on Vanaheim, and managed to elude her searchers in a most elegant way – shipping out to an Observation Station under the guise of an undercover agent for the Prime'*

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*'How in the world could ANYONE believe a... No – wait ... I used to do that for a living'* he muttered silently.

*'Just so, Grandfather'* Walter agreed.

*'She was running away, Grandfather'* Cathy continued. *'She overheard something contradictory to the official position of the Prime, and then started digging around to confirm it on her own. She used that reason to stow away on the Observation Station in order to conduct her own investigation and decide the truth for herself'*

*'As a rule, there are often differences between what is known publicly and privately within the halls of power'* Ronnie pointed out.

*'True, Grandfather'* Walter agreed. *'But in this case, should the lie become public, the entire warren of the Prime, and the Prime herself, obviously, would be censured, if not sanctioned. In either case, the warren would be out of power, and a new warren and Prime selected to rule'*

*'Ouch!'* Josie expressed.

*'Yes, ouch indeed'* Ronnie agreed. *'So ... what did she find out?'*

*'She found out... Yes, Aunt Lili... He's with us now'* Walter shared, and the sense of a widened room filled the void between them.

The crystal clarity of Lili's thoughts joined in, accompanied by a gentle grumbling.

*'Rondal, your Staff advises me there is new information about the crewperson known as Sue. The Emperor and I would hear this, Walter'*

*'Welcome, Uncle Radatel'* Walter sent. *'We were just reviewing our findings for Grandfather regarding his crewperson, Sue, and her relationship with the Vanir Prime'*

*'Please continue, Walter'* his brother's thoughts rumbled in.

*'Yes, Uncle. The person known as Sue appears to be a child or sibling of the Vanir Prime, and was in training for eventual assumption of the Prime's role. She is most likely a child. During some of her training, she became aware of information contradictory to public policy statements made by the Prime. Although the Prime has publically fostered a "hands-off" approach to humans, there exists information discovered by Sue that the Prime was aware of, and authorized, the implantation of explosive devices within Hegemony and Commonwealth citizens. The implication of this is that the Prime is not dealing with us in a truthful manner. The overtones Jaiying has been picking up from Samuel and Sally seem to indicate they fear this is true as well'*

*'You're saying the Prime lied to Samuel and Sally?'* Ronnie suggested.



*‘Really, Rondal?’ Lili chided him. ‘It is not all that uncommon to sacrifice a minion in order to gain perspective of an enemy’s strengths and weaknesses. Is this not so, my Lord Husband?’*

*‘I’ve heard it done’* he allowed.

*‘Walter, was Sue part of the implantation program then? She was found on the implantation platform, was she not?’* Lili continued.

*‘She was there, Aunt Lili, but only to prove her Prime was innocent. Unfortunately, the Senior Observer seemed to have legitimate documentation from the Prime for his actions. She also overheard communications purported to be from the Prime directing implantation efforts and targets. We did take note of the high percentage of Healers implanted, Aunt Lili. It would imply that Healers were known to certain of the Vanir ... although Samuel and Sally both were astonished at the discovery of Grandfather’s and Grandmother’s Healing skills’*

*‘That is true, Lili’* Ronnie added. *‘Sally seemed fascinated by us, while Samuel suffered an emotional breakdown requiring quite a bit of intervention to bring back his sanity. I can only imagine the shock this would be to the Vanir public as a whole, which is probably something the Prime would ... frown ... on...’* he tapered off slowly while rotating the pieces in his mind into a different configuration.

*‘Grandfather, Samuel and Sally have concerns about this as well. They are convinced the Kraken and all aboard are in danger upon entry into Vanir space ... perhaps even before’* Jaiying shared, rudely breaking Ronnie away from his train of thought. *‘I believe they will be reaching out to you within a day or so to explain their fears. Perhaps even to seek asylum’*

*“Ai-yah,”* Ronnie muttered quietly, dropping his face onto his hands and rubbing his temples while being quiet enough that the rest of the bridge crew ignored him.

*‘And how is YOUR digestion, little brother?’* Radatel asked solicitously, producing a silent, yet tingling titter from Lili.

### ***The Kraken’s Child***

Sai turned control over to her co-pilot to concentrate on the orders she had just received. They didn’t make any sense. The Elder had suffered that terrible set back over a week ago now, and Lili had informed her she’d been temporarily elevated to Elder pro tem until Lady Ai’s situation was resolved.

*‘Forgive me, Elder Ai, but is this TRULY the path you wish to take?’*

*‘Yes. As soon as you return to the Kraken’*

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Sai knew the situation was currently fluid and not overly pleasant, but a step like *this... Right now...*

*‘Elder ... I ... I cannot–’*

*‘Cannot ... OR WILL NOT?’* forced itself loudly into her mind.

*‘Elder ... I will not. This is inappropriate! It is–’*

*‘YOU WILL DO AS I ORDER, OR I WILL–’*

Sai sat silent ... stiff ... waiting for her own end ... that did not come.

It still had not come several minutes later.

*‘Lili ... do you have a moment?’* she sent out weakly.

### ***November 19, The Kraken, On the Road Again ... Slowly***

It was four days later when Sue found herself sitting between the Kee; each of them holding a hand, while Ronnie continued her gentle interrogation by using Samuel as a translator. So far, she’d only flailed out of control just once when they’d revealed knowledge of exactly *who* she was.

They didn’t tell her Jaiying was the person who’d extracted that bit of information from her. Of course, it might have been helpful if *Petrus* had mentioned overhearing it when he and Larl had exposed her to her dead *boyfriend* when he’d first reported aboard.

As the interrogation continued, she’d refused to speak of many things, but the unnerving silence of her inquisitor fueled her burgeoning fear. Each subsequent question the human had asked through Samuel only led to more detailed questions that could *only* be asked if she’d answered him truthfully – or at *all!* With Ronnie, Sai, Samuel, and Sally all present, she was barely able to keep her composure. The Kee sitting beside her helped a lot, though.

*‘Well, you were right’* Sai admitted. *‘I didn’t like keeping her in the dark, but–’*

*‘If she knew right away, it might have affected her recovery’* Sally offered. *‘As it was, Samuel had a great deal of trouble when first exposed to mindspeak’*

*‘This is true, Sai Tal. Without my Sally, I would still be a quivering ball on the floor of the Observation Station’*

*‘No, my Samuel. You would have been replaced by now’*

Sally’s frank declaration triggered a stiffened reaction from Samuel, but was softened by Ronnie’s next question for Sue.

“S’Ahi’Ma 42491, our survival as we approach Vanir space is very important to us, just as it should be to *you*. Please tell us the offensive and defensive weapons systems the Prime is likely to deploy against us, and also against planetary objects within the Hegemony and Commonwealth,” Ronnie asked politely, before Samuel translated it precisely for Sue, just as he’d heard it in his head.

Sue silently ran down the list within her mind – at least one segment of it – and Ronnie listened silently, along with the *rest* of them, except for the Kee, of course. As the moments passed, and her silence continued, Sue wondered again at some of the rumors she’d heard, but dismissed out of hand. Surely, if Samuel and Sally knew the truth about them, they would have told her.

Surely...

“Sue, please tell me how the Vanir relocated the Aesir home planet,” Ronnie threw at her on a tangent.

At the end of the translation, Sue began to quiver again, and Déjà and Kiki began climbing her arms to reach her face. They had her calm again in short order, but Sue had not noticed the arrival of Jaiying from the door behind her. Her guard was trying to be quiet, but she made a point of closing the door somewhat loudly so that Sue turned around and watched her when she walked around the table and climbed into Ronnie’s lap.

‘*Do you accept her, Grandfather?*’ she asked silently, while watching Sue and feeling her confused emotions, before glancing over at Samuel and Sally.

‘*Do you accept them?*’

“Yes, Jaiying. They are welcome,” he said quietly, and she kissed him on the cheek, before turning to Sue and speaking to her in a very precise, high-pitched Vanir.

“Sue, please don’t be afraid any longer. Grandfather has taken you into his family ... along with Samuel and Sally. If they *choose* to join us, of course,” she said, while glancing over at an astonished Samuel, and a nodding Sally.

Jaiying crawled onto the table and stood up, before slowly stepping over to Sue and continuing in Vanir.

“We need to keep the peace between humans and Vanir, Sue. To do that, we need to know what to protect ourselves from. You have been in training all your life, and you think you know what humans are, and what we are capable of. Grandfather wants to go home and live a peaceful

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life, Sue, but if the Prime continues on her current path, then *no one* will be at peace, and *no one* will be safe.”

Jaiying reached out and touched Sue lightly on the cheek, making a few quick adjustments to her mind in the process.

*‘If Grandfather fails to protect the Commonwealth and Hegemony, then my cousins and I will do it ... but it will end badly for EVERYONE’* she sent directly to *all* the facets of Sue’s mind, along with everyone *else* in the room.

Sue stood up in shock and lurched towards the door, only to hear it latch securely before she reached it. It failed to open at her grasp, and remained secure through all her tugging, before she turned her back on it and looked wildly around the room.

*‘Do not be afraid, Sue. Everyone one here loves you. You are FAMILY now, and your people can become family as well’* Jaiying sent to her, before opening up a few more connections within her mind. *‘You are with US now, Sue. Your mother is confused and afraid, but you can understand her fear, and that takes it all away’*

The panicked female Vanir’s mind could be felt scattering out of control.

*‘No...’ ‘No...’ ‘You’re all...’ ‘You’re all...’ ‘MONSTERS!’ ‘MONSTERS!’* Sue’s mind shouted between her audible outbursts, before shutting itself down and dropping her body to the floor in a heap; causing the room to remain silent for several seconds.

*“Well ... that could have gone better,”* Ronnie muttered.

*“I’m sorry, Grandfather. I didn’t mean to break her,”* a tearful Jaiying murmured, both audibly and in silent Vanir. *‘Sue is so nice inside, and she means well. I didn’t mean to break her... Sally... Samuel... I’m so sorry...’*

The Vanir were still recovering from the silent outburst from Sue’s modified mind, but Samuel seemed to be getting used to it by now.

*‘Jaiying, you are a remarkable young girl’* he sent somewhat warily. *‘I’m sure that, once Sally and Sai work with Sue for a little while, she’ll be quite all right. After a while—’*

*‘Ronnie, did you catch that bit before Jaiying ... broke her?’* Sai interrupted him. *‘The Vanir had a matter-transmitter at some point, and transmitted the Aesir from orbit here, all the way out to the OTHER side of Hegemony space. That’s a hell of a weapon!’*

*‘That’s not a WEAPON, Sai. That’s just delivering GROCERIES!’* he sent, then scoffed audibly.

*‘Ronnie! If you transport an entire PLANET to a place without a SUN–’*

*‘Well if you say it THAT way, I suppose–’*

*‘Rondal Caldar...’* Samuel interrupted, which drew his attention. *‘It would appear we have a few more things to worry about at the moment ... and some new information to share’* he pushed while glancing down at Jaiying. Sally stood by his side, nodding in agreement.

*‘Sorry. You are right, Samuel’* Ronnie sent, then checked the ships timer. *‘Time for dinner ... and maybe a little conversation?’*

*‘Just so, Rondal Caldar’* Samuel agreed after a short pause.

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

Dinner had appeared to be a very sedate affair between the humans and the Vanir.

Except for Sue, Jaiying, and the Kee, the rest of them had walked to the commons and sat separate from the rest of the crew, who had taken notice and stayed clear by several tables. Torga had been contacted and invited to attend dinner with them in person, while Jaiying and the Kee escorted the crew who’d been called to carry the still unconscious Sue back to their compartment.

Very little had been said aloud; although there had been shocked glances, and expressions of dismay and astonishment bouncing back and forth between them all – all who were actually engaged in the conversation. Kiki had arrived partway through the meal and reported Sue was resting quietly. Then she’d eaten lightly, before gathering a couple of bowls of food stuffs suitable for both Déjà and Sue, then headed back to their compartment. For his part, Torga had simply kept his own counsel during the midday meal.

By the end of dinner, nothing conclusive had been attained; other than a general agreement that a great many possibilities were ahead of each society – but many of them didn’t appear very comforting to either side.

*‘Rondal Caldar, I do not know what to say, or even believe at this time’* Samuel admitted. *‘This is unprecedented. Looking back now, I still cannot understand why the knowledge of certain realities failed to become common place, unless it was a deliberate effort at the very pinnacle of our society to keep such knowledge a secret’*

Ronnie nodded along while Samuel admitted his own confusion over what was real or not.

For himself, it sounded like an all too familiar situation to begin with.

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*'We are as confused as you, Samuel, but that does not affect our position'* he said. *'Our initial reaction must be to protect ourselves and the Commonwealth ... and the Hegemony'* he added immediately, with a nod towards Torga. *'Torga will be in touch with his father to advise him of the situation. We will attempt to act in concert whichever way the Prime directs her efforts'*

He looked around at his table companions, but realized he'd not confirmed Jaiying's offer officially.

*'Samuel, crewperson Sue is part of my crew, and is now my family'* he went on. *'Should the need arise, I offer both you and Sally the same association. I do not offer this lightly'*

Samuel looked at him in shock, but it was Sally who responded.

*'I believe I begin to understand exactly what you mean by family, Rondal Caldar. Now that I carry life within and have no reasonable expectation of survival, I feel the emptiness of potential loss of our Warren deeply. I will help my Samuel to understand your concept of family'* She looked at her mate while considering his emotional turmoil, then circled her arm within his.

*'I will take Samuel to rest now and see to his emotional needs. I bid you and your crew thanks for your hospitality, Rondal Caldar'* she added, before helping Samuel to his feet and leading him towards the corridors.

Sai rose with Torga and mumbled something about duties, while avoiding Ronnie's looks as she took her leave.

Donnel Arden, who'd seen the party breaking up, took notice and spoke quietly to his companion.

Once Sai and Torga had left the commons, he took advantage of their departure, and several seconds later, he and one of his minions were seated with Ronnie and intent on bringing him up to speed on their findings from the asteroid field survey.

"You look *terrible*, Ronnie," was the first thing he said, before setting down a data pad with a variety of images displayed. "Dolac here did the initial review. It's not conclusive at all, but there's tantalizing bits leadin' us to some interesting suppositions..."

He paused expectantly, but Ronnie remained silent.

"Right then. Dolac?" he continued, turning and putting his man on the spot.

"Uhhh, Lord Caldar... Sir... The findings we ... found ... seem to indicate that ... at one time, the asteroid field composed a more or less whole. A planet of some sort, Sir, that--"

“Unfortunately didn’t have enough total mass to coalesce into a *full* planetary body so that it never became solid enough to support a decent biosphere?” Ronnie interrupted with weary eyes.

“Well, if you based it on the *remaining* mass, Sir, that’s the conclusion one could come up with. However, analysis of the samples indicates many tiny abnormalities that should *not* be there. As a whole, a planetary body sans atmosphere should contain a specific set of components. For example, that moon we just left is primarily dry, too small to hold an atmosphere, and somewhat hollow in areas. It is quite evident that life could not evolve there normally – not life of *our* nature, certainly. The samples we took there showed no indication that supposition was false.”

At Ronnie’s continued lack of attention, Dolac glanced towards Donnel before gamely continuing when Donnel nodded at him.

“Sir, the majority of the samples we took in the asteroid field seemed similar in content – except that a few of them also contained elements that could – or *should* – only be created in an *active* biosphere, which–”

“But there’s not enough mass.”

“No, Sir. Not enough mass ... *now*. Except I’m at a loss as how to explain where it all went. If there was a massive impact on a planetary scale, then one would expect some bigger chunks to be laying about somewhere, unless they fell into the star or in one of those big gas giants...”

“Or ended up orbiting that planet we just left?” Ronnie suggested after finally looking up at both of them. “Or... Or if someone simply ... *transitioned* it somewhere?”

“Ahhhhh...” Dolac’s pause slowly petered out, but Donnel let out a quiet, understanding “Ahhh” of his own just a few moments later.

“Your man Riker ... the *devil* he is. Shoulda *told* me what he was lookin’ for. Said we’d likely find somethin’ interestin’ where the *fifth* planet used to be. Where might somethin’ like that be transitioned, Ronnie?” Donnel asked.

“Transitioned? You think a whole *planet* could be transported – *transitioned* across space?” he answered vaguely.

“I’d say – *yes!* Oh, I’m not saying it wouldn’t be *messy*, but if you pull what you need from the biosphere and get enough equipment together... Yes, I could probably figure out how to do that,” he considered, much to Ronnie’s surprised look. “Lad, getting something *into* transition is easy. Getting something *through* transition in one *piece* is the tough part. Shifting atoms from place-to-place is easy. Shifting them while keeping

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them in the same relative *position* is tricky. As for the *electrical* effects ... well, that's why you don't transition anyone with head injuries if you can avoid it," he stated while musing for a few moments more.

"I could transition something that big with maybe ... twenty stations in orbit ... and the same number at the receiving end. Though, like I say, it would be *messy*, and nothin' *alive* should be going along for the ride. Probably leave a few bits behind, too."

"But ... but what about the *power*? The power requirements *alone* would--"

"Synchronized, single-pulse transition. Five-hundred ... six-hundred thousand tons of reaction mass times twenty – all going off at once. It'd flip something that big ... oooh ... a *long* way across the sky. Maybe as far as forty ... maybe fifty minutes or more."

"About ... two *hours*, perhaps?"

"Double up on the reaction mass, and make sure it's shielded properly. Probably nothin' would *live* through it, but it should get to the destination in one jump ... intact. *Mostly*..."

Ronnie stared at him for several seconds, before taking hold of the data pad and linking it to the *Kraken's* database. Then he searched for the Aesir survey and downloaded it to the pad for Donnel. It was just a standard survey of general surface features, biosphere, and geological scans listed. Donnel glanced at it, then handed it to Dolac with a smirk.

"See how your data compares to *this* particular planet," he suggested – already knowing that it should – and watched as Dolac's eyes stared intently at it before a wide smile grew across his face.

With his attention glued to the data pad clutched firmly in his hands, Dolac rose and wandered off blindly; leaving the sitting Donnel behind.

"That's a fine thing you done, lad. Dolac's been wondering why he'd been dragged along for the ride. His specialties are rather unique – transition effects on elements was one of the papers he'd submitted for his degree. *One* of them, anyway. Riker picked him for the trip. Got *another* young one – Milsie is her name. Xeno-biologist. She's working on that genetic task Riker set her. Been up straight since we brought those samples up from your Earth."

"Oh? Larl failed to mention that to me. How's she doing?"

"Well, she's the emotional type – *all* them academics seem to have some quirks – and she's between laughing and crying half the time, with the 'tween times chasing everyone away while she works."

"Donnel, if the girl needs sleep--"



“Was thinking of talking to Lady Sai about that very thing, Ronnie. Girl won’t do any good if she’s too tired or too confused. People tend to make mistakes like that.”

“Any idea of what she’s trying to achieve?”

“Something about genetic comparisons between Earth life and your friend, the Ambassador...” He left it hanging, and Ronnie just looked at him. “Riker. Your man’s got some *funny ideas*, lad,” he added, then followed it up with a shrug.

Ronnie continued to stare at him for a few more seconds.

“Well ... that ... that’s something I’ll have to think about ... later,” he finally muttered, but then perked up a bit – knowing the *busybody* he was sitting across from. “How’s my *ship* doing? Anything new and *exciting* in it, or is it still the same as when you boarded it?”

“Well, now that you *mention* it...”

### ***The New Hanger Deck Gym***

Ronnie squared off against the simulacrum in the “new” gym (which had been converted from the storage/shipping/prisoner/morgue room), then he engaged with it.

After an initial surge of adrenaline, he continued on autopilot. But after another few minutes, he started thinking about the *new* problems he was facing – not only with Sue, but also with the Vanir Prime. After several more minutes, he halted the program and looked up the other options Donnel had programmed in. A smile crossed his lips, and he called up a Vanir fighter – obviously from Donnel’s “imagination” – and restarted the sequence.

Now he was facing a nine-foot-tall antagonist who looked very similar to Samuel – if Samuel was physically adept at wielding a sword in combat. It appeared that Donnel had put some effort into taking advantage of the Vanir skeletal structure and muscular strength. It was probably surmised from the physical records of the bodies recovered from the destroyed station. As Ronnie moved around the space, he found himself wondering if the Vanir really would pick up a sword and dance with him, or would they simply sit back and lob shots at them from afar. Most big ship combat was done at multi-kilometer ranges, and he didn’t see the prospect of hand-to-hand combat ever happening between humans and Vanir.

It was a fun exercise, just the same, even when he almost got caught by a swift tail swipe during an over-extended lunge on his part. Recovering quickly, he danced back and paused the simulation while

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contemplating the situation, but with a final sigh, ended the simulation and put away the practice blade.

*'Do you really think you'll have the opportunity to meet Vanir with a sword in hand, Rondal Caldar?'* Sally asked him, having come in unnoticed by him.

He froze with just a tiny chill running down his spine. He'd not felt her approach the room, let alone *enter* it. He'd been distracted ... yet *again*.

*'It's an interesting simulation, Sally. Donnel programmed it based on the physical build of an average Vanir male. I'm sure it does not come close to what the Vanir can physically accomplish in reality'*

*'No. Not nearly. And I'm afraid Samuel would be a poor example of such. The Vanir males do not engage in such activities. We do not let them'* she sent with an odd tenor to her thoughts.

He ignored her comments and offered a rebuttal of his own.

*'The Vanir must have engaged in manual activities of a similar nature at some point in their distant past. Most primitive species have some form of physical combat in their past, if only for ensuring the safety of the family and community'*

*'Yes. In the distant past'* she agreed. *'But the males were not the ones performing such acts. Traditionally, we – the females – were the aggressor of the species'*

He thought about that, and the more he thought, the more he applied it to his problem. His *problems*, rather. With a reluctant sigh, he finally leaned back against the wall before sliding down to sit with his legs spread in front of him.

Sally approached and very sinuously lowered herself in repose next to him. Casting his memories back, he considered *all* the situations he'd observed with both Sally and Samuel exposed to the same stimulations ... then started coming to a *different* conclusion than he'd originally supposed. Then he mentally smacked himself for not seeing it *earlier*.

*'S'Shac'Kah 38521... Do I speak to a mere Medical Technician, or am I now addressing the TRUE Ambassador to the Commonwealth?'* he asked quietly, which got a hissing response he recognized as laughter from her.

*'You humans! So quick to judge!'* she finally sent lightly. *'I am the Senior Medical Technician sent along with S'Shac'Kah 39496 to insure his intellectual stability is intact so that, between the two of our reports, a factual understanding is accurately reported to the Vanir Prime. This is so a suitable decision might be made about Vanir-Human relations ... or so we were led to believe'*

He felt a tenor of disgust in her tone before she went on.

*'I have since come to believe we were expended as a diversionary tactic so the Prime would have additional time to implement ... whatever she intends to do about the human worlds. I am truly sorry, Rondal Caldar. I am sorry also that we may not live to join your family in any meaningful sense. I would have liked to visit your home'* she sent, then hissed again, but in the Vanir equivalent of a sigh this time.

He reached out to her, laying a hand on her arm, and to her credit, she didn't flinch.

*'It may not be as bad as you think, Sally. We're not completely helpless, you know'*

*'Rondal Caldar... Ronnie, you do not understand. We have weapons so much more than even S'Ahi'Ma 42491 suspects. Though she is the daughter in line to replace S'Ahi'Ma 31245 – the sitting Prime – Sue does not know every secret of her warren. The resources the Grandmother can bring to bear are significant. What trivial machines were dropped on Zarox are as NOTHING to the machines the Vanir have had access to for millennia. All thanks to humans'* she sent, followed by a truncated hiss that was the equivalent of a snort this time.

*'What do you mean?'*

*'Humans... Most of our achievements are from you humans. Our history goes back nearly two-hundred thousand of your years, Ronnie'*

She paused at his astonished glance.

*'Yes. Thanks to your species cast-offs from about a hundred-fifty thousand years ago, we were able to reverse engineer and develop improvements to your designs ... but never with the same intent'* she explained to his surprise. *'We were never a very responsive species, Ronnie. We were content to be left alone and live our lives quietly on our home world. It was your expansion and the following wars that left your ... debris ... floating through our space. You might say it caused a revolution in our own society. I can't imagine the shock ... the bouts of insanity ... after finding evidence of alien life ... and so violent a species...'* She paused while a quiver rippled through her body, giving Ronnie a chance to ask her a question.

*'Sally, how long have the Vanir been watching humans?'*

*'Directly? The last fifty-thousand years or so ... I think. The Vanir Primes were always very careful to maintain a "let alone" protocol with humans until very recently. It was only within the last fifteen thousand years that we started interacting with humans at all. We acquired a*

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*sample world, and the residents upon it, plus their support humans from ... from the world we just left. We set them up close to where you found us, in fact'*

*'We think you transitioned the fifth planet of the system we just left'*

*'Yes. That planet was transitioned, but ... not all of the inhabitants survived the transition. It was a rather poor attempt at teleportation on that scale, and never repeated. We terraformed a suitable planet, then physically transported their support species there afterwards. Then we left clues to where they could be found. Once located, the Aesir set up a new terminus on Midgard and continued as before. They just recently developed a transition drive of their own, but the Prime ordered that development stymied. The developers were ... their minds were wiped. We could not take the chance they would spread'*

He considered the panic that would have ensued had that been allowed to occur. Then he considered what else they'd done earlier than that.

*'You dropped equipment on Zarox. Weren't you afraid of the Drecks spreading?'*

Her response was preceded by a series of short seizures – which he suddenly realized were internalized laughter for a Vanir.

*'Not really. The equipment was trivial in content. Besides, the Drecks were not the first effort. A program had begun previously that sought to come up with a control species. Something that could be introduced to limit the spread of humans in general'*

*'The Kee?'*

*'Yes. They were a failed experiment from one of the warrens. They – and the warren that created them – were quarantined'*

*'Until the Drecks found them'*

*'Yes. Until the Drecks found them ... and used them to some extent. You appear to have found an additional use for them as well'* she pointed out.

*'Well ... yes, but it's true. Unmediated Kee in the correct location can be an effective means of societal disruption'* he admitted.

*'Just as we set the Drecks against the Commonwealth'*

*'But the Commonwealth posed no threat to the Vanir!'*

*'Not yet. In addition, there were unanswered questions as to the strange peaks and valleys on certain frequencies within the*

*Commonwealth structure. We had no knowledge of what humans could do ... what SOME humans could do'* she sent, then held out her hand.

It began to glow just a tiny bit with a warm golden light that quickly faded.

*'To have THIS ability ... and yet your societies kept collapsing'*

*'Well, we're trying to get better, but this is a recent development ... mostly ... we think'*

*'Yes. This last cycle of yours has lasted twice as long as most. Sai tells me it is because of you. Men like you and women like her, rather. Her planet guides and advises you, and your planet performs the work'*

*'Much like the Vanir'*

*'Yes. Much like the Vanir. That is why my warren is so hopeful. We want to see humanity grow up, Ronnie. We want to have the freedom to visit human worlds as friends. We're tired of being alone'*

He turned his head and looked up at her curiously.

*'That doesn't sound too much like a Vanir, Sally. Wouldn't you rather bask in the warmth of your home world? From what I've read from some of the others I've encountered, the home world offers peace and tranquility'*

*'Yes. Peace... Tranquility... And a stagnant society! While we were still crawling through the mud of our home world, you humans were dashing about the galaxy and claiming new worlds – but then DESTROYING them and EACH OTHER! If we hadn't discovered those few pieces of ships that crashed onto our world, then we would STILL be crawling through the mud!'*

He easily recognized her extended hiss as another sigh, this time, before she continued.

*'When we first discovered your debris on our planet's surface, it took "interested" Vanir millennia to understand what they were looking at. Then it took centuries more to decide what to do with it. After that, a whole industry had to be developed – from NOTHING! We had NOTHING, Ronnie! We lived off the land. You could say that humans were OUR "Gods" and brought US inspiration to seek out the stars!'*

The thought of that – going from pre-agrarian to industrial just to deal with alien left-overs – was a hard concept to understand. Sure, there were similar, if not quite as spectacular, discoveries in humanity's past, but growing from nothing to advanced technology just to deal with used alien junk was a bit extreme.

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As for the *time frames* involved...

*‘Sally, if you had no structured society ... no cities and such ... how do you know how long your history existed?’*

She looked down at him with what he felt was a somewhat wry expression for her.

*‘Do you not wonder what our multi-segmented mind is good for? Some humans have an “oral” tradition, do they not? It is much the same with us. With what you and Sai have given to us, I cannot imagine what the Vanir could not achieve in the future – provided we do not DESTROY ourselves with this new knowledge!’*

He reached over and patted her arm comfortingly.

*‘With proper guidance and advice, the Vanir may be steered into a suitable and safe future. There are you and the Prime to do that’* he reminded her.

*‘If she does not fall victim to fear and ignorance’* she muttered silently before slumping against him in despair.

That’s how Jaiying and her shadow found them a few minutes later.

### ***November 20, Sue, A Work in Progress***

After many unproductive sessions, they were finally going to check and see if any *physical* differences existed between Sally’s mind and Sue’s.

It had become frustrating to Sally that every time she approached an understanding of Sue’s problem, Sue broke down and needed sedation. As a representative of her warren, Sue’s wellbeing was critical to their understanding of the overall Vanir situation they were facing. If they failed to determine a successful resolution to it, other avenues would likely have to be pursued to deal with the Prime’s apparent duplicity towards the Ambassador and the Commonwealth.

Sai, Sally, and Jaiying began their work on Sue, with Kiki standing by and ready to help. Ronnie quietly backed out of the room but met Petrus coming towards the Kee quarters just as he was leaving.

“Have the girls started yet? I was hoping to be there while they worked with Sue,” his First Officer asked.

“In the same room with Sai?” While he paused in the corridor, several thoughts flashed through Ronnie’s mind – such as, which of Petrus’ many hats he was currently wearing; reliable ship’s First Officer, concerned friend, interested bystander, or spy for his big sister.

“She’s stayed her hand so far, lad. I’m just curious why Sue is so unstable if she’s next in line for the throne. I’d also like to know what understanding she has concerning this business with the Prime changing from watchful waiting, to actively gunning for the Commonwealth.”

This surprised Ronnie, as it didn’t seem something that would be of particular interest to Four unless Lili had him keeping tabs on things.

“Four, you have to agree that Sue’s *more* than a little messed up in the head. She was *dead* for a month. Since we brought her back, she’s had to integrate all this new knowledge into all the segments of her mind. It would be hard enough for a person with *one* mind to grasp it all and accept it.”

“I see your point, lad, but ... well ... the kids are worried about tracking all the Vanir actives approaching Commonwealth and Hegemony space.”

Ronnie’s face froze for just a moment before defrosting just as quickly.

“Actives? Ships or ... or platforms? How many have they detected so far?”

“Walter says they’re keeping track of at least ten platforms right now, and there’s activity ramping up in half a dozen more outposts along the lower cloud under the Hegemony. Lad ... Walter says these things are *huge* ... easily three ... *four* times bigger than a CPS, and mounting weapons we’ve never seen before. The kids are trying to figure them out, but the best case is they can only destroy one planet at a time.”

Ronnie nearly turned in a full circle while thinking of solutions, before twisting back to Petrus.

“Then ... then we figure out how to *stop* them! Pull the power plugs without *killing* anyone! There are ways to—”

“Ronnie ... dance away from the edge, lad. The Elder is *already* of unsound mind. Don’t give her any reason to take you down *now*!”

“Family, Commonwealth, and *Crown*, Petrus! I’ll do whatever it *takes*!” he said, then left him standing in the corridor as he proceeded to his compartment.

He needed to make a *call* ... but first he needed to *pee*!

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Ronnie left his facilities somewhat refreshed, before lying on his bed and settling in. Things were getting out of hand and he needed more information.

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Four times *bigger* than a CPS? Sixteen-hundred meters ... almost a *MILE* in diameter? He needed *lots* more information!

After stretching his neck and trying to relax, he closed his eyes and reached out... *'Lili, do you have a moment?'*

'Rondal! The children are up to something and issuing orders! ORDERS, Rondal! They are declaring areas of approach from Vanir space off limits to Commonwealth observers!'

'Walter...'

'Hello Grandfather. We have perhaps acted impertinently with Aunt Lili and Uncle Emperor, but you were indisposed and we needed to make sure Commonwealth assets were well out of danger before proceeding further' a very determined sounding Walter sent on a band wide enough to include Lili and Radatel.

'Acted? Walter, what are you guys doing?' Ronnie sent with rising concern.

'We are preparing to defend against a Vanir intrusion into Commonwealth space, Grandfather' Cathy shared.

'Their weapons systems are pretty powerful, Grandfather' Josie added. *'But if you make a few slight adjustments, the power can be made to cascade nicely and vaporize the whole platform. You just gotta, you know, not be anywhere within a solar diameter or so'*

'Kids, I'm trying to PREVENT a war – not START one! YOU MUST NOT DO THIS!'

'Grandfather, this was one of your options the last time you considered them. You thought it might–'

'Walter, this is NOT A FIRST OPTION PLAN! This is WAY down there in the Y's and Z's! Please give me a chance to figure out what's going on with the Prime BEFORE we do anything we can't back out of nicely!' he pressed, on the verge of anger.

'And if they approach occupied worlds, Grandfather? Are we to let them destroy–'

'NO, but you are NOT to destroy them FIRST! Do something simple. Cut their drive systems and set them adrift. Have them jump to the wrong coordinates – but not into a STAR! Just ... just keep them at bay while we have a chance to figure things out with the Prime!'

'What if the Prime won't deal with us, Grandfather?' Josie asked. *'What if her mind is made up?'*

'If our suspicions are correct, the Prime has painted herself into a political corner and might feel forced to start a war instead of listening to reason. We need time to determine if this is correct, or if we can work with the Prime at all' he advised them.

'Grandfather, what if you can't work with the Prime?' Cathy asked.

'Then ... then maybe we'll have to find a Prime who will work with us' he sent along wearily.

'Like you're doing with Uncle Gagsa and the Drecks?' Josie asked.

The shock from Lili and Radatel was almost palatable. The children had already accepted Torga and Manya into the family, and now, by extension, the potential head of the new Master Pack – provided he lived to make that happen.

'Yes ... possibly something along those lines' he said, before shifting topics. *'Lili, how is the Elder?'*

'She is distressed, Rondal! Very distressed and upset about--'

'Lady Ai has gone nuts, Grandfather' Josie interrupted.

'Josie!'

'It's TRUE, Grandfather! She wanted Grandmother to kill you just a few days ago, and she was really upset when Grandmother said no'

The ether went still for an indeterminate fraction of time...

'Lili... Is this true?' he asked quietly.

'Rondal... Lady Ai is ... she is not well. The loss of the Visions, the lack of control over the Vanir situation... She – she ... she just collapsed. She ... she is different now. She is not the same. The children... I believe the children...' Lili trailed off, and the ether went still once again.

'Walter ... what did you do to the Elder?' he asked the silent void.

'When Lady Ai could not get Grandmother to kill you, Lady Ai was upset. Then she tried to kill Grandmother, just as Grandmother Kita killed Rakel. We also caught her considering killing Aunt Lili and Uncle Radatel, but that was unacceptable, so ... I changed her. She can no longer perform those actions against you ... or ANYONE, for that matter'

'Walter ... what did you do the Elder?' he asked again.

'Grandfather, I--'

'It was ALL of us! Me, Walter, and Josie!' Cathy broke in. *'Jaiying and Rose didn't know!'*

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'Lady Ai is alive and well, Grandfather, but she's no longer a Senior' Josie shared somberly, which brought quiet to the ether again.

The silence lingered until Walter continued.

'We believe Lady Ai's breakdown made her a danger to the Commonwealth when she lost her connection with reality, Grandfather. We protected the family, the Commonwealth, and the Crown. We believe Aunt Lili will be a suitable replacement for the Elder once it's been publically acknowledged that Elder Ai has decided to retire due to – unforeseen circumstances?' he suggested.

The silence continued again while Ronnie let that trickle through his mind. The children had taken it upon *themselves* to preempt an attack on him, Sai, and Lili ... *and the Crown*. They certainly shouldn't be punished for that, but the fact they took away Lady Ai's ability to function as a *Senior*...

'Lili, does Ai still function as a Healer? At all?'

'I do not know, Rondal. She no longer reaches out to me, but ... but if she is no longer a Senior, then she could not... Oh, what have you terrible children done!'

'They saved my life, Lili ... and yours and Radatel's and Sai's. Ai was confused, and thus dangerous. You have no idea of just how dangerous I was until I got my demon under control. With Ai's power and state of mind, I would wonder that lives weren't lost beforehand'

'We are very sorry, Aunt Lili' Cathy offered. *'Lady Ai was damaged, but we could not fix her. The next best solution was to make sure she could not hurt anyone else. She retains her basic Healer skills, and all of her knowledge and all of her memories, but she'll need help in resolving her emotional issues. It might take a few years to settle in before she accepts the reality of her situation. Perhaps once she recognizes she was a danger to herself and to others–'*

'Children, please do not perform any more precipitous actions without consulting me or the Crown, or Lady Lili, or Grandmother Sai' Ronnie interrupted her. *'I'm sure you reviewed all the possible avenues to arrive at your decision, but still, we'd like to be kept in the loop. We "old folks" just might have another option that might be less offensive in some way'* Ronnie requested.

"Ship handling" Grandfather?'

'No, Walter. A proper consultation, if you please'

Ronnie's sigh was felt through the void, before he went on. *'What other news have you got for me? Something good for a change?'*

'Well, the Master Pack has asked Lord Gagsa to meet with representatives of Lord Glau to discuss Pack Gagsa's return to position within the Hegemony' Walter shared.

'He'd be a fool to meet with representatives' Ronnie considered. *'Gagsa's an equal of Glau in stature. Glau will use a meeting with underlings to lower his position ... maybe even use it to trick Gagsa into an ambush'*

'We thought so as well, Grandfather, but Torga has already advised his father about it, and Lord Gagsa has declined; offering instead to meet with Glau personally in a neutral location – in front of other Lords' Cathy advised him.

'It comes so soon. He means to take the throne quickly. Do you think he is ready?' Lili directed at Ronnie.

'Gagsa is younger now and well trained. I'm sure Torga has been passing along techniques to him as soon as I taught them to Torga. If Gagsa has learned anything new at all, then Glau is a dead man'

'We believe so, too, Grandfather, plus Lord Glau is old and not well liked by his Pack. If Lord Gagsa defeats him and merges the two packs, he'll have a much stronger power base to control Zarox and be able to effect change throughout the Hegemony' Walter suggested. *'A public recognition of joint Hegemony-Commonwealth efforts against the Vanir would certainly cement that relationship into the Hegemony's collective realm of acceptability'*

Ronnie considered Walter's assessment carefully.

It was happening quickly ... *very* quickly, but it had to be done correctly.

'Walter, Lord Gagsa must do this all on his own. If there is any HINT of outside interference during their discussions, it would not go well for Gagsa ... or the Commonwealth'

'He has the tools you've given him, Rondal. As long as he doesn't openly flaunt them in the face of an honor duel, he should be all right' Lili suggested.

'We will watch with interest, Grandfather, and we promise to refrain from interfering with the discussions' Cathy promised.

'Good. Anything ELSE of note?'

'Rondal, a curious thing has been occurring of late' Lili shared. *'So far, we have intercepted three ships attempting to sneak out of Hegemony space and enter Commonwealth territory. All of them were simple*

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transports, all of them were unarmed, and nearly all of them were full of human-standards. Most interestingly, one of them held human-Drecks in addition to the other human-standards. They were all seeking asylum in the Demon's Realm, and--'

'What did the Senior report?' he interrupted her.

'We did not believe it at first, Rondal, but no less than three different Seniors interviewed each member of each ship. Of them all, we found only a handful of suspicious travelers. The rest appeared to be sincere in their desire to live outside of Hegemony control. They had all heard of the mystical realm of the Demon and wanted to live without the constant threat of beatings or worse. Dorcas has not told you?'

'No, she ... she's had her hands full. Just being informed about my "Staff" was quite enough to distract her further. What have you been doing with them all?'

'The usual; physicals, Healing whatever ails them, profiles of their history and origin. Once we get them prepared, we bring in some of our successful citizens and let them pitch their groups. No one has been turned away yet, and no one wants to go back to the Hegemony. The others ... we let them congregate with each other and listen covertly. All they know at that point is they've met Fringers who may or may not be associated with the Demon. We're thinking of turning them loose on Krux with stories of Fringer slavers taking in the foolish escapees and selling them for a free labor force'

'Diabolical, Lili'

'Why, thank you' Her sweet disposition radiated out to him. *'Oh, and you'll be frustrated to learn that the processing staff of the Demon's Realm have been removing both tracers and bombs for several YEARS now – they'd just never gotten around to examining them in any detail; figuring the Drecks had implanted them for some reason'*

'What? How...'

'Apparently, they'd all been detected during the standard screening process, then removed as a matter of course. Now do try to get some rest, and then see to that issue with the Prime. And PLEASE try to maintain better control over your STAFF, Rondal! Your brother is STILL in charge here, and we need to be kept in the LOOP!' she sent in a gruff reversal of her cheerfulness just a moment ago, before leaving the conversation.

'Walter, you heard the Lady. You guys keep Lili and Rad informed on all the stuff you do – and ask them BEFOREHAND, even if it distracts them from routine tasks. You are "Staff" – as in working-FOR-someone. Please leave off these unilateral decisions until you're officially in charge'

‘We hear...’ Walter sent.

‘And obey...’ Cathy sent.

‘Yup!’ Josie sent cheerfully.

‘Ai-yah...’ Ronnie’s thoughts mumbled through the ether.

He absently dropped the conversation while considering all the stress he and Torga had been put through when those bombs had been implanted inside of them.

For just a moment, he thought of asking Dorcas about them, but figured it would be a pointless exercise by now.

Kantor, The Royal Homestead, With the Kids

The Emperor stayed with the children while they talked about inconsequentials until Maya returned. Then he left to get back to work in the office he kept near his suite. When Maya sat down, Walter immediately climbed into her lap and patted her breasts to let her know he was thirsty, but she was beginning to suspect he had other issues developing in his young body, and the firmness of his erections when he nursed from her seemed to prove it out.

‘Walter, when do we tell Uncle Emperor about the Bornat’s gifts?’ Cathy asked him on a very narrow band.

‘Before the Vanir attack’ he shared silently.

‘Ship handling?’ Josie asked.

‘No. We do it like Grandfather said, but if the Vanir decide to move on us, we will already be in place and ready. Grandfather can make the decision then’

‘Grandfather promised we were not setting ships out against the Vanir!’ Cathy protested.

‘Grandfather promised them the Commonwealth wasn’t setting ships out against the Vanir – to his knowledge. Besides, they’re still on our side of the border. If they’re needed, they can be used. Anyway, it’s only in case we can’t stop them all’ Josie reminded her.

‘Shouldn’t we tell Jaiying, at least?’ Cathy asked.

‘She would only tell Grandfather, and he has enough to worry about’ Walter suggested while settling in more comfortably at Maya’s breast.

As Walter lay there enjoying the nourishment Maya was providing him, he was thinking of what else he’d pulled from the Elder’s mind before shutting her down as a Senior. It had been a surprise to him at

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the time, but it made so much more sense of the stories they'd all gleaned from probing the minds of those Seniors on the staff of Lady Ai. The Elder touched the Flux in an effort to direct the Commonwealth towards safety and security. Unfortunately, as a consequence of her efforts, she and all her predecessors had forced themselves to become hypersensitive to all those around her.

That was how Elder Kita had maintained control – not only with her extended staff of Seniors, but also by reaching out remotely and *personally* monitoring those individuals who might be on the verge of causing chaos ... like their Grandfather. The fact that he still lived was probably based on her interpretations of the Flux, even during his intermittent dabbling along the “Forbidden Path” for all those years. His *father* had failed the test of time, however, and paid the ultimate penalty for it.

Something he alone knew was what Kita had passed along to Ai – the extended mechanisms that enabled her to perform at such a level. Unfortunately, Kita had died before fully training Ai in their use, and how to avoid their sort comings – which is probably what drove her to such extremes of behavior. In hindsight, that probably explained how Lady Trenka had ended up as a guest at the Homestead for several weeks before finding a new position working for Aunt Lili.

He'd not shared it with the girls, and briefly considered if he should share it with Aunt Lili – should she be confirmed as the new Elder on a permanent basis. With the Flux gone, the management of the Commonwealth fell back into the hands of the Emperor and his wife, the Elder pro tem, using traditional means of decision-making.

After further review, he decided to hold off on that decision for a while longer. After all, it wasn't like he and his cousins were going to simply walk away from the job anytime soon, and besides – the Flux was already gone.

The Elder's Complex

Fan and Xiu left Lady Ai in Molar's care while they took a break from sitting with the distressed Elder. They knew something was *seriously* wrong with Ai, but were hoping Lili could provide answers because the three of them were at a complete loss at this point. They found Lili sitting in the conference room and furiously flipping through a stack of reports prepared by the Tier One staff. She didn't look at all happy.

“Lili ... are you not well?” Fan asked, only to get a disgusted grunt from her in return, before she swiveled in her seat to look at both of them.

“So ... did you *all* know Ai had turned murderous, or did she keep *that* a secret from you three as *well!*” she snapped, getting shocked looks from both their faces and picking up confused – and gratefully *innocent* – emotions from their minds.

“No. I can see it in your eyes that you didn’t know,” she muttered, before sighing and slumping in her seat. Lili reached out to her cup and sipped water from it sparingly, while Fan and Xiu recovered and approached the table opposite her. She swiveled back before gesturing for them to sit, which they did.

“What... I mean... Ai has been very confused since–” Xiu stopped at Lili’s glare, but Fan spoke up.

“What have you learned, Lili?”

She took another sip of water before turning to Fan.

“Lady Ai – the Elder – decided Rondal was no longer of any use. *And* Sai... *and* the Emperor... and ... and *ME* for that matter! When Sai refused to kill Rondal, Ai tried to kill Sai, but was stopped. There were indications that my husband and I were next on her list,” she finished quietly.

Both of the Elder’s senior staff looked at her in confusion, then started shaking their heads in disbelief. They still were when Molara entered the room and Xiu noticed her.

“Who’s with Lady Ai?” she asked.

“Mistress Kita,” Molara told her. “She said Lili had called for her to relieve me?”

Lili gestured for her to join them at the table, then stood to pour them all water from the drink tray. She passed out the cups and topped off her own before sitting back down with another sigh.

“Molara, I’ve just been informed that Lady Ai attempted to have Rondal killed. Failing that, she attempted to kill her assigned executioner – Sai. Both my husband and I were included in her plans.”

She was relieved when Molara also radiated disbelief and dismay at this shocking news.

“Lili ... how did you–”

“You’ve all heard the rumors about Rondal’s ‘Senior Staff?’” she asked, cutting her off. “It’s true. They were monitoring ... *are* monitoring many things related to the security of the Commonwealth. One of them was making sure disruptions in negotiations with the Vanir would not occur.

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Apparently, killing Rondal was high on their watch list ... along with making sure the Vanir do not make any preemptive strikes against the Commonwealth or the Hegemony.”

“But Rondal was... *Wait!* You say the Vanir are changing their position against us?” Fan asked.

“Vanir battle platforms have been mobilized and are moving into positions along the Human-Vanir boundary lines. They are being monitored, but have currently not made any moves to cross into human-occupied space,” Lili stated while looking at them all. “I’ve also been told that Lady Ai has been ... demoted. She no longer has the ability to function as a Senior, but should still retain whatever skills she had as a Healer.”

She stopped while the Elder’s staff digested this *new* batch of information. Finally...

“Lili ... who is monitoring the Vanir?” Molara asked.

“And who ... how was Ai ... demoted?” Xiu asked.

Fan didn’t say anything, but Lili could feel her trying to probe her mind gently – not that it would do any good, since the children had been working with her for a while now.

“The Senior Staff of the First Lord is monitoring the Vanir movements and is prepared to do *terrible* things to them if a move is made against any human-occupied planets. As for Lady Ai... The Senior Staff informed us of Ai’s demotion, but I declined to ask how it was done. My understanding is she will need counseling for a period of time until she can accept her new position as a ... a common Healer.”

Lili could feel the shock ... fear ... and finally the *anger* when that sank in. She could also feel the anger subside as they slowly realized Ai still lived, even as a mere Healer.

“Ai is ... she does not know why we have been silent to her calls,” Xiu said, and Fan nodded in new understanding.

“We have counselors on staff, Lili. They should be able to help Mistress Ai during this difficult phase of her life,” Molara suggested somberly, getting dismayed looks from Fan and Xiu before reluctant acceptance.

They all looked at each other, each now wondering where this was all headed. Fan looked to Lili and asked, “Rondal’s Senior Staff – do you know who they are?”

Lili stared at them for several seconds before finally blinking.

“They are ... in the most secure location within the Commonwealth that Rondal could find. They are protected by the most dangerous and capable guards available. My Ladies ... they have the trust of the First Lord, and of the Emperor ... and will work with the Crown to protect the Commonwealth – even unto their own *lives*.”

‘Or they will be sent to bed without their SUPPER!’ she kept to herself.

The Kraken

Sue lay quivering while Sally calmly went over the situation with her once again. She was trying to gain a foothold of understanding with yet another segment of Sue’s confused mind.

The last two hours had not been pleasant, but they needed to understand what was preventing Sue from assimilating her current reality compared to what she understood it to be before her death.

It appeared to hinge on several issues, one of which was her death and resurrection, which was probably to be expected.

The rest of the obstacles seemed to be related to the duplicity of the Prime in having different public and private policies regarding Vanir-wide issues – something that would *automatically* negate her from the position of Prime and call for the censure of her entire warren once such duplicity was made public.

Sally was already figuring the likelihood of that occurrence, and which warren would be a suitable replacement – her own included.

Both Sai and Sally felt the slight intrusion from Ronnie when he requested an immediate private audience from Sai. Sally looked up at Sai’s glance and nodded.

Sally and Jaiying continued working with Sue, while Sai stood and left the room; making her way to a conference room where Ronnie waited for her.

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“You did not need to be bothered about this, Ronnie. The kids took care of it, and everything’s under control.”

“Everything is *not* under control, Sai, if I don’t even know what’s going *on!*”

He paced the floor, while Sai sat there and watched him.

“What if the kids do something without approval and end up starting an inter-species *war* over something *stupid*? And when were you gonna tell me that Ai ordered my *death*?” he nearly shouted.

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“Ronnie... Lord Rondal, I did not tell you about Lady Ai’s order because you have enough things to worry about. The children dealt with the problem, and prevented the deaths of Lady Lili and the Emperor. Lady Ai is no longer a problem, and will receive the help she needs to resolve her emotional issues. Lady Lili ... she’s probably the best person to assume the Elder’s position. I can see where it would benefit the Commonwealth if that situation were made the norm, instead of the current situation of separate Elder and Crown offices.”

He considered that, then finally gave a reluctant nod in agreement, before returning to the issue in front of them.

“Sai, we are dealing with a species that doesn’t seem to understand *themselves* all that well. In most cases, their reasoning is black and white. Either good or bad ... where bad means *eliminate* for all practical purposes. If we come off as too dangerous to have around, the Prime is poised to eliminate our threat to the Vanir *completely!*”

“Then you have to find a way to reason with the Prime. A way to deal with–”

“Which I *cannot* achieve without understanding their *society*, and I’d rather not learn it while trying to survive an *attack* from it!” he snapped.

She was silent for several seconds before speaking again.

“You have Samuel and Sally, who can provide you with a cultural understanding of their warren, the S’Shac’Kah. They appear neutral to humans in general. Once we get Sue settled down, you can get a reading on the S’Ahi’Ma. Sally can help you with that better than Samuel. I would go with Sally’s advice rather than Samuel’s because their females–”

“Have a much better grasp of reality than their males, who suffer from emotional breakdowns at the unknown,” he finished for her. “So Sally was telling me.”

“Yes ... they rely on their females for certain strengths, and males for other strengths, just as humans do.”

“And in much more stringent cultural norms,” he conceded. “Humans switch roles, share roles, and even *abandon* roles, depending on the situation.”

“Yes, we do ... while the Vanir were all culturally raised to behave somewhat similar to each other – even if from different warrens. Probably a species trait.”

She watched as he stretched before sitting down listlessly.

“Ronnie, when was the last time you got any *real* sleep?” she asked, and he had to think it over for a few seconds, but couldn’t really remember ... and she caught his confusion about it.

“Ronnie, when was the last time you shared *contentment* with anyone?” She’d asked this while stepping over and gently reaching out a hand to rest on his shoulder, but the frown on his face caused her to withdraw it.

“Does it matter, Sai? Aren’t you still denying *yourself* the loving caresses of your *husband*?” he asked, just to watch her bristle, which she did for a moment before calming herself.

“Ronnie, as your Senior Healer, I *order* you to a good night’s sleep ... *after* accepting contentment in full measure. I will send someone along to your quarters after the evening meal.”

“Not coming to visit me *yourself*, Sai? I’ve missed you since ... since Petrus came aboard. And what about the needs of Petrus?”

“Petrus can take care of his *own* needs. He–” she stopped at his knowing stare. “I will deal with Petrus’ needs. You need not concern yourself, my Lord Caldar.”

“*Personally*, Sai?” he asked with a smirk.

“They will be dealt with ... somehow. But *I* will determine the needs of the crew, Lord Caldar, and your needs are *obvious*.”

“I hear ... and obey, my Healer.” He nodded and stood, then left without another word, while Sai sat there and fumed for a while. She finally shook herself before getting up to return to Sue’s Healing.

### ***Ronnie’s Compartment***

The rest of the day seemed to drag on. After eating a quiet evening meal in the commons by himself, he returned to his compartment and straightened it up for his expected visitor. Once relatively neat and tidy, he showered and rested on his bed while waiting for his “assignation” for the evening as ordered by Sai. It wasn’t long in coming, and Laisee entered quietly and came over to sit by his side on his bed.

“My Lord Caldar, by order of the Senior Healer, I am to see to your *contentment*. Are you going to give me any *trouble*?” she asked sternly.

He looked at her fierce expression and almost laughed, but caught the concern dancing at the edges of her mind and relaxed.

## Unhide the Past

“Laisee, you look as beautiful today, as you did when we first played together. Come share contentment with me once again. I’ve missed you,” he said, adding a warm smile and open arms to his invitation.

She smiled back and let her robes drop, before slipping under the covers with him and joining him in a loving hug.

“It’s been too long, Ronnie. I’ve missed you, too,” she murmured.

They hugged, kissed, and played gently, and then with more fervor until both fell apart in sweaty bliss. After a suitable amount of recovery, she latched onto him and teased, tickled, and kissed him into readiness until he rolled her underneath him and applied himself to their shared pleasure once again. This time they fell apart, exhausted, but a few minutes later he struggled up and returned from the facilities with a warm wet cloth he applied to her juicier parts before drying her with the towel he’d also brought.

Coming back from washing himself, he nestled next to her and settled in with a sigh. Relaxing now, he almost dozed off until he felt a tiny tendril of thought that skittered away just as soon as he noticed it.

“Was that ... was that *Jaiying*?”

Laisee giggled, then sighed.

“Yes ... probably. The children often ‘observe’ us during play. The girls, especially. We seem to share a bond with them, although Walter also seems quite interested in our activities.”

“Isn’t that ... doesn’t it seem a little ... I don’t know ... intrusive? *Off-putting*?”

“Ronnie, you have *no* idea what it’s like knowing your pre-adolescent child is fully sexually aware of your every physical interaction with your partner of the moment. *Jaiying* wants you to be her first.”

“But – but she’s only *five*!”

“Yes, but when she’s *old* enough, she wants you to be her first,” she murmured. “She’s quite insistent about it.”

“Isn’t there anyway you can ... I don’t know ... *block* them, somehow?”

“*Believe* me, we’ve all tried, but they still feel us no matter *what* we do. We’ve gotten used to it, though. It’s been three years now since we’d become aware that something was going on during our play, and it ... well, they’ve been very polite about it and behave themselves. They no longer ask questions *during* sex ... *that* can put you off, I assure you.”

She closed her eyes and giggled into his neck for a few moments. "They experience sexual responses vicariously through us. When the time comes, they will be fully aware as no other children have been. I'm somewhat surprised the girls haven't taken advantage of Walter yet."

"He ... he doesn't..."

"Oh, of *course* Walter has erections." She giggled at the memory of the first time she'd seen it. "He's a boy, after all, but his physical development precludes ejaculations for many more years. Aside from their minds, the children are physically the same as other five-year-olds; thank the *Gods* for small favors."

She continued with a tease, just to see his reaction.

"Couldn't you just image if Walter could get the girls pregnant at *this* age? What do you think *their* babies would be capable of?"

He thought that through in just moments, then experienced a silent shudder.

"Exactly," she murmured, then reached an arm over him.

Snuggling closer, she settled in to sleep, leaving him to ponder the outcome of that situation alone. It took a while, but he finally drifted off to sleep himself; totally unaware that Jaiying had been listening very quietly and relaying the problem to the rest of the kids.

They all considered it, and while Rose seemed agreeable to having a child by Walter, the *rest* of the girls decided that – for the time being – after several more years, they would be content to *play* with Walter; but not have any children by him. Besides, that was a long way off, and they had other things to worry about.

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

The First Officer heard the knock on his door and opened it to a surprise visitor; requiring several seconds for him to recover enough to actually speak.

"Sai ... I ... didn't expect to see you this evening," Petrus said quietly.

She stared at him for several seconds before finally mustering up the anger to speak.

"Well, are you going to invite me *in*, or what?"

"Uhhh ... yes, certainly. Please come in," he said, still perplexed by her unexpected visit while backing away to allow her entry.

## Unhide the Past

She walked in and chose a seat at his desk while waiting for him to close the door before speaking.

“Petrus, Sue is being attended to by the Kee—”

“How is she? Is she any better? Her mind seemed fragmented ... all over the place. I couldn’t—” he stopped at her expression.

“You couldn’t ... what?” she asked slowly.

He remained silent while she pondered his comment, then watched as a tiny bead of sweat trickled down his forehead.

“Are you ... are you like Ronnie?” she almost whispered.

“Ha! *Me?* Not *likely*, lass! No, I’m just an old soldier set to keep watch over the lad,” he said in a somewhat nervous manner.

She watched him closely – still staring at him – then started looking at him with *more* than just a jilted eye.

“Ronnie’s mother was an Earth Healer ... somewhat ... and his father was Rakel Timorous. Your father was an Earthling, and your mother ... she was from Cletus ... Lili’s mother...”

She continued to look at him, while moving the pieces around in her head.

“You and Lili ... *together* for all those years...”

“Would you like something to drink, Sai? I’ve got a bottle of Ronnie’s finest...” he trailed off as she continued to work it through.

‘*You can hear me just fine, Petrus, just like you hear the kids ... and Lili*’ she pushed. ‘*You’ve ALWAYS been able to hear Lili, haven’t you?*’

He stared at her for a moment more, but finally sat on the edge of his bed with a sigh.

“I’ve been able to hear Lili for as long as I can remember, love. This *other* ... it’s been recent. Last several years out here with the lad. I just ... never mentioned it to him until a few years ago.”

‘*Don’t know if he did it to me, or I just picked it up*’ he continued silently. ‘*Wouldn’t be surprised if the kids had something to do with it*’

“Can ... can you Heal?”

“Gods, *no!* That be *Ronnie’s* curse! All I’m good for is following orders,” he muttered angrily.

They sat in silence for a while more.

“Petrus, did you *really* love me?”

“With all my heart and being, lass. I *still* do,” he said with feeling, then opened his whole mind to her at that moment; his sincerity shocking her with its intensity.

“Then why did you—” she stopped.

She’d just read the jumbled memories of their last time together. Lili ... *he* wasn’t thinking of Lili! Lili was *talking* to him ... giving him *orders*!

“Lili *ordered* you to get me pregnant?” she exclaimed as she rose off the chair.

“Sai ... I-I *loved* you! I don’t know *how* she did it, but she ... when we were together that time, she ... she got inside my head, and ... well, I wasn’t able to *control* myself with you, and ... and that’s why I called out her name...” he finally petered out; the shame of it flushing his face.

“So you get me pregnant on *Lili’s* orders, and then ... what? You were going to just leave me and go on to your *next* assignment? Who were you supposed to get pregnant *next*, you bastard!”

“Sai, it wasn’t that *way*! I *swear*! We were happy, and I *loved* you! I *still* love you! I just ... I don’t know *why* it happened. Lili got into my head, and ... and it just *happened*! After that we ... we separated, but you had Maya—”

He stopped at a look from her eyes.

“I had Maya, and Maya was supposed to be ... she was *destined* to be Ronnie’s—”

‘Yes, *Grandmother*’ Walter interrupted her. ‘*Maya was to become Grandfather’s wife and create a child like us, but something happened and it didn’t turn out that way*’

The sense of his silent contact widened when Lili joined the conversation. She knew it would have eventually occurred, but this appeared to be the right time. She framed her words with appropriate contriteness and hoped Sai would eventually forgive her.

*‘Lady Sai Tal, it appears you have become aware of my role in Maya’s conception. I was ordered to insure Petrus fathered a child with you, and I took liberties with his mind in doing so. Please believe me when I say that I already knew Petrus was in love with you, and you with him. Kita was sure the two of you were destined to produce a wife for Rondal, and you did – except circumstances prevented their joining’*

‘Lili, *YOU* did—’

## Unhide the Past

*‘Elder Kita ordered this. You would have eventually had a child by Petrus, but the timing was critical. I do apologize, Lady Tal, for interfering in your lives. You well know the conditions that we who served Elder Kita lived under. Not a year goes by that Petrus does not complain bitterly over the intrusion I made, and the subsequent disruption of your lives. You still love one another, Sai, and you are together again. Blame me if you must, but please don’t blame Petrus. I will endeavor to become a good sister-in-law to you’*

*‘Yes, Grandmother. Aunt Lili promises to be a good family member from now on’* Cathy pushed firmly, with Josie and Jaiying joining in.

*‘I ... I...’*

*‘Thank you, girls’* Petrus sent. *‘Thank you, Walter. Goodnight, Lili’*

*‘Our love to you all’* Lili shared with them.

*‘And our love to you’* Petrus sent back.

The conversation dropped just as suddenly as it had begun, leaving Petrus and Sai staring at each other in silence.

Petrus rose and approached Sai warily, then slowly reached out and took her hands in his; linking his fingers with hers. They stood that way for several seconds while Sai assimilated this *new* reality ... and suddenly realized where she was ... and who she was holding hands with.

“Petrus... Petrus, I...” It had been a while ... a very *long* while.

“Petrus ... Sue is being attended to by the Kee. Ronnie reminds me that ... that the needs of his crew need attending to. Since ... since no one else is available, I have come to offer you contentment as Senior Healer of the *Kraken*. Your contentment is ordered,” she whispered.

They stood for a few more moments, before Petrus spoke quietly.

“I hear ... and obey ... my Healer.”

### ***November 21, A Good Morning***

Sai cuddled next to Petrus while silently reliving the events of last night...

At first it had been tentative and awkward between them – more so than any other engagement between strangers for an evening of contentment. Sometime after finally joining their bodies, it was as if the last two hundred years had fallen away, and they’d taken up just as if they’d never parted; bringing each other up to emotional heights and pushing them ever higher until the delightful crash to completion ...



followed by a moment's rest, and then another climb up that mountain of pleasure.

They didn't know when they'd become sated with each other and finally fallen asleep. He later awoke to visit the facilities, and she joined him in a natural and completely comfortable sharing of the space. They took turns at the toilet, then joined each other at the sink. When they looked at each other in the mirror, they both knew there were Gods in the universe and they'd been granted a boon in being together once again. After drying themselves, they returned to bed and played once more; slowly and more gently, this time while sealing their renewed relationship with loving caresses and silent promises until they both dozed off again.

### ***A Progress Report at the Commons***

"Good morning, my love!" Nathan called out with a happy, but weary smile.

Dorcas had just arrived at the dining commons with Jaiying and Rose holding hands beside her. She seated herself across from him while the children scampered over to one of the shorter tables to sit and have breakfast. Three shadows split apart; two of them following the children.

"You know, that's getting a bit annoying," Nathan muttered while nodding towards the children's guards, before stifling a yawn.

"Did Mistress Blanaid allow you to sleep last night, or should I worry that a tiny academic has worn you out for me?" she asked him, followed by a grin. She glanced around at the tables, but did not see her husband's partner for the night.

"The girl was wound tight, but it was over in less than an hour. Apparently, she'd been up most of the time she's been aboard. I got up in the middle of the night to pee, but she was comatose. Still was by the time I'd washed, dressed, and left her sleeping the sleep of the dead ... so to speak," he quickly added, at her expression.

"Just so Lady Sai is satisfied with your performance. She wanted assurances the girl would be well rested – at least for *one* night."

"Well ... *rested* she may be, but not particularly well *skilled*. I've gotten *spoiled* by the Healer training you've had all these years," he murmured, then reached across the table to hold her hands.

"Then tonight you're back in *my* bed, and I'll see if I can make you forget your temporary assignment, my Nathan," she said, and squeezed his fingers gently.

## Unhide the Past

"That, I look forward to, my love. I... Good morning, Lord Caldar." Nathan started to rise, but Ronnie waved him back to his seat. Laisee was standing by his side with a smile on her lips.

"Let's not begin any formal nonsense here, Nathan. I've seen you naked," he muttered.

Laisee squeezed his arm, then unloosed from him, before reaching around to hug Dorcas and pat Nathan's hand.

"You look well rested, Lord ... Ronnie," Nathan fumbled. "Ahh, my assignment conveyed some information she was all excited about, but unfortunately she's ... well..."

"My Nathan provided contentment to Doctor Milsie Blanaid last night, and she's *still* recovering from it," Dorcas explained. "I suppose she should be lucky that Larl was assigned to work with Auda on the *Midgard* project."

Laisee giggled just a bit. She remembered the *last* time she shared Amy and Larl's bed, and considered that Nathan was *still* no match in that department – but he was *close*.

"Ah! That's to be expected," she finally said. "Sai was quite worried about her. The girl was working *much* too hard."

"What's she so enthused about?" Ronnie asked.

"Well, she was working on something Larl suggested," Nathan explained. "Something about DNA, and pattern matching. It's all very confusing to me, but Milsie suggests the Vanier are *much* closer to humans than anyone suspects."

He paused at the expressions on everyone's faces before adding, "Not close as in part of the *human* family tree, but more in the nature of originating from the same general family of gene-pool *resources*."

"Huh?"

"She thinks the Vanir are related to the Earth somehow," he said, then followed it up with a shrug.

"But... I mean... I never studied *Earth* history all that much, but I don't recall *anything* like the Vanir existing as part of the fossil record," Ronnie said. "I mean, if a bipedal saurian with stereoscopic vision ever existed, then *someone* would have probably noticed it by now."

### *In Petrus' Compartment*

"We have to be up, Petrus," she murmured to his gentle snores.

"Hmmm..."

## Floyde Leong

“We have to be–” She was cut off with a kiss.

Not bothering to struggle, she immediately melted into it; forgetting all about getting up for the time being.

Twenty minutes later, Petrus rolled away with a sigh and pulled her to him snugly.

“Still want to get up, lover?”

“No... Yes, we have *things* to do. Ronnie needs–”

“Ronnie’s needs were *well* taken care of last night by Laisee. Sue could probably use some rescue from the *Kee*, though,” he considered.

“Sue? She should be *fine* with the *Kee*. She’s–”

“The last I looked, she was emotionally rung out, and the *Kee* only have *one* cure for that,” he countered immediately.

“She ... she must be *exhausted*,” Sai thought aloud, then sent a searching tendril out in Sue’s direction, but the chaos she found was nowhere *near* what it previously was, so she relaxed into his arms again.

“Ummm ... Sue should be all right for the time being,” she murmured while snuggling closer to him; having forgotten how nice it was to feel his arms tighten around her in return.

They lay like that for a while, until he brought up what neither of them had wanted to.

“My love ... Sai ... I never wanted to hurt you–”

She shushed him with a finger across his lips.

“I know ... *now*,” she said, and gave him a tiny peck on his cheek. “You’re a *devil*, Petrus – but you’re *my* devil. If Lili was told to ... well, *interfere*, then that wasn’t entirely your fault. After all, you’re just a man.”

“Yes, but *still*–”

“Petrus ... stop while we’re still on speaking terms,” she ordered, and he remained silent. “You have to get up and see to your ship, First Officer. I have to contact my superiors and see what my orders have become. Once that is taken care of, I’ll check the progress of my charges and see what *else* needs to be done.”

That said, she kissed him once, then shoved him away, before stretching herself across the bed. Seeing her like that, he almost rolled back over, but the look she gave him was absolute, so he stumbled out of bed and headed for the shower.

## Unhide the Past

He paused for several moments, but she remained in bed, so he went ahead and showered and dressed. After stealing another kiss from his lover, he left his compartment to see what was happening on the ship this morning.

Once he was gone, Sai got up, and showered, dressed, then sat at the desk to compose herself before initiating contact with Lili. She paused for a moment, remembering the news from the Elder's staff, then spent some time considering how it might change everything. She spent a moment more in thought, but then shrugged.

She still had lots of questions, and her prospective sister-in-law, and Elder pro tem, had most of the answers.

### *At the Commons...*

The small family meeting was put on hold while kitchen staff descended upon them with offerings for breakfast. After breaking their fast, the conversation finally got back on track.

"I kid you not, Ronnie. Milsie thinks the Vanir are descended from an early sauropodomorph of Earth's late Triassic period," Nathan said.

"Nathan ... you're not *seriously* telling me that Milsie thinks that ... that the Vanir are *dinosaurs*?"

"Not in so many words, but ... well, *humans* evolved from a lesser mammal species – unless you're a creationist, of course. Why isn't it reasonable to consider the Vanir might have evolved from sauropods? Her DNA research from the fossils we picked up–"

"DNA? From the *fossils* we picked up?" Ronnie interrupted him. "Those are all made out of *rock*!"

"Yes, Ronnie. But remember, the Commonwealth biolabs are *much* better at digging this stuff out than the ones on Earth," he said while lifting a finger and pointing it at him. "You're a fighter. Your background as a Commonwealth warrior didn't include detailed biological studies, did it? Milsie has studied this sort of thing for *years*, and when Larl suggested a relationship between the Vanir and fossil *Earth* animals ... well, that opened the door, and that's what she'd been working on. She said it was simple, really. She showed me a piece of dinosaur cartilage, and told me how she got samples from some of the blood vessels in–"

"Wait just a *minute*! The dinosaurs didn't *leave* cartilage! They left *bones*, and the bones got replaced with *minerals*. *That's* what you get when–" Nathan cut Ronnie off this time.

"You let them sit outside for a very long time, yes," he agreed. "But when you soak the bones overnight in acid, and dissolve all the minerals

out, what you're left with is all the things that were imbedded within the original calcium that was replaced by minerals. You get cartilage, and traces of vessels and arteries that lived within the bones. She showed me a piece of one. It was all ... *wiggly*." He grimaced a bit, then shrugged, before adding, "Anyway, she was able to establish the Vanir are an offshoot of Plateosaurus – or something very much like it."

"So, what did they do? Evolve to the point of building spaceships, and then just ... flew away and *forgot* about the Earth?" Ronnie asked, remembering the recent conversations he'd had with Sally.

Nathan snorted and shook his head slowly.

"Not likely ... or probably not *very* likely. The most *reasonable* suggestion is that a biological sample was taken from Earth and transplanted to Vanaheim. Next is the genesis theory ... the same one that says that all humans descended from a common ancestral proto-gene-set that was spread from a prior intelligence wanting to 'seed' the universe."

Ronnie sat there and stared at Nathan for several seconds while thinking through the ramifications. Finally...

"Transplants ... or the genesis theory. With us, genesis is the going contender, but *transplants*?" He paused for another few seconds while running down more scenarios.

"Soooo, if Samuel and Sally's antecedents can lay prior claim to *Earth*, then what if they decide humans are a late-coming nuisance that should be eliminated from their ancestral home? Who are *we* to put up a fuss if they have a prior claim?" he considered quietly.

Everyone at the table was silent for the moment, which was when Petrus showed up with Samuel and Sally in tow.

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

'Lili, do you have a moment?' Sai cast the tentative request back to Kantor.

'Good morning, Sai. I see that you slept well. Maya sends her love, as do we all' Lili sent back with warmth.

'I ... thank you, Lili' she answered, the warmth of Lili's greeting making her mind swirl in doubt.

'Don't be afraid to ask your questions, Sai. The children warned me you might be calling this morning, and I have nothing more to hide from you. Not any longer, Sai'

## Unhide the Past

*‘Lili ... it’s true, then... Kita ordered a child between me and Petrus?’*

*‘Yes, Sai. I was most curious about that because of his background. I shared his mother, but his father was from Earth, of all places. I often wondered why mother chose an Earthling to father a child with, and especially a BOY child ... but she said it was her heart that drove her, and she had Petrus in spite of instructions otherwise. I was most surprised to learn of this, considering Kita later determined that Petrus was to father a girl with you so she would become the mate of our Rondal’*

*‘Petrus said that he ... that he loved me, but that he hadn’t planned on ... well, having a child with me ... at that particular moment...’*

*‘Oh my. You should have heard Kita complain about the attention he was paying to you! You would have thought it was the most terrible thing in the world ... until one day she said you were to become with child – immediately! I was given the order, and waited until you and Petrus ... well, you know now what happened. I am sorry I distracted him to the point he mentioned my name, Sai’*

*‘He said it with such passion. I thought ... I thought he wasn’t thinking of me at all, but–’*

*‘Oh yes, he was. It was my distraction that made him forget himself while he was that excited. He could not have stopped himself, Sai. I’m sorry things got so out of hand. I don’t believe Kita saw the results, or if she did, it just didn’t matter to her’*

*‘It worked out rather well for YOU, though. With Petrus out of my life, you were able to set him watching over Rondal’ she sent with a touch of bitterness in her tone.*

*‘With you out of his life, I needed something to keep Petrus from despair. Petrus was distraught, so I arranged a variety of tasks for him to do. When Rondal finally came into existence, he was the natural choice to set as guardian over the boy’*

*‘So he just happened to become Rondal’s keeper? It wasn’t planned from the beginning?’*

*‘Sai ... at the time Maya was conceived, all I was told was to make sure Petrus fathered a child with you. How she knew it would be a girl was unknown to me. After all, we only learned about the Visions fairly recently – after Kita’s death. I had no idea why Maya needed to be born, nor was I aware Rondal would be conceived and then brought to Kantor to become what he has become. If anyone knew, it was Kita. None of the rest of us was aware until the very last’*

*‘So easy to blame the dead!’ Sai snapped at her. ‘Kita orders Maya’s birth! Kita sends Maya to the Drecks, sending my Granddaughters to their deaths! Kita kills the Emperor–’*

*‘The Emperor had stepped out of line–’*

*‘Yes! And he suffered for it–’*

*‘He killed one of US, Sai – a Healer. He took her life, as Rondal took life from others – but the Emperor took it ALL, and she died!’*

*‘And Kita finally miscalculated and left us in disarray! At least YOU’VE suffered no great personal loss at Kita’s hands!’*

*‘Are you so sure?’*

*‘Who have you lost? Meela? No great loss there, she was–’*

*‘My mother... My ... my child’*

*‘(!?!)... What?’*

*‘My daughter... Kita ordered her terminated, but my mother would not do it. My mother was ... sanctioned. And then Kita terminated my child – my daughter – personally’* The emptiness of Lili’s loss echoed across the minutes. *‘She wasn’t even on the same planet, but she ... she killed my child!’*

*‘But ... but you served her ... you were her–’*

*‘She was the Elder’*

*‘How could you SERVE her, Lili? After your mother, and ... and your child ... wait. She was never born, was she? I would have heard’*

*‘She had a month to go when Kita killed her in my womb. It happened during services for my mother. They said it was the stress of emotions, but I knew. My mother had told me of her orders, and Kita warned me as well. From then on, I vowed to serve the Elder – but never to have another child for her to harm. A nice trade-off, wouldn’t you say?’*

*‘But still–’*

*‘There was one other condition... The father of my child would not be harmed’*

*‘He remains safe?’*

*‘I leave him in your capable hands, Sai’*

*‘(?)... Petrus?’*

## Unhide the Past

*'He is a good man, Sai. A man of many talents. Use him wisely. My husband calls... Your orders – support the efforts to resolve a peaceful co-existence with the Vanir. Failing that, support the First Lord's efforts in protecting the Commonwealth. My love to you all'* she sent, before fading away.

*'I hear and obey, my ... my Elder'* was Sai's faint echo traveling back across the minutes.

### *At the Commons...*

*'Good morning, Rondal Caldar'* Samuel sent as he and Sally strode up with Petrus.

*'Good morning, Samuel ... Sally'* Ronnie gestured to adjacent seating, before turning to Petrus.

"Four ... I see you survived the night. Have you and Sai come to an understanding?"

"A work in progress, lad, but very promising. I'm almost jealous of the time you've shared with her – *almost!*" he said, then chuckled.

"She's all yours. I've got too many things on my plate to deal with as it is. At least Auda is off with Larl and his team working on reestablishing contact with our two 'lost colonies' over on the other side of Vanier space."

"Don't worry about her, lad. Once she sees someone other than *your* magnificent self everyday, she'll realize her pool of potential husbands has grown *significantly!*" he said, then laughed again, while settling down across from Ronnie, but leaving plenty of room for the Vanier to join them.

*'Rondal Caldar, Sue is much better this morning'* Samuel said, once he and Sally were seated. *'Once the Kee were able to stabilize her, I was able to direct her to instructional material normally reserved to Observation professionals. The fact that she was in line to assume the role of Prime did not include information I feel would be essential for proper decision-making at that level of management. In my opinion, it's an almost unforgivable lack of education'*

Sally turned and glanced sharply at Samuel.

*'It does seem very peculiar'* he added, for her. *'To be a proper Observer, you have to have a certain dispassionate disposition towards the subject. Although in my case, I suppose you could say I have a certain bias related to those I observe'*

*'Certainly ever since you joined us here, Samuel'* Ronnie agreed.



*‘Just so. Still, the level of crisis Sue is experiencing is very hard for us to explain’* he shared, before Sally joined the conversation.

*‘With those of us raised to be Observers, the validity of a judgment is always subject to interpretation, Rondal Caldar’* she explained. *‘Observers ... observe, and then evaluate what we observe to gain understanding of it. We notice with humans that errors in judgment do not always suffer a fixed reaction – sometimes no reaction at all’*

*‘You mean ... a penalty?’*

*‘Yes, a ... a penalty’* Samuel considered. *‘Within our society, the Prime determines a path and sets policy by it. In your terms, effectively she has given her “word” that a particular outcome will be forthcoming. The Prime before last gave her “word” that the Kee would be an effective tool in managing humans. She is no longer Prime’*

Ronnie thought that was rather extreme, but avoided just coming out and saying so. Instead, he thought of how competent humans often dealt with problem solving.

*‘Humans usually study a solution, and when it fails, they try another one until they find one that works. Of course, sometimes it only works for a very few of the governed populace. Still, the Kee are a VERY effective tool – you just gotta use them properly. But this one – this business of letting us humans collapse on our own didn’t seem to be working for her, so she got the Drecks involved at some point. Didn’t that break her word?’*

*‘That was the Prime immediately before this one’* Samuel corrected him. *‘When the sitting Prime was establishing policy, she and her supporters made their policy using a specific time-line based on research into the history of humans. She included non-specific modifiers within her policy statements that allowed for minor manipulations of your society without direct contact with humans. When this was accepted by consensus, the sitting Prime was put into power’*

*‘I fear your contacting us created a very definite crisis within the Prime’s office’* Sally added. *‘This was totally unanticipated, and could call into question the stated policy of the Prime’*

Ronnie didn’t need to think too hard about a response to this comment. Samuel, too, seemed to have a better grasp on humanity.

*‘She could argue that humans, acting randomly as humans are historically prone to do, might have initiated contact with the Vanir at some point’* Samuel offered. *‘But the real problem – the one causing so much chaos within Sue’s mind – is this new knowledge that the Prime appeared to not only have prior knowledge of DIRECT interference with humans, but*

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*orders were coming from her office to that effect – giving lie to her stated public policies’*

*‘So ... Sue was raised to become the Prime at some point and continue the Prime’s public policy — it’s the basis of her support within Vanir society’* Ronnie summarized. *‘Once Sue figured out her mother had lied to the Vanir...’* he paused for a moment, pushing the pieces around on the board a bit more, before continuing. *‘So, Sue’s trauma is based primarily on the Prime’s public versus her private policies, which clash with Sue’s somewhat naïve understanding of a Prime’s responsibilities?’*

*‘As we interpret it; perhaps’* Sally suggested. *‘You must understand, Rondal Caldar, if the Prime receives a vote of no confidence, the Prime and her entire warren would be subject to censure’*

*‘Sanctioned, you mean. Everyone from top to bottom eliminated!’*

*‘That is a very real possibility, Rondal Caldar’* Samuel pressed to him.

Ronnie thought it through carefully. The concept of public elections, with the winner being the one with the most popular ideas, was not new. The concept of capital sanction for a *bad* decision was, to say the least, rather *extreme*. Not unheard of, even on Earth, but still...

*‘Samuel, if the Vanir people selected a warren based on that specific warren’s policy statement – and that statement turns out to be false – wouldn’t it also be the Vanir people’s fault for making a bad decision to begin with? I mean, as long as you’re punishing an entire warren for their failure to calculate the behavior of a moving target – like humans – wouldn’t it make sense to punish those who selected that warren to begin with?’*

*‘But ... if you punished everyone who selected the offending warren, then...’* Samuel abruptly stopped, declining to pursue the rest of that thought.

Everyone was silent for a few moments, before Petrus spoke silently.

*‘If you were searching for a solution to a problem, and you’d tried a thousand different variables without success, it doesn’t mean everything you’ve done up to that point has been a failure. It just means you haven’t yet tried the right combination of things’*

### ***December 13, Kantor, The Royal Homestead, The Emperor’s Patio***

“Walter, what is the latest information about our ... observers,” Radatel asked.

He and the children were out in the garden and having cool drinks on one of the patios, while the valaets had staged themselves among the

bushes in the shade. From the canyon walls, it looked like the Emperor had been roped into watching the Royal children, while the Wives and nanny were otherwise engaged.

The slightest movement of the guards as they shifted position was unnoticed by all except the valaets. Radatel's attention was focused on Walter, and Walter was focused on a spot almost fifty-eight minutes "left and down" from Commonwealth space.

Cathy and Josie were keeping closer watch directly "below" Commonwealth space, but the battle platforms they were watching were stationary, and well out of range of the assumed boundary line between Vanir and Commonwealth territories.

Walter finally opened his eyes and addressed his uncle.

"Uncle, the Vanir are holding at the boundary lines below Hegemony space. I have no exact determination of their plans – either to perform a coordinated attack, or if they're simply waiting for a decision from the Prime's office."

"They could be waiting to see if the Prime takes out Grandfather's ship," Josie suggested.

"Yes, that is a possibility," Cathy agreed. "If they eliminate Grandfather's ship and all aboard it, then they remove the immediate threat."

"And if they remove *Grandfather*, we'll remove *them*!" Josie stated viciously.

"We ... will do what our Emperor requests of us, Josie," Walter corrected her calmly.

"Thank you, Walter. I trust you'll immediately let me know if there are any changes in their positions," Radatel said with a mirthless smile.

"Certainly, Uncle."

"How is your Grandfather's ship doing, Walter? Is he in any immediate danger?"

Walter closed his eyes again while searching along the *Kraken's* departure line for several seconds.

Finding nothing close by, he widened his search cone, and caught several interlopers proceeding along the expected entry line into Vanir space from their Earth-system departure point.

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"There are three ships approaching them ... contact with the first one in the next five days or less. Heavily armed," he murmured with his eyes still closed. "Do you want me to destroy it?"

Radatel tilted his head in thought, but came to a quick decision.

"No. At this point, it is too easy to make a foolish mistake and lessen our chances of peaceful coexistence. Please contact Rondal and advise him of your findings, Walter. He'll make his decision based on his latest understandings of Vanir society, and what their likely reaction would be to a first strike by the Commonwealth."

"But *Uncle...*" Josie whined.

"Josie, your Grandfather is a wise man, and most knowledgeable about the current situation. Walter, let him know that I am giving him permission to prosecute the engagement as he sees fit. Our first goal is peaceful coexistence; the second is survival of our species." He paused to consider another issue that might be helpful. "Ahhh ... see if you can backtrack their origins, if you will, and report *that* to Rondal as well. All *three* of them, please. He might find it useful."

"Yes, Uncle," Josie muttered.

"We hear..." Walter said.

"And obey..." Cathy added.

"Yup!" Josie finished cheerfully.

The Emperor paused; silently, wondering if his brother felt as unnerved when hearing conversations like this coming from his Grandnephew and Grandnieces.

### ***December 15, Vanir Space, The Kraken, A Monotonous Journey***

Things had resolved into a routine over the last few weeks, even as Ronnie had cranked up the *Kraken* to a quicker than normal transition rate to save time, and perhaps confound those coming to meet them, as reported by Walter.

He'd been spending a lot of time with Jaiying and Rose when he wasn't fretting about his intrusion into Vanir space. Being around his Grandchildren was calming for him; allowing him to divorce himself from some of his worries. The children helped by offering a simple audience for his attention and enjoyed their time with him; even going so far as to watching some of the older Earth theatrical programming with him, although both Jaiying and Rose were worried about the level of stress their Grandfather was dealing with.

Samuel and Sally kept mostly to themselves, with Samuel sending along observations to the Prime, and Sally working with Sai to further her development of Healer skills at a very much accelerated pace.

Her condition not much improved; Sue performed her daily shift in the galley, and indulged in nightly playtime with the Kee. Sai and Sally had stopped their more strenuous efforts at “curing” her, but both were hopeful that time would eventually allow her to heal more completely.

Sai and Petrus continued to work on their relationship, while Laisee, the true artist among them, could be heard playing an interesting instrument when passing by her quarters in the early evening on those nights she did not spend with Ronnie.

Nathan and Dorcas kept in contact with their staff at the Demon’s Realm through a round about communications loop. Donnel’s team was kept busy researching and analyzing the increasingly intriguing data they were gathering; both from the material they’d picked up from Earth, and the remote surveys they were mapping as they traveled.

When not on duty or sleeping, Laisee’s security staff had taken to hanging out in the new gym and playing with the simulations; maintaining their special skill sets in both armed and unarmed combat.

Between other activities, Jaiying and Rose kept in touch with their cousins back on Kantor, and assumed the duties of long-range detectors – Rose in training – watching for the first ship coming to meet them. For being a year younger, Rose was catching up rapidly, and could reach out nearly as far as Kantor on her own now. Walter was ecstatic.

At the close of the current day, Jaiying found the first tendrils of Vanir thought coming from an area just off their line of flight in front of them. She told Ronnie about it, and he decided to trot on out personally and take a look.

### ***December 16, A Vanir Battle Cruiser, En Route***

The Vanir battle cruiser commander rested in his nest and pondered the implications of his orders once again.

It seemed almost insane that an intrusion of humans into Vanir space was suspected by the Prime; particularly from a *specific* location and at a *specific distance*. That business with the Asgardians was *one* thing, but to suspect humans from the *dangerous* grouping were performing a survey prior to actually invading Vanir space was *ludicrous!*

His orders were clear, however – locate the intruder and neutralize it. Or him... Or them...

The Prime had ordered no negotiations, and no attempt at capture.

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Strange that. He'd thought there should be at least *some* effort to obtain a living sample and question it. They certainly had the *technology*, as demonstrated by the Observation Program they'd had in place for the last several thousand years.

'As long as no one actually touched one of them,' he thought with a shudder, before checking his transit clock. Another twenty periods, and they would be within tracking distance ... if the intruder was truly out there.

The commander snuggled down more comfortably, then considered calling his Senior Medical Technician for some pre-battle relaxation, but decided it would present an impression of discomfort with his crew. They were only fourteen minutes out from Base 4 and had plenty of time, so he settled for simply resting while waiting out the remainder of the night cycle.

### *The Kraken's Child, A Chance Meeting in Space*

Ronnie and Samuel were quite relaxed after breakfast, considering they were pacing the Vanir cruiser in the *Kraken's Child* while cloaked...

Of the three ships actively searching for them, the one from Vanaheim's furthest base was closest to them, so that's where he'd headed upon receiving Jaiying's alert. Besides, the line the other two had taken would have them miss the *Kraken* by a wide margin. Ronnie had deliberately *not* chosen a direct line from Earth to Vanaheim, but instead targeted an area several minutes below Vanaheim and intended to change course once they were in the middle of a cloud.

The approach itself had been a rather simple exercise, and Samuel had been appalled at the ease with which Ronnie had blithely swept in behind the cruiser's blind wake and began station keeping – easily within killing distance of the Vanir ship.

Ronnie had been quite surprised at Samuel's somewhat calm demeanor throughout the final approach and acquisition of their target, though.

For a brief moment, he'd felt some of Samuel's shock and dismay at the beginning of their approach, but he seemed to have calmed down quickly and accepted the situation quietly. Not stressfully, he noted, but with a rather calm acceptance of reality...

'Now that we're here, what's your recommendation on how to proceed, Samuel? Do we contact them directly, or just sit back and listen for a while?'

Samuel tilted his head a bit while considering the final goals...

Ronnie had asked for his assistance in neutralizing a threat to the *Kraken* and its crew, but his primary concern was not how best to protect the *Kraken*, but rather how to keep the peace between the Vanir and humanity.

The matter-of-fact way he'd approached, settled in, and then calmly prepared a meal for them both was at odds with the situation in his mind.

Ronnie was ... he was *different* – yet *again*. Over the last few months, he'd observed shifts in Ronnie that smacked of an underlying psychosis, or so Sally had suggested, but Samuel wondered if his *own* mind would be as stable if faced with so many challenges in such a short amount of time. It was very perplexing, but Ronnie still expected an answer...

*'The Kraken is hidden within its skin and travels safely on a different line. They are secure for the time being and quite capable of protecting themselves, if necessary'*

*'Only as a last resort'* Ronnie threw in.

*'Yes ... only as a last resort. Before your "adjustments" to my mind, I would have recommended that we simply contact the ship's commander and try to negotiate a safe passage. Now I can see the desirability of seeking within – quietly – to detect their true purpose and the mind-set of the crew. I'm afraid Sally should have been the one to accompany you on this journey, Rondal Calder. My skills in this are small'*

*'You simply lack the practice, Samuel, and perhaps the audacity to intrude on another's thoughts. We will work together in this and see how far that takes us. I will rely on your understanding of the Vanir mind to suggest possible options for our actions'*

*'Then let us begin, Rondal Calder'* he relented, his mind made up to proceed with this distasteful invasion of privacy.

### ***On the Kraken, Laisee and Jaiying***

"They seem much the same as humans, Mother," Jaiying suggested, then sighed while snuggling closer to her mother on the bed.

"Ronnie said they were people – until he decided otherwise," Laisee reminded her, before Jaiying went on.

"They have the same desires, the same needs, the same wants ... that Vanir captain even has the same questions that we've read from *many* Commonwealth and Hegemony captains. Most of all, they want to do the *right* thing and obey orders ... and yet they're all afraid of doing the right thing, but making things *worse* – just like Grandfather."

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Laisee had to think about that. Was Ronnie afraid of doing the *wrong* thing? Was he afraid of making a mistake? Looking back over the years, she'd never gotten the impression that Ronnie was afraid of *anything*.

"Mother ... Grandfather is afraid of *many* things, but mostly he's afraid of losing his family. If it's between the Vanir and humanity, then the Vanir will lose – disappear *completely* ... with the exception of Samuel, Sally, and Sue, of course. You know; family, Commonwealth and Crown..." Jaiying trailed off when she felt her mother begin to shudder next to her.

"It ... it probably won't come to that, Jaiying."

It was Jaiying's turn to pause before continuing.

"You're right, Mother. Grandfather would probably let them have Vanaheim to live on, and simply keep them out of space. Did you know that Doctor Milsie thinks the Vanir are descended from Earth life-forms?"

"I – Yes... I'd heard that, but we are not to tell the Vanir. Ronnie wants to wait a while and see if it would be a bad thing for the Vanir to know."

That was yet *another* tangled web that needed sorting at some point, and Laisee was glad she wasn't the one to do the sorting.

"I'll try not to say anything, Mother. Actually, I *like* Samuel and Sally. They are very nice. And Sue's kinda nice underneath everything. I think she'll come around once we straighten out those last two segments of her mind. I can't imagine how difficult it's been for her all this time."

Laisee looked up at the ceiling of her compartment while trying to think of how well the Vanir would adapt to humanity on a regular working basis.

"Well, sweetheart, every individual is different, and every race is different. They all grow differently, and they all think in different ways. That is the benefit the Commonwealth provides us – a way for *all* races to live and work together. We all take advantage of each other's strengths, and we provide support for each other's weaknesses."

Jaiying lay quietly in her mother's arms and considered that last statement. It was certainly correct. Once Uncle Gagsa took over the Hegemony and joined with the Commonwealth, then *all* the races of humanity would trade with each other and support each other – *mostly*.

"You're right, Mother. The Commonwealth is the best solution for humanity. The Bornat don't think so, but I never really liked them anyway. I'm glad they're leaving, because..."

She stilled when Laisee shuddered.



"You didn't know?" Jaiying asked in a tiny voice.

*'Jaiying!'*

The warning from Walter came on an extremely narrow band.

*'I'm sorry, Walter. I didn't--'* Walter interrupted her with a repeat of the children's carefully edited "official" story.

*'We've notified the Emperor, and we're letting him deal with it. The Bornat are leaving quietly, but have given no reason for their exodus. Grandfather does not need to be distracted by this. There is no reason for concern at this time, but the Bornat have indicated it is time for them to move on. There is no speculation as to the reason why'*

"The Emperor is working on it, Mother. I suppose it isn't public knowledge right now. Grandfather probably shouldn't be bothered by this since he's got so many other things to deal with right now."

Laisee's response was delayed while this news was quickly processed, but then shelved for later conversations with home.

"Yes... Yes, if father is aware of this, then Ronnie need not be bothered." Even after she said it, she continued to think it through aloud. "The Bornat have always been neutral within the Commonwealth. They have never been prone to conflict, and have only that one incident in their history – something about the sampling and testing of primitive humans ... on Earth, I think," she suggested, then ran through several possibilities using the knowledge gained by living in the Royal household over the last two hundred years...

The Bornat were never outgoing. They stayed within their own systems, and seldom ventured outside of them.

They maintained a neutral relationship with the rest of the Commonwealth, yet allowed landing ports on their planets, and on each of their few outposts. From what she remembered, the Bornat did not seem all that curious about the rest of humanity, and shared a much smaller portion of common genetic markers with everyone else. They were "human" – but just *barely*. She considered it a while longer, but suspected the Kee were probably more "human" than the Bornat ... and now they were leaving.

Laisee shuddered again; wondering what *new* hell was venturing towards them.

### ***On the Kraken's Child***

*'I like this guy!'* Ronnie shared somewhat eagerly.

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‘Yes’ Samuel agreed. *‘He has a certain amount of individuality and inquisitiveness that would have been put to good use in the Observation division of our government. I am almost certain he would respond favorably to open communications with us’*

‘How about the rest of the crew?’

*‘They would follow the lead of their commander. He should be rather easy to talk to ... unless he displays aberrant behavior in front of his Medical Technician, and she declares him unfit’*

‘Or if he doesn’t shoot first’ Ronnie muttered silently.

*‘True, but he would have to see us first. Would ... could you do something to prevent him from accidentally firing his weapons at us? My understanding of what happened to Observation Station 23 is somewhat unclear, but I understand Sai Tal used this ship to prevent that station from offensive behavior’*

*‘Sai disabled certain pieces of that station by ramming it a couple of times ... but I believe there are subtler things I might be able to accomplish’* he quickly suggested, at the shocked expression Samuel threw at him.

He neglected mentioning his relative freedom to act now that the previous Elder had been forcibly “retired” before outlining what assistance he might desire from him.

*‘If you would help me to understand the fire control and flight system operators, I might be able to get those systems temporarily disabled during the conversation’* he suggested helpfully.

*‘Very well. Let us seek them out and learn more about this cruiser’* Samuel agreed, and they figuratively bent their heads to the task.

### ***Kantor, The Imperial Court, An Invitation to Dinner***

Acting First Lord Taldus Remy hurried to the throne room, having been summoned as soon as the Emperor had arrived this morning...

Once a conspirator against the Crown, he’d been forced into the position of acting First Lord as punishment for his crimes. He’d never thought the Royals were running things adequately, and after a rather short interview, the Emperor’s First Wife had made her recommendations, and the Emperor accepted them – putting him in a position to deal with all those issues he and his small group of conspirators had most often complained about.

Now he had a *much* greater appreciation for the difficulty of the job; the irony of which was not lost upon him ... or on his *fellow* conscripts within the Imperial Administration...

Taldus finally entered the Throne Room, and the Majordomo immediately presented him. He made the appropriate greetings to a rather somber Emperor, who merely glanced down at him, and said, “The Bornat are leaving. Apparently, we’ve been less than agreeable neighbors.”

Taldus was caught flat-footed. Of *all* the things he could have imagined, the Bornat were the *least* of his worries. In fact, he knew very little about them, other than what most Commonwealth subjects already knew – they were just *there*.

“But ... but, my Lord *Emperor* ... our *treaties* ... our – our *trade agreements*...”

“We do not trade with the Bornat, Taldus. At least, nothing we really need ... or anything they really want. At worst, we lose a little side income. At best, we pick up a few worlds, with resources enough to support more colonists. Perhaps the Demon would like to expand inwards towards the *center* of the cluster, eh?” he mused idly.

“My Lord... I – I don’t understand. Why? What reason did they–”

“The Bornat don’t need a reason, Taldus. They have been around for a *long* time. It appears they feel it is time to move on. It’s not as if we can *keep* them here against their will. Besides, they never were much for conversation,” he muttered, while casually waving an arm.

Both leaders of the Commonwealth considered that for a moment. The Bornat – those bulbous-headed, huge-eyed gray beings – had been around for as long as recorded history. They were there before the Commonwealth was created, and had been around while several versions of Empires, Clusters, and other entities had all sprung up before falling into chaos over the millennia. Not ones for sharing, the Bornat simply existed, and apparently just watched the other races of man grow, evolve, then fall back into chaos.

Radatel considered this decision of theirs to leave led to only one of two conclusions; either the Commonwealth was going to become a stable and enlightened society, or something really *bad* was headed this way and the Commonwealth was going to fall – along with everything *else* within an hour or two of Kantor – and the Bornat wanted to get the *hell* out of the way!

From the look on his face, Radatel imagined Taldus had just come to at least one of the same conclusions – and not the *good* one. Too bad he needed to bring in another variable for this young acting First Lord to consider.

## Unhide the Past

“Umm, Taldus ... you’re invited to the Royal Homestead this evening. In truth, your presence is *required*.”

Taldus froze with a panicked expression on his face that didn’t go unnoticed by several of the court’s advisors. Radatel continued somewhat kindly in hopes of lessening his fears.

“We have Issues of State to discuss that ... well, are much better handled in the comfort of my home. Dinner will not be formal, and you may bring your companions with you, if they are available. I’m sure they’ll find the company of the Royal Wives enjoyable, while we discuss some more *recent* developments that affect the Commonwealth.”

“I-I ... I will contact my companions, my Lord, and let them know to prepare. We will—”

“We will all be transported by my private transport, Taldus. Join us at the Imperial port at the end of the day. Bring a change of clothing,” Radatel instructed him, before sparing a smile in his direction.

Finally seeing his face relax, he sent Taldus back to his offices to start dealing with the Bornat exodus from the Commonwealth’s perspective until it was the close of official business for the day. He’d read a heartfelt relief from his surface thoughts, but wondered how long *that* was going to last once he was brought into the conspiracy involving the Vanir.

### *Vanir Space, The Kraken’s Child*

Vanir Ambassador S’Shac’Kah 39496, a.k.a. “Samuel” to his human companions, opened a Vanir hailing frequency on the *Kraken’s Child* and broadcast his muted greetings in clear Vanir.

“Any Vanir vessel in the vicinity, this is S’Shac’Kah 39496 on special assignment for the Vanir Prime. I am requesting escort for myself and my party for our return to Vanir space at the request of the Vanir Prime.”

Once that was accomplished, he settled back and closed his eyes; being content to follow along while Ronnie drifted through the thoughts of the affected crewmembers, from communications technicians and officers, all the way to the ship’s commander.

Despite the absurdity of finding a lone Vanir requesting an escort literally in the middle of *nowhere*, those crew members who’d heard the message remained calm as it was routed to their commander.

‘*Remarkable level of discipline*’ Ronnie shared.

‘*The signal broadcast level was very low. If it had appeared closer, it might have earned more than a casual reaction*’ was Samuel’s rejoinder.

The communications panel woke up with an incoming message that was being translated into Standard and displayed on screen, even as the audible Vanir was played for Samuel.

*"Unidentified ship ... please repeat your message."*

"This is Ambassador S'Shac'Kah 39496, formerly Senior Observer of Observation Station 27. I am on special assignment for the Vanir Prime. I am returning from human space, with myself, my immediate staff, a survivor from Observation Station 6, and an Ambassadorial party from the human clusters generally located in the former monitoring area of Observation Station 6," Samuel repeated with embellishment.

*'Wow. I thought I was a chatterbox'* Ronnie chided him.

One of Samuel's segments parsed that phrase with the skill borne of familiarity while placing it into context for him.

*'It is an inborn trait that I constantly strive to control. I have yet to succeed in its management. However, it has the advantage of presenting an open and unassuming demeanor to the listener'*

*'Purely coincidental, no doubt'*

*'And usually fortunate'* Samuel added.

*"S'Shac'Kah 39496 ... please wait while we evaluate your request,"* came from the speaker, and was displayed moments later, translated on the screen.

Ronnie nodded familiarly before slouching in his seat.

*'What do you think they'll ... oh, never mind. The communications officer just shot a signal back in the direction of Vanaheim Prime... Without authorization, it would appear...'*

*'Without...'* Samuel paused, then concentrated *very* hard while digging into the mind of the communications officer, with Ronnie's subtle help, where he discovered some conflict.

*'It would appear that you are correct. The commander is still composing the question, while the communications officer has reported contact with an alien species and asks for instructions'*

He pried a little deeper and discovered a discomfiting fact.

*'The communications officer works directly for the office of the Prime, and not the commander. We may have a problem knowing who is in control, and who is to be believed. There goes the commander's message to his control base'*

## Unhide the Past

Ronnie offered his snap judgment.

*‘Personally, I’m in favor of the commander. It is his ship, after all. Ahhh... is the commander aware of the first message going out?’* he asked, while turning to look at Samuel.

*‘He does not appear to...’* he paused at the further look from Ronnie. *‘I will ask him’*

“Commander of Vanir vessel, this is S’Shac’Kah 39496, the Ambassador assigned to the Vanir delegation to the human cluster. My pilot has noted two communications from your vessel – one directed back to Vanaheim Prime, and one to your control base; both of which appear to be asking for instructions on how to proceed, but both of them directed to different receiving contacts. Has a problem occurred since my dispatch to the human clusters?”

They observed remotely the sudden stillness in the control room of the cruiser while the Vanir commander conducted a short question and answer session with the communications officer. After a quick review of the transmission logs, the officer in question rose and was escorted from the control room under guard, while another body took his place; a subordinate from the impression they got from his mind.

*‘Well, this is a talent that would be both a blessing and a curse to a commander’* Samuel muttered.

*‘Yes, it often is. How long before his message hits Vanaheim Prime, and he gets an answer?’*

*‘It is like your burst transmissions. From here, about five minutes out and back, then allow some time for reception, distribution, review, and reply. Perhaps half an hour’*

*‘Unless a canned reply ... a previously determined response is selected and sent’* Ronnie corrected himself. *‘Which would come rather quickly, one would think. We’ll find out in another ... three minutes’*

A message from the cruiser came considerably quicker.

*“Ambassador S’Shac’Kah 39496 ... while we are waiting for an answer to both of our transmissions, I request that you tell me the names of the Vanir citizens who accompany your group.”*

“I am joined by my Senior Medical Technician, S’Shac’Kah 38521, also late of Observer Station 27. I also have with us a survivor from Observer Station 6 named S’Ahi’Ma 42491.”

*“That cannot be. Observer Station 6 was crewed by Warren S’Slich’Tah, and all aboard perished when it was destroyed by the humans,”* the commander sent back quickly.

“S’Ahi’Ma 42491 tells us she was aboard that station clandestinely; seeking proof the Prime had been misled by the intentions of Warren S’Slich’Tah,” Samuel replied calmly. “The station was destroyed when the Senior Observer aborted his mission and passed through a Death Void. The quick actions of one of its crewmembers saved the life of S’Ahi’Ma 42491 by placing her into a food stasis box. I was part of the human-led investigation to recover evidence from the wreckage, and we found her body in the box. In the end, it was the humans who were successful in resuscitating her – although she suffered a great deal of emotional distress in the process.”

There was a period of silence while the commander reasoned through this answer. Finally...

*“How did the humans manage to successfully pass through the Death Void?”*

“The human captain I am traveling with reasoned that an unarmed ship would be allowed passage through a Death Void. Apparently ... he’d done it once before,” Samuel stated, with a glance towards Ronnie.

*“He sounds insane.”*

“Well ... he *is* human,” Samuel offered, with an apologetic look at Ronnie.

*“I suppose one must make allowances. Have you... Excuse me, S’Shac’Kah 39496.”*

Both Ronnie and Samuel listened silently while the commander read the reply to the communications officer’s first message. They noted confusion, but little conflict in his mind, when he turned back to the communications console and spoke quietly.

*“Ambassador S’Shac’Kah 39496 ... it would appear that the communications officer has been ordered to tell me to destroy you and your vessel immediately. Unfortunately, I do not recognize the transmission codes of this reply, so I must consider this communication false ... or at the very least, misleading. Besides ... I don’t know where you are.”*

Samuel gripped Ronnie’s arm tightly, but he just smiled and tried to ally his fears.

*‘And he doesn’t want us to tell him. As an officer, he would be glad to have the decision taken out of his hands; but he will not act with bad information. Besides, I read, he is extremely reluctant to end the life of a fellow Vanir, let alone an unknown human. If anything, he’ll attempt your rescue, and that of Sally and Sue, before trying to do anything about me’*

## Unhide the Past

Samuel gave his shoulders a slow roll before turning back to the communications system.

*‘I hope you’re right, Rondal Caldar’* he shared, before transmitting, “That is truly unfortunate for you, Commander ... whom do I have the pleasure of addressing?”

*“Forgive me, Ambassador. I am Commander S’Kala’Mak 32246. We are crewed by Warren S’Kala’Mak – with the exception of our previous communications officer, who has now been relieved of duty for a long overdue rest period,”* came the polite reply.

“S’Slich’Tah Warren, perhaps?”

*“No. S’Ahi’Ma Warren. Or so he says. I have my doubts.”*

Ronnie spared a puzzled look at Samuel, but before the question could be asked, the Commander continued.

*“If I may, Ambassador, several major battle platforms have been quickly provisioned and ordered into place along the Vanir-Human boundary spanning nearly two hours in length. The orders are to hold in place and await further orders. My ship has been ordered to observe, intercept, identify, and destroy any human intrusions into Vanir space from the specific area of the source world, and yet ... and yet, here you are. Somewhere...”*

“We are a ways off, still,” Samuel offered to the open-ended question

There was silence for a few more seconds.

*“Ambassador ... by the Pit of Disaster, do YOU know what is going on?”*

### ***Vanir Base 4, A Little Confusion***

“Captain, this just came through from S’Kala’Mak 32246, commanding the cruiser heading out towards the human source world,” the messenger reported while handing over the communications tablet.

Reading quickly ... then pausing, and starting over *slowly* ... and then once more, just to make *certain*, the captain shuddered for a moment while his tail twitched nervously. He copied the data to his local tablet and wiped the messenger’s before handing it back. Afterwards, he settled back and considered his next actions.

On the face of it, this could be the human intrusion they were looking for, but if this business of a Vanir Ambassador to the human clusters were *true*...

Knowing those above him would be asking, he immediately sent out a request for background information on this “Ambassador” S’Shac’Kah



39496; anything and everything related to his identity, postings – Observer Station 27, he noted – and the claimed “survivor” from Observer Station 6, this “S’Ahi’Ma 42491”, whomever *she* might be.

He immediately got a hit on S’Ahi’Ma 42491 – missing from the Prime’s own household on Vanaheim Prime since before the destruction of Observer Station 6.

S’Ahi’Ma 42491 of the *Prime*’s warren – of the Prime’s direct *line*, it sounded like. He wondered how close she was, and that information suddenly filled his screen. He read it in shock; realizing how fortunate it was that it wasn’t going to be *his* decision on the disposition of this “Ambassador’s” ship.

### ***The Kraken’s Child***

Having been regaled with a heavily edited recounting of Samuel’s travels over the last two months, Commander S’Kala’Mak 32246 now had a *much* better idea of what was behind the recent activities; not an understanding of what the *final* plan was, but that there was a *reason* for all the activity. He thought for a moment about making what he thought might be an acceptable offer – then made it.

*“Ambassador S’Shac’Kah 39496, I don’t suppose you and your party would care to transfer to my ship for the remainder of your return home to Vanaheim, would you?”*

“I hadn’t really thought about that, Commander. I have my Senior Medical Technician, of course, the survivor, S’Ahi’Ma 42491, all of our supplies and records, plus various samples of potential commodities and such. I suppose if you had the storage space for everything, plus cabin space for me and my companions, we could make the transfer – in perhaps a few days or so.”

*“Ambassador, I must ask ... are you able to speak freely?”*

“Certainly, Commander. The captain of this vessel cannot speak or understand spoken Vanir,” he replied misleadingly; leaving out the fact that Ronnie was quite capable of reading the simultaneous translation coming through the communications system, or that he was just as easily reading the thoughts and intentions of the Commander directly.

*“Ambassador, are you under any duress or threat? Do you require our assistance at all?”*

“Not at all, Commander.” Samuel’s voice carried the sound of mirth in an undertone. “Although, when the Prime *herself* gave me my orders, I was sure that my days were numbered to the digits of one limb! Traveling with the humans over the last two months, I have learned many of our

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fears were groundless. They can be quite dangerous when threatened, but for all that, they are people – much like us. In fact, it turns out they are not poisonous at all, and we can safely consume many of the same staples.”

He paused to let that sink in before continuing.

“I met with the ruler of their Commonwealth and his family. The meeting proceeded quite well,” he reinforced his previous tale. “He authorized this ship to return us to Vanir space with an expectation of friendly discourse to determine how, or even *if*, Vanir and humans should interact with each other. They have no desires on Vanir space, having enough to deal with in their own.”

*“Ambassador, the ship ... is it armed? Are there fighters aboard?”*

“The crew of the ship is a mixture of many of their people – somewhat like our warrens. They have their scientists, linguists, engineers ... some of their technology is most interesting, in fact. Also aboard the ship are representatives of their ruling house. Commander, they do not expect this visit to be fraught with any danger.”

*“The ship, Ambassador ... is it armed?”* he persisted.

“Your ship, Commander ... is it armed? Are there fighters aboard your ship, ready to do battle to defend your lives?” Samuel countered. “Out of all aboard the ship, perhaps a dozen are skilled at fighting. The rest are merely those who seek new knowledge and extend an offer of friendship – or non-interference, at the minimum. Our *own* efforts of interference within their society have been examined and determined to be ‘understandable’ – given consideration of *our* viewpoint. The Prime has already extended assurances through me to their ruling body that the more unfortunate misunderstandings were not official policy, and that answer has been accepted, and the issue resolved.”

Samuel had specifically left out mention of explosive implants in humans; not knowing if that had become common knowledge as yet, then glanced at Ronnie before continuing.

“I have promises from the Captain of the Human vessel that his intentions are peaceful, and his weapon will remain silent ... unless his ship or crew is threatened. This is the same promise I made to him about our intentions as the Prime had communicated them to me prior to leaving the central cluster of the Human realm.”

There was a pause before the Commander continued.

*“Ambassador, how do you account for the positioning of our forces along the Vanir-Human boundary?”*

“Commander ... it might appear the Prime has either changed her mind,” he said, the distaste in his voice becoming evident, “...or may be privy to new information she has not yet disclosed to me as her direct representative to the Humans.”

*‘Or she’s just hedging her bets and making sure she can make a pre-emptive strike if we screw up’* Ronnie offered silently. *‘Note that neither the Commonwealth or the Hegemony have responded in kind – even with full knowledge of these events’*

“When discussing this situation with the Captain – yes, his government informed him immediately upon their detection of our platforms and movements – he noted that his government is content to wait and observe the behavior of our platforms before making any decisive conclusions. It would, of course, be in poor taste to make a *unilateral* strike against the Humans after they have extended a civil greeting to us and we have responded in kind.”

*“Of course. That makes perfect– Ambassador, I have a message coming in – several messages, in fact, and ... and I think I should provide an update to my command structure,”* S’Kala’Mak 32246 said.

“No doubt they will appreciate further updates, Commander. May I suggest you send the audio records of our conversation to them for analysis? Perhaps a more thorough examination at the upper command level will tell us whether I should be returning home ... or seeking asylum among the Humans.”

*“Seeking? No... No, I cannot imagine... Oh... Your pardon, Ambassador. I’m afraid your humorous comment took me quite by surprise.”*

Samuel quickly worded a thoughtful reply.

“Yes. Of course. They are a curious race. I sometimes wonder how they got to where they are with just that one lump of brain in their skulls. No way to really *think* about significant issues, let alone remember anything *really* important.”

*“Yes ... yes, it must be most difficult for them,”* S’Kala’Mak 32246 conceded. *“Ambassador, I’m afraid I must deal with communications for a while.”*

“Do not worry, Commander. We are not going anywhere in a hurry. I will wait for your further contact. In the meantime, I believe it is time to eat.” Samuel closed and terminated the link.

Ronnie stood up and stretched, before heading back to the small kitchen while wondering what to fix for the limited mid-day meal.

## Unhide the Past

*‘Sufficiently vague, yet tantalizingly informative. Your Ambassadorial credentials are well earned, it seems’*

*‘You sound surprised, Rondal Caldar’*

*‘Commonwealth Ambassadors are not necessarily known for their wisdom. Of course, those few I have met officially, had been promoted more for punishment rather than necessity of their skills. There are exceptions, of course’* he added, thinking of his big brother.

He contemplated serving Samuel a portion of ships poop, but wasn’t sure what the new system was configured for at the moment. He poked around in the cabinets while Samuel chided him about this Commonwealth deficiency.

*‘The selection of mediocre Ambassadorial staff sounds counter-productive, Rondal Caldar’*

*‘Yes, it certainly does. I noted you neglected to mention the personal security details for Lady Laisee and Lady Dorcas’*

*‘Sometimes it is wise to retain certain information until it becomes necessary to share it, Rondal Caldar. In this case, the security details are presumably only concerned with the safety of the Royals, and not the ship. It would only cause the Commander further distress to suggest otherwise’*

*‘Sage advice, Ambassador. What shall we have for dinner?’*

### ***Kantor, The Imperial Homestead***

Lili and Rad had returned from the Capitol with their houseguests for the weekend; acting First Lord Taldus Remy, and his First Wife, Lady Mayella Donszi, along with his assigned Second Wife, Lady Lifen Ning Shan se Cletus. After an early supper (early breakfast on *this* side of Kantor), they’d been allowed sufficient rest time before joining the family for an afternoon meal. Afterwards, the Emperor and acting First Lord took the late afternoon air in the gardens, while Lili and her co-Wives entertained Mayella and Lifen within the family lounge...

When first approached about it several years earlier, Mayella had been resistant to having another woman in her household; the fact that her husband had risen from humble beginnings to the position of First Lord – if only in an “acting” capacity – not withstanding.

Lili had been patient ... up to a *point*. Once that point was breached, Mayella had been brought in for an audience with her, and had a *thorough* mental workup done – all from the comfort of her seat. Having determined that the young wife would *still* be suitable – under *proper* management, of course – Lili had explained a few, previously *unknown*, aspects of her husband’s prior life.

The shock of learning of her husband's past life as an unsuspecting Krux spy brought her to tears, and denial ... all of which got worse when Taldus had been called into the room to confirm what she'd refused to believe. Lili had led them both through the background of his deceit, but effectively put a positive spin on it for her benefit – even pointing out how well he seemed to be doing as the acting First Lord.

She'd also pointed out that *all* men in Imperial positions of power had Healer companions by their sides to help guide them, and Mayella had been offered the chance to train as a Healer – if only to remain as First Wife to her husband. It had been explained that the alternative for her was not the one *he* had been previously offered – *termination* – but the seriousness of Lili's intent had been made plain, and she'd reluctantly agreed.

Senior Lifan Ning Shan se Cletus had been brought in at that point, and introduced as her prospective “trainer” for the position. Over the next few years, she'd lived up to the promise of her names, and very cleverly provided the tranquility necessary to guide the young Healer-in-Training to the point where she'd achieved a good level of skill – certainly good enough to enhance both her and her husband's life expectancy. Lifan's openness and friendship eventually won over the young wife, and she'd finally been accepted into the family as Second Wife. The latest news from Lady Shan was positive. The acting First Lord and his First Wife were expecting ... they just didn't know it yet...

The Emperor and the acting First Lord were returning from their walk in the gardens; ostensibly to “walk off some of that supper” as Radatel had claimed. Unfortunately, Taldus' stomach was anything *but* relaxed at the moment. His area of knowledge had just been expanded by several orders of magnitude with the revelations the Emperor had just entrusted him with, and thoughts of them rolled around in his mind.

*‘The Vanir – ALIENS! – were actively encroaching into human space and planning a destructive means to the end of Humanity! No, that wasn't quite what the Emperor had said at all! What ... what HAD he said?’*

Radatel listened silently with amusement, while Taldus' mind scrambled to sort out the information it had just been given. He wondered that it hadn't affected *him* in such a drastic fashion, but considering he'd known Rondal for a much longer period of time, such revelations were more or less a *constant* from that venue.

He reached out quickly to steady Taldus from an inadvertent stumble, and heard a quiet, “Thank you, Radatel,” for his trouble.

*‘Lili, I believe I may have broken the First Lord’* he sent to his wife.

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*'Nonsense! He has a child on the way, and needs a steady job! Bring him back and I'll have Lady Shan and Lady Mayella work with him for a few hours – and eventually let him sleep it off'*

*'A child? Oh, may I tell him?'* he asked eagerly, and heard her silent titter from across the compound.

*'You've already shattered his peace for this evening, my Husband. It would be better presented by his Wives. They do not yet know about the Vanir, but their loyalty is not in question'*

*'Then I will give Taldus the option to confer privately with his Wives, if only to unburden his mind'*

He chuckled while directing Taldus in through the patio door that led into the children's suite. In only moments, they were surrounded by laughing children. The Royal nanny, Maya Tal, had risen and bowed to both of them.

*'Uncle Emperor! Uncle Emperor! Maya said we have visitors tonight! Can they stay with us?'* Cathy asked pleadingly, and he caught the shock, then worry from Taldus, as he looked down at these tiny humans surrounding them.

While Taldus crouched down and introduced himself to each of the children, Radatel shared a smile with Maya, then watched when Lili led Mayella and Lady Shan into the room. She passed him a knowing nod, and he went to greet her, before the two of them slipped into the corridor while leaving the acting First Lord and his family to the frenetic mercies of the Senior Staff.

One of the kits – the male this time – had come in long enough to let his presence be known, and then gone out again on night patrol with one of his parents.

It was later in the evening when Maya had finally gotten everyone settled down – the First Lord and his two wives in the visiting parent's room, and the children in their own – with promises not to intrude on their guests for the evening.

As usual, the children bunched together – not for warmth, but for the physical connection – and reached out with their combined skills to do a little probing. What they learned was reassuring ... to a degree. As it wasn't that late, and Lili was otherwise unengaged, Walter decided to bring her up to date.

*'Aunt Lili, there appears to be some confusion within the Vanir command structure'*

*'How so, Walter?'*

*‘Jaiying has been following along closely with the cruiser captain who’d been contacted by Uncle Samuel. The captain is confused by the contradicting orders he’s been given. He plans to wait until he gets orders from a source he trusts before he does anything’*

*‘Well ... that does seem reasonable, Walter’*

*‘It is reasonable and expected. What wasn’t expected was the confusion of the orders to begin with. The communications officer acted independently from the captain, and sent a message without permission. Jaiying tried to determine why, and she says it feels much like what she reads in Sue’s mind. Not as messed up because of her being dead and all, but very much like part of his mind doesn’t think like the rest of it’*

As far as she understood the relationship within a mind composed of multiple segments, Lili didn’t think that to be particularly odd. But Sue was still suffering from her ordeal, so did that indicate a similar problem with the errant communications officer?

*‘Their minds are made up of multiple segments – twelve, I believe, is what Sally explained to me. She did say they acted in concert in a healthy Vanir, and only the extreme distress of Sue’s death and resurrection should be the cause for Sue’s condition. Perhaps something similar applies to this situation?’*

*‘Unless he was \*brainwashed\*’* Josie contributed, then sent along a mental explanation of the term she’d learned from her mother.

*‘Josie, how likely would... No...’* Walter paused and thought it through. *‘I suppose not all Vanir would welcome a dialogue between humans and Vanir’*

*‘And not all Vanir think like the Prime does ... but the Ambassador did report some inconsistencies between their warrens, and Rondal and Samuel are now experiencing them with the captain’* Lili echoed back, while letting that thought sit for a few more moments.

*‘Rondal ... Samuel ... there is a situation I have been made aware of for which I need your advice’* she sent along quietly.

### ***Vanir Space, The Kraken’s Child***

*‘Well, what do you think?’* Ronnie asked.

*‘Jaiying is very perceptive, Rondal Calder’* Samuel observed, with Sally and Sai both listening in remotely, as he continued. *‘If she postulates a modification to normal perception within the communications officer’s mind, then I believe Sally should carefully examine Sue to determine how that might be achieved. Sai Tal would be most helpful in that task’*

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*‘Yes, my Samuel. Sai Tal, would you please help me examine the area of Sue’s mind that is having difficulty?’ Sally asked.*

*‘Certainly. Ronnie, we’ll get right on it and let you know what we find’*

*‘Thank you, Sai ... Sally’ Ronnie agreed, before turning back to Samuel. ‘How about we dip into the resident S’Ahi’Ma officer’s mind and do a little more digging ourselves?’*

*‘That sounds both prudent and reasonable, Rondal Caldar’*

### ***The Kraken, In the Gym***

Sally and Sai relaxed their guard and stepped away from each other, before returning their weapons to the storage area.

Sally glanced at her sparing companion and wondered if she had learned anything new about herself ... but decided to simply ask.

*‘Sai Tal, do you see the difference now? Do you understand the significance of the problem you have been having?’*

Sai pondered that while they wiped down and inspected their weapons.

*‘I understand the reasoning behind it, Sally, but ... but your way is so-’*

*‘It is a deliberate act to either ATTACK or DEFEND, Sai Tal. There is nothing in between, and no other consideration is necessary. To defend is a protective function, and if one is to attack, there must only be ONE outcome – the defeat of your opponent’*

*‘I was about to say “so cold” but I see your point. Gods know, Ronnie has caught me up often enough by taking advantage of my weaknesses. I know I shouldn’t let him, but-’*

*‘This is a human thing, yes? But Rondal Caldar does not have weaknesses like yours?’*

*‘He has weaknesses, all right. Family, Commonwealth, and Crown. He would destroy ANYTHING that threatens any of those!’ she sent vehemently, but noticed Sally jerk aside and stare intently at her. ‘Oh, he wouldn’t WANT to, of course’ she quickly added. ‘He’d rather see everyone on FRIENDLY terms ... no matter HOW inconvenient it was for everyone involved. He even had a plan to marry me off to that Drecks Lord if it seemed the right thing to do’*

*‘Truthfully? He would trade your happiness for securing safety within the Commonwealth? Did he not think of your safety at all?’*

Obvious astonishment was written across even her alien features.



*'He thought about it, all right. Told me I was the probably the safest wife Gagsa could have. Said I would leave a trail of bodies behind me of all of Gagsa's followers who thought otherwise. 'Sides, I've already been with Drecks for several decades, so it would be nothing new – mostly'*

*'Nothing ... new?'* Sally pondered this news with several segments, before fitting the pieces into a different picture. She still needed confirmation, though.

*'The boys – YOUR boys? You've had relations with Endo and Gallus?'*

*'Since they were old enough to perform – yes. As a Commonwealth Healer ... well, it helps bond our species together'* Sai looked at her quizzically. *'I thought you already knew this'*

*'I ... I understood they have been with you for a very long time, but I never... And you're so tiny!'*

Sai started to laugh as they finished cleaning and putting away their weapons, before heading out, still chuckling, to the Vanir showers. It seems she had left out some important details in Sally's Healer training that needed to be corrected, but that would have to wait until they looked in on Sue ... during which they would hopefully discover the cause of her problem.

### ***In the Kraken's Security Office***

*"Crap! Did you see the moves on that guy?"*

Guard Captain Teldrus, leader of the Royal Protective Detachment, restrained an outright laugh, and instead settled for a quiet chuckle. He and three of his men had meant to practice in the improvised gym, when they'd bothered to check the security cameras and found it was already occupied.

Watching Senior Tal in action was educational. Watching her sparring partner had been *frightening*.

*"Girl. That is the Ambassador's companion – and also a Healer,"* he said, then looked around at his subordinates.

*"But ... if she can do that, then the males could... Crap!"* his second in command said.

*"Indeed,"* Teldrus muttered. *"I'll inquire of Commander Zickgraf if either he or the First Lord would care to lead refresher courses for us."*

### ***The Kraken's Child, A While Later***

*'Jaiying ... truthfully, I don't know what I'm looking for in here'* Ronnie sent. *'Can you detect anything out of the ordinary, Samuel?'*

## Unhide the Past

*'I don't really... This is where the memories of his orders exist, but there seems to be something ... something stressful?'* he suggested. *'He is just a communications officer, and I don't understand what stress he could possibly be under'*

Between the five of them – Sally, Sai, and Jaiying having joined them remotely after failing to identify Sue's problem – they were trying to figure out the strange anomalies in the communications officer's mind.

*'Maybe he thinks his orders are not right for what he should be doing?'* Sally suggested, and Samuel offered his opinion.

*'He should simply follow orders. Following the path of his recent actions, it's almost as if an overriding choice was made for him, although I have no idea of how that might be accomplished'*

They all watched while Jaiying used their closeness and the linked relationship between the five of them to poke and prod at the sleeping mind of the S'Ahi'Ma officer, while remaining wary of waking him unintentionally.

It wasn't nearly as good as being close enough to touch him, but it would have to do.

Ronnie had started thinking back to the little accident she'd had the first time she'd tried to disarm an implanted bomb, when she suddenly dragged them along a convoluted mental pathway and brought them to a sudden halt in the memory sequence. Neither Ronnie nor Samuel could tell why she stopped, but Sai pointed it out immediately.

*'Here... There is a break here! His memory sequence is intact until here, then it becomes confused, and another decision becomes an option. For some reason, he decides not to follow protocol under certain circumstances'*

"I am so totally lost," Ronnie muttered aloud.

*'I see the break, Sai Tal, but I do not see how it could have occurred. This is from ... several months ago?'* Sally estimated. *'He was not aboard his ship then, so it must have occurred sometime before deployment'*

*'Sue has a similar break, but it occurs sometime after she joined Observation Station 6'* Jaiying sent after a few more seconds.

*'What seems to be her alternate memory?'* Samuel asked.

*'She seems merely confused ... not quite capable of thinking clearly. I don't see what benefit that would have to anyone if this was a deliberate attempt by someone to control another person's mind'* Jaiying suggested.

The ensuing silence dragged on until Ronnie came up with a somewhat plausible theory.

*'Since the station was manned by Warren S'Slich'Tah, that might be reasonable, since she was aboard as a S'Ahi'Ma representative. It would keep her confused and slightly off balance, while the crew goes ahead and does what the Senior Observer tells them to do. Her uncharacteristic behavior and memory problems would then explain anything she reported negatively upon'*

*'But that sounds—'* Samuel was about to say "horrible," but was interrupted by Sally when she declared *'Like something I would do ... if left up to me, and I had the technology'*

She felt the sudden shock from Samuel, and sent a wave of caring directly to him.

*'So this is just technology?'* Ronnie asked. *'It's available off-the-shelf to just anyone?'*

They all felt the wave of disgust from Sally, before she silently voiced her opinion on the subject.

*'I've never heard of anything like this. Special counseling for extreme departures from normal emotional states requires many hours of interaction. I don't see how a mere machine could affect the mind in such a manner'*

*'Surely there would be a record of it, if someone had gone through this sort of treatment?'* Samuel pressed. *'Surely it would disqualify someone from positions of authority and power, wouldn't it?'*

*'This is not from any known form of treatment I am aware of, Samuel'* Sally explained quietly. *'This is new – this way to override the mind. It is probably very subtle, and quite technical. I seriously doubt that anyone could be convinced to alter their current behavior by someone simply talking to them'*

*'Actually ... that's exactly what some humans can do'* Sai admitted candidly. *'But we have full memory of it – the process ... usually'*

*'And they have to want the change – unless hypnotized and told to forget'* Ronnie added; now thinking of some of the things he'd done in the past.

*'Even then, it excludes behavior that would never actually occur to the victim unless they were already capable of it ... for the most part'* Sai expanded. *'But that's with humans. How would that work on Vanir?'*

*'As I said, a long treatment of counseling that discusses the problem, and the thinking required to resolve it'* Sally restated. *'Programming counter to normal behavior would not be possible ... SHOULD not be possible'* Sally amended herself, before going on.

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*'With our minds, it is usually easy to resolve such issues ... which is why it has been so frustrating working with Sue. She has been less than responsive to my treatments. Once a male Medical Technician becomes available, I am hopeful he will be able to distract her enough for me to help her mind find reason once again'* Sally suggested.

*'Is there special training involved for this?'* Ronnie asked.

*'Not particularly. He just needs to provide a physical distraction for her, while I engage her mind in thoughtful contemplation of what is real and what is not'* Sally explained, then sighed silently.

*'Well ... what about the Kee? Or is there another consideration involved?'* he asked, but had to wait a few seconds until Sally finally responded.

*'It is ... different'* she stated, somewhat tentatively. *'There is a ... a necessary requirement for the proper emulation of physical affection that would then lower the patient's mental reserves'*

That sat out there for a couple of seconds until Ronnie finally got it.

*'Oh. You need a GUY'* he sent.

*'Well ... how about using Samuel?'* Sai asked. *'He's right here ... well, he's over THERE right now, but when he comes back--'*

*'Never!'* Sally flashed angrily. *'Samuel is not trained! He is--'*

*'He is S'Shac'Kah'* Jaiying interrupted diplomatically. *'And it would be unseemly for him to perform such an act with someone very ill and not of S'Shac'Kah Warren'*

*'I ... yes, Jaiying. It would probably not work with any male, other than one from the S'Ahi'Ma Warren'* Samuel quickly added, although it was blatantly apparent to the humans that Sally was definitely *not* in the sharing mood about this point.

*'So ... all we need is another S'Ahi'Ma male?'* Ronnie considered this thoughtfully, then went ahead and suggested it, anyway. *'I wonder where we might borrow one for a few days?'*

*'Grandfather, it seems rather obvious to point out there is one on the cruiser that is approaching. The Commander might be agreeable to loaning him to us for a few days as long as we returned him unharmed'* Jaiying suggested.

*'Yes ... if he hasn't been ordered to destroy us on sight'* he responded less than enthusiastically.

***December 17, Vanir Cruiser, A Change in Orders***

As it turned out, after a day of message traffic flowing back and forth, the Commander had been ordered *not* to destroy them on sight. Rather, he was to make contact with them, and by way of an unarmed boarding party, identify the Ambassador and his staff, examine their living conditions aboard the human's ship, and physically determine the identity of the S'Ahi'Ma survivor, while extending all courtesies to the human Captain and crew – within reason.

If it appeared the situation was in anyway *other* than reported by the Vanir Ambassador, he was to report back immediately and make all haste to return the Ambassador – with or *without* his staff – back to the safety of the command base for debriefing.

Those were the “official” orders from his official command structure. *Unofficially*, via encrypted private video communications from the head of that very same command structure, he had been ordered to assess the situation, make the best determination of risk, and then resolve it decisively – one way or the other. Depending on his actions, it was understood that he might find himself expendable upon his return. His judgment was trusted, however, and in the event things ultimately turned sour, his personal sacrifice for the Vanir was greatly appreciated.

He didn't know what to think about the Ambassador's request – on behalf of his *Medical* Technician, no less – for the “loan” of the communications officer; if truly of Warren S'Ahi'Ma.

A rather heated discussion had occurred with his *own* Senior Medical Technician, who had determined the request to be somewhat *inappropriate*; considering the male in question was not trained to perform that particular function. However, the suggestion that *she* would be welcome to accompany him aboard the human's ship had immediately quelled that objection. The Commander had considered dragging her along anyway, but ultimately decided against it. If he lost his life on this venture, his crew would need *some* moral support on their flight back to their Vanir base. At any rate, they would find out more in a few more days.

***The Kraken's Child, En Route to the Kraken***

While it's host sat on a rather comfortable, if hastily constructed, seating accommodation within the small transport the Ambassador had called the *Kraken's Child*, a portion of Commander S'Kala'Mak 32246's mind was reviewing the rather confusing events of the last few hours. His most *Junior* Medical Technician and the S'Ahi'Ma accompanied him...

The Ambassador had *personally* orchestrated the meeting in space and crossover to the human transport. He had ordered the human pilot

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to approach and stand off several meters from an exterior port of the Vanir cruiser to allow personnel to transfer between the cruiser and the rather small transport that had made a long, previously undetected, approach along their line of flight. Once alongside, the Commander had mused at how easy it would have been to eliminate the transport and the Ambassador with a single shot. At least, that was until his weapons officer reported scans that stopped a few meters short of the shell of the transport. Apparently, these humans were somewhat serious about their security.

Gentle probes soon provided some idea of the defensive shield surrounding the transport – if, in fact, that is what it truly was – and once aboard that seriously cramped ship, he'd observed the obvious weapons accommodations that could only have been used with a severely functional primary weapon. His estimation of the humans had gone up a bit, but he kept these observations to himself, while the Ambassador led them from the now obvious assault hatch in the rear of the transport, to the forward area. Once there, he'd found accommodations suitable for the Vanir physique had been made available for the return trip to the human's primary vessel.

The trip had been short; several small jumps traversing a passage normally taking several hours at standard cruise, as he and the Ambassador engaged in idle conversation while observing his surroundings carefully. The human pilot, seated all the way forward, had kept his attention on his controls. The Commander was personally pleased with his two crew persons, for they seemed to keep any anxiety towards the human in check. Of course, that may have been due more to the fact that they were all wearing vacuum suits.

With some method of communication between himself and the human, the Ambassador had been able to explain each step of the flight; right up until their approach to a shadowy area in open space – an area that kept getting larger and darker until it eclipsed the entire star field in the forward view screen. Then the human did something, and a glowing square opened in front of them, showing the insides of a hanger area. The Commander could see a larger transport tied down to one side.

Their own vessel drifted in silently alongside of it, and settled to the hanger deck with a quiet thump. During the passage through the portal, he could see another small blockish transport that was very black nestled on their opposite side.

### *Welcome Aboard the Kraken*

The human lingered for a moment over his controls, before standing and turning to the Ambassador – saying something in his curiously

barking language – then promptly walking past them and exiting the transport from a side door air lock.

“Commander S’Kala’Mak 32246, on behalf of the Captain of this ship, I bid you welcome to the *Kraken*,” the Ambassador said. “I’ve been advised the Ambassadorial quarters have had the atmospheric pressure adjusted to match that in your suit so you and your crew will be able to visit us in comfort. Please keep your suits sealed until we’ve entered our living spaces.”

Exiting the transport, the Commander stood on the hanger deck and looked up at the rather bright lights above them, while his Junior Medical Technician and the S’Ahi’Ma remained standing rather stoically by his side. Stepping forward past the front of the *Kraken’s Child*, the Commander took note again of the overly large transport, and then recognized it was from the humans attached to the Hegemony association. He turned and compared it to the smaller space black transport he and his companions had been brought aboard in just moments ago.

Looking closer at its lines, he suddenly realized it was a modification of one of the Commonwealth association’s mobile combat units; from his studies, a terribly dangerous weapon in its own right, depending on the person piloting it ... just like the one right next to it.

“Ambassador, this transport ... it’s not just a transport. It’s–”

“It performs the function, Commander. Come. Let us get out of these terrible suits and relax before our evening meal,” Samuel suggested quietly, then led the way to the Ambassadorial access corridor just off the hanger deck.

A group of three ship-suited humans entered the hanger deck, and at Samuel’s pointing arm, pushed rolling carts over to the *Kraken’s Child* to transfer the packages the Commander and his crew had brought with them to the Vanir corridor.

As a matter of course, Ronnie had already gone over them remotely and been surprised at not finding any tracking devices inside. Either these Vanir trusted the humans, or more likely, these three were another set of sacrifices to the blood lust of the ravenous human scum.

### ***Hanger Deck Decompression Chamber***

After leaving the *Kraken’s Child*, Ronnie had remained suited until he’d entered the attached hanger deck decompression chamber and began cycling down. Having been tasked with transporting the Vanir visitors, he’d pumped up the tank’s pressure to accommodate them, but was now stuck on the hanger deck until it was safe to embrace the one

## Unhide the Past

and a half atmospheres the *Kraken* had been operating at for the comfort of the Vanir passengers and crew.

He knew someone had been thinking of him when he'd found a carafe of water, and a couple of sandwiches to tide him over for the next few hours.

He dropped his face shield, but left his ship suit on – no sense taking chances the door might be opened accidentally – and decided to catch up on how his visitors were adapting to the new environment as he settled back to wait out his time.

*'How is the Commander doing, Sally?' he asked.*

*'He is doing quite well. He is, of course, from a more orderly and structured occupation – much like your own, one would imagine. He maintains an emotional steadiness quite unlike his junior companion, or the S'Ahi'Ma'*

*'Really?' Sai asked. 'I would have thought she would be a stabilizing influence on him, much like you are to Samuel'*

*'She should be – but she is very young. She is 41631 in the S'Kala'Mak Warren, and this is a new assignment for her. She has yet to deal with any practical problems'*

*'Well... We'll just have to keep those at a minimum for the time being'* Ronnie considered. *'What about the S'Ahi'Ma?'*

*'That one is indisposed. His mind displays a curious amount of confusion – almost as if it doesn't quite know what to do now that it's here'*

*'Then with your permission, I would like to begin active monitoring of his quarters to assure us of his benign intentions until we can sort him out'*

*'That would probably be for the best' she agreed. 'We will see how he is in the morning'*

Ronnie maintained a tenuous contact with the Vanir visitors, but other than some temporary confusion over the human-centric facilities accommodations, they seemed to take things in stride, and simply chatted banalities with Samuel and Sally regarding the current goings-on.

Afterwards, they shared a pre-packaged Vanir meal between the five of them, before returning to their assigned spaces and settling in for the night.

Of note, Samuel had not allowed the Commander access to his personal communications link, but promised it would be addressed on the next day.



***December 18, An Inauspicious Start***

“Commander, are you ready for the morning meal?” Samuel asked politely. “We’ll be joining some of the crew in the commons for this, and you’ll be able to meet Sue ... I mean, S’Ahi’Ma 42491.”

“Sue?”

“Yes,” Sally confirmed. “The humans have a *deplorable* amount of memory available to them, and could not keep our birth order in mind. As a result, they gave us individual names. *Human* names, no less.” She hissed mirthfully at the expression on his face, before going on. “S’Shac’Kah 39496 is ‘Samuel’ and I, S’Shac’Kah 38521, am ‘Sally.’ We allow them this familiarity as it eases our relations with them.”

She was watching him carefully, noting he’d adjusted to the loss of Vanir air pressure quite well. He’d not mentioned it, anyway; not that she’d actually *told* him it would be happening.

“Most interesting. I wonder what *other* limitations their minds keep them to?” he wondered aloud.

“It is most intriguing, Commander,” she continued. “One of their medical personnel said they estimate only ten percent of their brain capacity is of any use at all, and yet ... here we are,” she said; raising her arms expansively.

“Yes ... here we are. Remarkable,” he muttered. “I will see if S’Kala’Mak 41631 is available as yet. I understand she did not have a comfortable sleep cycle.”

“If that is the case, Commander, then I recommend both you and she share a nest during the sleep cycle. It will help you both adapt to the current situation more quickly, and as you can see, both Samuel ... S’Shac’Kah 39496 and I, are quite comfortable around them – the humans,” she corrected herself, again, finding it curiously awkward to speak correctly after only two months with the humans...

The Commander pondered her last utterance with several segments of his mind, while a few more ran a breakdown of the pros and cons of sharing a nest with his Junior Medical Technician. While that was in process, yet another few segments were observing the coloring and general health and well-being of the two of them together – then wondered if this Senior Medical Technician had become pair-bonded with the Ambassador.

Given the stress of their situation, that might explain some of her relaxation – unless, of course, their psyches had already pushed on to a fatal acceptance of their fates. As for sharing his nest with the very *Junior* Medical Technician – as if that would prove even *slightly* enjoyable...

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“Commander?” Samuel asked solicitously.

“Ah ... I will just check,” he said, and left to get his own Medical Technician.

*‘Well, my Sally ... what do you think?’*

*‘He seems very nice, my Samuel’* she sent silently while gently curling her tail along his leg. *‘I hope he will be reasonable about all this, and lend us the S’Ahi’Ma for Sue. If we can break through her blockages, we may be able to discover what has caused them’*

*‘Perhaps you may find the key behind those of the S’Ahi’Ma officer, as well’* he suggested hopefully.

*‘Indeed’*

The Commander returned shortly, in company with his female companion, but the S’Ahi’Ma was not with them.

“S’Kala’Mak 41631 joins us for the morning meal, but S’Ahi’Ma 41942 is still ... not quite himself. He wishes to remain here for the time being, and I feel that is probably appropriate at this time.”

“Certainly, Commander,” Samuel said. “However, I must insist that he remain within his quarters for security reasons. This is an unfamiliar ship, and it would be unfortunate if he were to wander into an area where he might become ... ahh, distracted?”

“Understood, Ambassador,” the Commander agreed. “He will consume another of the rations we brought with us.”

Samuel nodded, then waited while those arrangements were made, before leading them all to the commons for breakfast.

### ***Breakfast with the Crew***

As Samuel directed, they proceeded towards the commons – once the Commander had gotten over the surprise of being decompressed overnight while sleeping. The short walk through the clean and well-lighted corridors had been a pleasant experience, and the smells as they approached the commons promised a rewarding dining experience that could easily surpass that of the combat rations they’d brought along with them. The Ambassador himself had extolled the virtues of the menu selections, and praised the dispenser of that strangely satisfying paste he recommended to the Commander and his assistant.

The few humans in attendance during the meal communicated in the curious barking noises of their kind, while two of them, females if he wasn’t mistaken, had greeted them in passable, if childish, Vanir. They

appeared to be escorting the survivor reported to be known as S'Ahi'Ma 42491 – or “Sue” to these simple humans.

The Commander had remained still upon seeing her, but his Junior Medical Technician gave out a quiet hiss of recognition, before silencing herself.

S'Ahi'Ma 42491 had greeted them quietly, before sitting off to the side with her companions. He listened intently while they chatted with her animatedly about the day's “duties” they all had to perform, and upon hearing that, he looked hard at the Ambassador, but let it go for the time being.

The rest of the meal had been eaten in quiet contemplation of the foodstuffs, and in simple conversation with the Ambassador and his bond-mate – for that was what he'd finally concluded she actually was. The humans had ignored them for the most part, other than to acknowledge them when eye contact was made. Otherwise, they remained mute to any interaction with them.

### ***After Breakfast, In a Conference Room***

They currently sat waiting for a delegation of humans to join them in a room off one of the access corridors. The Commander felt relaxed after their filling breakfast – during which the Ambassador's bond-mate had quietly cautioned him *not* to divulge the source of the textured paste the Ambassador had enjoyed so well.

Though he supposed it was large by human standards, the meeting room was rather small in his view; although the seating was quite comfortable for a variety of species, it would appear. Now sitting here as directed by his superiors, he wondered just how he might accomplish his orders without causing an inter-species rift, then flushed when he remembered his commander's last words...

He'd already been advised that he was expendable – *either way* – so either way it went ... well, at least it should be interesting. Perhaps he *should* engage his Junior Medical Technician during the sleep cycles? She might prove to be trainable...

His thoughts were interrupted when the door opened and admitted several humans, two males, and two females – one of which was very small. They smiled in greeting, and made quiet noises with their mouths, before joining them at the table. The three adult humans each carried a couple of data pads and laid them on the table in front of everyone, before turning to the Ambassador.

*‘Samuel, would you please introduce me to our guests’* Ronnie asked silently.

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“Commander S’Kala’Mak 32246, may I present the Captain of this ship, Rondal Calder,” Samuel announced.

The Commander noted the quick glances at their data pads; then one of the male humans stood and nodded his head slightly before speaking.

“Welcome aboard the *Kraken*, Commander,” Ronnie said aloud in Standard. “I am honored you have accepted our hospitality.”

Samuel tapped the data pad in front of the Commander to draw his attention to the Vanir text scrolling up the screen.

The Junior Medical Technician hissed quietly, and all of them sensitive enough to note it, were amused at her astonishment at the cleverness of the humans.

“You may speak, Commander,” Samuel murmured, “...and the data pad will present a close approximation of your words to the Captain.”

Still somewhat surprised at the human’s adaptation to spoken Vanir, the Commander turned to Ronnie, before fumbling his way through a greeting of his own.

“I ... I thank you for your hospitality. I ... we were most surprised to find you ... coming to meet ... bringing our Ambassador back to Vanaheim.”

Ronnie looked down quizzically at the data pad, and compared it to what he’d just read in the Commander’s mind, before replying.

“Yes. I imagine you were quite surprised to learn of us,” he stated slowly. “Seated beside me is my First Officer, who is called Four. Beside him is my Senior Medical Technician, Sai Tal. The child next to her is Jaiying Calderous, my Granddaughter ... a child of a child of a child of mine,” he added after seeing the blank translation.

The Commander read the text and appeared confused over that last, until Samuel explained it quietly.

“The child, Jaiying, is of the ruling house of the Commonwealth association. The Captain’s bloodline is within her.”

“He brings a ... a *child* on a *war ship*?” he asked loudly enough for the data pad to catch it.

Ronnie answered before the text finished scrolling.

“I bring my Granddaughter as a show of good faith in the Prime’s word, yet I would be foolish to transport her in a defenseless vessel...”

He paused while the Commander read that, before continuing.

"The wisdom of the Prime moves her to insure the protection of the Vanir from human intrusion into Vanir space. To my current knowledge, there is no other human vessel headed towards Vanir territory. I recognize the wisdom of the Prime in positioning protective battle platforms along the Vanir-Human boundaries as a simple precaution."

After the initial shock of humans already having knowledge of their placement, the Commander quickly composed himself, along with his response.

"The humans are not moving into position to oppose them?" he asked, watching as Ronnie looked down at his data pad.

"Those directing the Commonwealth association of humans have decided to observe the behavior of the platforms and act accordingly. The leadership of the Hegemony association is somewhat more ... fluid? It is currently in a state of change that will hopefully bring about peaceful co-existence between the two major human associations. You may be aware of our internal problems," he suggested, then listened to the Commander's internal dialogue.

*'Oh yeah, he knows about the Vanir manipulations with the Kee and the Drecks ... not so much about that business with Gagsa'*

*'He still knows little about the platforms, other than they were sent into place. Perhaps those above him--'* Samuel cut himself off when the Commander spoke again.

"Captain ... Ambassador ... I have been instructed to insure the safety of the Vanir Ambassador and his staff, and provide safe passage for their return to Vanaheim. I need you to arrange the transfer of their possessions and their persons to my vessel as soon as possible."

Ronnie looked at the data pad, then up at Samuel, then down at the data pad again, and then spoke quietly to his male companion, who smiled for a moment, before resuming his attentive position. Ronnie looked up and smiled politely at the Commander.

"Commander ... the Vanir Ambassador is free to seek transport on any vessel he so chooses. Samuel, you and Sally are always welcome here. If you desire to travel with the Commander, that is entirely up to you. I will arrange for your supplies to be packed, and we can have you and Sally ready to go in ... perhaps six hours."

"And the S'Ahi'Ma! S'Ahi'Ma 42491 is to return with *us!*" S'Kala'Mak 41631 burst out, as she quickly leaped to her feet after reading that last.

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All eyes turned to the Junior Medical Technician in surprise. The Commander flushed a brighter color, which was quickly followed by his junior technician as she meekly settled back onto her seat.

"Ahh ... as S'Kala'Mak 41631 reminds me, S'Ahi'Ma 42491 is to be returned as well," he said quietly, while trying hard to control his colorful outburst.

It didn't get a chance to alter much before Ronnie presented an untenable situation to him.

"That is quite impossible, Commander. Sue is a crewman ... crew-*woman*. She is part of ship's crew."

The Junior Medical Technician quickly stood, and the Commander began to rise, but was gently restrained by Samuel.

"Commander, there is an unusual set of circumstances involved that we should probably discuss privately," he literally hissed in his ear. "It may take some time to understand them completely."

"But my *orders*..."

"No doubt your orders have asked for the *best* of all possible solutions, with a cascading level of success for your ability to complete them; either in whole, or in part," he offered sagely. "I am quite familiar with such orders, Commander. Let us keep separate counsel privately and see where that takes us. In the meantime, you must have *other* questions?"

The Commander paused in thought, before finally nodding slowly in acceptance. Then he turned his head and stared at his junior technician until she sat once again, before returning his attention to Ronnie and his staff.

His color was slowly returning, but the technician's was still brightly aroused.

"Captain Rondal Caldar, I wonder if I might have a tour of your ship?" he asked somewhat diffidently, and watched when Ronnie produced a smile after reading that from his data pad.

"Certainly, Commander. My First Officer will be your guide to any of those spaces you wish to see ... with the exception of the crews' private quarters. Those will require permission of the occupants," he said, and the Commander read the surprising response on his data pad.

Ronnie leaned over and muttered quietly to Petrus, who chuckled in response.

"Ambassador, we will meet again at your convenience," Ronnie said, before standing and leaving the meeting room, taking Jaiying with him.

Sally had been considering the rather simplistic mindset of the Junior Medical Technician with Sai, before making a suggestion about her to Samuel.

*‘I think S’Kala’Mak 41631 should stay with us, Samuel, and you should go with S’Kala’Mak 32246. There is much missing from this Junior Medical Technician’*

*‘Very well, my Sally’* he sent as he stood.

“Commander, your companion may remain here with S’Shac’Kah 38521, if you’ll allow,” Samuel prompted, as Petrus rose as well. “S’Shac’Kah 38521 has questions of a professional nature to ask of her.”

“Yes ... yes, certainly,” he muttered, then stood while making a negating gesture to his junior technician. “Let’s see this mighty warship. Perhaps the human will show us all of his secret weapons while we’re at it.”

“Just got the *one*,” Petrus said jovially. “Just ... don’t push any *buttons*,” he added with a shrug, before opening the door for them and holding it, while Samuel and the Commander passed through, then closing it, and leading them to the main gun bay.

It took several more seconds before the Commander realized Petrus had spoken in perfect Vanir.

### ***Left Behind in the Conference Room...***

“S’Kala’Mak 41631, you seem to be in some distress. In what way may we help resolve your upset?” Sally asked her.

“The ... the *S’Ahi’Ma!* S’Ahi’Ma 42491 must be returned *immediately!* The Commander has orders to return her to *Base 4! Unharmd!*” she persisted, while rising from her seat again.

“Sue is part of our ships crew now,” Sai stated quietly, then waited while Sally reached over and tapped lightly on the data pad in front of the junior technician. She waited while the text was read, and watched as her body color started shifting once again.

“S’Kala’Mak 41631! I expect *much* better control from a Medical Technician!” Sally said sternly, and the technician looked stricken.

*‘Sai Tal, perhaps we should find some way to calm her so we may get better answers from her?’*

A thought ran through her mind, and Sai quickly considered the duty roster.

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*“Torga, please send Déjà and Kiki to the main conference room with an assortment of fruit beverages suitable for Vanir. Something ... relaxing”* she sent with a slight hint of humor, while Sally and S’Kala’Mak 41631 spoke in quiet tones.

Shortly there came a knock at the door, and Kiki and Déjà came in pushing a cart between them with a selection of beverages for both Vanir and humans. On a lower shelf, Sally caught sight of several towels, and a container of oil. She smiled when she rose to select a chilled drink for their guest.

“S’Kala’Mak 41631, please sit back and relax. Have some of this,” she said, offering a carafe and watching as it was first sampled tentatively and then gulped down appreciatively. She handed the empty container back to Sally with a gesture of grateful thanks.

*“Sai, perhaps we should move this to a more comfortable venue?”* she suggested with a slight gesture to the cart.

*“Excellent idea. Your place or mine?”*

*“She would probably be more comfortable in the Ambassador’s quarters”*

Sai nodded and spoke quietly to Déjà and Kiki, who giggled as they rolled the cart back out and headed to Sally and Samuel’s compartment.

“S’Kala’Mak 41631, this room is not conducive to a proper discussion. We will return to the Vanir quarters, where we may relax in comfort and continue our conversation,” Sally directed her, so they gathered their materials to leave.

S’Kala’Mak 41631 picked up the data pad in front of her, but wobbled just a little after she got to her feet.

*“My, isn’t SHE a cheap date”* Sai observed silently, and Sally stifled a snort as she handed Sai both her and S’Kala’Mak 41631’s data pads.

Sally wrapped a supporting arm around the junior technician to stabilize her, before the three of them made their slow way back to the Vanir living compartments.

### ***Inside the Breach Room of the BFG***

“Just this *one* gun? That’s *all*?” he asked in astonishment.

As promised, the First Officer had taken the Commander to see the main weapon of the *Kraken*. Apparently, the *only* weapon.

“Yes. Well, we do have some small arms, and a few other hand-to-hand weapons, but for the most part, this is it,” Petrus said while patting



the breach of the containment housing affectionately. “Of course, it only fires once every few minutes or so, but usually one shot is enough.”

The Commander walked around it, then peered into the breach; noting no rifling or any other indication of what sort of shell it launched. He looked around curiously and finally noted the huge power busses feeding into the mechanism – then stopped dead still; realizing just what kind of weapon this was.

“This is a *particle* beam? But ... it can’t be too effective. The power feeds aren’t *nearly* big enough to–” his train of thought ground to a halt when Petrus opened a hatch and displayed a single ready-load for the gun – the unmistakable glow from its inspection port merrily brightening up the space.

“Anti-matter load,” he said, confirming the Commander’s worst fears. “One load; one shot. The power feeds run the containment fields around the breach – keeps all that energy going out in one direction. Don’t want to be anywhere within forty-thousand kilometers from the front end when it goes off. Don’t want to be in *here*, either.”

Most of the Commander’s mind stalled while coming to grips with the device in front of him. The extremely delicate nature of the forces involved in containing such power was an affront to his sensibilities, especially on a *manned* firing platform. These humans were *truly* insane. He took a few more moments to frame his next question.

“Ahh ... this weapon ... has it been fully ... tested?”

Petrus closed the hatch; locking the anti-matter load securely away, before turning back to answer him.

“Truthfully, Ronnie’s only fired it twice that I know of and one of those was done remotely. Took out a swath fifty kilometers wide, nearly forty-thousand kilometers deep. Asteroid belt.”

“That would ... that would...”

“Vaporize a ship or two, and still leave a nasty hole in a planet, yes,” he confirmed. “Funny thing is, *most* of the damage from the weapons loads were by accident. He had to jettison the loads on a couple of occasions, and one time they got bumped by accident. Well, *shot* at, actually.”

“Shot at?”

“Twenty loads, all going off at once. I hear it left a pretty star somewhere over in the Hegemony.”

“Twenty loads in ... in *here*?” His gasp was audible.

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“No. We can’t keep the loads in the same space with the weapon. We let the Drecks work that out for us. We keep a few of them a couple of compartments over from here behind active shields – except for this one.” He reached up and patted the load cover. “The majority of them aren’t even onboard. They’re stored...” he paused to check with the boss...

*‘Ronnie, can I tell him about the removable hull?’*

*‘No secrets that won’t be obvious pretty soon’*

“We keep the majority of shells in the outer transit hull of the *Kraken*,” he said, then escorted them out of the breech room and down the corridor.

“It’s like a big *box*...”

As they continued down the corridor, Petrus was of the opinion that this promised to be a long day.

### ***In the Vanir Ambassador’s Compartment***

S’Kala’Mak 41631 was giggling quietly while Déjà and Kiki were working her over; firmly rubbing scented oils into her skin, while she lay *completely* relaxed on a platform in the Vanir spaces. Sai was doing the same for Sally, who appreciated it greatly, but had abstained from an excessive amount of fruit juice so she could keep her senses about her.

“S’Kala’Mak 41631... S’Kala’Mak 41631 is such a *long* name for these humans to deal with,” Sally pondered aloud. “Déjà, is there a name that would better suit her?”

Déjà paused to give it some thought.

“Well, she is very *pretty*! She is very *outspoken*! I think she looks like ... like a *Katie*!”

“Yes!” Kiki readily agreed. “She is *Katie*! She is *Katie*!” she said happily, while continuing to work on her with talented hands.

“I’m a what?”

“Katie,” Sally said somewhat languidly. “Your human name is Katie ... just so the humans can remember it easily. You know how limited their memory is,” she whispered loudly.

“Katie,” Katie mumbled quietly. “Katie... I like it. I can be a Katie,” she murmured, while Déjà pushed her gently to her side and began working down around her stomach.

In a few more minutes, Sally noted that “Katie” was becoming aroused at Déjà’s attentions, but also somewhat alarmed by them. She sensed an

impending issue beginning to arise, so she brought it up silently with Sai, who then muttered something to Kiki.

Kiki nodded happily and quickly worked her way up towards Katie's face, then darted her tongue into her mouth just as she opened it to protest the location of Déjà's hands.

It was all over in moments, when Katie succumbed to Kiki's enzymes, and Déjà proceeded to violate this barely experienced *very* Junior Medical Technician.

*'What in the world were they thinking? Sending this CHILD to provide medical service on a ship at a time like this'* Sally shared in exasperation.

*'Then it's a good thing you're here to provide valuable training for her. At least she will be safe with us'* Sai shared, but then snickered at the thought she just had.

*'Safe?'*

*'Well, usually when you visit a foreign port to drink and get laid, you run the risk of getting robbed!'*

Sai laughed, and Sally joined in once she worked out the references, but then considered the current situation and wondered what was next.

*'Sai ... do you plan to make a Healer out of her as well?'*

*'That should be up to her and you. She would have to become more conversant, as are we'* she shared meaningfully, with a light touch of her fingertip to her forehead. *'She might become shockingly disturbed when she discovers just what I've done to you'*

*'Couldn't you just make her... No. I think we are all in agreement there has been too much interference with Sue's mind ... and likely that of S'Ahi'Ma 41942'*

Sally paused for a long while before continuing.

*'I think we'll call him Silas'*

*'Who?'*

*'S'Ahi'Ma 41942. His human name will be Silas. It is a name that one of the crew had mentioned'*

*'Ah. What about the Commander?'* Sai asked.

*'Samuel, have you chosen a human name for S'Kala'Mak 32246 yet?'* Sally reached out silently.

*'Petrus says he reminds him of someone called Sasha'* Samuel replied.

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*‘Very well. Please advise Commander Sasha of his new human name’*

*‘I hear and obey, my Healer’* he sent back warmly.

*‘Oh! So wrapped around the tip of your tail, you naughty girl’* Sai chided her.

*‘You know it’* Sally shared, then smiled somewhat saucily for a Vanir, before turning back to the Katie pile. *‘Well... Let’s dip into our lovely little technician and see what clutters up her mind’*

### ***In the Conference Room***

It was late afternoon, and they were seated once again in the conference room, just Ronnie, Samuel, Petrus, and “Sasha” this time...

The tour had taken him from stem to stern, through all levels and nearly all compartments. A running commentary had streamed from either Petrus or Samuel; sometimes including some event that had taken place in them at one time or another.

One portion of his mind still shuddered at the tale of the Kee infestation on that Drecks engineering world. Another portion was still considering the transport of human and Drecks refugees from Hegemony territory to open worlds within the Commonwealth territory ... and the *reason* for them.

Thus, he was not quite as surprised as he would have been to find Drecks crewmen standing watch on the bridge of the ship. From evidence discovered in passing, it apparently even included Drecks *families*...

“Well, Commander S’Kala’Mak 32246, how do you like my ship?” Ronnie asked through the data pad’s translation application.

“I am told you may call me ‘Sasha’ now, Captain Rondal Calder,” he said politely; finally getting used to speaking through the data pad.

“And you may call me Ronnie – a concession I’ve yet to reach with Samuel.”

“Thank you, Ronnie. I find your ship quite a remarkable achievement. Your leaders’ engineers have created a platform well suited for your needs. Your main weapon ... your *only* weapon, I’m told, is quite ... quite ... ahhh–” he was still trying to come up with an appropriate remark when Ronnie interrupted him.

*“Useless for the most part. Damn thing only has one power setting. I stole it from the Drecks, then spent the next few years convincing them it was too dangerous to use. It is, you know. You can’t be in the breech compartment when it goes off. Can’t keep reloads in there, either, or they all go off. Incredibly dangerous. Still ... when you need the fire power...”*

He let it hang there, following it with a shrug at the Commander's blank expression.

"And ... how many of these ships do the humans have?" Sasha finally asked.

"Just this one ... and whatever the Drecks have tried to keep together. My leaders are afraid of it. Actually, my *brother* is afraid of it. I had to pay for it *myself*."

"Just ... just this *one*?" Sasha asked, his foremind glossing over the reference to a brother, which had automatically been churned into the background.

"Custom built for me out of salvage parts I picked up here and there. Just about cleaned out all of my savings, but it has allowed me to continue with the task my brother set for me."

"The task your brother—"

"Resolve the issue between the Drecks and the rest of humanity."

Sasha sat there and simply stared at him, while half a dozen segments of his mind were just *now* putting together the pieces from all those military intelligence reports – the ones that far exceeded those available to the Observation community, or sometimes even those of the Prime herself.

Rondal Caldor – *that* Rondal Caldor – was calmly sitting there before him...

Ronnie had been paying attention and marveled at the quickness of Sasha's brain.

"I see that my reputation precedes me," he said quietly, then watched the translation scroll up Sasha's screen.

After reading the translation, Sasha very slowly reached over and gently poked a finger into Ronnie's shoulder. Then he sat back with a quiet hiss of resignation, before taking a long, slow sip from his drink, while Samuel offered conciliatory comments to help him over this revelation.

"Disappointed? This Rondal Caldor is *exactly* whom you think he is, Sasha. He is the human who has tried to stabilize the human territories for the last century and a half. For all that, he is *still* just a human."

'Well ... *pretty much*' Ronnie added silently for both Samuel *and* Sasha.

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It took about three seconds for *that* to sink in, before Sasha choked on his drink, and sprayed both the table, and everyone else with it.

### *In the Ambassador's Compartment*

Katie was slowly coming down from her last peak and lay in a satiated stupor on the platform.

Once Déjà got her going, Kiki had broken off and spent some quality time between Sally and Sai. After her last turn, Sai was content to observe from the comfort of a soft pile of nesting while languidly pleasuring herself with a toy the Kee had secreted under the towels in expectation of a girls' private pleasure party. After Katie had collapsed in exhaustion, Déjà had gone to Sai and cuddled with her; letting Sai pleasure her, as well, with fingers, lips, and toy.

Kiki was curled up with Sally, while the Vanir carefully massaged the inside of her vagina with her thumb – the one with the nail that had been severely shortened and dulled for the occasional Human-Vanir interaction of this nature. In return, Kiki's small hand was moving sensuously around inside of Sally, and eliciting quiet mewls of pleasure from her throat ... similar to the sounds Katie had been screaming for the last hour or so, only much softer.

*'By the Gods, she was easy'* Sai observed quietly, to which Sally replied *'Virgins!'*

That set both of them chuckling, and Déjà took that opportunity to switch sides to nurse from Sai's other breast. She didn't know what Mother and Sally were thinking to each other, but suspected it was at Katie's expense. She teased her nipple in the extra delicious fashion she knew Mother liked, before settling in to drain whatever milk was left in it.

Sai hugged her close and ran her fingers through her hair, which elicited a contented sigh from her in return.

Sally and Sai were both in a quandary over how to approach the concept of Commonwealth Healers to Katie without sending her inexperienced mind into chaos – anymore than they already had.

*'Perhaps ... perhaps I could present it to Katie as advanced training she was unaware of?'* Sally suggested, while taking it upon herself to run the fingers of her other hand through Kiki's hair. *'Healing as the Commonwealth experiences it is needed among my people'*

*'Special training only required for those who are expected to work with humans?'* Sai suggested. *'And the mind adjustments for communications purposes are required merely because humans can't understand or speak Vanir ... well, most of them?'*

*'But the Vanir have no practical working knowledge of mind-to-mind communications'* Sally considered, while quivering delightedly at Kiki's continued ministrations.

Sally thought back on all she knew about the mind before bringing Sai up to date, but after several seconds of conversation, they were still no closer to an answer.

*'There was much research on it, but it needed instrumentality to actually achieve anything at the spectrum level the mind operates at. Even then, nothing was ever attained – not like you and Ronnie can do. We never achieved mind-to-mind communication. The only useful things developed from the research were the implants. They transmit data at that level almost instantaneously, which is why it was pursued'*

Sally turned to Sai, seeing the same light dawning in her eyes.

*'It is very low power'* Sai considered.

*'It would not need much'*

*'We would have picked it up during our scans'* Sai reminded her.

*'We were not looking for it'*

Sai closed her eyes and sought out Sue, finding her resting in the compartment she shared with the Kee. Starting at her toes, she slowly scanned up each of her legs, went back, and covered her tail, proceeded through every nook and cranny of her torso, and then up and down each arm. She refocused on her shoulders and worked her way up towards her skull – where she froze at a small spot deep in the upper side of her neck, and just outside the cranium.

*'Sally ... what is that?'* she asked, pointing out the suspicious area to her.

*'That is a nerve nexus. The males have one on the opposite side, slightly lower and smaller. I don't know what that tiny mass is, though'* She pointed to a dark spot adjacent to the nexus where Sai had shared her vision.

After a few moments...

*'You don't have one'* Sai reported. After a few moments more... *'Neither does Katie'*

*'Neither does Sasha or Samuel'* Sally reported.

*'Silas does'* Sai shared while carefully sitting up and disconnecting Déjà from her distended nipple.

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*'Ronnie – you need to bring Sue to ship doc! She needs a full body scan, right now!'* she called out silently while standing to go and wash, before heading out to meet them.

*'What shall we do with Katie?'* Sally asked; determined to be part of this investigation, and Sai paused for a moment.

*'Leave Déjà here with her. We'll take Kiki with us to sedate Sue if needed. Déjà can see that Katie remains here and ... and relatively happy'* she suggested, then continued in to wash, with Kiki following along and happily chatting about what they were going to play at next.

### ***In the Conference Room***

"Are you quite all right, Commander?" Samuel asked.

"It ... it's *true!* Humans *can* speak with their minds!"

His skin tones were shifting through an amazing pattern of colors, while Ronnie calmly pulled a towel out of a sideboard and wiped his face and the table.

Petrus had grabbed two of them – one for himself and one for Samuel.

*'I don't think you were THAT colorful, Samuel'* Ronnie commented privately.

"I suppose you might have heard rumors to that effect," Samuel continued with the newly named Sasha. "And perhaps also something about Commonwealth Healers? Sai Tal has been giving Sally lessons for the last month or so. It is quite remarkable."

"I'd heard, but no one has ever confirmed ... *Healers* ... and speaking with the *mind!* It is all so *fantastic!* It is almost *unbelievable!* And you say S'Shac'Kah 38521 – *Sally* – has been trained as such? Then she can *also*–"

"Yes. She can speak with her mind as well. It comes with the gift of Healing," Samuel confirmed.

*'It makes it much easier to communicate between people, Sasha'* Ronnie pushed gently. *'I may speak falsely to you with my voice, but the best I can do is present less than all the facts when I use my head instead of my voice'*

"And you can ... you can *read minds* as well? So you knew what I was thinking all this *time?* You've been reading my *mind!*" Sasha bristled in defense.

*'Impressions, Sasha. Merely impressions for the most part'* Ronnie assured him; albeit somewhat inaccurately. *'You appear to be quite*



*orderly and well-possessed. Your mind keeps things tightly bound, but we noticed – Samuel and I – we noticed things like the confusion during that business with your communications officer. Thank you for not following those false orders to destroy us’*

*‘I am grateful as well, Sasha’ Samuel shared silently. ‘Sally and I intend to live long and productive lives serving the Prime – or perhaps doing something else productive, if necessary’*

“I ... certainly. I could not follow orders which didn’t ... you too?” he blurted out, swiveling to face Samuel.

*‘It does make life much easier at times, Commander’ Samuel sent. ‘The ability to communicate clearly is paramount to good negotiations. As for a Medical Technician, I believe it will become a key tool in helping resolve issues of crisis ... such as with Sue and S’Ahi’Ma 41942 – Silas, I believe Sally has named him’*

“Silas ... and I am now Sasha! All for the convenience of humans!”

*‘And we of the tiny brains appreciate your indulgence, Sasha!’ Petrus sent with an audible chuckle.*

The Commander swiveled to stare at Petrus.

“I suppose that S’Kala’Mak 41631 has also been given a new name?” he accused them.

“Sally informs me one of the Kee has named her Katie. If I understand correctly, because she looks like a Katie,” Samuel remarked bemusedly.

“Of course. One of the ... the KEE?”

*‘Yes, one of the Kee’ Ronnie affirmed. ‘Sue shares quarters with them. They are quite handy. They have an innate ability to produce a calming enzyme that affects most carbon-based life forms. Without them, I believe Sue would still be barely functional. It’s been mostly with their help that she’s made the progress she– Gentlemen, Sai has asked for Sue to be taken to ship doc, right away’ he pushed, and then stood.*

Petrus was already up and out the door.

“Why? What is going on?” Sasha asked in a controlled panic.

*‘Don’t know, Commander. Something about a full body scan’ Ronnie shared, while grabbing the data pad before him and motioning to the door. ‘No secrets now, Commander. You are welcome to join us’ he added belatedly.*

All three of them left together and headed for the Kraken’s medical center.

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### *At Ship Doc...*

Sue did not seem all that surprised when Petrus had come to the door and asked her to accompany him to ship doc. She'd been expecting something like this ever since that Vanir Commander and his Medical Technician had arrived, so she gathered herself and left arm-in-arm with him, but somewhat stiffly; only becoming a little more relaxed when Kiki joined them on the way and began chatting with her aimlessly about everything and nothing as the little Kee was prone to do. Arriving at ship doc, she found only Ronnie, Samuel, and the Vanir Commander awaiting them inside.

"Hello Sue. Healer Sai Tal has requested you come in for another evaluation," Samuel said. "We want to assure Commander S'Kala'Mak 32246 that you are in good physical health." It wasn't *exactly* a lie. He was sure it was *somehow* related to the quality of her health.

Sue looked around somewhat anxiously, but was visibly relieved when Sai and Sally walked through the door and greeted her calmly.

Sai took Kiki aside to have her help set up the scanning table, while Sally spoke to Sue and helped her prepare for the scanning session. After everything was ready, Sai dimmed the lights to a comfortable level, and the observers stood back respectfully while Sally walked through the procedure with Sue. Everyone else would be a witness to the process – not altogether comfortable for Sue, but not unexpected.

Once the procedure started, Sally began a running commentary in spoken Vanir for Sue and the Kee, and silently for everyone else.

"Sue, we're going to start at your feet and move up to your torso. We will be looking for abnormalities in structure, any damage to your tissue and bones, and the possibility of any foreign bodies that may have become lodged under your skin during your ordeal."

"I thought you did all this while I was recovering?"

"We did, but we want to see how well your injuries have healed since their repair, and we also want to see if we may have missed anything else," she assured her. "How are you feeling, Sue?"

"Feeling? I ... have no pain. Everything seems to work, except ... except—" she stopped in thought.

"You still have some unresolved issues we need to work on, Sue. Sai and I are working on a way to help you with them. You have been very patient, Sue."

"I ... Déjà and Kiki have been very kind to me," she shared, but hissed quietly when Sally turned away and started her scan.

“You’re legs have healed remarkably well, Sue, and your internal organs seem to be well and functioning properly,” Sally commented after a while. She repositioned the scanner up towards Sue’s shoulders and began again.

“You had some abrasions on your upper body and limbs, but they have healed well, and your skin is unblemished now. Your neck ... your upper neck seems to have a small spot near the lateral nexus just under your cranium.”

Sally paused and went silent with Sai for a few moments.

*‘Ronnie, can you see what we’re looking at in any better detail?’* Sai asked.

Ronnie stepped up and bent over near Sue’s neck, while focusing tightly on the object pinpointed by the scanner. He saw it was regular, not ragged like shrapnel, and of very fine construction – *much* smaller than he could resolve, though.

*‘I can see it, but I can’t define it well. It is fabricated – not debris’* he finally told them. *‘I can’t get the details of it, but I know who can. Would that be all right with Sue?’*

Sally knew just who he meant, but also knew Sue had strong feelings about her.

“Sue ... Healer Sai Tal sees something inside your neck,” she said softly. “Something that we don’t think should be in there, but we don’t want to touch it without knowing more about it. There is one aboard who has experience with things like this, and who may be able to help identify it for us.”

“Jaiying! The *Demon Child*! You want the *Demon Child* to look into me again!”

*‘Jaiying is not a Demon Child, girl’* Ronnie countered. *‘She is a child of the Healers, and well gifted to help you. She learned how to disable the implants placed within our people. She should be able to tell us something about this bit of construct within your neck’*

“You think the S’SlichTah *implanted* me with something?” she asked aloud, while cringing at Ronnie’s silent message. Sue was still uncomfortable with the silent speech Jaiying had “gifted” her with. Sally knew this and spoke to her aloud.

“Sue, you have unresolved issues involving the wholeness of your mind. Now we find a tiny bit of material near your nexus that none of the rest of us has. It may be nothing, or it may be significant. If you have no knowledge of it being there, and if there is no record of it being placed

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there, and if we cannot determine its function ... then my *first* inclination is to remove it – intact – to find out what it is, and where it came from. That is the only *reasonable* thing to do.”

Sue lay there silently in thought. She hadn’t known this item was in her neck, but now that she knew, she wanted it removed right away...

But then ... she *didn’t* want it removed.

Sue thought it through again while replaying Sally’s chain of events; agreeing with her at every step, and coming to the same conclusion – remove the item intact, and find out what it was ... but then, she *didn’t* want it removed...

Sue thought it through again...

‘*She’s looping*’ Sai observed, and Ronnie listened in.

‘*Interesting*’ he commented.

Sally, who’d been watching Sue’s biological readings, noted an increase in heart rate and blood pressure.

‘*This is causing her some degree of stress ... and it’s getting worse*’

“Kiki, your roommate is becoming distressed. Would you please help her calm down? Kisses only, please,” Sai whispered; knowing it wouldn’t do to have Kiki *sexually* sedate Sue in front of casual visitors.

Kiki came forward and gently caressed Sue’s face, before darting her tongue out and licking her lips. Sue opened her mouth eagerly and accepted Kiki’s oral intrusion; almost as if she knew she was going out of control and needed Kiki’s help to settle down. In very short order, Sue had been effectively sedated and now lay in a state of deep relaxation, while Kiki rubbed around both of her ocular orbitals and across the supporting bands of muscles around her neck.

Sasha was both appalled and somewhat aroused at this display of affectionate care the human woman had given Sue – but then realized this tiny human was a female *Kee* ... one of the *cannibal people*!

‘*Ah! You finally noticed!*’ Samuel silently complemented him. ‘*Amazing, aren’t they? We can’t speak in human voices, and very few of the humans can emulate our speech, but the Kee not only learn to speak and understand spoken Vanir, they also display a true level of association with us*’

‘*You just gotta keep them fed*’ Petrus shared silently as he stepped over to hold and pat one of Sue’s arms. ‘*And when it comes right down to it, they’ll have sex with just about anything that walks ... or crawls, come to think of it*’

He felt Sasha's mind starting to scatter again and tried to help him out.

"We have just the two Kee aboard, Sasha. Déjà and Kiki," he said aloud in Vanir, which got Kiki turning to him with a big smile on her face. "Unfortunately, we can't carry enough *food* for any more than that," he added, getting a tongue pointed at him, followed by a smile wetted by that same teasing appendage, which then took a swipe at the *top* of her nose before retracting inside her mouth again.

'*You know ... this looping business is WAY different than anything I've listened to during Sue's treatments*' Ronnie pointed out.

'*I agree*' Sally pressed. '*Her thoughts would usually become scattered and confused ... unable to focus on a variety of concepts. Her assigned work has had to be very simple, which is NOT what I had expected from a child of the S'Ahi'Ma Warren, even as young as she is*'

'*Certainly not from one in training for the office of the Prime*' Sasha stated silently; *totally* unaware of even doing so.

"That explains a lot," Ronnie muttered in Standard to no one in particular.

"The device ... can you pull it out safely?" Sasha asked aloud.

'*Sai can pull it out, can't you, Sai?*' Sally asked.

'*I can probably get it out, but Jaiying would do a better job of it*'

'*And Jaiying can poke around in there and may be able to figure out what it's doing in there to begin with*' Ronnie suggested. 'Sally?'

'*Yes. Sue is sedated. Jaiying is quite capable. Sai, please call for her*' Sally asked, before turning to Samuel and speaking quietly.

"My Samuel... Déjà is tending to Katie in our quarters. Katie is... Katie is *very* inexperienced in physical relationships. Déjà is helping her with that, but she would benefit from your *mature* teachings if she is to become a suitable companion for the Commander during his stay."

He was almost speechless at her comment.

"My Sally... I will ... try to ... do ... my ... best ... for her," he got out awkwardly; *very* surprised at Sally's sudden change in attitude.

"Your *very* best, Samuel. I expect your *very* best."

"I hear and obey ... my Healer," he said with a quiet hiss, then left for his quarters; moving slowly but still not sure if he'd heard correctly.

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*‘Teach her the proper methods for emulation of physical affection to reassure a crewman of his worth as a person and a viable member of his warren, my Samuel’* Sally clarified her order reassuringly.

*‘Yes, my Sally. I will do my very best ... and I will demonstrate my very best to you later this evening’* he promised her, then suddenly felt the warmth of affection that flowed from her back to him.

Once Samuel had been correctly focused on his task, Sally turned to Sasha, who was still somewhere between shock and embarrassment at that last personal conversation.

“Commander, you may remain, but I will expect you to be quiet during this procedure. I do not want the human child to be disturbed such that Sue suffers any further injury,” she ordered briskly, and the assumption of authority by Sally was both abrupt and unexpected; but the Commander found himself obeying without question.

Ronnie brought over a stool and placed it close to the head of the scanning table. It was just about the right height for the next person to enter the room; Jaiying, accompanied by her mother, and two guards who remained outside ship doc. Sally took notice and made formal introductions.

“Commander, may I present Laisee Caldarous, human Ambassador to the Vanir Prime, and daughter of the Commonwealth Emperor.”

“Commander S’Kala’Mak 32246,” she greeted him in acceptable Vanir, before switching to silent speech. *‘We are so very pleased you and your crewmates have accepted our hospitality. We hope to prove our peaceful intentions during negotiations, but right now, our newest family member needs our assistance’* she stated obtusely, while raising a hand slightly in Sue’s direction.

She strode forward while looping her other arm in his and resting her other hand atop his arm, gently locking them together, before pulling him slightly aside to make room for Jaiying to approach the table.

Confused by her last words and pushing that comment off to yet another segment of his mind, Sasha followed along mutely and stood quietly by her side while glancing down at her a few times in subdued concern.

*‘Do not be overly alarmed, Commander. We have many in our family, and Sue is our latest fosterling’* she shared silently while looking up into his eyes. *‘Family is VERY important to us. You are confused now, but it will become clearer, I promise’* she sent, while smiling gently, and he found that he was beginning to relax.

He noted a soft glow where her hand touched his arm and thought for a moment that he should be alarmed. Then he noted that he did not seem to be all *that* concerned, and finally determined that he found it quite *pleasant* to be in her company. That information was *also* passed off to a few unoccupied segments of his mind, but by this time, most of them had decided to just kick back for a while and watch what happened *next*. After all, it wasn't as if they could actually *do* anything about it right now.

Jaiying sat on the stool and observed where Sai indicated. Then she closed her eyes to better focus on the item.

*'It's smaller than the trackers'* she shared with them all. *'We didn't make it. The material is similar to the trackers, but the circuitry is different. There are very fine connections to the nerve bundles'*

*'I didn't see those'* Ronnie admitted.

*'They are very tiny, Grandfather'* she explained, before concentrating on the impressions she was getting from it; becoming silent for several minutes.

Laisee could feel the curiosity emanating from Sasha, and patted his arm for patience. She tried looking within to try to see what Jaiying was seeing, but it was so very tiny that she could not see the connections, either.

*'It doesn't seem to do much'* Jaiying finally shared. *'I felt no signals coming from it, and didn't see anything like a communications channel that would accept external signals. Walter would know better, but he's still asleep. From what I can see, it just seems to monitor the neural nexus and ... and does something when some particular event happens – neurologically, that is'* she concluded, sharing the gist of it with other remote listeners as well.

Feeling the question coming from Sasha, Laisee answered him before he could ask.

*'Walter is Jaiying's cousin back on Kantor. He and the other cousins have been monitoring the Vanir platforms along the boundary'* she explained silently.

*'The cousins ... they are much older, of course?'* Sasha asked without realizing he'd neglected to speak aloud.

*'By several months, at least'* she confirmed; this new data simply being stored by his mind until it could be fitted into the developing picture of a *new* reality for him – and probably the *rest* of the Vanir race.

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*‘Jaiying, can you break those connections without damaging any of Sue’s nerve tissue?’* Sally asked.

*‘They are very small, but that only means they should fail before the nerve tissue fails’* she shared, before concentrating on one single fiber. *‘It failed as expected. I should be able to disconnect the other few hundred just as easily’*

*‘Please do so, Jaiying’* Sally asked her. *‘We will have Sai remove it from Sue’s neck afterwards’*

Jaiying relaxed for a moment, before focusing on her task. It took several minutes, but the job got done, and she sat back on the stool and settled against Sai, who’d remained standing there to support her.

“Very good work, Jaiying,” she said while reaching around to hug her and kissing the top of her head. “It should be easy to move everything out of the way and pull it out now.”

“Should I wake up Walter?” Jaiying asked. “He can probably figure out what it does.”

“Let’s let him sleep in, sweetheart. I’ll take it out and ask Mister Ardan to take a look at it,” she said, before lifting her up and handing her over to Petrus – warning him not to drop her with a single glance. After moving the tall stool out of the way, she sat next to Sue on a shorter one.

Placing her hands close to Sue’s neck, Sai concentrated, and her hands began to glow. They shifted from a soft, warm gold, up through a brighter yellow, then stabilized at a pure, bright white that illuminated Sue’s neck clearly ... showing a tiny bump where the hidden object was slowly migrating to the outer layer of skin.

Sally watched intently as Sai’s fine work cleared the path of nerve bundles and approached layers of muscle, tendon, veins, arteries, and other connective tissue, until it reached just the epidermis level of Sue’s neck. Then a narrow slit opened, and a tiny rectangular sliver of circuitry exited and neatly dropped into the dish she’d prepared with a gelatin base to catch and hold it in place.

Sally reached over and capped the dish, while Sai sealed and Healed the opening. Then she backtracked her path to check for any injury caused on the way out.

“Very nicely done, my girl,” Petrus murmured as he leaned over to kiss her on the cheek. Sai blushed slightly, but sat up abruptly.

*‘Sally, Mister Ardan can take a look at it now, and we can have one of our other experts take a look at it later. In the meantime, does it look at all familiar to you?’*



*'No. I would have to say it is similar to our tracking implants, but it is very tiny. I do not know what it is. It is certainly Vanir, though'*

Sai took the container back from Sally and handed it to Ronnie.

*'Take this to Donnel and have him look at it – non-destructively. Tell him where it was found, tell him about the filament connections to the nerves, and ask him what it does. I know it's somewhat late, but tell him I will see to his contentment personally if he can figure out what it is before we have to call in someone else to look at it for us'*

"Was that a promise or a threat?" he asked teasingly while taking the container from her and getting a light punch in the shoulder for his rude comment. He nodded with a smile, then left the room, while Sai looked over at Sue.

*'Sally, do you want to wake her up, or—'*

*'Let her sleep for now. Can we move her back to her quarters?'*

*'Certainly'*

"Petrus, help me move Sue to a transport," Sai ordered.

Kiki scampered over to a gurney and rolled it over, pushing it against the scanner platform. After putting Jaiying down, Petrus and Sai lifted Sue to slide her over to it, before Kiki strapped her lightly and then waited by the door.

Meanwhile Sai turned back to the group.

*'My Ladies Caldarous, Sally, Gentlemen ... thank you for your assistance and attendance. We will call another meeting and share our findings as soon as we have some results. Déjà and Kiki will be watching over Sue, and alert us if she experiences any behavioral changes'*

With Sai at one end and Petrus at the other, they wheeled Sue out the door and down the corridor towards the Kee's compartment, with Kiki leading the way. Sally offered to accompany Laisee back to the commons for a delayed supper, but she begged off, took Jaiying by the hand, and bid everyone a good evening, while being followed by their guards in a loose tail.

With just the two of them left, Sally asked Sasha if he would like to share a meal at the commons, but he seemed distracted at the partial conversations he'd been party to. He wondered why Healer Sai Tal had hit Rondal Caldar, and who Mister Ardan was, and why did the Healer offer a personal "contentment" – whatever *that* was? His mind caught up with Sally's suggestion, and he muttered something about having a ration back in his quarters.

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“Sasha, it would seem you have many questions for which you need answers. I would gladly provide you such answers as I have the knowledge of – provided those rations are *fresh*?” she suggested adroitly.

‘I...’ ‘I...’ he paused at the unmistakable echo between what he said aloud and what he sent unconsciously with his mind.

“That is one of *many* questions I have an answer for,” she prompted him.

“Are you speaking as S’Shac’Kah 38521 ... or as Sally?”

“I am speaking as whoever I need to be for you at this moment, Sasha. I am a Senior Medical Technician and have many insights and experiences in my skill set – many of them somewhat *unique*. My ... mate and I ... we have endured much trauma in the last two months. I am quite happy to share those lessons with you, just as Samuel is sharing them with Katie right now. And I’m hungry,” she added.

The Commander looked at her, and the *majority* of his mind’s segments took a vote and decided, ‘*What the hell...*’

“Senior Medical Technician Sally, I find that I am very confused at the moment and just barely able to rationalize my tenuous grasp on reality as I know it ... *knew* it,” he corrected himself with a sigh of defeat.

“Come with me, Commander. We’ll get some food into you, and then I’ll see if I can sort you out,” she promised him, then took his arm in hers, much like Laisee had done earlier.

Just as he had earlier, Sasha found himself obeying without question, but somehow didn’t seem to care at the moment.

### ***In the Engineering Lab***

“I *thought* I’d find you in here,” Ronnie muttered. He’d addressed Donnel’s back, since his front was facing a pair of screens with a variety of data and images slowly scrolling up them.

Ronnie had found him in the lab as expected, and still engrossed with some form of scientific inquiry or other. A piece of equipment lay nearby and parts of it looked familiar.

“Isn’t that the control panel from that stasis box we recovered?”

Once the less than mundane greeting had evolved into a technical question, the arrival of the *Kraken*’s master finally worked its way through Donnel’s concentration. Donnel Ardan had a habit of becoming too focused at times, but *talking* about his work was almost as stimulating as actually *doing* it.

He paused his display and turned a smiling face towards Ronnie while catching up to the question before him.

“Hmm? Oh, yes! *Fascinating!* Simply *fascinating!* It’ll revolutionize food transportation once we get a few quirks worked out of it!”

“What kind of ‘quirks’ are we talking about? The one we recovered seemed to work just fine.”

“Well, *theirs* works fine. *Ours* ... not so much. We keep finding tissue degeneration even after a short stasis.”

“How bad is it?”

Donnel held up two containers. One held a soft-skinned fruit, and the other held a semi-liquid solution of about the same shade.

“Two seconds – start to finish. We aren’t sure if it happens going *into* stasis or coming *out* of it ... or if we’ve reverse-engineered the circuits poorly. Well ... obviously we’ve done *something* poorly.”

“No – no – no... You’ve come up with a new *blender*. Saves time in the kitchen. Hey, you got time to look at something else?” Ronnie asked while holding out the container with the chip in it.

Donnel’s eyes gleamed at the prospect of a new challenge, so Ronnie gave him the background from discovery through removal, along with the suspicions of Sally and Sai.

Donnel gave him an outside estimate of two ship days before getting around to asking how things were going in general, but there really wasn’t that much to say at the moment.

“Well, the Commander hasn’t made any more noises about running away with the Vanir ... although the *girl* still wants to take Sue back, first and foremost.” Ronnie withheld his snort, but his torso spasmed slightly before Donnel added his own observations.

“I expect he’s still in spy mode.” Donnel’s voice was hushed in supposed confidentiality. “Saw him walking about and poking his head in, here and there. Probably reporting back regularly with all our secrets.”

“Gods, I *hope* so,” Ronnie admitted. “You know, this is entirely new to me; being so open and honest about everything. I hope it doesn’t come back to *bite* me – bite *us* ... *all of us*, I mean.”

There was a span of several seconds while Ronnie felt the consternation in Donnel’s mind, so he waited for it to be expressed.

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“Ronnie, I’m not one to worry – not with *you* in charge, lad, but ... the Vanir ... they aren’t like us. *Humans*, that is. They’re *fast* – *very* fast. They can pick stuff up very quickly; *much* more quickly than we can,” he said, and Ronnie felt the worry across his mind’s surface as he continued. “I can understand your viewpoint, Ronnie, but ... they’re *quicker* than us and they can figure things out *much* quicker than we can.”

For a moment, he thought Donnel had picked up a loop as well.

“Donnel, if they were all that quick, then we would have been eliminated a long time ago. Sure, they have huge platforms and a great deal of interesting technology, but for all that, it’s handed-down stuff from other *humans*. They’re *terrified* of us.” He offered Donnel a small smile, but got a frown back in return.

“It’s not that. You can’t compare their technological maturity with their *sociological* maturity. Their race has been around – *stable* – a *lot* longer than we have. I’ve spoken with Mistress Sally. With them it was, ‘What is this?’ and then they spent the next few thousand *years* deciding what to do about it. With us it’s more like, ‘What is this?’ and then we figure out how we can turn a *profit* on it just as fast as we can.”

Ronnie smiled at his astute observation while Donnel continued.

“You see, humans see something and wonder right away how to take the best advantage of it. The Vanir ... well, this is all new for them – Sally and Samuel – but they seem to be getting along with us right well, and ... and that’s the *problem*,” he insisted. “*Sociologically*, it’s *totally* out of character for them. It’s like they’re *learning* from us – really, really *fast*. It *worries* me, lad.”

Ronnie glanced away for a moment while looking over Donnel’s improvised lab space.

He could see that it looked very comfortable in here for that purpose, then wondered if Ardan and the rest of them had planned for this space all along, before turning back to him with an answer.

“Samuel *did* say his warren favored a neutral to positive approach towards humanity. He had a few rough days there at the beginning, but once I got into his head and made a few adjustments, just so we could carry on a decent *conversation*, mine you, he was quite friendly and even *more* positive about us. Sally seems to be developing Healer skills ... quite readily as a matter of fact.”

He glanced around once again while thinking this was something to consider more deeply.

“Thank you, Donnel. You’ve given me something else to think about,” he said calmly; belying the chilly feeling that was beginning to creep into his mind.

He had one more thing to share before he left, and it warmed his heart to see Donnel’s face light up when he mentioned it.

“*Personally?* She really *said* that?”

### ***December 20, While Waiting for a Meeting***

It was two afternoons later, and the humans sat quietly while waiting for the Vanir to arrive. Donnel had come through just as expected, while Walter had observed remotely and silently agreed with the basis of his conclusion, although only sharing his interpretation with the Senior Staff and the family.

The results of Donnel’s investigation had come to a *semi*-conclusion – at least enough so he could share the results of his findings. However, this meeting was not expected to go smoothly and would certainly ruin appetites for the evening meal in just a few hours. Ronnie, Sai, Petrus, and Donnel were already in attendance, but Ronnie was still dwelling on the events over the last two days...

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After Sue’s impromptu Healing, Ronnie spent time in conference with both Lili and his brother; bringing them up to speed on the situation. They’d displayed confidence in his ability to choose the proper path, and accepted that a final solution might not be forthcoming in the near future. There *was* a solution out there – it just wasn’t obvious at the moment...

It was yesterday when Sue, having slept from the evening of her treatment to yesterday afternoon, had awoken late and ravenous. After a few hours, she’d become somewhat pissed at discovering, yet *again*, that she’d been assigned cleanup duties in the kitchen. Later on, she discovered her roommates – well intentioned though they seemed – were *overly* insistent that she play with them. By early yesterday evening, she’d finally gotten fed up and left their shared quarters.

She’d wandered about the ship until finally deciding to visit Sally – or S’Shac’Kah 38521, as was her *proper* name – but then froze at that revelation. She’d stood in the corridor and considered – with *all* the elements of her mind – just what had been going on for the last several weeks, before leaning against the wall and sliding down to the floor. She’d sat there quietly while reviewing the memories rolling around in her head of what she’d done to leave Vanaheim, and where she’d ended up, and ... how had she’d gotten *here*? Working as a *scullery slave* on a *human ship*?

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Instead of breaking down in confusion, she'd stood and taken a few faltering steps, before gathering her focus and heading to the Vanir Ambassador's quarters to ask some very important questions of him ... or her. She'd not quite remembered which one was which.

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On the morning of the *previous* day, Commander Sasha had updated his ship on his situation – relatively safe and secure – and passed along an encrypted transmission for forwarding to his squadron superiors; advising them he was engaging in covert information gathering.

As an afterthought, he'd added, "Do not, under *any* circumstances, approach anywhere within fifty-thousand *kilometers* of the ship he was on without letting the humans know in advance. They are somewhat touchy about their security."

He'd neglected to mention the humans were slowing their ship, and had changed their line of approach further away from Vanaheim for the time being. If anyone was triangulating his transmissions, they could still find them – *maybe* – but he wanted to live long enough to report back in *person*.

Message traffic had flown back and forth freely all day, and he was allowed unsupervised strolls about the ship – the humans apparently not caring *what* he did, as long as he stayed out of the weapons bay – and he'd given up nearly every bit of information he'd learned, including the fact that – yes – some humans *could* learn to understand and speak Vanir, but they also had a very sophisticated translation device to help those who could not.

He'd also neglected to mention that whole business about him now speaking with his *mind*, as it might be construed as not a *good* thing for them to know – no matter *how* easily he and the other Vanir could converse from room to room, or even further away from each other. He'd seen a real advantage in developing that skill, but again, he wanted to *live* long enough to pursue that endeavor.

After the evening meal, his Junior Medical Technician had approached him and observed he'd been somewhat stressed throughout the day. She'd ordered him to rest with her that night so she could refresh his countenance and help him prepare for the next day by providing a relaxing evening.

He'd blinked in surprise at her assertiveness, then noted her color – slightly tinged with the appropriate tone to indicate interest in physical interaction. It took only a moment for him to decide that he could certainly welcome the attention. Besides, it would also be beneficial to evaluate the training she had received from Samuel the previous evening.

Arriving in his compartment, he'd noted the containers of refreshments, the towels, and scented oils already present, and decided that, *whatever* happened tomorrow, this night he would enjoy for all it provided.

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A few hours after she'd burned its filaments within Sue's neck, Jaiying and Walter had been in deep conversation – all of about thirty seconds worth – and reviewed the results of her investigation of the implant. He'd thanked her for letting him sleep, then updated the rest of the staff, plus Aunt Lili and Uncle Emperor, before locating the offending bit of Vanir technology in Donnel's lab and vicariously ripping it apart to delve into its innermost secrets. It appeared to be very simple, and he figured Donnel would have no problem with it. He'd updated the rest of the family to keep everyone appraised, but agreed with Grandfather that Donnel should be the one to advise everyone else as the expert on site.

Having done that, he'd joined the rest of the staff in the garden, where they were surrounded by the fragrant essences of a beautiful Kantite morning – and four valaets. Having attached Jaiying and Rose along the way, they'd all stretched out to the *Kraken* and poked around the Vanir crewman with the other implant.

Once they'd identified what it looked like, and how it was attached, they'd continued to the Commander's home base and began a rigorous search for other implant victims. The list they'd later dictated to Uncle Petrus was not very long, but some of those implanted were in positions of relative importance.

Walter's first inclination had been to disable all the chips with Jaiying's assistance, but after discussing the list with Petrus, Grandfather had advised waiting on that. On the face of it, this was, after all, an *internal* Vanir problem. It would be better to advise them of their findings and see if they were capable of resolving it themselves. Plus, they needed a way to determine *who* was doing the implants, and why...

The Kraken, On the Way to a Meeting...

"Sue, are you *sure* you're up for this?" Sally called forward as they proceeded along the corridor to the meeting room. Sue turned her head back and threw a look of disdain at her in response.

"My apologies, S'Ahi'Ma 42491," Sally murmured contritely.

Sue was indeed pissed. She didn't walk, so much as *stalk* on the way to the meeting room. Alongside her was one of those irritating little Kee – *Déjà* she thought – and behind her trailed the Ambassador, his technician, and the Commander, and *his* technician ... or *whatever* she

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was. Based on the passionate sounds she'd heard as she was leaving the Ambassador's corridor last night, she still wasn't quite sure.

At the door to the conference room, she stopped and waited. Déjà paused with her, before quickly reaching forward and opening the door. She stood aside and held it open for all of them to enter, before being pushed back into the corridor by her roommate – her *former* roommate.

Déjà stood outside quivering and almost keened in distress. Then she thought she should seek out Kiki to let her know they had lost their big playmate – maybe for *good* – and then thought that maybe some *ice cream* would help ease the pain if the supply from Earth wasn't already gone. She wandered sadly down the corridor on her way towards the commons, only quickening her pace when thoughts of ice cream spurred her on.

Inside the conference room, Sue stood poised and glared imperiously around the room, before focusing on Ronnie.

"What is the meaning of my imprisonment?"

'You are not a prisoner here, Sue'

"GET OUT OF MY *HEAD*, HUMAN! AND STOP *CALLING* ME THAT!"

Ronnie sat there quietly and considered his options ... deciding he would be polite for the time being. He neatly slid a data pad over to her; it coming to rest right side up and facing her. He repeated his answer audibly, and waited for her to read it on the data pad.

"I *TOLD* YOU—"

"S'Ahi'Ma 42491" he said quietly, then watched upside down as her data pad translated her name automatically. She glared ... first at it, and then at him.

"We are not here to discuss your *personal* situation at the moment," he added calmly, then turned his attention to Sasha while ignoring her completely.

"Commander, my crew and my staff have arrived at some conclusions for us. Mister Ardan, if you will?" he said, and Donnel stood and approached the wall monitor. Before he got halfway there, Sue leaned forward and was about to erupt again, when Sally stood and stared her down.

"I must *remind* you, S'Ahi'Ma 42491, that your attendance here is conditional upon your *polite* behavior."

Sue bristled with anger, but slowly sat on the proffered Vanir-compatible stool. To her credit, her colors did not change all that much,

and Sally's had remained stable throughout the confrontation, even as she went on...

"We will accept your input and interpretation of facts as we ask for them – not *until* we ask for them," Sally finished, then turned back to the meeting before sitting and nodding towards Donnel, who continued as if nothing had happened.

He activated the display, and called up an enlarged image of the implant that covered nearly sixteen square feet of it. It rotated slowly, the flat surfaces of the tiny rectangle bristling with the remains of tiny filaments. He stood to one side with his data pad in hand, then began.

"This is a marvel of construction. My congratulations to the Vanir scientists who created it," he said, giving credit where it was obviously due. "The device itself is slightly less than two millimeters on any side, and covered with very fine filaments that were connected to nerves massed within the nexus on the lateral portion of the Vanir subject. Once disconnected by one of our more talented Healers, the device appears to be unaffected, and one might assume it became inert at that point."

The image changed to a hollow wire-frame that showed a regular array of features inside the cube. It was only disturbed on one side by a larger block that rested against an outer wall.

"This..." he said, pointing to the block with an on-screen pointer, "...appears to be a power supply that is similar in nature to the ones used on the tracking implants. It generates power from biological energy extracted from the host. What it's powering ... that was tricky."

The image on the screen enlarged to show even more detail.

"There is no signal processing section that I could find. Nothing in there to receive or send signals – not at all like the trackers – so, the power requirements are very minimal. From where it was located and what it was attached to, I can make a guess it was involved in manipulating the nerve structure somehow. Exactly what it was doing required a little more thought and background information – in this case, information about the subject," he said, and gestured at Sue.

"As a result, I can say confidently – with confirmation from other sources Lord Caldar apparently has – that the device is a simple computer. From what I can determine, the device is inserted into the nexus, and then randomly attaches itself to nerve endings with its several hundred filaments. After that, it appears you only need to introduce *external* stimulation to affect the programming of the device," he said, then stepped back to sit down in his chair, while the wire-frame image continued to rotate slowly on the display.

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Everyone was silent for a moment, until Sue raised her hand and was acknowledged.

“What sort of stimulation – how would it be applied without a signal processing section?” she asked, and Donnel watched her translation scroll up his screen until he could craft a response.

“Since there are no external signal processors involved, it would have to be something that stimulates the mind itself. Perhaps a device of some sort ... maybe even something as simple as a set of questions. I did find a tiny bit of memory that was hard-coded. I thought that perhaps it was a program initiation block of some sort. Without being able to actually get in there and read the code, it is anyone’s guess as to what it really does. Without more detailed knowledge about the device’s physical structure ... well, I’m pretty much limited at this point. It is most fascinating, though, and I would welcome any other speculation...” he trailed off; his hands raised slightly in supplication.

Sue sat back in thought as her mind segments churned and ran checks through her memory. She had holes. She already knew that, but attributed it to the “unfortunate death event,” as S’Shac’Kah 38521 had called it. The problem was that these holes were from *before* the break-up of Observer Station 6 – *long* before.

Shortly *after* her arrival on it, it would seem...

‘Sally...’ “Sally...” Sue fumbled, while those aware of it listened curiously.

She remained silent and looked around guiltily. Sally reached over and patted her arm reassuringly; letting a tiny glow emanate from her palm to help calm her, before turning to Donnel.

“Mister Arden, what do you speculate the function of the device is?” Sally asked.

“Well... from your description of the before and after behavior of the subject...” he paused to glance at Sue, “...it appears to affect behavior when a certain set of circumstances occur.”

Now that people were getting truly curious, he warmed up to share his further speculation.

“You reported Mistress S’Ahi’Ma 42491 ‘looped’ at one point. That might indicate a specific set of questions, or a specific event, would trigger a response that was contrary to what would normally be expected. That would imply a response that was ‘programmed in’ if you will. It’s as if ... if you normally turned *right* at a corridor intersection, but after the implant was *programmed*, you could only turn *left* at that same corridor,” he suggested.

Everyone was silent while that sank in, before Sue finally presented an observation.

“When I ... when I was ... being examined, I heard the description ... of the device ... and the recommendation to ... remove it, and I ... wanted it removed – and then I ... I didn’t,” she stammered a bit shakily.

The translation was having a problem, but only Donnel was having a problem with it, as everyone else was there when it happened.

“She reviewed the process internally and agreed to it,” Ronnie said aloud for his benefit. “Then she didn’t want it removed. Then she reviewed the process *again*, and agreed to it – but decided she didn’t want it removed, again. She got stuck in that mode until Kiki ... sedated her.”

‘*How ... how many times?*’ “How ... how many times?”

Sue fumbled over her words, with the unwanted echo between her mind and her voice beginning to stress her already shaken confidence.

“You repeated your thought process about two dozen times before Sally decided your heart rate was becoming dangerously high,” Ronnie said. “If that was the only time you’d experienced a physical reaction like that, I would speculate it was a programmed condition to prevent removal of the device.”

“That’s what I would do,” Sally said.

“Well ... we could *test* it,” Sai said. “We have Silas. He’s still locked in his quarters, right?”

“S’Ahi’Ma 41942 is quite secure,” Samuel said, but Sue jerked around to face him.

“S’Ahi’Ma 41942 is *here*? Where is he? Is he all *right*?”

‘*Gods, can this get any WORSE?*’ Ronnie thought, then remembered the list from Walter. He slumped in his chair while turning back to Sue.

“Sue ... S’Ahi’Ma 41942 was the communications officer on Sasha’s ship,” Ronnie explained calmly. “He reported our presence to an unauthorized organization, whose responding orders were to destroy us – and kill *you* in the process. It was the Commander’s wisdom that prevented that from happening,” he said, while gesturing to Sasha at that last, then waited for the translation to scroll up her screen.

If Vanir could be said to display emotions, then *haunted* seemed to be the current expression on her face.

“He would not... He would not... We played together at the crèche. We were friends...” Sue had slowly faded into enough despair that she

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completely overlooked being called by her hated human name; then she seemed to collapse into herself, and her body began to shake.

“Katie, would you please escort S’Ahi’Ma 42491 back to our quarters?” Sasha quietly asked her. “See that she rests ... perhaps some refreshment?”

“No ... no ... take ... take me back to the Kee.” *‘Take me back to Kiki’* she sent, so Katie helped her stand, with Sai joining them and walking to the crew’s quarters with them.

‘Keep going, Ronnie. Tell me about it later’ Sai sent, and got his silent promise.

“Well ... **curiouser and curiouser**,” Ronnie muttered unintelligibly to everyone left in the room. “Donnel, thank you for your efforts on our behalf. We’ll see if we can arrange for your observation during the second removal. Oh! And enjoy your evening with Lady Tal.”

“Thank you, Lord Caldar, and my Lady Tal need not bother if she’s busy – although I hear she sets a man *right* after a stressful day,” he said, then chuckled lightly while gathering up his materials. “Mistress Sally ... Gentlemen,” he nodded, then left the room.

Sally was looking curiously at the data pad for the translation of her name, which Ronnie noticed.

‘It’s an honorific for an unassigned Healer, or an un-bonded Lady of the Royal household. It appears that Donnel holds you in high esteem’

‘He honors me?’

‘He does ... or suspects you are already a member of the Royal household. That option is still available to you and Samuel – no conditions, no time limit. Well ... unless I die’

‘You humans are a curious race, Rondal Caldar’

She sighed while turning away, then noted Petrus had pulled out a curiously flat piece of semi-soft material.

“Ah! You noticed!” Petrus said in Vanir, followed by a smile. He looked down at the paper written in Vanir and turned to the Commander.

“Our resources have determined there is a problem with some of your base personnel, Commander Sasha.”

He slid the sheet of what looked like an archaic form of document storage over between Sasha and Sally, then waited while the Vanir looked it over. From what he could recognize of Vanir reactions, they were both puzzled by it.

‘This is a list of names. You’ll note that Silas is at the very top’ Petrus silently prompted them.

‘These names. I recognize many of them from the base’ Sasha shared.

He looked at it, along with Sally, with quiet hisses going back and forth between them, while Sasha pointed to specific names on the list and where he knew their duty assignments were located; either squadron or base support staff, but with no apparent pattern to them.

Aside from those he already knew personally, the names seemed to be a random collection of Base 4 personnel. A few seconds later, Sasha suddenly came to a dawning realization, and changed color appropriately.

‘These are people with implants!’

December 21, Decisions, Decisions

This morning’s meeting had been scheduled late the night before. Its venue was the same; but its content had been carefully decided upon to be short and concise. Including the minimum number of participants – Ronnie, Sai, Sasha, Samuel, and Sally – it began right on schedule, and took only ten minutes to reach the critical phase of the meeting...

“We will, of course, help in any way we can, but I must remind you that this is an *internal* issue involving the Vanir,” Ronnie offered once again.

“But it affects you as well!” Sasha insisted.

Ronnie continued with the illusion that he was reading the translation, before responding.

“Commander S’Kala’Mak 32246, I cannot, in good conscience, interfere with what is a strictly *internal* Vanir issue. My obligation is to return the Vanir Ambassador to Vanaheim, and transport the Human Ambassador in company with him. My orders are to insure safe transit for them both. The Human Ambassador’s obligation is to negotiate a peaceful treaty between our two societies, but failing that, I am to ensure the Human territories are protected from Vanir aggression,” Ronnie reiterated.

“But ... but what about S’Ahi’Ma 42491?”

“The fact that we found a Vanir implant of a *previously* unknown type lodged within the nerve nexus of *my* Vanir crewperson – one called S’Ahi’Ma 42491 *prior* to her death, and then given the human name of ‘Sue’ upon *post-resurrection* at our hands – is a separate issue *entirely*. The fact that – with *your* permission – we have identified a similar device

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within your *own* crewman, one called S'Ahi'Ma 41942, is merely a fortunate happenstance."

On cue, Sasha flung his arms out in exasperation, before Sally could gain her feet and continue with the play.

"Lord Caldar, if we might ask a *favor* from you, then?" she began politely, then continued after his delayed nod. "We would request that your Healer examine the crewman, S'Ahi'Ma 41942, and attempt to remove the foreign body from his nexus as well. I suspect his current state of confused and insubordinate behavior might become mitigated. Perhaps a better understanding of what had been done to him might also be attained."

Ronnie sat contemplatively, counting down the seconds before turning to Samuel.

"Ambassador S'Shac'Kah 39496 ... *your* viewpoint on this request?"

Samuel went through several recognizable Vanir contemplative motions while waiting the appropriate amount of time to give his opinion – which had already been worked out late last night.

"I do not see a conflict with this simple request for assistance, nor does it obligate further assistance from the humans for any further related issues. It *would*, of course, have been prudent to have recorded in detail what we have discussed here. Perhaps the medical procedure as well – whatever of it that could properly be recorded, if my understanding of human Healer techniques is correct."

Ronnie raised his hand and gestured pointedly to the camera in the corner of the room.

"This meeting, since it is between Vanir and human Command and Ambassadorial functions, is already being recorded," he said. "A copy of which will be made available to each of you – with video, audio, and auto-translations of all parties."

Ronnie turned to Sai and whispered inaudibly for a few seconds.

"Blah – blah ... blah – blah – blah," he whispered, while Sai was barely able to stifle a laugh.

"Blah ... blah, blah – blah ... blah blah," she whispered her reply, and he sat back with a reluctant sigh.

"Commander S'Kala'Mak 32246, Lady Sai Tal has recommended that I allow her services on your behalf – which in no way obligates me or my crew to any further support on this obviously *internal* Vanir issue without further discussion," he offered reluctantly.

‘Well, does that tie things up nicely for you, Sasha?’ he shared with everyone in the room.

‘I believe it does, but ... if things turn unfortunate, do you think you might have room for me and Katie?’

‘I have many rooms in my house, Sasha. There should be room for two more in my family’

“Please have your crewman brought to our medical station for an evaluation in one hour. We would like both of your Medical Technicians in attendance for a review of their impressions, both before and after treatment,” Ronnie said, then waited for the translation to scroll up the Vanir screens before standing to leave.

Before he got away, Sasha stood and caught his attention.

“Thank you for your generosity, Lord Caldar,” he said respectfully.

“To our mutual *benefit*, Commander S’Kala’Mak 32246,” he replied, before leaving the room.

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It was later in the afternoon when “Silas” found himself contemplating his fate. Unlike Sue, he’d remained awake during his treatment and never needed sedation; apparently, because they’d never actually discussed removing the implant *aloud*.

Shortly after the procedure, he’d ended up back in the Vanir corridor and locked in his compartment – for his *own* safety, he’d been told. He’d looked at the solid walls that surrounded him, then remembered the comment from the one called Four about when they used to transport Drecks in these same compartments. Well, it wasn’t as if he had anywhere *else* to be.

He closed his eyes while listening to the segments of his mind catching up with each other – apparently having *finally* become aware that something had happened to their host at some unspecified time in his recent past.

The Medical Technicians had been relentless in regressing through his memory, but the most they’d come up with was a hole that he could not account for. He would remember being injured, or any medical treatment or examination around his neck, but this hole in his memory was just ... empty data.

The *worst* part after treatment, was remembering transmitting action information to an unauthorized agency. He did not know *who*, and worse yet, he didn’t even know *why*. He could not account for it, but was *sure* it

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was going to cause his censure! His once promising career was going down in *quicksand*, and taking him *with it*! Sadly, he didn't even understand *how*.

### *A Change of Duty...*

Sasha came back from the bridge after sending and receiving encrypted communications to his second in command. He seemed disturbed, almost to the point of distress, and Katie immediately noted it upon his return. He stood in the doorway while looking around their compartment, somewhat absently.

"What troubles you, Sasha?" she asked, still wondering at the novelty of having *human* names for them both, and how easily she'd adjusted to them.

"I have just relinquished my command to my First Officer. From this point on, we are on detached duty to ... to ... observe the *humans*, one supposes," he said quietly.

He slowly closed the door, then stood staring at it for several seconds, before finally backing away and turning, then curling listlessly into his nest ... *their* nest now, apparently.

Katie poured him a drink and brought it to him, before finally squatting in front of him to catch his attention.

"And what do *you* suppose, Sasha?" she asked him while handing him the drink.

He took it from her and sipped it; all the while staring at her. He took in her youth, her expectations, and her future – what little of it remained. Then he turned his head away from her in shame.

"I'm sorry to have involved you in this," he quietly stated to the floor.

"Why do you worry, Sasha? You sound like you don't expect us to—" she stopped when he looked up at her sharply. "What do you fear, Sasha?"

"Do you not see where we *are*?" he asked almost anxiously; waving his free arm around their quarters. "Just down the corridor resides a Senior Observer and his *mate* – carrying *eggs*, no less! – and they've been contaminated by their contact with the *humans*!"

"Contaminated?"

"They've been *changed* – *modified* ... as have *we*!" he said loudly; letting his hue change through several shades all at once...



He'd not even *known* he'd been changed. The speculation from Sally and Sai had suggested that his multi-segmented mind took a vote, and decided to go along with it *themselves*...

"Sasha, it is all right. It did not hurt us. It ... it only allows us to communicate with them – the *humans*, I mean."

"Then why are my orders not to return to my *ship*? Not to return to *base*? They mean to *control* the contamination! To – to keep themselves *pure*! And when they're ready to, they'll..." he stopped in frustration, then paused a moment longer to sip his drink and try to bring himself back under control.

"They probably mean to terminate us," he said with finality, then laughed once. "And I thought Samuel was *joking* when he suggested seeking asylum with the humans!"

He shook his head slowly, before taking another sip of his drink.

"There is no reason to suspect such, Sasha," Katie murmured, then tried to settle closer and reach out to him, but he rebuffed her.

"You have an assignment for this evening," he reminded her with just the hint of a smile.

"I can tell them I have other duties. My Commander ... my Sasha *needs* me," she said warmly.

He looked at her, then reached out to hug her.

"I can survive for a little while longer ... Katie," he said just as warmly, before gently pushing her away and pointing in the general direction of the door.

She got up, but walked slowly to the door. Turning back, she said, "I'll hurry back."

"No. Do your very best ... and *then* hurry back."

He smiled at the welcome surprise on her face, before she turned and left him to his solitude.

### ***Preparations for a Medical Distraction***

Sally and Sai were having a final meeting in the Ambassador's quarters before sending Katie off for her assignment.

The plan was simple. Present Silas with a suitable distraction, then dive into his memories and try to find the missing pieces. Sally and Sai had dismissed the idea of using the Kee for that purpose because of the cultural issues that would naturally crop up. They had decided to use

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Katie instead because she was already a familiar quantity to Silas and would be expected to perform her role for this evening.

Sally felt the conflict rolling off the surface of Silas' mind and commented on it.

*'He worries'*

*'He should. He's been a very bad boy'* Sai reminded her.

*'He could not know'* "He could not know," Katie stuttered, and looked a bit embarrassed.

"You'll get used to it" Sally assured her, then reached out to pat her arm.

Katie looked down at Sally's faintly glowing hand. *'You'll get used to that as well'* she added silently.

*'That is true, Katie'* Sai shared. *'The Vanir are particularly well adapted to receive Healer training. Sally is absolutely the fastest student I've ever had'*

*'I thought you said Ronnie had students just as fast?'* Sally asked.

*'Almost as fast, but he added a little bonus to their training'* she said with a nudge.

*'Oh? Ohhh...'*

Sally remembered Sai Tal telling the story of Ronnie's *special* Gift to his crewwomen so long ago.

Some of the stories Sai told of him were unbelievable, but she forced herself to focus on their *current* task while looking in on Silas.

"He's about ready. Do you remember what you're to do, Katie?"

"I am to offer him refreshments, and then see to his ... contentment?"

Her tone questioned the odd word.

"You will execute the proper methods for emulation of physical affection to reassure him of his worth as a person and a viable member of his warren," Sally stated formally.

*'Get him drunk and screw his brains out, girl!'* Sai added helpfully. *'He is kinda cute for a Vanir'*

*'Oh! He is very attractive, Sai Tal'* Katie sent in subdued nervousness.

*'Go get him, Katie!'* Sai cheered her on.

Katie took a final sip of her fruit drink, before leaving the compartment to go next door and offer Silas her services.

*'Were we ever that young?'* Sally wondered.

*'You think she'll be all right?'*

*'From what I heard last night, she'll be completely oblivious to our intrusions – for at least as long as she's conscious. After that, it will not matter. Do you really think this might work, Sai Tal?'*

*'If he has even a remote memory of someone during the time frame involved, he should be so relaxed and distracted by Katie, that any suggestions implanted in his mind should be distracted as well. It is just going be awkward for me to shift among all those segments'*

*'As long as you can focus on the faces and names you see, that should be enough for me to retain the memory of them. Then it's just a matter of tracking them down at the base – or wherever he was when he experienced his ... hole'* she sent, then hoped that Sai could keep track of everything without triggering any defensive mechanisms in his brain.

Twenty minutes later, the party next door had finally started. Five minutes into it, the ladies began their intrusion into the mind of Silas.

For the next forty minutes, Sai poked and peeked into the memory bits just prior to the hole, and just shortly after it, in all twelve segments of his brain. Sally rode along and recorded every facial image and name she could come up with. Sai made a second loop and dug in a little deeper at the edges of the hole. On one segment, she found fuzzy images of a new face, so she paused there, jumped to the end of the hole, and worked her way back; seeing the same face and seeing it looking intently at Silas from close by, then looking away at someone else.

She watched closely, jumped back to the beginning of the hole, and saw the same face a little clearer this time. The view from Silas turned to glance at someone else whom he saw fuzzily. Jumping to the end of the hole, Sai slid in a little deeper, and saw lips move, but heard nothing in the segment. Then she watched as Silas turned his head again, and she got a clear picture of the second person; letting Sally remember it exactly. Then the memory suddenly shifted away, and she felt herself bounced out of his head.

*'Did I trigger something?'* Sai asked, but Sally hissed in amusement.

*'Katie finally removed the very LAST bit of excitement from poor Silas. I believe he will sleep well tonight. You did well, Sai. I memorized most of those faces'*

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*'At the very last ... what about the one who was looking at Silas so closely?'*

*'Him, I did not picture well – it was obscured – but the other one next to him was very clear. His name was forefront in his memory, and it is on the list' she confirmed.*

*'And so we have our first link. It's not much to go on' Sai cautioned.*

*'It is not much, no, but it is a beginning. Sasha is developing a plan to attain a secure channel to command that will bypass those who have been tainted'*

*'Sasha is aware that the only secure communications available is the one we offer?' Sai reminded her.*

*'And you are aware of the difficulty of gaining acceptance of it under the current situation?'*

Sai let out a breath of understanding while nodding in agreement.

Offering to fix it so command could talk mind-to-mind would raise just as many circular arguments as finding Vanir-created implants within Vanir officers and crew. Trying to keep discovery of that secret from finding its way to the offenders would be an even *more* difficult task. Hopefully, whatever plan Sasha came up with would cover that.

Katie finally stumbled back to the room and looked at Sally and Sai, hopefully.

*'Did it work?'*

*'Very good job, Katie. Sai got some very good results. You have given us our first positive step in resolving the issue'*

*'Be sure to wash all the squishy parts before you go to bed' Sai reminded her, before she gathered her stuff, leaned over and kissed Sally on the cheek, then wandered back to her compartment, while Katie came over and sat down beside Sally.*

*'She is a very strange Medical Technician, Sally' she said, speaking in silence more easily now that she was totally relaxed.*

*'Hopefully, you will have time to learn a lot from her' Sally opined, but felt a lingering desire from the young Vanir seated next to her. 'Sasha must be very lonely by now' she suggested silently, triggering a color shift over the anterior portion of Katie's body.*

*'Yes! I must go and practice my lessons some more!'*

Katie giggled eagerly, but got up unsteadily. She righted herself, leaned over, and kissed Sally on her other cheek, then hurried back to her Sasha.

“Children...” Sally muttered, before she got up and entered the inner chamber to join her Samuel in rest. She slipped into the nest beside him, and cuddled her back to his front and relaxed ... but felt something slowly sliding closer and warmer than expected. She felt a sensual rush come over her, and opened herself to him.

“Oh ... *yes*, my Samuel,” she murmured, then hissed when he penetrated her, before letting herself go in a sensation of timeless pleasure.

### *In Ronnie’s Compartment...*

It was the middle of the evening, and Ronnie was still up. He was sitting in a comfortably overstuffed chair and reading a book, while listening to an instrumental piece from Earth playing quietly in the background. It was one of his favorite stories, and he’d had to replace the book at least four times in the last century. Not the *original*, of course. He’d given that to his Grandson, David, as part of the gift of his ship, the *Odontoceti*. It seemed appropriate they should stay together. He’d just started chapter seven when his door chimed and he allowed it to open.

It revealed Sai standing in the corridor. He motioned her in and bookmarked his place, before setting it down and getting up to greet her.

“Ronnie, how are you feeling?” she asked before getting halfway to him.

He diverted to the side table and pulled open a chiller containing fruit juices. After making his selection, he poured himself a cup, then held up a second cup and offered it to her, getting a nod in return.

“Laisee said you’ve been busy the last few days ... *and nights*,” she persisted.

“I’m feeling well enough, Sai. I’ve had a lot on my mind – we *all* have a lot to deal with, you know,” he murmured before sipping from his cup.

He set his cup down, then poured some juice for her. Ducking down lower, he pulled out a chilled bottle of ambrosia and added a bit to her cup. He smiled faintly when he turned and offered it to her. She accepted and sipped it appreciatively before sitting in an adjacent chair, while he resumed his more comfortable seat.

“You must be getting soft, Ronnie,” she observed, glancing at the lushness of his seating arrangement.

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"A gift from my Grandson. I believe it's a used \*BarcaLounger\* from Earth. *Very* expensive ... at least on Earth."

He settled back comfortably before reaching down to pull a lever. The bottom front of the chair pushed out and raised his legs, while the back settled lower and tilted him backwards.

"I'm told Lili had a *fit* when she first saw it," he added with a grim smile.

"I wouldn't imagine Lady Lili would care one way or the other, but I suppose *proprieties* must be upheld within the Royal household. At least she still allows Diane to harvest her own vegetables," she said, then snorted.

"And Spring Blossom as well," he added, then sipped once again.

They sat and quietly sipped their drinks. He knew Sai was not going away without venting at him, but still tried diverting her, anyway.

"How is the boy? Did Mistress Katie perform as you'd both planned?" He ignored the real purpose of the test. She was going to tell him anyway.

"She did as requested. According to Sally, she performed rather well. She diverted his attention away from his surroundings well enough that we discovered a possible link to one of the conspirators. She seemed to have a good time, as well."

"Yes. Well ... a good time was had by all, then."

She sat silent for a few more moments, before getting angry enough to lash out at him.

"Damnit, Ronnie, what is going *on* with you!"

He sipped at his drink and almost reluctantly set it back down. As he met her eyes, the sigh he let out was nondescript.

"Lady Tal, I am sitting here reading a book, while listening to restful music and relaxing. What more do you want from me?"

"I want to know why you've closed yourself *off* from us! You're shutting *down*, Ronnie, and I want to know *why*!"

"Sai, I am trying very hard not to upset these very delicate first steps between humanity and the Vanir anymore than I already have. Messing with Samuel and Sally was one thing. Sasha and Katie are a completely different matter; not to mention the boy and Sue," he said quietly.

"*Why*, Ronnie? Why is it different for Sasha and Katie?" she asked; already lost at his comments, and now stuck listening to his extended sigh of frustration.

“Sai ... Samuel and Sally were the first Vanir contacted by humans in ... well ... *ever*, apparently. That fact is known at the Prime’s level, and in a few more places. It has triggered a series of events that are playing out from Vanaheim, all the way to Sasha’s ship. There is no telling what *other* obstacles we’re up against from that quarter alone. And they’ve placed their *own* planetary strikers along the boundaries between us.”

He crossed his arms before rubbing the palm of his right hand across his forehead several times. Sai could sense an almost palpable emotional stress leaking from him as he brought his hand down his face and started talking through his fingers before starting to rub the side of his cheek as he continued.

“For all practical purposes, it appears that both Samuel and Sally have been written off, so you *must* appreciate Sasha and Katie’s position in all this.”

He started rotating his fingertips against his temple, and his left hand came up to join in the exercise. Glancing down at his lap, he continued once again.

“If Sasha lets it be known that they’ve both been ‘modified’ so their brains can now speak mind-to-mind, how do you think that will be received by his command structure? Do you *really* think they’ll take his word that all is right and proper with him and Katie?”

He dropped his hands to his lap and looked up at her.

“Do you think they’ll believe him when he says there are Vanir-implanted moles within their *own* command structure, but humans are the *only* ones who can remove them without killing them in the process?”

“We don’t know if just pulling them out will kill them, Ronnie. That’s just a speculation that Walter–”

“And you cannot deny that it *wouldn’t*,” he interrupted her. “We don’t know how effective Vanir surgery techniques are, and Sally wasn’t that hopeful when I asked her about them; but that’s beside the point. Sasha and Katie are new at this – the mind-to-mind business – and that makes it imperative they get a chance to develop their skills with it before they get back to their base. They have to be able to *block*, Sai. They have to be able to *block*, *obscure*, and otherwise operate as if they were *completely normal* in every way before their command has a chance to work with us and discover what I’ve done to them.”

While Sai was considering that, he stood up and freshened his drink.

He could read what path she was following, but needed to clarify something she was leaving out.

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“There is another issue ... a more *important* one. What if the Vanir command decided this capability was too valuable an asset to pass up?”

Sai looked at him numbly as he continued.

“It took a couple of days to teach Samuel to efficiently communicate with his mind. It took Sally ... just ... as ... long,” he stated slowly, while holding up two fingers.

“Sasha and Katie are picking it up at about the same pace – Sasha ... apparently all by *himself*! How long does it *usually* take a Healer to pick it up before she’s considered for Senior?”

“Well, it depends. A Healer can practice for *years* before...”

Ronnie watched the light dawn in her eyes, and he jumped at it.

“Yes! A *human* Healer can practice for years ... *centuries* ... and not every Healer makes Senior. The *vast* majority of humanity cannot mindspeak unless you go in and *mess* with them a little, as I did with Samuel and Sally. Some of them can never mindspeak at *all* – like the Kee.”

“The Kee aren’t really human,” she muttered, but was slowly seeing his point, before he finally admitted it to himself.

“I fucked up, Sai,” he said, then paced away from her. “The Vanir mind is quite capable of figuring out how to do a lot of things, and it adapts much faster than ours does. I’ve been in Samuel’s head and watched.” He turned and came back to her – bending down and putting his face close to hers.

“There are things in there I can’t keep up with, and Sasha is *just* as fast, if not *faster*.”

He straightened up and turned away before going on.

“There’s no telling if Samuel or Sally can pick up on their own the *telekinetic* skills a high-level Senior is capable of, but I wouldn’t put it out of their reach. If they pass that ability along to their *own* kind, then I’ve handed humanity over to them. I’ve lost us to the Vanir before the first shot is even fired.”

The impact of saying it aloud hit him like a hammer, and he reconsidered the whole situation in this new light; now having *very* few options to choose from. He walked back, dropped like a rock into his chair, then sat there shaking his head between sipping his juice. Sai got up, poured more ambrosia into her cup, and sat back down, taking a heartier sip in the process.

“But ... would the Vanir *really*...” her voice died at his look.



“S’Slich”Tah. That warren is perhaps the most *vocal* opponent of Humanity, but I’m certain there are others. Even if they were completely sanctioned, the chance remains that some Vanir *somewhere* would like to continue with the genocide of the human race,” he muttered, then sipped a little more of his juice.

Sai watched him roll his head and heard his neck joints crackling; feeling the tension radiating off him as he sat there.

“Well, what can you do?”

“Do? What can *I* do? I can do what I’ve *always* done. I can lie, cheat, and steal my way through the Vanir worlds – eliminating threats as I find them. I can have Walter commit *mass murder* on my behalf by having the kids short out the power systems on all those weapons platforms and eliminate *that* immediate threat!” he threw at her while flinging an arm out and getting louder at each word.

He seemed to sink into the chair as he let out a weary breath.

“I suppose the *prudent* thing would be to ... to kill *all* the Vanir – *everywhere*. That’s the *only* way to be sure,” he said in a near whisper.

Silence filled the room for several seconds until Sai let out a breath to speak.

“And you ... you’d do that?” she murmured, her face having gone pale as she looked at the dead eyes staring back at her.

“No ... not at first. Not ... that’s not Plan A,” he muttered, before closing his eyes in despair. “That’s way down there in the Y’s and Z’s.”

She reached over to send along a comforting glow, but it was rebuffed – actually curling *away* from him before reaching the edge of his flesh. She jerked away in shock, then tried to pull herself together.

“Ronnie ... do you want to talk to someone else? Lili perhaps? Or your brother? Petrus? Petrus knows you and how you work. Surely, between the two of you, you can work something out,” she suggested softly.

He shuffled all the elements within his thoughts while considering again the few possibilities available to him, but no other solution came to mind. He looked up at her with death in his eyes, and she shrank back in her seat.

“I’ll meet with Sasha tomorrow and see what he intends. If his plan is sound, and if he can convince his command to round up the implanted ones ... it turns *that* problem over to the Vanir,” he said hollowly.

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He reached back and squeezed the back of his neck before rotating it once again.

“That only leaves the problems of Samuel and Sally ... Sasha and Katie ... and Sue and Silas.” He’d nodded slowly with each pairing, but finished in a whisper.

“Ronnie ... you can’t–”

“Family... Commonwealth... And Crown,” he said slowly, before breaking eye contact with her and turning away.

He picked up his book in dismissal and opened the page to his bookmark – ignoring her as she sat there for a few moments longer. He never acknowledged the fact when she got up and left his compartment.

### *A Mass of Confusion*

Sai stood outside Ronnie’s door, confounded by his change of disposition.

She turned and slowly walked back to the compartment she now shared with Petrus; all the while going over the conversation in her mind and trying to see any flaws in his logic – but couldn’t. She arrived and opened the door; seeing Petrus’ smiling face as he waited for her inside.

“How was Ronnie, my love?” He was lying on the bed waiting for her, all fresh from his shower.

She came over and sat next to him, hugged him once, then settled into the comfort of his arms before bringing herself to say anything.

“H-He’s pretty messed up right now. He’s concerned about the Vanir. About how q-quick they are with m-mindspeak,” she murmured shakily.

“Well, they have that multi-compartment brain thing going for them and all.”

“It’s not just that. He’s worried about them gaining an advantage over us ... *humanity* ... and – and I think he’s worried he’ll have to do something horrible to prevent it,” she whispered.

Petrus thought that through, and immediately thought of a solution.

“Have you told Lili yet? The kids should know, if they don’t already.”

“No ... but you’re right,” she said, then reached out tentatively, but found only Jaiying still awake.

*‘Jaiying, there is a concern with Ronnie. You should let the rest of the Staff know about it’* she sent, then brought her up to date.

She knew whatever she told Jaiying would be relayed intact to Walter and the rest of the Staff; hoping they could come up with an alternative before Ronnie committed genocide of an entire *species*.

***In Ronnie's Compartment...***

As his mood had deteriorated greatly in the last few minutes, Ronnie just could not get back into his book. "Some First Lord *I* am," he muttered, before replacing the bookmark and closing it on his lap.

He looked down at it, then placed it on the table.

"That Loca spy is doing so much better than I am right now," he mumbled, then looked over at his cup and considered its contents.

He glanced over at the chiller and got up, poured a small measure of ambrosia for himself, then sat back down ... sipping it slowly and letting its warmth envelope him in solitary comfort. He finished the rest of it slowly, settling back with his feet up again before finally setting the empty cup down and closing his eyes for just a few moments...

Thanks to the ambrosia, sleep came easily.

Unfortunately, the *nightmares* that followed were an unwelcome addition that plagued him for the rest of his slumbers.

***Kantor, The Royal Homestead, Late Evening***

*'Walter, Grandfather is very disturbed'* Jaiying reported. *'And he's blocking again – even while he sleeps'*

*'We felt it – all of us. Did Rose?'* he asked hopefully.

*'No ... well, just that he's unhappy. Walter, what are we going to do?'* she asked plaintively.

*'Grandfather would never hurt anyone, Jaiying. No matter what he said to Grandmother, he would go out of his way to save lives. Not take them'* Cathy assured her.

*'Grandmother said he would'* Josie reminded them. *'Even Samuel and Sally ... even our Sue!'*

*'This doesn't make sense!'* Walter insisted. *'Just because the Vanir are quick at learning new things doesn't mean they'll automatically use it to wipe out humanity'*

*'You heard Grandmother. Grandfather said if they follow it to the logical conclusion, then we won't have a chance against them'* Cathy stated dismally.

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*'Well, they don't have a chance against US!' Josie pushed defiantly.*

*'They would, though ... wouldn't they?'* Jaiying suggested.

*'How can a Vanir... Okay. I suppose if ENOUGH of them got carried away, they could'* Josie admitted.

*'What do we do, Walter?'* Cathy asked plaintively. *'Warn Aunt Lili? Warn Samuel and Sally? I don't want to lose any of our new family'*

*'Well ... we could do what we did to the Elder and just, you know, turn them off'* Josie suggested.

*'That would be too cruel!' a horrified Jaiying exclaimed. 'How would you like it if you suddenly lost the ability to talk?'*

*'And Samuel and Sally aren't sick!'* Cathy protested.

*'And ... and Sue is getting much better – even if she IS getting bitchy. And they've never done anything that Grandfather didn't approve of!'*

*'No ... not yet, anyway'* Walter considered. *'But maybe it wouldn't be so bad. Maybe this was a premature event in their development that we can \*nip in the bud\* like Mama Diane says. They've never been able to do it themselves before Grandfather made them'*

*'It allowed humanity to develop the Commonwealth'* Jaiying advised. *'Maybe it's time for the Vanir to–'*

*'It allowed humanity to DESTROY itself over and over again, stupid!'* Josie jeered.

*'No name calling!'* Walter shouted silently, nearly waking up their mothers.

*'Sorry'* Josie shared contritely. *'But it's true. We ... well, THEM before us used our type of skills to destroy themselves over and over until Aquintus Tiberious was born'*

*'But we don't know the particulars for sure, Josie'* Cathy reminded her glumly. *'Even with all the research Grandfather did, he never worked it out completely'*

*'The fact remains that Aquintus and the first Elder stabilized the Commonwealth and kept us on the path to peace'* Josie pressed. *'This time around, it's the Vanir who are screwing with us and trying to topple us. Who's to say they won't continue if we give them some sharper tools to do it with?'*

*'What I'm wondering is why has it taken Grandfather so long to figure this out?'* Walter asked. *'It isn't like him to ignore all the possibilities'*

*'He'd never worked with Vanir before' Cathy suggested. 'He couldn't have known. Even we never considered it'*

*'He can still make it right, can't he?'* Jaiying asked. *'Even if we all have to help, we can make it right, can't we?'*

*'What? Kill all the Vanir, or just mess with their brains?'* Josie asked flippantly.

*'Kill them or mess with their brains? Why you vicious, little, bloodthirsty daughter of mine'* Amy tossed in with a dash of amusement.

*'Don't forget precocious'* Cathy added.

*'No, that's Jaiying'* Diane observed. *'Since you aren't going to let us sleep, what are you all discussing?'*

Twenty seconds later, and after adding Lili, Laisee, Dorcas, Sai, and Shay to the conversation, the Ladies were up to date, and considering the matter.

*'Well this is OBVIOUSLY something that Ronnie just can't handle by himself'* Diane shared strongly.

*'Rather, let us say that he COULD handle it – but probably indelicately, to say the least'* Lili delicately corrected her.

*'What do we do, then?'* Sai asked.

*'I would suggest we get ALL of the Ladies involved – on BOTH sides – and see if a solution becomes any clearer'* Lili suggested.

Then she added another factor to the mix. *'Also, preliminary reports from the Tier One staff indicates the Prime might be suffering from a previously unexpected setback within her own security structure that seems to go all the way to her office – or perhaps to her NECK'*

*'I don't think Ronnie has considered that'* Sai opined. *'Wait ... how did they–'*

*'Balese... They are particularly adapt at data analysis. We throw random information at them, and they sift out the most reasonable tidbits of data. Ronnie has not... He is...'* Lili paused, having just checked *'...blocked. Rather quite well at the moment. See that he considers it in the morning, Sai. In the meantime, would you please ask Sally to join us ... and perhaps Mistress Katie? Oh! Can you imagine the excitement at Court if we could add ALL of them to Ronnie's family of fosterlings?'* she postulated gleefully.

They waited while Sai interrupted Sally, and finally Katie; getting promises to have them join in very shortly, while the rest of the wives

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chatted amongst themselves about how big the children were growing, and the exciting news that Puss was pregnant again and carrying two more kits to add to the internal security apparatus.

It promised to be yet another long night, but the acting Elder wanted to make sure her brother-in-law didn't fuck things up unintentionally.

### *December 22, The Kraken, After an Uncomfortable Night*

Morning didn't come soon enough for Ronnie, who'd been plagued by nightmares and woken up feeling stiff and uncomfortable for having slept in the lounge chair instead of on his sleeping platform.

The rest of his morning routine was shadowed by the summation of possibilities he'd outlined to Sai last night.

Sai had reluctantly left her bed that morning after fending off Petrus' amorous advances. She'd often wondered where he found his energy, but now suspected he drained it from his companion of the moment – just not quite as permanently as Ronnie had done in the past.

She'd known that if she'd let him have his way with her this morning, she'd be dragging herself to the meeting.

Samuel had awoken cheerfully, not having been included in the stressful conversations Sally had endured the night before. He got up and allowed her to sleep in, while he'd gone to remind Katie there was a meeting this morning. Sasha was already up and going over his notes; telling him he'd bring Katie along with him this morning.

Sally had been the very last to rise, and she appreciated Samuel having let her sleep in after she'd told him she would be in conference with the human women long after they'd finished playing the night before. He'd not made mention of it and simply fallen asleep after she'd left his side to go and sit quietly in the outer chamber with Katie.

### *In the Conference Room*

They'd all somehow missed each other at breakfast and wandered into the conference room by ones and twos.

Now it was a somewhat somber group of four that met first this morning: Ronnie, Sai, Samuel, and Sally. Quiet greetings had been exchanged, but then they sat – silent – while waiting for Sasha and Katie to arrive. What little further conversation there was, had been between Samuel and Sally, who'd spoken quietly in Vanir. Finally, a rather cheerful Sasha and Katie arrived, which only darkened Ronnie's mood even further.

*'Ronnie! I think I've worked it out!'* Sasha sent excitedly while coming over to sit across from him at the table.

A somewhat flushed Katie joined him. Sitting next to him, she caught a glimpse of Ronnie's eyes and turned aside while displaying a slight tinge of fear in her coloration, something only Sally seemed to notice.

Ronnie held up his hand while they settled in, then pointed to the recording camera in the corner of the room. He pointed down to his data pad and touched a key, then pointed to the camera again.

Sasha nodded his understanding, then took a breath to begin the convoluted audible meeting for recording purposes.

"Good Morning, Rondal Caldar. Between the two of us, the Ambassador and I worked out the positions of all those named on the list you so graciously provided us. To deal effectively with the ... problem ... I need to communicate the information securely to my superiors. I have a plan that I want to share with you."

Ronnie watched the text scroll up his data pad while comparing it to what he was getting directly from Sasha's mind. It matched in both content and enthusiasm, so he gestured for him to continue.

"We obviously cannot allow those so afflicted to have access to our communications, so any contact with my command has to be handled carefully," Sasha said aloud. *'I've yet to tell anyone that I can ... that I've been able to use my mind to speak with you ... and others'* he sent more somberly while looking around the room *'And I think that is something we should discuss at length, but at a later time'* he shared before going on aloud.

"I've considered an encryption scheme that relies on having knowledge of an individual – very *personal* knowledge. Any encryption scheme requires a key, but before you unlock the data, that key must be known. What I plan do is contact a specific individual who would have knowledge of a specific event and allude to a possible key sequence from that knowledge."

Ronnie's knowledge of key construction was not excessive, but even he could see the many points of failure for a key structure that shaky.

"How would that work – exactly?" he asked.

"As a simple example, you want to send an encrypted file through a public network. You encrypt the data and send it, but afterwards you send along a message containing the specific reference for that individual ... something like, 'the fruit we ate on our third meeting at the second

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base we were both stationed at.’ That individual should be the only person who would know that, and could then use it as the key.”

Ronnie ran that through his thoughts, but found himself reluctantly agreeing with it.

“That sounds ... rather clever, actually – as long as the reference was unique,” he allowed.

“That was a simple reference. If you have a reference that was somewhat *undesirable* for sharing publicly and you merely *alluded* to it, it would be unbreakable. At least it *should* be.”

“So ... if I said my key was – ‘my grandson’s, father’s, second child’s middle name’ – there would be a very limited pool of individuals who would possibly know that ... without doing the research, that is?” he asked.

He waited for the translation to scroll up Sasha’s screen, then watched the following juggling of human family structures in his mind, until he came to a similar conclusion.

“Exactly! Information only the person you are contacting is likely to know – or figure out. Maybe a reference to another person, or perhaps a ... a random event that only the two of you shared ... something like that. And I think I have the right key to use with my Senior Commander!”

Ronnie stared at him for a few seconds before asking, “How ‘Senior’ is this Commander of yours? Is he just above you, or is he in general command of your fleet, or what?”

“He is S’Kala’Mak 30132 of my warren, and the Commander of my squadron above me. He is a most reliable and trustworthy individual. And his name was not on the list.”

Ronnie thought it through before dipping into Sasha’s mind to confirm a few things.

“Your encryption method; how sure are you that there isn’t, ahh ... an alternate universal key structure built into it?”

“Like all encryption programs, the designers probably did put in a ‘security patch’ to allow them to read the raw data – after a while. If you double the encryption – use two different algorithms and two keys – it would take much longer to decrypt, but the plan I suggest will trigger a rapid response after the decryption.”

“How can you guarantee that?”

“Mostly trust ... and maybe some leverage,” he admitted with a tiny change of hue.



Ronnie read him again and felt the shame and embarrassment, if not the *exact* reference, of what he intended to refer to. It seemed that either Sai had started the blocking lessons, or the Vanir were naturally disposed to block certain subjects – perhaps a by-product of their segmented mind? He let that go and came back on topic.

“What do you intend to say to your Commander?”

“I will warn him about disseminating the information I send him until he has *personally* reviewed all the information thoroughly and contacted me first. Initially, I will advise him of the situation regarding my ... the events on my ship, followed with a review of Sue’s problem and her behavior – both before and after its resolution. Even I noticed a marked difference.

“Then I will send him the list of possible contacts. They are in various positions, but there is a communications route that can bypass all of them. Once he knows that list, we can move quickly to ascertain the most effective way to isolate the risk.”

“Won’t that become rather obvious to everyone involved?”

“He will have to engage the Base Commander at some point – whose name is also not on the list – and deal with them all at once,” Sasha admitted.

‘*Sasha, were you able to identify that one individual I shared with Sally?*’ Sai asked silently.

‘*No. There was not enough information there for us to even determine his warren. Katie identified the other one, and he is on the list*’

Ronnie sat in contemplation for nearly a minute before speaking again.

“Commander, you are the only one here who can make a value judgment of the potential effectiveness of your plan. However, I would like you to run it past Samuel for his evaluation as an experienced Observer. I would also recommend that Sally be included, as she may offer suggestions that could be helpful. I would like to go over your final plan in detail before you encrypt and transmit it to your superiors, if you please,” he said, then stood before turning to Sai.

“Sai, I’d like you to check in with Sue and see how she slept. She had a long shift yesterday and she’s still recovering from that terrible accident,” he said obtusely.

He reached down and terminated the recording before turning back to Sasha.

## Unhide the Past

*‘The recording is available to you, if you wish to include it. You blanked your references to the implants, but I will trust your judgment on the rest of it. One thing to remember is that we do not know who is behind all this. I have my suspicions, but that is all they are – just suspicions. Once we find out for sure, then there are many avenues open to us that I would be very happy to explore with you – with the understanding that both Vanir and Humans stay on friendly terms throughout.’*

He looked up at the ships timer and let out a quiet sigh.

“I believe I have an exercise period scheduled. Perhaps that will help me work out some of this stiffness,” he muttered, before gathering his things and exiting the room – leaving the others behind and looking at each other in confusion over his behavior.

‘*Rondal Caldar seems somewhat out of sorts*’ Samuel observed, and Sally patted his arm.

‘*He’s not been sleeping well*’ Sai mentioned, having caught the comment and concern from his mind. ‘*And he can be very stubborn at times. I should probably order his contentment – if he will accept it. I’ll go and check Sue, and see how she’s recovering today*’ she said, then gathered her things and left.

Samuel turned to Sasha.

“Commander, let’s review your plan in detail. It sounds very intriguing and somewhat dangerous – but we’re *all* in danger, aren’t we?” he said jokingly, but Sally nearly cringed; barely holding back a hue change at his words.

The three of them spent the next half hour going over the plan, with suggestions and observations being offered by both Samuel and Sally.

Katie was content to be sitting beside her nest partner from last night. She considered her youth, and wondered if she should consider mating at such a young age. This business of being a female and ultimately responsible for the welfare of her society promised to be a *huge* burden. She would need some extra hands at some point to help her.

### ***In the Gym***

Ronnie flexed his muscles before lunging at the simulacrum of the Vanir fighter – this time an approximation of Sue – and found himself woefully out of place once again. He scampered back in a rush, while cringing in pain after pulling the same muscle. After more than an hour, he was getting fed up. He just could *not* get his head into the game, and knew it. He halted the simulation, then, after turning away, noticed Petrus had entered the space and been watching him.

"*There* you are, lad, and I must say ... you look like *shit*! If it keeps up, I think Sai will be ordering your contentment any day now ... just a heads up, lad," he said jovially, while getting a daggered look back in return.

"Thanks for the warning, but I already have an appointment with Laisee for later on. I trust you slept the sleep of the *innocent* after Sai drained all the anxiety out of your system?" He killed the simulation and hobbled over towards the wall, where he sat on a bench and focused on his minor injury for several seconds.

"Would that she did, lad, but she was up late talking to 'Ladies in High Places.' Never felt her cuddle up to me until she kicked me out this morning. She's in a state, Ronnie, and not a happy one. What's the problem with *you*? You dance like a raw *recruit*!"

"Oh ... the usual. Too many things on my mind; too little control over the situation. It was all so much easier--"

"When we just poked them with a sword? True, lad, but I don't think we could get them all if we started now and had a *century* to finish the task. Not the way *you're* dancing, for sure. Of course, there's always Plan-B."

"Plan-B?"

"You know ... the one where we go in all sneaky like and eliminate the threats one at a time – or maybe in small groups? Sai mentioned this might be one of those times a plan like that might work. We go in, take out the implants, then see what happens next."

"You make it sound so simple."

"It *is*, lad. We have the means to detect them, and a way to remove them. If I understand Sai correctly, we might get by with just trimming the leads and leaving 'em in there."

Ronnie stared at his friend for several seconds before nodding his head thoughtfully.

"That's quite possibly true. We could have Jaiying do a little remote surgery on the implants and watch the results – or let some of Sasha's friends watch the results. It would be helpful if we could track down who's putting the damn things in there in the *first* place!"

"Tricky thing, that, but it can be done. Like turning on the light and seeing what scurries into the shadows."

Ronnie turned thoughtful again, and noted a few more things for Sasha to consider in the final plan.

## Unhide the Past

Meanwhile, Petrus came up with another issue.

“You do realize the *only* reason Sue is with us today is because her Prime was acting *against* protocol? There’s a very good chance this business goes all the way to the *top*. Or perhaps ... to her *neck*?”

Ronnie turned and stared at him in surprise.

He hadn’t really considered that, then snorted at the likely consequences of *that* particular investigation.

“And what *better* way to endear ourselves to the Vanir by *invading* Vanaheim, *kidnapping* the Prime, and *scanning* her for a chip. And then ... and then we either find it and *remove* it, or *not* find it and discover we’ve either *really* pissed her off, or she’s really a two-faced bitch out for *blood*, and we’ve given her ample reason to drain *ours*?” he described less than calmly.

‘*We no longer drink blood ... in quantities*’ Sally sent.

Both men spun around and stared at her standing casually by the door.

“By the Gods, lass! Wear a *bell* or something!” Petrus exclaimed.

### ***Kantor, The Royal Homestead, A Conference***

‘*That is the plan they’re working with, but it lacks something*’ Jaiying reported.

‘*Elegance!*’ Lili declared; her snort almost audible. ‘*It lacks elegance,, and it needs fleshing out a little more. Jaiying, from where you are, to where the Vanir base is, can you disconnect the fibers remotely?*’

‘*I don’t know, Aunt Lili. I could try*’

‘*It might be better if we focused on following the data packet path to make sure it isn’t intercepted*’ Walter suggested.

‘*It should be easy to block certain operators if it isn’t splattered all over their com bands while it’s being received*’ Josie suggested.

‘*I thought it was supposed to be encrypted?*’ Cathy asked.

‘*It will be – but maybe we could help by distracting those who might be interested in reading it*’ Walter suggested. ‘*Their minds are pretty tight, but if we all gang up on them, we should be able to distract them – even from here*’

‘*What if ... what if we do distract them, but they analyze their minds and figure out what was done to them?*’ Jaiying asked. ‘*Won’t that prompt them to consider working with their minds? Sue hardly needed any help*

*once she learned she could do it. Neither did Samuel or Sally. Katie was just as adaptable, and Sasha ... he figured it out on his own'*

*'And THAT, children, is what your Grandfather is MOST worried about at the moment!'* Lili pressed. *'They currently need but a few adjustments to let them function in mindspeak. It's a wonder they haven't stumbled across it by themselves, but for now, we will advise Sally of these additional options and let her feed it to the men'*

*'So behind every GOOD man...'* Cathy began.

*'Is a BETTER woman...'* Josie continued. *'With her FOOT up his--'*

*'JOSIE!'* Amy shouted silently.

### ***The Kraken, In the Gym***

Ronnie greeted her politely.

*'Hello, Sally. What do you think – check her for chips, then disable them ourselves, or let someone else on Vanaheim try to do it for us?'*

*'It is a delicate problem'* she considered, while slowly walking over to join them. She tucked her data pad under one arm, since she wouldn't need it for this conversation.

*'If humans find a chip, there is the question of did they put it in there for anyone to find ... or is it a sham? If Vanir find a chip ... it is much the same question – although how it got there to begin with then becomes problematic. One could argue it was obviously manufactured by Vanir. I don't believe your Donnel Ardan was in error about that'*

*'No. We have no technology like that. Nor for the tracking implants'* Ronnie admitted.

*'But we would like to learn more about it, if we had something to exchange for it?'* Petrus suggested.

*'Yes. A balance of trade. I think your Lady Lili mentioned it. Now ... I wonder which of Humanity's many capabilities we would be most interested in?'*

Petrus was about to speak up, but Ronnie froze him with a look. Sally ignored the silent byplay while she went on.

*'I suppose we COULD ask for the knowledge of using our minds to communicate ... but I am of the opinion such knowledge in the wrong hands would be of little immediate benefit to the Vanir as a whole. Indeed, it might prove disastrous for our society in the short term'*

*'Really? How so?'* Ronnie casually asked.

## Unhide the Past

*'I look back to my Samuel's reaction to you, Rondal Caldar ... Ronnie'* she corrected herself, while stepping closer to look down at him.

*'I would gauge the reaction of the average Vanir would be to fall into a chaotic state of mind that would require a great deal of personal support to recover from. I believe it was only Samuel's experience, training, and acceptance of humanity to begin with that allowed him to recover as quickly as he did. Along with my help, of course'*

Ronnie noted the statement was offered as a matter of fact and not pride on her part, but that referenced only Samuel's response.

*'The rest of your crew seemed to take it in stride'*

*'The rest of our crew never learned of it. That knowledge was kept from them. All knowledge of Samuel's and my "adjustment" was encrypted and sent by our communications officer without him having knowledge of the contents – much like Sasha intends to do with his Squadron Commander'*

*'Are you in agreement with that plan?'*

*'In principal. There are elements that need careful review'*

She hissed a sigh, before stepping over to the wall and sliding down to settle at the base of it; putting her head at Ronnie's level where he sat on the bench.

*'He does not intend to notify his command of his own adaptation – or Katie's, or the rest of us. I believe he is concerned he will never be allowed to return. He also worries that once a search is begun for victims, those behind it will become alerted and leave the area'*

*'Then you'll need to have elements in place to observe personnel suddenly finding a reason to leave the base'* Petrus said as he came over to join her.

*'Sai has suggested an alert for a bacterial infection that would require screening of all in the area to insure its containment. She said it would be better if a few individuals actually did pick up an infection to trigger the alert'*

Petrus gave out a short laugh.

*'The Healers have done that in the past for very special reasons. If nothing else, it would test the base's response to a biological threat. He could present that to his superiors as a bonus'*

*'I will suggest that to him, Petrus'*

She closed her eyes for a moment, before rejoining them, while Petrus slipped to the floor beside her as Ronnie asked her a question of his own.

*‘Sally, you said that knowledge of mindspeak, and ... and other such gifts should be kept from the Vanir. You use it with us, and I’m assuming you’re using it with Samuel and Sue. I know a different aspect of it is used during Healer training to view inside. Why would you not want the Vanir to have this skill?’*

She gave out a lingering hiss that he recognized as a deep sigh for a Vanir.

*‘Ronnie... The S’Slich’Tah Warren developed the technology to transmit telemetry using sections of the thought bands. This was needed in order to get a reasonable communication speed. Otherwise our observations would be of things that happened years ... even centuries beforehand – if we received any data at all. The advantage of using the thought bands is they are very low power, and nearly instant. You, yourself, can communicate with anyone like you, anywhere in known space – just like your Healer women’*

*‘Our Senior Healers ... that is true’*

*‘If we were to ... if we could read the minds of anyone else, then our privacy would be lost! We could devolve into fear and anger over the possibility of intrusion! It would lead to public unrest, and the toppling of our social structure!’*

Petrus looked up at her and got her attention.

*‘Lass, I almost hate to say this, but the Vanir are so close to working it out by themselves, that it should matter very little – in my opinion. You already have devices using the thought bands, and part of their purpose is to transmit data containing emotional readings from their hosts. The only thing lacking is a willingness to subject someone to the danger of testing the technology for such a function that comes to us naturally ... SOME of us, anyway’*

Sally considered his opinion, while Ronnie offered his own viewpoint.

*‘I suspect someone is already doing research on it’ Ronnie pointed out. ‘We have a new model of implant showing up in nerve bundles, and someone has figured out how to make them, implant them, and program them to affect the Vanir mind. If I were to guess, I would say the same warren that developed the original implants is probably continuing their research, and has produced the ones we are finding now. It’s not that far from merely affecting the mind, to attaching appropriate connections to allow it to communicate silently’*

*‘With instrumentality’ Sally reminded him. ‘The requirement of surgically implanting something like that, would preclude wide-spread adoption of the technology ... speaking for myself, of course’*

## Unhide the Past

*'And if they couldn't shut it off like we do, it would drive people mad'* Petrus considered.

*'Shut it ... you can shut it OFF?'* she asked, seeming surprised at the concept, while Ronnie snapped his head around to look at her.

*'Didn't Sai teach you about blocking stuff, yet? That is one of the FIRST things you need to learn. It doesn't work for everyone, but it's usually necessary to keep you from going insane – and to keep your secrets. I thought SURE I'd told her to'*

*'Sai never ... I wondered how you humans managed to deal with the constant noise in your head. It is better when we are alone in our quarters, but in the commons... I'm constantly picking up random words and phrases from just about everyone – except the Kee, for some reason'*

*'Good luck THAT was'* Petrus snorted at the mere thought of it. *'Having Kiki chatting along incessantly is nothing you want to subject yourself to'*

*'Gods! You weren't there when Déjà and Kiki first MET!'* Ronnie shared, while shaking his head. *'We couldn't get them to shut up!'*

Ronnie sighed and slumped lower, before looking at Sally guiltily.

*'I'm surprised Sai never taught you to block'* he continued. *'With us it's a matter of ... what? Protocol? Etiquette? What would you call it, Four?'*

*'Polite behavior, lad. That's what it is'* he sent, then turned to look up at Sally. *'You're always very polite when you need to ask a question or report anything. The big thing is not constantly sending pointless information to everyone you know. Usually, you set up a schedule to contact someone – unless you need to report an emergency. Here, we need to communicate with you and Samuel, and this is the most efficient way to do it – but we avoid bothering you when you are off doing something else and not dealing directly with us. It is something we've had to learn just to get along with ourselves'*

*'And blocking – that is an effort of will to maintain your thoughts to yourself, and keep others out of your head'* Ronnie added.

*'Eventually, you learn to hold things in subconsciously'* he continued thoughtfully. *'But it can be affected by distractions ... or food or drugs ... or certain fruit juices in the case of Vanir'*

A light dawned in Sally's eyes.

*'Distractions I am familiar with. We used Katie to provide such to Silas'* she said while nodding her head. *'I will need to learn blocking ... if Sai will teach me?'*



## Floyde Leong

*'She should ... or Four can teach you. He can even hold off Lili – sometimes'*

*'Ronnie...' Sally paused for several seconds before asking him outright. 'Is there a way to ... to disable this ability to mindspeak?'*

*'Take it away? Probably. The ... my Senior Staff had to do it to someone whose reason failed, and she became a danger to ... just about everyone. I'm not aware of the details, but I can ask' he shared, gratified that she'd been the one to bring it up.*

He glanced at the ship's timer, then groaned while getting to his feet, before putting his weapon away.

*'Well, I'm told I have another appointment ... this time to have myself "sorted out" or something like that. Please contact me if you need advice, or want comments on that plan you're all working on. I'll see you both later'* he sent, then started to leave, but paused and looked back.

*'Sally, after I first spoke with Samuel, he had a ... he collapsed in distress. Why did Sasha not do the same?'*

*'Sasha is from a military background. It distressed him greatly, but he recovered just as quickly. I watched him – inside his mind. It was most impressive'*

Ronnie nodded twice, adding this new factoid to his knowledge of Vanir psychology. He waved, and turned, heading out the door.

Petrus turned and looked up at Sally with a smile.

"Well, my girl! What would you like to learn *first*?" he cheerfully asked in Vanir.

She looked down at him while considering what she had observed on the security monitor while visiting the bridge earlier. Ronnie had been practicing in the gym – *poorly*, from what she could tell.

"I was led to believe that Rondal Caldar was a great warrior of your people, yet what little I've seen of his skills is sorely lacking. Why is that, Petrus?"

He blinked at her, but thought back to what he'd seen himself just a little while ago. The boy was out of balance, certainly, and he hadn't seen him practice since he'd come aboard, yet they used to spar every day just to keep in shape. He looked a bit older now, too – perhaps in his mid-forties, Earth Relative. It appears that stress ages a man.

"I think the boy has too much on his mind. He needs to get back to basics. Maybe I can have Captain Teldrus approach him and ask for

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lessons for his security team. At least it would let the boy work out some of his frustrations,” he considered aloud.

“Ronnie would ... teach ... others? I don’t see how that would be a very efficient use of his time ... or particularly worthwhile to anyone else.”

He looked at her, and considered a suitable answer for that, but right now, there just wasn’t one. She’d never seen Ronnie in action, and triggering a combat flush in practice was wasteful – you tended to get carried away without your life on the line. Otherwise, he would have danced through that muscle pull painlessly – until it was over.

“Politics was never Ronnie’s strongest area. With everyone aboard, I’m afraid the burden he shoulders is weighing him down. I don’t recall ever having this many crew aboard – passengers, yes, but not crew.”

He neglected to mention Ronnie’s prior position as Captain of the CS *Microcosmus*, but Sally seemed to have accepted it at face value. Her Samuel had faced similar issues, but they were not as debilitating.

“Then he should resume his practice if he will become more ... *stable*?”

“I will take steps to see that he does, my Healer,” he said and nodded his head at her.

She blinked in surprise, then felt a slight flush of ... *pride*? Then it was pushed aside when a segment of her mind finally kicked in to get an answer to a lingering question that was still bugging it.

“Petrus... Petrus, why do some here call you *Four*?” she asked curiously.

### ***On the Way to Being Sorted Out***

Ronnie slowly walked back to his compartment while thinking about what Sally had told them. It was bad enough he was having major doubts about what he’d done to them, but now Sally had voiced concerns it was not a good thing for Vanir as well. He was thinking of a way to exploit that, when he met Laisee headed his way with her guard rolling a narrow cart along behind her. It was much like a large, square suitcase on wheels.

“Ronnie, I’m told you need some attention. From the way you’re walking, I’d say you’ve forgotten all that you were taught back at the Academy,” she chided him cheerfully.

“Now that you mention it, I *could* use a bit of Healing from someone who does it properly,” he said while looking curiously at the cart being trundled along behind her.

They continued to his compartment where he welcomed her in and offered her a cool drink. She declined the drink while she pointed to the spot where she wanted the cart deposited. Once the guard took up his position outside the room, she turned back to Ronnie and accepted the proffered cup of chilled water.

“How about you go in and shower while I set up in here. When you come out, I’ll show you the gift Diane sent me – all the way from Earth.”

He looked at her curiously, but she chased him away and started setting up the portable massage table Diane had imported for her. Diane had already gotten one and let her practice on David with it a few times. She’d voiced an interest in getting one for herself after experiencing how much easier it was to work on someone without having to crawl around on the floor. It had been shipped, along with her belongings, when she and Jaiying transferred to the *Kraken*, and now she was going to break it in with Ronnie.

When he returned naked from his shower, the lights had been dimmed, and she was wearing invitingly little in the way of clothing. She rebuffed him when he reached for her, and instead pointed to the table. Reluctantly, he climbed atop it and lay back, letting her peruse his body from head to toe. A dim glow emanated from her hands as she walked around him – her hands held just above his body and searching out areas needing attention.

He could feel the warmth from them as she moved around him.

“That’s a *new* technique, isn’t it?” he remarked, never having seen it before.

“No, it’s very old. Lili showed it to me. It was used to sense areas that were sore or damaged back before ‘looking within’ became common. You don’t seem to have any damage, but you do have soreness in several muscle groups.”

“Not sleeping well. Fell asleep in my chair the other night.”

“Well, not tonight... And not right now,” she muttered, then gathered up a glob of stiff cream in her hands and rubbed them together briskly. “Right now I’m going to see if I can take care of some of this soreness.”

Matching deed to words, she started spreading the cream on his upper body and began light warming strokes to loosen up his muscles, before digging in and readjusting the internal fibers within them.

At the end of ninety minutes, she had gone over him from head to toe, front and back, and left him a limp imitation of an Imperial warrior who was currently snoring quietly.

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She considered simply leaving him there, but her orders were clear, so she shook him awake – barely – and got him into bed, where she would execute the second part of her treatment plan for the evening ... provided he woke up enough to participate in it, let alone enjoy it.

As it turned out, that little nap he'd taken had done *wonders* for his aches and pains, and he not only participated, but enjoyed it fully, as did she.

Afterwards, they lay together and simply cherished the closeness of their being ... before he asked what he knew was an issue of concern.

“So ... what was the consensus of the Ladies?”

She stifled her snort. Obviously, either he or Petrus were aware of last night's conversation – but she went on as instructed.

“Umm ... that things aren't *nearly* as dire as you fear?” she murmured hopefully. “We ... *all* of us, have talked about it and don't think an extreme measure is called for. Not right away.”

“When you say–”

“Yes. The Vanir as well. Sally and Katie, anyway. Sue is still an unknown to us.”

“Sue might have an opinion of her own. She was training to become the Prime at some point.”

“She's still sorting things out – at a very *rapid* pace, mind you – and Sally feels she'll understand the ramifications of whatever decision Sue makes for herself,” she said quietly, then waited while Ronnie developed his response.

“Sue is ... we *saved* her, Laisee. I don't want to take that away from her. If it means she stays alive on one of the Demon's worlds, then that's what will happen. If she'll accept a life on Kantor – that's even *better* ... although she's been rather *bitchy* lately.”

Laisee laughed quietly, before suggesting an alternate path.

“Or... Or if they can be disabled ... without *harm* to them, of course,” she suggested. “Like the Elder, Lady Ai. She seems quite well ... just a little bit confused. Well, a *lot* confused, but not dangerous any longer, and – and becoming adjusted to her situation. What the children did was ... well, it was *awful*, but it was better than the alternative.”

“Better or worse?” he asked the room. “Life, or a *half*-life of what you were? Or death? I wonder what I would choose if given the offer. Or if I was *forced* to choose?”

She let his feeling of despair wash over her, but it didn't seem as critical as Sai had reported his emotional state was in last night.

"Ronnie, I think that ... if I had to choose to be *silent* all the rest of my days, but still had my *family* around me, then it would take just a moment for me to decide. I would choose my *family*, and accept my silence. Do you not think the Vanir would do the same?"

"Emotionally – from a *human's* point of view – I would have to agree with you. From a *Vanir* point of view? We don't have enough sociological understanding to guess what decision they'd make for themselves – certainly not enough to say Humanity is safe from destruction by the Vanir."

They lay silently for a long while, until finally...

"Ronnie, what would it take to make you feel safe?" she quietly asked him, and he could almost *feel* the expectant void waiting for him to respond, while considering his honest answer during the next several seconds.

"I would like to be sure the Vanir could not ... *would* not prosecute an attack against the Commonwealth or Hegemony. I would like assurances the Vanir would remain *within* their own territories and not interfere with Humanity any longer. I would probably accept Human and Vanir watching posts along both territories ... with *mixed* crews – human and Vanir on the *same* stations."

She turned to him in confusion.

"You would have humans and Vanir working *together*?"

"Maybe even commit to commerce at some point. Look, Samuel and Sally are working together with us now. Granted, we're all on our best behavior right now, but it's no different than having a mixed-race environment on any of the *Commonwealth* worlds..." A flashing thought haunted him for just a moment, before it flittered away.

"Or a mixed-race marriage back on *Earth*, for that matter," he went on. "Laisee, there's a learning curve to be climbed when people from different backgrounds live and work together. If you aren't willing to see and appreciate the perspective of the other person, then you can never become a team. If you work hard and develop an *understanding* of each side's limitations and strengths, then you'll become a *successful* team. Sure, whatever the result is will be completely *new*, but it will *still* contain elements of all sides. Hopefully, you learn to keep the *best* of them, and eliminate the *worst* of them."

## Unhide the Past

### ***Kantor, The Ladies Make a Decision***

*'Do you think Grandfather means it, Aunt Lili?'* Walter asked.

*'Your Grandfather believes in it, truly, Walter. He just worries that things will get out of hand before he can settle things down'* she stated, then switched focus to Radatel; he sitting on the throne of Kantor at the moment. *'Would such be agreeable to you, my Husband?'*

There was a delay in court proceedings while Radatel held up his finger as he perused his data pad vaguely; all the while reviewing what he'd just followed along internally, before giving an answer to Lili.

*'If such were the overall conditions between Vanir and Humanity, then yes, that is a very workable solution. I would not even preclude the possibility of cross-Confederation travel for vacation and business purposes – on dual-crewed ships, of course'* he shared, before returning his attention back to the matter in court.

*'Sally, you have heard our Ronnie's conditions, and heard the acceptance of the Emperor'* Lili stated formally. *'Of course, there are a few issues remaining to be worked out'*

*'I understand, Lady Lili. I will work on my end to guide them into the proper path. Perhaps between us, we may set things right'*

*'Let us hope so. And Sally... You and Samuel ... and Sasha, Katie, Sue, and Silas, are offered asylum with the Royal family if you choose – whether Ronnie lives or dies'*

*'I ... I thank you, Lady Lili'* she sent, before fading away from the conversation.

*'Do you think it will come to that, Aunt Lili?'* Cathy asked.

*'I have seen the results of letting individuals with lesser vision decide important issues. The Vanir suffer from the same curse. If Ronnie is skillful, careful, and VERY lucky, we may all live to see a peaceful resolution to this problem'* she sent, then dropped out to focus once again on the latest reports from the First Tier staff; leaving the children to themselves.

*'What should we do, Walter?'* Josie asked.

*'We'll keep an eye on things and make sure they don't cross the border. If we can't stop the platforms by ourselves, the Bornat ships are all in place and ready'* he reminded them. *'Jaiying, you're with Grandfather. Help him as much as you can'*

*'I will, Walter. I promise'* she said, then they all dropped the conversation; all of them being sleepy this late at night, but still setting aside a part of their subconscious to keep track of things.

***The Kraken, In Ronnie's Compartment***

Laisee had waited while the void first analyzed, and then accepted the challenge he'd presented. Then she relaxed once the void had come to a conclusion and disconnected.

She turned to him with a frown on her face.

"Is this that 'messy person/neat person' analogy again?" she asked nonsensically while looking at him sideways and seeing him yawn, before he ventured an answer.

"It's the Nathan and Dorcas analogy again. Or the Kantite and Balese analogy, or the Bornat and ... and ... uhhh, the Bornat really don't relate to *anyone*, I suppose..." he muttered while drifting off...

"Not any longer," she mumbled, just a *tad* too loud.

"What?"

***December 23, Sasha Makes a Plan***

This morning's meeting was going well. Ronnie had listened attentively, then made a few minor suggestions that Sasha jumped on and included on the spot. The others – Petrus, Sai, Sally, and Samuel – each offered their opinions; and each topic was examined carefully, and a consensus taken, before heading on to the next. Finally, the plan was a "Plan" and ready to go into play.

All it needed was encryption, transmission, and buy in from Sasha's Squadron Commander, whom Sasha swore would be most willing to carry it out once he understood the significance of the issues involved.

Just to be on the safe side, the kids would double-check the intended recipient, and all those who would have a hand in transferring the data packet to him. That would give them a certain level of confidence in what was expected to be a difficult plan to carry out. Before they broke to begin its execution, Sasha formally announced his reassignment to "Observer" status, along with Katie. Ronnie assured him that he and Katie were still welcome, then offered them their choice of available living compartments anywhere aboard the ship, but they declined; stating they were content to share a corridor with the Ambassador. The offer was left open should they change their minds.

As they filed out of the room, Sally lagged behind and reached out silently for Sai to stay with her. As the door closed, leaving them both alone, Sally used her data pad and brought up a few questions over the late night discussion she'd been invited to.

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*'If you focus narrowly, you don't need to worry about spillage' Sai advised her while smiling at Sally's cautiousness. 'But you're right. It would be best not to mention this to Ronnie at the moment. We're still working on easing his fears, and the kids will do everything they can to help him through this'*

*'You will tell us, Sai Tal, if we become ... expendable?'*

Sai appreciated the worried expression in Sally's eyes, but felt it was unjustified – no matter *how* things turned out.

*'Men will do many things out of fear. Ronnie does things, but only out of necessity' she assured her, then explained what he'd done to her daughter to save her from madness over the loss of her children, before continuing with 'I believe that, at MOST, you would wake up one morning, and wonder where you were, and how you got there ... and why all those little Vanir were calling you Mommy'*

Sally's tint changed at that, and Sai reached over and hugged her.

*'Welcome to the family, Sally'*

### ***December 26, Vanir Space, Base 4, The Game is Afoot***

Two nights ago, a crewmember at Base 4 had fallen ill. It was not a specific illness, just a general feeling of indisposition.

By the next morning, that general feeling had become *very* specific, and subsequent tests had discovered the serious possibility that a dangerous bug had gotten loose and not only infected him, but potentially other crew and staff on the base.

By midday, several more crew and support personnel had taken ill and been sequestered into quarantine to further isolate the infection.

As a safety precaution, the base was locked down. A general screening for infection was performed, and inoculations were initiated to contain any possible spread of the disease.

By the end of the week, over thirty individuals had been isolated – a little over one percent of the base's twenty-five hundred complement, and seventeen of them were from Sasha's list. The Base Commander ordered a general news blackout, and covert monitoring of all signals was implemented. This was a protocol in order to control information leaking from the base to unauthorized persons or associations.

In addition to this, Sasha's Squadron Commander had initiated his *own* monitoring and recording of all communications, and even the most trivial of messages were reported to him. The supposition was that *someone* would be contacting whomever ordered the implants, and this



supported efforts to track them down and identify them – Petrus’ act of “shining the light and seeing where the vermin scurry.”

The only exception was the very secret intercept mission that Base 4 had been hosting, where encrypted communications went straight to squadron senior staff for decoding and review privately. The communications staff was very professional, and to their credit, the only fact known by the majority of the base was that a ship was on patrol somewhere out towards the human boundary.

It looked like Sasha had chosen his inside man well. Sasha’s squadron security and medical teams had been covertly infecting both implanted and random crew and staff personnel to force them into quarantine, where they would be held until a special medical team could respond to take over for them. It just remained to be seen if it would flush out their quarry before having to alert the Commander of Base 4 – that officer having been deliberately kept *out* of the loop for this effort.

### ***January 2, 2005, Vanir Space, Base 4, Harsh Decisions***

Nearly a week later, everyone infected seemed to be recovering, albeit slowly, but remained in quarantine. Unfortunately, one of the attending Senior Medical Technicians noted an anomaly in the upper neck area of one of the implant victims and decided to attempt its removal – *despite* never having trained to do such a thing.

Ignoring more junior advice to leave it to the specialists, the Senior Technician pulled that unlucky victim into surgery, but during the course of treatment, he managed to sever several hundred important nerve passages – including ones involving breathing and regulation of the circulatory system. Due to his incompetence, that patient died on the table.

After a quick review, which involved the Base Commander himself, the Senior Medical Technician was found at fault for the death; convicted of medical malpractice for performing a procedure without prior training, skills testing, or proper senior supervision, and then terminated for that failure. It was only after his termination that a routine scan was performed on his body, and *another* implant was detected ... in *his* nexus. This was a surprise to the Base Commander, and led to many questions whose answers he’d not been made privy to.

That discovery sent a ripple through the command staffers, and someone from Sasha’s squadron had foolishly admitted knowledge of such. Subsequently, Sasha’s Squadron Commander had been called to task over it. Explanations had been presented, and although the evidence was sustainable, the actions were deemed borderline questionable and under review.

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Having survived his very intensive question and answer session, S'Kala'Mak 32242 returned to his office and immediately composed and encrypted a message to his clutch mate, S'Kala'Mak 32246 – whom he'd reassigned to special a assignment with the humans for the duration. He got it off as part of a routine update to the intercept mission.

Meanwhile, his staff was left trying to figure out who else might have slipped through the cracks. Another round of scanning had already been started, but now the Base Commander was in the mix. Having reviewed all the material, he was leaning towards a *different* solution to the implant issue.

### *January 3, The Kraken, A Special Meeting*

"I suppose we should be thankful the Base Commander didn't sanction *all* of them on the spot," Sasha muttered. "Presenting our suspicions as you advised is probably the *only* thing that saved them, Samuel."

"Being able to present solid data did not hurt, either," Samuel added. "What I don't understand is why that Medical Technician wasn't picked up by Ronnie's staff?"

"The simple reason is that he just wasn't there until *after* the quarantine was in effect," Sally told them. "The quarantine was meant to keep people from leaving. Not keep people from coming in. After arriving on base, he was in an excellent position to avoid being scanned properly. He would have had access to the scanners and the scanning records. He could have blanked the scanners or simply changed the results with another person, yet he did not – as if he was *personally* unaware of what he'd detected in that person."

"Was there anything special about the person he operated on? Did that person hold any special place of trust on the base?" Samuel asked.

Sasha checked his tablet and confirmed the assignment.

"She worked in the galley ... food preparation. Unless someone was planning to *poison* everyone during one of the meals..." he ended with the Vanir equivalent of a shrug.

"That makes no sense unless *everyone* on the base ate at the same time," Petrus said. "The cooks would be suspect first, followed by whoever was serving food. Did anyone check the girls' kit?" At their confused looks, he added, "Her living quarters, locker, storage spaces," he explained.

"I - I don't know, but I'll request that be done in my next communications," Sasha said. "Maybe it will turn up something."

He turned to his ships tablet and scripted these suggestions for later transmission.

### *In Laisee's Compartment*

Alerted of the Base Commander's intent by Petrus, Ronnie tracked down Jaiying in her quarters, along with Rose, while Laisee was composing something on her keyboard. She was brought up to speed on the problem, and Jaiying readily agreed to work with her Grandfather on this issue.

"We're about ten minutes out, Jaiying. I'd like you to see if you can work down at the filament level on one of those implant victims on the base."

"I'll try, Grandfather," she said, then concentrated on a sleeping Vanir in the quarantine ward. She spent several minutes at it, but finally gave up. "They're just too tiny, Grandfather."

"Jaiying ... Walter was able to see the leads all the way from Kantor, and we were already on the far side of thirty minutes from Earth. Are you saying that Walter can see things better than *you* can, even though you're much closer? Isn't this like disarming the implanted bombs? You were further away the first time you did that successfully."

"No-o-o ... I just ... I don't want to hurt anyone, Grandfather. The filaments are very tiny, and ... and I can't be sure I won't hurt anybody."

Ronnie was getting frustrated, but continued to press her lightly.

"Jaiying, you can see the leads, and you know how fragile they are. I'm not asking you to *remove* the implant. I just want you to try to sever the filaments. It should be enough to eliminate their threat, and they can be removed later."

"Are you sure, Grandfather?"

"We need to help the Vanir quickly. Please try, Jaiying. Try it on just one person and we'll see how it goes."

She hugged him before closing her eyes, and he went out with her this time and marveled at the speed and clarity of her search for a sleeping victim. He watched as a fuzzy image of an implant suddenly came into sharp focus, then froze as she began severing the filament leads that attached it to various nerve tendrils in the Vanir's nexus.

Most of it was done thirteen minutes later, but she pulled back to pause at the face of the victim, before pulling all the way back to the *Kraken*.

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"I'm sorry, Grandfather."

"It's all right, Jaiying. You did just fine. I know you tried your best," he assured her, before switching focus.

*'Sally, a moment of your time, please?'*

*'Yes, Ronnie?'*

*'I have asked Jaiying to sever the filaments in one of the victims in quarantine. It was not entirely successful. This is his face. Can you place him?'* he sent, while sharing the image from his mind.

*'I ... yes. He worked in base security'* she confirmed after a quick consultation with Sasha. *'We still don't know if it will take, Ronnie'*

*'I understand, but with the Base Commander thinking of wholesale terminations, I wanted to give this a try. If the leads grow back, then we will have to do it in person, and yank out the implant at the same time. In the meantime, you might have them isolate this individual and question him when he wakes up. We may have restored some of his free will'*

*'I will inform Sasha, Ronnie. Thank you'* she sent, then immediately dropped out.

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

"Sasha, Ronnie has worked with Jaiying to partially disable one of the implants from here. Number twelve on the list. He suggests he be placed in solitary quarters and questioned upon awakening."

"Sally, there is no one who can really--"

"A Senior Medical Technician is *quite* capable of working with mind injuries! Even with the implant only partially disabled, she should have the opportunity to work with him and try to discover what his difficulty was!"

Sasha typed on his ship's tablet and scripted an addition to his notes, before encrypting them for transmission to his Squadron Commander. He sent it out through a link from Ronnie's com system back to his ship for relay to Base 4.

Maybe it would help, maybe not. What they *really* needed was a way to recover the implant victims, but he hadn't yet figured out how.

### ***A Walk-About in the Corridors***

Sue and Silas were walking around the ship together while catching up and talking about their ordeals. Aside from his astonishment at her death and resurrection – courtesy of the *humans* – he was also torn with

guilt over telling his commander that she and the ship she was on was to be destroyed. Understanding and acceptance had been the surprising response from her.

She did not seem to blame him, and he questioned again how his reasoning could have become so distorted; but her answer was not reassuring.

"It is easy, Silas. Someone, or more likely, some *group* is behind my implant and yours. There are factions on Vanaheim that do not agree with the Prime, and this seems to be a response to that."

"A Vanir would go so far to bring down the *Grandmother*?"

"And use humans as the excuse to do so," she muttered, then fell silent as they continued their slow walk. She was rolling things around her segments; finding connections, before discarding them, and making new ones.

*None* of them seemed reasonable – in a *normal* warren – but the circumstances they found themselves in proved otherwise.

"Silas ... I was dead," she said quietly as they walked along, then turned down another corridor. "I was dead ... and the humans ... they brought me back..."

She paused while the enormity of that fact finally triggered an unfamiliar response within her segments.

"*H-he* brought me back. I *felt* him. I felt him give me some of his *life*..." She stopped and looked up at him. "H-He did not have to *do* so, Silas!"

He was listening to her and following her words, but a good portion of his mind warmed every time she called him Silas. He was startled by that, but shelved it for the moment while rejoining the conversation.

"S'Ahi'Ma 42491 ... they're *humans*. No one really knows *why* they do what they do. We've been watching them for millennia, and we *still* don't understand them."

She turned and reached out to grab him by both arms.

"Don't you *see*? That's the *point*, Silas! We don't really know *anything* about the humans, and they ... they cared enough to bring me *back* ... and even the *Kee*..." She stopped and began to shudder, and he reached out and drew her to him, before hugging her firmly.

"It is all right S'Ahi'Ma 42491. You are safe now. I will stay with you, S'Ahi'Ma 42491. I'll stay with you as long as you want ... Sue," he

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murmured to her; then something snapped within her and her eyes began to water.

Tears continued to drain down her face, and she almost panicked – thinking she'd sprung a leak somehow. A small portion of her mind connected her to the memory of one of the humans doing the same thing during a fit of crisis that had lasted for several minutes until sanity was restored – or she'd run out of tears. That memory was then shared among *all* her segments, and a *frightening* conclusion was reached.

"Oh... Oh Silas! I can *never* go home again! The humans ... they've *infected me!*" she said in a quavering voice, and fearfully backed away from him.

### *In Another Corridor...*

Sally had found Samuel at the commons, and they were heading back towards their quarters when they heard Vanir voices echoing around the next turn. They both stopped and listened quietly while Sue drove herself into crisis; Sally smiling knowingly when she heard and felt Silas' response to Sue. Samuel was startled when Sue made her declaration of infection, and Sally rushed around the turn to see them both standing against the walls at either side of the corridor.

Sally quickly approached, and ignoring Sue's raised arms, went over and through her thoroughly, but found nothing out of sorts. She lightly dipped into her mind and felt the issue dancing about, before relaxing with a light Vanir hiss of derision – *very* light, for Sue was indeed distraught.

"*Samuel!*" she called out loudly. "We've got another infected *Vanir* here!"

'*She believes she has been substantially changed since Rondal Caldar brought her back to life. She thinks she is no longer purely Vanir*' she sent privately.

'*Is that all?*' he replied with the Vanir equivalent of a silent chuckle as he made his way around the bend.

"Children," he muttered quietly when Sue came within sight of him.

"*Sue!* You look ... are those *ears* growing from your aural orifices?" he asked with a shocked glance.

She quickly raised her hands and felt around her head, but found nothing. It took just a fraction of a moment more to realize he was mocking her, and her anger flared.

“Ahhh, now *there’s* the young Prime-in-Training we’ve come to know and avoid!” he said, then watched as her anger faded slightly when she crossed her arms in a purely human gesture.

She caught herself at it and dropped her arms to her sides ... but raised them back up and defiantly crossed them again. It felt *better* somehow. It felt *right* for what she was feeling.

“Come along, children,” Sally chided both of them. “We seek the wisdom of youth – perhaps even the wisdom of a Prime-in-Training. There is a problem involving Vanir lives and how best to save them. Time is becoming critical, as well.”

“Yes. Perhaps a *fresh* perspective may provide a solution,” Samuel agreed as he gestured towards the Vanir corridor and guided the small group along.

‘*We will pursue your feelings at a later time, Sue*’ Sally promised her silently, but got a glare back in return.

They continued on and through the Vanir corridor while talking about the situation back on the base. Silas was distraught at the reasoning of the Base Commander, and Sue believed that only the humans could save them – and only in *person* – but didn’t see how that could happen if they had to be on the base and in the base clinic to do it. They walked through their corridor and continued through to the docking bay access door. Their sibilant voices echoed throughout the open space as they ran through their options, but there didn’t seem to be any good solution to their problem.

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Petrus was planning on letting off some tension with an exercise session, but paused at the door when he discovered the docking bay was crawling with Vanir. He thought about the Vanir impression of humans and almost decided to cancel, but reconsidered. Since they already knew, it should not make that much of a difference. Besides, they wouldn’t have to watch. He entered the space and called out a greeting.

“Ambassador ... Mistress Sally ... Sue ... Silas,” he greeted each politely in Vanir. “What brings you to the docking bay? Not going to take one of the transports out for a *ride*, are you?”

Silas looked around quickly and almost guiltily.

“N-No ... we were just ... we were...” Silas fumbled his words, and Sue stepped in to explain.

“The Ambassador has asked for our input on the current problem. We are finding it somewhat difficult to resolve.”

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Petrus already knew which particular problem they were dealing with, and nodded his head.

"I agree. We cannot land and access the clinic without causing all kinds of problems, and you can't exactly ship your victims to somewhere else. Too bad you don't have a portable medical center. The *Microcosmus* would do, but he's still back in Commonwealth space."

"That would be *too* much to ask for," Sally said. "I've seen the facilities and they are very nice, but we don't need *nearly* that much space."

"No, I suppose not," Petrus agreed, then noticed Silas staring at the ex-Drecks transport.

He watched as Silas approached and slowly walked around it – touching it here and there, and running his hands along its lines.

"You'll have to save up a long time to *buy* one, lad," he called out.

"I - I ... no. I was just thinking..." He glanced at Petrus, but turned back to the transport. "This is about the same size as a medical transport ... or a field hospital. A little bigger, perhaps."

He looked back at Petrus and the rest.

"It has similar lines. We don't engage in battles, but with humans on our borders..."

"Better to be prepared than caught with your ... facilities lacking," Petrus finished adroitly, quickly adjusting for the fact that Vanir didn't *wear* pants ... or any *other* clothing for that matter.

"Yes. We don't have one at the base, but there is one at the next echelon. I handled reports of supplies and facilities at one time. We'd have to figure out a way to get them to issue it to us, although it would probably take too much time."

Petrus thought that through, then smiled.

"Well, the lad be a *devious* sort, Samuel. I *like* that in a man!"

He chuckled as a *new* plan came to mind.

'*Ronnie, are you up for a little diversion?*'

'*Oh Gods! YES! What have you got in mind?*' was heard by all.

'*Meet us on the docking bay. Silas has a plan ... or the start of one*'

'*On the way!*'

"Ronnie's a comin'. I think he's gonna *enjoy* this. Samuel, would you please ask Sasha to join us?"

In short order, the nefarious scheme was coming together and everyone was feeling good about it – except for Sasha. He left the planning session wondering if Ronnie would put in a mud bath for him if they made it back to Kantor alive.

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While Sasha's ground man at Base 4 was running interference, it took all of that day and most of the night to get the transport converted into a Vanir MEDPOD – or the equivalent of an Imperial Field Medical Transport that *looked* like a Vanir MEDPOD.

Ronnie took turns with Sai and Petrus manning the *Kraken's* con, while the Drecks and Sasha worked on converting the large transport into a faux MEDPOD. They were augmented by Sally and Katie for their medical knowledge of such things, and helped along by a small team headed by Donnel.

A partition had been fabricated and put in place to separate the transport con from the rest of the interior space. All of the remaining seating had been removed, and improvised accommodations had been added to give the appearance of a MEDPOD ... *sort of*. Only Katie and Sally had ever seen the inside of one in person, and they were making it up based on their memories of such, along with images Sasha had pulled down from his cruiser's records. While that was being done, they still needed to do something about the exterior.

Instead of using paint – of which they had very little – Petrus gave Donnel copies of the exterior color scheme provided by Sasha. From that, he was able to program the cloaking system to emulate the colors, patterns, and markings of a non-descript Vanir MEDPOD that had been not-*quite*-neglected, but still showed some areas of the hull that were smudged just a bit – including the serial numbers. As long as no one looked at it too hard while it was on the ground, it could probably pass.

Crewing for the event was the tough decision. Of them all, only Ronnie, Petrus, Sai, and her boys had the requisite experience for performing the sneaky act of subterfuge they were attempting. Petrus was considered the best choice for transport pilot since he now spoke fluent Vanir and could probably pull it off if coached by Sasha during approach and landing.

Between Sai and Ronnie, the issue was who was going to become the medical “assistant” to their Vanir *specialist* – Jaiying – and who was going to fly cover for the mission. In the end, Sai's skill at Healing won out over Ronnie's usual ham-fistedness, and he was stuck flying cover in the *Kraken's Child* for the duration. Jaiying's *direct* involvement was something he'd fought valiantly against, but lost out when overruled by

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*Laisee* of all people. Her argument had been simple; Jaiying could do things that neither Sai nor Ronnie could do, and do them quickly.

The fact that this was *probably* going to become a recovery operation, as in bringing the patients back here to the *Kraken*, didn't soften her resolve. Jaiying was going along at *Laisee's* insistence.

The approval from Jaiying's guard contingent was another matter until it was pointed out that both Petrus and Sai were *more* than adequate protection, given they were both in active service with the Madman during the events at the Fringe over a hundred years ago. The head of security had reluctantly agreed that facing off with either of them in the gym to prove their worthiness was probably pointless.

Logistically, Torga would helm the *Kraken*, with Endo and Gallus as backup, and if things turned *really* sour, he would turn tail for the Commonwealth at the best, vomit-producing jump cycles necessary to return the rest of the crew and staff to safety.

That left an actual, *physical* representative for the Vanir to meet and speak with, and Sally was chosen for that task in a subordinate role to Sasha's MEDPOD Commander position. She was already a Senior Medical Technician, and familiar with the procedures and policies that would need to be addressed, and as Sasha had already discovered, she wasn't afraid of putting a little fear into any male that tried to disregard her.

### *January 4, The Curtain Goes Up*

Finally geared up and ready to go, they launched on their mercy flight.

They were attached to the *Kraken's Child* by his tightened shields and made several gut-wrenching jumps to reach the appropriate approach vector – supposedly from another Vanir support base. Once there, they reported their approach, and entered a parking orbit above Base 4. Ronnie separated the cloaked *Kraken's Child* from the transport, while Sasha used the faked authorizations his Squadron Commander had forged for them and gotten them clearance to land at the base before they dropped down near the base clinic – being on the ground less than an hour after they'd left the *Kraken*.

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"We will be expecting delivery of our patients shortly. MEDPOD out," Sasha spoke firmly to the base coms officer.

The circuit went dead, and Petrus set it for monitor only. They both sat back and relaxed for the moment; still tucked safely inside the fake MEDPOD currently parked on the emergency landing pad next to the base medical facility...

It was a little crowded in the smaller con area, but they'd all squished in there: Petrus, Sasha, Sally, Jaiying, and Sai. The limited amount of "medical equipment" in the back of the MEDPOD was mostly for show, as they expected to receive sixteen victims on transport gurneys that would simply be strapped in place before they launched.

The jumps had sickened them, but got them there quickly. Jaiying was able to take comfort in Sai's milk, but Sasha and Sally declined to partake of it, along with Petrus. During their delay in orbit, Sasha spent several precious minutes talking directly to the Base Commander on a clear voice channel about delaying the victim terminations until they could arrive and recover them for *proper study – alive and intact* – as per his supposed orders from the upper echelon. He'd also encrypted and sent a message to his Squadron Commander.

Now all that was left was the waiting, and the Vanir began preparing for the occasion...

"Stay here, Petrus. With any luck, we should be in and out in less than two hours. Hopefully, my Squadron Commander got the message," Sasha said.

"What if they call? About food, fuel ... that sort of thing?"

"Advise them you have to consult with the MEDPOD commander. As we are keeping to 'quarantine protocols', the only persons coming aboard should be the gurney bearers who will be in biohazard suits, as will Sally and I. With any luck at all, no one else will want to come aboard with the 'infected' victims and we can simply leave at that point."

"The Base Commander sounded very upset. Do you think he'll give us a bunch of dead bodies?"

"That's why I sent it clear. Hopefully, he'll have to stay their execution until he can explain it to whomever he reports to – and before he finds out our authorization is false. Fortunate that, having Sally aboard to show us how to take advantage of weaknesses in the command structure."

"Ha! That's only *half* his problems. Ronnie is really pissed right now. If this goes bad, he's got a load of nasty stuff up in the *Kraken's Child*," he reminded him, triggering a panicked outburst from Sasha.

"He promised this would be a simple *retrieval* operation!"

"That was before the Base Commander decided to terminate everyone implanted. If they refuse to hand over the implant victims, there's no telling *what* he might do if he thought any of us was in danger."

"Jaiying, you mean–"

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"I mean *any* of us – you and Sally included. Like it or not, you and Sally are *family* now. If your guy decides to make life difficult for us, there *will* be repercussions."

"He would *do* this? He would *risk*–"

"Family, Commonwealth... Yeah, he would do it ... or something *else* that maybe wasn't so bad, but it won't leave your Base Commander with any happy feelings towards humans. Tell whatever lies you have to, Sasha, but make 'em good. The less Ronnie interferes with anyone, the better ... and I think you know what I mean."

Sasha considered that, while thinking about what he and Sally had discussed over the last several days. That whole episode with Ronnie's first interaction with Samuel at Station 27 had been very benign in comparison. He'd gone in and learned all that he could about Samuel before ever attempting to contact him ... *modifying* his mind in the process to facilitate that contact. He'd done so with Sally and Sue. No ... *Jaiying* had done that to Sue. As for his decades of actions against the *Drecks* ... he shuddered for just a moment, but overcame it just as quickly. Now was *not* the time...

Sasha got up and joined Sally in the rear compartment, before donning his biohazard suit to match hers. They were still going with the fabrication of dealing with a biologically infectious outbreak that coincided with the fiction the Base Commander had continued to propagate. As it was, the infections were all under control, but all of the victims, implanted, or not, were still in quarantine for "observation" just to keep any groundside observers confused.

Ideally, a selection of victims would soon be wheeled out in bio-containment travelers, hauled aboard the MEDPOD, and strapped in place. Once they had the sixteen Vanir aboard, they would simply leave and return to the "upper echelon base" for further evaluation of the "outbreak."

Looking at an external monitor, they saw an angry-looking Vanir walking stiffly towards the forward airlock of the transport. Once he reached it, he began looking in vain for an intercom toggle, so Sasha reluctantly opened the inner and outer airlock doors to face the wrath of the Base Commander.

The Kraken's Child, Close By

Ronnie was sitting tight just a few thousand feet above the transport. This being a military spaceport, there was no air traffic to speak of, and what little of it there was, followed definite transit lanes well away from the medical facilities. His cloak and shield were up, and as long as he didn't occlude anything with notable detail, he would be all right for the

time being. He still wisely refrained from making any *wishes* to that effect.

‘Sai, what’s going on?’

‘Not quite sure. Sasha is back there arguing with someone. Sally says it’s the Base Commander. He wants us to lift this “pathetic piece of hardware” off his emergency landing pad and take it to the other side of the base. He’s going to terminate the implant victims anyway and give us the bodies. Says it’s the only way to be sure’ she reported, before pausing to listen a bit more.

‘Sally’s telling him she’s been ordered to recover all of them intact for further investigation ... going to try to remove the implants to see if they can trace their origin. He’s really being a jerk about it’

She listened a bit longer.

‘He’s not giving up. Says to move it or he’ll have it moved. He’s really getting ... not angry, but more ... insistent’

‘Is he implanted?’ Ronnie asked.

‘What? You think he’s been implanted in the time we’ve been–’

‘Check him ... humor me’

A moment later, she called back.

‘He’s clean, Ronnie. Oh-oh, here comes someone else ... he’s clean, too’

While things were heating up below, Ronnie sat here and fumed. He was trying to locate the implant victims, but having little luck in doing so. Giving up, he reached down and delicately inserted himself into the mind of Sasha, which got him a look at the argumentative Commander. From there, he slipped into the Commander’s mind to find their location, but then discovered what might be *another* little problem.

‘Get him inside, Sally! Get him inside and let Jaiying touch him! Sally – get the Commander inside so Jaiying can touch him! It’s important!’ he called out, before contacting Jaiying directly.

Base 4, The MEDPOD

‘Sasha, Ronnie says Jaiying needs to touch him! Right now!’ Sally sent, just before Sasha’s Squadron Commander showed up.

Sai watched on the monitor while the argument continued, until the new arrival suddenly shoved the Base Commander hard in the back. Caught by surprise, he fell forward into the MEDPOD, where both Sasha and Sally jumped him.

Unhide the Past

While the newcomer stayed by the door and effectively blocked the view, Sasha and Sally struggled with the Commander until Jaiying wiggled out of Sai's grasp and squeezed through the partition door. Once she was able to reach out and touch him, he fell limp and unresponsive to the deck. Jaiying scurried back to the shelter of the forward compartment, but not before smiling and waving at a very surprised Squadron Commander.

S'Kala'Mak 32242 froze in shock, but recovered quickly. His clutch mate, S'Kala'Mak 32246, had told him he had gone through some changes, but telling him to shove the S'Shala'Doc through the door was certainly unexpected. His voice had sounded really strange, too. As for the tiny, fuzzy thing that had smiled and waved at him ... well, wasn't that the cutest little thing *ever*!

He finally came to his senses, then grabbed the S'Shala'Doc's legs to help stuff him all the way into the MEDPOD before climbing aboard himself.

"Is he still alive?" he asked, while looking warily at both Sasha and Sally in their biohazard suits.

Sally pulled her headpiece off and bent down to examine the Base Commander; an S'Shala'Doc from his coloring. In addition, she was searching within and seeking what Ronnie had obviously had Jaiying look for but didn't find anything out of the ordinary.

"He's alive. Alive and healthy, and ... and we think he may have a connection to the problems on the base. I can't really explain why."

"Is he implanted?" Sasha asked after having pulled off his headpiece as well.

"I can't tell for sure. I need Sai to look. His mind is confused. I don't think—"

Sally was stopped by the sight of Jaiying standing near by.

"Someone has been telling him bad things about us," said a high-pitched Vanir voice coming from about knee height right behind S'Kala'Mak 32242. "He thinks he is protecting the Vanir, but he doesn't really understand it's the *Prime* who's in danger. He's been talking to someone..." she reached through him and caught the name, "...someone named S'Slich'Tah 29531."

"The S'Slich'Tah Warren Leader! She is in custody at the *Capitol*!" S'Kala'Mak 32242 said in a hush.

"You'd think they would keep her in solitude. I thought they would terminate her," Sally considered calmly.

“Oh, a whole *new* outlook from the Prime. Very ... *progressive*,” S’Kala’Mak 32242 said with a hint of disgust. “Senior Medical Technician, do you have the means to scan for implants aboard?”

Jaiying bent over and touched the S’Shala’Doc again. A tiny bit of glow emanated from her hand, and flowed over his body for a few moments before fading away.

“I found nothing in there. I think he is simply misguided. Sally, he is Vanir. How will you handle this?” she asked in her tiny voice, while ignoring the two males in the room.

S’Kala’Mak 32242 was affronted at being ignored, then astonished when Jaiying calmly reached up and grasped his hand. He almost wrenched it out of her fingers, but Sasha gestured negation to him. When nothing bad happened, he relaxed and noted the warmth and texture of her fingers in his.

“S’Kala’Mak 32242, has the S’Shala’Doc’s behavior been questionable of late?” Sally asked.

“No. He has always been professional – as is his entire warren. A little reclusive, perhaps. My apologies for my tardiness, Kala 32246, but there is a reason. I kept my communications personnel monitoring message traffic. They noted irregular communications from S’Shala’Doc 30118...” he said, pausing to gesture at the inert body on the deck, “...to an unidentified recipient. As a matter of course, it was encrypted. With a great deal of effort, my staff finally decrypted it and discovered he’s been taking orders from *outside* the command structure.”

“That’s ... not ... good,” Sasha muttered slowly. “That’s grounds for *censure*.”

“If not worse,” S’Kala’Mak 32242 agreed, while still holding onto Jaiying’s hand.

Sally glanced over and noticed Jaiying was sending a calming glow up his arm. They both smiled at each other in secret, then Sally looked down at the S’Shala’Doc, and said, “We can’t leave him lying there. Let’s get him up on an examination pad.”

Putting action to words, she squatted down, and with Sasha’s help, got his body stretched out more or less comfortably. At least he wasn’t under foot any longer.

Sally checked the scrapes and bumps, and out of habit, got a cleaning wipe and some wash for his wounds, before treating them, just as Sai entered the compartment.

‘*Jaiying, are you all right?*’

Unhide the Past

‘Yes, Grandmother. I’m keeping S’Kala’Mak 32242 company while we figure out what to do with the Base Commander’

‘Is he still alive?’ Ronnie asked.

‘Yes, Ronnie!’ Sai blurted angrily. *‘He’s still alive – and you didn’t have to expose Jaiying like that! You could have asked ME to do it!’*

‘Yes, I COULD have. But I knew Jaiying wouldn’t have ARGUED with me about it. What does Sally plan to do with him?’

‘Don’t know yet!’ she sent angrily, then watched as Sally worked.

A smirk came to her lips, and she crossed her arms in an exaggerated fashion while waiting for Sally to notice her. When that was not forthcoming, she brought the issue up.

‘Tell me, Healer Sally, are you going to take all DAY doing that?’

Sally looked up and stared at her blankly while trying to figure out what Sai was talking about. Then she let out an embarrassed hiss, set down the wash, and tossed the wipe on top of it, before reaching out to Heal the unconscious Commander’s damage.

To S’Kala’Mak 32242’s further astonishment, the scrapes sealed, and the bumps flattened out, but the epidermis looked different.

“Umm, Sally ... is that supposed to wash off like that?” Jaiying asked while pointing her finger at the wipe.

They all looked at the thin hint of green hue on the wipe, then Sally looked closer at the S’Shala’Doc – or *whatever* he really was. She opened cabinets and found a bottle of solvent, then splashed some on a clean wipe and started wiping the S’Shala’Doc again; leaving wide streaks of a *different* color pattern under what appeared to be a cosmetic coating over his body.

The just-Healed area washed cleaner, and further exposure matched the repaired area of skin.

It was a very short leap to determine that S’Shala’Doc 30118 was *not* who he said he was. The Squadron Commander pulled a communicator off his kit and sent orders to track down a member of S’Shala’Doc Warren and have him *immediately* brought to the MEDPOD – under *escort* if necessary.

After that, he sent another message to have the implant victims removed from quarantine and brought to the MEDPOD for immediate transfer. He also requested an additional transport gurney to carry away the Base Commander, who seemed to be coming down with the infection himself and needed an immediate inoculation booster.

As soon as that was accomplished, his communicator chirped at him, and he listened attentively. He glanced down at the humans – *Yes! Real Live Humans!* – and closed his communicator.

“Kala 32246, things are going to start happening down here fast. Get your humans out of sight, and get the implanted ones strapped down as soon as they arrive. I’ll see if I can delay any pursuit, but I’m pretty sure things will become a bit confused for a while once it’s known that S’Shala’Doc 30118 is ... ‘infected’.”

S’Kala’Mak 32242 looked at the dirty wipe, then picked it up and tentatively ran his finger over it ... leaving a stain of tint behind on his fingertip. “After they find out about *this*, it will probably get *crazy*,” he muttered.

“Thank you for trusting me, Kala 32242. We hope to protect the Prime and keep the peace between Vanir and humans. You have well repaid your honor debt to me,” Sasha said.

“I’ll do what I– Here comes your cargo,” he said after glancing out the door.

Sally ran back to open the main cargo door in the rear of the MEDPOD, while S’Kala’Mak 32242 took another look at Jaiying and Sai, before leaving the transport to meet with a contingent of his own squadron guards. He was still issuing orders, while Sasha closed the airlock and went back to direct the loading of the implant victims.

Since they’d all been sedated prior to their scheduled termination – the Vanir not being unnecessarily cruel – the loading of the sixteen victims went rather fast. They got them locked down and ready to go in less than half an hour. The Base Commander had been transferred to a transport gurney, strapped in place, and was ready to be wheeled away by the squadron’s guardsmen.

Sally sealed the hatch, and Sasha went forward to help Petrus with the exit protocols.

Aboard the Kraken’s Child

Ronnie was still fretting at high guard. He would rather be down there in the mix of things, but knew this was where he was better suited. He didn’t have to like it, though.

He started picking up emissions of stress, which were followed by *distress*. Parts of the base were becoming panicked, and rumors had probably already started based on partial information leaking out from both casual and involved observers – whether true or not. He kept his sensors open to engine emissions, and picked up the first one while

Unhide the Past

Petrus was still trying to negotiate a departure vector from the base, but *not* getting it.

‘What’s the hold up down there?’ he called down to Petrus.

‘Departure hold. Looks like the base is going on alert’ he said, and Ronnie could hear through him the angry sibilants coming from Sasha as he communicated with flight control personnel.

Ronnie was picking up more engine emissions and wondering which part of their plan covered this, when Jaiying contacted him.

‘Grandfather, the Base Commander intended to kill the implanted ones, but he also planned to destroy our transport after we launched’

‘Understood, Jaiying. Tell that to everyone aboard’

He continued marking engine emissions and feeding them into his targeting computer.

“Not the best solution, but if they really want to play...” he muttered aloud, but then thought of an even *better* diversion.

‘Petrus, switch on your cloak just prior to launch! Once airborne, run a defensive withdrawal pattern AWAY from me, and make best headway back to the Kraken’

‘I hear, Ronnie. We’re ready’

‘Tell me when you’re clear. I’m installing a hole where the emergency pad is, then running cover for you’

Ronnie loaded a number two round into his main weapon and began rotating the ship to align the *Kraken’s Child* with his new first target.

Base 4, The MEDPOD

“AW, CRAP!” Petrus said loudly, then checked the surrounding pad for stragglers; thankfully not seeing any.

‘Hang on, everyone!’ he pushed out, then triggered the cloak, and immediately raised ship diagonally away from Ronnie’s approach vector.

‘Clear, Ronnie’

‘Incoming!’

Half a second later, an explosion typical of an overloaded converter rocked the base. It was not a regular event by any means, but devastating to the ship it happened to. Ground observers had little to report, other than one moment the MEDPOD was there, and the next

moment it had exploded and left a depression in the emergency pad several feet deep.

'That should hold them until they figure out why there's no debris' Ronnie sent to all of them, and it took a moment for Sasha's dread to creep over him.

'What did you just do, Ronnie?'

'For the sake of argument, I've just granted the Commander's wishes and terminated the implant victims. We'll figure out what to do with them later. Jaiying, did you get much from his mind?'

'Yes, Grandfather. I don't think he was a bad man, but he seemed very determined to keep us from helping the people in the rear compartment'

'Jaiying, I want you to show Sally and Sasha everything you pulled from his head. EVERYTHING – no matter HOW trivial. Sally ... Sasha, I want you to go over everything Jaiying shows you and see if you can find our next link up the chain'

'Yes, Grandfather'

'Certainly, Ronnie' Sally sent.

'Sai, I want you to scan the people in the back and confirm they all have implants' he sent, and then thought of something else. *'Check for ALL kinds of implants; brain, nerve, trackers, bombs ... whatever. I don't want them following you home'*

'I'll let you know' she replied, and he turned his attention back to what was going on below him.

He felt things were starting to heat up sharply, and the first ship's emissions peaked less than a minute later. He backed in the opposite direction so he could keep watch for pursuit and plan his next move.

"Too bad it's still daylight down there," he muttered, then watched from three-thousand meters when the first ship launched. He immediately pulled back to sub-orbit and tracked the newcomer ... and the next three that joined it.

"What in the world are they *doing?*" he murmured to himself as he watched them take up random positions over the base, but held them.

He reached out delicately, but only caught flashes of impressions from the minds of the ship commanders. Apparently, they currently lacked orders of any note.

'Ronnie, one of the guys back there has a second implant – a bomb. Jaiying says it's special – not like the other ones' Sai reported.

Unhide the Past

“Wonderful,” he muttered loudly, then sent *‘Leave it in there! Do NOT try to remove it! Petrus, stay away from the Kraken! Everyone don ship suits! Get that guy into a ship suit – use one of the Drecks-sized ones! Get ready to dump him out the airlock!’*

‘You’re not just going to–’

‘JUST DO IT, SAI – ALL OF YOU!’ he sent forcefully, and watched as first one, and then the other three ships nosed around and started following in the direction of the fake MEDPOD.

‘Petrus, you have a tail on you. Micro-jumps at your discretion, but I don’t know how far away they can be and still set off that bomb. Don’t let them get any closer!’

‘On it, Ron ... nie!’ he heard, and noted the shift as Petrus didn’t waste any time jumping.

He reached out tentatively and tried to pick the brains of the first ship’s complement, but wasn’t getting anywhere other than farther behind, so he rotated the *Kraken’s Child* and joined the pursuit.

He couldn’t allow them to reach the MEDPOD – *or the Kraken* – and *whatever* it took, he’d make sure it didn’t happen.

On the MEDPOD

Sai was helping Jaiying into her small ship suit. Sasha and Sally were in the back and struggling to get the targeted Vanir into a too-big, Drecks ship suit, but the amount of urgency involved seemed excessive to Sasha.

*“Is he *really* going to have us just throw him outside?”*

*“The implanted bombs of the S’Slich’Tah have a very low yield – only a few hundred tons at most. Outside is *still* too close for me,”* she muttered.

Sasha lurched back from her in shock before leaning down and grasping the suit; urging her to, *“Help me get his legs in here!”*

The Kraken’s Child

Ronnie was catching up to the pursuers and planning his next move. He reached out again and searched for any information about the implant, the bomb, or how they were going to handle the intercept. From what little he caught, it appeared they were merely following the track and waiting for it to lead them to either the MEDPOD or the debris from it.

There didn’t seem to be anything onboard to detonate it remotely – just trackers to follow it. He caught the thought from one commander’s

mind that this could lead them to the base of the saboteurs who'd spread the biological agent at the base.

"Okay. I suppose that sounds reasonable," he muttered to himself.

After poking around a bit more and not finding anything else useful, he thought about what he could do now. Maybe some more sabotage, or perhaps a wild goose chase?

Vanir Interceptor 17

Sub-Commander S'Shala'Doc 39842 of the lead pursuit ship was chafing at his station...

The Sub-Commander had been detained by two S'Kala'Mak guardsmen and taken by ground transport over to the Medical Center for something involving the Base Commander. Just as he got there, the Base Commander, having been strapped to a transport gurney, had lurched and struggled; shouting for help, ordering the MEDPOD grounded, and the occupants arrested just before he was sedated.

S'Shala'Doc 39842 had immediately broken away from his escort and rushed back to commandeer the ground transport. He'd hurried back to his squadron, where he'd reported the events he'd just witnessed, and his Squadron Commander had immediately contacted Base Command. When answers were not forthcoming, he sent out an alert for his stand-by ships to shift to pre-launch status.

Receiving his new orders directly, S'Shala'Doc 39842 had returned to his ship; finding it only moments away from flight status.

They had been waiting for launch authorizations while still listening to the MEDPOD officer arguing with departure control when he'd ceased all arguments. Shortly afterwards, a loud thump had been felt throughout the ship, followed by a *huge* increase in communications chatter.

Not knowing what was going on, S'Shala'Doc 39842 ordered a clearance sweep, then followed it with a launch – then invited the remaining three alert ships to join him.

Once in sub-orbit, they'd hovered and reported their status, which was followed by receipt of a tracking frequency to monitor, and orders to track and follow – which they did – following a wildly shifting target performing tiny jumps that weren't normally in the repertoire of a MEDPOD. He wondered if the track would lead them to the operations base of the supposed saboteurs.

The Kraken's Child

'Ronnie, we got the guy ready. Where do you want him?' Petrus asked.

Unhide the Past

'Head three seconds out and dump him. Update me just before you jump again and I'll pick him up'

'Ronnie! There's a bomb inside him!' Sai pushed in a rush.

'I said I'd pick him up - not let him INSIDE with me!' he pushed back angrily, before cutting off the conversation.

"Girl just pisses me off!" he grumbled, then watched as the pursuers shifted track again.

He waited for Petrus' call, and when he did, jumped ahead and reached out – searching for the body, and finding it floating real close to where he'd said it would be.

"Gotta love this nav computer!"

He extended a light shield around the sedated Vanir and brought him in closer. Once within a hundred feet, he cut it off, and brought the shield up against the hull; tightening it *severely – fuel burning severely*. He didn't want to end up in *pieces – or vapor*.

"Okay. Let's see if Donnel and company have earned all that bonus pay," he muttered, then extended a light shield around the Vanir from the *second* shield generator located at the rear of the *Kraken's Child*, and reeled him in until he was snug against the rear assault door.

'Sai, this guy got a full load of air?'

'Yes, Ronnie. The collar was fully charged. Sally estimates a Vanir has about three hours in a Drecks ship suit ... maybe a little less'

'Thank you, Sai. Petrus, head back towards the base and let's see if they follow you. If they stay on me, you'll be free to return to the Kraken. Sai, when you get back, see if Donnel brought one of those implant-removal systems with him – the explosion-proof kind'

'Yes, Ronnie. What are ... what do you plan to do in the meantime?' she asked politely.

'New space ... pretty stars. Think I'll take a tour for an hour or so. Gim ... me a shout wh ... en you get th ... ere' he sent, already micro jumping a few minutes away.

'Yes, Ronnie' she sent quietly, having heard the shifts during his jumps.

Ronnie paused and checked his scanners, watching intently for the following ships to find him again.

Once they did, he chose a random direction, then made another jump.

The MEDPOD

“Girl, are you all right? Don’t worry, lass. He’ll be all right. This was a right *proper* plan this time – nobody *died!*” Petrus said cheerfully, and Sai grinned, but then sighed.

Petrus jumped the MEDPOD and waited for stomachs to settle.

“It’s just that ... he seemed so *angry* with me. I think I disappointed him.”

“You and he are alike, lass. On Earth, you’d both be called an ‘A-type’ personality, or so I’m told.”

He made a fine adjustment before jumping the MEDPOD again.

She thought that through ... and a little more ... but was still confused.

“He means both you and Grandfather are used to getting your own way,” Jaiying said, which triggered a small gasp of indignation from Sai that quickly petered out.

Sai laughed and hugged her, before relaxing back in her seat.

Then she turned thoughtful for a moment and considered her husband’s last comment.

“Petrus ... you talk about Earth a lot. Did you spend a lot of time there?”

“Never thought to look for me *there*, did you?” he teased her, then reached over to pat her hand, before jumping the MEDPOD again.

Once the jump was completed, he searched passively but detected no trailing ships. It was confirmed when Ronnie sent that they were following *him* now.

‘Well, Sasha ... Sally... Ronnie picked up our lost cargo and is taking him for a tour of Vanir space ... and dragging those ships along with him. How are our passengers?’ Petrus asked while making another fine adjustment to the navigation computer.

‘They seem to be ... well. The bio-agent is ... under control and ... no longer contagious. We’re not sure ... if it would ... affect humans, anyway’ Sasha said, while valiantly trying to keep down his last meal.

‘The sedative will ... be wearing off in ... about an hour’ Sally added awkwardly, still being somewhat queasy herself.

Unhide the Past

‘Good! We should be back to the Kraken right about...’ he paused and jumped one last time, ‘...now!’ he said, and the irregular surface of the Kraken’s portable transit rock loomed in front of them.

‘Welcome home!’

The Kraken’s Child

Once he’d determined the Vanir ships were truly following him, Ronnie led them on a casual tour of the local system, before bouncing over to the next star to poke around over there for a while. Because he had nothing better to do, he ran a truncated survey pass over some of the planets in the habitable zone of that star, but found nothing worth noting about them.

That done, he jumped to the next star, but that one didn’t have *any* planets – or a habitable zone. That star was pumping out *way* too much radiation, anyway, so he jumped to another, more *favorable* system, and poked around again.

Vanir Interceptor 17

“What is that mad pilot *doing?*” S’Shala’Doc 39842 muttered to no one in particular. “First they were doing tiny jumps in random directions, and now they’re jumping from star to star, like ... like...”

“Like they’re doing a *survey?*” his communications officer suggested.

“A survey? Yes, a survey ... but *why?* Why not just look it up in... *Communications!* Direct to Squadron Command; ‘SUSPECT HUMAN SURVEY SHIP IN THIS SECTOR. THEY MAY HAVE RECOVERED MEDPOD ... THEY MAY HAVE RECOVERED MEDPOD WITH IMPLANTED TRACKER ABOARD ... THEY MAY HAVE BEEN ORIGIN OF MEDPOD!’ Send immediate!”

The Kraken’s Child ... Outside...

S’Mok’Sak 40432 had felt miserable before, but now he was feeling both miserable *and* queasy ... and it sounded like he was losing his *hearing*, too. It would seem he had caught a particularly *nasty* bug...

First, there was the business of becoming so indecisive about things. Maybe that was due to the bug? However, that had happened just recently. His mental stability, something he prided himself on, had been shaky for several *weeks* now...

The world lurched around him, and another wave of dizziness surrounded him. He did not hear anything ... but suddenly noticed he could hear his own breathing – quite loudly, it seemed. He opened his eyes, and his eyelids brushed against his blanket ... no, that wasn’t a

blanket. He tried to reach up and pull away whatever covered his eyes, but was suddenly racked by severe vertigo and lay listless while waiting for the moment to pass.

He finally recovered sufficiently enough to discover that his arms were held firmly in place by something – not straps – but something like a heavy blanket. He tried moving his head around and found that he'd been encased in a heavy blanket or bag ... or maybe not a bag, as he noticed a dim, bluish light just above his head. When he struggled to tilt his head back a bit, he watched and saw a field of stars slowly pass overhead, followed by a sudden burst of bright light, followed by another bout of vertigo.

This time when he came back to awareness, everything was dark. He struggled for a moment, before relaxing and trying to think things through. He refused to panic. He was not going to consider this as anything more than a medically induced hallucination. He would just ride it out and wait to see what happened next, and if necessary, *then* he would panic.

In the Kraken's Child...

'Pretty,' Ronnie thought.

He'd come out of the jump near the habitable zone of another star and did a scan of the system – discovering two planets in the process. He micro-jumped near the most likely planet and scanned the surface.

The Kraken's Child ... Outside...

The world shifted again, and once again S'Mok'Sak 40432 saw light from the top of his ... container? He struggled mightily and inched his way upwards until his head reached a transparent blue sphere. He slowly pushed himself up a fraction of a centimeter at a time until he was looking out at a star field that was partially occluded by the curvature of a planet.

'Pretty,' he thought.

Vanir Interceptor 17

S'Shala'Doc 39842 had just received new information.

The MEDPOD was reported destroyed with all hands back on the base. That had been the explosion occurring just before he'd launched. Somehow, at least one of the infected crew had been transferred to another ship prior to the explosion, and that ship was the one they were following.

Unhide the Past

No explanation had been given as to how or why that ship harbored someone with a tracking tracer in them, but he was ordered to close with the target ship, identify it, and then *destroy* it! He signaled the rest of his squadron, before going silent – moving to close with the target using stealthy operations with cloaking shields on.

He had his new orders and *nothing* was going to distract him now.

The Kraken's Child

Ronnie really liked what he was looking at; blue water, green lands, and snowy mountains. Then he looked through the opticals and noted the vastly overgrown ruins of cities and infrastructure rotating below him. He could not understand what he was seeing and relate it to anything Samuel or Sally had told him.

According to them, the Vanir had never engaged in planetary warfare. Could it mean that this was a *lost* colony? Maybe one of their human predecessors? Maybe even one of the races that had tried and failed to make a go of this area of the galaxy and left their machines for the Vanir to find and eventually reverse engineer?

It was a shame, really. It seemed like such a nice place from orbit.

A telltale flashed on his console, followed by an audible alarm. He silenced it and stretched out around him, searching for the transition his detector had just picked up. The impression he got was that the Vanir tracking him had just entered the system. He focused a little harder and felt them when they started making a direct approach to him.

He continued around the planet that he was orbiting while running jump calculations. Once he had the planet between them, he jumped out-system and stopped in space between the stars.

He wasn't getting any more of those "follow him home" feelings from his pursuers. Now it was more like "vaporize him on sight."

He decided to wait it out and see if he could mess with them a little longer before Sai called him back.

Vanir Interceptor 17

"Sub-Commander, they've jumped again. Tracer location now puts him ... there – and stopped," the combat officer reported, then highlighted a spot on the combat screen.

S'Shala'Doc 39842 considered *everything* he'd studied about the way the humans fought from all the observations the Vanir had made over the centuries. This should be a very simple encounter, but he was taking no

chances. He ordered the remaining ships in his group to make an approach, and attempt a shot *only* if he failed to take out the intruder.

He ordered the last ship to break off and return to base if the first three failed.

The Kraken's Child ... Outside...

"Great. Back with the darkness," S'Mok'Sak 40432 grumbled, but was surprised to discover that he still had his voice.

Of course, since he'd just now used it, there was no reason to suggest that he'd ever *lost* it, was there? He shook his head inside the ... *helmet* ... of the rather oversize spacesuit he was wearing, and reconsidered his position. This was something he was *sure* he would have remembered putting on if this was the sort of thing that any Vanir *anywhere* had ever done. He couldn't remember doing it, so someone *else* must have done it.

Someone who wore *really* big... All right, *now* it was time to panic!

Vanir Interceptor 17

The lead ship jumped to within several hundred kilometers of the tracking signal, then slowly crept forward from there. S'Shala'Doc 39842 was keeping an eye on the contact screen, while the kilometers wound down and down until they were creeping along at what seemed like a walking pace.

"Should I go active, Sub-Commander?" the combat officer asked.

"No ... passive only! If we're lucky, we'll get a visual. Recorders on?" he murmured, as if any sound he made would be carried across the vacuum.

"Yes, Sub-Commander," was the subdued reply.

The closer they got, the quieter the bridge crew became ... and the Sub-Commander in particular.

"Opticals?" he whispered.

"Nothing yet, Sir. Just a lot of ... wait! A star was just occluded!" that observer reported.

"Where? Zoom in!" came the hurried whisper.

The screen in front of them showed a zoomed image from about a thousand meters in front of them. It was the outline of a spacesuit, with a blue bubble at the top. Zooming in even further, they could see the face of a Vanir ... casually looking around at the rather empty vacuum surrounding him.

Unhide the Past

The Kraken's Child

"Cautious *and* sneaky. I *like* that in my officers," Ronnie murmured.

He reached out and poked around the Vanir vessel immediately behind him to read some of the impressions they were having of him.

He noted them, then searched out the combat officer's mind. With a great deal of effort, he carefully noted the controls necessary to fire their weapons. He backed out before pushing down into the control console while trying to follow the wiring back to the weapons bay. Fiber optics? Nice, but he didn't have time to fart with it.

That path not working out, he jumped right to the weapons bay and did a quick look at the main projector – a rather nice, narrow particle beam – and considered his options. He could make it blow up when they fired it but that was probably not a good idea. Besides, it might hurt the guy stuck to his rear bumper. No... Something else... Something... Ahh, still using *super*-cooling to transfer power? He chuckled quietly to himself while gathering energy, then use it to loosen a fitting on the bus housing in a *really* awkward space to get to. Coolant began to leak, and moments later, an alert displayed on the weapons console, followed by a duplicate at the bridge console.

Vanir Interceptor 17

"Sir, primary weapon *cooling* failure!" the weapons officer shouted, and S'Shala'Doc 39842 literally cringed at the loudness of his voice.

"Very well, we can ... we can do something else," S'Shala'Doc 39842 considered quietly while rapidly running down his list of options. '*Maybe send someone over and manually attach a mine?*' he thought. Wait! That Vanir on the ship in front of them ... something about their tracking tracer.

"Do a very low scan on that body and see if that's where the signal is coming from," he ordered, and waited for the results while they continued to creep closer and closer.

The Kraken's Child ... Outside...

S'Mok'Sak 40432 had become quite introspective of late ... over the last several minutes, at least. He'd had ... well, not a *long* life, but at least it was interesting. He wondered if the Drecks would keep him out here until he suffocated, or would they bring him inside to be eaten alive?

Wait ... what was that dark thing in front of him? He couldn't see it but something was occluding stars right in front of him. He strained his eyes and could barely make out the outline of a circle in front of him from the stars that kept flickering out the closer it came to him.

Floyde Leong

Now he wondered if he would be *squished* to death before he suffocated or was eaten alive.

Inside the Kraken's Child

"What is that bonehead *doing?*" Ronnie muttered.

If they didn't stop drifting up soon, he'd have to move or push him back with his shield ... or not... It wouldn't do to accidentally squish his passenger to death while fending off a fender-bender out here in the middle of nowhere. He thought for a second more.

'Sai, you got that thing loaded yet?' he pushed out loudly.

Vanir Interceptor 17

"Sub-Commander! A tracking signal was just sent from somewhere immediately in front of us. Different frequency and very powerful," the sensor operator reported.

"Duration? Direction?" S'Shala'Doc 39842 quickly asked.

"Just a burst, and no specific direction, Sir!" the operator replied.

S'Shala'Doc 39842 was in a quandary. Here he was so very close to the intruder, yet they had no weapon to take him down. On top of that, he could not signal anyone in the squadron without alerting the intruder that he was here.

The Kraken's Child

"Well, enough fun and games, my lad." Ronnie sighed, and keyed in the next jump.

He finished that, but wondered what *else* he could do to confuse the pursuit. It shouldn't take much, and he and Sai only needed a few minutes once they met up to finish the task. He thought of Sai, and a memory came back to him – and then he smiled *evilly*.

The Kraken's Child ... Outside...

He was moving. S'Mok'Sak 40432 was *sure* of it, since the view seemed to shift as if he was slowly rotating at the end of a stick. He wondered if whatever he was on was going to move out of the way.

Vanir Interceptor 17

"Sub-Commander, target aspect changing! The ... the Vanir body is rotating out of view ... stars are being..." the optical sensor operator let out a loud hiss of alarm.

Unhide the Past

The bridge crew froze in consternation as they locked their attention to the front-screen optical display.

The pale, faded outline of a bulbous-headed creature began to form on the display in front of them. Long tentacles curled around below it and reached out to where the Vanir captive had been attached. The arms seemed to wiggle, and a bi-pedal figure was pulled from nowhere and continued up towards the pulsating head, then pushed beneath it, occasional splotches of dark fluids spurting from within.

This nightmarish vision lasted for at most a few seconds, but suddenly blinked from sight with no trace left behind of its existence.

"A *Vormat!* We've been chasing a *Vormat!*" the young sensor operator cried, then curled into a tight ball and fell to the deck, with two others joining him only moments later.

"Medical Technician to the bridge!" S'Shala'Doc 39842 called out through the ship's intercom, then turned to the communications officer to report their status to his squadron, but found that person on the deck as well.

"Recorders?" he asked no one in particular, and got a weak-voiced response that they were still up and recording.

He slouched back in his bridge chair and considered what had just happened. That wasn't a *real* Vormat ... not according to the security briefings he'd been privy to. That was something the humans had dreamed up and used very effectively out near the sample worlds during their attack on Observation Station 23.

He looked around his bridge while considering himself lucky that his ship was still in one piece. According to history, humans were *not* known to show mercy to an enemy. Unless ... they weren't really enemies? He thought that through for a while...

The humans had come to observe something at the base? Something to do with the biohazard outbreak? They had somehow taken one of the infected victims and stuck a tracking device into him after taking him from the MEDPOD before it exploded. Unless humans were *already* on the MEDPOD? Except, looking back over his memories, he'd not *seen* any humans ... just the Base Commander being wheeled away by medical staff over by the MEDPOD. Moreover, humans did not *use* tracking implants. Certainly not *Vanir* tracking implants.

The MEDPOD ... it had been a little dirty, but not exceptionally so. Something *odd* about it, though, but he just could not figure out what it was. It *looked* like a MEDPOD ... somewhat *bigger* than he remembered them being. It made no sense.

S'Shala'Doc 39842 stretched his neck and rotated it.

There had been an explosion – that *much* he was sure of – and the MEDPOD had been reported destroyed, but...

He thought about their encounter over the last ... how long had it been? Only a little over three hours? They'd been dragged all over the place by the madly jumping pilot of that ... whatever it was ... and then ... and then his tactics had changed, and they'd been dragged through much longer jumps, and then the pilot had started – what looked to the casual observer – a planetary *survey* of all things.

Two different pilots? Two different *ships*?

“Communications, message to squadron, ‘REJOIN FORMATION. CONTINUE PURSUIT LAST AVAILABLE TRACKING SIGNAL’. Communications, send recordings to Base Command up to this time. Helm, get us back on track and reengage pursuit when the rest of the squadron joins us,” he said wearily.

So far, *nothing* about this encounter had gone right, and he wondered if his career would survive it. *One* thing for sure – he would be chatting up the Squadron Commander for the S’Kala’Mak when he got back. He would *really* like some answers.

The Kraken’s Child ... Outside...

S’Mok’Sak 40432 had not died ... he just *wished* he had. He just realized that all his dizziness and stomach upset was *transit* jump related, and the last one had nearly ruined him. He was sick of dry retching and considered himself fortunate that he’d already been empty before being stuffed into this stuffy space suit.

Stuffy? Great ... he *was* going to suffocate, after all.

Wait, something was coming...

The Kraken’s Child...

‘Ready? I’m gonna let him go, Petrus’ Ronnie sent while observing the cargo hatch of the shuttle slowly opening.

‘Wait a minute, Ronnie. Let us get into position first’

‘Can’t wait – he’s running out of air!’

Ronnie released the shield from around their Vanir survivor and watched him drift limply towards the open hatch. He could see Sally back there with a safety harness on both her and Sasha – both of them wearing ship suits for the vacuum.

Unhide the Past

Sasha jumped out and gripped the limp figure, while Sally reeled them back in. Then she released a large metal contraption and sent it drifting towards the *Kraken's Child*. Ronnie waited a moment before snatching it with his secondary shield.

He dropped his assault hatch and went back to snag it; hauling it in and securing it to the deck before closing the hatch again. He pressurized the compartment and popped his face shield afterwards. Searching the device, he opened a package on it and pulled out a booklet, before finally sitting down on the deck and starting to read. He had to read fast. Their pursuers were still headed this way, albeit slowly.

The MEDPOD

S'Mok'Sak 40432 lay there, gasping and coughing, but *immensely* happy to be alive and in the hands of such a pretty Vanir Medical Technician. He hoped she would be assigned to help him recover from his strenuous ordeal.

'He seems to have recovered quickly' Sasha pushed silently.

'He made peace with his death, and now wishes to celebrate life ... and Katie needs the practice' Sally teased him, before turning her attention back to her patient.

"Hello ... how ... are ... you ... feeling?" she asked slowly.

"I ... am ... feeling ... pretty ... glad ... to be ... alive, actually," he said weakly, and smiled up at Sally through watering eyes. He continued to smile, before breaking into another coughing fit.

"Thought you would be. I am S'Shac'Kah 38521 and this is..."

"S'Kala'Mak ... 32246! You're from ... the base! You ... made it *back*? Did ... everything go all ... right? ... They were ... they were going ... to *kill us*! I *remember* now, he ... was going to ... *kill us*!" he got out with difficulty, and started to sit up, but fell back in another coughing fit.

"Easy Mok'Sak," Sasha said, using a *very* familiar address for him.

Sally looked at him strangely for a moment, until he explained.

'We shared an interesting evening involving fermented juices and several young Medical Technicians ... or maybe it was a week?'

"Are ... are we ... on the base?" S'Mok'Sak 40432 asked, and looked around at the unfamiliar features of the faux MEDPOD.

"No. Not at the moment. You seem to have a few things that need to be examined, Mok'Sak," Sasha said quietly, before Sally drew his attention.

“S’Mok’Sak 40432, you seem to have two foreign bodies in you that we cannot account for. One is in your neck, and the other is in your lower torso.”

“I - I don’t recall ... anything that would account ... for that. But for the last several ... months I have been somewhat...” he paused, and looked off for a moment. “I’m sorry. Was I saying something?”

“Uhhh, we believe you have a chemical imbalance in your system that might be causing that,” she said comfortingly, now making it up on the fly. “It might also explain your susceptibility to that biological agent that got loose on the base. We need to run some tests, but your infection seems to be on the mend, and you look like you could use some food?”

“Not at the moment, please. I had the *wildest* dream. I was in space, and ... and all kinds of things were happening to me. I couldn’t move, and then ... when I was finally able to move a little, I thought I was in a space suit!”

“You look a little dehydrated. How about sipping some of this? Get a little fluid back into you and let it help make you feel better,” Sasha said.

S’Mok’Sak 40432 leaned up and sipped the proffered drink cautiously, before slugging it back and relaxing on the platform.

“That was *good!* What was in it?” he asked while his eyes were already starting to close.

“Juice, water ... and a little something to help you sleep,” Sally murmured, but he was already out.

‘*Sai ... Jaiying, he’s ready*’ she called out, and they both came from behind the forward partition with their ship suits on. Sasha and Sally got back into their suits, while Sai strapped their patient down before helping Jaiying onto a stool so she could sit and disconnect his implant.

Several minutes later, that part of the operation was done.

Then Sai removed the nerve implant and sealed the wound while Jaiying was looking into the tracer/bomb with Walter.

‘I don’t see a charging mechanism, Jaiying. I think once that battery wears down, it just collapses and the bomb goes off’

‘What is that section there for, Walter?’ She pointed out a surface that took energy from the living body but did not seem to apply it to anything.

‘I think that’s a fail-safe. Remove the bomb and it still goes off’

‘Okay! Let’s get him suited back up and out of there!’ Ronnie sent, startling all of them.

Unhide the Past

‘Grandfather, can’t we still try to–’

‘We can’t disable it, we can’t pull it out, and we can’t wait any longer. Bag him please, Sally. I will haul him away from everyone. I’m sorry’ he pushed abruptly, then dropped out of the conversation.

Sai pulled Jaiying away, while Sasha and Sally stuck S’Mok’Sak 40432 back into the Drecks ship suit. She made the extra effort to fit it to him better just in case he woke up ... before...

The Kraken’s Child

Ronnie hated this, but there was nothing for it. The guy was just unlucky, and there was nothing he could do about it.

S’Mok’Sak 40432 was enveloped in the secondary shield and being hauled away from the shuttle that was returning to the *Kraken* for docking. Ronnie got him to a safe distance a few minutes away from them and stopped. That would give him some time while their pursuers picked up their new location and changed course to intercept them.

He was still fuming over the situation, but didn’t see any way around it. It was *stupid*, really, making a deadly device like this. How would you even *test* such a thing? Battery, bomb, tracer, and fail-safe. He sat dejected and considered the amount of effort they’d put into saving this one Vanir.

There must be *some* way...

Somewhere Else...

*Destiny materialized behind the Fainting Fate while she shared Ronnie’s agonizing decision over his current situation. It considered the situation, and the solution was **obvious** – to **it**, of course.*

***She** really seemed care, however, and it wondered if the Fainting Fate was **really** suited for this line of work. A stray thought caught its attention, and it turned back to observe what this human was going to do next.*

The Kraken’s Child

Ronnie was considering what he had to work with, and wondered if his thought would actually work. Maybe if he tricked the *kids* into figuring it out?

‘Hello Walter ... do you have a moment?’

The Kraken's Child ... Outside...

S'Mok'Sak 40432 woke up from a wonderful dream where he was floating in a sea of stars, and when he opened his eyes ... he still saw them.

"Typical," he muttered, then closed his eyes again.

Inside the Kraken's Child...

'So, do you think it might work?' Ronnie asked again.

'Well ... Jaiying would be better at this, but ... sure. If I can recharge the battery, then it should work'

Walter went silent for a few seconds while he concentrated on the bomb.

'It would be better if you took the tracer output and routed it to the fail-safe input, though ... nope, different signals. The tracer is also too strong' he finally determined.

'But all we need is something very tiny to keep the fail-safe alive?'

'Yes, Grandfather. Besides, it shouldn't go off immediately, even if it was removed. You might have a few seconds. Even if he died, you would probably have several seconds to get out of the...' he paused, and Ronnie picked up on it just as Walter was making the suggestion.

'You can maybe stick it into something else ... fleshy like?'

'Bless you, Walter. Tell Maya to give you an extra cup of milk ... even if this doesn't work'

Ronnie reached out and touched S'Mok'Sak 40432's mind – sending him into a coma. He didn't want to distress him unnecessarily for this. Then he set about tucking things away and setting up an emergency micro jump just in case it *didn't* work as tentatively planned...

Back on the Kraken

Half an hour later, the *Kraken's* back door opened and the *Kraken's Child* drifted in to dock. After setting down, the airlock opened, and Ronnie came out drenched in sweat. The Vanir, Petrus, and Sai greeted him; all gathering around him and hugging him in relief that he'd survived the ordeal...

They'd watched from the monitors in the conference room when Ronnie had returned to just within visible range and then stayed out there with S'Mok'Sak 40432 until the very last. It seemed to take a long time, but when it finally happened, the flash from the explosion surprised

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them all, and silence had hung over them for several minutes until he'd quietly called out that he was coming back.

The Vanir in particular had been surprised at his efforts to save one of their own – probably someone who would never make a difference, one way or another. S'Mok'Sak 40432 was only a base worker who did something like working in the warehouse or kitchens.

It was ... it must be a *human* thing, Samuel considered. Like recovering the Vanir bodies from Station 6. More and more he was questioning his understanding of humanity, and wondering if it would also apply to Vanir someday...

Samuel sought him out last and took his arm firmly.

'We appreciate what you tried for one of our people, Rondal Caldar. It matters not that nothing could be done. What matters is that you cared enough to try. Each day you teach us more about what humans can be like'

'You look exhausted, Ronnie. You should get something to eat, and then rest' Sally told him while hugging him tightly.

'Yes ... good idea. I am tired, and I appreciate all of you coming to greet me. Sally, while I'm freshening up, would you see about getting your patient to the medical bay? He's going to need some rebuilding' he shared, before wandering off to his compartment.

Vanir Interceptor 17

After being led on a merry tour of near space, and an encounter with a monster from their distant past, they had finally noted the signal was once again stable and a long ways off. S'Shala'Doc 39842 had ordered a silent approach from three different angles and watched passively as the rest of his squad slowly approached the radiating tracer ... only to have it disappear in a silent flash.

S'Shala'Doc 39842 had ordered active scans, but found nothing of note, other than a small rock several hundred kilometers from the origin of the flash. Neither did the three other ships in the pursuit squadron.

There wasn't even the barest hint of a transit warp to detect, and they had nothing to show for the last four hours except for totally unacceptable bridge recordings. After several disgusted minutes, he ordered the search terminated.

He sat in his bridge chair just shy of fuming. The desire for further professional development seemed a distant goal at this point, and the prospect of returning to Base 4 was becoming grimmer and grimmer.

With a reluctant sigh, he ordered his small squadron to return to Base 4 for whatever punishment would be meted out – on *him*, naturally.

January 5, Kantor, Elder's Offices

'He did WHAT?' Lili asked; still astonished at what Sai had just told her.

'He isolated the implant. He grew a cyst around it of muscle tissue and ligament. Then he simply carved it out and jumped them away from it' she said again.

'He jumped ... how did he–'

'Had the assault hatch open and threw it outside, then triggered the jump remotely. It was ... pretty messy' Sai explained.

'But if the hatch was open, then how–'

'He cut a hole in the ship suit just over the implant. It was subdural – put in just before they escaped on the transport pod. With the tank opened to vacuum, the skin and the cyst was pulled through the hole, and Ronnie just sliced it off, tossed it out, upped the shields, and jumped' Sai expanded the details.

'Oh my! That was ... that was...'

For once, Lili was at a loss for words.

'Gutsy!' Walter contributed, followed by a chorus of *'Eew!'* from the girls.

'Indeed ... gutsy' Radatel agreed. *'Remind me never to allow Rondal to attend to any of MY Healings, my Lady'*

'The Vanir – he still lives?' Lili asked.

'Oh yes. Sally was quite impressed, as were all the Vanir. They now have a new appreciation of Ronnie's intentions towards keeping peace with the Vanir'

'Very well, Sai. Please keep us informed of the remaining issues as you learn them' she sent, before letting out a reserved sigh.

'I hear and obey, my Elder' Sai sent respectfully, before dropping the conversation.

'Your little brother is a very SICK individual, my Lord Husband' Lili shared with a shudder.

Her Seniors in attendance looked at her strangely – first the sigh, and then a *shudder?*

Unhide the Past

‘Yes. And isn’t it delightful that he’s on *OUR* side?’ he reminded her, before getting back to his court reports.

It seemed that things just kept getting *busier* now that the Bornat had started packing up to leave.

Base 4, Things Get Busy

“S’Kala’Mak 32242, we want S’Kala’Mak 32246 returned to base as quickly as he can get here! He *started* this whole mess, and I want him to explain the reasons *why* – *personally!*” the acting Base Commander insisted.

“That is no longer possible, Sir. S’Kala’Mak 32246 has been reassigned to observation and monitoring duties on the human’s transport until such time as they successfully arrive at Vanaheim and deliver the Vanir and Human Ambassadors to the Prime herself. He continues to report to me on a regular basis, and I will, of course, share those reports with the Base Commander – once one has been assigned *permanently*,” S’Kala’Mak 32242 said.

“This is *insubordination!* May I remind you that–”

“With all due respect, the *previous* Base Commander – S’Shala’Doc 30118 – was found to be a *less* than trustworthy individual. I currently have no way to authenticate your authority to command this base, let alone anyone you may turn it over to. I will be investigating members of my warren. May I suggest that you do the same,” he said, before rendering the required gestures of respect, turning, and leaving.

“Oh, Kala 32246, what have you gotten us embroiled in?” he muttered quietly to himself while stalking out of the administration building and heading for his squadron headquarters. They had not denied S’Shala’Doc 30118 was *not* of their warren, but had not as yet *identified* him, either, other than to say they were “investigating” it.

He had been in service long enough to know it would not end here. The information S’Kala’Mak 32246 had shared with him, the evidence found by his *own* medical personnel, and the very *damning* evidence that S’Shala’Doc 30118 was an imposter, would not negate his *own* duplicity in causing infections on the base. He still held out a thin hope they would be mitigating factors to whatever charges were brought against him. Overall, things were bad enough, but on reflection he resolved that he just did not like the fact that humans were involved in *any* of it.

The little one was cute, though, and so *friendly*.

The Kraken

It had been nearly twenty hours since Ronnie had gotten back, and it now approached early evening. The previous night he'd washed and crashed, then slept most of the following day. He finally woke up rested and hungry after all that jumping around the day before.

Getting dressed in clean clothes, he wandered to the commons and found Petrus and Sai sharing a quiet meal.

"Everyone all sorted out?" he asked lightly as he stood across from them.

They looked up at him and smiled. As others in the commons noted his presence, a light scattering of applause began that slowly died out as he looked around and nodded in recognition of it.

"Word travels fast, lad. The new arrivals have all been stripped of their encumbrances and are resting in the new medical wing – one of the Drecks transport sections," Petrus said in explanation, then turned to look at Sai for her input.

"Sasha is still trying to determine how they can be introduced back into Vanir society after being 'infected' with humanity. It's something Sue came up with," she said, much to his surprise.

"Pears our girl *Sue* is becoming more 'human' after being around us every day. Prob'ly 'cause of the Kee, I 'spect," Petrus added.

Sai stifled a laugh.

"It turns out Sue and Silas have a history. Things got a little tense between them once they started calling each other by their *human* names. Sue figured she'd become infected by us. Sally told me all about it."

A kitchen helper brought over a menu and Ronnie made his selection before sitting down.

"Interesting observation, then. The Vanir have suppressed feelings, but when allowed a more *personal* recognition of individuals, their feelings come to the forefront? I guess it would make sense if you lived in a society where you were just a number to anyone else. What's our current ships status?" he asked Petrus.

"We're still moving 'right' about eight minutes from our encounter. From there, I would recommend 'down' another twenty-four minutes. That would leave us a straight shot to Vanaheim of about thirty-minutes ... twenty-two minutes of that through the cloud."

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“With Sasha’s ship following us, we’d still be a target for anyone gunning for us,” Ronnie noted.

“With us traveling in the rock ... maybe not so much. Drop it off in the cloud, and do the last ten minutes by quick jumps to Vanaheim,” Sai suggested.

“Still ... our transmissions to his ship, and their transmissions to their base ... it’s iffy, at best,” Ronnie said.

“What’s the alternative?” Petrus asked.

“Well, we can go silent and just show up when we get there–”

“And spread fear and panic when the Vanir realize we’ve snuck in through their security screens with little or no trouble,” Sai reminded him.

“Or ... we can send someone back to report our progress from one of their ships or bases.”

“Which *still* means us communicating with them to have them relay messages from us,” Petrus said.

“Unless that someone can *already* communicate with us silently,” Sai suggested.

“Yeah, but I’m still leaning towards the fear and panic option for the time being,” Ronnie muttered. “Quite frankly, I’d like to turn around and let them thrash out their problems on their *own*,” he added while shaking his head slowly.

‘That doesn’t sound like the Demon of the Commonwealth ... not from what I’ve heard about him’ Sue pressed, having come up silently behind him.

He’d not felt her arrival, but managed to control his surprise while casually turning to greet her – noting the data pad she now carried with her everywhere.

“Hello Sue. I understand you’re under treatment now for a nasty infection of ‘humanity’,” he said lightly, then waited for the translation to scroll up her screen.

Once read, she hissed at him and smiled grimly.

‘Most amusing, Rondal Caldar. I’m not surprised you find novelty in others suffering. It will make it all the better when the Prime censures you for your crimes against the Vanir!’

‘What crimes might those be, Sue?’ he asked curiously, wondering where she was going with this.

‘To start with; performing incursions into Vanir space, kidnapping Vanir citizens, performing invasive intrusions into, and corrupting Vanir minds!’

‘Well, I suppose we could have the Elder ship us all those implants we’re recovering so we can give them back to the Vanir – one at a time. There won’t be enough to go around, but I’m sure they would make enough of an impression – when they all go off at once’

She maintained her stability for several seconds while contemplating his implication ... before suddenly quaking in fear, then lurching away awkwardly when he reached out to help her.

‘AWAY FROM ME, MONSTER! I know what you ARE! I know what you’ve DONE!’ she cried silently, then turned to run away, but bumped into Sally instead.

‘Sue, we’ve talked about this. Ronnie is your host, and gave you back your life’ she sent calmly.

‘He’s murdered MILLIONS!’

‘And the Vanir have stolen an entire human world, and killed millions as well. In addition, we implanted bombs in their citizens’ she reminded her calmly.

‘And we should DESTROY them! ALL of them!’ Sue cried, before collapsing to the deck in tears.

‘Children’ “Children” “Children” “Kids” all four adults said as one – more or less.

Ronnie reached out to the bridge and found Endo there.

‘Endo, please have Kiki sent to the commons – Sue’s had another meltdown’

‘On it, Ronnie!’ he replied, and the ships intercom called for Kiki to report to the commons. It took only a few minutes, and she was there.

“Sue! Sue! It’s okay, Sue! Kiki is here for you!” she cried happily in Vanir, and reached down to hug her; easily slipping between her flailing arms and giving her hugs and kisses while darting her tongue lightly at her mouth until she began to quiet down and just sniffled a bit.

Sue finally got to her feet and walked away with Kiki leading her ... presumably back to their quarters. Ronnie turned to look at Sally, who appeared a bit guilty in front of them.

‘She wanted to know more about you and was asking some of your crew – those who’d served with you. Endo, Gallus ... and Torga, and their

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wives ... and Donnel Ardan. Lady Laisee was most forthcoming about ... about your history during the Drecks war'

"I hope she didn't mention the *kittens*," he muttered sourly, then noticed the plate that was just being delivered to his table, but waved it off and stood up slowly.

"Petrus, maintain course and speed. Turn down at the mark, and ... and let's slow down to *standard* cruise at the mark. We'll let the Vanir work on their internal problems for a while and see how it goes," he said thoughtfully.

"Sally..." he said absently while turning to her.

'Sally, I trust you will be working with Sue for a while longer. We will follow your recommendations as to her treatment and final disposition ... as well as the rest of your patients. Repatriation is the most desirable solution for them – for ALL of you, of course – but not at the expense of your lives. In that regard, you have my word on a safe haven for you if Vanir society no longer offers you solace – for ANY of you' he said, then turned away and slowly started walking back to his compartment.

"Oh, Petrus... He tries so hard," Sai murmured.

"Aye, lass. That he does. Always has ... even when working the Blight."

"Yes, he ... *what?*"

In Laisee's Compartment

'Jaiying, what is wrong with Sue?' Cathy asked.

'She is still resolving her issues, I suppose'

'The girl is just messed up' Josie insisted. *'Grandfather should smack her'*

'Josie!' Walter chided. 'She's under enough stress as it is. Let her get herself together for a while. You know the way she was trained'

'Yes, Josie. She was trained very strictly. Everything is black and white with her' Jaiying reminded her.

'Yeah, ones and zeros, I suppose' Josie considered. *'She's gotta learn a little gray, though'*

This brought up another issue.

'How are the Bornat? Have they all left yet?' Jaiying asked.

‘They’re still packing up for the jump’ Walter reported. *‘They expect it will take a while, and they want to make sure they have everything they need’*

‘They’re going nearly ten-thousand hours towards the core’ Josie scoffed. *‘Hope they bring along lot’s of movies’*

‘I can’t imagine going that far. What are they running away from?’ Jaiying asked.

‘Who says they’re running?’ Cathy asked.

‘Yeah. They were watching us rise and fall for all those millennia. What makes you think they’re running away from something?’ Josie asked.

‘Maybe they’re just tired of watching us fail?’ Walter suggested. *‘Or maybe it’s taken them this long to perfect their jump ship?’*

‘I still think that’s crazy – building a ship the size of a moon’ Josie declared. *‘And what’s that inertialess drive they keep talking about?’*

‘Supposedly it will let them jump longer distances without turning their stomachs inside out’ Walter proclaimed.

‘Oh! Did they tell you how it worked?’ Josie asked eagerly.

‘No. They said we would have to work it out for ourselves. I tried to pry into the engine room but it’s shielded somehow’ he admitted.

‘They have a MIND SHIELD?’ Cathy asked.

‘They wouldn’t tell me how THAT worked, either’

‘Bummer!’ Josie expressed sadly.

‘Yes, unfortunate’ Jaiying agreed.

In the Medical Wing

S’Mok’Sak 40432 opened his eyes and looked up at the harsh lighting. It required the absolute minimal amount of thought to know that he wasn’t anywhere *near* a Vanir facility. Sitting up and looking around told him the same thing, starting with the strange platform he was lying on, the smell, and the strange markings on the walls. In fact, the only Vanir-looking thing in the room besides himself was the *other* Vanir patient lying on another platform.

He slipped off the platform and slowly walked around the room; finding a partially open door that led to what appeared to be a waste disposal and cleaning facility. He played with the controls until becoming sure of what they did, then took advantage of the toilet and the shower.

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Afterwards, he stood and dripped while searching for something to wipe himself with – finally finding *huge* towels behind a cabinet door.

“Lovely. Captured by giants. *Humans*, probably,” he muttered darkly, before letting out a dismal sigh.

He dried himself, then went over to the sink, where he saw his reflection in the mirror. He looked at himself and stretched, feeling a slight pinch near his abdomen where his skin was a slightly lighter shade of green. He rubbed it, finding nothing wrong other than the pinch, and finished with the towel. He looked around and found what looked like a disposal receptacle, but decided he would hang on to the towel for a while and took it back with him to the platform in the other room.

His roommate was still asleep, so he looked around and discovered the other door, but it was locked and no amount of prying would get it open. There was an electronic locking mechanism off to one side, but not knowing how it worked, he was loath to mess with it and maybe be locked inside for the duration.

He went back to the cleaning facility and considered if it was safe to drink the water – knowing how water was processed on *Vanir* ships. He was not in dire straights yet, so he shrugged and headed back to the platform room in time to hear a light knocking at the door. He watched as it slid open to reveal a somewhat familiar Vanir Medical Technician.

“Hello. I’m S’Kala’Mak 41631 ... but you can call me *Katie!*” she said cheerfully.

On the Bridge

“*How* long?” Torga repeated, not quite believing what he’d just been told, so Petrus repeated it for him.

“We drop to standard cruise at the second mark after we make the turn. Twenty-four minutes to the third mark, and then turn towards Vanaheim. That’s two more days to the second mark, and forty-eight days until we turn back towards Vanaheim...” He paused to run the numbers in his head. “Add in another sixty days from there, and that’s ... fifty plus sixty ... about one-hundred ten days at standard cruise.”

“By the *Gods!* What will we do until *Harvest?*”

“Harvest?” Petrus paused, then flipped his fingers several times while working it out. “That’s only *half*-way to Harvest. Besides, do you have anywhere *else* to be?”

“My *father!* He’s going to be challenging the *Master Pack* by then! I would like to be around to support him ... or close by, at least.”

“Well, the closer we get to Vanaheim, the closer we’ll be to the Hegemony,” Petrus promised him.

He grinned at Torga’s frustration, but understood it well. Ronnie had gotten everyone used to traveling at his accelerated transition rate, and what promised to be a trip of less than two weeks had just been stretched out to several months.

In Ronnie’s Compartment

Ronnie wandered back to his compartment and pulled a juice from his chiller. He looked around his empty room, then shrugged before sitting in his comfy chair and tilting it back. He picked up his book, paused, and put it back down. Sipping his juice, he settled back and closed his eyes – reaching out with his mind to see what was going on around his ship.

With the barest amount of intrusiveness, he let his mind wander up to the bridge where Gallus was on watch, accompanied by his lovely wife, Gaia. After that, he drifted through the labs and watched curiously as Milsie dug deeper into a complex diagram of DNA on one of her displays.

Shifting over to Donnel, he saw that he was studiously *re-writing* the operator’s manual for the implant insertion/removal device. The original had confused him so badly that he didn’t trust himself to program it safely, and he wasn’t about to drag *Donnel* out on the same fool’s mission with him.

Nodding his head, he pulled out and drifted his consciousness to some of the other researchers – finding both Sasha and Samuel working with the linguists this evening.

He found that Sally had gone back to the medical wing and was busy helping Katie with the implant survivors. He wondered if they’d brought enough food aboard, then realized the ships poop processor probably had *more* than enough capacity for the time being – what with all the trips he’d made in the past with human and Drecks refugees aboard.

He continued to relax and let his mind drift outwards, touching the Vanir ship pacing them some twenty-five kilometers to the side. He had allowed that as a courtesy to them in the hopes they could run interference with them should any other Vanir vessels attempt to intercept them unexpectedly.

Looking within, he touched lightly on all the crews’ minds; finding nothing amiss. Everyone seemed content to work with the humans, while the new captain still harbored some regrets over his abrupt promotion over Sasha. He watched as a communication arrived from Base 4, and was immediately retransmitted to the *Kraken* for Sasha’s perusal.

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Leaving the cruiser, he stretched out to Base 4 – attempting to reach either of the two minds he'd danced around on the day of their intrusion.

Sasha's friend, S'Kala'Mak 32242, was at his headquarters and going over reports related to the ever-widening results of their discoveries. He was still trying to establish links between the data. The other mind, the one in the false S'Shala'Doc 36118, was dimmed somewhat, and he recognized it as a symptom of being sedated. He poked and prodded for a bit, before making a request.

'Jaiying, a moment of your time, please?'

'Of course, Grandfather'

'Can you please share with me what you found in the mind of the Base Commander?' he asked somewhat belatedly.

She opened up her memories to him, and they reviewed them together. It didn't take long, and he considered the impact of this new knowledge. The commander *must* have had help with his disguise, but he, himself, *really* believed he was from S'Shala'Doc Warren. That meant that, instead of using an implant, someone had reprogrammed him *directly* – *brainwashed him*, in fact. This did *not* bode well for their venture.

'Jaiying, what I want to do is break their subconscious suggestion over him to free him from their control and let his original self return. Can you help me with that?'

'We should get Walter and Cathy, and ... and Sally to help...'

'No. I want to see for myself what has been done to him, Jaiying'

'I ... yes, Grandfather' she reluctantly agreed, then followed his link to the false Base Commander, before looking within him.

In short order, they found memory areas that were in conflict, and started separating fact from fiction in those memories. At a certain point, they found an interesting sequence of words and numbers. Just on a hunch, Ronnie projected that sequence into the resting mind of the Vanir, then followed it with the order *'Remember everything'*

Pausing for a moment, he added *'Tell the truth'*

Then he shifted focus outside the body. Not finding anything hooked up to him, he went back inside and began neutralizing the medication they'd used for sedation. Once done, he pulled all the way back to the ship and sat up somewhat dizzily, before sipping his drink once again.

'Thank you, Jaiying. That was most educational'

'You're welcome, Grandfather'

‘Sasha, do you have a moment?’ he called out.

‘Yes, Ronnie. How may I help you?’

‘I believe the S’Slich’Tah masquerading as S’Shala’Doc 36118 will be coming awake soon, and it would be beneficial if your Squadron Commander was there during his interrogation’ he suggested, then tried to listen as the Vanir’s mind flashed quicker than he could keep up. Familiar with this by now, he merely waited for a response from Sasha.

‘I’ll contact him immediately!’ he sent, and Ronnie felt him already composing a message in his mind, even while he was reaching for his ships tablet.

Ronnie reached out, and in an impressive seven minutes, the message had been sent, relayed, distributed to the intended recipient, and decoded. It was a short minute later that Commander S’Kala’Mak 32242 grabbed several of his security guards and rushed towards the holding unit in the medical facility.

He watched long enough to see that their efforts would be fruitful, before pulling back and settling in for a nap.

In Laisee’s Compartment

‘Walter, Grandfather and I did something you should all be aware of’ Jaiying called out selectively, then brought him up to date. She knew he would pass it along verbatim to everyone else.

Base 4, Sasha’s Message is Received

Halfway through his latest set of contact reports, S’Kala’Mak 32242 had received a flash message from S’Kala’Mak 32246 suggesting the impossible. Somehow he knew that S’Shala’Doc 36118 was *really* an S’Slich’Tah, and was about to wake up. Grabbing his gear, he’d pointed to three security staff and headed out the door.

On the way to the Medical Center, S’Kala’Mak 32242 reluctantly opened his communicator and reported to the acting Base Commander that he was headed to confront the false Base Commander in the holding unit. He and his security detachment arrived at the Medical Center, just as a contingent of S’Shala’Doc arrived with them – led by S’Shala’Doc 39842 himself.

He’d had heated words with S’Shala’Doc 39842 earlier; having been confronted by him shortly after his return from that pointless chase through space, and they’d separated with hard feelings. They both now assumed a rigid stature of affront for a few seconds while their forces

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arrayed themselves behind them. The confrontation was broken by the arrival of the acting Base Commander and his staff.

“What is the meaning of this, S’Kala’Mak 32242?” the acting Base Commander demanded.

“I have suspicions that ... that the false S’Shala’Doc will soon be awake. We should all be present when he speaks his first words,” S’Kala’Mak 32242 stated firmly.

“What makes you think he’ll awake? He’s been sedated since yesterday.”

“And why would that be, I wonder? Trying to buy time while you manufacture a story to cover your warren’s *duplicity*, perhaps?” S’Kala’Mak 32242 asked pointedly.

This brought all three officers to an affront stature while their staff stood by silently, but after several seconds, S’Kala’Mak 32242 finally relented.

“My apologies, Commanders. The events that threaten to overtake us are taxing all of our controls – *mine*, at least. I am suggesting we speak to the S’Slich’Tah and find out what he knows.”

“S’Slich ... S’Slich’Tah?” S’Shala’Doc 39842 sputtered. “What *false* accusation is—”

The acting Base Commander held up his hand while nodding somewhat somberly.

“We found this out upon physical examination of his body. He had been disguised as one of my warren. Once cleaned with solvent, we discovered his true nature. We have kept him sedated while we try to locate the *real* S’Shala’Doc 36118. We expect that record search will give results sometime tomorrow. In the meantime...” he gestured towards the Medical Facility, and they all relaxed and followed him in. The guards remained outside and spoke quietly with each other – each silently wondering what in the Pit of Disaster was going on *now*.

Vanaheim, A Holding Cell

The view from within the holding area was sparse, but still provided some semblance of comfort to Warren Leader S’Slich’Tah 29531. She was residing within the Prime’s governing building, and her accommodation had a place to sleep, a facility for waste disposal, and something that was fairly close to edible food. Aside from the small windows set very high up in the walls that recorded the presence of day or night, she was oblivious to the status of the current situation that had snared her in its grasp.

Since the recall of her Observation Stations, she'd had no interaction with her warren, and remained totally isolated from life outside the locked door that kept her prisoner. On this particular mid-morning, she paced alone while contemplating again the events leading up to her incarceration...

Decades upon decades of research had finally panned out when her scientists and researchers had provided the *ultimate* weapon to destroy humanity. Along with tracking monitors, they had come up with extremely miniature *bombs*, then manufactured them by the *thousands*. Then they'd applied their knowledge of the Vanir mind, and given her a method to get dissemination of the weapons approved by the sitting *Prime* – all *without* her active consent, of course.

It had seemed like the perfect ploy, with the endgame going to *her*, either way it ended. If the weapons were ever used, the Prime would be caught in a lie. If the weapons were *never* used, then a data trail would lead to their origination at the Prime's behest, and the Prime would *still* be caught in a lie. In *either* case, the Prime would fall, and the poor, beleaguered S'Slich'Tah Warren could point to the fact that *they* were merely following orders.

Things had been going smoothly, until one of those damningly inconvenient *humans* had somehow stumbled onto her plans; resulting in her warren being censured, and her *own* person held in the Capitol without access to any of her contacts. Not even the courtesy of a *Medical Technician* had been provided for her emotional comfort!

At least the conditioning the Prime had received prevented the *immediate* elimination of her warren. Clever that – programming her to proclaim that genocide of an *entire* warren would be ultimately destructive to the Vanir species as a *whole*. Solitary confinement here was certainly *much* better than being reduced to molecular components and fed back into the ecology as fertilizer; or worst yet, banished into a stellar *void* for all the rest of her long life.

She'd been *warned*, of course.

Her scientists and advisors preferred the option where the Prime *voluntarily* stepped aside from the reins of power and allowed the S'Slich'Tah to ascend – after it could be shown the *current* path of humanity would put it on a convergence path with the Vanir, and they would *then*, of course, need to be eliminated.

Such a distasteful task would not appeal to Warren S'Ahi'Ma, but with the backing of a *new* sitting Prime, someone of her *own* warren, the S'Slich'Tah could rise to supremacy and take *proper* steps to protect the Vanir for all *time*.

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They'd warned her – wait – wait – wait – but she'd not been that patient.

The first part had been easy. Make sure that you have a way to cause destruction and chaos in certain key human locations. Then you needed a reason for one of the human clusters to “discover” the Vanir in some fashion.

All they'd need to do was drop a few hints about an undiscovered group of aliens to one of the existing clusters, then let nature take its course. Arranging for one of their sample species to develop a transition drive seemed a reasonable trigger mechanism – until one of the more *stupid* human species decided not to question the source of their “surprise meal.”

Even then, it had not been a *total* loss, as the sole survivor had somehow become the possession of a *thinking* human. Unfortunately, *that* particular human had been the absolutely *worst* possible individual to acquire the survivor – having taken what the survivor knew, extrapolated the history of it, then postulated the existence of *another* race – the Vanir – being the cause for the survivor's existence; and then *searching* for them using previously unsuspected *capabilities* – something *else* her minions were quickly researching and adapting for the cause.

Instead of having a relatively controllable human incursion into Vanir space, this *particular* human had somehow managed to sneak close enough to Observer Station 27 to study it, learn how to communicate with it, and located both sample worlds ... but then arranged the destruction of Observer Station 23 on its way back from deployment in *human space*!

Worse yet, nearly all of its crew were rescued by the humans and turned over to the Prime for *her* investigation of Warren S'Slich'Tah's “crimes against the Prime's public policy.”

If only she could send messages to her *warren*!

She paced in frustration while considering again the solitary residence she was incarcerated within – buried in the center of the Prime's own complex, and provided with only the most basic necessities to insure her health for the time being. At least several of the Prime's, and other warren's staff in positions of power, remained under conditioning. Ideally, the stresses they would encounter would not bring about the breaking of that conditioning until *long* after the Prime had been deposed, and Warren S'Slich'Tah had been returned to society...

Her reverie halted with a knock at the door, and the corridor guard opened it to allow the steward carrying her meal tray to enter. She pointedly ignored him, until he dropped a utensil that drew her attention

... then noticed he was tapping his finger lightly on one of the plates. He glanced up at her and nodded *ever* so slightly, before bowing and leaving the room.

After the door was once again secure, she wandered over to view the swill they were feeding her today. She made a point of presenting disgusted sounds and unhappy expressions – all for those watching and listening remotely – before finally examining the tray, and then picking at it.

She continued wasting time until thinking she had waited long enough, before sliding the plate over slightly – catching sight of a corner of a thin sheet containing writing.

Well... Things were finally looking *up*!

January 6, Base 4

S'Slich'Tah 29636 was resting quietly – after having spent an absolutely *horrible* afternoon the day before, when he'd been providing answers to questions he'd seemed *compelled* to respond to.

His replacement had hammered him with question after question regarding who he *really* was, what he was *doing* there, who he was *reporting* to, and what had happened to the *real* S'Shala'Doc 36118. He'd been astonished at what had spewed from his mouth, as he not only remembered *everything* about his secret mission, but was also unable to *lie about it*!

He'd successfully deflected some of the more *damning* information he knew, until Commander S'Kala'Mak 32242 began making very pointed inquiries about the *details* of his actions; including the location of his secret transmitter, his recognition codes, his decoding pads, and then requesting a detailed roster of those on the base who were *also* in league with his organization.

Two unaffected warrens had been present with recording devices, and their respective leaders had immediately agreed to pool their resources against other senior command personnel involved – effectively brokering a coup on the base.

Their efforts netted the majority of compromised personnel, and they agreed to a detailed analysis and write up of the situation for presentation up the chain of command – provided they could find someone who was *not* currently involved.

For his part, S'Kala'Mak 32242 had agreed that S'Shala'Doc 37328 should remain as acting Base Commander for the time being. This eased the temper of S'Shala'Doc 39842, which allowed him to focus on his

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Squadron Commander's orders. In return, S'Shala'Doc 37328 asked that both Squadron Commanders provide assistance to monitor and intercept suspected and potential problems before they came to full bloom.

S'Kala'Mak 32242 agreed to this, and S'Shala'Doc 39842 pulled out his communicator and contacted his Squadron Commander – sending along a request for an emergency meeting with the acting Base Commander.

They all had a lot of ground to cover.

Kantor, The Royal Homestead, The Emperor's Suite

"*Ships! ... Along the boundary? Gods! What is Rondal doing now? And after I've given my word that there wouldn't be any ships out there!*" the Emperor exclaimed.

"My Lord Husband, they don't appear to belong to Rondal. They seem to be Bornat in construction – although there appear to be mixed crews of human-standard and human-Drecks aboard them."

"Human and ... and Drecks? Lili, they *must* be Rondal's. He's the *only* one who could field crews of that nature."

"No, my Husband..." she said, then paused to bring him a measure of chilled ambrosia suitable for the warm weather this early evening.

Their patio doors were wide open, letting in a breeze of fresh air while they dealt with the current looming crisis. She glanced outside, where she could see the children playing with the valaets, and nodded her head towards them.

"I suspect the source for this situation is *much* closer to home."

"*Walter, dear. Do you have a moment please?*" she asked sweetly, but not sweetly enough that he couldn't read the side tones in her request.

'Plausible deniability, Aunt Lili. The Bornat suggested they did not need the ships any longer, and we figured Grandfather's gleanings could eventually use a space fleet of their own. Since things heated up, we thought a training exercise was in order'

Radatel nearly choked on his drink, and had to take a moment to clear his throat before being able to respond.

"*Walter, am I to understand that Rondal now has a private fleet of ships that he has dispatched in contradiction to my given word?*"

"No, Uncle Radatel. We neglected to mention it to Grandfather" Cathy explained.

'Plausible deniability!' Josie sent cheerfully.

‘Children, what you FAIL to understand is that, as leader of the Commonwealth, the Emperor has given his word that we will NOT station vessels in opposition to the Vanir BATTLE platforms!’ Lili pushed chillingly.

‘Aunt Lili, what we thought... What I thought...’ Walter clarified ‘...was if it became necessary to deal with the battle platforms, it wouldn’t be wise to simply disable them from a distance. That would indicate more of an imbalance of power between the two societies. If the Vanir faced a Bornat ship instead, then any loss they suffered would have a visible face to it ... deflecting suspicion from anything special the Commonwealth could do’

‘Walter, your Grandfather had requested ... ORDERED YOU, in fact, to notify us of circumstances that you place us in unwittingly! You must withdraw those ships IMMEDIATELY!’ she sent forcefully.

“Lili...” Radatel murmured, then paused contemplatively before asking a question of his own.

‘Walter ... they are manned from the Demon’s Realm?’

‘Yes, Uncle. All are staffed by experienced spacers’

The Emperor paused further to consider the overall situation, before continuing.

‘I suspect the current situation within the Hegemony warrants close monitoring, and such monitoring would take best advantage of crew who are most familiar with the locations involved. Wouldn’t you agree, Lili?’

She calmed herself while running through the situation from this newer perspective.

‘If the Bornat ships do not stray towards Vanir locations, but point instead towards Hegemony worlds, then ... then I suppose their use as observation platforms would be a mitigating factor – but they will NOT face off against Vanir battle platforms until such time as the Vanir have POSITIVELY made an aggressive move towards the Hegemony or Commonwealth!’

‘So ... it’s all right if we lose a world or two–’

‘Walter! You will NOT–’

“Lili,” Radatel said gently, and she stopped her tirade with difficulty.

‘Walter ... we must be as good as our word’ Radatel pressed gently. ‘If the Vanir advanced to within range of human worlds, you could simply disable a minor circuit or two, and have the same effect. However, you will NOT actively prosecute an aggressive ship encounter with the Vanir unless

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they have fired their weapons FIRST – and this decision is on a platform-by-platform basis. Not ALL of them can be completely incompetent!’

‘Yes, Uncle’ Walter sent reluctantly.

‘Yes, Uncle’ the girls repeated.

‘And you will inform us *BEFOREHAND!*’ Lili sent forcefully.

‘Yes, Aunt Lili’ they all replied.

January 7, The Kraken

Laisee stood outside Ronnie’s door and closed her eyes before looking within – finding him dozing lightly in his cozy chair.

She smiled at the memory of Lili becoming apoplectic upon discovering it in one of the common family areas and ordering it summarily removed from existence. She, on the other hand, thought it suited Ronnie rather well, as she sensed his comfort nestled in its curvature. Too bad it prevented soothing sleep, however. She sighed before knocking softly on the door, which opened at her touch just a few seconds later. She noted the empty ambrosia bottle lying on the floor beside the chair, and frowned.

“Good morning, Ronnie. At breakfast, Samuel mentioned activities on Base 4 have reached a fever pitch, and ripples were headed back towards Vanaheim, even as we slept. Jaiying tells me you and she might have had something to do with that *yesterday?*” she asked with a tiny measure of mirth; it currently being nearly midday.

She slowly walked over and stopped beside him while he roused himself enough to respond.

“Hmm? Oh, yes. The previous Base Commander was the victim of a post-hypnotic suggestion that she and I were able to free him from. I’d hoped it would become productive to the investigation. Are things going well?”

“Let us say that Sasha no longer fears returning to Base 4 – not so much, anyway. He still has outstanding queries as to his level of participation in events, though.”

She bent down and picked up the empty bottle before slipping it into the disposal chute while he watched.

“Alas, I fear that I am all out of liquid refreshment,” he lamented, then watched as she opened his chiller and pulled out a chilled fruit drink, before popping the top and handing it to him.

While he drank, she paused to look deeply within and interpreted how his body was functioning – finally seeing internal complaints over the lack of protein in his diet. She looked further and saw other signs of neglect, then tsked quietly. Petrus had been correct. Ronnie needed to get back to *basics*!

“I see that you missed *supper* last night. As one of your Healers, I request that you accompany me for a light brunch in the commons, where we may share a meal, and you may show your crew and guests your happy countenance.”

“And if, instead, I choose to goof off all day?”

“Do not have me make this difficult for you, my Lord Caldar. As the Emperor’s daughter, I have some authority of my own. As one of your Healers, I may simply *order* it – and when I order your *contentment* later this evening, I may decide to make you work extra hard to *earn* it!” she threatened with a frown, which slowly curved into a demure smile.

“I hear ... and obey, my Healer,” he finally said, then got up and stretched.

He dropped his clothes where he stood, and walked into the facilities to relieve himself and shower; correctly assuming she would pick up after him in frustration.

When he came out several minutes later, he saw that she’d picked up after him, but only to the extent of tossing his dirty clothes on the chair, and setting out clean ones in a pile on his bed for him. She stood there patiently while he dried and dressed, then walked out arm-in-arm with him to the commons.

As they walked along, she brought up the issue Petrus had mentioned to her, hoping he would willingly take the bait they had devised.

“Captain Teldrus mentioned his security team was languishing without proper exercise. I spoke to Petrus and he offered them the use of the ship’s gym – should you allow it.”

“Well ... yeah. A man needs to stay in practice. Otherwise, you get slow and clumsy,” he muttered.

“Teldrus had wondered if Petrus was available to provide some limited instruction to his team. Something about ... ‘getting back to basics’ for some of his new men. What do you think?”

“Petrus should be fine ... as long as there isn’t any *blood* on the floor,” he muttered.

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“That’s what I thought at first, but Petrus said he was very busy ... as the First Officer, you know. I suggested that maybe *you* might find some spare time to help them train, but he just laughed – said you were slowing down in your *old age*.” She’d said it lightly, but he caught the smirk with a glance.

They walked along a bit further while he thought it through, but it didn’t take long.

“I suppose that ... in my *vast* amounts of spare time, something could be arranged. Nothing *strenuous*, of course ... due to my *old age*, you know,” he grumbled, then felt the relief from her that he took the suggestion willingly.

She sighed internally at her tentative success. Now it was just a matter of getting him to stick to it. While they continued along the corridor, she decided to torment him with another new tidbit of news.

“Oh! The *Bornat*... They had several ships in excess, so Father has seen fit to deploy them within the Hegemony ... somewhere along the lower portion of it, is my understanding. What with Lord Gagsa gathering his factions, it seems a reasonable precaution to observe them from a closer position.”

“*Bornat* ships? Wherever did they find crews to *man* them? And I wouldn’t think he’d have enough Drecks-speaking crew to make it worthwhile,” he considered, before suddenly remembering the one time *he’d* taken a ride in one of those horrible monstrosities of space...

They were misshapen abominations of design with no clear lines indicating up, down, fore, or aft. No two of them were alike, and the closest description he could imagine was a baked potato on steroids...

“Well, that was a consideration, but when Walter heard mention of it, he suggested they pull crews from the Demon’s Realm. Makes sense. They all speak Drecks, and they’re all familiar with the Hegemony – the *flight* crews, you know,” she said airily.

“Yes, so I would expect.”

It wasn’t too far an assumption that perhaps the evolution of this event wasn’t *quite* as truthful as she’d let on, but if Radatel was behind it, then he’d wait before raising any more questions about it. With this in mind, they made an entrance to a semi-populated commons and ordered a light brunch.

January 8, Hitting the Mark

Petrus was on the bridge this morning while Torga was making ready to turn ‘down’ and drop to standard cruise. Ideally, no one should be

aware of the change, since it would take place during the interval between transitions. He observed Torga updating the navigation system with the course and speed changes, and silently approved his settings. He was very proud of the young Dreds Lord's skills at ship handling.

"And we're coming up ... and it's done," Torga said. "Or it will be in five minutes when the system makes the next jump.

Petrus stole a glance over at Manya and saw her obvious pride in her husband's work.

"Well, now that you'll have *vast* amounts of time between transitions, maybe you can work on your training courses while on watch?" Petrus suggested, getting a frown back from Torga in return.

"Commander... I understand Lord Caldor's desire to let the Vanir work out their own problems, but – wouldn't it be better if we were back in *human* space while they do so?"

Petrus leaned against a console before answering him.

"Ronnie is still working through a bunch of issues regarding the Vanir, and wants to be close by just in case a ... a more *creative* approach needs to be applied. And besides, you two are still on your *honeymoon* cruise!"

He grinned at the expression on Torga's face, but heard retching from behind him, before Manya quickly pushed past him and into the bridge toilet compartment. They could hear her emptying herself, and wisely kept comments to themselves. After a short delay, they could hear the sink running, and finally a very pale Manya came out and excused herself to return to her quarters.

"Bad breakfast ... *again*," Torga muttered.

Petrus considered the possibility of that for *less* than a heartbeat, then smiled while shaking his head slightly.

"I'll have a talk with the cooks," he said, then left Torga on the bridge, while holding off his chuckling *until* after the door had closed behind him.

'*Sai, a moment please?*' he called out politely as he walked away from the bridge.

'*What is it NOW, Petrus? Can't you wait until this evening? I've no time to play right now!*'

'*Ahhh, my love ... just a thought... Have you taught the new wives ALL the proper techniques to assure a happy and LONG honeymoon?*' he asked teasingly.

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'Of COURSE I have! Ronnie INSISTED upon it! Sometimes all he THINKS about is contentment!' she snapped, before remembering Ronnie had been going thorough a slump recently.

'Well, that's good. A man and wife SHOULD become knowledgeable about contentment ... and caring ... and love ... and responsibility ... and BIRTH CONTROL...'

Even for this early in the morning, Sai was just a sharp as ever. It took her only seconds to put that statement in to a recognizable frame that triggered the appropriate response...

'WHAT?'

End of Book Five

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank anyone who'd actually read volumes one through four – and the *Second Editions* of them – in order to fight their way past the horribly tedious delay in getting to the end of volume five.

The fact that I'd foolishly believed that this story could be told in sequential chunks *before* knowing how the story ends is all on me. Rest assured that there *is* an ending ... *eventually* ... and I hope you don't find it too dismal in its delivery.

Again, I must blame the *characters* for many of the delays, as several of them had been off by themselves and working in the background before I'd even discovered their *existence*. Thus – *Second Editions* for volumes one through four.

That said, I'd been in a quandary after discovering the tremendous amount of literary and grammatical errors in the first four volumes – a lack of proper “ink on paper” editing the apparent cause [that's my story and I'm stickin' to it!] and I'd dithered between going back and editing the dickens out of them, and *then* moving on, but ... what if I discovered something *else* along the way?

That was the state of things back in the Summer of 2015 when I'd finally decided to push onwards and complete the series – and *THEN* go back and freshen things from beginning to end.

So, here's where we are as of today: books one through four have been set free in their *Second Editions* [yet again!] and I'm gonna release this sucker and continue on with editing Book *SIX*.

In the meantime, keep reading for a tiny, *nearly* two-page, teaser from Book Six, “The End of the Road”...

March 13, 2005, On a Small Moon, Inside a Vanir Raider...

“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!*”

~~~

Petrus felt a slight shudder in the hull before his ship suit face shield automatically initiated as the suit started to tighten up around him. After a few minutes, the display on his face shield indicated a 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 that *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; making 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 – to cut around the tighter edges to ease its release. When it 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.



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